

The Road to Freedom

**An Exploration of Alternative Healing and Spirituality in the Context of the Post-Socialist
Transition in the Czech Republic**

An honors thesis for the Department of Anthropology

Barbora Hoskova

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Introduction

It was nearing noon on a hot summer day, as I sat in a coffee shop in Prague and sipped on my drink, listening intently. “I have this image of two feet in my head. One of them is the rational one, the logical foot, which is essentially too big in today’s society. It’s too much.” Sitting opposite to me was Daniel, a constellations therapist. “The second foot is the spirit – some kind of spiritual growth. And this foot is destroyed,” he continued. As a constellations therapist, Daniel leads shamanism-based group role-play therapies, in which people are able to connect and communicate with others’ souls in order to alleviate psychological suffering or treat an illness. I met with him that day to discuss his experience with this form of therapy and other burgeoning non-conventional healing practices in the Czech Republic. As the conversation twisted and weaved, we discussed multiple aspects of these practices, among them the spiritual beliefs associated with them.

The purpose of this conversation – and of several other interviews that I conducted in the summer of 2015 – was to examine the significance of alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech Republic. In investigating this topic, I was guided by several questions of interest. What does the existence and relative popularity of alternative healing and spirituality convey about Czech society? How do they fit within the country’s historical and social narratives? To what ends are they utilized by the people who embrace them? An exploration of these questions not only framed my inquiry and directed my research, but also provided an insight into the larger cultural realities in the Czech Republic. An interpretation of the story told by the alternative healing and spirituality community reveals a deeper understanding of the forces that have led to the emergence of this community and to the rising popularity of alternative healing and spirituality practices.

Alternative healing and spirituality are not only a product of historical, social and political forces – all closely intertwined with the post-socialist transformation of the late 20th century – they are also mechanisms utilized by individuals to combat the challenges of their every day lives. The end of the Soviet socialist regime in 1989 marked a historical and political transition with a significant impact on the Czech society in terms of both larger social structures and intimate personal lives. Before delving into an examination of the recently expanded alternative healing and spirituality community, then, a discussion of the historical, political, and social background in the Czech Republic is in order.

Transitioning to a Post-Socialist Society

In order to understand the realities of alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech Republic today, an understanding of the larger historical processes is necessary. A deeper look at the post-socialist transition process allows for a better understanding of current social realities. Ever since 1948, conformity with USSR policies and ideas in all areas was expected (Gsovski 1955). While the late 1960s marked an era of reforms and a more free, less censored society (the Prague Spring), the Soviet invasion in August 1968 marked the beginning of the period of renewed “normalization,” the forced abandonment of earlier reforms and an imposition of a strict communist rule (Wheaton & Kavan 1992). Bernard Wheaton and Zdenek Kavan provide important insight into this period, which lasted until the late 1980s and was characterized by the re-establishment of the communist government’s monopoly over the public sphere. This meant increased censorship, recentralization of the rule to the USSR and strict policing and control of the population (Wheaton & Kavan 1992). The social sanctions for nonconformity increased, among them “interrogations, house searches, phone tapping, the interception of private

correspondence, unlawful detention, and eventually arrests, trials, and imprisonment” (Wheaton & Kavan 1992:8).

As enforced as the socialist propaganda was, it was also seemingly at odds with the actual beliefs and practices of the governmental leadership¹ (Wheaton & Kavan 1992). After a period of reforms, the hypocrisy of the socialist leaders – the spread of ideology without content – along with strictly enforced conformity to this ideology led to the disillusionment of the population (Wheaton & Kavan 1992). Outwardly exhibiting conformist behavior to avoid social sanctions while inwardly disagreeing, most of the Czech population retreated into the private sphere (e.g. family). Even though the socialist ideology became perverted, the public life became what Wheaton and Kavan refer to as the “as-if game” – “the nation behaves as if it believed it [socialism], as if it were convinced that it lived in accordance with this ideologically real socialism” (1992:10). Lisa Wedeen also describes this “as-if” system of power, in Syria, critically noting not only the political propaganda and system of punishment that perpetuates it, but also the feeling of powerlessness, which informs any form of functioning within or resistance against this system (1998). Until 1989, people in the Czech Republic lived their lives within this system of power and governance, pretending to adopt the socialist ideology in public in order to avoid social sanctions for nonconformist behavior.

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the political collectivist and conformist propaganda yielded to a capitalist, individualistic outlook. According to Wheaton and Kavan, the purpose of social policy was to “create space for the self-determining individual to succeed or fail in his or her endeavors on the basis of merit” (1992:143). Success was not anymore merely achieved through the “correct” affiliation with the Communist Party and model conformist behavior.

¹ As shown by the fact that disobedient members of the intelligentsia were punished by unskilled labor, which, according to the Socialist propaganda, was valued (Wheaton & Kavan 1992). The fact that unskilled labor was used as punishment points to the hypocrisy of the Socialist leadership.

Rather the emphasis was placed on the individual – on individual productivity, success and efficiency. Yet the ethic of the majority of the Czech population had become morally corrupt during the normalization era, accustomed to lack of hard work, pilfering, and stealing (Wheaton & Kavan 1992:10). Similarly to Kideckel’s observations in Romania, the majority of Czech people became “of necessity self-centered, distrustful, and apathetic to the very core of their beings” (Kideckel 1993:xiii). While Burawoy and Verdery argue that the socialist-induced state of mind does not mean that “their [the people’s] vision of the world has been so ‘corrupted’ ... as to make them unfit for other ways of life,” implying a more or less easy transition into post-socialism (1999:2), one of Lass’ interlocutors tells him: “Not *that* much has changed, you know; this place is still Kafkaesque. People are mean to each other, and just about everybody wants to rip you off” (Lass 1999:273).

This points to the conflicting values arising from the post-socialist transition that exist in the Czech Republic – on one hand, the historically perpetuated self-serving individualism hiding underneath overt conformity, and on the other, recently introduced production-oriented individualistic mindset. This co-existence of different values creates a social setting filled with uncertainty that inevitably accompanies the existence of these two mindsets – uncertainty regarding the perpetuation of old habits and the formation of new social norms through the interaction of these two mindsets. In this social setting, in which people juggle these different understandings of the role of an individual in society, alternative healing and spirituality emerge. Existing as a mechanism of subversion of both of these understandings of individuality, alternative healing and spirituality practices allow people to forge their own understanding of individuality, empowering them with the necessary rhetoric and agency. In sum, it is through

alternative healing and spirituality that people are able to escape the uncertainties of mainstream values and realities in transition, and create their own.

Just as the transition to post-socialism brought with it conflicting values and uncertainty, this introduction of a new political and economic system was also accompanied by a promise of change for the better, by a promise of a better life. Yet no system of governance is perfect nor does such a system exist that would guarantee a perfect life with no social agenda advanced by the state. Thus, while life has improved in certain areas after the transition to post-socialism, many Czech citizens – including the majority of my interlocutors – voice their disappointment with the current capitalist system, its preoccupation with materialist values, and the pressure to function as economically productive individuals. I will argue that alternative healing and spirituality are therefore also a response to this discord with expectations and the disillusionment arising from it. By locating agency within the individual, alternative healing and spirituality imbue each individual with the power to escape the society with which they are disillusioned, to forge their own reality, and to live in accordance with their own values² as opposed to accepting the ones that are predominant in the Czech society.

Global Connections

Yet another aspect of alternative healing and spirituality linking these practices to the post-socialist transition is the global nature of these practices. “Alternative healing and spirituality practices”, much like the New Age movement, refers to an “eclectic hotch-potch of beliefs, practices and ways of life” that draw on philosophies and religions such as esoteric or mystical Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism or Taoism, as well as on Celtic, Mayan, Native

² Yet these values still incorporate and mirror the dominant ones existent within the Czech society. The rhetoric is simply altered and given a different focus.

American, and other pagan teachings (Heelas, 1996:1). Many of these beliefs and practices of alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech Republic draw on parallel beliefs and practices abroad, an action enabled by the opening of borders and end of censorship. Many of my interlocutors – constellations therapists, shamans, homeopaths and others – referred to works written in the United States, Germany, or Austria as the reference points and influences in their understanding and practice of alternative healing and spirituality.

The origins of constellations therapy, for instance, can be traced to West Germany, according to the information provided by my interlocutors. This therapeutic practice was founded by Bert Hellinger, a psychotherapist who integrated elements of shamanic healing and psychotherapy. Thus, as two constellations therapists, Daniel and Marie, informed me, many texts informing this practice in the Czech Republic were written by German authors. Additionally, Daniel also mentioned several American authors who have shaped his understanding of constellations therapy. Similarly, Julie, a Czech healer and shaman, mentioned several influential authors from Austria, as well as discussing (and criticizing) the study of Brazilian shamanic practice by other shamans in the Czech Republic. Homeopathy as well, is informed by German practice of it, as stated by Diana, a homeopath. Other practices and beliefs – reiki, karma, meditations, etc. – are also globally informed and, to an extent, “imported” and adapted to the Czech setting. A result of the existent global connections fostered by the global market, the alternative healing and spirituality community owes its existence and rise in popularity in part to the lack of censorship and integration of the Czech Republic into global networks of information and capital.

It is therefore impossible to discuss alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech Republic without noting their global presence. Especially the parallels that can be drawn between

the Czech alternative healing and spirituality community and the New Age movement emphasize this global presence. Just as the New Age movement, alternative healing and spirituality subvert the dominant mainstream culture, by centralizing and placing importance on the self and individual agency (Heelas, 1996). However, while it is important to note these global connections and recognize alternative healing and spirituality as embedded within them, alternative healing and spirituality also manifest themselves within the Czech society as an indirect response to the post-socialist transition, a fact that distinguishes these practices from others within the global network.

Defining Alternative Healing and Spirituality Practices

It is for this reason that I choose not to refer to alternative healing and spirituality practices and beliefs as “the New Age movement.” While this term may provide the reader with a more or less accurate image of what I am referring to, its usage automatically locates alternative healing and spirituality as merely a part of a global movement. This terminology inherently implies that no differences exist; yet, the emergence of alternative healing and spirituality during and after the post-socialist transition makes this a uniquely nuanced phenomenon that, while highly similar to the New Age movement, also differs from it due to the historical forces at play. Whereas the New Age movement reflects a general disillusionment with society (Heelas, 1996), alternative healing and spirituality reflect not only that, but also the disappointment of unfulfilled promises and the search for alternate pathways to the feeling of freedom, still missing after the transition to post-socialism.

Additionally, none of my interlocutors referred to alternative healing and spirituality as “the New Age movement.” Among the titles offered by them were “alternative,” “natural,” and

“free.” This indicates that they do not see themselves as a part of this New Age movement. This does not necessarily mean that the term “alternative healing and spirituality” reflects my interlocutors’ perceptions of these practices and beliefs more accurately than “the New Age movement;” however, at minimum this label situates these practices as belonging within the healing and/or spirituality categories. Moreover, it allows for an examination of alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech Republic as an independent unit and not only as a part of a global movement. This positioning apart from the global movement is necessitated not only by my interlocutors’ perceptions of alternative healing and spirituality, but also by the above-described cultural and historical specificity.

Furthermore, in addition to the exclusion of “the New Age movement” terminology, the arbitrary utilization of “alternative” is necessary in order to be able to group together and describe these practices and beliefs. While utilizing merely “healing and spirituality” practices and beliefs may suffice, it removes a level of necessary nuance. Without the inclusion of “alternative,” the natural conclusion would be that these practices compose the conventional healing and spirituality fields just as equally as conventional biomedicine and institutionalized religion. The term “alternative” therefore lends a necessary nuanced understanding of these practices as located outside of the “norm.”

In a more concrete sense, I use the term “alternative healing and spirituality” to indicate a compilation of healing practices and the spiritual beliefs, which often accompany and are closely intertwined with these practices, yet also exist independently of them. “Alternative healing and spirituality” refers to practices and beliefs such as constellations, reiki, energy healing, tarot cards, Zen Buddhism, belief in karma, meditations, homeopathy, BICOM bioresonance therapy and many others. These multiple practices and beliefs are greatly varied and have their roots in

many different religions, philosophies, beliefs and practices. Yet despite their variance, they share characteristics that allow them to be grouped together under one term. Some of these common threads consist of the pathways to alternative spirituality and healing and the centralization and empowerment of the self. While these characteristics are easily perceived in some practices – reiki or constellations therapy for instance – they are harder to locate in others such as homeopathy and bioresonance therapy. Nonetheless, even these therapies are based on philosophies and beliefs centered on the self. Thus while overtly different, alternative healing and spirituality practices and beliefs contain innate similarities.

