

**Western Buddhist Experience:
The Journey from Encounter to Commitment in Two
Forms of Western Buddhism**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the nature of the socialization and commitment process in the Western Buddhist context, by investigating the experiences of practitioners affiliated with two Buddhist Centres: the Theravadin Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre and the Gelugpa Tibetan Vajrayana Institute. Commitment by participants is based on the recognition that, through the application of the beliefs and practices of the new religion, self-transformation has occurred. It follows a process of religious experimentation in which the claims of a religious reality are experientially validated against inner understandings and convictions, which themselves become clearer as a result of experimental participation in religious activity. Functionally, the adopted worldview is seen to frame personal experience in a manner that renders it more meaningful. Meditative experience and its interpretation according to doctrine must be applicable to the improvement of the quality of lived experience. It must be relevant to current living, and ethically sustainable. Substantively, commitment is conditional upon accepting and successfully employing: the three marks of *samsaric* existence, *duhkha*, *anitya* and *anatman* (Skt) as an interpretive framework for lived reality. In this the three groups of the Eight-fold Path, *sila*/ethics, *samadhi*/concentration, and *prajna*/wisdom provide a strategy for negotiating lived experience in the light of meditation techniques, specific to each Buddhist orientation, by which to apply doctrinal principles in one's own transformation.

Two theoretical approaches are found to have explanatory power for understanding the stages of intensifying interaction that lead to commitment in both Western Buddhist contexts. Lofland and Skonovd's *Experimental Motif* models the method of entry into and exploration of a Buddhist Centre's shared reality. Data from participant observation and interview demonstrates this approach to be facilitated by the organizational and teaching activities of the two Western Buddhist Centres, and to be taken by the participants who eventually become adherents. Individuals take an actively experimental attitude toward the new group's activities, withholding judgment while testing the group's doctrinal position, practices, and expected experiential outcomes against their own values and life experience. In an environment of minimal social pressure, transformation of belief is gradual over a period of from months to years.

Deeper understanding of the nature of the commitment process is provided by viewing it in terms of religious resocialization, involving the reframing of one's understanding of reality and *sense-of-self* within a new worldview. The transition from seekerhood to commitment occurs through a process of socialization, the stages of which are found to be engagement and apprehension, comprehension, and commitment. Apprehension is the understanding of core Buddhist notions. Comprehension occurs through learning how various aspects of the worldview form a coherent meaning-system, and through application of the Buddhist principles to the improvement of one's own life circumstances. It necessitates understanding of the fundamental relationships between doctrine, practice, and experience. Commitment to the group's outlook and objectives occurs when these are adopted as one's orientation to reality, and as one's strategy for negotiating a lived experience that is both efficacious and ethically sustainable. It is also maintained that sustained commitment is conditional upon continuing validation of that experience.

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Glossary

Aggregates	<i>Skandha</i> (Skt). <i>Khandha</i> (Pali). The five heaps or components which collectively constitute the human being: form, feeling, perception, volitional factors, and consciousness
BMIMC	The Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, in Medlow Bath, NSW, Australia
<i>Bodhicitta</i> (Skt)	A key term in Mahayana Buddhism. The state of mind of a Bodhisattva. One of the three principals of the Mahayana path: renunciation, bodhicitta, and wisdom-realizing-emptiness.
<i>Bodhisattva</i> (Skt)	The embodiment of the spiritual ideal of Mahayana Buddhism. The bodhisattva generates the aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, and cultivates the six perfections.
<i>Brahmaviharas</i> (Skt, Pali)	The four sublime states of mind: compassion, lovingkindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity.
Concentration	<i>Samatha</i> (Skt, Pali). The meditation technique used to achieve the state of one-pointedness of mind.
<i>Dana</i> (Pali)	Generosity. An Asian-derived practice that involves giving to others.
Deity Yoga	A key meditative practice of Tantric Buddhism, in which the visualized image of the deity is used as a model of the enlightened attributes within oneself.
Dependent Origination	The Buddhist doctrine that teaches that all phenomena arise in dependence on causes and conditions, and lack intrinsic being.
<i>Dhamma</i> (Pali)	<i>Dharma</i> (Skt). Denotes three things: the natural order that underpins the physical and moral spheres, the Buddhist teachings, and the phenomena that constitute the word. It refers mainly to the fourth <i>satipatthana</i> in this work.
<i>Dukkha</i> (Pali)	<i>Duhkha</i> (Skt). There is no direct English translation, although suffering is the word most commonly used. While I prefer the term unrest, I have used suffering throughout the thesis, following the way the term is most commonly understood by Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners.
Emptiness	<i>Sunyata</i> (Skt). The Mahayana doctrine that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence.
Five Lay Precepts	To abstain from killing, stealing, false speech, sexual misconduct, and taking intoxicants
Four Noble Truths	The four foundational propositions of Buddhist doctrine: the truth of suffering; suffering arises because of craving; the end of suffering is <i>Nirvana</i> (Skt); the way to <i>Nirvana</i> is the Noble Eight-fold Path.
FPMT	The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, a world-wide <i>Gelugpa</i> Tibetan organization
<i>Gelugpa</i> (Tib.)	One of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, founded by <i>Tsong-kha-pa</i> in the fourteenth century
Hindrances	The five mental states held to be the main impediments to the development of both concentration and insight meditation: sense-desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt

Impression Point	Dilthey's notion of a symbolic phenomenon in which a new understanding of self and symbol system, and a feeling of commitment are all generated at once
<i>Lam Rim</i>	A class of Tibetan literature which outlines the stages of the path to enlightenment. Tsong-kha-pa's work <i>Lam-rim Chenmo</i> is the foundational text for the FPMT.
<i>Madhyamaka</i> (Skt)	The Middle School, which advocates a middle course between extreme practices and theories. It was founded by Nagarjuna in the Second Century CE, and later transmitted from India to Tibet.
<i>Mahayana</i>	One of the three vehicles of Buddhism, emphasizing the values of compassion and insight, and the ideal of the bodhisattva
<i>Metta</i> (Pali)	A meditation based on generation of lovingkindness to all beings equally, in order to develop equanimity
Mindfulness	<i>Sati</i> (Pali). An alert state of mind cultivated as the foundation for insight
<i>Nibbana</i> (Pali)	<i>Nirvana</i> (Skt). The goal of the Eightfold Path, attainment of which marks the end of Samsaric existence
Noble Eightfold Path	The path that leads from Samsara to Nirvana. The eight factors are placed in three groups: wisdom, ethics and concentration. In teachings at VI these three are referred to as the three higher trainings.
<i>Samsara</i> (Skt; Pali)	The cycle of repeated birth and death that human beings undergo until they attain <i>Nirvana</i> (Skt)
<i>Satipatthana Sutta</i>	The foundational sutta for the Vipassana method of Mahasi Sayadaw, outlining the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness
<i>Satipatthanas</i> (Pali) <i>Sutra</i> (Skt)	The foundations of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and <i>dhammas Sutta</i> (Pali). A discourse of the Buddha. In the Pali Canon, texts are grouped in the second of the three pitakas.
<i>Tantra</i>	A class of Mahayana treatise claiming to provide a rapid means of attaining enlightenment. Within the Mahayana, enlightenment may be gained by sutric or tantric practice.
<i>Theravada</i>	One of the three vehicles of Buddhism. It is characterized by fidelity to the texts of the Pali Canon.
Three Marks of Existence	<i>Duhkha, Anitya, Anatman</i> (Skt). <i>Dukkha, Anicca, Anatta</i> (Pali). Translated as suffering, impermanence, not-self
<i>Vajrayana</i> (Skt)	Tantric Buddhism: one of the three vehicles of Buddhism, although sometimes thought of as a branch of the Mahayana
VI	The Vajrayana Institute in Sydney, NSW, Australia, a centre affiliated with the FPMT
<i>Vipassana</i> (Pali)	<i>Vipasyana</i> (Skt). Insight Meditation: the form of meditation practised predominantly at BMIMC

Chapter 1: The Nature of Exploration and Commitment in Western Buddhist Experience

1 Introduction

This thesis explores and articulates what, for the practitioners and adherents of two forms of Western Buddhism, it means to be a Western Buddhist. It accomplishes this by exploring practitioners' engagement with the religious activity at two Australian Buddhist centres: the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre in Medlow Bath, in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, and Vajrayana Institute in Ashfield, in Sydney's inner west. By *religious engagement* I refer to the nature of religious belief, practice, experience and commitment, the religious change undergone by the participant, and to the shaping and maintenance of these by the religious cultures of the two centres. The thesis also aims to describe the way in which Buddhism meets the expectations and needs of its Western adherents and practitioners.

Throughout, the study maintains a synchronic perspective. An exploration of the way in which the two Buddhist centres were founded and developed, while historically significant, would detract from the revelation of contemporary Anglo-Australian Buddhist engagement as facilitated by a focus on the mental cultures of the two centres. The history of Buddhism in the West is well-documented in the literature, while information about the mental cultures of the many Western Buddhist centres in Australia currently is still scarce, according to the view of Michelle Spuler expressed in 2000.¹ Spuler notes that research of this nature has been undertaken in America and Europe, but not in Australia. She also noted that the existing literature focusses mainly on demographics, ethnic identity and migrant history.² Notable publications exploring these are Paul Croucher's *Buddhism in Australia*³, a historical survey, and the more recent publication by Adam and Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia*, based on the 1996 Commonwealth of Australia's Census results.⁴ By comparison with these publications, Patricia Sherwood's *The Buddha is in the Street: Engaged Buddhism in Australia*⁵ explores more of the *ethos* of Australia's Western Buddhists. However, it is the intention of this study to explore a dimension that has hitherto been little addressed in the literature about Australian Buddhism. This concerns both the nature of the mental cultures of Western Buddhist centres, and the subjective experience of being a Buddhist in a Western, and specifically

¹ Spuler, M. "Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia", in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15 [1], pp29-44, Taylor and Francis, 2000, p29.

² Spuler, *op.cit.*

³ Croucher, P. *Buddhism in Australia 1848-1988*, New South Wales University Press, 1989.

⁴ Adam, E, and Hughes, P. *The Buddhists in Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996.

⁵ Sherwood, P. *The Buddha is in the Street: Engaged Buddhism in Australia*, Edith Cowan University, 2003.

Australian context, in contrast to studies with more pragmatic demographic, social, or political focus. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to an outline of how the study is to proceed. I commence with a discussion of the essential characteristics of Western Buddhism in order to highlight the essentially *convert* status of its adherents, and the implications this has for the way in which participants engage with Buddhist doctrine and practice, and derive meaning and fulfilment from such engagement.

2 The Nature of Western Buddhism

Scholars distinguish *Western Buddhism* as a form of Buddhism emergent among Western adherents of Buddhism.⁶ Although Coleman notes that this new Buddhism draws on three principal Asian traditions: Zen from east Asia, Vipassana from the Theravadin tradition, and Vajrayana from Tibet⁷, several American researchers observe that Western Buddhism draws upon the common foundations of all Buddhist schools⁸: the Four Noble Truths, the Eight-Fold Path, and the meditative practices of mindfulness, concentration, and loving-kindness.⁹ According to Conze, Prebish and Coleman, it is characterized by a strong emphasis on doctrinal study and meditation practice.¹⁰ Coleman adds that the central focus of Western Buddhists is 'direct religious experience and the personal transformation it produces'.¹¹ The Western Buddhist is seen to make a commitment to Buddhism independent of family or cultural affiliation because it provides an appealing set of values and practices¹², and to report having undergone constructive personal changes after intensive meditation practice.¹³

⁶ Coleman, J. "The New Buddhism: Some Empirical Findings", in *American Buddhism*, pp91-99, Curzon Press, 1999. p92; Layman, E. *Buddhism in America*, Nelson-Hall, 1976, pxvi; Numrich, P. "How the Swans Came to Lake Michigan: The Social Organization of Buddhist Chicago", in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39 [2], pp189-203, Association for the Scientific Study of Religion, 2000, p195; Prebish, C. "Introduction", in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp1-10, University of California Press, 1998. p1; Rawlinson, A. *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*, Open Court Publishing, 1997, p13.

⁷ Coleman, 1999, *op.cit.*, p92.

⁸ Fronsdal, G. "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness", in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp164-180, University of California Press, 1998, p176; Rawlinson, *op.cit.*; Coleman, 1999, *op.cit.*, pp97-8.

⁹ Fronsdal, *op.cit.*, p176.

¹⁰ Conze, E. *A Short History of Buddhism*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1980, p131; Prebish, 1998 *op.cit.*, p1; Coleman, 1999, *op.cit.*, p98.

¹¹ Coleman, *op.cit.*, 1999, p96; p98. The results of Coleman's questionnaire on the motivation behind American commitment to Buddhism emphasize the need for spiritual fulfilment as a motivator: 53.5% of the respondents became involved in Buddhism because of a desire for spiritual fulfilment, 20.6% as a solution to personal problems, and about 12% were attracted to Buddhist group members. This was also supported by the ranking of the relative importance of meditation, services and ceremonies, and social relations. Over 90 percent of the respondents ranked meditation first.

¹² Sherwood, *op.cit.*, p29. Sherwood refers to Australians in particular, but the American literature reflects this also.

¹³ Layman refers to a *meditational Buddhism*, to refer to Americans who have been seen to have undergone personality changes because of their meditation practice. Changes most often noticed are increased warmth and friendliness, spontaneity, improved disposition, more efficient

Western Buddhists are mostly *convert* Buddhists, a term used to distinguish them from indigenous Buddhists. These two terms emphasize the sociological nature of the differences between the two. Whereas *culture* or *cradle* Buddhism maintains an ethnic group's cohesive way of life and heritage, and its temples provide the locus for a larger cultural matrix, convert Buddhism's function is transformative, providing an alternative religious identity by facilitating a shift in worldview. The former is identity continuity and maintenance while the latter is identity transformation.¹⁴ My informants and interview respondents, with very few exceptions, were convert Buddhists. My interest in the nature of Western Buddhist affiliation and identity, in contrast to the interest in the same questions by sociologists of religion¹⁵, lay in the way in which Western appreciation of Buddhist doctrine and practice contributes to the maintenance of shared discourse at the centres, and equally, how shared discourse facilitated socialization and commitment.

North American studies have shown Western interest in Buddhism to be intellectual, text-based and experientially-oriented.¹⁶ How then do seekers sample and engage with the practice? What determines their choice of affiliation? Although the beliefs and practices of Western Buddhism are Asian-derived¹⁷, the choice is thought to be shaped by Western freedom and liberty to select what appeals out of the variety of Buddhist traditions and schools currently available, under the direction of Westerners' own needs, tastes and sentiments. Fronsdal notes that giving American Vipassana students pragmatic and experiential goals without the support of

functioning and serenity, alleviated anxiety and depression, better physical health, a sense of purpose and direction, improved concentration, better self-control, awakening of creativity, a reduction in ego-centredness, and a withering of attachment to material things. See Layman, *op.cit.*, p275. Also see the following authors for a profile of the Western Buddhist: Goldstein, J. *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism*, Rider, 2002; Sherwood, *op.cit.*, p29.

¹⁴ Coleman, *op.cit.*, 1999, p91; Numrich, *op.cit.*, pp194-95; Prebish, *op.cit.*, p1.

¹⁵ Many American scholars concern themselves with this area of study. Several patterns of Buddhist activity and affiliation have emerged which make the determination of religious identity a complex issue. Layman, Nattier, and Tweed note that a large number of people are self-defined Buddhists with no formal Buddhist affiliation, a category of Buddhist sympathizer that Tweed refers to as night-stands, those who read and incorporate Buddhist ideas into their life. See Layman, 1976, pxiv; Nattier, 1998, p185; Tweed, 1999, pp71-2; pp74-5. Bryant and Lamb raise the complexities introduced by the phenomena of serial conversion and religious pluralism. See Bryant, M, and Lamb, C. "Introduction: Conversion: contours of controversy and commitment in a plural world", in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, pp1-22, Cassell, 1999, pp9-11. Tweed believes that a problem is created in the discipline of Religious Studies and in the subfield of American Buddhist history by use of an essentialist, normative definition of religious identity. A variety of means have been suggested: using criteria such as taking refuge or the five lay vows (Prebish), or holding certain beliefs, meditating and chanting, or active membership in a specific organization. Nattier, J. "Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America", in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp183-195, University of California Press, Berkely, 1998. Tweed, *op.cit.*, 1999, pp79-80.

¹⁶ Prebish, *op.cit.*; Numrich, *op.cit.*, p195; Tweed, *op.cit.*, p75.

¹⁷ Coleman, J. *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p97.

traditional Theravadin doctrinal frameworks and motivations appears to reduce Vipassana in the West to a form of therapy¹⁸, and similarly, Urban maintains that Tantra may be reduced to a hedonistic and pleasure-affirming spirituality in the West.¹⁹ The current Western preoccupation with self can be seen in various aspects of the contemporary religious counterculture. Numerous scholars have written about the relationship between religious identity construction and the consumer culture²⁰, the growth of self-religion facilitated by the religious supermarket, the aim at the heart of New Age religion of sacralizing the self and the cosmos²¹, and the self-constructing activity observed in Neo-Paganism.²²

The characteristic that distinguishes Western Buddhists from indigenous Buddhists is that they have converted to Buddhism. They have chosen to adopt a religion that was not theirs from birth. The attraction of Westerners to doctrinal, practical, and experiential elements of traditional Buddhist systems suggests that any successful explanation of conversion in the Western Buddhist context must account for the role of Buddhist doctrine and practice, and for the role of the meditative experience accessed by practitioners, in the conversion and commitment process. This raises questions about the nature of the worldview being shaped, maintained and shared by Western Buddhist practitioners. How do Westerners understand and accept reality from the Buddhist perspective, and what changes in thinking and self-perception are initiated by such acceptance? These are the fundamental questions that the thesis attempts to answer.

2.1 The Western Buddhist Ethnographic Field

An initial survey of the Western convert Buddhist milieu in Sydney was conducted.²³ It appeared at once diffuse and complex, comprising many organizations from various Buddhist traditions, and some, such as the Buddhist Library in Camperdown, Sydney, that were not affiliated with any specific form of Buddhism. Two ways of treating the field of Western Buddhism seemed evident from the initial investigation. The first was as a single religious subculture with many manifestations. The second was as a collection of institutions or organizations each with their own comparatively separate religious culture. A related consideration was whether my research should evenly represent the three most popular forms of

¹⁸ Fronsdal, *op.cit.*, p172. This article contains a discussion on the relationship between Vipassana and Psychotherapy. Fronsdal sees both as a strand of western individualism that focuses on personal experience and change.

¹⁹ Urban, H. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, University of California Press, 2003.

²⁰ Lyon, D. *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Polity Press, 2000, pp76-77.

²¹ Heelas, P. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

²² Berger, H. *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States*, University of South Carolina Press, 1999, p8; Pike, S. *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*, University of California Press, 2001, p221.

²³ This was largely by use of Buddhnet, at www.buddhanet.net

Buddhism in the West: Vipassana from the Theravada tradition, and Zen and Tibetan Buddhism from the Mahayana.²⁴ However, this posed more decisions about which of the multitude of organizations representing these forms to approach. Some preliminary fieldwork, conducted with BMIMC (Theravadin), VI and Rigpa²⁵ (both Tibetan Buddhist, although Gelugpa and Nyingma respectively), and Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (which draws upon the entire Buddhist tradition),²⁶ gave me an understanding of individual organizations' beliefs, practices, teaching activities, and social structure. It also demonstrated the diversity of Buddhist doctrine, practice, social organization and teaching formats that could be found in different Buddhist organizations.

The second view, organizations as discrete religious cultures, seemed more true to the Western Buddhist reality. Also, taking into account the needs of a comparative study, it seemed more methodologically sound to compare material from two or more groups that could be compared along doctrinal, practical, and experiential lines, rather than to interview individuals from a diffuse religious culture wherein lines of comparison would be difficult to draw. As outlined above in Section 1, Western Buddhists are in the main, *convert* Buddhists. Conversion models are frequently generated from single-group studies wherein the nature of the group's shared reality is assumed to be shared by all participants. Comparing Buddhist groups with commonalities and differences in doctrinal, practical, and experiential approach should provide two levels of comparison: between participants affiliated with the same centre, and between the respective religious cultures of the centres selected. This enabled me to narrow my choice of organizations to what was both manageable for and relevant to my thesis.

BMIMC and VI were selected ahead of the others for several significant reasons. First, with the exception of Tantric initiation at Vajrayana Institute, both centres allowed access to their range of activities. This had to be borne in mind; I needed to access and understand the nature and range of religious and social activity, and its role in maintaining and propagating the centre's shared reality, within the time constraints imposed on researching and writing a thesis. Conversely, Rigpa appeared designed to field newcomers into a program of introductory meditation courses that would occupy one for a year or so. Second, the FWBO appeared to be somewhat eclectic in its mix of Buddhist ideas and practices compared with the traditional foundations of BMIMC and VI,²⁷ and although its inclusion would have provided an interesting contrast to the other two, it was decided that the limitations

²⁴ See Coleman, 1999, *op.cit.*, p92.

²⁵ Rigpa is an international network of meditation centres under the guidance of Sogyal Rinpoche. Its website for the Sydney centre is found at www.rigpa.com.au/sydney.htm

²⁶ The Sydney Buddhist Centre at 24 Enmore Rd, Newtown, is the Sydney centre for the FWBO, the website for which is at www.sydneybuddhistcentre.org.au

²⁷ Its website at www.sydneybuddhistcentre.org.au, states that the FWBO draws upon the entire Buddhist tradition.

of time and space imposed by the format of the thesis dictated that two organizations provided enough material from which to work.

2.2 The Two Centres

The two centres, the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre (BMIMC) and Vajrayana Institute (VI) are comparable in that the religious activity of each draws on traditional textual material to inform the teachings of its practices. The teaching and religious activities of both centres exhibit a consistent adherence to their doctrinal foundations. While not initially apparent to a new participant, the teachings and practices of both organizations offer a slow, structured progression on the path to enlightenment. Rawlinson's model of experiential comparative religion categorizes the nature of Eastern traditions embraced in the West according to two pairs of opposites: hot and cool, structured and unstructured. Hot and cool contrast otherness and numinosity with self-realization, while structured and unstructured contrast an inherent order in the cosmos which needs to be discovered, with identity of method and goal.²⁸ According to this model, both groups are classified as structured, but Theravada is classified as cool and Vajrayana as hot.²⁹ Of the list of characteristics that Rawlinson outlines for each, a comparison of hot and cool structured with respect to soteriology appears to hold for the two traditions, at least superficially. Hot structured Buddhist soteriology sees 'everything in Samsara as sacred, and that one should live as though this is true', while cool structured sees 'learning how Samsara operates' as the way to liberation.

However, Rawlinson's description of cool structured, "Liberation is within oneself but it must be uncovered by disciplined practice"³⁰ is more substantially applicable to both. As discussion in Chapters 2 and 4 indicate, the gradual stepwise approach taken to the acquisition of insight into the nature of reality, is explained in the textual sources for the practice in each case, namely, Mahasi Sayadaw's Thirteen Stages of Insight Knowledge,³¹ and Tsong-kha-pa's Lam Rim Chenmo.³² Despite the apparent differences between the FPMT and the Vipassana Buddhism of Mahasi Sayadaw, it seems that the essentially structured nature of both appeals to those individuals, including myself, who take the experimental approach to religious involvement, and facilitates their gradual comprehension of the meaning-system of each organization.

However, these similarities would be evident to a participant/practitioner only after some period of involvement with the group, from weeks to months, and exposure to

²⁸ Rawlinson, *op.cit.*, pp98-99.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p103. See diagram 4: The Different Kinds of Buddhism.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p100.

³¹ Mahasi Sayadaw. *Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages*, trans. U Pe Thin and Myanaung U Tin, Buddhist Publication Society, 1971, pp20-38. Also see Chapter 3 Section 2.4: *Mahasi's Thirteen Stages of Insight Knowledge*.

³² See note 34 below.

its range of teachings and activities. From the perspective of the potential participant, the most obvious difference between the two is the retreat format at BMIMC and the classroom style of VI. With exposure, differences in meditation practices and doctrinal emphasis would become apparent. Major differences between the centres exist with respect to worldview—Theravada and Mahayana respectively—doctrinal foundations, the nature of religious activity—the style of religious authority and instruction, meditation techniques practised, and ritual activity—and social organization and interaction. The Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre (BMIMC) is Theravadin and facilitates teaching and practice of Vipassana meditation in the method of Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. This practice is doctrinally based in the *Satipatthana Sutta* from the *Majjhima Nikaya* of the Pali Canon.³³ BMIMC primarily offers meditation retreats of two days' to one month's duration, and also some one- or two-day workshops.

In distinction, Vajrayana Institute (VI) is affiliated with the worldwide *Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition* (FPMT) under the directorship of Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, the successor to Lama Thubten Yeshe. The FPMT belongs to the school of Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhism, which bases its scriptural authority in the writings of Lama Tsong-kha-pa, the founder of the Gelugpa Order, who drew on the work of Lama Atisha and the earlier Kadampa Order. Tsong-kha-pa's *Lam Rim*, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, is the foundational text for the FPMT's teaching program.³⁴ The FPMT also draws on a variety of Mahayana sutric and tantric literature, including root texts composed by key figures of the lineage. VI offers a variety of beginners' and advanced courses on various aspects of the Gelugpa path to Enlightenment. Because of the difference in teaching styles—predominantly retreat-style and classroom style respectively—the nature of social engagement differs between the two centres. These characteristics are explored comprehensively in Chapters 2 and 4, which outline teaching and learning formats and processes at the two centres: BMIMC and VI respectively. In sum, the two centres offer different methods of engagement and different shared realities, each thereby showing differences in doctrinal, practical, experiential and social dimensions of activity.