Of Data Collection, Privacy and “Halfies”

As mentioned, the interviews and fieldwork on which this text and analysis are based were conducted in the summer of 2015. Over the course of three months, I interviewed members of the alternative healing and spirituality community in the Czech Republic – whose voices I convey with the use of pseudonyms – and conducted participant observation. My research was limited to Prague and the surrounding area, as a high concentration of alternative healing and spirituality practices exist and take place there, in proportion to a high concentration of the Czech population. This location also reflects the previously discussed global nature of these practices and well as the historical, political and social forces of the transition to post-socialism. Prague, as the capital of the Czech Republic, is not only the global metropolis of the Czech Republic, but also the locus of historical, political, and social changes.

After determining the location of my research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the alternative healing and spirituality community in Prague; these interviews composed the majority of my research. While an equal proportion of interviews and participant

observation would prove even more informative by allowing for a comparison of statements and actions, participant observation was not an ideal method in many cases, due to privacy issues. This was the case not only from an ethical standpoint, but also due to the historically rooted reserved mindset and protection of privacy. With a history of state surveillance, the majority of the Czech population still remains reserved and wary of strangers. Taking this into account, as well as considering the fact that alternative healing and spirituality practices and beliefs strive to overcome these sentiments and often consist of highly emotional moments, I considered semi-structured interviewing a better approach in terms of one-on-one information gathering and chose participant observation only in cases of group therapy or workshops where my presence would not be disturbing, as opposed to observing one-on-one therapy sessions.

Alongside a discussion of privacy considerations, I would be remiss not to include here a discussion of my “halfie” status and its constant presence throughout my research. Lila Abu-Lughod first introduced this term, discussing the peculiarity of the researcher’s position as simultaneously the “other” and the “self” (1991). The researcher, neither a “native” nor a “non-native,” occupies a role between the two worlds, not fully integrated in either. As such, the subjective interpretation of the field offered by the “halfie” researcher is based on the combination of her experiences within both of these worlds (1991). As I performed research in the country of my origin, a country in which I spent a significant portion of my life, I found her discussion of the distant, yet embedded position of the “halfie” status highly relatable. Thus the interpretation offered in this text was not only based on my interlocutors’ experiences, but was also informed by my “halfie” status as Czech, yet not Czech; as enmeshed in the networks of the alternative healing and spirituality community through my mother, yet hovering outside of them at the same time.

Just as research is influenced by conditions characteristic of the field, the inherent subjectivity of the researcher's analysis also plays an important role in collecting data and their subsequent analysis. In this case, both of these aspects have played a significant role in my research and analysis process. While the reserved mindset and emphasis on privacy by people in the Czech Republic led to the prevalence of semi-structured interviewing as a research method, my identity as a "halfie" is infused in my analysis of the collected data. Conscious of this cultural influence and of the inherent subjectivity of the researcher, I strive to relay my interlocutors' experiences as truthfully as possible, engaging them in dialogue with my analysis.

Theoretical Frameworks

Throughout my analysis, I engaged with Michel Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower. While biopolitics refers to the state's management of people's lives, to the policies that shape how lives are lived, biopower, a result of biopolitics, refers to the power that state exerts over people's bodies and lives (Foucault 1990). In addition to these mechanisms, thinking in terms of the "panoptic gaze" of society, a metaphor employed by Foucault to describe the self-regulation and self-policing of a society, also proved useful (Foucault 1995). While the panopticon originally denoted a prison structure of a centrally located disciplinary power that watches over everyone and that everyone is aware of, Foucault converted it to a fitting metaphor for the self-regulation of a given society to preserve existent social norms. Within this metaphor, disciplinary power is diffused to each member of the society and deviance from social norms is punished by social sanctions until they are internalized (1995).

Analyzing biopolitics and biopower in relation to the post-socialist transformation inevitably evokes Adriana Petryna and her work on the management of the Chernobyl

catastrophe. In her book, *Life Exposed*, Petryna examines the management of people's bodies and health in Ukraine over the span of the country's transition to a post-socialist, democratic system (2003). She illuminates the durability of the state's mechanism of power and control, noting that while the political system overtly changes, this change is not necessarily reflected within the system; people are still subjects of biopolitics, their agency restricted by the laws and rules enforced by the state (Petryna 2003). Cognizant of the state's influence over their lives, people in Ukraine, as well as in other formerly socialist countries, recognize this mechanism of state control. Finding loopholes within this mechanism, yet still functioning within it, people in Ukraine strive to reclaim agency in their lives (Petryna 2003).

In addition to this overarching interpretation of alternative healing and spirituality in terms of the post-socialist transition and biopolitics, an analysis of people's lived experiences also yields important insights about the role of alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech society. Here, Arthur Kleinman's emphasis on the importance of personal experience provides a relevant analytical framework. In lieu of a translative interpretation, Kleinman argued, the ethnographic task should be to focus on people's everyday experiences, follow their processes of interpretation and unveil their logic of which the people themselves may be unaware (1995). In other words, people's experiences should not be reduced to analyses of power structures and importance should be given to their own interpretations and experiences as well. Thus, combining the biopolitical and experiential frameworks, I attempt to discern the importance of alternative healing and spirituality for each individual, as well as striving to situate it within the overarching social realities.

Providing An Alternative Narrative

Integrating these experiences into the analytical frame, I argue that alternative healing and spirituality arise in a period of change and uncertainty and serve as mechanisms that imbue each individual with agency and thus allow them to shape their own reality and life. Disillusioned with and critical of society, individuals just like Daniel who criticized the extreme rationality prominent in the contemporary Czech society, are attracted to alternative healing and spirituality for the freedom they find in these practices and beliefs. Thus, I argue that alternative healing and spirituality serve as means finding and creating a freedom narrative that is centered on the individual.

In Chapter 1 I focus on the pathways through which individuals first become introduced to alternative healing and spirituality. I consider the role that suffering and pain play in most people's personal journeys, and contrast such experiences with others' gradual, "natural" immersion in these practices. Drawing upon Mara Buchbinder's phrase "bottom of the funnel," which refers to the processes through which adolescent chronic pain patients arrive at chronic pain clinics, I argue that for the majority of my interlocutors in Prague, alternative healing and spirituality are the "bottom of a barrel"³ – a place where hope can be found after all other options and possible solutions had failed, a place where they turn to after becoming disillusioned and disappointed with the conventional social system and structures. The metaphor of the "barrel" envisions these practices as residues of a multi-layered system of care and healing, rather than a system of a top-down nature invoked by the funnel. Coexisting with conventional structures such as biomedical institutions, alternative healing and spirituality provide people with hope when the

³ Although this phrase traditionally implies a negative connotation, I choose the barrel as the metaphoric container representing the Czech society and system of care, for reasons that I explain in more detail in Chapter 1.

conventional system fails to do; thus an examination of the pathways to alternative healing is an examination of the mechanisms and processes of finding hope.

After examining the reasons why people embrace alternative healing and spirituality, I turn to an examination of the central aspect of these practices and beliefs – freedom. Freedom can be designated as the desired state, which my interlocutors endeavor to achieve by embracing alternative healing and spirituality. Specifically, freedom from internalized social norms and constrictions seems to be the desired state that many of my interlocutors referred to and strive to attain. In Chapter 2, I turn to an examination of this goal and the ways in which alternative healing and spirituality practices and beliefs reflect it. Focusing on the transformation and acceptance of suffering and negative emotions, these practices and beliefs serve as means of altering one’s mindset. As such, they reflect a conscious decision to change socially internalized ways of thinking, which are seen as inherent causes of problems and suffering in people’s lives. Striving to transform them along with the attempt to eliminate them therefore indicates dissatisfaction with the dominant discourses of freedom as well as an attempt to “find freedom,” locating this aspiration as the goal of alternative healing and spirituality.

In Chapter 3, I turn to an examination of the conceptualizations of freedom existent within alternative healing and spirituality narratives. Analyzing the discourses of my interlocutors, which focused largely on self-help, self-development and self-responsibility, I locate a focus on the individual as an important aspect of alternative healing and spirituality. I argue that this emphasis on the self not only exists as a product of people’s disillusionment with society, but also locates agency within each individual, empowering members of the alternative healing and spirituality community to take control of their lives, thus imbuing them with a sense of freedom that was previously lacking. People within this community recognize themselves as

subjects of institutions and realize the influence that these institutions have on the internalized beliefs they hold. In other words, they recognize the biopolitical system at play. While they still exist within this system, they are at the same time highly critical of it and strive define freedom in a different way.

Thus I focus the attention of this paper on the philosophy and beliefs inherent in alternative healing and spirituality, rather than examining the somatic processes of healing. In the text that follows, I attempt to unravel the philosophical contributions that this set of practices and beliefs makes and perpetuates. Locating alternative healing and spirituality within the social system of care in the Czech Republic, I ask: What narratives are being created and why?

Chapter 1

Bottom of a Barrel Pathways to Alternative Healing and Spirituality

Ever since the age of two, I have been exposed to alternative healing. My mother tells me that I used to be a sickly child – I had frequent ear infections and an eczema that refused to disappear. Desperate that the conventional biomedical treatments (e.g. antibiotics, corticoids) did not work, my mother searched for a different treatment option and found homeopathy. Satisfied with the results of this healing method, she began to treat my entire family with it and eventually with other alternative healing methods. As she became increasingly more interested in alternative healing, she began to adopt the spiritual philosophies of this healing and turned to alternative spirituality as well. I, therefore, grew up – first in the Czech Republic, and later, after the age of 13, in the United States – drinking herbal tea or taking homeopathics instead of taking an aspirin when I had a headache or fever, and hearing about the importance of being attuned to myself. As a result, I became loosely connected to the alternative healing and spirituality community in the Czech Republic.

During my yearly summer visits to the Czech Republic, I thus noticed a general increasing interest in alternative healing and spirituality, which then sparked my interest in investigating the role and importance they play in people's lives and in Czech society. Delving into this topic, I quickly realized that the pathways through which people become involved with alternative healing and spirituality reveal important insights into the inextricably linked personal and social roles enacted by alternative healing and spirituality. What are people looking for in alternative healing and spirituality and why? Searching for the answer to this question, it is the examination of these pathways and the insights they bring that I turn to in this chapter.

Inspired by Buchbinder’s phrase “bottom of the funnel,” which refers to the processes through which adolescent chronic pain patients arrive at chronic pain clinics, I argue that for the majority of my interlocutors in Prague, alternative healing and spirituality are the “bottom of a barrel” – a place where they find hope after all other options and possible solutions had failed, a place where they turn to after becoming disillusioned and disappointed with the conventional social system and structures. Yet, rather than existing at the bottom of a system of a top-down nature, as invoked by the funnel, the metaphor of the “barrel”⁴ envisions these practices as residues of a multi-layered system. Coexisting with conventional structures such as biomedical institutions, alternative healing and spirituality provide people with hope when the conventional system fails to do so; thus an examination of the pathways to alternative healing is an examination of the mechanisms and processes of finding hope.

Beyond that, this chapter also offers an examination of the social circumstances that have led to the increased popularity of alternative healing and spirituality, which I observed and many of my interlocutors confirmed. As Kleinman argues, suffering, healing and care are social processes that make and re-make meaning. They are “collective modes of experience,” overtly and indirectly socially acquired “patterns of how to undergo troubles,” as well as intersubjective processes, shaped by social interactions (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997: 2). As such, they therefore invite two levels of analysis – one of personal experience and one of the overarching social structures. In examining people’s pathways to alternative healing and spirituality, my analysis mainly consists of and is based on personal experiences; yet I also attempt to unravel the underlying social implications that each journey to alternative healing and spirituality reveals.

⁴ In this metaphor, the “barrel” represents Czech society; it is, in my eyes, the ideal container to choose, as it envelops a space, yet is permeable, thus also taking into account the global connections discussed earlier and their influence on the “contents” (in this case, social systems of care and belief).

There are several ways in which people become involved with alternative healing and spirituality. Searching for relief from suffering immediately lends itself as one of them, as this – the dissolution or transformation of suffering – seems to be the primary goal of alternative healing and spirituality. However, while the majority of people certainly seek out alternative healing and spirituality in hopes of alleviating their suffering after they have exhausted all other options, there are also other ways in which people become introduced to alternative healing and spirituality. People also become familiarized with alternative healing and spirituality through kinship ties as well as their own gradual immersion into these practices. In the text below, I follow the stories of people who have followed each of these paths.