3 Theoretical Approaches to Religious Change

As *convert* Buddhists, Western Buddhists come to worldviews—and methods of engagement therewith—to which they are not native. Although I have chosen to use the term *commitment* to denote the style of religious change that practitioners appear

³³ Bikkhu Bodhi (ed). "Satipatthana Sutta", in *Majjhima Nikaya* (The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha), pp145-55, translator Bikkhu Nanamoli, Wisdom Publications, 2001

³⁴ Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Snow Lion Publications, volume 1, 2000; volume 3, 2002; volume 2, 2004. These three volumes were edited by the Lam Rim Chen Mo Translation Committee, Joshua W. C. Cutler editor-in-chief, Guy Newland editor. They are readily available at Vajrayana Institute.

to undergo, the commitment process as exhibited by the adherents of both forms of Buddhism involves the same mechanisms of change that are typically associated with religious conversion. The term *religious conversion* is presently understood to refer to religious change in a general sense.³⁵ However, it is understood and accepted to be a complex process involving personal, cultural, social, and religious dimensions.³⁶ Of the many models formulated in response to the almost infinite number of views of conversion, possibly the most universally applicable is Rambo's seven-stage model, which attempts to account for the field of influences that bear on the phenomenon.³⁷

A search of the conversion literature reveals that most conversion models are generated from single-group studies, and founded on factors relevant to the disciplinary concerns of the researcher.³⁸ It is accepted that a model generated to explain the transformation process in one context may not have general applicability. My search of the conversion literature has revealed no suitable model by which to organize and explain the data collected from the respondents at BMIMC and VI, other than that founded on Berger's principle of conversion as religious resocialization, to be outlined presently. This adaptation provides a broad framework in which to organize the particulars of individual religious processes of change. Apart from this, the thoughts of a number of other scholars tend to express the *sentiments* and manner of approach to Buddhism held by the Western Buddhists concerned. Chief among these are the notion of participants as active seekers; exploration as experimental participation;³⁹ conversion as a dynamic process of resocialization,⁴⁰ or as a self-transformation,⁴¹ or as a change in the self-concept;⁴² and

³⁵ Rambo, L, and Farhadian, C. "Converting: Stages of Religious Change", in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary practices and Controversies*, pp23-34, Cassell, 1999, p23.

³⁶ See Rambo, L. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University Press, 1993, p165, for a discussion of current thought about religious conversion. Also see Paloutzian, R. *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, Allyn and Bacon, 1996. Paloutzian discusses the broad categorization of conversion processes into fast, gradual, and socialization (the ongoing lifelong socialization into a tradition). Granqvist, *op.cit.*, p173.

³⁷ Rambo, L. "Conversion: Toward a Holistic Model of Religious Change", in *Pastoral Psychology* 38 [1], pp47-63, Human Sciences Press, 1989; Rambo, 1993, *op.cit.* The seven steps are context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences. Rambo states that the stages are not linear; they are cumulative and interactive. The stages have similarities to Lofland and Stark's seven stages of their Worldsaver model, which Rambo states he uses as a heuristic guide. However, his approach allows for more self-directed action on the part of the subject. See Lofland, J, and Stark, R. "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective", in *American Sociological Review*, pp862-75, 1965.

³⁸ Lofland and Stark, *op.cit.*, pp862-75, 1965. Possibly the most well-known is Lofland and Stark's World-Saver model, derived from their 1965 study of the Divine Precepts movement, later renamed the Unification Church.

³⁹ Lofland, J, and Skonovd, N. "Conversion Motifs" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20 [4], pp373-85, The Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1981.

⁴⁰ Pilarzyk, T. "Conversion and Alternation Processes in the Youth Culture: A Comparative Analysis of Religious Traditions", in *Pacific Sociological Review* 21 [4], pp379-405, Pacific Sociological Association, 1978, pp382-83.

⁴¹ Stromberg, P. *Language and Self-transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p18.

most significantly, a trend toward treating religions 'less as systems of truth than as efforts to discover a ground of being that orients and orders experience more generally'.⁴³ The last of these accurately reflects the spirit in which the Buddhist view of reality and salvation is embraced by the Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners.

Historically, the essential nature of conversion has been seen as change to one's self or identity and to one's worldview, often denoted by the term *universe of discourse* from symbolic interactionism. Trivisano's definition of conversion as a 'radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life',⁴⁴ and Heirich's as 'the process of changing a sense of root reality',⁴⁵ were frequently employed in scholarly research during the 1970s and '80s.⁴⁶ Categorizations of conversion types based on the distinction between complete or partial internal movement, typically take Nock's conversion/adhesion distinction,⁴⁷ or symbolic interactionist Richard Trivisano's conversion/alternation distinction⁴⁸ as their foundation.⁴⁹ Much research has been based on the traditional implication of *radical personal change* at the heart of conversions.⁵⁰ Over the previous few decades, notably since the 1970s, the radical change thesis has decreased in influence for two reasons. First, scholars maintain that such *radical* internal transformation is not easily observed.⁵¹ Second is the

⁴² Staples, C, and Mauss, A. "Conversion or Commitment? A Reassessment of the Snow and Machalek Approach to the Study of Conversion", in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 [2], pp133-47, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1987, p137.

⁴³ Heirich, M. "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion", in *American Journal of Sociology* 83 [3], pp653-80, The University of Chicago Press, 1977, p674.

⁴⁴ Trivisano, R. "Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations", in *Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction*, pp594-606, Xerox College Publishing, 1970, pp600-01.

⁴⁵ Heirich, *op.cit.*, pp673-74.

⁴⁶ Lofland and Skonovd, *op.cit.*

⁴⁷ Nock, A. *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, John Hopkins University Press, 1998 (first published 1933).

⁴⁸ Trivisano, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹ Categorizations of this type are based firstly on whether the transformation is complete or partial, and on whether the new universe of discourse is the Centre or the periphery of the individual's reality picture. Secondly, they employ the substantive relation between the old and new universes of discourse, and how such movement facilitates identity change. See Gordon, D. "The Jesus People: An Identity Synthesis", in *Urban Life and Culture* 3 [2], pp159-78, Sage Publications 1974, pp165-66; Richardson, 1980, pp47-49 for discussions of such schemes and their derivations.

⁵⁰ Snow, D, and Machalek, R,. "The Sociology of Conversion", in *Annual Review of Sociology* 10. pp167-90, Annual Reviews Inc., California, 1984, pp168-69. They draw attention to scholarly debate about whether conversion involves sudden, gradual, or multiple and serial changes, but the notion of radical change remains at the core of all conceptions of conversion. They and Richardson observed that the term was used in different ways without clear definition. Richardson, J. "Conversion Careers: In and Out of the New Religions", in *Conversion Careers: In and Out of the New Religions*, pp5-9, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, 1978, p7. Also see Wilson, S. "Becoming a Yogi: Resocialization and Deconditioning as Conversion Processes", in *Sociological Analysis* 45 [4], pp301-14, Roger O'Toole editor, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1984, p301.

⁵¹ Cusack, C. "Towards a General Theory of Conversion", in *Religious Change, Conversion and Culture*, pp1-21, Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture, 1996, p3.

acceptance of the active conversion paradigm. Based on James's identification of two conversion types according to the active or passive nature of the convert, 'volitional conversion and the conversion of self-surrender',⁵² Richardson posits an alternative *active* paradigm which questions the traditional assumption of a passive subject and a deterministic model.⁵³

The view of the active convert, the religious seeker who experiments with religious beliefs and practices in order to effect processual identity change, is widely accepted.⁵⁴ The conceptualization of the active participant possibly reaches its zenith in the thinking of Dawson, who sees the process of self-definition and change at the heart of conversion. Dawson argues for not only active conversions, but for the possibility of rational conversions which are reflectively monitored, based on the principle that rational actions are their own explanation.⁵⁵ Dawson also argues for self-affirmation as opposed to the self-surrender implicit not only in the traditional view in the West, often referred to as the *Pauline* paradigm—an imposition of a Christian conversion model onto all conversion data⁵⁶—but also in models of conversion based on coercion, deprivation and neediness,⁵⁷ and on the assumption of psychological pathology or unstable identity.⁵⁸ This includes literature devoted to the study of the recruitment mechanisms utilized by religious groups to ensure commitment⁵⁹, such as the forming of cult-affective bonds and the severment of beyond-group ties.⁶⁰

⁵² James, W. *The Varieties of the Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Routledge, (1902) 2002, pp163-64. James actually credits Starbuck with this distinction.

⁵³ Richardson, J. "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24 [2], pp163-79, The Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1985. Also see Berger, P, and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday & Company, 1966, p145. Lofland and Skonovd, and Kilbourne and Richardson disagree over the cause of the active and passive views. Lofland and Skonovd attribute it to differences in the nature of the conversions themselves; to an historical shift that has occurred in Western culture. Kilbourne and Richardson see it as a matter of "theoretical goggles". It is more conceivable that both conversion phenomena and theoretical perspectives are subject to historical change.

⁵⁴ Richardson, J. "Conversion Careers", in *Society* 17 [3], pp47-50, Sheridan Printing Company, 1980, p49. See also Kilbourne, B, and Richardson, J. "Social Experimentation Self-Process or Social Role", in *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 31 [1], pp13-22, The Avenue Publishing Company, 1985, p13. This paper uses Lifton's *protean man* concept to describe a pattern of social experimentation with role change in new religious and self-growth groups in contemporary American society.

⁵⁵ Dawson, L. "Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality: Theoretically Elaborating "Active" Conversions, in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29 [2], pp141-63, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1990.

⁵⁶ Dawson, *op.cit.* See Kilbourne and Richardson, 1989, *op.cit.*, pp1-2, and Cusack, *op.cit.*, for discussions of the Pauline experience as the model of the conversion 'event' and the passive subject, which the former posit as the model for the old conversion paradigm.

⁵⁷ Glock, C. "The Role of Deprivation in the Origin and Evolution of Religious Groups", in *Religion and Social Conflict*, pp24-36, Oxford University Press, 1964.

⁵⁸ Lifton, R. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*, BasicBooks, 1993.

⁵⁹ This is the concern of Hall's paper on commitment pathways, based on Kanter's commitment thesis derived from study of Nineteenth-Century communal groups. Hall, J. "Social

From the understanding that conversions differ in a number of significant ways, several researchers have devised models that attempt to account for the phenomenological variations found in different religious contexts. These schemas aimed to account for large differences, highlighted by much research of the previous few decades, in both mainstream religion and new religious movements. Both classification schemes arrange conversion process types along a passive-active axis which attempts to account for the somewhat competing forces of the individual's set of needs and interests, and the socioreligious interests of the group.⁶¹ A notable example is Lofland and Skonovd's conception of six conversion *motifs*⁶², conceived as salient thematic elements and key experiences combined with objective situations. They define *motif experience* itself as 'those aspects of a conversion which are most memorable and orienting to the person *undergoing* personal transformation'⁶³.

3.1 Lofland and Skonovd's *Experimental Motif*

Data gathered early in the period of my fieldwork suggested the appropriateness of applying Lofland and Skonovd's *Experimental Motif* to the interpretation of the process of engagement and change undergone by both types of Buddhist practitioner. Lofland and Skonovd hold the experimental motif to consist of 'a pragmatic, *show me* attitude', learning to act like a convert, withholding judgment for a considerable length of time after taking up the life style of the fully-committed participant. There is a relatively low level of social pressure and transformation of identity, behaviour, and worldview takes place over a relatively prolonged period,

Organization and Pathways of Commitment: Types of Communal Groups, Rational Choice Theory, and the Kanter Thesis", in *American Sociological Review* 53, pp679-92, American Sociological Association, 1988.

⁶⁰ Lofland and Stark, 1965, *op.cit.*

⁶¹ See Kilbourne, B, and Richardson, J. "Paradigm Conflict, Types of Conversion, and Conversion Theories", in *Sociological Analysis* 50 [1], pp1-21, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1989, pp3-8. Kilbourne and Richardson's "2 x2" typology conceived along two axes: the passive or active role of the convert, and the intraindividual or interindividual mechanism for change, results in four categories: Active Intraindividual (intellectual or self conversion by self-initiated cognitive responses to particular kinds of information); Passive Intraindividual (mystical belief change/affectional/psychopathological — deterministic in nature); Active Interindividual (experimental/social drift — emphasis on situational context); Passive Interindividual (revivalist/socialization/deprivation/coercive).

⁶² Lofland and Skonovd, *op.cit.* Their six conversion motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive, are conceived as salient thematic elements and key experiences combined with objective situations. They define *motif experience* itself as 'those aspects of a conversion which are most memorable and orienting to the person *undergoing* personal transformation'. Also see Gussner, R, and Berkowitz, S. "Scholars, Sects, and Sanghas, 1: Recruitment to Asian-Based Meditation Groups in North America", in *Sociological Analysis* 49 [2], pp136-70, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1986, p138, who acknowledge Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs as a recognition of the different forms of conversion generated by the interplay of structural circumstances and the actors.

⁶³ Lofland and Skonovd, *op.cit.*

from months to years.⁶⁴ Fieldwork indicates that the experiences of all participants and practitioners can be accommodated by this view. The exploration and socialization process occurs over a period of months to, more usually, years. The practitioners unanimously fit the profile of the religious seeker. They undergo a process of trying out and evaluating belief structures and practices, both in their religious exploration before encounter with Buddhism, and as part of their exploration of Buddhism. The process is an active one, and when commitment ensues, it is either a decision made privately or stated publically by the individual of their own volition.⁶⁵

While the experimental motif accurately models the means of approach to religious change, it does not explain or define the nature of the change itself. Lofland and Skonovd themselves note that their motifs adduce types of change, but do not 'delineate steps, phases or processes within each type'⁶⁶. Interview data from adherents of both Buddhisms illustrate the processual nature of personal change leading to commitment. The accounts offered by both Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners show the outcome of experimental immersion in a group's shared reality to be the gradual acquisition of knowledge of the worldview and its frameworks of meaning. However, while socialization into a religious reality is facilitated by a variety of factors, including intellectual, emotional, experiential, aesthetic, and social characteristics, the point of decision to commit to the religion appears to be fundamentally cognitive or intellectual in nature. Respondents from both centres described a gradual intellectual process of evaluation and acceptance that included experiential and emotional components, and that was marked or signposted by more than one point of apprehension, evaluation, and decision. Significantly, these descriptions exhibited a correspondence to James' definition of volitional conversion as the regenerative, usually gradual building up of a new set of moral and spiritual habits, which contains critical points where movement is more rapid.⁶⁷

Respondents' descriptions of these points or moments also bear a striking resemblance to Stromberg's borrowing of Dilthey's *impression point*, 'the moment in the perceptual process when a complex phenomenon becomes a graspable, coherent

⁶⁴ Lofland and Skonovd, *op.cit.*, pp378-79. They hold the experimental motif to operate in new age, metaphysical types of groups, and in other groups where the prospective convert is encouraged to take an experimental attitude toward the group's ritual and organizational activities.

⁶⁵ Lamb, C. "Conversion as a Process Leading to Enlightenment: the Buddhist Perspective", in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, pp75-88, Cassell, 1999. Lamb raises the issue of formal ceremony vs quiet transition to the Buddhist perspective. It is significant that the issue of a private commitment and its process of being gradual rather than sudden is contained within the Buddhist perspective as shown by Lamb. There are structured conversion/commitment paths, but one does not have to take them.

⁶⁶ Lofland and Skonovd, *op.cit.*, p383.

⁶⁷ James, 2002, *op.cit.*, p164.

unity to the perceiver'.⁶⁸ Stromberg's adaptation of Dilthey's conception to the understanding of conversion experiences, is rendered as: 'a symbolic phenomenon in which a new understanding of self, a new understanding of a symbol system, and a feeling of commitment are all generated at once. In a sense, these three developments are inseparable, and better understood as three different perspectives on the same change than as separate processes.'⁶⁹ Stromberg successfully describes the central and ideal transformation process of the more intense of respondents' experiences when he states that 'as the actor forges a commitment to a set of symbols—elements of culture—those symbols reform the actor by becoming part of his or her new understanding of self'.⁷⁰ As a model for the conception of the instant of change that appears to elude theorists, it has some explanatory power for the two Western Buddhist contexts of interest, if two conditions are borne in mind. First, Stromberg's theoretical approach is generated from Christian conversion accounts, viz. from the experiences of St Paul and St Augustine, and from other accounts collected during fieldwork. These accounts appear to convey much more of an intense emotional response to the moment in question than do the Buddhist accounts of interest.

The second condition is related. According to the interview data, these moments varied with respect to the effect on self, and the nature of the symbol involved. There is no one dominant symbol, set of symbols or symbolic representation of ideas that features in commitment accounts. Unlike conversion accounts offered by Jehovah's Witnesses that had to follow a standard symbolic rhetoric⁷¹, a standard symbolic representation of change is absent from the accounts at hand. Practitioners who reported this kind of experience cited a symbolic moment or a grasp of a symbolic representation that appears to be peculiar to them. Two further points of difference exist. Some respondents reported having more than one point or moment of this nature, and some added that their experience overall was more akin to an extended process with several of these markers. Each one was accompanied by the realization that they felt more involved with the new meaning-system than previously. In addition to this, some respondents did not appear to experience these moments of relative intensity. While they had invested effort in study, personal meditation practice and contemplation, and were committed to the endeavour of learning and application of the new material, their descriptions convey the sense that their actions were intended to bring about a transformation⁷², and not the result of one.

⁶⁸ See Stromberg, P. "The Impression Point: Synthesis of Symbol and Self", in *Ethos* 13 [1], pp56-74, The American Anthropological Association, 1985.

⁶⁹ Stromberg, 1985, *op.cit.*, p61.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Beckford, J. "Accounting for Conversion", in *British Journal of Sociology* 29 [2], pp249-62 Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

⁷² Staples and Mauss, *op.cit.* They hold the rhetorical indicators of conversion identified by Snow and Machalek, to be indicative of the desire for transformation instead of representative of one that had taken place. See Snow and Machalek, *op.cit.*

3.2 Berger's Phenomenological Sociology

Lofland and Skonovd's approach can be seen to be phenomenological in that they attempt to "adduce types of change", to isolate the essential types of conversion process from the mass of data generated by research. Two other phenomenological perspectives are found to be highly applicable to the task of 'delineating the steps, phases and processes' within the experimental type itself⁷³, and the thesis utilizes the theoretical positions and frameworks of the two: the Phenomenology of Religion and the phenomenological sociology of Peter Berger. The Phenomenology of Religion provides a useful frame from which to explore the elements of a meaning-system that religious seekers may engage with. One such frame is Smart's *dimensional analysis of worldviews*, consisting of seven dimensions of religious activity: the doctrinal, ritual, narrative, experiential, ethical, social and material.⁷⁴ The advantage of this disciplinary approach over others, for instance the Sociology or Psychology of Religion wherein religious conversion studies constitute a subfield of enquiry,⁷⁵ is its manner of exploration and articulation of the modes and forms in which religion manifests itself,⁷⁶ instead of interpreting religion reductively, in terms of psychological or social function. This morphological approach is employed throughout the thesis in the reporting, interpretation, and analysis of data. This approach is rendered more conducive to the aims of the thesis by the borrow of the use of Husserl's *epoche* or suspension of belief from philosophical phenomenology,⁷⁷ and the conscious attempt to empathize with the experiences and orientations of the religious participants.⁷⁸

Toward similar ends, the thesis employs Berger's phenomenological sociology,⁷⁹ which provides useful theoretical constructs within a theoretical frame of reference that allows for the articulation of both how the individual engages with a new meaning-system, and the role of individual response in maintaining, proagating, and even changing a group's shared reality where this can be seen to occur. Central to the theoretical position of social constructionist theories in general, to which Berger's approach belongs, notably Socialization Theory, Symbolic Interaction,⁸⁰ Role

⁷³ Lofland and Skonovd, *op.cit.*, p383.

⁷⁴ Smart, N. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*, Fontana Press, 1997. Smart's dimensional analysis of worldviews is outlined on pp8-11.

⁷⁵ Granqvist, P. "Attachment Theory and Religious Conversions: A Review and Resolution of the Classic and Contemporary Paradigm Chiasm", in *Review of Religious Research* 45 [2], pp172-87, Religious Research Association, 2003, p172.

⁷⁶ Smart, *op.cit.*, p1.

⁷⁷ See Erricker, C. "Phenomenological Approaches", in *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, pp73-104, Cassell, 1999.

⁷⁸ Smart, *op.cit.*, pp1-2.

⁷⁹ See Wallace, R, and Wolf, A. *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Continuing the Classical Tradition*, Prentice-Hall, 4th edition, 1995, chapter 5, for a discussion of the philosophical origins of Berger's phenomenological approach.

⁸⁰ See Mead, G. *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist*, University of Chicago Press, 1934.

Theory and Reference Group Theory,⁸¹ is the notion of socialization.⁸² It is defined by Berger and Luckmann as ‘the comprehensive and consistent induction of an individual into the objective world of a society or a sector of it’.⁸³ Berger explains the social world in the ideal situation of a closed system or culture in terms of a three-step dialectic, namely *externalization*, *objectivation* and *internalization*. Respectively, these refer to: the ongoing outpouring of the human being into the social world in terms of physical and mental activity; and by the products of this activity, the attainment of a reality that appears as a facticity external to its original producers, and the reappropriation of this same reality, transforming it from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness.⁸⁴ Berger and Luckmann refer to processes of resocialization as they occur in a religious setting as *alternations*, instances of near-total transformation⁸⁵, which Berger defines as ‘the possibility to choose between varying and sometimes contradictory systems of meaning’.⁸⁶

According to Berger and Luckmann, complete movement between worldviews or meaning-systems is not possible for two reasons. First, the authors maintain that subjective reality is never totally socialized, to begin with.⁸⁷ Second, although alternations are held to resemble primary socialization—one’s initial childhood socialization into society—because they need to replicate the childhood affective ties with significant others responsible for socialization, as distinct from the original socialization process, they need to dismantle the *preceding* structure of subjective reality. According to the authors’ perspective, the most complete case of alternation

⁸¹ See Shibutani, T. “Reference Groups as Perspectives”, in *The American Journal of Sociology* 60 [6], pp562-69, University of Chicago Press, Cambridge University Press, 1955; Greil, A. “Previous Dispositions and Conversion to Perspectives of Social and Religious Movements”, in *Sociological Analysis* 38 [2], pp115-125, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1977.

⁸² See Preston, D. *The Social Organization of Zen Practice: Constructing Transcultural Reality*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, who explores the applicability of socialization theory to understanding the commitment process for Zen practitioners. See pp3-4 for his discussion of interpretive vs explanatory approaches within the social sciences. Various schools of thought such as phenomenological sociologies and symbolic interaction comprise the interpretive approach.

⁸³ Berger, P, and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday & Company, 1966, p120. Also see Berger, P. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England; Ringwood, Australia, 1966 (a), p116; p140. Here, Berger defines socialization as “the process by which a child learns to be a participant member of society, and the process by which the social world is internalized within the child”. Also see Wentworth, W. *Context and Understanding: An Inquiry into Socialization Theory*, Elsevier North Holland Inc., New York, 1980, p85, who similarly defines it as ‘the activity that lends structure to the entry of nonmembers into an already existing world or a sector of that world’.

⁸⁴ Berger, P. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Anchor Books, 1969, pp3-4. This external facticity is often referred to as *taken-for-granted* reality, defined as the level of experience not in need of further analysis. See Schutz, A. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Northwestern University Press, 1967, p74.

⁸⁵ Berger and Luckmann, *op.cit.*, p144.

⁸⁶ Berger, P. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, Penguin Books, 1963, p68.

⁸⁷ Berger and Luckmann, *op.cit.*, p144.

as resocialization into a new meaning-system would involve a *near-total* transformation of subjective consciousness, which they see as impossible.⁸⁸ This needs to be considered in view of the fact that the transition between religious worldviews or meaning-systems, for the individuals concerned essentially involves movement from a denomination of Christianity to either Theravada or Vajrayana Buddhism.⁸⁹

The exploration of religious biographies in Chapter 6 will show that respondents are from Christian backgrounds. Although two common routes of passage from Christianity to Buddhism were apparent, the first from Christianity straight into a form of Buddhism before their involvement with either BMIMC or VI, and the second from original Christianity into some form of Western alternative spirituality or the alternative religious subculture, all had had contact with *alternative* meaning-systems in some form, and all took an experimental attitude to their spiritual, religious or self-growth involvements and affiliations. It was found that the alternative religious field provides access to Buddhism both in terms of passage through organizations and groups, and in terms of the intellectual and experiential structures of their shared reality.

These passages come about as something allowed within Western religious culture itself. Much has been written about an alternative religious stream in the West—which has existed alongside Christianity since antiquity in Ellwood's view⁹⁰, but more recently can be seen to be embodied in the religious counterculture⁹¹—that brings together and reinterprets earlier streams of religious thought. Prescribed by

⁸⁸ Berger and Luckmann, *op.cit.*, p144. Also see Paloutzian, R. *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, Allyn and Bacon, 1996. Paloutzian's statement to the effect that socialization into a tradition takes place over a lifespan allows for the possibility of an open-ended process where original socialization as an ideal, is never complete in reality.

⁸⁹ Preston, D. "Becoming a Zen Practitioner", in *Sociological Analysis* 42[1], pp47-56, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1981, p48. Preston refers to Suzuki's comment that it is impossible for Western categories of thought to grasp Zen adequately. Bedford, S. "Crying out of Recognition: Experiences with Meditative Practices in a New Religious Movement", in *ARC, the Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies*, McGill, 24, pp119-32, 1996. Bedford observes that it is difficult to find language to describe phenomena that are not generally part of a culture. Also see Campbell, C. "The Easternization of the West", in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, pp35-48, Routledge, 1999. Campbell argues for a movement toward Eastern understandings in the West. Although I find the argument unconvincing, he does give a sense of how ideas can be incorporated into another culture. Also see Gilgen, A, and Cho, J. "Questionnaire to Measure Eastern and Western Thought", in *Psychological Reports* 44, pp835-41, Psychological Reports, Montana, 1979.

⁹⁰ Ellwood, R. *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*, Prentice-Hall, 1973, pp42-3. Ellwood's is the most inclusive view of this current historically and substantively. He sees it as continuous with a current alternative to mainstream religion in Western culture since the Hellenic period, which includes Asian shamanistic influences. He calls this the *Western Alternative Reality Tradition*.

⁹¹ See Buckner, H. "The Flying Saucerians: An Open Door Cult", in *Sociology and Everyday Life*, pp223-230, Prentice-Hall, 1968; Jorgensen, D. "The Esoteric Community: An Ethnographic Investigation of the Cultic Milieu", in *Urban Life* 10 [4], pp383-408, Sage Publications, 1982.

this culture is the religious seeker who effects exploration and change, thereby negotiating his or her own religious identity.⁹² Dawson draws attention to the human existential dilemma of human autonomy versus socialization underlying the postulate 'rational action is its own explanation'. For people's actions to be seen as self-directed and expressive of their authentic preferences, they must be able to stand apart from the products of their own socialization. Because, as many, including Dawson, hold that our thoughts, feelings and actions are the products of primary and secondary socializations, this capacity to be objective or reflexive is itself part of one's socialization, and therefore present as an idea in one's culture.⁹³ To recapitulate the theoretical argument to this point, two issues are accorded centrality. First, one can never entirely transform the imprint of one's original interpretive frameworks through religious change, and second, passage from Christianity to Buddhism appears to be facilitated by passage through forms of Western alternative spirituality, a passage prescribed by the surrounding culture. A third consideration at this point indicates what can be realistically determined about the nature of such religious passage.

Fieldwork data gathered by participation and interview highlight the impossibility of determining the substantive constitution of complete internalization of either Buddhist perspective. The doctrinal foundations and textual material are vast for both forms of Buddhism. Vipassana Meditation, including the *Satipatthana* Vipassana of Mahasi Sayadaw, draws on the entire Pali Canon for its doctrinal and philosophical foundations. Similarly, the Gelugpa lineage draws on much Mahayana material besides the writings of lineage leaders such as Lama Tsong-kha-pa, Lama Atisha, Lamas Yeshe and Zopa, and the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. What can be demonstrated from the fieldwork data is what practitioners typically learn, apply to their own understandings of experience, and accept. There is a clear indication of the religious material involved in the socialization and commitment process. As stated above, what can be demonstrated is the role that specific doctrines and practices appear to play in acculturation to and acceptance of the Buddhist meaning-system. It will be shown that commitment is conditional upon accepting and employing the three marks of samsaric existence, *dukkha*,

⁹² The formulation of Lofland and Skonovd's experimental motif draws on the work of Balch and Taylor with the Human Individual Metamorphosis Movement, later renamed Heaven's Gate. Balch, R, and Taylor, D. "Salvation in a UFO", in *Psychology Today* 10 [5], pp58-66, 1976; "Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult", in *Conversion Careers: In and Out of the New Religions*, pp43-64, 1978. Balch and Taylor's essential observation involved the way in which HIM participants did not exhibit signs of *radical personal change*, but saw their own involvement as a logical extension of their spiritual quest, a quest prescribed by the epistemological individualism of the cultic milieu. Also see Campbell, C. "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization", in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5, pp119-136 SCM Press, 1972. Campbell maintains that the cultic milieu is united and identified by the existence of an ideology of seekership and by seekership institutions.

⁹³ Dawson, 1990, *op.cit.*, pp150-51. See Wentworth, *op.cit.*, p2, for his discussion of two extreme positions within sociology and particularly influential on socialization theory: individualism and sociologism, mirroring the determinism versus freedom issue within the social sciences.

impermanence and *anatman* (in Sanskrit) as an interpretive framework for lived reality; the three groups of the Eight-Fold Path, ethics, concentration and wisdom as a strategy for negotiating lived experience; and meditation techniques specific to the particular Buddhist orientation as a method for applying doctrinal principles to one's own transformation. What is thereby demonstrated, by determining the role of doctrine and practice in these processes, is the way in which Westerners are socialized into a Western Buddhist shared reality.

As will be demonstrated throughout the thesis, commitment to a Buddhist perspective can be seen as a response to the way in which these doctrines and practices facilitate comprehension of the worldview, and in turn promote self-transformation in the practitioners. In this sense, commitment can be seen as one's *response* to the knowledge that one acquires through interaction with the shared reality of the Buddhist centre of one's affiliation. Further, this response has a quality of perpetual *intention and orientation towards*, as if respondents' commitment is the expression of intention and motivation to internalize the frameworks of Buddhist thought, rather than as a final result of *internalization*. As the discussion in Chapter 6 will show, adherents' accounts indicate that they adopt the Buddhist perspective as their primary authority, but in the sense conveyed by Heirich in his reference to scholarly literature 'which treats religion less as systems of truth than as efforts to discover a ground of being that orients and orders experience more generally'.⁹⁴ This reflects the way in which the Buddhist meaning-system is viewed and utilized by practitioners. It is not accepted as an absolute internal authority, but more as a guide to interpretation of personal experience.

Heirich's view is useful in one other respect, viz. his view of conversion and commitment as two qualitatively different processes, where the former is a dramatic turnabout, either adopting a new belief system or returning to a former one with new intensity, from a qualitatively different process where 'there is qualitative change in experience and in level of commitment, regardless of previous mindset'.⁹⁵ This usage must be distinguished from others that do not convey the same qualitative difference. Harrison's distinction between conversion and commitment, where the latter is the renewal or regeneration of existing beliefs as opposed to the adoption of new beliefs⁹⁶, is similar to Snow and Machalek's use of alternation and regeneration to denote processes of change where there is no disruption to an individual's existing worldview.⁹⁷ Ultimately, my use of the term is generated from the quality of activity

⁹⁴ Heirich, *op.cit.*, p674.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p654.

⁹⁶ Harrison, M. "Preparation for Life in the Spirit: The Process of Initial Commitment to a Religious Movement", in *Urban Life and Culture* 2 [4], Sage Publications, 1974. Harrison employs this usage to distinguish between the processes of belief and identity change he observed in members of the Catholic Pentecostal Church in Michigan in the early seventies. Catholics underwent commitment, a renewal of faith, and newcomers to Catholicism underwent conversion, the adoption of new beliefs.

⁹⁷ Snow and Machalek, 1984, *op.cit.*, p170.

presented in research data itself, and not from its usage by other researchers. The term commitment is used in this thesis to denote the process of comprehension and adoption of the Buddhist perspective by Western practitioners of the two forms of Buddhism explored.

3.3 The Resocialization Thesis

The resocialization thesis offers two advantages as an explanatory model for the process of induction into the shared reality of a Buddhist centre, and the consequent commitment to the aims, ideals, and realizations of Buddhist practice. First, its theoretical premises highlight differences between cognitive and social factors, which appear to underpin the actual points of transformation, as expressed by Stromberg's conception of the impression point. Researchers recognize that religious change occurs through the interaction of a range of forces, individual and collective, intellectual and emotional, that serve ideological and existential needs. While there is no doubt that differences exist between individuals in terms of response style⁹⁸, after my examination of many approaches to and instances of religious conversion, it is suggested that the religious change itself, as far as it can be distinguished from the surrounding social forces and processes, is essentially cognitive in nature, a point made by Berger and Luckmann.

Berger and Luckmann maintain that a successful *alternation* has to include both social and conceptual conditions, 'the social serving as the matrix for the conceptual'. They see the availability of an effective plausibility structure as the most important social condition, which is mediated to the individual by means of significant others. This is because significant others represent the plausibility structure in the roles they play with regard to the individual, roles that are defined in terms of their resocializing function. Berger and Luckmann maintain that, in this way, the cognitive and affective focus of the individual's world is the plausibility structure.⁹⁹ Symbolic interactionists are divided over the question of which is the dominant factor in people's choice of religious group: the worldview or perspective of the group, or the individuals—those who may become one's new significant others—who share the perspective. Some emphasize the role of significant others in conversion, suggesting that they amount to a change of one's reference group, or group of significant others.¹⁰⁰ Conversely, supporting his argument for a 'socialization as interaction'

⁹⁸ Rambo, 1993, *op.cit.*, p56.

⁹⁹ Berger and Luckmann, *op.cit.*, pp144-45.

¹⁰⁰ Shibutani, T. "Reference Groups as Perspectives", in *The American Journal of Sociology* 60 [6], pp562-69, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Cambridge University press, London, 1955, p568. Wilson, 1984, *op.cit.* Wilson maintains that commitment to a religious group's perspective emerges as the convert becomes socialized into the group's social structure, and reaps social rewards of group membership. Similarly, Greil argues that it is theoretically possible for an individual to become converted from just about anything, regardless of previous dispositions, provided he orients himself to significant others who share a new perspective. See Greil, A. "Previous Dispositions and Conversion to Perspectives of Social and Religious Movements", in *Sociological Analysis* 38 [2], pp115-125, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1977, p123.

model to replace the 'socialization as internalization' model, Wentworth reframes socialization as 'the process of acquisition', and 'what the novice does to accept experience', to avoid confusing 'the social-nurturing activity with a cognitive process'.¹⁰¹ It is further suggested that truly active, intellectual conversions are apparent only in religious environments where social pressures are minimal, and where the cognitive process is free to function unencumbered by social *moulding* as distinct from social facilitation.

It is clear from descriptions of trends exhibited by the research data outlined so far that involvement in both forms of Buddhism explored in this thesis, the Vipassana and the Vajrayana, is illuminated by the active paradigm. In the case of the Vipassana setting that is taught under retreat conditions with the observance of Noble Silence for much of the time, it is highly probable that this religious environment allows the socialization and commitment process to occur under the least amount of social influence or pressure. By comparison, these processes as they take place in the environment of VI are more open to social influence and shaping because of the existence of the refuge ceremony it holds on occasion, and the rationale it offers as to why taking refuge helps one's progress. However, this is to be interpreted as encouragement rather than pressure.

Second, it offers an approach that is tenable. In not arguing for the occurrence of total internalization of the Buddhist worldview as a demonstrable phenomenon, but instead utilizing the theoretical premise of *alternation* as the result of socialization into a shared religious reality, it enables the researcher to determine what *can* be observed in instances of and contexts for religious change. This in turn enables the isolation, description, and formulation of explanatory models. This process is aided by Berger and Luckmann's theoretical distinction between *apprehension* and *internalization*. Berger emphasizes the difference between apprehension of the social world as an external facticity, and its internalization as the formative influence on the subjective structures of consciousness itself.¹⁰² Speaking in terms of primary socialization, where internalization is defined as 'the reabsorption into consciousness of the objectivated world so that its structures come to determine the subjective structures of consciousness itself', it is held that one is socialized through the effectiveness of *internalization*. Berger also emphasizes that a crucial dimension of socialization is not adequately grasped by seeing it as a learning process; one's view must include *internalization*.¹⁰³ In the argument to be advanced throughout this thesis it is asserted that no objective distinction between *apprehension* and *internalization* is possible in the environments of religious change described here. Researchers typically describe and compare the transformative context or religious environment,

¹⁰¹ Wentworth, *op.cit.*, p8; p64; p83. Wentworth stated in 1980 that recent research had confused and identified socialization with internalization. The latter had 'a connotation of a purely passive subject if simply equated with the socialization process'.

¹⁰² Berger, 1969, *op.cit.*, p15.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

the mental and behavioural approaches to initiating change, and the language and behaviours said to represent the change, but without successfully representing the change itself.¹⁰⁴

Applying role theory to the study of active religious change, researchers perceive the participant as learning to act like an adherent by outwardly conforming to a prescribed set of role expectations, learning of values and norms of a society, and learning a technology, a language and interpretive schemes for the group.¹⁰⁵ Several researchers have employed a role theory approach to explain learning and transformation processes in Asian-based meditation groups. In each of these writings, the researchers paid attention to the fact that participants are seeking meditation or *altered state* experiences. Wilson¹⁰⁶, Preston¹⁰⁷ and Volinn¹⁰⁸ treat of participant learning by learning the behaviours of the meditator and the associated meanings of the practice involved, but without attempting to deal with the comprehension of philosophy or doctrine by the meditators.

Preston's work focusses on the nature of conversion and commitment processes in Zen Buddhism. He explains these processes largely as an outcome of marrying experiential effects with the interpretations accorded them by the group, limited to explanations of what the practitioner can expect it to feel like. In so doing Preston largely isolates Zen practice from its doctrinal framework. However, his thesis that personal transformation is affected non-cognitively, indicates some ways in which meditation can be understood as body-based phenomenological bracketing.¹⁰⁹ In his later work he draws attention to the nature of desocialization processes in Zen

¹⁰⁴ See Beckford, J. "Accounting for Conversion", in *British Journal of Sociology* 29 [2], pp249-62, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

¹⁰⁵ Strauss, R. "Religious Conversion as a Personal and Collective Accomplishment", in *Sociological Analysis* 40 [2], pp158-65, 1979, p, 163. Balch, R. "Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult: Implications for the Study of Conversion", in *Sociological Analysis* 41, pp137-43, 1980, p142; Wilson, *op.cit.*; Shibutani, T. *Society and Personality: An Interactionist Approach to Social Psychology*, Prentice-Hall, 1961, p46. Shibutani's definition of a conventional role is 'a prescribed pattern of behaviour expected of a person in a given situation by virtue of his position in the transaction'.

¹⁰⁶ Wilson, 1984, *op.cit.*, Wilson refers to deconditioning as a process involving modification of one's core personality. He explores the way in which this is effected in a yoga ashram, by giving up assumed rigid role expectations of being a yogi, and instead freeing the impulsive and spontaneous elements of the personality from the socially conditioned component. This involves experiencing a state of shakti, which has its own definition in this context.

¹⁰⁷ Preston, 1981, *op.cit.*; Preston, D. "Meditative Ritual Practice and Spiritual Conversion-Commitment: Theoretical Implications Based on the Case of Zen", in *Sociological Analysis* 43 [3], pp257-70, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1982. Preston, 1988, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁸ Volinn, E. "Eastern Meditation Groups: Why Join?", in *Sociological Analysis* 46 [2], p147-56. Volinn sees participants' desire to learn meditation as desire for the experience of a meditative state, as opposed to an escape from everyday life.

¹⁰⁹ Preston, 1981, *op.cit.* In this paper, he deals with the physiological impact and symptoms of meditation, such as changes in pulse rate, rate and depth of breathing, brain wave patterns and so on, which he sees as an important aspect of learning to become a member. Preston, 1982, *op.cit.*

facilitated by these body-based techniques as ‘unlearning’ rather than relearning.¹¹⁰ McIntyre explored the learning process for Vipassana practitioners as their assuming the role of the meditator¹¹¹. In each of these cases the researcher did not attempt to deal with comprehension of doctrine as a meaning-system. They were concerned with concepts and meanings directly associated with learning the practice. A more holistic approach is suggested by Dawson’s combination of rational choice theory and role theory, which he calls reflexive role re-enactment. This is informed by the notion that role-taking becomes increasingly about role-making, fashioning one’s self-concept. As one’s sense of self matures, the process becomes more reflexive.¹¹² The explanatory power of this perspective is tested in the discussion to come.

3.4 A Proposed Model of Commitment

Role approaches focus on the consequences of learning meditation as factors in commitment to a group, with minimal attention given to doctrinal influence. In contrast, the aim of this thesis is to explain how meaning is attributed to experiences generated in meditation according to the perspective of the Buddhist group concerned, and further, how meanings are accessed and selected from the range of doctrinal material associated with two forms of Buddhism. The thesis is also concerned with the way in which this effects commitment to the Buddhist worldview and its soteriological aims. By focussing on the doctrinal understandings that practitioners learn from their exploration and apply in their personal practice, researchers can identify and explain the substance of what is apprehended, viz. specific doctrinal positions and interpretive frameworks, and their role in the comprehension of a shared reality. This is accomplished by taking a role approach to the understanding of how participants access, begin to make sense of, and apply the religious material they encounter, with the limitation that it cannot describe the essential change or changes themselves. It must be borne in mind that what can be described is the apprehension of doctrinal and practical approaches, and the comprehension of these as integrated aspects of the meaning-system.

In brief, what respondents report of their engagement with and application of Buddhist principles and practice indicates that they form a deeper and more committed *orientation towards internalization* with the passage of time. Apprehension, validation and acceptance of the meaning-system is gradual. One’s commitment to

¹¹⁰ Preston, 1988, *op.cit.*, p3; p64. He maintains that the learning process that occurs in examining oneself and taken-for-granted reality in meditative practice is not equivalent to simply replacing one group’s reality with another’s.

¹¹¹ McIntyre, J. “On Becoming a Meditator: Adult Learning and Social Context”, in *Qualitative Research practice In Education*, David Lovell Publishing, 1997. McIntyre’s theorization takes place within the context of adult education, and therefore, does not attempt to treat the learning of doctrine in any depth, except to say that in acquiring the meditator’s perspective, one learns the practice and understandings associated with the learning context.

¹¹² Dawson, 1990, *op.cit.* Dawson believes that a role-theoretical approach is too limited, as it fails to adequately differentiate between active and passive phenomena, hence his position of combining it with rational choice theory.

learning and application increases in intensity from the time of engagement until the decision point is reached. Based on my interpretation of the data collected through fieldwork conducted at the two Centres, I propose a model of commitment consisting of three cumulative stages: 1) apprehension and engagement, 2) comprehension, and 3) commitment. The decisions about appropriate terms for these stages take the difference in meaning between apprehension and comprehension into account. According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, to apprehend is 'to understand or perceive', and to comprehend is 'to grasp mentally, to understand, to include, comprise, encompass'.¹¹³ Both terms have the meaning of understanding, but the difference is in perceiving one or several discrete meanings as opposed to an understanding that encompasses a field of meanings and their interrelationships. In other words, apprehension really refers to the acquisition of a stock of knowledge¹¹⁴, while comprehension refers to the acquisition of a framework for organizing this stock of knowledge. As the analysis of respondents' accounts will show throughout the thesis, practitioners feel committed to their Buddhist practice once they have apprehended some of the key meanings, and have then comprehended them as a set of interrelated meanings. Apprehension engenders engagement and deeper, more intense exploration. Commitment is engendered by increasing comprehension of the meaning-system and validation of life experience.

Accordingly, the apprehension and engagement stage describes initial encounter with the new group and its meaning-system, and how one begins to learn the concepts, practices, and experiential states that comprise it. The comprehension stage describes the point at which one begins to form a framework of concepts or notions and to understand how key ideas fit together within it. Feelings of being committed or wanting to commit do not occur until one has begun to understand how aspects of the framework relate to each other. This commitment is conditional upon ongoing validation of the meaning-system through its capacity to interpret life-experience. Despite the organizational differences in the propagation of religious belief and activity promoted by the two centres, certain consistencies of *orientation* to Buddhist engagement are exhibited by both types of practitioner (referred to hereafter as Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners). These are outlined here in brief in order to indicate the nature of those elements found to be central to Buddhist engagement in the Vipassana and Vajrayana forms explored.

Commitment, as opposed to conversion, is based on the recognition that one has internalized the beliefs, values, and expectations of the new religious reality. This

¹¹³ Soanes, C, Stevenson, A, and Hawker, S ed. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Catherine Soanes, Angus Stevenson, and Sara Hawker editors, Oxford University Press, Oxford, eleventh edition, 2004, p64; p294.

¹¹⁴ Greil, A. "Previous Dispositions and Conversion to Perspectives of Social and Religious Movements", in *Sociological Analysis* 38 [2], pp115-125, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1977, pp115-16. Greil uses the term stock of knowledge to designate the sum total of all that which a given individual perceives at a given point in time to be true about the social or physical world.

occurs after a process of religious experimentation in which the claims of a religious reality are experientially validated against one's inner understandings and convictions, which themselves become clearer as a result of experimental participation in religious activity. Functionally, the adopted worldview is seen to frame personal experience in a manner that renders it more meaningful. Meditative experience and its interpretation according to doctrine must be applicable to the improvement of quality of lived experience. It must be relevant to current life challenges and ethically sustainable. A theoretical and methodological strength of the social constructionist approach of Berger's sociological phenomenology is its explanatory power for the way in which a Buddhist centre's shared reality is maintained and perpetuated by the engagement of the experimental participant with its teachings and practices.

As outlined above in Section 1.2, it can be seen that the two centres represent two very different Buddhist perspectives, and yet, strong similarities exist between the two types of Buddhist practitioner in terms of their general orientation and commitment to Buddhism. Substantively, commitment is conditional upon accepting and employing the three marks of samsaric existence: *dukkha*/suffering, *anitya*/impermanence, and *anatman*/no essentially existing self, as an interpretive framework for lived reality; the three groups of the Eight-Fold Path, *sila*/ethics, *samadhi*/concentration, and *panna*/wisdom as a strategy for negotiating lived experience; and meditation techniques specific to the particular Buddhist orientation as a method for applying doctrinal principles to one's own transformation. A central aim of the thesis is to outline how these consistencies occur despite the different Western Buddhist grounds that foster them.

4 Methodological Considerations

This section is devoted to those methodological considerations that can be seen to affect the gathering and reporting of, and the drawing of meaningful conclusions from the available data obtained by the fieldwork undertaken. Of utmost importance to the quality of data obtained, is the successful acquisition of respondents that accurately represent participant and adherent characteristics of both centres. I have not included a separate section on respondent characteristics, but refer the reader to Appendix 1: *Interview Respondents*. Beyond this, respondent characteristics will be discussed where relevant in the sections below, in methods of data gathering and in methods of interpretation and exposition.

4.1 Methods of Data-Gathering

There were three methods of data gathering: examination of relevant sources and teaching material, participant observation, and interview. Both centres recommend a range of relevant teaching material to students, and have these on hand. They include primary texts, recommended writings by Sangha members, Western teachers and interpreters, and handouts for classes or workshops at VI. Both centres also

keep a collection of recordings of previous teachings which students can borrow. There is also access to some teachings via the Web. The first challenge was to satisfy myself that my fieldwork participation and observations were accurately representing the activities of the two organizations. VI was in Newtown, Sydney, and the BMIMC was and is in Medlow Bath in the Blue Mountains. My research with both groups involved both fieldwork (participant observation) and interview. Dividing my time between the two organizations has meant that some fieldwork opportunities have had to be sacrificed. For example, both groups hold their weekly meditation sessions on Monday nights.¹¹⁵ These sessions are valuable sources of information about teaching the techniques, and beginners' access to the tradition's worldview through instruction in and explanation of meditative practice. This has divided my attention between the two classes.

My way around this was to attend a range of classes, courses, workshops, retreats, and other activities from each group, and take my cues from interview material describing how the practitioners themselves decided what to try. Crucial information was revealed in the practitioner interview material. For example, in the case of the BMIMC, interviews conducted with long-term practitioners revealed the nature of differences between teaching styles and approaches to the practice between teachers associated with the centre. I have therefore participated in a range of workshops and retreats in order to establish the range of religious material explored, and the variations in teaching styles that are representative of the activities that the centre offers practitioners. Establishing this range is vital to the exposition of the nature of the teaching and learning processes involved in practitioners' socialization into the practice and its worldview. Similarly at VI, I was confronted with a large range of literature and courses to become familiar with, although the familiarization process was easier in this setting due to the social nature of the centre. Participants spoke freely about their choice of courses and reading material. After some involvement with both centres, I established a knowledge of the scope of teachings and practices on offer.

Because the style of interaction between participants within the two organizations was so different, each presented its own challenges to participant observation. Most of the teaching and meditation activity at BMIMC takes place in *Noble Silence*, except for instruction and teaching given by the teacher. VI has a broader range of teaching formats, and generally there is more verbal interaction between teachers, facilitators, and participants.¹¹⁶ The following points give an indication of the nature of the fieldwork issues to be discussed more fully in the finished chapter, which will include more about the relationship between the practitioner and the participant observer. However, my interaction in both groups was more than as a passive

¹¹⁵ Since the fieldwork was concluded, both Centres have changed their meditation night to another weekday.