Suffering

For Petr, the primary impulse to embrace alternative healing and spirituality was a difficult situation. I met him on an extremely hot summer day, in a town close to Prague. As we sat in a restaurant outside, sipping on our drinks, he told me his story, his steady voice and expression showing contentment and balance. He recounted the difficulties he had been having in the past, as the structures and stabilities in his life were falling apart. Bankrupt and divorced, he felt at a loss of what to do, when his partner at the time introduced him to reiki, a way of healing through energy. In reiki he found a relief, an “inner rebuilding and resetting,” as he put it. With reiki as the gateway, he then became involved in other healing practices; namely, systemic constellations and a therapeutic practice called “Key to Life,” and now finds fulfillment as a therapist, working with other people to heal their suffering, just as he healed his.

In Petr’s case, the motivation to seek alternative healing and spirituality – I refer to both here, as he not only participated in alternative healing methods, but also adopted the philosophies

that accompany them – arises from psychological suffering and dissatisfaction with his life. This suffering, as Kleinman would argue, is not simply an individualistic endeavor; it is a result of discord with internalized social norms. In the relatively newly established capitalist society, Petr attempted to fulfill his role as a productive citizen, functioning within the conventional system and social norms until his attempt ended in bankruptcy. Similarly, he experienced failure in his role as a husband, another factor contributing to his suffering. When both of these attempts to fulfill conventional social norms failed, he experienced distress and came to alternative healing and spirituality seeking to relieve it.

Thus, Petr illustrates the social nature of suffering – his suffering arose from the inability at the moment to fulfill the roles that were expected of him by the dominant social views. By consequence, then, his journey to and the subsequent embrace of alternative healing and spirituality do not only signify his failure to fulfill these roles. In this case, they also signify the failure of the social systems in place to provide adequate care for the psychological distress that arises from this inability to fulfill the expected social roles. Alternative healing and spirituality then rise to fill up the void, offering alternative narratives and roles to subscribe to. Petr's recounting of his "inner rebuilding and resetting" indicates the changing of a mindset – indeed, when I asked him if his life has changed ever since he became involved with alternative healing and spirituality, he replied "Yes, very much". Alternative healing and spirituality, therefore, offer a respite from the dominant conventional social norms and provide an alternative avenue of life.

Just as Petr searched for the alleviation of his psychological distress in alternative healing and spirituality – and thus represented the motivations of many participants in the alternative healing practices that I observed – others first became acquainted with alternative healing and spirituality due to physical, or health, issues. Rather than searching to heal the wounds to their

psyche, these people arrived at alternative healing and spirituality after the failure of the conventional biomedical health system. Experiencing physical suffering, they were unable to find the alleviation of their pain in conventional biomedical methods of treatment. Such was the case in my mother's search to heal my recurring health issues and such was the case of Iva and the majority of her patients.

I met Iva, a homeopath, towards the end of my research period through a friend of my mother's. Curious about her involvement in the alternative healing and spirituality community, I asked her about her journey. After a moment of thought, she told me that it was through sickness – both her and her children were very sick, as was previously her mother. “In my mother's case,” she said, “I saw how conventional medicine does not work at all. At least out of everything that was offered to her [Iva's mother]. And I saw the horror of it [the illness] going from worse all the way to death.” She then proceeded to tell me that when she and her children started getting sick, the doctors wanted to operate on them and give them corticoids. It was at that point that Iva decided to explore and study homeopathy; she did it to heal herself and her children.

In contrast to Petr's case, Iva's motivation for exploring homeopathy, a method of alternative healing, was rooted in a different kind of systematic failure. It was the failure of conventional medicine, her experience of the failure of biomedicine to cure her mother that prompted her to explore alternative healing possibilities for her and her children. This avenue to alternative healing and spirituality is also reflected in other patients. As Iva said when asked about her patients, “I think that most of the time it's people who are completely desperate. They don't know what else to do. They've tried regular doctors, which didn't help, and then they tried something else, which also didn't help. So they allow for the possibility that one little pellet

could actually help them.” In other words, many people who arrive at alternative healing and spirituality arrive there out of desperation, after exhausting all other possibilities.

As such, their pathways reflect the pathways of the adolescents with chronic pain issues about whom Buchbinder writes. Just as these adolescents arrive at the chronic pain clinic as the place of last resort, after exhausting every other option available to them, many people in the Czech Republic embrace alternative healing and spirituality after exhausting the conventional methods of healing available (Buchbinder 2015). Desperate and without hope, they are forced to search for the solution to their suffering outside of the biomedical healthcare system. This search also reflects the failure of the conventional system; yet in this case, it is the failure to heal.

Suffering, be it suffering of the psyche or physical suffering, is therefore one of the reasons why people seek out alternative healing and spirituality. When the conventional “collective modes of experience”, the socially prescribed “patterns of how to undergo troubles,” do not suffice, a void is created (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997: 2). Alternative healing and spirituality rise up to fill that void, offering a different approach to healing. Still functioning within the “collective mode” and including the intersubjective aspect of suffering and healing that Kleinman talks about, alternative healing and spirituality appear as last resorts of hope; people turn to them in desperation, after experiencing the failure of the conventional social and healthcare systems.

Kinship

However, this “suffering pathway” is not the only way in which people become introduced to alternative healing and spirituality; kinship networks play an important role as well. Just as Iva’s children and I grew up exposed to the world of alternative healing and

spirituality through our mothers, so do many other children; children, whose parents sought help in the alternative healing and spirituality community, became involved in this community and started to use alternative therapies as their primary modes of healing. One of these children is Klara.

I met with Klara, a young 23-year-old student, on a summery afternoon. As we sat on the grass and talked, we discussed her experience with alternative healing and spirituality – experience that she owes to her mother, who, similarly to Iva, is a homeopath as well as an EFT (emotional freedom therapy) therapist. Klara situated her mother as the conduit through which she learned of alternative healing and spirituality: “I got to this [alternative healing and spirituality] through my mom, actually. I mean, I probably wouldn’t get to it by myself...So actually through my mom, that’s the only way.” Her mother used both, EFT and homeopathy to treat Klara and the rest of the family, including the family dog and even an infected tree in their garden. This treatment of both her dog and the tree, Klara remembered with a degree of excitement, was successful in curing both.

While exposed to alternative healing and spirituality throughout her childhood and believing in its functionality, Klara did not blindly accept these techniques of healing and spiritual beliefs. On the contrary, she expressed to me certain critiques and concerns, stating that the emotional freedom therapy, for instance, did not seem to work for her. She also shared with me the fact that she has had several bad treatment experiences, which have made her skeptical of the therapist’s qualifications. In her words, “it’s really hard to recognize who can do it and who cannot. Yeah...and that’s what I don’t like about it. That there are so many people that just do it and think that...well and in fact they cannot really do it and are not at all sensitive to it.” Aside from these considerations, however, she fully believes in the power of alternative healing and

spirituality. In Klara's words, she rather simply prefers to "do it by myself," stating that while alternative healing therapies are great for some people, she prefers to work through her problems on her own.

As seen in Klara's case, alternative healing and spirituality not only function as last resorts – for her, they are located on the spectrum of "normally" available treatment options, along with the more conventional biomedicine and along other belief systems. Just as she is critical of society, saying that conventional ways of thinking stunt personal growth and limit possibilities, she is also critical of alternative healing and spirituality. Thus even though Klara may be partial to alternative healing and spirituality due to her upbringing, she does not thoughtlessly and fully embrace them. This indicates that for her alternative healing and spirituality are not, in fact, an "alternative" to the conventional systems, but rather exist on an equal level with them.

While Klara is the only person that I have interviewed who has grown up in a family that embraces alternative healing and spirituality, healers and therapists that I have spoken with, such as Iva and Daniel, provided further evidence for what I term the "kinship pathway." They indicated that it is quite common for a parent (usually the mother) to either become interested in alternative healing and spirituality, thus introducing it to their family or to seek treatment either for themselves or for their children. Once these parents see it work, my interlocutors recounted, they then introduce alternative healing and spirituality to their families. Within these kinship networks, then, alternative healing and spirituality become a "normal" option; they are not seen as outlandish or "crazy."

Here again, I invoke Kleinman's theory of the "collective mode" and of the intersubjective nature of suffering and care to argue that – as seen in kinship relations – this

social nature of suffering enables the integration of alternative healing and spirituality into the palette of “normally” available treatment options. For children and often also spouses of people who embrace alternative healing and spirituality, these healing and belief systems no longer seem illegitimate when compared with the conventional healing and belief systems (i.e. biomedical healthcare system and institutionally perpetuated social norms and beliefs). This, however, does not mean that the conventional systems automatically become the illegitimate ones. On the contrary, all of my interlocutors (Klara among them) have emphasized the integration of conventional and alternative healing (which then translates into the integration of conventional and alternative beliefs). Alternative healing and spirituality simply serve as means of filling the void that is created by the limitations of the conventional healing and belief systems. As the “kinship pathway” plays an important part in perpetuating this integrative view of the alternative and the conventional systems of healing and belief, kinship networks therefore also play an important part in determining the role and place of alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech society.

Gradual Immersion

In addition to suffering and kinship, people also become involved with the alternative healing and spirituality community through a self-initiated search for life meanings other than those commonly offered by society. These people encounter alternative healing or spirituality at some point in their lives and, inspired by childhood mystical experiences or simply drawn to the mystical, become gradually immersed in and gradually embrace the world of alternative healing and spirituality. Among my interlocutors, several have described their initial involvement with alternative healing and spirituality as following this pathway.

Michaela, Klara's mother, is one of these people, who gradually discovered and became immersed in it. According to her, her first encounter with alternative healing and spirituality was through literature; she read books written by Eduard Tomáš and his wife Míla Tomášová, both of whom wrote about mystical experiences, practiced yoga and led meditations, as early as before and during the Soviet regime⁵. In these books, she recognized the depicted states of altered consciousness as those that she experienced in childhood. She referred to these states as "expanded consciousness," stating that she remembers feeling "the connection to the wider system." Because of this resonance between the states described in the books and her personal experience, she was motivated to keep reading. Discovering additional texts and authors, Michaela became gradually immersed in the alternative healing and spirituality community. In her own words: "And...as I progressively read, you know, and was interested in this [mysticism]...then you kind of start meeting other people and...and you somehow slide into it [alternative healing and spirituality community], so that it feels natural to you."

Thus Michaela first became involved with the alternative healing and spirituality community through her interest in the mystical, encountering and exploring alternative spirituality. Later on, when her mother was sick, they (Michaela and her mother) both visited a healer that focused on natural herbal remedies and energy healing. This visit marked Michaela's first encounter with alternative healing practices. Later, when she read an article about homeopathy, an alternative healing practice that at that time (early 1990s) was not well known in the Czech Republic, a practice that appealed to her, she sought advice from and was encouraged to pursue studies of homeopathy by this healer. Subsequently, over the years, she became more and more immersed in the alternative healing and spirituality community, now preferring

⁵ Although during the Soviet regime, both, Eduard and Míla, were persecuted by the state and eventually forbidden to give talks and presentations on mysticism and spirituality (as written in a blog post by their son, Miloš Tomáš in 2005).

alternative healing as her first therapy choice and actively practicing EFT, systemic constellations and, from time to time, shamanic healing.

Michaela's story is one of a gradually increasing interest in alternative healing and spirituality. At first reading literature on the topic out of general interest, then finding connections with childhood mystical experiences, she was increasingly drawn to exploring alternative healing and spirituality without perceiving it as a "last resort" option, but rather as a form of life that exists on the margins of conventionality (which, I will argue later in this chapter, alternative healing and spirituality constitute). As such, her story exists in direct juxtaposition to Mara Buchbinder's "bottom of a funnel" metaphor of arriving at conventionally less available forms of healing.⁶ Whereas Buchbinder invokes the funnel metaphor to demonstrate the desperation with which chronic pain clinics for adolescents are sought out – akin to the desperation with which people seek out alternative healing and medicine as a last resort option to heal their suffering, as described earlier in this chapter – Michaela's story illustrates that alternative healing and spirituality, while not as prominent or conventionally accepted as the biomedical system of care, exist not only as a "last resort" option, but simply as one of the healing and spirituality options available in Czech society (2015).

Similarly, Daniel's account of his experience with alternative healing and spirituality, his account of the journey through which he arrived at constellations therapy, also evokes the theme of gradual immersion. Drawn to the mystical allure of the stars, he joined an astronomy society during his teenage years. "Everyone thought that I would be a great astronomer," he stated, recounting his story. Yet, he ceased his studies of astronomy when he emigrated to Germany at the beginning of his college career. Building a life for himself there, he started to regularly

⁶ Just as alternative healing and spirituality, the holistic clinics for adolescents with chronic pain exist in the margins of the healing system; they are not commonly advertised nor constitute the predominant forms of healing sought out by the majority of the people (Buchbinder 2015).

participate in Zen meditations, referring to them as a “safe point of entrance” to alternative healing and spirituality in our conversation, as these meditations and their benefits can be more or less rationally explained. In addition to meditations, Daniel also dabbled in astrology, first computing horoscopes for his friends, and then offering these services for others as well. However, feeling dissatisfied with the fact that people were searching for definitions of themselves in the horoscopes and were not inspired to grow spiritually, he relatively quickly abandoned this practice. Nonetheless, his interest in the mystical and esoteric did not cease and he continued to practice meditations, staying connected to alternative healing and spirituality in this way.

He did not protest, therefore, when, several years ago, his partner at the time suggested that he try systemic constellations, a group role-playing therapy based on the principle of the interconnectedness of all souls. Remembering his first encounter with this practice, he told me, “I arrived at the [constellations] seminar and within the first half hour I knew that this is the method that I had been searching for my entire life. Because it’s at the same time intuitive, yet logical. Simultaneously spiritual, yet contains an element of rationality.” Intrigued, he continued to attend constellations seminars and eventually became a constellations therapist himself, now leading systemic and other constellations in Prague.

Daniel – just as Michaela – thus became slowly involved with alternative healing and spirituality. Both drawn to the mystical ever since childhood, they progressively embraced alternative healing practices and beliefs, eventually becoming healers themselves. In the same way as Michaela, David’s personal experience thus also serves as a juxtaposition to the funnel metaphor, which would locate alternative healing and spirituality as a last resort option for people desperate to give meaning to their suffering. Both of these stories, therefore, indicate that

alternative healing and spirituality do not merely fulfill the role of a last resort, but rather exist as a part of a multi-layered system of care. Although situated in the margins of and generally shunned by the conventional biomedical treatment model and by conventional belief systems (mainly atheism and emphasis on rational thinking), alternative healing and spirituality constitute one of the multiple options of care and meaning in Czech society.

A Multi-Layered System of Care

Rather than only existing as an unusual substitute for the cases in which conventional medicine and conventional social norms fail, for people within or drawn to the alternative healing and spirituality community, alternative healing and spirituality co-exist alongside these other, more conventional, options. It is in this coexistence that I find the metaphor of the barrel. In this barrel that I envision, conventional biomedicine and conventional beliefs dominate the space; they fill up almost the entire container, and are the first thing that anyone would notice upon peeking into the barrel. Yet, even though conventional healthcare and beliefs fill up the majority of the space, they do not fill it up in its entirety. In other words, they do not encompass everyone's needs and leave some spaces empty.

As illustrated in the discussed personal stories, alternative healing and spirituality fill these spaces (i.e. needs and desires) left unfulfilled by the conventional medical and belief systems. In other words, people who become involved with alternative healing and spirituality are cognizant of the limitations of the biomedical healing system and of conventional systems of thought. Be it through the failure of these systems to process and treat suffering, through kinship-acquired recognition of these limitations, or through an inner desire for something beyond the conventional, they seek out alternative healing and spirituality to account for these limitations.

Thus, albeit not integrated into the mainstream – not sought out nor accepted by the majority of the Czech society – and existing in the margins (or the “spaces” left empty by the conventional, widely accepted systems), alternative healing and spirituality exist alongside conventional systems in an attempt at the creation of a pluralistic system of care.

As people spoke about their pathways to alternative healing and spirituality, this is not only the image that their personal histories created, but also one that was perpetuated by their attitudes towards alternative healing and spirituality. Firstly, everyone was quick to state that they do not advocate a focus centered only on alternative healing and spirituality. Everyone indicated that a combination of alternative and conventional healing and spirituality would be ideal, some expressing their disappointment with the fact that a holistic, integrative approach is not accepted by the conventional systems (mostly when talking about healing approaches). Some of my interlocutors even argued for the erasure of the “alternative” label and thus an erasure of the division between the “alternative” and the “conventional” and the creation of a system of care not dissimilar to the one that Stefan Ecks describes in his book *Eating Drugs* (2014). Within this system of care, which my interlocutors seemed to desire as well, multiple ways of healing coexist, informing each others’ explanations of illness and affliction (Ecks 2014).

A Way of Life

In addition to informing conclusions about the role of alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech society, people’s personal pathways to alternative healing and spirituality also unveil the significance that these practices and beliefs eventually come to hold in their personal lives. Positioned alongside conventional healing and beliefs, alternative healing and spirituality not only offer alternative treatment, but also introduce alternative, non-conventional beliefs.

While the personal pathways of the people that I have spoken to vary, in the end, they all come to embrace alternative healing and spirituality as a way of life.

Not only are the pathways themselves different, but people also become introduced to alternative healing and spirituality through different “entry points.” These “entry points” could be likened to the spaces left empty, or unfulfilled, due to the limitations of conventional healthcare or beliefs. For most of these people, therefore, these “entry points,” or first encounters with the alternative, are composed of alternative healing practices, as the majority first seeks or embraces these practices rather than purposefully seeking out alternative spiritual beliefs. Several of the stories recounted in this chapter follow this pattern, especially those that fit in the “suffering pathway” category (i.e. Iva and Petr). Michaela’s account of her first introduction to alternative healing and spirituality also seem to fit this template, at least partially – Michaela initially both read about alternative spirituality and experienced alternative healing. It is however also possible that people become involved with alternative healing and spirituality by being drawn to the spiritual first, as is the case of Daniel.

These “entry points” then serve as gateways of a sort to the alternative healing and spirituality community. Since alternative healing and spirituality are intertwined – they inform and shape each other – it is inevitable that once people become involved with alternative healing they also encounter alternative spirituality and vice versa. This is clearly apparent in the stories told by my interlocutors; they either encountered alternative healing and spirituality almost simultaneously (e.g. Michaela), or gradually became immersed in either alternative healing (e.g. Petr and Iva) or alternative spirituality (e.g. Daniel) and along the way embraced or encountered alternative spirituality or healing as well. It therefore seems that as people become more deeply involved with alternative healing and spirituality, they come to embrace a combination of

alternative healing practices and alternative spiritual beliefs. It is certainly possible that people only embrace alternative healing or alternative spirituality; multiple interlocutors who are healers or therapists mentioned that some of their clients are only interested in alternative healing and one of my interlocutors stated that he embraces alternative spirituality only. Nonetheless, even if people choose to embrace only alternative healing or only alternative spirituality, they are at least aware of the existence of the other and still belong to and function within the alternative healing and spirituality community in the Czech Republic.

In this way the “collective modes of experience” of alternative healing and spirituality become enmeshed in people’s everyday lives. As this term is used by Kleinman to describe the mechanism through which people make sense of their experiences and of suffering, it adequately sums up the alternative healing and spirituality community (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997). As people become immersed in this community, they adopt these “modes of experience,” or explanatory frameworks and begin to explain everyday occurrences in terms of the narratives provided by alternative healing and spirituality. In other words, alternative healing and spirituality become an integral part of their lives, be it that they embrace both or focus on only alternative healing or only alternative spirituality. Either initially motivated to seek out alternative healing and spirituality in order to find a “more meaningful narrative of suffering and the human condition” or internalizing the narratives offered by alternative healing and spirituality since childhood due to constant exposure, alternative healing and spirituality become a way of life for those who embrace them (Ross 2012). They frame people’s everyday experiences, filling the “empty spaces” left by conventional healing and beliefs or, for some, even existing as superior, first-choice modes of explanation.

Concluding Remarks

The above-discussed accounts of the three various pathways to alternative healing and spirituality weave an image of a multi-layered system of care and beliefs existing in the Czech society. It is within this system of care that I employ the “bottom of a barrel” metaphor to represent the role that alternative healing and spirituality play. As a combined analysis of the pathways to alternative healing and spirituality shows, this metaphor proves more fitting than Buchbinder’s “bottom of a funnel” one, which would conceive of alternative healing and spirituality as a last resort option, only viable after a thorough failure of the conventional systems of healing and belief.

Certainly, the accounts of the “suffering pathway” to alternative healing and spirituality evoke a striking similarity with Buchbinder’s findings and may insinuate that her “bottom of the funnel” metaphor might describe alternative healing and spirituality in a better way than the chosen “bottom of a barrel.” However, while in these particular “suffering pathway” cases, alternative healing and spirituality fulfill the role of the last resort, or the last place where hope is situated, their role in the Czech Republic exceeds this. As illustrated by what I term the “kinship” and “gradual immersion” pathways, alternative healing and spirituality are not only seen as places of last resort. Although they exist in the margins, they are also perceived on equal footing with conventional medicine and beliefs by the people who embrace them and advocate a pluralistic system of care. Thus, instead of only last-resort replacements for conventional biomedicine and beliefs, they are also perceived as simply another available option.

Furthermore, alternative healing and spirituality complement not only to the conventional systems of healing and belief but also exist in dialogue with the ways of life in the Czech Republic. Rising to fill the void created by the limitations of these conventional systems,

alternative healing and spirituality provide different meanings that are embraced and collectively perpetuated by the people involved in the alternative healing and spirituality community in the Czech Republic. This observation unavoidably generates multiple questions in regards to the nature of alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech Republic and to the embraced narratives. In what ways do alternative healing and spirituality differ from conventional healing and beliefs? In what ways do they contribute to the lives of my interlocutors? Or, in other words, what do people attain when they embrace alternative healing and spirituality? It is these questions that I turn to in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

Finding Freedom

Alternative Healing and Spirituality in Dialogue with the Post-Socialist Transition

Only a neoliberal market can truly free the populace from its Communist confinement...

– Elaine Weiner (2007:4)

In fact, it [alternative healing and spirituality] is about freeing oneself. Like, being *svobodny* and *volny* in your life, in all of the meanings of these two terms.⁷

– Michaela, EFT and systemic constellations therapist

Freedom is central to alternative healing and spirituality in the Czech Republic. Not only Michaela, but also many of my other interlocutors – among them Peter, Klara, Daniel and Iva – situated the feeling of freedom as the life-changing product of these varied practices and beliefs. When asked about the contributions of alternative healing and spirituality to their lives, people's responses mirrored that of Michaela; they spoke of *svoboda* and *volnost*, two terms that designate freedom in the Czech language⁸. This feeling of freedom appeared as the desired state to be achieved with the help of alternative practices and beliefs. Thus, these practices and beliefs not only serve as means of healing one's body, but also function as tools for attaining a sense of freedom.

Naturally, this centrality of and desire for freedom provokes questions. What precisely does freedom mean to the people who embrace alternative healing and spirituality? Why does the need to seek freedom arise? Why do these practices and beliefs come to be equated with the feeling of freedom? In this chapter, I offer a consideration of these questions, taking into account the historical, political and social realities in the Czech Republic. Positioning alternative healing

⁷ *Svobodny* and *volny* are the adjective forms of *svoboda* and *volnost*, terms that are explained in detail in Chapter 3.

⁸ Each of these terms conveys a slightly differently nuanced feeling of freedom, both of which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3.

and spirituality in dialogue with the post-socialist transition, I seek to discern the significance of the role of these practices and beliefs as means through which a sense of freedom is attained.

Political Discourse of Freedom

An apparently intrinsic feature of alternative healing and spirituality, freedom is also inextricably linked to the transition to post-socialism and the changes that have accompanied this transition. With the dissolution of the USSR in 1989, and the introduction of democracy, came the remaking of the state. Czech Republic became one of the newly emerging democracies in Eastern Europe, undergoing a period of transition and social, political and economic transformation. This restructuration impacted multiple areas within Czech society, among them the political and economic spheres.

Accompanying these changes was a political discourse that centered freedom as the main objective, in a “constructed story about good conquering evil” (Weiner 2007:4). The “evil,” in this case, was socialism, described as restrictive and oppressive with its totalitarian form of governing. The “good”: capitalism. In the political discourses employed during the period of transition, this role distribution took the central stage. As Elaine Weiner describes in her book, *Market Dreams*, politicians – especially Václav Klaus, the first democratically elected Czech prime minister after 1989 – positioned capitalism as the “hero” in the narrative they offered to the Czech population during the transition to post-socialism (2007). Through this political narrative, then, socialism became even more despised and unwanted and people turned to the newly instated capitalist system, starry eyed with hope, expecting change.