¹¹⁶ Teaching styles and formats at BMIMC and VI will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 respectively.

participant observer. In order to empathize with the practitioners, I had to take on the role and perspective of a religious explorer.

With my participation in the activities of BMIMC I faced the problem of gathering data from a group whose primary activities take place in silence, and where personal interaction is minimal. Primary source materials available were formal instruction, *dhamma* talks, group interviews during retreats, everyday activity at the beginning and end of retreats¹¹⁷, and interviews with practitioners. Generally, the nature of the activities at VI made participant observation easier. I got to know people, joined in conversations, helped set up chairs for class, &c. The main difficulty of participation in the Western-style teachings, where discussion was encouraged, was that I felt that, in my enthusiasm, I regularly blurred the boundary between participant observer and seeker.

During instruction, *dhamma* talks, and group interviews at BMIMC I took notes as discreetly and as unobtrusively as I could, and similarly during meditation sessions at VI. Although I had permission from both organizations to conduct participant observation, there were still times when it seemed intrusive to keep writing, to take down every word being said. This seemed especially so in group interviews at BMIMC when individual responses to points of technique, or progress reports were called for, and during classes at VI when people were discussing a personal problem from the Buddhist perspective. In situations where it seemed insensitive to keep writing, I attempted to note the main points mentally, the important trends of response, some indicative examples or some differences from the norm, and to record them later. When I needed to rely on memory until I had access to my tape recorder or notepad, it is likely that pieces of information may have been lost, or that people may have been paraphrased incorrectly. This was true of the Monday night meditation sessions for both organizations. One way around this was to observe a number of sessions in order to extract the main points. Increasing familiarity with and understanding of the two discourses and their techniques, terms, concepts, and belief structures, as well as familiarity with the style of and structure used by the teacher also helped. Another way was to check my impressions against practitioners' understandings and memories.

Interview respondents were selected by three means. At both Centres some volunteers were gained by word-of-mouth, and in response to posters outlining the nature of my thesis and asking for volunteers for interview. At BMIMC, by prior arrangement with teachers, I asked for volunteers during the closing talk at the end of some workshops and retreats. Many committee members and volunteer workers at the centre were receptive to the aims of my study and gladly gave of their time. Respondent selection at VI was more reliant on word-of-mouth and, to an almost negligible extent, on responses to the poster. Teachers did not want to be seen to

¹¹⁷ These activities and their relationship to the practice will be discussed in Chapters 3-6.

endorse any particular individual's research, and so I did not ask for volunteers during or at the end of teachings, but waited until suitable opportunities presented themselves during social occasions. In all, twenty Vipassana and nineteen Vajrayana practitioners were interviewed. For both groups of practitioner the average age was in the mid-forties, with a range from mid-thirties to late fifties. Almost all respondents were either highly-skilled or university-educated, and engaged in occupations that made use of their qualifications. A difference in the male-to-female ratio existed: of the twenty Vipassana respondents nine were male; of the nineteen Vajrayana, five were male. In round terms, the proportions of male respondents to the whole were one quarter and one half for VI and BMIMC respectively. However, there was no evidence to suggest that the differing sex ratios had any bearing on the nature of data collected.

Significantly, as a result of the relative effectiveness of the employment of the three selection methods at the two centres, a difference exists between the two groups of respondent in terms of the amount of practical experience in the practice that each represents. Of the twenty Vipassana respondents, nine had been meditating for a period of twenty to thirty years, and most had been attracted by the poster placed in the dining room at BMIMC. Conversely, almost all of the Vajrayana respondents had been involved with Buddhism for fewer than ten years. At VI people did not respond to the poster, and the spread of information by word-of-mouth was surprisingly slow. In the end I approached individuals of my acquaintance from teachings and study group attendance, many of whom had been coming to the centre for only a small number of years by comparison with the former group. As noted in the conclusion to Chapter 5, accounts by more experienced Vajrayana practitioners are under-represented in the reporting and analysis of experience and transformation.

It is accepted that the lack of access to potentially valuable data provided by more experienced Vajrayana practitioners, concerning their experience with and comprehension of the Vajrayana Buddhist path, limits the potential understanding of the nature of the experiential dimension as it is constituted within the FPMT. This does not diminish the significance of the results of the study with respect to its analysis of the role of doctrine, practice and experience in the commitment process. All Vajrayana respondents at the time of interview were clear about why they had or had not committed to the Buddhist path. However, it limits the applicability of the findings to the comprehensive understanding of the stages of progress on the path more generally for these Western Vajrayana practitioners. I hold more confidence both in the accuracy of respondent reports to represent accurately the range of experiential knowledge, and its interpretation according to Theravada doctrine by the Vipassana practitioners. Consequently, I am more confident in the validity of conclusions drawn about the nature of the experiential dimension as it is constituted through practice at BMIMC. This must be borne in mind when engaging with the material presented in those sections of the thesis devoted to Vajrayana Institute,

namely, Chapters 4 and 5, Chapter 6 Sections 2 and 3, and the comparative discussion in Chapter 7.

A formal set of interview questions was formulated to obtain information about the relevant dimensions of religious activity and engagement, and paid particular attention to the doctrinal, practical, experiential and social aspects.¹¹⁸ Aesthetic aspects, if relevant, emerged from the interview material. Other questions addressed specific issues to do with conversion theory, such as testing for the existence of a crisis or turning point in one's conversion process. During interviews I used the questions as a guide to discussion, and would often blend formal questions with letting the interview go where it was taken by my respondent. I asked for further detail at times, or asked the participant to go in a particular direction. In order to get clarification of a point, or to elicit further response, I commented, summing up their previous statement or approach. As has been suggested by Snow et al.¹¹⁹, this proved an effective means of gathering information.

Generally, interviews with Vajrayana respondents did not present any problems. They seemed confident in their recall of events and in their interpretations of their own experience. The Vipassana respondents presented some challenges. I noticed that the shorter the time of involvement, the easier it seemed to be for respondents simply to recount their experiences. Everyone found it easy to recall their own religious history, including their path through Buddhism. However, some of the more experienced practitioners who had been practising for ten to twenty or more years had trouble recalling certain facets of their personal experience with the practice. They found it difficult to state and discuss the concepts and notions of significance for them, a question I asked everyone, without some thought and usually more explanation and prompting from me.

It may be that they were unused to analysing their own understanding of their meditative experience in this way. Experience is used here in two senses: the experience that occurs while the practitioner is in a meditative state, and the cumulative store of memories of meditative experience and their interpretations gathered with time. This second usage also relates to the sense of life experience resulting from evaluating meaning in events and information. It seemed that Vipassana practitioners were not used to self-reflection on their storehouses of both meditative experience and assumptions and premises about the world gained through Buddhist involvement as I was asking them to do. This line of questioning

¹¹⁸ See Smart, *op.cit.*, pp8-11. I used his set of dimensions as a guide for the formulation of my initial questions.

¹¹⁹ Snow, D, Zurcher, L, and Sjoberg, G. "Interviewing by Comment: An Adjunct to the Direct Question", in *Qualitative Sociology* 5 [4], pp285-311, 1982. I agree with the authors: sometimes the need to ask the right questions in the right way is overstressed in unstructured fieldwork interviews.

was designed to reveal the nature and order of acquisition of specific meaning-structures, as well as their relative significance.

Isolating and exploring the internalization of the Vipassana practice and its worldview has of necessity relied heavily on the use of data from interview. Data from participant observation are limited because of the internally subjective nature of the practice and its effects. In interviews I aimed to get first-hand accounts of the bare experiential level of the practice, and how the interpretive frameworks are acquired, so as to understand how experience was interpreted and accorded significance and meaning. I asked questions about the kinds of experience typical for the practitioner, and those of significance for them; how these were interpreted; and how the understandings were applied to daily life. This latter enquiry is taken up in Chapter 5. When appropriate, I encouraged practitioners to describe the experience without the doctrinal conceptualization, so that the relationships between experiences and their interpretations were visible. My questions to do with immediate experience were not always clearly understood. Practitioners often gave the experience and its interpretation together. Conversely, transcripts showed that this barest level of experiential reporting was to be found in dialogue that took place between the teacher and practitioner during teacher-student interviews on retreats. Teachers ask the students to describe their experience at its barest level of observation, and how it was noted. For example, 'I felt pain in my legs' is typically noted as 'feeling', but in interview practitioners said 'On retreats I have experiences of *dukkha*'. Sometimes practitioners had difficulty with questions that involved clear distinction between the conceptual and experiential aspects of practice.

For best understanding of the interpretive process underlying internalization, and how particular concepts are applied to experience, I attempted to get an overview of the experiences and experience-concept relationships reported by practitioners. This question was largely irrelevant to the Vajrayana practitioners because most of them practised concentration and deity visualization, with no analytical component. For the Vipassana practitioners, commonalities emerged between reports in terms of immediate experience and its interpretation. What can be derived from the transcript material as the most immediate experiential level of the practice is the range of objects and mental states noted by practitioners during meditation.

The second concern, my treatment of the experience-interpretation relationship, is not so easily solved. I have attempted to isolate the conceptual and doctrinal from the experiential base in accounts of meditative experience and its interpretation. The learning of and reflection on doctrinal material, and the understanding of meditative experience according to this doctrine, may be seen as the two modes of learning at the student's disposal. The attempt to isolate these dimensions is simply so as to understand how they are put together by students. A large problem is that the practitioners themselves cannot always clearly isolate experience and its interpretation. At times I was able to ameliorate this in interview by asking more

specific questions. For example, I asked “When you say that you experienced impermanence, do you mean that the observation of changing mental states lent itself to interpretation as impermanence?” Much of the description of experience in the interview material is already contextualized. For instance, unusual meditative experience usually does not happen in isolation, but as part of a broader life issue or circumstance for the practitioner. It seemed that these experienced practitioners generally had accumulated so much experience, along with its doctrinal interpretation, that their engagement with the practice had become second nature. It was as if they had undertaken a long journey and had remembered the route as an entirety without taking note of markers or landmarks along the way. In many instances I had the sense that the information was there, but the practitioner was having trouble articulating it in the way I was asking them to do.

4.2 Methods of Interpretation and Exposition

Throughout the period of fieldwork, two interrelated methodological concerns dominated my thinking: the concern for accurate representation of practitioners’ experiences, and for a treatment of the experience-interpretation relationship that does justice to the material at hand. A consideration related to both is the way in which respondents were obtained for interview and how accurately they can be taken to represent the range of learning, practice and experience possible through the activity of each centre. With respect to the first my discussion of significant trends and their variations has attempted to mirror the data as closely as possible. While every interview contained important information, such as an account of the individual’s religious history and exploration of and experience with Buddhism, particular interview transcripts seemed to lend themselves easily to particular topics. For example, a comparison of the interviews of two Vajrayana practitioners highlights the point. One practitioner was good at recalling factual information such as the books he’d read, the courses he’d done, and the order of acquisition of concepts and their significance. This was something that the Vipassana practitioners had difficulty in doing (see above). Much of this material will be presented in Chapters 4 and 6. A feature of the second transcript is the clarity with which the practitioner recounts her experiences of self-transformation, and the significance she attributes to them. Much of this material will be used in Chapter 5. Where material from one interview is given prominence in this way, I shall make this obvious, and indicate how it compares to similar material, so that single instances are not taken to represent the whole.

My interview questions reflected a set of concerns related to the understanding of conversion and commitment in Western Buddhism. Initially I had no structure in mind for reporting the data. After several interviews had been conducted with practitioners of both groups, significant features of the whole field of religious activity for each organization became apparent. First was how features of the organization and teaching structure facilitated access to the perspective. Second were features of individuals’ own religious exploration, viz how they encountered

the organization and its perspective, and how they made choices about what to engage in. Many practitioners were able to evaluate what they had learned through their exploration by reviewing the changes that had occurred within themselves as a result of application of the principles and techniques. Finally, the decision to accept the Buddhist perspective and commit to its practices was linked to the appreciation of what had been learned and the self-transformation it had produced. However, these processes of learning doctrine and practice, testing their validity, applying them to effect self-transformation and making the decision to commit to the perspective, did not occur as a linear set of discrete steps. They were intertwined and mutually reinforcing. In this way, the division of the material into chapters that treats these significant features sequentially, creates an artificial distinction between them. The chapter sequence, outlined below in Section 3.2.2, was chosen for ease of reporting and to ensure clarity of exposition.

4.2.1 My Participatory Perspective: From Seeker to Sympathizer

This study was initially conceived as a response to my personal wish to explore Buddhism and pursue my academic interests in religious experience, social constructionist views of experience and its interpretation, and in theories of religious conversion. These interests came together in the aim of exploring the cognitive and noncognitive ways that individuals structure, maintain, test and transform their personal worldview or reality perspective, in the area of Western Buddhism. Because my knowledge of Buddhism was minimal to begin with, consisting of familiarity with the fundamental doctrines and their import—*Samsara* and *Nirvana*, the *Four Noble Truths*, the three marks of existence, a very limited knowledge of the five *skandhas* / aggregates, and a naïve appreciation of Vipassana meditation—when I began as a participant observer, I felt initially swamped with new information.

Throughout my time as a student of Comparative Religion, I have favoured the interpretive over the explanatory approach within social science.¹²⁰ For a researcher, this means, among other things, to learn the vocabulary and meaning-constructs of the *shared reality* of the group or organization in order to understand how these things become meaningful for participants. I noticed that practitioners' experiences began to make more sense to me after I began to learn the language of discourse at both centres. Within several months I found myself participating in the same experimental process that all seekers do, that of learning and testing new concepts and meanings against those acquired by prior spiritual involvements. For me, this reflexive stance included the complexities of resistance to some ideas and observation of ways in which my thinking began to change. This had implications

¹²⁰ McCutcheon, R. *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, Cassell, 1999. In this essay, McCutcheon draws attention to the differences between four methodological approaches within the Discipline of Religious Studies: the empathetic, explanatory, agnostic, and the reflexive. Also see Rambo, 1993, *op.cit.*, pp18-9 for his six-stage methodology for studying religious conversion: observation, description, empathy, understanding, interpretation, and explanation.

for my own exploration and understanding, and for my empathy with my interview respondents. The two instances recounted below from my time with BMIMC are but two of the many significant *impression points*¹²¹ that I experienced. I recount them here to give the reader a sense of my experience of the *insider-outsider* perspective in the study of Religion,¹²² which endured for the entire time of my fieldwork.

After I had participated in several Vipassana retreats and had begun to experience brief periods of mindfulness,¹²³ I began to understand the purpose of its cultivation for both meditation and everyday awareness. I began to form an impression as to how practitioners could both develop the discipline needed for progress in the practice, and hold their mind on an object in the way needed in order to experience *dukkha*/suffering and *anicca*/impermanence in the way they described. Experiences that I had during two nine-day retreats deepened my understanding of the practice and its meaning-system. During the first, in December 2002, I noticed the tendency of my mind to activate and relive old narratives, past events and their effects, whenever it was 'at a loose end'. On the second, in April 2004, the experience of learning how to identify mental states, to categorize them as one of the five hindrances, and to observe their arising and ceasing, especially "sloth and torpor", gave me an experiential understanding both of the nature of mindfulness and of the way in which mental states could be both investigated and transformed.¹²⁴ In turn, this gave me an understanding of mind as the third *satipatthana*/foundation of mindfulness. These were key experiences for me both as a researcher and seeker. These experiences gave me faith in the truth of the Buddhist path, which in turn gave me an empathy with the experiences of practitioners who had committed to Buddhism.¹²⁵

My responses to the activities at Vajrayana Institute were more cognitive and emotional by comparison, and lacked the same experiential focus. I found myself using the Theravadin framework of Vipassana meditation as a point of comparison, to orient my understanding of the Gelugpa Tibetan framework, which for some time felt overwhelmingly vast and complex. While I looked to both for an understanding of the ethical dimension to Buddhism and its application in my life, initially I looked to the Vipassana for my meditative training, and to the Vajrayana for those elements maybe considered 'more spiritual' by Western sensibilities: the *bodhisattva* motivation, and the emphasis on compassion. Of course these elements exist in both

¹²¹ Stromberg, 1985, *op.cit.*

¹²² McCutcheon, *op.cit.*

¹²³ See Chapter 2 Section 4.3: *The Distinction Between Concentration and Insight Practice* for a description of another such impression point.

¹²⁴ See Chapter 2 Section 4.5: *Identifying the Hindrances*, for a discussion of the nine-day retreat held in April 2004.

¹²⁵ Eddy, G. *Fieldwork and the Reflexive Stance: Managing the Relationship between Methodological Agnosticism and One's Own Academic and Religious Standpoints*, paper presented at the AASR/RLA conference on. In this paper I discussed the problems of interpretation that arose as a result of evaluating the Theravada perspective against my previously acquired Western Esoteric one.

forms of Buddhism: both have analytical practices, concentration practices, and lovingkindness and compassion practices. I was simply responding to what was superficially dominant in conceptual and experiential discourse at the two centres. To this day, I still feel over-awed by and respectful of the depth and complexity of the Buddha's teachings.

Particular aspects of doctrine and thought began to have special import for me, either because they appealed to religious sensibilities that I had gained as part of my own prior experimental history, or because they directly challenged them. Chief among the latter was the doctrine of no-self, *anatta*, *sunyata*. In my twenties I had for six years been a committed member of AMORC, the *Ancient and Mystical Order of the Rosy Cross*, a Twentieth-Century Rosicrucian order which scholars of religion place within the current of Western Esotericism. My strongest memories of the thought expressed in the teachings and rituals of the Order was that mind and being are beginningless and endless. Of Faivre's four distinct usages of the term esotericism: the generalist view of the occult, paranormal, and exotic wisdom traditions; the attainment to a centre of being by certain procedures; the creation of an esoteric/exoteric dichotomy; and the ensemble of spiritual currents that is the subject matter of formal research,¹²⁶ the one that I have always responded to most strongly is attainment to a centre of being. To me this expressed the theme of AMORC ritual and the Order's purpose.¹²⁷

At this point the reader is referred to the comparative discussion about the way in which the doctrine of *Anatta/Sunyata* is approached both conceptually and experientially by the Vipassana and Vajrayana orientations, in Chapter 7 Section 5: *The Self and Its Transformations*. In terms of belief, this view's acceptance is conditional upon other aspects of the belief system being validated by the practitioner's own experience. In practical and experiential terms, Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners alike maintain that they are working their way toward its experiential realization by doing those practices that prepare one's mind for it. My own endeavour to understand the position was almost wholly intellectual. In my exploration of the three views of the self—the absolute, relative and imputed—and their implication for the understanding of self-transformation undergone by practitioners,¹²⁸ I began to entertain the possibility that the *centre of being* so sought after by many contemporary spiritual practices, may in fact be a reification of the imputed self. There are many possible positions that one could take with respect to this. What I learned from this experience, was that the attempt to empathize with the

¹²⁶ Faivre, A. "Questions of Terminology Proper to the Study of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe", in *Gnostica 2: Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions*, pp1-10, Peeters, 1998.

¹²⁷ Spencer-Lewis, H. *Rosicrucian Manual*, Rosicrucian Press, 25th edition, 1978. Definitions of key terms such as divine mind, inner self, and soul personality, are outlined on pages 161, 171, and 192.

¹²⁸ See Chapter 3 Section 3 and Chapter 5 Section 4 for such discussion.

view of another tradition radically different from one's own can be truly confronting. The doctrine of *Anatta/Sunyata* is threatening to a view of the self as having an enduring, unchanging, and divine core. I have noticed, however, that I am more willing, with time, to see it from the Buddhist perspective. Queen distinguishes three categories of religious researcher: the participant observer, sympathizer, and adherent.¹²⁹ Although an experimental participator, I also fall into the category of sympathizer. I hold enormous respect for the Buddhist tradition and its practices, and similarly for the views and motivations of its practitioners, but I simply do not have the degree of belief and faith—the necessary conviction—to become an adherent, a self-professed Buddhist.

4.2.2 Chapter Structure

The fieldwork data for each centre are divided into three topics: engagement and learning, self-transformation, and socialization and commitment. The first two aspects are treated in individual chapters for both centres: Chapters 2 and 3 for the BMIMC, and Chapters 4 and 5 for VI. Chapter 6 deals with the socialization and commitment processes undergone by both types of practitioner. Chapters 2 and 4 explore the nature of the interaction between the experimental participant and the religious activity of the centre. They explore the scriptural foundations of the centre's worldview, the nature of religious authority, methods of teaching, teaching content in terms of doctrine and practice, how participants begin to engage with and work with the material, and finally, what they learn.

Chapters 3 and 5 explore the significance of personal application of the interpretive frameworks and techniques to the project of self-transformation. This is essentially a study of the way in which concepts, doctrines, practices, and the experiential states that they facilitate, become meaningful for the practitioner through the efforts of their private practice, study, and self-reflection. One of the trends to emerge early in the interview process was the effect on the practitioner of the recognition that they had undergone personal change as a result of their Buddhist involvement. This resulted in either a definite decision to commit to Buddhism, or to keep investigating it with *new* energy. These chapters explore the nature of the self-transformations involved, and the doctrinal frameworks and practices employed to effect this change. It is this approach that I believe uncovers an aspect of the nature of the construction and maintenance of shared reality. Distinguishing between what one learns through interaction at a Buddhist centre and what one applies in personal practice, reveals what is selected from the range of material accessed through the centre's activity, and therefore what one holds as personally valuable and useful. This distinction has explanatory power for understanding how the shaping of a Western Buddhism is affected by the tastes and needs of the practitioners.

¹²⁹ Queen, C. "Professing Buddhism: The Harvard Conference on Buddhism in America", in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 18, pp217-20, Honolulu, 1998.

Whereas the preceding four chapters explore the processes of engagement with, and acquisition of the new reality perspective, Chapter 6 examines the two processes that occur before and after this process of socialization. The first concerns the entire religious histories of the respondents as far as practical. This is to establish the relationships between their religious backgrounds, experimental pathways, and current choices of Buddhist affiliation. Their biographies offer insights into the ways in which religious explorers make use of concepts, interpretive frameworks, practices and the experiential states that they foster, they encounter within the broader alternative religious environment. The period after socialization, which itself is complete when one has comprehended enough of the new frame of reference, to feel comfortable in assessing it's validity in the light of personal experience, consists of the decision to commit. Chapter 6 encapsulates the previous exploration of the socialization process within the gamut of its exposition. Finally, Chapter 7 conflates the findings and conclusions about the elements of religious engagement active in the socialization, commitment process and perpetuation of the shared reality of each Centre.

Chapter 2: Instruction, Learning, and Practice at Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre

1 Introduction

The Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre (BMIMC), in the tradition of the late Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, provides facilities for the teaching and practice of *Vipassana*/Insight meditation. This chapter explores the way in which socialization into the Theravadin worldview of *Vipassana* practice is facilitated by the activity at the centre. It also seeks to outline how learning takes place in a meditative setting that permits minimal social interaction between participants. At base, socialization refers to the process by which the roles and norms of a group are learned.¹³⁰ In the context of religious resocialization, the group's worldview becomes a frame of reference for newcomers, within which they reorder their view of the world.¹³¹ Although social theorists agree that socialization involves both cognitive and social factors, theoretical approaches differ in the emphasis placed on the role of other people in the socialization of individuals. Two extremes are represented by the views that socialization is the process of accepting the opinions of one's 'significant others',¹³² or that it is an active process of negotiation.¹³³

Because social interaction at the centre is limited by the constraints of its retreat-style format, socialization into the practice and its Theravadin worldview depends largely on the instruction given by teachers, and on the opportunities taken for practice by the participant. This necessarily emphasizes the practical and experiential orientation to learning in this setting, because the student spends much time effectively isolated in meditation practice.¹³⁴ In this chapter, meditation practice is

¹³⁰ Wilson, S. "Becoming a Yogi: Resocialization and Deconditioning as Conversion Processes", in *Sociological Analysis* 45 [4], pp301-14, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1984, p301.

¹³¹ Shibutani, T. "Reference Groups as Perspectives", in *The American Journal of Sociology* 60 [6], pp562-69, University of Chicago Press, Cambridge University Press, 1955.

¹³² Greil refers to a body of thought that sees conversion as a process of accepting the opinions of one's new *reference group*, citing the work of Shibutani and Lofland and Stark's notion of strong affective bonds to adherents of the new perspective. See Greil, A. "Previous Dispositions and Conversion to Perspectives of Social and Religious Movements", in *Sociological Analysis* 38 [2], pp115-125, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1977. Lofland, J, and Stark, R. "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective", in *American Sociological Review*, pp. 862-75, 1965. Shibutani, *op.cit.*

¹³³ Wentworth, W. *Context and Understanding: An Inquiry into Socialization Theory*, Elsevier North Holland Inc., 1980, p65; p85. Wentworth sees socialization as the activity that structures the entry of nonmembers into an already existing world, but as an active as opposed to a passive process.