Freedom was the principal characteristic of capitalism that politicians invoked in their discourses. Positioning the neoliberal free market as an agent of freedom, the political discourse

had for its chief aim to convince the Czech population of the free market's benefits, thus setting the stage for easy acceptance and a smooth transition (Weiner 2007). This image of capitalism and the free market as means towards freedom quickly rooted itself in the minds of Czech citizens. They fervently welcomed the new political and economic systems, for the freedom that they brought (Weiner 2007). The new economic order was embraced with hope, as were the values that accompanied it.

Along with this new economic system came individualist behaviors such as self-reliance and responsibility (Weiner 2007). If free market were to bring freedom and prosperity, politicians conveyed to the Czech population, each individual would have to do their part, so to speak, and eliminate her dependence on the state, assuming responsibility for her own life (Weiner 2007). In other words, freedom lay in individualization, self-reliance, and responsibility. With the transition to a capitalist system, the state seemed to take a backseat, no longer exercising extreme control over its citizens. Within this dynamic, Czech citizens gained more freedom at the cost of state care, expected by the state to take their lives into their own hands. Much like in Adriana Petryna's account of the management of the Chernobyl catastrophe throughout the transition to post-socialism, the relinquishing of state control also signified a decreased presence of the state and state care in people's lives (2003).

This rhetoric of individualization and the decrease of state influence and management of people's lives points to a reimagining of state-subject relations not only in terms of economics, but also in terms of biopolitics. Biopolitics, a term coined by Michel Foucault, refers to the state's political management of people's lives, to the policies that shape how lives are lived (1990). From this management the state gains power – referred to as biopower by Foucault – that it exerts over people's bodies and lives (Foucault 1990). Biopolitics form an inherent part of the

state-subject relationship. When I say, that the state took a backseat, I thus do not seek to convey the complete erasure of any sort of state-formed biopolitical framework. Rather, just as Petryna, I see a restructuring of biopolitics, from a system in which state excessively controls, but also assumes responsibility for people's lives, to one in which the state places the burden of responsibility on each individual citizen, while still exercising the power to manage people's lives (2003). It is, among other things, this restructuring that I see in the political discourse that deems self-reliance and responsibility "good" behaviors.

The political discourse regarding the transition to post-socialism in the Czech Republic has thus employed the framework of freedom, positioning capitalism with its free market and individualist outlook in the savior role in order to ensure a smooth transition to a new political and economic system. In this way, the discourse shaped the nature of the state-subject relations as well as that of people's expectations of the new system. Freedom became equated with capitalism and the free market and "proper" behavior with self-responsibility and reliance. Yet, how is this official political rhetoric, aimed at managing the reactions of the Czech populace to the transition, manifested in people's lived experiences? In what ways does it exist on a social level?

Transition on a Social Level

People in the Czech Republic exist within a social system, which is, like any other social system, historically and politically shaped. The transition to post-socialism along with its political discourse therefore also significantly affected people's lived experiences. Before 1989, they were accustomed to the totalitarian governing system of socialism, with its implemented strict social surveillance and policing of behavior through social sanctions (Wheaton & Kavan

1992). Within this system “going against the grain” did not yield any merit, and people lived resigned to the extreme determining power that the state held over their lives.

When this system of governance yielded to a capitalist, democratic government after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, there was therefore a general sense of optimism and hope in the air; things were about to change (Weiner 2007). Expecting better, happier lives, people rattled their keys in protest against the Communist government, symbolizing their desire to open a new door, a new and better chapter in the country’s history. The political discourse perpetuated by the new government latched onto this desire, identifying capitalism and its values as the only other possible way of governance and life (Weiner 2007). This discourse was quickly internalized and all hope for a better life was placed on the newly instated free market economy.

However, while their expectations accompanying the transition to post-socialism were grandly optimistic, the reality did not necessarily reflect them. As Katherine Verdery notes, the transition to post-socialism is a process, which, just as any other process, has its shortcomings (1996). It would seem that in the case of the Czech Republic, ideology-based grand optimism slowly gave way to reality-based disillusion: in a poll of the Czech population, conducted 20 years after the revolution, only 40 percent indicated that these 20 years were one of the best periods in Czech history (LIDOVKY.CZ 2009). Jaromír Nohavica, a popular Czech folk singer, echoes this sentiment in one of his songs, titled *Pane prezidente (Mr. President)*, in which he complains about the undesired changes that accompany a capitalist economy, such as increased prices of commodities or employment insecurity. Addressing the first president after the revolution, Václav Havel, he states, “Mr. President, I just want a little bit of happiness. After all, what else did we rattle our keys for?”

This line of the chorus suggests that not much has immediately changed in terms of life satisfaction in the Czech Republic, even though Wheaton and Kavan note that the purpose of social policy has indeed undergone a transformation, with success being a mark of individual merit rather than of a strategic party affiliation (1992).⁹ However, the influence of the Soviet era is impossible to erase, as one of Lass' informants relays (1999:273). While some pieces of the social "formula" may have changed with the introduction of a capitalist system, the general social system still functions in the same way, a testimony to the durability of *habitus*, a system of constraints that is embedded in the unconscious, linked to social, political and historical phenomena, and which influences habits and behaviors (Bourdieu 1977). In other words, while capitalism supplanted socialism as an economic system, and democracy became the new governing system, the lived realities did not reflect the political discourse of change and "a radiant future," causing discontent among the Czech populace.

Freedom was achieved, but the structures and social behaviors remained. While marketing itself as *the* way to freedom, the new political and economic system did little to change the mentality ingrained during communism, as illustrated by steadfastly increasing corruption in the economic and political sphere (Weiner 2007). Just as during socialism, the wealth still accumulates in the hands of a chosen elite. Similarly, the mechanism of social disciplinary power, instilled and enforced during communism in the form of the secret police and of social sanctions for nonconformist behavior, still prevails (Wheaton & Kavan 1992). People still strive for conformity, afraid of social judgment and subsequent social exclusion. Therefore, the functioning of the system of power as well as that of the social system has not changed. What

⁹ Although, personal connections and networks still play an important role. Thus Wheaton and Kavan's distinction may not be as clear as it seems, since strategic connections also play a role in succeeding in a capitalist society. The difference, I would argue, lies rather in the fact that one does not have to adopt a certain ideology in order to obtain these connections; they are formed on a person-to-person basis.

has changed, however, is the added emphasis on individualization, and the way in which these systems are framed in the utopic terms of freedom.

Recognizing the Disciplinary and Biopolitical Power

Thus, according to the official political discourse, a sense of freedom should already exist. Why is it, then, that people who turn to alternative healing and spirituality indicate a sense of freedom as the most significant gain? What does this fact signify about the social realities in the Czech Republic? Before turning to an examination of these questions, it is important to establish the nature of disciplinary power in the Czech Republic. Yet another of Foucault's concepts – namely his metaphor of the panopticon – proves useful in this analysis. Originally serving to describe centrally located disciplinary power in prisons that watches over everyone and that everyone is aware of, the panopticon metaphor was employed by Foucault to describe the self-regulation and self-policing of a society (Foucault 1995). He saw hierarchical institutions such as schools and hospitals as mirroring the panoptic structure of the prison while functioning as mechanisms of normalization (i.e. perpetuating the biopolitics of the state) (Foucault 1995).

In the Czech Republic, this disciplinary power does not only reside within institutions, but also within each citizen. A remnant of the communist-enforced social disciplinary mechanism, this power is equally distributed to people who watch, compare and judge each other, thus strongly enforcing and participating in the creation of the “normal” (Wheaton & Kavan 1992). A sense of shame and guilt stems from non-adherence to these social norms, indicating the power that the disciplinary gaze of others holds in Czech society. As Michaela described: “Guilt for something, shame, disgrace. It's about people seeing it as...what it's supposed to look like, not what it looks like in reality.” She is not only aware of the existence of

the disciplinary gaze within each individual, but also recognizes the power that this disciplinary gaze holds over each individual. Others within the alternative healing and spirituality community also recognize various forms of social disciplinary mechanisms and the normalizing power that they hold over their lives.

During my conversation with Klara, the 23-year-old college student who came to embrace alternative healing and spirituality through her mother, we arrived at the topic of childhood and the forces that play a role in shaping a child. Commenting on the effect of families and schools on behavior and social value formation, she stated,

Parents begin to say to them [to their children]: ‘You can’t do this, because of this. And you have to do this, because of that. And you have to go to school, because of this.’...It’s really hard to raise children differently in this society. It’s not possible. Not at all. The child wouldn’t survive here otherwise. Or – when you have to send them to school or daycare...It’s just not possible! If they’re not influenced by you at home, then they’re influenced by them [the teachers] in daycare.

Here, she considers the roles of family and school as mechanisms of internalization of behaviors and values; she is, in fact, describing the social mechanism of the social regulation of behavior through which behavioral and other social norms are learned. As such, she recognizes the disciplinary power – what Foucault described as the panopticon – located not only within each individual, but also within institutions. It is therefore clear from her description that she is aware of the fact that ever since childhood people police each other’s behavior.

Similarly, as I spoke with others within the alternative healing and spirituality community, it quickly became clear that they were also cognizant of the internalized social norms (behaviors and values) as well as of the mechanisms of internalization and perpetuation of these norms. In her explanation of the practice of EFT (emotional freedom therapy), Michaela, for instance, described the objective of this practice as dismantling “internalized thought

patterns” that have been “handed down” to an individual by others in his/her environment. “People have very many internalized thought patterns,” she told me, “because, since childhood, we all restrict ourselves by all kinds of rules, often imposed on us by others.” In this way, Michaela also recognizes the process of internalization of social rules, enforced by the disciplinary gaze of others.

Another person involved with alternative healing and spirituality, Iva, also recounted the expectations that her family placed on her, along with their disappointment when these expectations went unfulfilled: “I had a problem with my family. Because I studied economics and because I didn’t stay [working] in a bank. Because I didn’t wear suits or high heels. And didn’t make a lot of money every month.” Here, the disciplinary power is located within her family who disapproves of her chosen profession, deeming it an unfitting way of making a living. Michaela, Iva, and Klara thus illustrate the recognition and awareness of the disciplinary gaze of institutions and individuals in Czech society. Just as others within the alternative healing and spirituality community, they are aware of the disciplinary power that each individual holds within a democratic society and through which normalization of behaviors and values is enforced.

People within the alternative healing and spirituality community recognize not only this mechanism of the social panopticon but also realize the impact that biopolitics have on their lives. Just as an anthropologist would, they acknowledge and deconstruct the power, which institutions such as schools, hospitals or families hold in forming and perpetuating social norms. In continuation with her discussion of childhood, Klara, for instance, referenced the competitive nature and judging attitudes that are encouraged by schools. She outlined the competitions that would take place at the end of each art class in her elementary school. The children were divided

into three groups, each of which would first choose “the best” picture among themselves. These three pictures were then laid out in front of the class and the children were asked to select “the best” one. Telling her story, Klara recognized the way in which the state – through teachers educated in state-run universities and implementing state-approved curricula – influences the children’s behaviors and values and thus the ways in which life is lived. Albeit not overtly cognizant of the role of the state in her account, she nevertheless discerned the influence of schools – which are state institutions – on each individual.

Paralleling Klara’s train of thought, Daniel, a constellations therapist, also referenced the power that institutions such as schools hold over people’s lives. Extreme rationality and systems of classification employed in all areas of life, he claimed, are traits perpetuated by the emphasis that schools place on them. According to him, the schooling system teaches people to incessantly classify and rationalize the world around them. This tendency to rationalize and classify is also manifested within and further disseminated by the biomedical healthcare system according to Julie, an energy healer, with whom I met in Prague one afternoon. Recounting her experience with serious health issues, she recalled the “disabled” category that she was a part of for an extended period of time, and the treatment that came along with that category. Unable to function properly as a productive, full-fledged member of society, she “lost everything” – her job, her independence, financial stability, etc. Both Julie and Daniel, therefore also recognize the state’s biopolitical influence – transferred through state institutions – over life and the ways in which life is lived.

Thus, as exemplified by the accounts of multiple people within the alternative healing and spirituality community, those who embrace these alternative practices and beliefs demonstrate an understanding of the social mechanisms through which certain behaviors and

values become internalized and disseminated. Recognizing the power that institutions such as schools, hospitals, or families hold in perpetuating these social norms, people within the alternative healing and spirituality community thus acknowledge not only the social disciplinary power Foucault described in terms of the panoptic structure but also the state's biopolitical influence over the formation of social "norms" (Foucault 1995). Even though such acknowledgment may not be stated overtly, it is inherent in their recognition of the roles that institutions play. Therefore, people who embrace alternative healing and spirituality are, in this way, aware of the role that other individuals as well as institutions play in influencing social constraints and thus informing and perpetuating the set of social norms in the Czech Republic.

Criticism

Coming back to Klara's commentary on the role of schools in the formation and perpetuation of social norms, it quickly becomes apparent that she does not think this molding of behavior beneficial. "I think that people make a horrible mistake when they tell children 'You can do this. You can't do that.'" she said to me. Utilizing a metaphor from her favorite movie, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005) – the metaphor of gaining the ability to fly simply from one's belief in it – as an illustration, she described to me a world with no social limitations, a world in which people's actions are not the result of internalized formulas, a world in which they are not constrained by social judgment and policing. "It's hard being different nowadays, thinking differently," she told me, "People look at you as if you're crazy if you're different." In this way critical of the state-controlled institutional power over life and of the disciplinary gaze of society, she perceives these social mechanisms as negative influences and manifestations in people's lives, describing the limitations and judgment, which accompany them.

In a related way, Iva recounted the story of one of her patients who linked his recovery from health issues not only to the homeopathics that she gave him, but also to his decision to ignore the normative views of marriage as a life-long commitment.

He told me, “[After taking homeopathics] I was relieved of my headaches, slept better. But then came a moment, when I all of the sudden realized the situation that I was in. Within three minutes, I decided on a solution, accepted this solution with all responsibilities that would follow, packed my bags and told my wife that I was leaving. I know that I will be perceived as a bastard. But I also know that if I wouldn’t do it now, then I would stay in this for the next couple of years, would get sick again, have the same problem again. And I feel like I saved my life.”

While this man’s story illustrates the recognition of the disciplinary judgment that his actions will provoke from others, the recognition that he “will be perceived as a bastard” for leaving his wife, it more importantly positions marriage, a socially normative form of life-long partnership, as the source of this man’s afflictions. More importantly yet, this particular quote also exemplifies the moment of “waking up,” as Iva termed it, the moment of realization that, contrary to general belief, socially prescribed values and behavioral norms may serve as causes of suffering, leading to negative emotions, internal tension and other issues. This newly critical outlook on social norms is also accompanied by the realization that they do not have to be followed at all times. It is this realization that then leads this man to risk negative social judgment and, counter to the dominant social values, leave his marriage. While Iva used this example to criticize the suffering and negativity that may arise as a result of internalized social norms, this story thus also provides an example of critical engagement with these norms through one’s actions.

The concepts of “blindness” and “waking up” surfaced in multiple conversations, not just in my conversation with Iva. Criticizing the values and behavioral patterns that are perpetuated in the Czech Republic, people within the alternative healing and spirituality community

expressed the belief that “blind” functioning within the society brought about suffering and negativity (i.e. stress, internal tension, negative emotions etc.). Themselves cognizant of the mechanisms of internalization of these values and behaviors, the “blindness” that they described referenced an unconscious acceptance of these norms. In other words, “blind” functioning referred to an unawareness of and functioning within these social constraints and the mechanisms through which they are perpetuated. “Waking up,” on the other hand, then referred to the realization that the roots of suffering and negativity in people’s lives can be traced to these social constraints and mechanisms. Identifying these norms as limiting and the social mechanisms, which inform and perpetuate them, as fear inducing, people who “wake up,” much like the man in Iva’s story, critically perceive them as potentially having a negative impact on individuals’ lives.

Thus the people with whom I spoke not only recognized the mechanisms through which certain social behaviors and values are formed, but also expressed their criticism of these internalized norms, locating them as causes of suffering and negativity in people’s lives. In their eyes, the social expectations placed on individuals – the expectations that force these individuals to fit a certain mold, to be a “proper” person – led to negative emotions, internal tension and physical manifestations of stress when at odds with the individuals’ desires. It is due to these negative effects that people within the alternative healing and spirituality community in the Czech Republic were critical – either verbally or through their actions – of the social norms and the mechanisms that produce and perpetuate them. Thus aware of the negative emotions, internal tension and other forms of stress caused by these social processes, these people then turned to alternative healing and spirituality for relief from these negative aspects.

Transformation

Acceptance and transformation of “negative” emotions (anger, sadness, fear, etc.) are a central aspect of the alternative healing and spirituality practices I observed. In most cases, as stated by my interlocutors, sickness as well as inability to achieve one’s desired life goals is viewed as a result of suppressed emotions, mostly “negative” ones. For instance, healing practices such as constellations and Emotional Freedom Therapy (EFT) help individuals process emotionally charged moments of their lives, attempting to heal their illnesses in this way. These practices attempt to transform these emotions, although not necessarily into positively perceived ones such as love or happiness. Rather, they strive to strip those feelings of their negative valence, as illustrated in the following excerpt from my field notes, which also demonstrates the performative aspect of some of these practices.

I arrived at Maitrea (a center for self-development in Prague) promptly at 6 PM to participate in the “Angels and Demons” dance workshop. Once the workshop leader introduced herself, we started with a meditation centered on the “angels” and “demons” inside of us (positive and negative emotions, respectively). We were asked to become aware of all of them in us, to ask the “angels” to be with us, to help us, as we transfer the “demons” to “angels”, as well as to thank all of them and to appreciate their existence. After the meditation we started dancing. First we embodied the four elements – earth, water, fire and air – and thus “cleaned” and “opened” our chakra energies, readying ourselves for the subsequent embodiment of our emotions through dance. The first emotion we danced was love. We were asked to dance it, to feel it, to express it and at the end of the dance, we were asked to remember the feeling and recall it whenever we wanted to transfer a “demon” into an “angel”. Following this, we danced a set of dances that were focused on living and dancing negative emotions, eventually focusing on transforming them. This does not necessarily mean that they were transformed into positive emotions, but rather, through the dance, which enabled the participants to embrace each emotion with love, the attempt was made to shift participants’ perception of the emotion as negative to one of acceptance.

While other practices may lack the performative aspect of this dance workshop, not embodying the emotions that are being processed, their focus also lies in “freeing” and “living” negatively

perceived emotions, actions that, according to my interlocutors, ultimately lead to their acceptance. “You know it’s [the emotion] there, inside, but it doesn’t affect you, you just observe it,” seems to be the general state that people strive to achieve through these practices. Thus they acknowledge the negativity that arises from breaking the socially enforced norms, processing it with the help of alternative healing and spirituality practices and beliefs, and eventually arriving at a state where they are “free” of it.

Such state of mind also serves as the end goal of EFT, an alternative healing method in which Michaela specializes. A significant portion of my conversation with her, therefore, revolved around the discussion of the purpose and function of this form of therapy. In an attempt to explain to me the philosophy of this alternative healing practice, Michaela utilized the metaphor of balloons. Likening the internalized thought or behavioral patterns to the body of the balloon, she determined the negative emotions and effects of these thoughts and behaviors as the imaginary string that connects the individual with the “balloon” (thought or behavior pattern). Through EFT, the individual then works to symbolically “cut” this string and release the “balloon.” By doing so the individual “cancels the emotion, frees it from his/her body.” As a result of this “freeing” of the emotions associated with the ingrained thought and behavioral formulas, one “releases the balloon.” In other words, the individual escapes the hold that internalized thought and behavioral patterns have over her by processing the emotional backlash created by these patterns.

According to Michaela – and the EFT philosophy, to which she adheres – one needs to process the negative emotions, internal tension and stress associated with internalized thought and behavior formulas. Only through this processing can the individual “free” herself from these formulas and manage the effect and role that they play in her life. Such belief is reflected in other

alternative healing practices as well, albeit in slightly altered formats. Taking homeopathy, for instance, supposedly brings to surface any suppressed emotions or afflictions, and “forces” a person to live through them, and thus to process them. The practice of systemic constellations, a form of alternative group therapy, also leads to the individual’s recognition of the internalized formulas and provides an environment in which the emotions pertaining to these formulas surface and are processed. Similarly, according to general belief, reiki and other energy healing methods bring one’s negative emotions to the surface in order for the individual to process them and thus “free” herself from their influence. Therefore, multiple alternative healing practices process the negativity that arises when internalized social norms (thought and behavioral patterns) conflict with personal dreams and desires.

What, then, do these philosophies and practices reveal about the role of alternative healing and spirituality in Czech society? As evidenced in the above discussion of several healing practices, people who embrace these alternative practices and beliefs utilize them as means of transforming (or perhaps neutralizing would be a better term) any negativity that arises as a response to internalized social norms. By “freeing” people from negative emotions through processing them, alternative healing and spirituality serve as tools that make the subversion of the existent social norms possible by unraveling the hold that these social norms have over each individual. Providing a space where the negativity that arises due to the disciplinary gaze of society can be expressed and processed, these practices and beliefs allow individuals to recognize and process the social constrictions within which they exist as well as the effects that these constrictions have in their lives. Alternative healing and spirituality thus serve as tools of recognition of the social disciplinary mechanisms and power, as well as of transformation of the

negativity that arises in the moments when this disciplinary gaze is felt (i.e. in those moments in which people break with the internalized social norms).

Concluding Remarks

The sense of freedom, which people find through alternative healing and spirituality, is therefore of a different kind than the one advocated by political discourses. In fact, the desire for it arises from the disparity between political discourses and the social changes (or lack thereof) that accompany the transition to post-socialism. While in official governmental discourse the dawn of capitalism and its free market automatically indicate a transition to a free society, the lived reality in the Czech Republic does not provide the people with a sense of freedom. Instead, the mechanisms of social control and normalization through the disciplinary gazes of institutions and individuals – the remnants of communism – instill in people the sense of living under an ever-watchful eye. Because people in the Czech Republic experienced extreme surveillance during communism, they now more easily recognize both forms of social disciplinary power (institutional and individual-based), and the ways in which they create social norms and influence their behaviors.

People within the alternative healing and spirituality community reflect this recognition of the mechanisms of disciplinary and biopolitical power. They recognize the ways in which these mechanisms function to internalize and perpetuate social norms, thus identifying negativity as arising from dissonance with these internalized norms. It is this negativity, then, that they strive to transform through alternative healing and spirituality. In other words, the sense of freedom that people within the alternative healing and spirituality community strive to attain is a sense of freedom from the disciplinary power of society. It is a type of freedom that the state

does not account for. Thus, people utilize alternative healing and spirituality to strive to find freedom on a social, lived, level – a level where the official discourse of the government fails.

Alternative healing and spirituality, therefore, serve as tools in constructing an “alternative” narrative of freedom. Similarly to the alternative healing practices in relation to biomedicine, this alternative does not aim to replace the official discourse of the state. Instead, it serves as its complement, providing a freedom narrative where that of the state does not reach. Focusing on the lived experiences in the Czech Republic, this narrative offers a different kind of freedom to be found. It re-defines the concept of freedom, elaborating on the discourses of the state, and taking into account the social restrictions placed on individuals. I now turn to this conceptualization of freedom.

Chapter 3

Filling the Void

Re-defining the Concept of Freedom Through Alternative Healing and Spirituality

Socialism's collapse has created an ideological void. For CEE populaces, the communist counter-narrative has been discredited, leaving the metanarrative of the free market not only hegemonic but unrivaled.

– Elaine Weiner (2007:7)

“Before November 1989, evil had reigned for forty years. An evil to which all people had to subject. Power was located in the hands of few, who exercised control over everyone and all aspects of life. You could not speak against it and you could not act against it, else you be punished. Thus it reigned, unchallenged. Then – a hero appeared. The only one capable of successfully challenging this evil. He took it upon himself to drive this evil from the land, and succeeded in this endeavor, allowing freedom to slowly settle in.”

If the political discourse accompanying the transition to a post-socialist Czech society took the form of a fairytale, I imagine it would sound similar to this. As Elaine Weiner describes in her book, and as discussed in the previous chapter, political actors – most prominently Václav Klaus, the first democratically-elected prime minister after 1989 – positioned capitalism and free market economy in the role of the only possible savior from the grips of great evil (i.e. socialism) (2007). “Freeing” the Czech population, capitalism and its implementation ushered in a new age, an age of freedom. This is the metanarrative, the narrative to surpass all others, that Weiner describes as internalized by the Czech populace (2007). It also constitutes one possible conceptualization of freedom.