¹³⁴ The constructivist view, that all experience is mediated by language, as it applies to the study of religious experience, was influenced by the work of Katz in the 1970s. Those who disagree posit the existence of a form of pure experience, take the experiential state attained in concentration meditation, called the pure consciousness event by Forman, as their test case. This position is untenable in this instance for two reasons. First, the employment of *bare attention* to immediate experience necessarily involves the processing of mental content, and second, the purpose of this

conceptualized as a technology for marrying concept and experience, with the further aim of comprehending the practice's supporting worldview.¹³⁵ Practitioners learn the technique and its interpretive framework by learning and applying conceptual maps to their experience. For this reason, much attention is devoted to understanding the relationship between experiential states and their interpretation according to Buddhist doctrine.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Sections 1 and 2 outline the centre's social structure, and the doctrinal foundations and textual sources for the practice, respectively. Sections 3 and 4 outline how the practice is taught and learned, respectively. In that they describe two aspects of the same process: teaching and learning, these latter sections are complementary. Section 3 outlines those aspects of activity that facilitate access to the practice and its doctrinal foundations. Considerable space is devoted to an exposition of the nature of beginners' retreats, in terms of the consistency of doctrinal material imparted despite the variation in individual teaching styles. Section 4 describes the conceptual and experiential acquisitions facilitated by participation, practice, and learning. As shown by the data from participant observation and interview, all of these aspects of learning and experiential development are common to practitioners' experiences. My treatment cannot be seen to be exhaustive of the range of meditative experience and doctrinal interpretation that it is possible to engage with through Vipassana practice, but I have found that it is representative of practitioners' experience.

2 The Centre's Organization and Activity

The majority of the centre's religious activity takes the form of meditation retreats, although workshops are held occasionally. The homepage of BMIMC's website claims that the Centre has developed as a place of meditation, study, and

investigation is to establish how meaning is produced by the identification of experiential states according to Buddhist terminology. Katz, S. 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism', in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, pp22-73, Sheldon Press, London, 1978. Katz, S. 'Rent Work on Mysticism' in *History of Religions* 25 [1], pp76-86, University of Chicago Press, 1985. Forman, R. 'Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting', in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, pp3-49, Oxford University Press, 1990. Forman, R. 'Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology', in *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*, pp3-41, Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹³⁵ Two phenomenological approaches to meditation, those of Shaner and Preston, employ the concept of bodymind, taken to denote the existence of an original unity in Japanese Buddhism. Shaner cites textual evidence which suggests that the emphasis on bodymind inseparability was an inherited tradition in Japan. However, the method of both scholars depends on isolating a practice from its doctrinal framework. In the context of learning a religious practice, understanding the relationship between the experiential foundation for the practice and its doctrinal elaboration, is necessary. See Shaner, D. *The Bodymind Experience in Japanese Buddhism: A Phenomenological Study of Kukai and Dogen*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1985; Preston, D. *The Social Organization of Zen Practice: Constructing Transcultural Reality*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

community.¹³⁶ There is a small resident community, with occasional vacancies, which may be filled by people with from considerable to almost no experience with the centre. The centre is run by a management committee, which appoints a manager, and sometimes an assistant manager and other support staff to assist with day-to-day running. During the period of my fieldwork at the centre, the committee has consisted of about eight members at any time. Volunteers help in regular maintenance and on community work days, and with administration, shopping, cooking and cleaning during retreats. Certainly the centre aims to provide a conducive space and atmosphere for practice of and development in the Vipassana technique.

However, several organizational features limit the amount of social contact possible between most participants and practitioners. First, *Noble Silence* is kept on most retreats, and therefore, social activity is limited in several necessary ways during the retreat. In addition, the community at BMIMC is small, and in continual flux. Participants may build Buddhist social networks within the centre by volunteering, or outside the centre by attending other centres, or at the Buddhist Library in Camperdown, Sydney.

3 The Practice and Its Doctrinal Underpinnings

Vipassana is a meditation practice derived from the *Sutta Pitaka* of the Pali Canon. It is outlined in two suttas: the *Satipatthana Sutta* from the *Majjhima Nikaya*,¹³⁷ and the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* from the *Digha Nikaya*.¹³⁸ The homepage of BMIMC's website refers to the practice as Satipatthana Vipassana in the style of Mahasi Sayadaw, and gives the centre's inspiration as the Buddhist Theravada tradition.¹³⁹ Data gained from participant observation and interview demonstrates the instruction given by the centre's teachers to be thoroughly loyal to the method outlined by Mahasi Sayadaw. Similarly, data demonstrated a strong conformity to the meditation technique and its doctrinal position outlined in the *Satipatthana Sutta* by teachers. From this it can be seen that the *Satipatthana Sutta* is the source of religious authority for the practice.¹⁴⁰ For ease of explanation of everything to follow, the basics of the practice, the Vipassana method of Mahasi Sayadaw, and its doctrinal foundations, beginning with its relation to the sutta, are discussed. This will serve two related

¹³⁶ The website for the Blue mountains Insight Meditation Centre is www.meditation.asn.au.

¹³⁷ Bikkhu Bodhi (ed.). "Satipatthana Sutta", in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, 2nd edition, 2001, pp145-55.

¹³⁸ Walshe, M (trans.). "Mahasatipatthana Sutta", in the *Digha Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, 1995, p335-50. Also see Nyanaponika, Thera. *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha's Way of Mindfulness*, The Word of the Buddha Publishing Company, 2nd ed., 1956, pp2-3. The difference between this and the *Satipatthana Sutta* is that the latter contains a longer section on the Four Noble Truths.

¹³⁹ At www.meditation.asn.au.

¹⁴⁰ See Venerable U Silananda. *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, Wisdom Publications, 1990. Venerable U Silananda, a student of Mahasi Sayadaw, draws attention to the importance of these two suttas for Vipassana practice.

purposes. First, it is necessary to understand this connection in order to appreciate the doctrinal and practical uniformity of instruction underlying the apparent diversity of emphasis on points of doctrine and technique demonstrated by individual teachers. Second, a clear outline of the practice and its doctrinal matrix, will aid the discussion to take place throughout the thesis, of the learning and application of the practice by practitioners, and their resultant commitment to Buddhism.

3.1 The Vipassana Technique of Mahasi Sayadaw

The aim of Mahasi Sayadaw's Vipassana method is the attainment of *Nibbana*¹⁴¹ through the cultivation of *mindfulness*, the awareness of immediate experience, which Mahasi Sayadaw defines as concentrated attention¹⁴², Bhikkhu Bodhi as 'the capacity for attending to the content of our experience as it becomes manifest in the immediate present',¹⁴³ and Kornfield as observing 'the natural sequence of changing experience'.¹⁴⁴ A popular term for mindfulness among students and teachers is Nyanaponika Thera's *bare attention*, 'the singleminded awareness of what happens at the successive moments of perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind'.¹⁴⁵ Development of mindfulness and insight is effected by contemplation on the four *satipatthanas*, translated as *foundations of mindfulness*, outlined in the *Satipatthana Sutta*: the body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas*. *Dhammas*, the Pali term for the fourth *satipatthana*, is sometimes translated into English as *mind-objects*.¹⁴⁶ Several notable scholars, for instance Nyanaponika Thera¹⁴⁷, Analayo¹⁴⁸, and Silananda¹⁴⁹ advance strong reasons as to why this rendering is unsuitable, and so I leave the term untranslated throughout the thesis.¹⁵⁰ The reader is referred to Chapter 3, Section 2.1: *The Satipatthanas as Categories of Change*, for discussion of the relationship between the nature of the phenomena classified under this *satipatthana* and the transformative effects of their contemplation by Vipassana practitioners.

¹⁴¹ See Nyanaponika Thera. *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A Handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha's Way of Mindfulness*, The Word of the Buddha Publishing Company, 2nd ed., 1956, p2.

¹⁴² Mahasi Sayadaw, 1971, *op.cit.*, p20.

¹⁴³ Bhikkhu Bodhi. "Message", in *The Way of Mindfulness: the Satipatthana Sutta and Its Commentary*, pv-vii, Soma Thera author, sixth revised edition, Buddhist Publication Society, 1999, p.v.

¹⁴⁴ See Kornfield, J. Intensive Insight Meditation: A Phenomenological Study, in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 2 [1], pp41-58, Transpersonal Institute, California, 1979, p42.

¹⁴⁵ Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, *op.cit.*, pp17-8.

¹⁴⁶ See Soma Thera. *The Way of Mindfulness: the Satipatthana Sutta and Its Commentary*, Buddhist Publication Society, 1999. See p133 espially, where he uses the term *mental objects*, and gives the Pali equivalent *dhamma* in brackets.

¹⁴⁷ Nyanaponika Thera. *Abhidhamma Studies: Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 4th ed., 1998, pxvi.

¹⁴⁸ See Analayo. *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization*, Windhorse Publications, Birmingham, 2003, pp19.

¹⁴⁹ Venerable U Silananda, *op.cit.*, p95. U Silananda states that no English word covers the full meaning of the Pali word *dhammas*.

¹⁵⁰ Coincidentally, during a talk given by Venerable Antonio Satta at Vajrayana Institute on Friday 7 January 2005 which predated a two-day *Vipasyana* retreat, he translated the four 'objects' or *satipattanas* as body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas*.

That the *Satipatthana* method is the true way for the realization of *Nibbana* is stated in the second paragraph of the *Satipatthana Sutta*.¹⁵¹ Although the precise nature of *Nibbana* is frequently debated, when associated with the goal of Vipassana or insight practice it is often described as ‘absence of craving’ or as ‘liberation from suffering’.¹⁵² Nyanaponika Thera sees the practice as having two goals: *Nibbana* and mindfulness in everyday life.¹⁵³ The latter, as a goal in itself, is attainable in both religious and secular settings, to the point where concern is expressed that Vipassana, isolated from its traditional framework, may be reduced to therapy in the West.¹⁵⁴ In either setting the aim of practice is insight into the nature of psychic functioning,¹⁵⁵ outlined as three objectives by Nyanaponka and Deatherage: to know one’s own mental processes, to have the power to shape or control them, and to gain freedom from the condition where they are unknown and uncontrolled.¹⁵⁶ However, BMIMC supports practical instruction with *dhamma* talks that provide schooling in Buddhist philosophy and ethics.

The aim of all Vipassana meditation instruction given during retreat is the development of mindfulness. By directing participants to be aware of whatever mental or bodily experience is predominant in each moment, the immediate aim is to train the mind to observe and note the succession of physical and mental phenomena that appear to it.¹⁵⁷ To this effect, Mahasi Sayadaw’s method utilizes two techniques: sitting and walking. The difference between the two lies in the nature of the *primary object*, that object used to anchor the mind in present experience. Sitting meditation uses the in and out movement of the breath as *primary object*. Meditators observe the rising and falling of their abdomens while the movement occurs, noting the ‘rising ... falling ... rising ... falling’. Walking meditation invokes contemplation of the actions of stepping. The recommended noting technique is ‘lifting ... placing’, which, with practice, is extended to “lifting ... moving ... placing ... shifting”. Meditators may note either the movement itself or the resulting sensations from the soles of the feet.

¹⁵¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Majjhima Nikaya, op.cit.*, p145.

¹⁵² See Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, *op.cit.* He states that aim of *Satipatthana* is *Nibbana* as the final liberation from suffering.

¹⁵³ Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, *op.cit.*, p2.

¹⁵⁴ See Fronsald, G. “Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”, in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp164-180, University of California Press, 1998, p166.

¹⁵⁵ Engler, J. “Therapeutic Aims in Psychotherapy and Meditation: Developmental Stages in the Representation of Self”, in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 16 [1], pp25-61, Transpersonal Institute, 1984, p27.

¹⁵⁶ Deatherage, G. “The Clinical Use of ‘Mindfulness’ Meditation Techniques in Short-Term Psychotherapy”, in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 7 [2], pp133-143, Transpersonal Institute, 1975, p133. The *Satipatthana* method also dispenses with any concentrative attainment prior to insight training. Williams maintains that in much of the Buddhist tradition, it is not held necessary for jhanic achievement before commencing insight. Williams, P, with Tribe, A. *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, Routledge, 2000, pp81-2.

¹⁵⁷ Kornfield, *op.cit.*, p42.

Beyond this, Mahasi's method and the centre's teachers stress some basic principles of technique. 'Do not think of the processes of rising and falling, and lifting and putting, as words, but be aware of the process of movement. When the mind wanders, it should be noted, for example, 'reaching'. After this, begin noting the rising/falling, lifting/putting again. Make a mental note of each object observed, every item of mental behaviour as it occurs, thoughts and mental functions; after the disappearance of the object, return to the primary object, the abdomen or the walking. Failing to note and dismiss such distinctive objects, such as sounds and sights as they occur, may allow the meditator to fall into reflections about them instead of proceeding with intense attention to the rising and falling, or lifting and putting'.¹⁵⁸

Fundamental to the Mahasi practice is the categorization of the range of objects into *primary* and *secondary* objects. The *primary* objects include the rise and fall of the abdomen and the two for walking meditation given above, all of which belong to the first foundation. *Secondary* objects are any other objects that appear to the mind, and are important for maintaining strict adherence to the Vipassana technique. When the untrained mind rests on one object for too long, whether it be the breath or the soles of the feet, it may slip into concentration practice. With respect to the secondary objects used for the practice, my interview data show that there is a difference between those listed in the *Satipatthana Sutta* and those that are typically used by practitioners at the centre. In the *Satipatthana Sutta* objects are categorized according to which of the four satipatthanas they belong: body, feelings, mind and *dhammas*.¹⁵⁹ Under 'body' are listed mindfulness of breathing, the four postures (walking, standing, sitting, and lying), foulness in the body parts, the elements, and the nine charnel ground contemplations.¹⁶⁰ 'Feeling' is divided into pleasant, painful, and neutral, and further into worldly and unworldly. 'Mind' or mental states consists of mind affixed or not by lust, hate, and delusion. Similarly, 'mind' may or may not be contracted, distracted, exalted, surpassed, concentrated or liberated. *Dhammas* includes the hindrances, the five *khandha*/aggregates, the six bases, the seven enlightenment factors, and the Four Noble Truths.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ These instructions are a synthesis of the main points outlined in two publications by Mahasi Sayadaw, *Discourse on the Basic Practice of the Satipatthana Vipassana*, U Pe Thin translator, printed at the Burma Art Press, 1958; *Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages*, U Pe Thin and Myanaung U Tin translators, Buddhist Publication Society, 1971.

¹⁵⁹ A comprehensive diagram of the objects listed in the *Satipatthana Sutta* is to be found in Analayo, *op.cit.*, p19. Both the four satipatthanas and the relevance of Analayo's diagram for self-transformative practice is discussed in Chapter 3, Section 2.1: *The Satipatthanas as Categories of Change*.

¹⁶⁰ See Analayo, *op.cit.*, p153, who phrases this last one as the corpse in nine consecutive stages of decay.

¹⁶¹ These are listed in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, *op.cit.*, pp145-54.

Data from participant observation and interview show a consistency among the range of secondary objects that practitioners tend to use for contemplation. This range excludes the charnel ground contemplations and meditation on the foulness of the body. These seem to be most removed from immediate body-based experience when considered alongside the range of objects belonging to the body, the first satipatthana.¹⁶² Another notable and more surprising omission from practice is the lack of referral by practitioners to the five *khandha*/aggregates belonging to the fourth satipatthana. On several occasions throughout my period of fieldwork, it was clear that both doctrines model the view of the person employed in Vipassana meditation. Because the Mahasi method utilizes the former, practitioners habitually think of the self in this manner.¹⁶³ This view of the self is given considerable attention in the discussion in Chapter 3.

3.2 Doctrinal Texts and Teaching Resources

The Buddhist worldview is imparted to students and practitioners through a range of reading material. As discussed above, the doctrinal foundations of the practice are the *Satipatthana* and *Mahasatipatthana Suttas* from the *Nikaya Pitaka* of the Pali Canon. Of equal value are the writings of Mahasi Sayadaw that outline and explain his approach to the Vipassana practice. Reference is sometimes made to the *Anapanasati Sutta*, the sutta devoted to the *Mindfulness of Breathing*. Other sources include writings by Western interpreters, commentators and teachers of Vipassana, such as those of Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield,¹⁶⁴ writings by Eastern teachers who have popularized Buddhism for the Western mind, and writings by teachers associated with the centre, for example, Venerable Pannyavaro, Patrick Kearney, and Steve and Rosemary Weissman. Some of the writings in this latter category may be downloaded from the BMIMC website.¹⁶⁵ The Buddhist worldview and the doctrinal foundations of its practice are ever-present in the meditation instruction given at the Centre. During retreat, the participant begins to encounter the fundamentals of the Buddhist worldview almost immediately through teacher instruction and *dhamma* talks. This fundamental framework consists of the Four Noble Truths, especially the Noble Eightfold Path in its three aspects of *Panna*, *Sila*, *Samadhi*—wisdom, ethics and meditation—and the three marks of existence, *Dukkha*, *Anicca*, and *Anatta*—suffering, impermanence and no essentially existing self.

¹⁶² Analayo, *op.cit.*, pp152-53, makes the point that this last meditation, on the corpse in day makes use of visualization and reflection, since the meditator must compare their own body to these images.

¹⁶³ In a one-day workshop given in early 2005 at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown, Sydney, the aggregates and their utilization as contemplation objects in Vipassana were the subject of considerable discussion by the teacher. This was the only time in my several years' involvement with the Centre that I recall discussion of this doctrine in the context of practice.

¹⁶⁴ Other writing popular among some practitioners includes much material by authors from many Buddhist traditions writing specifically for the Western Buddhist.

¹⁶⁵ Several sets of teachings are available on the website, www.meditation.asn.au, and can be downloaded as PDF files.

Materials from the latter categories of literature above appear to be generally popular with practitioners. However, preference for a type of literature is an individual matter, and does not directly correlate with development in the practice. Generally, however, interest in and familiarity with the Pali Canon tends to develop with experience in the practice. Some preferences expressed by practitioners were for the *Abhidhamma*, the *Dhammapada*, and for the study of particular *suttas* such as the *Anattalakhana Sutta*. However, most practitioners express a preference for the Western commentators and interpreters of the Vipassana practice and Theravada tradition. Nyanaponika Thera's *Heart of Buddhist Meditation* is very popular. Some preferred the writings of the lay Buddhist teachers because such writings were 'easy to read' or 'accessible'. Examples are Joseph Goldstein's *The Experience of Insight*, and writings by Jack Kornfield or Sharon Salzberg. These several are quite possibly more widely read than Mahasi Sayadaw's writings. However, these were mentioned by some practitioners. Some read the 'satipatthanas through other literature', such as *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness* by U Silananda. Others are drawn to teachers within the tradition, such as U Pandita. Other Buddhist authors from various schools mentioned were Ajahn Chaa, Tenzin Palmo, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Pema Chodron. Overall, whether practitioners wanted light reading in bed, something inspirational to reflect on, or instruction in the practice for clarification of technique or insight into meditative experience, the general consensus was for material that practitioners could relate to and apply to their daily lives, and which could put their own experience into perspective.

4 Contexts for Learning and Practice

The centre does not hold regular Buddhist teachings or philosophy sessions, but doctrinal material, imparted in practical instruction and in *dhamma* talks, informs the practice. Activities conducted at the centre or affiliated with it can all be viewed as learning contexts, and fall into three categories. First is the weekly meditation night. Beginning at 7pm, the usual program is for a half-hour's sitting, half-hour's walking, another half-hour's sitting, and then a *dhamma* talk for about a half-hour. A roster of four teachers takes turn to lead the night's session.¹⁶⁶ Second, teachers affiliated with the centre often give one-day meditation workshops or study courses at the Buddhist Library or elsewhere. Examples of such courses are the Sutta Study Weekend held in August 2003, which concentrated on the relationship between *Samatha*/Concentration and *Vipassana*/Insight Practice, and the annual series of Sutta Study Classes entitled *Evam Me Suttam*, held at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown, Sydney.¹⁶⁷ All of the learning contexts associated with the centre include instruction

¹⁶⁶ Since this fieldwork was undertaken, the time and venue have both changed. The weekly sessions are now held on Friday nights at 7pm, but at the Life and Balance Centre, 132 St Johns Road, Glebe, Sydney.

¹⁶⁷ Recent courses include 4 October to 8 November 2001, on the oral nature of the early *suttas* and how the *suttas* that analyse the meditation process are read in the contemporary world; 2 April to 7 May 2002, which focussed on texts that teach dependent arising, and August/September 2004, which focussed on some key *suttas* from the *Majjhima Nikaya*. See the BMIMC website.

in the practice, and instruction in its doctrinal underpinnings. The third and most significant of these learning contexts is the Vipassana retreat.

4.1 Retreats

Nearly all of the teaching and practice conducted at BMIMC takes place as a live-in arrangement. Participants remain at the centre for the duration of the activity, which may be a workshop or a retreat. While a workshop might be for one day or a weekend, retreats are typically two,¹⁶⁸ four,¹⁶⁹ or nine days,¹⁷⁰ or for a month.¹⁷¹ All activities are highly structured. Set periods are scheduled for sitting and walking meditation, *dhamma* talks, meal breaks, personal activities such as washing, and chores which are referred to as 'mindfulness jobs'. In general, the one- or two-day workshop or retreat is for beginners, and the four- or nine-day for beginners and advanced meditators. There are also retreats of one month's duration, some of which are *self-retreats*, meaning that no teacher is present. These are for advanced practitioners only. Despite the variation in length of retreats, the only observable differences between them are in the amount of instruction about meditation and in the time set aside for meditation. From time to time a teacher sets shorter times, eg half- or three-quarter-hour periods instead of the typical hour for sitting and walking, during beginners' retreats. Retreat descriptions, outlined in the retreat program or available from the website and the printed newsletter, prescribe the proficiency level at which a retreat is aimed: beginners, beginners and advanced, or advanced. Some retreats intended for the last will specify that no meditation instruction will be given.

Sometimes there is an option to take only a portion of a longer retreat, for example, the first weekend of a nine-day retreat, or fifteen days of the thirty-day retreat in January. Participants are encouraged to stay for the length or portion of the retreat that they have chosen, but they are not prevented from leaving if that is their wish. However, teachers view this as the mind's creation of resistance to the practice. Some teachers discuss this during the course of the retreat. As will be discussed later, recognition of resistance to the practice and the deepening awareness that it fosters can be used as a meditation object. Teachers try, in private interviews, to help practitioners to deal with problems that arise from their participation in a retreat.

¹⁶⁸ See Appendices 2 and 3: Beginners' Weekend Workshop Schedule, 29-30 May 2004, and Long-Weekend Retreat Schedule, 12-15 June 2004, as examples.

¹⁶⁹ See Appendix 4: Four-Day Retreat Schedule, 14 to 17 February, 2004, for example.

¹⁷⁰ See Appendix 5: Nine-day Retreat Schedule, 23 April-2 May 2004.

¹⁷¹ A typical daily schedule for most retreats conducted at the Centre is outlined in Weissman, R and S. *With Compassionate Understanding: A Meditation Retreat*, 1999, pxiv.

4.1.1 Mindfulness Training Practices

Vipassana meditation is taught as the primary practice during retreat. However, it is supplemented with a range of practices, all with the aim to develop practitioners' mindfulness. These support practices include daily mindfulness jobs, *Metta*/lovingkindness meditation and thought reflection. Daily mindfulness jobs include such chores as cleaning, washing-up, sweeping and the like, and time for these is included in the daily timetable. Each participant chooses to perform a chore that aids the routine operation and maintenance of the centre, and also encourages mindfulness during its performance. *Metta* practice, as Fronsdal has noted, is promoted by American teachers, a practice which many of BMIMC's teachers also tend to promote.¹⁷² However, his observation that North American teachers tend to teach mindfulness independent of *Metta*/loving-kindness, *Sila*/ethics and *Dana*/generosity¹⁷³ is not supported for this setting. Teachers emphasize mindfulness as the foundation of mental transformation. While the inclusion of *Metta* practice is at the teacher's discretion, practitioners in interview expressed strong approval for the development of equanimity and compassion for others that it engenders. As shown in Chapter 3, Section 1.2, the ultimate function of *Metta* is to transform habitual attitudes so as to hold all beings as of equal value. *Thought reflection* is introduced by some teachers to complement the Vipassana, and uses a chosen principle for reflection during, for example, washing or eating.

4.2 Introductory Retreats

4.2.1 Orientation and Introduction

Workshops and retreats at BMIMC commence either on Friday night or Saturday morning. Before the introductory session in the meditation hall, supper (Friday) or breakfast (Saturday) is served in the dining room. This is the only opportunity for participants to talk to each other before the retreat officially begins in the meditation hall with a welcome and orientation talk by the centre manager. This defines the retreat schedule, and housekeeping matters such as the selection of mindfulness tasks, for example, cooking, washing up, and cleaning. If the retreat is to take place in *Noble Silence*, this is also explained. Other practical matters, such as what to do if you need to speak to someone, or contact the outside world, are explained.¹⁷⁴ The manager then introduces one or more teachers to begin the retreat with a short introduction to the practice and instruction for sitting meditation.

¹⁷² Fronsdal, *op.cit.*, p174, maintains that when *Metta* practice is taught in Asia, it is seldom mixed with Vipassana.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, p172.

¹⁷⁴ A brief description of the retreat structure is found in McIntyre, J. "On Boming a Meditator: Adult Learning and Social Context", in *Qualitative Research Practice in Education*, David Lovell Publishing, 1997.