I hope to have established, by now, that alternative healing and spirituality offer a conceptualization of freedom that is “alternative” (or rather, complementary) to this official discourse. Engaging not only with the political discourse, but also with the social realities of the

post-socialist transition, alternative healing and spirituality serve as tools in attaining a sense of freedom. This desire and need for a sense of freedom points to the insufficiency of the political discourse in fulfilling its purpose (i.e. disseminating a sense of freedom). While the political metanarrative fills an “ideological void” previously occupied by socialism, it does not do so in a comprehensive way. In areas of this “void” where this political discourse fails, alternative healing and spirituality step in and offer a supplementary imagining of freedom. Thus they fill a “void” of their own, providing a different conceptualization of freedom. What, then, does freedom mean in the context of alternative healing and spirituality? How is it re-defined? These are the questions that I explore in this chapter.

Svoboda and Volnost

There are two different concepts of freedom that people within the alternative healing and spirituality community described: *svoboda* and *volnost*. While both of these terms denote freedom, they each do so in a nuanced way. These nuances in meaning merit a deeper look, as they illustrate the multi-faceted nature of freedom, even within the alternative healing and spirituality community.

Svoboda would best be described as freedom in the conventional sense. It refers to a freedom comprised of independence and autonomy. The individual gains importance as an agentive force in her own life, thus having the ability to determine her own life and the way it is lived. *Svoboda* indicates that people have the ability to choose from “multiple possibilities” in life, a feeling conveyed by Iva and Michaela. “I would define it as expanding your options, or returning to and taking stock of the possibilities,” Iva told me, defining the central aspect of alternative healing and spirituality. Michaela echoed this sentiment, “You can do essentially

anything, as long as you don't infringe on the *svoboda* (freedom) of others." Allowing others the same level of agency and self-determination thus also comprises an important factor of this particular notion of freedom.

Positioning the individual at the center of freedom, *svoboda* most directly corresponds with the political rhetoric regarding freedom – the freedom that accords agency to each individual. However, while a similarity with this rhetoric exists, this conceptualization of freedom as *svoboda* also differs from that offered by the state. As noted by Adriana Petryna in her book, *Life Exposed* – and as reflected in the lived experiences of people in the Czech Republic – a political discourse preoccupied with freedom does not directly translate into unequivocal freedom for the citizens (2003). Petryna illuminates the durability of the state's mechanism of power and control, noting that while the political system overtly changes, this change is not necessarily reflected within the system; people are still subjects of biopolitics, their agency restricted by the laws and rules enforced by the state (2003). The “freedom” that they are allowed to experience, is thus limited by the politics of the state (i.e. biopolitics). Therefore, even though the state employs the rhetoric of freedom, it still exercises power over the way that people live their lives. Where *svoboda*, as conceptualized by alternative healing and spirituality, differs from this political discourse is the actual location of power within each individual. In other words, this idea of freedom does not ignore the social and political realities, but rather works to empower the individuals within the scope of these realities.

While the conceptualization of freedom as *svoboda* exists in dialogue with the official political discourse on freedom, *volnost*, another term for freedom, evokes a slightly different image of it. *Volnost* would best be described as *unrestrictedness*, if such a word would exist. It signifies the feeling that a bird experiences when it gains the ability to venture outside of its

cage. Similarly people within the alternative healing and spirituality community use this term to illustrate the feeling of unrestrained freedom to exist as one desires to exist, no matter the social judgment incurred. One of my interlocutors, David best described this feeling of *volnost*, juxtaposing it with social expectations:

Nowadays, a lot of people actually don't live their own lives; they live the lives of someone else. They adapt to their workplace, because they have to, you know. [If] he's a manager then he *has to* behave a certain way. So he behaves that way. A politician. If you're a politician, you can't behave like— going to a nudist beach to tan. You just can't do that, that's not how it is done. So they [people] actually live the lives of someone else – fictional lives. They are not themselves; they live someone else's lives. This [alternative healing and spirituality] is essentially a return to the self. So that you live your own life. So that you come back to yourself and live your own life. The way that you want to and the way that you imagine it.

As becomes apparent from David's description of alternative healing and spirituality, these practices and beliefs enable those who embrace them to function outside of the socially expected norms and behaviors. They do so by locating the only disciplinary gaze that matters within oneself and living "the way that you want to and the way that you imagine it," a feat that David terms the "return to self."

Thus, the need for *volnost* arises from the recognition of and subsequent need to escape social constrictions. Rather than existing in direct relation to the political discourse, the conceptualization of freedom as *volnost* engages with the disciplinary gaze of society that is felt by members of the Czech populace. It even exists in direct correspondence to Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon: when someone is released from prison (the original panoptic structure) he is termed *volny* ("free"), the adjective form of *volnost*. The utilization of the terms *volnost* by my interlocutors to describe the feeling of freedom thus indicates that the freedom narrative offered by alternative healing and spirituality not only incorporates elements of the

political discourse of freedom (i.e. *svoboda*), but also engages with the disciplinary power of institutions and individuals in Czech society (i.e. *volnost*).

These two nuanced conceptualizations of freedom – *svoboda* and *volnost* – present in the freedom narrative of alternative healing and spirituality have one aspect in common: the focus on the individual, or, as David termed it, the “return to the self.” While *svoboda* evokes freedom in the sense of an individual’s ability to determine her life, *volnost* addresses the feeling of freedom that arises when the locus of disciplinary power is re-situated within the individual. In the sections that follow, I examine this focus on the self, which David described and which is central to the conceptualizations of freedom within alternative healing and spirituality. I analyze the discourses of my interlocutors, which focused largely on self-help, self-reliance, self-development and self-responsibility. Additionally, I examine the manifestation of this emphasis on the self in the alternative healing and spirituality practices (i.e. therapies and workshops) that I have observed. Such integrative analysis of the discourses and practices provides the information necessary for the decoding of the freedom narrative that alternative healing and spirituality provide for the people who embrace it.

Imagining the Self

There are several ways in which those who embrace alternative healing and spirituality “return to the self.” Or rather, there are several ways in which people in the alternative healing and spirituality community narrate and imagine the self. Similarly to the discourses of the self in the New Age movement, these self narratives are both intertwined with and existing separately of each other (Heelas 1996). They influence how the self is construed, shifting the locus of

power to the individual. As such, these narratives empower the individual with personal agency in regards to life decisions.

Dependent upon the type or practice, various aspects of the self are emphasized. For instance, practices such as homeopathy and bioresonance therapy that are based on more rational precepts, do not seem to accord as much importance to the psychological construct of the self as more spiritual-based practices, such as shamanic healing or systemic constellations, do. While self-responsibility is emphasized, it is only emphasized to the extent of following through with the prescribed treatment, thus mirroring the self-responsibility that is an essential part of biomedical treatments. On the other hand, the spiritual-based practices perceive the self as the center of alternative spirituality and healing, focusing more on the psychological rather than the physical aspects of the self. It is this perception that I attempt to unravel below.

Central to the majority of these practices and beliefs is often karmic philosophy, described to me by Michaela as the idea that “everything has a cause and, at the same time, an effect.” This conception, according to her and others, positions the individual as the one responsible for her own life, as it also locates the individual’s actions as the “cause,” rather than seeing her as a subject of external forces. According to this philosophy, any form of negativity, such as disease, arises “because there is something wrong, there is a problem that needs to be resolved.” Therefore, contrary to biomedical philosophy which positions bacteria and viruses as causes of illness, people within the alternative healing and spirituality community perceive illness as stemming from a situation brought about by the individual’s doing, pointing to a larger problem in the individual’s life that needs to be resolved. “Illness,” in Michaela’s words echoing the sentiments of other interlocutors, “pushes the individual to realizing his responsibility for his own life; pushes him to self-discovery.” The incorporation of this karmic philosophy into

alternative healing and spirituality, therefore, introduces self-responsibility for one's life. According to it, the individual creates, either indirectly by unconsciously transmitting energy carried over from past lives¹⁰ or directly by her own actions, the situation in her life from which negativity arises. It is, therefore, the individual's responsibility, or the responsibility of the self, to resolve and regulate the situation at hand.

Connected to this self-responsibility for one's life is the idea of self-discovery, as seen in Michaela's statement above. It is rooted in the idea that the individual is responsible for the negativity in her life (i.e. unpleasant situations, illness, etc.). This negativity, according to my interlocutors, forces the individual to explore herself and the ways in which she is connected and influences the situation at hand. During our conversation Petr described this process of discovery: "One begins to understand that what is happening on the outside, in his life, is in fact his. He begins to understand that it is him who creates the situation and begins to explore the problems within himself." Thus, as this statement illustrates, one's gaze shifts from placing the blame on outside forces to one of self-exploration; it is turned inwards.

The concepts of self-responsibility and self-discovery form the base for the central aspect of alternative healing and spirituality: self-development. Once the individual assumes responsibility for her life and engages in self-exploration, my interlocutors stated, she begins to unravel that, which causes negativity in her life, thus engaging in the process of self-development. Self-development is a major aspect of these alternative practices and beliefs and as such is also rooted in karmic philosophy. It is "never-ending," according to Michaela, Iva and others, spanning over multiple lifetimes. "Once you begin the process, it never ends," said Michaela to me with a small laugh, "even though you might want it to." Improvement and

¹⁰ This karmic philosophy is accompanied by the ideas of rebirth and of certain energetic "baggage" from previous lives that each individual carries with them; it is those ideas that I am referencing here.

development of the self thus become the central principles of alternative healing and spirituality. Instead of complacently existing within a given situation, people within the alternative healing and spirituality community rather emphasized turning an inquisitory gaze inwards in order to improve the self and thus further develop it.

This rhetoric of self-responsibility, self-discovery and self-development locates the self as the central point within alternative healing and spirituality. Seen as a contributor to the negativity in people's lives, the self becomes the locus of healing. As evidenced by the rhetoric of my interlocutors, it is therefore imagined as a symbolic center of the vortex that is life. The self, therefore, gains importance in people's perceptions of the world. Rather than perceiving themselves as only subjects of external forces, people who embrace alternative healing and spirituality begin to see themselves as agentive forces in the world, thus attaining the feeling of *svoboda* (freedom). Through the emphasis on the self, perpetuated by these alternative practices and beliefs, their perception of the world shifts to one of the world as a partial product of their own actions. In this way, people within the alternative healing and spirituality community also partially echo the internalized political discourse of freedom as a product of capitalism, a system advocating productivity and self-responsibility of individuals.

Centrality of the Self in Practices

Over the course of my research, it became clear that this centrality of the self manifested itself in alternative healing and spirituality practices in addition to the rhetoric of people who embraced these practices. Albeit approached from different points of view, one's self remained at the center of these healing practices. Be it homeopathy, constellations group therapy, reiki, or bioresonance therapy, each healing practice concentrated on the individual, thus placing an

emphasis on the self. These alternative healing practices and the beliefs that accompany them, therefore, render the self as central, allowing for a practical experience of the self as the focal point of one's life.

Within the practice of systemic constellations this emphasis on the self becomes clear. This practice is an alternative form of group therapy, in which the situation needing to be resolved is played out by the participants who represent both, concrete people and abstract concepts such as emotions. Over the course of my research, I had the opportunity to attend several constellations therapy sessions. Each session was centered on an individual, providing her with the opportunity to unravel the situation at hand along with her functioning within it, as the following excerpt from my field notes illustrates.

We (those who were not chosen to represent certain actors or abstract concepts in the role play) were sitting on pillows lined up against the walls of the room, observing the going ons. For this session, the constellations therapist chose to initially exclude the individual who was "building" the scene (i.e. the one to whom the situation "belonged"), inviting her to at first observe the scene – the individual was still represented within the scene by another participant in today's therapy session. As the situation was "brought to life," so to speak, the therapist invited each actor in the scene to act in an uninhibited way, encouraging them to loudly voice any emotions or perform any actions they felt the need to perform. Based on these actions and reactions, the therapist then invited other participants to assume additional roles – often abstract ones, such as love or pain – thus illustrating all of the aspects of the situation. Throughout the session, the therapist periodically turned to the participant "building" the constellation, and commented on the unraveling scene (e.g. "You need to embrace your emotion." or "See how your anger limits you in this situation?"). Eventually, the participant was asked to assume her place in the scene in order to directly experience the situation. Throughout the session – which lasted for around an hour and a half – the therapist continually focused on the role of the participant within the situation. She [the therapist] frequently pointed to the participant's influence on the situation and encouraged the participant to transform herself and her actions in order to resolve the situation.