The introductory session presents some background to the practice, such as its place within Buddhism, and some information about Mahasi Sayadaw and his popularization of the practice amongst lay people. The teacher may include some explanation of key Pali terms such as *satipatthana*/foundations of mindfulness, *Vipassana*/Insight, and *Bhavana*/Meditation. Key notions are also explained in more colloquial terms. One teacher defined Vipassana as a Pali word that translates as 'seeing clearly', and by extension, 'being honest about what we see'. Teachers then typically draw attention to the emphasis on direct experience in Vipassana meditation. One teacher outlined the Buddha's view that the essence of the practice is experience, not belief. Thus the purpose of the retreat was to explore, from the perspective of experience, how meditation works. Consequently, 'progress in meditation takes place at the level of direct experience where the conceptual is helpful'.

Another teacher explained that the practice involved *praxis*, the combination of theory and practice. However, his explanation took a more formal approach from a doctrinal perspective. He briefly outlined the eightfold path by discussing *Panna*, defined as 'wisdom, overcoming defiling mind-states'; *Sila*, defined as 'ethics, moral foundation, being gentle in word, deed, and thought', and *Samadhi*, defined as 'concentration, absorption, and meditation practice'. Another teacher again expressed the same ideas, as 'bring beginner's mind to the practice, also called bare attention, meaning that every moment is unique, a new beginning'. The practice was to 'observe what is happening as it arises and passes away', and to 'observe with mindfulness the physical and mental process; what's happening in the mind and body', adding that 'right effort', mindfulness and concentration all come into play with practice.¹⁷⁵

From these introductions it can be seen that teachers explain the ideas of formal doctrine in accessible language. Their introductory comments provide participants with an initial conceptual orientation to the practice. One of the teachers above, to illustrate how defiling mind-states are created, expressed the process as 'thought manifests into word, which manifests into deed, which manifests into habit'. Another teacher, with a background in psychology, likened the practice to therapy, expressing his appreciation for a 'method for understanding what's going on inside us'. Ideas expressed in this manner are easy to follow for those without prior knowledge of Buddhism. At this point, teachers may draw attention to the relationship between the nature of 'suffering' and the goal of Buddhist meditation practice. As a Buddhist form of meditation, the goal of Vipassana is to achieve happiness and to overcome sorrow, pain, and suffering. It is thus concerned with suffering and the end of suffering. Some teachers refer to *dukkha*, and outline its common translations as suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

¹⁷⁵ This is a reference to the three *Samadhi* factors of the eightfold path.

After the introduction to the practice itself, the teachers discuss any remaining matters of retreat housekeeping, such as behaviours encountered from and expected of practitioners. For example, some practitioners may bow to show respect for the Buddha. The practice of Noble Silence is explained: no written, spoken or body-language exchanges with others; no reading or listening to music, because these call forth extra thinking. The introduction of Noble Silence is left to the discretion of teachers, and is introduced with the aims of the retreat and level of experience of the participants in mind. For instance, on my second retreat, Noble Silence began on the Saturday morning from waking onwards, whereas on the first it was in effect from 7pm on Saturday until 10am on Sunday. For the present retreat, the teacher explained that there would be silence wherein things, including the self, would be confronted moment-to-moment: 'Talk can function to communicate, but it can also allow you to hide from experience'.

The teachers continue with an introduction to the precepts. The five lay precepts are given as abstention from: killing, stealing, false speech, sexual misconduct, and taking intoxicants.¹⁷⁶ Some retreats observe eight precepts, the additional three being abstention from food after midday, high or luxurious beds, and entertainment.¹⁷⁷ Generally, introductory retreats limit themselves to the first five. One teacher explained that the precepts are taken to establish participants in *Sila*, or ethical practice. Another explained that 'they are not as in Christianity', in being related to notions of sin and redemption. They are instead related to the principle of right motivation producing correct action.¹⁷⁸ The precepts were explained as one of two supports for the practice. The first, *Dana*/ generosity, is an Asian-derived practice that involves giving to others, for instance, the voluntary work of the cooks and helpers during a retreat.¹⁷⁹ The second is *Sila*/ethics, the foundation for practice. In this retreat we were asked to follow a set of rules: to agree to act in a way that was harmless (no killing or hurting); to act with trust and respect toward others; not to steal or take without asking; not to engage in sexual activity or take intoxicants; and not to use false or harsh speech. He directed that most of the retreat should be in silence, and that we were to limit eye-contact with others. On this occasion, the teacher asked us to make the commitment quietly to ourselves.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ See the following publications for an outline of the five lay precepts. Coleman, J. *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p30; Kornfield, J. *A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*, Rider, 1994, p297.

¹⁷⁷ These other three precepts are outlined in Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p87.

¹⁷⁸ See Coleman, 2001, *op.cit.*, p30, for a discussion of the relation between *Sila* and precepts.

¹⁷⁹ Harvey, 2000, *op.cit.*, p61. Harvey describes *dana* as the primary ethical activity.

¹⁸⁰ This beginners' retreat took place on the 12th and 13th of February, 2005. I have not included the schedule for this one as an appendix, as it followed a standard retreat pattern, akin to those outlined in Appendices 2 and 3.

At other times, observing precepts has been left to individual choice. It was up to participants whether we observed them or not for the duration of the retreat. One teacher expressed it so: 'As yogis/meditators we are not required to believe in anything. We can take it on conditionally'. For some retreats, refuge and precepts are taken formally at the beginning of the retreat, and first thing each morning. How much explanation about taking refuge and precepts is left to the teacher's discretion, but as these examples show, teachers invariably emphasize that the precepts facilitate a conducive state of mind for meditation. Teachers give as much explanation as is necessary to establish the relationship of precepts to the practice.¹⁸¹

4.2.2 Initial Meditation Instruction and Practice

At the end of the introductory session, some fundamental meditation instruction is given, followed by a sitting practice period. Participants are first instructed in the various ways of sitting correctly and comfortably, using meditation cushions, stools, or chairs. The purpose of finding a good meditation posture is to be comfortable enough not to be distracted from meditation by discomfort, but, at the same time, not so comfortable as to fall asleep. Initial instruction involves description of the significance of the primary and secondary objects for the practice. Meditators are told to take the abdomen as primary object, and while breathing normally and steadily, to observe and note the rising and falling, or the in-out movement, of the abdomen. The secondary object is anything that appears in the mind, or anything else that the mind wanders to, and this can be noted as 'wandering, wandering', or more specifically. For example, in an imagined meeting of someone, note 'meeting ... meeting', and further, 'bored ... bored', or 'happy ... happy', as appropriate. The important consideration is to be aware of everything experienced in the mind and body without entering into internal dialogue about it. In the words of one teacher, 'What matters is to know or perceive the object, not what you say to label it'.

Teachers draw attention to the noting of physical sensations such as stiffness, pain and tiredness. 'If these sensations impel a change of posture, as they often do, instead of moving immediately note the urge as 'wishing to change', 'rising ... moving ... touching', &c.' Practitioners are instructed to make the note before the move, because that aids development of the patience necessary for the practice. During sitting periods of introductory retreats, teachers often employ statements such as 'just be present with your experience', to keep meditators in the present, and to discourage them gently from allowing discursive thinking or daydreaming to taking over. This excerpt from my retreat notes exemplifies the above:

To begin with, C drew our attention to two important things involved in this practice. First was concentration, the placement of attention on an object, and second was the fine-tuning of that attention. He then gave some preliminary

¹⁸¹ This introductory session is also described in McIntyre, *op.cit.*

instruction for sitting meditation, beginning with the primary object. This followed the standard instruction for sitting meditation: 'Keep the back erect, the eyes closed, and the hands resting in the lap. Focus on the breath at the abdomen, the in-out movement of the abdomen.' He then went on to explain the nature of, and to direct us toward, secondary objects: sounds, thoughts and the like. There was ten minutes of this instruction, and then ten minutes of meditation. C began with, "Settle into the body. Be aware of the feeling against the cushion. Note the physical sensations".

Teachers may now give some walking meditation instruction, or leave it until later in the retreat. Alternatively, in beginners' retreats or workshops, some teachers have introduced another form of awareness exercise before the sitting and walking practice. The following two examples show how a teacher may ease participants gently into the principles and experience of Vipassana:

At this point in the first retreat we were directed to go outside for ten minutes, pick three objects, observe them, 'take them in' in detail, and observe our reaction to our observations. On our return to the meditation hall, the teacher commented that from a Buddhist perspective, it is not *what* we notice, but *how* we notice things. He offered the following comments on the qualities of such observation. First, we note with precision, 'I'm seeing this, not that'. We saw, observed things outside ourselves, but meditation is largely internal and deals largely with internal things. The second is sharpness, to note with clarity 'the object and things going on around it'. Awareness is necessary for finer levels of observation. Third is movement, 'things shift, they don't stay the same', an observation which related to 'the recognition of impermanence'. Fourth is insight, 'new ways of seeing', 'I saw some things in my reactions'. The teacher explained that insight is not conceptual, but 'observing the reaction space'. Five is aesthetics, 'being there with simple things', 'happiness arises in the smaller things', 'the underlying experience of joy'.¹⁸²

The introductory session in the February 2005 retreat consisted of a discussion about our previous meditation experience, and an introductory mindfulness meditation.¹⁸³ The teacher split us up into four groups in order to discuss our previous meditation experience with each other. It seemed that many of the people present had tried other forms of meditation, and the views of several held it to be almost an undirected stream of images, sensations, and thoughts. After some clarification, the teacher suggested that we view this meditation as a way of perceiving and understanding our own experience. Between morning tea and lunch, he led us in an experiential session which consisted of a body scan exercise where we placed our mind on each part of the body in turn, beginning with the feet and working our way up the body, a short guided Metta meditation, which as he explained, is not the main practice but is

¹⁸² See Appendix 2: Beginners' Weekend Meditation Workshop Schedule, 29-30 May 2004. This is a description of the *Awareness Exercise* conducted at 10 am.

¹⁸³ The purpose of this weekend retreat was as a gentle introduction to the practice.

used to encourage a sense of acceptance, and a half-hour of sitting, where the primary object is either the breath at the abdomen or the whole body. The body scan is a practice that this teacher employs frequently. It consists of sweeping each part of the body with one's awareness, in order to place it on the body as a unitary object. This teacher's approach emphasizes the need to see the body as the foundation for the practice,¹⁸⁴ especially to students whose occupations tend to keep them 'in their heads'.¹⁸⁵ After this, we were again split into four groups to share our experiences of the half-hour sit, beginning with the question, 'What was the primary object?' This was followed by a short question-and-answer session.

4.2.3 The First Day (After the Introductory Session)

For ease of explanation, each example retreat will be outlined separately and consecutively, for each of the two days. During the introductory workshop, the first session after the introduction consisted of a discussion of concentration, and then a practice session.¹⁸⁶ Concentration was explained as fixing the mind on an object such as the breath. The teacher said, "You must have good concentration before practising mindfulness. You must be able to hold the mind on one object before turning to place it on a succession of objects." The concentration exercise itself consisted of sitting for twenty minutes, focussing on the breath where it felt clearest, for instance, at the nostrils, throat, chest, or abdomen. Then followed a discussion.

During the early afternoon, there was a *Meditation and Awareness* session, in two parts. The first was walking meditation, which included instructions about what to do, where to place the attention, and about noting. For faster walking (at normal pace or slightly less), note 'right ... left'. At even slower pace, note 'lifting ... moving ... placing'. The teacher directed us to register the sensations in the feet, as our practice for the moment.. He explained that the slower walking provided the opportunity to register more sensations than the faster walking. Walking meditation was for half an hour, followed by group discussion of our experience with it. The second part was an awareness exercise: we were directed to look at our pen and imagine what it would be like to be that object, in order to 'see what experience would be like from the inside'. The teacher asked each person to report one observation that they had made, observing afterward that some people had 'picked up' on the notion of *experience* from another perspective. The rest of the day was devoted to alternating sitting and walking meditations.

¹⁸⁴ See Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, *op.cit.*, p40. He draws the reader's attention to the body as the foundation for the systematic meditative practice, despite the necessity to cultivate all four contemplations.

¹⁸⁵ Both the Theravadin and the Gelugpa views of the mind and body see them as ontologically distinct. One of two positions taken to their relationship outlined by Shaner, is to see them as ontologically distinct, as in Platonic, Cartesian, and Samkyan philosophy. From this position the aim in meditation is to discover how they interrelate. Shaner, *op.cit.*, p4.

¹⁸⁶ See Appendix 2: Beginners' Weekend Workshop Schedule, 29-30 May 2004.

The *dhamma* talk that night was entitled *The Story of the Buddha and Buddhism*. The talk recounted the well-known facts about the Buddha's birth, family of influence, how the Buddha's father tried to protect him from the real world, and about the four sights the Buddha saw after leaving his family's palace. Further comments concerned the Buddha's renunciation and his finding the Middle Way, the point of reaching enlightenment, and his insight into the nature of existence: impermanence, suffering and no-self. Under the teachings of the Buddha, the teacher outlined the Four Noble Truths. He explained the relationship between the first truth, the truth of suffering, and the three poisons greed, hatred and delusion, and further, our clinging to the 'I'. He then described equanimity as not getting caught up in good or bad things. The second Noble Truth was stated to be craving as the cause of suffering; the third as the cessation of suffering, and the fourth as the Eight-Fold Path. The teacher briefly outlined the eight aspects and their grouping into three: Panna, Sila, and Samadhi. It was clear from the brevity that he intended to provide an introduction to the fundamental notions and their import, which could be amplified by the participant for themselves later.

The mid-morning session of the June Long-Weekend retreat¹⁸⁷ consisted of a walking session and a question-and-answer session. The instruction given was: for fast walking, note 'right ... left', and for slow walking, note 'raising ... dropping (the foot)'. When we could register and note the raising and dropping with some mindfulness, we were encouraged to move onto the next level of registering and noting 'lifting ... moving ... placing'. During question time, participants discussed their experiences with the practice so far: inability to hold their minds on the primary object, drifting-off and the like. The teacher fleshed out his answers and suggestions with much practical detail, especially about the wandering nature of the mind. He outlined the hindrances, and the fact that everybody experiences them, and emphasized that, with practice, they get easier to label and deal with.

During the morning session of walking-meditation instruction we had been given instruction in preparation for the group interview in the afternoon. We were asked to be aware of how we were observing the primary and secondary objects. At the beginning of the group interview each person was asked, in turn, how they observed the primary object. Some responses were: 'Walking is easier because something is happening'; 'Trouble with breathing'; 'Trouble with thought'. At this stage there were some comments on progress with noting. Some people commented about feeling distracted by the cold weather, and were instructed to use the sensations of cold and shivering as mindfulness objects.¹⁸⁸ Here the teachers asked, "What sort of noting are you making?" The responses were, 'lifting ... shifting ... dropping ... pressing'. One person answered, 'awareness of birdsong ... looking ... freshness on the skin'. We were told, "You can note it, or just be aware of it", and "You can bring

¹⁸⁷ See Appendix 3: Long-Weekend Retreat Schedule, 12-15 June 2004.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

the mind back to one object". Other responses included 'tiredness ... headache ... emotional stuff'. The teachers' advice was to accept the experience, just to note whatever was happening, and that this would lift the energy level.

The teachers then asked us about our observation and noting of the breath. Were we following the rising and falling? In the feeling of the breath, was there tightness? Were we aware of the length and pressure of the breath? For instance, was there any unevenness within and between breaths? On a related point of practice, in response to a question about why we would discriminate between thinking and remembering, since these were both forms of thinking, we were instructed that each mind-state will arise with different qualities, and to be aware of the differences. The teachers' concluding remarks were something akin to, 'Why do we practise? Our minds are quite out of control, being caught between craving and aversion. We can live in this way or choose to do something about it. Living thus is to be continually in suffering. The practice is not easy, and takes time to pick up.'

The *dhamma* talk that night was an introduction to the set of central Buddhist concepts, and illustrated the subjects that may be covered in an introductory *dhamma* talk. Topics included the Buddha as Bodhisattva, the Tripitaka of the Pali Canon (*Sutta*, *Vinaya*, and *Abhidhamma* pitakas), and the systemic and cross-referenced nature of the Canon. The bulk of this *dhamma* talk was devoted to an outline of the four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path as two maps within the Pali Canon that can show the way to liberation. The teacher likened these two doctrines as maps in that they 'indicate a direction to go in', and 'tell us about the environment'. He stressed that, theoretically and by development through practice, other maps emerge. To this latter end, showing how other maps emerge through practice, he went over the elements of the Eight-Fold Path, showing how they related to the Vipassana practice. During the weekend retreat in February 2005 participants were largely left to their own practice when the introductory session had ended. During the sitting period at 5.30pm, the teacher remarked that this was a difficult time in the retreat. In his experience it was the time when the mind begins to quieten, and anxieties, tiredness, or obsessive thoughts may come to the surface. He told us to be gentle with ourselves and just be with our experience. A *dhamma* talk was given later that evening.

On all three retreats, during the introductory instruction and practice period, and for several sessions on the first day, teachers attempted to engage participants with their own immediate experience in various ways. Of these retreats, Retreat 2 was the most typical, in that practical instruction consisted of the standard instruction for sitting and walking meditation. The awareness exercises given during Retreat 2 directed our attention to specific objects: concentration on the breath where it was clearest, and on the soles of the feet during walking. During Retreat 3 we were instructed in a number of short exercises: group discussion of previous meditative experience, a body-awareness exercise, some *Metta*, a sitting period and discussion. This session

allowed participants to settle into the retreat setting, to sample the practice, and to begin to work with the mind.

4.2.4 The Second Day

The second morning typically begins with some further instruction for the practice. During the February 2005 retreat, in the sitting period just before breakfast, there was instruction from the teacher about just being with our experience in whatever is happening, what we were doing, whether it be standing, walking, or otherwise. If we found ourselves lost in thought or thinking, we should gently bring ourselves back to the primary object. Overall, there was minimal instruction during this retreat compared to the other two. Much of the time was given to personal practice of sitting and walking.

On the second day of the May 2004 Weekend Workshop, we broke *Noble Silence* at 10am with an Awareness period.¹⁸⁹ The teacher began by asking participants about their experiences of observing Noble Silence from 7pm onward the night before. Feeling ‘irritation’ was one response. He spoke about the way the silence makes us more aware of what goes on inside us ‘a lot of the time’. He used this response to exemplify how meditation practice can make us aware of mental content without creating ‘the story’—the need to attribute cause and meaning to the mental states we experience—in this case, irritability. The teacher elaborated by pointing out two aspects of consciousness that apply in meditation: the knowing aspect or being aware, and mind states such as sleepiness or irritability.

The teacher drew attention to the difference between direct experience through the senses, and indirect experience such as labelling. He had made reference to the difference between the conceptual and the experiential earlier when talking about the stories we put around our mind-states. He elaborated on this distinction. External direct experience involved the senses, whereas internal direct experience consisted of bodily sensations and emotions, both of which could be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Sensations and emotions are both aspects of, and covered by, feeling. Mental states are in this category also. One can have direct experience of thinking, but with the content or story, the consciousness or direct experience is lost and it becomes indirect experience. Similarly with memories: we know that we are having a memory, but it is removed from immediate experience. We were directed to ‘get to know the space of mindfulness’ for the rest of the day. For the three meditation periods between 11am and 12:30pm, we were instructed to pay particular attention to specific experiences. In the first sitting we were to observe the relationship between the breath and other things going on in the body: the breath as primary object, the other things as secondary objects. During the walking, the aim was to be aware of all sensory information: sight, hearing, smell, and touch. In the second sitting, we were

¹⁸⁹ See Appendix 2: Beginners’ Weekend Workshop Schedule, 29-30 May 2004.

directed to focus on the breath while being aware of mind-states such as sleepiness or irritation.

The mid-afternoon *dhamma* talk was a brief look at the historical development of Buddhism. This began with India's change to Buddhism under Asoka's leadership, and continued to the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia, the continuation of Vipassana with Burma and Thailand, and its travel to the West via the influences of Achan Chaa, S. N. Goenka, and Mahasi Sayadaw. The teacher finished by recapitulating and elaborating on some points previously made during the retreat: the fact that the weekend had dealt largely with concentration—which was necessary to establish mindfulness, and for progression in Vipassana—including experience of more of the hindrances.¹⁹⁰ In time, he assured us, we would come to notice things such as intention, and get a richer sense of things such as impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self, greed, hatred and delusion.

Some brief instructions for the two final periods of the retreat were given. In the walking meditation we were directed to be aware of the arising of thought and the content of thought; in other words, to distinguish between process and content. In the sitting meditation we were to be aware of feeling, including emotion, as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. During the final discussion, the teacher focussed on the way that thought and emotion arise from feeling, that they have feeling around them when they arise, and that the base feeling is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.¹⁹¹ The retreat ended at about 4pm.

In the early morning of the June Long-Weekend retreat,¹⁹² additional instruction from the teacher built on the previous day's instruction. Returning to the topic of observing the breath, he drew our attention to 'the spaces' which may occur in meditation. He pointed out that in sitting meditation, there will often be a gap at the end of the falling; the mind will 'go', that is, through the seeming loss of the object because of the gap as the movement of the breath is momentarily imperceptible. Then occurs a gap wherein the mind falls into the habit of identifying with its mental contents. The teacher instructed us to return our attention to the sitting, and note 'sitting'. There was then some discussion about the path of Insight which is sequential in nature; rates of progress are an individual matter, but each person has to negotiate the same stages.

¹⁹⁰ Bikkhu Bodhi, 2001, *op.cit.*, pp150-51; p1194 (note 58). The *Satipatthana Sutta* lists the hindrances: sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restless and remorse, and doubt, under mind and *dhammas*. See Appendix 6 for notes on investigating the hindrances.

¹⁹¹ *Satipatthana Sutta*, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2001, *op.cit.* This distinction between a pleasant, painful, and neither pleasant nor painful feeling, is outlined on p149.

¹⁹² See Appendix 3: Long-Weekend Retreat Schedule, 12-15 June 2004.

The *dhamma* talk that night was about *The Place of Faith in Vipassana Practice*. The flow of ideas was: we come to the practice with some faith based on previous experience, or some initial faith engendered by having heard about the benefits of meditation. The faith provokes some effort. The practice is about learning a technique that uses body, mind, and mind-states, using trial-and-error. Here the five controlling faculties were listed—*saddha*/faith, *virya*/effort, *sati*/mindfulness, *samadhi*/concentration and *panna*/wisdom—and briefly discussed. The teacher added that *sila* is central. It supports the five faculties, which reduce and remove the impurities.

Causes for developing these faculties were given as: attention directed to impermanence; a careful and respectful attitude to the practice; continuity of awareness; supportive conditions (such as food, posture, *Noble Silence*, &c); reapplication of conditions remembered to be supportive; courageous effort; patience and perseverance; and unwavering commitment. It was stated that, given practice, the hindrances: sense-desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt may start to rede, and the enlightenment factors: mindfulness, tranquillity, investigation, energy, joy, concentration and equanimity may start to arise.¹⁹³ The teacher continued, “Mindfulness is the main factor involved in Vipassana. Concentration is the focus on the breath. Mindfulness is being aware of what you are doing. Mindfulness stops the hindrances, purifies the mind, and makes it more flexible.” There was discussion about the application of effort and concentration. These were seen as opposing factors. Too much concentration can lead to mental laziness. Too much effort without concentration makes the mind restless. The teacher then returned to the subject of faith. It ‘clears the mind of doubt and aversion’. Faith needs to be balanced with insight and wisdom. Verified faith brings together the five controlling faculties and clarifies them. Initial energy applied repeatedly is the cause of concentration and mindfulness. Concentration helps the mind adhere to the object, pulling it away from defilements and unwholesome states, but without mindfulness no insight arises. The teacher distinguished between continuous—where concentration is fixed on the object—and momentary concentration. We use the latter here. Finally, he commented that concentration, energy, wisdom, and faith all work together.

The last session of this retreat contained a *dhamma* talk on *Metta* and a short meditation, one of the *Four Brahmaviharas*: compassion, *metta*/lovingkindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity, which are developed through Vipassana practice. It is also one of the *Protective Meditations*. These were given as: Buddha meditations or recollections of the noble qualities of the Buddha; *Metta Bhavana*, contemplation of the loathsomeness of the body, and mindfulness of death, a meditation used to overcome the fear of death. These meditations contribute to the mind-states of faith,

¹⁹³ The teacher stated that when the hindrances become weaker, other faculties such as the enlightenment factors, become stronger.

joy, and happiness. It was also explained that Metta is a *Samatha* practice, and is complementary to Vipassana. The wording for Metta meditation was given as (using the first person), 'may I be free from danger', 'may I have mental happiness', 'may I have physical happiness' and 'may I have ease of well-being'. Clarification was given for the second phrase, 'may I have mental happiness', as having fewer unwholesome mind-states and more wholesome mind-states. In Metta we first direct these things to ourselves, then second, to a benefactor who is alive, who is not an object of desire, who has helped us and toward whom we feel respect and gratitude. Third, we direct these things toward a good friend; fourth, to a neutral person; fifth, a difficult person, and last, toward all beings.

4.3 How to Maintain a Practice After the Retreat

The Vipassana teachers associated with the centre often give advice on how to establish and maintain a regular practice. They do this because their teaching experience has shown them that many people find this difficult to do. Busy lives mean that time for meditation may be rare, depending on individual circumstances. In addition, teachers are aware that while retreat experience and learning may induce an immediate resolve in the participant to cultivate mindfulness in daily life, in reality the demands of daily life seem inimical to maintenance of a calm, clear mind. Compared to the concentrated meditation practice during a two-day or nine-day retreat, personal practice at home may be irregular, and as short as a few minutes a day. Several teachers have observed this, and therefore try to help practitioners to put some 'safeguards' in place. They point out that meditation practice in daily life is different from retreat practice.

One teacher noted that, in shorter meditation periods, more time is spent on keeping attention on the primary object, and therefore mindfulness is not as deep. As another said, compared with the kind of development that takes place during a retreat, daily practice periods of half-an-hour or so involve going back to the 'baby steps'; the mind doesn't achieve the depth of mindfulness or concentration possible on longer retreats where it has more continuous time in which to settle and focus. Therefore, the advice for daily meditation is to abandon the expectation that the retreat milieu can be replicated. The teacher suggested that to make progress in daily practice, one chooses a regular time every day for at least three months. If daily practice lapses, do not give in to the distraction or resistance, but choose to be attentive as if on retreat and resolve to work with whatever condition you are in. One suggestion I heard at the end of a retreat was to observe and be aware of what conditions our choices in daily life. In this we can be guided by the five precepts. I gathered from this that the teacher concerned was drawing our attention to the use of the five precepts as a framework for identifying the mental states behind our actions. He went on to describe meditation as part of a broader path that includes ethics and wisdom, how they are related, and the way they come together in meditation.

4.3.1 Monday Night Meditations

Teachers often recommend finding a community, such as that at the regular Monday night meditations at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown, with whom to practise. If there are enough newcomers to warrant an induction to the practice, the teacher takes them into a side-room, where they are given an introductory talk and some meditation instruction during the first sitting or the walking session. Alternatively, such induction may be achieved by the basic meditation instruction given during the first two sessions, and the opportunity to talk to the teacher at the end of the night. For instance, on the several occasions I have sat with one particular teacher, he has taken newcomers apart during the walking meditation period in order to orient them and give them basic instruction. On one occasion when I joined this group, the teacher gave them basic instruction in the practice, after going around the room and getting everyone to introduce themselves and say something about how they went in the previous sitting period. I commented on the difficulty I always have in holding my mind on the primary object, and after short successful periods, feeling very mentally tired.¹⁹⁴

Instruction given during the first sitting meditation is to keep the mind on the rise and fall of the abdomen. 'When the mind wanders, note the wandering, and bring the mind back to the breath'. After a time, say ten minutes or so, the teacher might tell us to bring our attention back to the mind by, for instance, asking (rhetorically) whether our minds were still on the abdomen. Instruction for the walking meditation is similar to that given at the beginning of retreats. The second sitting session is typically the same as the first, but generally with less instruction from the teacher. The topic for the night's *dhamma* talk is left up to the teacher. It may range widely, from an aspect of the practice such as the relation between ethics and meditation, or about an aspect of Buddhism, such as women in the sangha.

4.4 A Summary of Instruction in the Practice

This outline of instruction given at introductory retreats is intended to demonstrate several significant features of the learning context and participant experience at BMIMC. First, all teaching and learning activity falls into three interdependent categories: doctrinal, practical, and experiential. The practical dimension, instruction in the technique and its exution, relates the doctrinal and experiential dimensions. It facilitates engagement with immediate subjective experience: bodily and sensory impressions, feelings and mental states, for which the four foundations of mindfulness provide an interpretive framework. During retreats, the first and foremost task of the teacher is to orient the student's mind to the practice. This initial step is facilitated during the first session of the retreat, orientation and introduction to the practice. The next task is to engage students with their immediate experience, and to teach them how to observe such experience. A significant proportion of the

¹⁹⁴ This took place during the session on Monday 15 March 2004.

instruction given during retreats is devoted to this. All three retreats taught the basic practices of sitting and walking, and the latter two introduced Metta meditation. But by comparison with the first two retreats, instruction in Retreat 3 was minimal, allowing more time to be spent in practice. The teacher emphasized basic body awareness, directing us intermittently throughout the retreat just to *be* with our muscular and joint pain, and to 'be present with our experience'.

The teaching during the first two retreats had more practical content than the third. The teacher at Retreat 1 gave significant attention to instruction about *how to observe*. Much of the instruction during Retreat 2 focussed on the practical detail involved in the noting technique, for instance, to note the gaps that occur while watching the breath. Each retreat also differed in the nature and amount of doctrinal material introduced, and its manner of delivery. The teachers at the first two retreats gave more *dhamma* talks. The teacher at Retreat 1 introduced some key Buddhist frameworks: the three marks of existence; *dukkha, anicca and anatta*; the *Four Noble Truths*; and the historical development of Buddhism. The teachers of Retreat 2 paid more attention to doctrinal material that applied to the path, and to understanding the nature of mind from a practical perspective. Topics were the *Noble Eight-Fold Path*—especially *Panna—Sila, and Samadhi*; the Pali Canon and its cross-referenced nature; the hindrances and the enlightenment factors.

Instruction during Retreat 1 made more use of everyday language rather than formal Buddhist terminology, which made instruction easy to understand in terms of everyday experience. This can be seen as a method of preparation for a deeper appreciation of the rationale for the practice and the philosophy behind it.¹⁹⁵ For instance, the teacher spoke about suffering, impermanence and no-self, rather than referring to them as the three marks of existence. This can be viewed as directing the beginner's mind to the experiential sense of the object or concept concerned rather than providing a list of terms and ways of categorizing existence that may not meaningfully engage the beginner. The teachers on the second retreat introduced more Buddhist doctrinal frameworks, for example, many of the lists that go to make up the maps referred to in one of the *dhamma* talks. For students, hearing the same material expressed in these two ways, begins to form a bridge between the commonsense view of the everyday world, and the Buddhist worldview. It is evident that the concepts introduced and explained during these introductory retreats, are both fundamental to understanding the practice and how to effect it, and

¹⁹⁵ Preston focusses on the mundane aspects of Zen practice that allow the beginner to participate in the activity of Zen because of his belief that Zen is not adequately grasped by Western categories of thought. He maintains that if there is no philosophy necessarily attached to sitting, the objectified meaning of and the learning of the activity can be dealt with by the sociologist without denying its broader implications or validity. Preston, 1988, *op.cit.*, p56. This belief is shown to be untenable with respect to Vipassana, largely because, as the material in Chapters 3 and 6 shows, practitioners come to appreciate the practice as an embodiment of the doctrinal and ethical dimensions of Buddhism.

sufficient for giving the participant an initial orientation to the Buddhist worldview: to provide access to interpretive frameworks that become meaningful through experience with the practice.

The purpose of this exploration has been to demonstrate that despite the variation in style between teachers, the same techniques and principles of practice are taught. The most significant difference between retreats is in the amount of instruction given, and in the amount of doctrinal material imparted. Interview material indicates that one's first retreat facilitates access to, and engagement with the practice, and a sense or feel for the relationship between practice, philosophy, and immediate experience. Beyond that, the marrying of concept and experience that is needed in order to understand the practice, is acquired through ongoing practice and study, and the attendance of many more retreats.

5 The Stages of Experiential Development and Conceptual Acquisition

The nature of instruction in the practice and its supporting doctrine given on introductory retreats was explored in Section 3.2, where it was shown how the student is taught to begin to access experience normally hidden by everyday awareness. This section describes how the meditator makes progress in the practice, and begins to acquire a set of references for the interpretation of meditative experience. These reference points begin to form an interpretive framework once their interconnections are understood according to Buddhist doctrine. Comprehension of the Buddhist frame of reference occurs by learning to experientially identify, label, and conceptually categorize mental states. Accordingly, an understanding of the processes of *apprehension* and *comprehension* that practitioners undergo necessitates an exploration of the experiential states, and their labelling and categorization, according to Buddhist terminology and meaning.

An overview of the experiences with Vipassana described in the interview material suggested that experiential development be categorized into three stages. The first stage consists of those experiences especially common to new meditators that are attributed to a lack of mindfulness: poor concentration, a distracted mind, reactivity to pain. The second occurs when the development of some mindfulness allows the meditator to note these mental distractions and label and investigate them as mental states. With this degree of mindfulness and skill with labelling, the meditator begins to notice, explore, and attribute meaning to types of meditative experience, while experientially part of everyday awareness, that have special significance within a Buddhist frame of reference. These experiential types are commonly interpreted as *sukkha*/pleasure, *dukkha*/ suffering and *anicca*/impermanence.

The excerpts from interview transcripts reproduced in Section 4.3 onwards show that, at this stage, engagement with the practice depends on the combination of developed concentration and mindfulness with the acquisition of conceptual

structures to frame their interpretation. The deeper, more intense experiences involve both the prolonged placement of the mind on an object and deeper, sharper observation of objects or phenomena. The capacity to reach this level of mental stability depends both on length of time as a practitioner, and on regularity and intensity of commitment. The remainder of the chapter outlines these stages in experiential development and conceptual acquisition. These experiences and their classifications are not intended to be exhaustive of the possibilities that present themselves during retreat participation, but are intended to represent the most common and significant sets of meaning-constructs that are acquired during the learning process, and in turn to show how derived meaning is applied to further practice and personal exploration and transformation, the subject of Chapter 3.

5.1 Being on *Retreat* and Being *Mindful*

Participants on their first retreats at the centre typically choose a day or weekend workshop, or a weekend, four- or nine-day retreat that caters for a range of beginners' abilities.¹⁹⁶ Generally, a first Vipassana retreat is an extension of an experimental journey that may include other forms of meditation, alternative health practices and other forms of Buddhism. Although novices vary in familiarity with Buddhism and meditation, most attempt to be open to the experience at least for the duration of the retreat. As KT expressed her feeling on her first Vipassana retreat, a ten-day retreat, that the first two to three days had been 'weird', and she was 'not sure', but on the third day she decided to suspend her doubt because the teachers seemed to know what they were talking about. She decided to do what they said for the duration of the retreat. This mixture of resistance, engagement and willingness to 'take it on' appears to be a common reaction during a first retreat.

This initial resistance is indicated in the interview material and in my own participant observation notes. At best, it will take a new practitioner some time to acclimatize to the retreat situation. At the beginning of a retreat, during the introductory session, the manager requests that 'yogis' move slowly, applying mindfulness to all their actions. However, it often takes time for new practitioners to slow their movements down. In my notes from several retreats I have commented that it appeared that some participants had had trouble slowing their movements down and being mindful. Their actions, such as closing doors, fidgeting with personal possessions and making eye contact, all displayed a palpable agitation. Many people spent considerable time sleeping during meditation and rest periods¹⁹⁷. While it is recommended that the retreat schedule be adhered to, it is not enforced, and people are at liberty to alter it slightly to suit their own needs. Some practitioners spoke openly about their favourite avoidance tactics: staying in their

¹⁹⁶ Information about retreats and teachers is obtained by word-of-mouth, from the newsletter, or from the website at www.meditation.asn.au.

¹⁹⁷ On nine-day retreats, managers expect that many participants will miss periods for the first few days, and allow for the fact that people arrive tired and stressed at the beginning of a retreat.

room, reading, doing their washing. Most are simply unused to the continual effort to be mindful that is encouraged by the teachers.

It was noted in Section 3.1.1 that all retreat activity contributes to the development of mindfulness. The resistance towards being constantly mindful can be used as a meditation object in itself. When one begins to see how all of the expected retreat behaviours and meditation practices relate to the development of mindfulness, the mind begins to slow naturally and one's resistance usually becomes more manageable. There is a visible change in participants' behaviour: they begin to move more slowly, and those who were absent during some meditation periods begin to attend more sessions. In addition, the quality of one's practice changes after the establishment of some mindfulness. While this may not happen on the first retreat or even for several, meditators reach a point whereat the mind feels sharper, there are fewer gaps in noting, objects are clearer, and mental states are easier to distinguish and label. Before this point is reached, however, many experience: inability to focus or concentrate the mind and to stop the internal chatter, and the constant distractions from physical pain and strong sensations.

5.2 Early Experiences with Vipassana

Many report that the inability to concentrate, and to remember to note the object as it appears to the mind is a difficulty at this stage, and many say that their minds 'wander everywhere'. Learning about the naturally unruly tendencies of the untrained mind often serves as an incentive for the practitioner to keep trying. One said, "I can chart my progression over the last four years or whatever, and it took probably two years of nothing much happening, not much of a shift or anything, just going and listening and stuff." This lack of ability to concentrate is usually accompanied by self-annoyance and self-judgment. EC recalled:

EC: You're told a thousand times, you know, 'Just be in the moment, and whatever's happening, just observe it and don't buy into it', and all this sort of stuff. But when you're there and experiencing it emotionally, and of course it's a silent retreat so you're not talking, you're dealing with it by yourself. I was beating myself up about it, and so the more I tried to do it properly, the more I wasn't because I was just getting into this vicious circle of 'Oh no. It's not working', and because it wasn't going to work while I was thinking like that, so like I've had very few meditation sessions where it is just calm and blissful. You know my mind is usually racing at a thousand miles an hour, but I just learned to accept that. I mean gradually, just by doing the meditation I've got better at it, and probably more so in the last year.

A common problem for meditators in this early stage is the accompaniment of the inability to focus by an almost constant self-judgement for one's lack of ability. This reactivity extends into feeling annoyed with objects external to oneself. After

persistent effort, one's noting becomes more consistently applied, and one's reactivity subsides.¹⁹⁸ The same practitioner continues:

EC: I got better at accepting what's happening in that sit, that's just what's happening, like I remember when I first went to the Buddhist library, everything used to annoy me, like the urn turning off and the noises because I kept honing in on them and they just became real issues, and I just gradually realized over time that I was letting go of those external things, and it's just been like a process of osmosis, sinking in and being able to practice what you are told all the time.

Another problematic occurrence for meditators, at this stage and for some time to come, is distraction by one's internal dialogue. As Nyanaponika Thera's notion of *bare attention* conveys, mindfulness is ideally an accurate, non-discursive registering of events.¹⁹⁹ In Vipassana meditation, discursive thought is minimized so that it does not replace the meditation object as the focus of one's immediate attention. Nyanaponika Thera lists three phases of the perceptual process: the first as an indistinct picture of the object, the second as closer attention to its details and its relationship to the observer, and the third as the coordination of experience—related to associative thinking from psychology—which enables the mind to compare the present perceptions with recollected similar perceptions.²⁰⁰ Until mindfulness becomes strong one aims for an object with minimal conceptual elaboration. Recollections and associative thinking are to be avoided, as they deflect the mind from noting the immediate present. One teacher explained to me that minimal internal dialogue is necessary for noting and investigation of the object, "Otherwise the meditation just becomes concentration".

The experience of bodily pain from sitting in the same position for up to an hour is possibly the principal hindrance to mindfulness in the initial stage. One is encouraged not to ease the pain by changing posture, but to observe and note the pain as a meditation object. By maintaining one's posture, one takes the opportunity to observe the nature of the pain.²⁰¹ The following account is representative of early retreat experiences described by many practitioners.

HD: There was this beginning stage ... I was the sort of person who had to move every ten minutes. I suffered extreme pain. I could not follow two breaths in a row. I'd go to the teacher and they'd be very encouraging, and I think it was only the fact that I was going along to the American teachers who I could relate to and who talked about pain ... I gave someone my car keys on my first retreat so I couldn't run away. They had group interviews, and I'd see that everyone

¹⁹⁸ Another quality of mindfulness is its nonjudgmental quality. See Kornfield, 1979, *op.cit.*, p42.

¹⁹⁹ See Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, *op.cit.* Deatherage, 1975, *op.cit.*, p133.

²⁰⁰ Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, *op.cit.*, p14.

²⁰¹ Mahasi Sayadaw, 1958, *op.cit.*, pp20-22.

was struggling the same as I was, so I kept at it, not very well. I'd skip a lot of the walking sessions and do my laundry, and I'd read, and I'd go and look at the notice board ... But for some reason I kept going, I don't know why. So every time one of those teachers would come out to Australia, I'd do a ten-day retreat.²⁰²

The resistance eventually gives way to more mental engagement with the practice. Even before this point, meditators occasionally report the experience of a quiet, calm mind in meditation. At this stage, too, certain experiences are noted and begin to be interpreted according to a Buddhist perspective. Many connect with the notion of suffering through the bodily pain that arises, and when *bare attention* is successfully applied to the rise and fall of the breath, it may be used to observe impermanence.²⁰³ Becoming aware that one is prepared to work with whatever presents itself, and that the mind is noting objects as opposed to becoming lost in blind reaction, are taken as signs that mindfulness is developing. Gradually, with persistence, one develops a feeling of equanimity toward one's immediate experience. RN, a practitioner of many years, puts it thus:

GE: So your actual approach to do with method is to note it (the object)?

RN: Yeah. Just be aware and see what happens to it. It may stay around for a while, or it might just disappear in a moment or whatever, to just observe with awareness, see what happens to it.

GE: And the trick is, from what I understand, you suddenly become aware that you've let the mind go into something or attach to something and so all you can do is just bring it back to the primary object.

RN: Yeah. Just bring it back to whatever you use as your focus of concentration, because it's just a tool to use without clinging onto ... because if you cling onto the primary object, then it's just a concentration practice.

When some equanimity towards one's immediate experience has developed, the mind becomes more conscious of moments when it loses the object, and returns to it more easily. With this increased stability the mind can investigate, label, and discriminate between mental states without *identifying with them*. However, before this can happen, one must learn to distinguish concentration from insight, otherwise the afflictive states of mind that must be overcome so that Vipassana meditation can progress, do not arise.

²⁰² See the full transcript excerpt in Appendix 7.

²⁰³ Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, *op.cit.*, p45.

5.3 The Distinction Between Concentration and Insight Practices

In order to distinguish concentration from insight, the difference between concentration—the ability to hold the mind on an object—and mindfulness—the ability to know where the mind is placed—must be understood.²⁰⁴ Concentration entails placement of the mind on one object and allowing it to remain there, while insight needs *momentary* concentration sustained on a changing object.²⁰⁵ The Mahasi Vipassana practice dispenses with the concentration practice and the attainment of the *jhanas* outlined in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, and it focusses exclusively on insight. Accordingly, practitioners are not taught concentration practice at BMIMC. As their practice progresses they may experience its effects by inadvertently focussing on and limiting awareness to one object, eg the abdomen, instead of applying momentary concentration to the primary and secondary objects. Teachers and advanced practitioners note that remaining on an object continuously, without noting any change, turns their practice into concentration. In my experience this may happen when the difference between the two practices is not clearly understood, and when the noting technique is not strong.²⁰⁶ It is easy to slip into concentration unwittingly during insight practice, as my own retreat notes illustrate:

Friday 30 April 2004. During the walking meditation period from 3:15 to 4pm, I began with my usual problem of the chattering mind. I decided to just focus on what was immediate to my experience as I walked, which was awareness of the body (mostly my feet and breathing), the sights passing by my eyes as I walked, and the sounds around me such as the wind, and the occasional bird. There was minimal thought, possibly some in the background, but these other things were definitely in the foreground. This describes my 'experiential field' of the moment. In truth, my attention was probably shifting very quickly between these things. Each object registered, that is, I was aware of each object as my attention fell on it. I didn't label the objects with words, I was simply aware that my awareness had shifted and was shifting between these objects. I also noticed, and was thinking in words at this point, that in this more aware state, you seem to register the object more fully: colours and shapes seem brighter, more vivid, or 'something'. The dominant sense of the state was 'awareness'.

During the sitting or standing meditation period between 4 and 5pm, my mind was again a bit 'all-over-the-place' during the sitting meditation. At 4.45pm, the teacher indicated that it was time for standing meditation for those who wished to stand. I got myself into the lying posture instead. I found myself concentrating on the breath in the abdomen, which is easy for me in this

²⁰⁴ Goleman, D. *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience*, Rider and Company, 1978, p22. Goleman draws attention to the balance between concentration and mindfulness best for successful insight practice. He maintains that the one-pointedness of access concentration is essential in adopting the habit of bare attention, because mindfulness is applied to normal consciousness, and from the first jhana on, these normal processes cease. At the access level, perception and thought retain their usual patterns, but concentration is powerful enough to keep the meditator's awareness being diverted from steadily noting these patterns.

²⁰⁵ Engler, 1984, *op.cit.*, p27.

²⁰⁶ Goleman, *op.cit.*, p22.

position. Because of the mind-agitation, I tried focussing on the breath at the nostrils for a while, which seemed to help calm the mind. I remember shifting focus between the two places (the abdomen and the nostrils), and still having some awareness of my surroundings in the background. The same thing happened as in the walking meditation. I was clearly noting the shift in attention between objects. After a while I noticed that my attention had primarily settled on the abdomen, and my mind had calmed. There were no racy thoughts, no narratives, no mental pictures except of what my mind was focussed on. I had an awareness of alertness but calm, and a sense of the fact that all other mental states were *agitated* by comparison. The dominant sense here was one of mindfulness and calm, the same as in the walking meditation, but with more calm. When it was time to get up and go outside for the walking period, I moved my arm and placed my left hand and forearm on the floor in order to help myself back up into the sitting position. This produced a particular feeling in the mind that I labelled as 'agitation'. I was about to get up and go about things at the pace and in the mental state that I normally experience. Instead, I caught this habitual pattern before it manifested, and deliberately kept focussing on the breath while moving very slowly. There was much more of a quality of calm, alertness, awareness, as I got up, walked to the door, opened and closed it, put my shoes on, and began to walk.

My own understanding of the difference between the two meditation periods was that the former was *insight*, and the latter predominantly *concentration*. While the state of mind in each case could be described as focussed awareness and calmness, each gave rise to its own dominant quality of mind. The insight was predominantly focussed awareness, and the concentration was calmness. The lying position seemed to facilitate an almost exclusive focus on the abdomen—my mind rarely drifted from it—which produced a concentration-type response. The concentrated mind proved to be a good vantage-point from which to note the passing stream of objects, and this was the first time that I had experienced both concentration and mindfulness in this close relationship. Two months later, during the June long-weekend retreat, I recorded the following:

The teacher began with, "Settle into the body. Be aware of the feeling against the cushion. Note the physical sensations." I recall something about the mind and the five senses. While listening to the meditation instructions I found, at least for a few minutes, that I kept my awareness on my breath, with thoughts, sleepiness, and the semi-dream state being caught before they took over. There was the breath-awareness and the secondary object awareness, but my mind remembered the primary object more easily and constantly compared to previous times. Gaps in mindful attention still occurred, but for shorter periods, and when they did occur and were noted, the mind shifted back to the breath more easily. It seems to me that this quality of *remembering* the object, this direct awareness of where the mind is placed, and of how much of one's attention is placed there, is 'mindfulness'.

Concentration experiences are those that people generally equate with meditation: states of mind that are peaceful, blissful, while at the same time clear and focussed.

Often people trying meditation for the first time come with this expectation. Even those with some experience of Buddhism may view, with awe, the possibility of attaining the *jhanas* that result from concentration practice. One teacher made comment about the expectations that often accompany the subject of Samatha practice and the *jhanas*:

HU: And you say *jhana*, and people go, "Oh! *Jhana!*" All of the Buddhist stuff is a continuum. It's not like you're in or you're out. It's just this progression of the whole teachings. They weave in with each other, and you just understand at a deeper level, or that your practice becomes at a deeper level. The first *jhanic* factor is initial application, and the next one is sustained application. And then there comes what they call rapture, and the other one is the one-pointedness. That's it. That's the *jhanic* factors, and obviously if you practise long enough sitting on the breath and they take on a very different perspective, but they're just normal things that we're all familiar with ...

Some meditators bring to the practice a previously developed concentration ability and an acquired appreciation of its meditative value. HR first encountered the Samatha and Vipassana practices, and the difference between them, through reading a book, the technique for the latter being given as to 'fix attention on whatever comes along'. When she tried concentration practice some time later, she found it useful as a support for the Vipassana. Her concentration strengthened, her mind was calmer, more centred, and did not wander as much. SI described her prior experience with concentration practice at the Sydney Zen Centre before taking up Vipassana:

SI: The bliss? It was just very deep, and I went into the state of nothingness and timelessness, and I kept on losing the body. That's in my first meditation. When I came out of it I found it didn't really relate to daily life, and that the way you could get the best techniques was in meditation, and then it didn't give you any help to deal with ordinary daily problems or difficulties that arose.

Both practitioners had arrived at their own conclusion about the value of concentration practice prior to their involvement with BMIMC, but many others learn to attribute value to these two types of experience through practical instruction and *dhamma* talks given during retreats and in workshops. Much debate takes place in Theravada Buddhism about the relative values of concentration and insight practice, but Mahasi Vipassana practitioners view concentration primarily as an aid to the development of mindfulness and insight into the nature of existence, which brings about *nibbana*, or release from the cycle of existence. Engler describes the difference as concentration leading to withdrawal from sensory input in progressive states characterized by increasingly refined tranquility and bliss. This induces conflict-free functioning by temporarily suppressing the operation of the drives and the higher perceptual-intellectual functions. Conversely, insight leads to the observation of sensory input in progressive states of knowledge of the nature of all

phenomena.²⁰⁷ With respect to the goal of practice, the experiences arising from the two practices are classed roughly as productive or unproductive²⁰⁸. *Sukkha* experiences that arise from concentration are accepted as part of the practice, and as a sign that concentration is developing, but not as ends in themselves.