Other constellations therapy sessions, which I observed, mirrored this pattern. It can therefore be concluded that the individual plays a central role in this healing practice. As evidenced by the

therapist's continuous referral back to the individual whose illness or psychological suffering was played out, the practice of constellations therapy locates the self as a center point in a way that mirrors people's discursive descriptions of it. While people locate bacteria or chemical imbalances in the brain as responsible for one's affliction within the biomedical model, constellations therapy deems the individual's problematic functioning within a social system such as the family as the cause of affliction. Thus an assumption of responsibility by the individual, the willingness of self-discovery and the desire to evolve in order to transcend a situation are necessary in order to successfully complete a constellations therapy session.

Similarly, albeit in a slightly different way, homeopathy also requires self-responsibility and self-discovery, thus leading to self-development. Anna, a former EMT who is now a homeopath explained that constitutional homeopathy, which is the branch of homeopathy originating in Germany, does not only treat illness symptoms, but also enables an individual to achieve inner harmony. In order to determine each individual's homeopathic medication, then, she sits with them for over an hour during the initial session, discussing their health and psychological issues. During this extensive interview, she pushes the individual to self-exploration with her questions. After this initial visit, the questions become less inquisitive, yet they still force the individual on a road to self-exploration. She often asks the question "why?" in order to determine the proper homeopathics to distribute. However, self-responsibility and self-exploration are not only achieved in interviews with her. After taking the homeopathics, she said during our conversation, each person usually experiences a period of worsened effects, be they health or psychological issues (both of which are often tied together). As such, each individual becomes cognizant of the situation they are in, and of the responsibility she holds within it, thus gaining the ability to transcend the situation.

In the words of Iva, another homeopath, “taking homeopathics forces you to see the situation in which you are more clearly, to accept your responsibility for it and to decide on a proper course of action.” Even though ingested, then, homeopathic medicine does not only treat the body, as a biomedical approach would. Rather, forcing the individual to self-exploration and other “self-processes,” as Thomas Csordas termed it, it addresses both, the physical and the psychological plane of existence (1994). Centrality of the self, therefore, becomes an integral part of this healing process, as these two planes are perceived as tightly interwoven in the healing process. Homeopathy thus illustrates that even those alternative healing practices that are at first glance closer to the rational, biomedical end on the spectrum of healing perpetuate a focus on the self that extends beyond the responsibility to take medication that is characteristic of biomedicine.

With this discussion of systemic constellations and homeopathy, I strive to illustrate the various ways in which the self becomes centered through alternative healing and spirituality practices. While both of these discussed practices accomplish the same goal, elevating the importance of the self through the healing process, the approaches taken to do so differ significantly. In the practice of constellations, the individual embodies herself within the situation, thus also embodying and experiencing her impact on the situation at hand. Homeopathy, on the other hand, claims to more subtly push the individual towards the recognition of the importance of the self. In thusly representing the centrality of the self in alternative practices, I strive to not only illustrate and situate its importance within alternative healing and spirituality practices, but also to exemplify the different avenues through which the self becomes centralized in these practices.

The Narrative: Agency and Empowerment

An obvious impact of this “return to the self” that is facilitated by alternative healing and spirituality, and in which the two conceptualizations of freedom are rooted, is the effect that the discursive and active centering of the self has on personal agency and on the empowerment of each individual. As stated earlier, due to this centrality of the self, people begin to perceive themselves as agentive forces rather than subjects of the whims of the external world. The imagining and positioning of the self at the center of one’s life brings along with it an awareness of one’s agency in the world, and, more importantly, of one’s agency in her own life. In this way, the individual becomes empowered in regards to her own life; the locus of power shifts from the state and the society to the individual, enabling her to determine her own life and the way in which it is lived.

Once they have embraced alternative healing and spirituality, people come to internalize this agentive role of the self. Through alternative healing and spirituality, they learn to perceive the agency, which they hold in their own lives and which they have previously assigned to the state or to other individuals. Thus they come to recognize their part of the responsibility for the negativity in their lives and, encouraged by alternative healing and spirituality practices and beliefs, they strive to actively eliminate this negativity through a self-oriented transformation of their lives. Petr describes this process of recognizing one’s problems and reclaiming one’s agency over them:

When you start to see them [the issues] and begin to work with them, then you can start to do something with it [the situation from which these issues arise]. So long as we’re unaware, we cannot do anything. Because of this unawareness. We just react to certain situations, but we don’t really know why. Whereas if he [an individual] looks within himself and finds the reason why he reacts that way, why these things are happening to him, then he can start to consciously work with this. He can start working to change his views and attitude and so on.

Petr locates the recognition of one's own responsibility for the way in which life is lived as the proverbial "push" that renders the individual aware of her own agency. Describing himself before he arrived at this awareness, he said to me: "Before, I used to blame everyone around me for my problems. But now, my work with alternative healing and spirituality made me realize that these problems exist within myself and that I am the only one who can solve them." As evidenced by his statements – and echoed in the statements of others – alternative healing and spirituality function as means of claiming one's agentive role in the world.

This recognition and reclamation of agency over one's own life is closely accompanied by a feeling of empowerment. The recognition of one's responsibility over her life, along with the realization of an individual's agency in her life, yields a feeling of power in regards to the determination of one's life. Describing this process of empowerment as a product of alternative healing and spirituality, Michaela illustrates its instrumentality in creating a sense of freedom:

Everyone has some kind of responsibility for...for what happens to him. It's not like 'it's falling down on me from somewhere and just happening to me,' but it originates on the inside. That's what seems the most fundamental to me, because I know that it changes everything. Because, through this, you all of the sudden gain power and responsibility and freedom. Because as long as you think that it's happening from the outside – and that it's the circumstances and the people around you who have power over your life – it's an extremely hard life. And at the moment that you realize that it is *you* who creates it [life] and who has responsibility for it, you gain an enormous feeling of freedom.

Just like others, Michaela positions the self at the center of everything, noting that the realization of this centrality – and thus responsibility – of the self "changes everything." It shifts the locus of power to the individual, allowing for the realization of power to determine the way in which life is lived. Shedding the disciplinary and determinant power of society and the state, and focusing one's gaze inwards thus leaves the individual empowered and with agency in her life.

In these explanations of agency, empowerment and freedom, one can not only easily identify the predominance of the individual, but also discern the concepts of *svoboda* and *volnost*, both of which are inherent to the freedom narrative offered by alternative healing and spirituality. Even though these conceptualizations of freedom are not directly referenced, the components that make up their nuanced meanings are discussed. *Svoboda* and *volnost* are indirectly found in the rhetoric of agency and empowerment. This discourse, as described by Michaela and Petr, focuses on the importance of self-determination and autonomy, evoking the conceptualization of freedom as *svoboda*. Additionally, it also diffuses the disciplinary power of institutions and individuals in a society, situating it within the individual, rather than in one's surroundings. The discussed emphasis on the self along with the agency and empowerment it brings therefore serves as a more concrete representation of these abstract conceptualizations of freedom. In this way it thus enables people within the alternative healing and spirituality community to attain the sense of freedom described by these concepts.

Concluding Remarks

After embracing alternative healing and spirituality as means to freedom in addition to seeing them as healing methods only, people within the alternative healing and spirituality community internalize a reconfigured narrative of freedom. This narrative of freedom is focused on and stems from an emphasis on the self, and takes the form of two nuanced conceptualizations of freedom – *svoboda* and *volnost*. Reflections of the different ways in which the self is emphasized, these two conceptualizations indicate not only an elaboration on the political discourse of freedom, but also its internalization.

Thus, albeit critical of some societal values such as the prominence of institutional and individual disciplinary power in Czech society, the narrative of freedom that is perpetuated by

alternative healing and spirituality also incorporates certain aspects of the political discourse, among them self-determination, autonomy and individuated agency. However, instead of only internalizing it, alternative healing and spirituality also expand on the political narrative of freedom. As indicated by the conceptualization of freedom as *volnost*, people within the alternative healing and spirituality community do not perceive freedom only in terms of agency and self-determination, but also find it in the escape from the disciplinary power of social constrictions. In this way, they elaborate on the political discourse, “filling the void” left open by it.

Conclusion

“Filling the void” thus seems to be the overarching purpose of alternative healing and spirituality. Initially motivated by the failure of the conventional systems of care to process their suffering, people first turn to alternative healing and spirituality in an attempt to find hope. As they become embedded in and embrace alternative healing and spirituality practices and beliefs, they are empowered to place the locus of power within themselves. The self becomes the main agentive force in their lives, simultaneously attempting to weaken the impact of biopolitics, yet, at the same time, incorporating the political discourse of freedom. Expanding this narrative of freedom to areas with which the political discourse is not concerned, people also strive to attain freedom from the disciplinary power of the social panopticon through alternative healing and spirituality. For people within the alternative healing and spirituality community, freedom becomes their purpose; it becomes the goal advocated by and central to alternative healing and spirituality practices and beliefs. Disillusioned by the limitations of the new political and social system and the power that it holds over them, people who turn to alternative healing and spirituality, embark on a journey of self-discovery and self-development, a journey to freedom.

Mechanism of Adaptation

Alternative healing and spirituality thus do not only serve as complements of the biomedical system of care. They also engage with the biopolitical discourse in the Czech Republic, complementing the political discourse of freedom. Striving to create an “alternative” way of life, the discourses and practices of alternative healing and spirituality position *svoboda* and *volnost* as the two desirable forms of freedom to be achieved.

While it may appear that these narratives are a mechanism of subversion, I believe that they are rather mechanisms of adaptation. Just as Adriana Petryna observed an ongoing adaptation to and mediation of the new parameters of citizenship created by the capitalist-informed biopolitical system in Ukraine, I see in this nuanced narration and conceptualization of freedom a re-imagining of the citizen. Rather than relying on the state, or even criticizing the state, the biopolitical discourse is adopted into the discourses of freedom offered by alternative healing and spirituality. These discourses then expand on the politically propagated conceptualization of freedom, allowing its personification and individualization.

Therefore, rather than working *against* the image of individualized, self-reliant freedom advocated by the state, people within the alternative healing and spirituality community partially work *with* and *within* it. In the wake of the post-socialist transition, they strive to relieve their disillusionment with the social reality by empowering themselves to change it. Contrary to Petryna's observations of demands for state, the discursive logic of alternative healing and spirituality seems to ignore the state, or at least does not directly address the role of the state in the constitution of this dissatisfying social reality. The philosophy of alternative healing and spirituality, rather, strives to create conditions that empower the individual to resist the conformity-producing disciplinary power. Reclaiming agency after forty years of extreme state control, people within the alternative healing and community, take matters into their own hands, so to speak, as active agents in Czech society. Thus, striving to attain a sense of freedom in all its nuances by changing the lived reality for oneself, the alternative healing and spirituality freedom narrative constitutes a mechanism of adaptation, rather than a mechanism of subversion, as I had initially thought.

This dissonance with other negotiations of citizenship in the wake of the post-socialist transition naturally provokes an array of questions. Why ignore the state and the power that it holds over people's lives? Has the level of disillusion with the ability of politicians to create constructive social policies risen to a level so high that the state does not even come into consideration? What implication does this construction of the citizen as the locus of power and agency, as the one responsible for constructing her own sense of freedom, hold for other analyses of the mediation of citizenship?

Divining the Future, Creating the Present

Additionally, what format will this mediation take over the next couple of years? Most of the people who embraced alternative healing and spirituality were those who have grown up under socialism, and often witnessed and were the driving forces behind the Velvet Revolution and the subsequent transition to a post-socialist democracy. Witness to both systems of governance, they were thus directly affected by the transition to post-socialism and social change (or lack thereof) accompanying it. What will happen when this generation slowly makes way for the next one?

Will the subsequent generation, having grown up under one system of governance, feel the need to seek complementary narratives of freedom and healthcare? Perhaps the children of those who now form the alternative healing and spirituality community in the Czech Republic will maintain the legacy of this search for alternative narratives. Perhaps the discourses of alternative healing and spirituality will develop over time and come to hold a different sort of significance in their dialogue with Czech society.

For now, however, alternative healing and spirituality remain engaged in an active dialogue with several aspects of the social realities in the Czech Republic. They serve as means of negotiating citizenship, providing not only narratives of illness, but also those of freedom. Rising in popularity along with the rise in dissatisfaction and disillusionment with capitalism, they complement not only the biomedical model of care, but also the official political discourse of freedom, “filling the void” where needed. Aware of the dissonance between the official political discourse and the lived realities, and recognizing the limitations of the post-socialist social system, people choose to embark on a different journey, embracing alternative healing and spirituality as their road to freedom.

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