5.4 'Right Effort'

This example serves the twofold purpose of first demonstrating how a concept can be grasped experientially without necessarily much training or development in the practice, and can be used by labelling an object—to isolate it in the mind—in order to investigate it further. Second, application of the concept can lead the practitioner to an understanding of the concept's place in a broader interpretive framework.

In one of the Monday night meditation sessions in 2004 the teacher introduced the use of *Right Effort* in meditation practice thus.²⁰⁹ During the second sitting we were instructed to keep the mind on the rise and fall of the abdomen. 'When the mind wanders, note the wandering, and bring the mind back to the breath'. A while later the teacher instructed us to put effort into keeping the mind on the primary object, as much effort as we needed to, and to note the effort involved. After about five minutes, he asked us to divide into groups of two or three to discuss our experience of using effort in this way. Some comments were 'more awake', 'felt like I was waking up', 'with more effort I was more successful but tired', and 'the effort made me feel tired'. The teacher had us apply effort for a further five minutes, and note the effort but with more emphasis on the noting. Noting in this instance meant to be continually aware of how much effort was involved from moment to moment. Discussion followed, with the comment from the teacher that when the effort is noted, less effort becomes needed, because the system somehow rights itself. By extending the second sitting into the discussion, the teacher built effectively on the experiential state established in the meditation. Practitioners had identified and established in their minds the factor of right effort.

By learning to work with right effort in this way practitioners could go on to develop an understanding of the relationship between the three concentration factors, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In explaining the development of the three concentration factors of the Eight-Fold Path, Ven. U Silananda draws attention to the phrase from the *Satipatthana Sutta*, 'ardently, clearly comprehending and mindful'. 'Ardently' here refers to investing energy into being mindful, and

²⁰⁷ Engler, 1984, *op.cit.*, pp27-8.

²⁰⁸ See Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed.). *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon*, Wisdom Publications, 2005, p228. Bhikkhu Bodhi, as do many others, states that the attainment of the *jhanas* silences the defilements, it does not eradicate them. Many practitioners refer to the fact that concentration only suppresses the hindrances, preventing the mind from using their identification as a disciplinary aid to the development of mindfulness.

²⁰⁹ This session was held on Monday 22 March 2004 at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown.

therefore the energy you invest, ‘when you have mindfulness combined with energy or effort, the mind can stay on the object for some time, and therefore has concentration’. He adds that the three aspects of the group of concentration must be practised together²¹⁰. This example, like the one before it, has an experiential base which is easy to access and identify with the aid of the labelling technique. The broader conceptual framework takes a period of time to comprehend.

5.5 Identifying the Hindrances

The five hindrances to meditation: sense-desire, aversion (usually experienced as anger), sloth and torpor (usually expressed as laziness or tiredness), restlessness (when the mind is distracted), and doubt (about the efficacy of the practice), are found and discussed under *dhammas*, the fourth satipatthana.²¹¹ The hindrances are held to be the main inner impediments to the development of concentration and insight,²¹² and training in their identification may be introduced early into one’s practice as part of mindfulness training. The early experiences mentioned above demonstrate the action of the hindrances on the mind before its training to identify them. Inability to hold the mind on the breath is often a result either of sleepiness or restlessness, and one’s immediate reaction to physical pain is aversion, wanting to push the pain away. Daydreaming, thinking about a favourite television program can be classed as sense-desire. Teaching addresses these by drawing attention to what goes on in the mind habitually. This was the purpose of observing *Noble Silence* between 7pm and 10am on one beginner’s weekend retreat. When asked to describe experiences with the period of *Noble Silence*, one person’s response was ‘irritability’. The teacher explained that the purpose was to notice the effect that silence has on our registering and noting of mental states. The arising and ceasing go on all the time in daily life, but we don’t notice them. We don’t need to get annoyed with ourselves for having them, but just to observe their arising and ceasing, their effect on the body, and their quality.²¹³

Participants on a four-day retreat ranged from beginners to advanced.²¹⁴ To cater for this range of experience, the teacher held a *Beginner’s Mind Group* from 5pm to 6pm, and scheduled interviews for advanced practitioners in the afternoons on the first three days. The purpose of the group was to discuss problems arising in meditation, how to deal with them, and to clarify points of technique. Among the teacher’s responses to the range of questions put to him in the session on the first day of the retreat, the following related to the subject of the hindrances:

²¹⁰ U Silananda, 1990, *op.cit.*, pp20-21.

²¹¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi. “Satipatthana Sutta”, in *The Majjhima Nikaya, op.cit.*, p151. The sutta lists the hindrances as sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt. The terms I have used here reflect those in common usage by teachers and practitioners.

²¹² See note 158 in the *Majjhima Nikaya, op.cit.*, p1194.

²¹³ See Appendix 2: Beginners’ Weekend Workshop Schedule, 29-30 May 2004.

²¹⁴ See Appendix 4: Four-Day Retreat Schedule, 14 to 17 February, 2004.

- 1 Where sleepiness is a problem in maintaining a focus on the breath, pay attention to connection between the breath and the sleepiness. Does sleepiness occur on the in-breath or out-breath?
- 2 When pain comes, focus on it. Do you notice aversion? Then switch your attention to the resistance. Notice the quality of the labelling so as to be more aware of the quality of the resistance—to the sensation, and to being aware—for example, ‘dislike’. Notice the sensation and the relationship to the pain. Try another posture if the pain is really distracting. This is better than fidgeting and losing concentration.
- 3 In dealing with aversion, eg thinking about getting through the next three days of the retreat, ‘don’t believe the story’. Here the teacher explained that the ideal is not to get involved with the content of the story, or with thinking about the various things and issues that arise in one’s mind, such as life’s events, or things that need to be done after the retreat. The idea is to note the mental content accurately, then return to the primary object. For example, is the thought of getting through the next three days aversion?

In the examples above the two teachers used minimal doctrinal categorical terminology, referring to the hindrances as ‘mind-states’ or distractions, and states that people typically report experiencing and having difficulty with. Learning occurs through noting the different mental states experienced during meditation, with the purpose of training the mind to acknowledge and understand the nature of distraction. From this perspective, aversion and avoidance are seen as a strategy for dealing with existential pain. Another function of training in recognizing the hindrances is to learn to work with them correctly in order to break down our natural resistance to being aware. These were the purposes of a nine-day retreat in April-May 2004.²¹⁵

5.5.1 The Nine-day Retreat in April-May 2004

During this retreat the five hindrances were treated both as meditation objects and as a labelling system for the mental states experienced during practice. In this way a more developed framework was introduced, a typology for noting, identifying and discriminating between mental states. In brief, the method was to note and label the state, and to explore its quality without ‘buying into any surrounding story’. The teachers explained that one may find that the story has already begun to unfold as the mental state is noted. This was held to be more likely with sense-desire and aversion, because they are more object-directed than sleepiness or restlessness.²¹⁶ The

²¹⁵ See Appendix 5: Nine-day Retreat Schedule, 23 April-2 May 2004.

²¹⁶ See Analayo, 2003, *op.cit.*, p269. He refers to the discussion in Sutta 137 in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, of desire, grief, and equanimity as the three *satipatthanas*. Also see U Silananda, 1990, *op.cit.*, pp22-3. He notes that the phrase in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, *covetousness and grief in the world* is a reference to desire and aversion, the two grosser of the five hindrances, where ‘in the world’ refers to the body, the five aggregates. He states that the Buddha meant that removal of the hindrances

state was to be identified through selection of the hindrance that best described it. During the retreat a small number of talks was devoted specifically to the subject of the hindrances. They were named and described, and how to work with them in meditation was addressed. For instance, on the sixth day, the morning talk described their role in the excuses we make for not being able to meditate properly. These included the like of blaming the schedule, or the length of meditation periods, or the noise made by other meditators. This method of investigation and recognition for correction was the backbone of the retreat.²¹⁷

The technique was supplemented with two others: application of compassionate understanding, and thought reflection. When we think of our own problems and difficulties, we direct feelings of compassion towards ourselves, not least when we develop aversion to our own inability to meditate successfully because we have allowed the hindrances to meditation to dominate.²¹⁸ The practice of compassionate understanding was applied to training in the hindrances by labelling them and objectifying their content. This allowed participants to see the process instead of getting caught in the story. By observing the effect of the content on the body, emotions, and mind, we directly experienced the suffering caused to ourselves. This demonstrated cause and effect, and also engendered compassion for others, because we understood what others experience. I recalled one of my experiences from this retreat in conversation with HU, one of the teachers from the centre.

GE: When you were talking about feelings of discomfort, in just letting be, it's interesting because that's one of my own problems. There's that real wanting to get away from unpleasant things. It actually dominates a lot of my meditation.

HU: That's a realization, that's what's happening. The hard thing is this thing of beating up on yourself, this 'I'm no good, I can't do this', or whatever ... That's generally what happens next when you have this sort of realization ... so that's the next thing. 'Ah! I'm judging myself.' So it's kind of like working through all these different strategies we have, that the hindrances essentially block us from observing what's really happening, and they're just different mental processes, different values or interpretations we put on the experience.

GE: That's actually an area where I had an experience akin to what you're talking about: if you let it be, it changes. I did nine-day retreat earlier this year, where the teachers were working a lot with the hindrances. They were saying, "Note the mental state, label it, and then go back to the breathing." Well, I was amazed! It took a few goes to do it, but I'd been really, really, sleepy. That was when I'd first noticed it, and instead of just going with it, I noted it and literally,

results from good meditation. It appears that learning to deal with desire and aversion effectively is significant for the development of concentration and mindfulness.

²¹⁷ See Appendix 6.

²¹⁸ The two teachers are known for their focus on techniques such as compassionate understanding and thought reflection.

in words, told myself to 'be more mindful'. So I sat there focussing on the breath while I was aware of the sleepiness, and it started to change. And I thought, "Oh. That's how that can be used!" That was my first awareness of that, because before, I was just going with it.

My retreat notes about the above experience read:

At one point during the retreat I was having considerable trouble with drowsiness, as I often do. I found that by labelling the mental state 'sleepiness', and further, by sitting with it while focussing on the feel of it, rather than discussing it internally and getting annoyed, I was able to maintain a mindful focus on the state, even while I was experiencing the state at the same time. It seemed that my mind had two states concurrently until a short time had passed, the drowsiness subsided and the state of mindfulness remained.

This was both my first experience of being able to direct or control my own mental state in meditation, and a striking instance of the direct application of a doctrinal framework to the contents of immediate experience. It may appear that experience is being interpreted in its immediacy, but this learning process has distinct experiential and conceptual components. As with the noting technique generally, the identification and labelling of the mental state functions to keep internal discourse to a minimum. The bare attention to the state, applying mindfulness to the experience as my example demonstrates, prevents the mind from identifying with the state itself. After a while, the state itself begins to change and mindfulness remains. This is a clear example of the transformative function of mindfulness at the experiential level where all conceptual activity is about the experience, and internal discourse is minimal. As with learning to distinguish concentration and insight practice, the process has two aspects. The first is learning to identify the hindrances experientially by applying the labelling system to the contents of experience. The second is learning the meaning and value attributed to them by Buddhist doctrine.

In Buddhism the classification of mental states as wholesome or unwholesome is a consequence of their role in one's progress on the path to enlightenment. This categorization is exemplified by the relationship between the hindrances and the enlightenment factors as negative and positive, unwholesome and wholesome mental states respectively. This doctrinal stance was explained during one of the *dhamma* talks during Retreat 2. It was stated that with practice, the hindrances: sense-desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt, may start to recede, and the enlightenment factors: mindfulness, tranquility, investigation, energy, joy, concentration and equanimity may start to arise. U Silananda makes the statement that the hindrances are removed only when they make room for more wholesome mental states,²¹⁹ suggesting that they will not be removed from one's experience

²¹⁹ U Silananda, 1990, *op.cit.*, p23.

before the enlightenment factors themselves are cultivated. He adds that the enlightenment factors are the components of knowledge of the *dhammas*, which knowledge begins with ‘discerning the arising and fading away’.²²⁰ Temporary removal of the hindrances occurs in meditation when one is mindful. However, it can be seen that lasting self-transformation involves development of habitual positive mental states. The impetus for sustained application is the experience of the absence of the hindrances in meditation—and how clear the mind itself feels when it is not experiencing one of these mental states—coupled with their designation as unwholesome states.

5.6 Insight Experiences

When mindfulness is developed to a degree whereat the noting technique is rigorously and constantly applied, and the practitioner has learnt to identify and have some direction over the hindrances, the practitioner’s mind becomes more stable in meditation. Generally, progress is discerned in the fact that practitioners realize that their minds have lost their tendencies to wander, and they are capable of more prolonged and deeper levels of concentration and mindfulness. They can sustain attention on a single object without slipping into concentration because the technique of constant noting is strong. In the following excerpt, the practitioner, also a teacher, was commenting on his appreciation of the aspect of the practice involving the primary object. However, within his reflection about Mahasi’s instructions to do with following the secondary object later in the practice, is a description of how the mind can settle on objects once the hindrances have been dealt with.

HU: I mean, the whole thing with that, the whole relationship with the primary object, is quite a difficult one to come to terms with because there can often be a sense of pushing this other thing away and coming back to the primary object, and that’s not necessarily the skillful way of doing it, either. It’s like pushing this thing away. It’s like there’s an aversion there.

GE: And that can be the very thing that gives you more understanding of what’s going on?

HU: I mean, that’s one of the things with the Mahasi system, that it tends to—in my way of thinking—tends to overemphasize the primary object. It’s funny because it’s presented as a mindfulness practice. If you look at it, it’s essentially a concentration practice. If you’re continually bringing your attention back to this one object, then it’s concentration. But if you actually read the Mahasi stuff, later on after he’s gone through all this detailed explanation, ‘watch the rising and falling’, there’ll be a paragraph saying, ‘later in the practice, if other things arise you just note *them*. Don’t worry about the rising and falling.’ But it’s kind of like a little addendum here. But to me, in many ways, that’s the practice. My understanding is that at a later point, when a lot of those

²²⁰ *ibid.*, pp124-26.

hindrances and the mental stuff have started to drop away, it's not so much an issue, whether it's the abdomen or some other object, that the mind will naturally rest on a particular single object or process, and concentration will be there naturally without this kind of struggle. To me, mindfulness is in some ways a tool to concentration, a way of dealing with all of this other stuff, you know, the self-judgment, the doubt, the aversions, all the rest of it. It's like these are all the things that are happening, and after a while, after watching all the different things we throw up, they just all start to drop away. And then there's a much clearer object, there's the body or the breath or whatever, and not all this other stuff. But if we just try and go for the object, and all this other stuff's happening, then we don't really know how to deal with it. And then we're in this struggle between 'Oh, come back to the abdomen. Oh I'm no good at it. Come back to the abdomen.' It's just this constant struggle.

KBN adverts to his ability to select and maintain focus on a specific object:

KBN: ... Vipassana, which I understand as taking whatever phenomena present themselves as predominant to the attention. So one brings attention to the primary object. I'll expand on this. The primary object is the breathing for me, like I'll always look at the breathing, but the breathing is never a very dominant object. It's always something else, and in retreats it's often just the sitting. So I've come to slowly realize that the actual sitting, the contemplation of sitting itself, the whole body sitting, is actually an object, the most common object I've used, so the breathing is somewhere within that and I can zoom in onto the kind of smaller phenomena. The sitting as a whole is what I use, being in that sitting and within that there are objects within that. So that hardness of the cushion or the seat itself which is earth element, that hardness itself can be an object. One can have one's attention on that quite a lot. It gives you a base to look at other things.

This practitioner's reference to the seat as the earth element is a reference to the *dhatu*, the elemental aspects of experience. The four elements are a conceptual scheme to map out direct experience. Instruction about use of the elements in this manner was given during a four-day retreat for beginners and advanced practitioners in February 2004. It was explained that their purpose is to develop accuracy and precision of awareness. They relate to basal responses: movement, tingling, sensation, pressure, heat and light, labelled as: earth/resistance, air/movement, fire/heat and cold/water, moisture and cohesion.²²¹ As the above example illustrates, application of this scheme to mapping of experience is not advanced practice. However, development of mindfulness is necessary for practitioners to be able to hold their minds on objects in order to note the changes in their experience of them.

²²¹ See Appendix 4.

Another aspect of one's practical development at this point concerns the relationship between the experiential state and its labelling. The range of experiences described above, and even their labels in most instances, are common to the realm of everyday experience. This includes the inability to concentrate the mind, the chattering mind, and being distracted by physical pain. Even the hindrances in both effect and terminology are part of one's everyday reality. However, beginning with the discrimination of concentration and insight, experiences become harder to make sense of without understanding their relevance from a Buddhist perspective, and without reference to the Buddhist frameworks that support the doctrinal constructs. For instance, many people appreciate suffering and impermanence as concepts, the experiences of which do not take much mindfulness to identify in meditation. One can identify them as physical pain and the changing stream of sensations that dominate the mind's attention. However, the deeper experiences relating to these constructs that advanced practitioners describe cannot be accessed without a high degree of mindfulness. It appears that with the development of mindfulness and access to deeper meditative states comes the need to utilize Buddhist terminology and frameworks in their understanding. The experiential account below illustrates a range of experiences that are often reported by practitioners with considerable experience in the practice:

HD: My experiences so far I sort of put into three stages. There was this beginning stage. I had to move every ten minutes. I suffered extreme pain. I could not follow two breaths in a row ... A little bit of concentration started to develop. I could use pain as a concentration object. Then I noticed that the pain was not constant, that when I watched it, it would break up, and on one retreat I found I could be mindful all day long. I could feel more sensations than the day before. I had so much energy, I didn't need to sleep, and I'd observe many aspects to the rising and falling. I used to do extremely slow walking meditation, like we're talking an hour to do ten metres. I could see all these minute sensations. And yeah, one afternoon I was doing meditation, and suddenly nausea started overwhelming me—it was just extremely unpleasant—and fear as well. I couldn't sleep. I'd turn over and my body was just vibration. In the second period, when everything got more exciting, and interesting and fascinating—and it was really pleasant—the body's really pleasant. Then the dukkha decade followed. That was the third stage, which was basically the '90s, I suppose. A large part of that was very unpleasant sensations in the body, and I believe that this stage of where you're gaining insight into dukkha very strongly, is very short for some people, and very intense and long for others.²²²

At the time of interview the practitioner felt that her practice was moving into a new phase, wherein she was experiencing changeability from one sitting to another during intensive practice; from pain in the body to pleasant sensations in the body; to equanimity, to frustrating sits where there was little sensation in the body and no discernible object. She had interpreted this as the mind's reviewing mental states

²²² See the full transcript excerpt in Appendix 7.

such as desire and aversion, with a view to ‘giving them up, releasing them’. This excerpt, reproduced in more of its entirety in Appendix 7, is the clearest and fullest account of a practitioner’s experiential progress in the practice that I was given. Generally, practitioners do not relate their experiential progress in the practice, including specific instances of learning or leaps in understanding. Instead, when asked about their experience—either routine or unusual—with Vipassana, they tend to recall either one experience or one kind of experience that occurs regularly. With the development of mindfulness, a practitioner’s experiences, means of interpretation and skill in the practice appear to accumulate with time, and specific instances appear to contribute to this sense of overall accumulation, adding to the practitioner’s stock of knowledge. Most typically, deeper meditative experiences tend to be experienced as pleasurable, interpreted as *sukkhā*, or experiences of *dukkhā*/suffering and *aniccā*/impermanence. While the excerpt above shows how the practitioner concerned found her experience dominated by one type or another, *sukkhā*, *dukkhā*, or *aniccā* at specific times, the latter two, *dukkhā* and *aniccā* tend to dominate reports generally, and appear to be related in practitioners’ experiences. By this stage of the practice they are well acquainted with foundational Buddhist doctrines such as the *Three Marks of Existence* and the *Four Noble Truths*. Some advanced practitioners recalled experiences of deep *sukkhā*. Instance the following:

KBN: I was sitting, sitting, sitting, and then I noticed I had built up some saliva. I was swallowing mouthfuls of saliva, and then I had ... I was like a rocket ship, vapours streaming off me. There was a complete lightness of being, feeling I could just ... someone said to me it was like a rebirth experience, remembering your mouth being full, so I rushed off to see (the teacher) and he said, ‘You’re just experiencing a deep level of *sukkhā*’, but I think, “What was its significance?” It was just extreme comfort, which is probably an effect of deep concentration.

Many advanced practitioners recalled experiences typically associated with Vipassana practice, and related to *dukkhā* and *aniccā*, the first two of the *Three Marks of Existence*. Those practitioners who reported these experiences, either directly or indirectly, had been practising for roughly between six and thirty years.²²³ Some practitioners reported experiencing *dukkhā* in ways that went beyond the registering of the physical pain that occurs from sitting for long periods. The following excerpt, which illustrates the practitioner’s development of mindfulness and ability to meditate on pain, also indicates the beginning of what is commonly interpreted as the experience of *aniccā*, impermanence:

²²³ The practitioner who had been committed to the practice for six years is a particularly intense meditator. She had had considerable experience with both Transcendental Meditation and Zen before coming to Vipassana, and therefore, her concentration was already strong. Chapter 6 addresses such issues as personal religious history and prior relevant experience with other meditation techniques.

HD: For some reason I kept going, and then I suppose a little bit of concentration started to develop. I'd do a ten-day here and a twenty-day there, and I still thought I was hopeless. But I kept doing it, and then I ... yeah ... I did start to notice that I could use pain. I used to get a sheet of pain in my back. Then I noticed that the pain was not constant, that when I watched it it would break up, and there would be vibration in the pain, and I think I remember telling the teachers that some of the vibrations are painful and some aren't. So that was quite exciting, and I sensed that the teachers ... they would say, "Oh, keep going."

As indicated, the concepts of suffering and impermanence are easier to identify and interpret in one's experience, and easier to utilize in the construction of one's frame of reference. These concepts have been shown to be related to bare experiences that lend themselves easily to specific interpretations. Some experiences can be interpreted afterwards, as was noted above, and some experiences seem to come as part of an experience-concept package in that they have already been shaped by doctrinal material. During participant observation, in the teachings and instructions from several retreats and Monday night meditation sessions, and from interview material, I observed how certain lists—conceptual maps—are employed to map out experience, and how the teachers introduce these concepts to aid learning and understanding of the practice.

Mahasi Sayadaw states that the practice in Vipassana meditation is to observe and contemplate the swift and successive occurrences of mental phenomena that seem to occur simultaneously, but in fact occur sequentially. With practice comes the ability to observe the arising and vanishing of each process at the very moment of its occurrence.²²⁴ Some practitioners reported the experience of the arising and passing away of phenomena, and some referred to the experience of the *breakdown* of phenomena, which they took to be an experience of *anicca*. The experience of arising, and its connection to *anicca*, appears to have formed the basis of reflections and contemplations about *Dependent Origination* for one practitioner. When asked about specific meditative experiences, she responded, "I suppose the teaching of *Dependent Origination* is something that comes into my mind now, just watching the way things arise, and relate it to other things like the connections between things." Without further description it is hard to tell exactly how the connections are observed, but the meditator's words indicate that she used the basic experience of the arising of phenomena to contemplate the doctrine of *Dependent Origination*. *Dukkha* and *anicca* were recalled as dominant in SI's experience of the *dukkha nanas*, the insight knowledges of suffering, while on a one-month solitary retreat:

SI: ... and they took me to depths of concentration that I have never experienced before in my life, nor since, and they took me through. It's still in the *dukkha jnanas*. You've probably read about them. The *dukkha jnanas* are the

²²⁴ Mahasi Sayadaw, 1958, *op.cit.*, 1971, *op.cit.*

three insight knowledges you know when we see impermanence for the first time. You know how we all experience impermanence, but it's quite mental. We're still living in it, you know. They take you to a point where you see mind-moment and nothing else.

GE: So you've actually got to be quite concentrated.

SI: You actually see that there is no mind moment before and there is no mind moment yet to come. There is non-existence except for that one moment, and I'd seen it some time before. They wanted me to get through the *dukkha jhanas* as soon as possible, and so I still live in the past and future and all of that, but I actually know, I have seen, that they don't exist. It comes instantaneously like a flash, but your behaviour takes years to catch up with your insight, and when they took me through it was like it just happened (inaudible) most horrific experience of your life, and Joseph Goldstein describes it as the time when a yogi picks up their mat and goes home. It's just pain, absolute mental pain. It lasts for about three days—I can't believe it—it's too hard.

From the examples above it can be seen that experiences of *dukkha* and *anicca* are easy to understand and accept, and further, how certain experiential phenomena lend themselves to specific interpretations. Many experienced practitioners have direct experiences that lend themselves easily to interpretation as *dukkha* or *anicca*. Only one practitioner interviewed reported a direct experience of *anatta*, or non-self.²²⁵ Mahasi Sayadaw outlines the goal of practice as the realization 'that the self, the living entity, exists as a continuous process of elements of mind which occur singly at a time and in succession'.²²⁶ The experience of *anatta* is a stated outcome of the practice. However, comments during interviews reflect the practitioner's own thoughts and contemplations about the notion, as opposed to their direct experience of it. I commented to one of the teachers that the practitioners generally had some understanding of *dukkha* and *anicca*, but seemed to have trouble with *anatta*, and that they take it on more as a given. The following is a paraphrase of the response:

EBS: They don't really have any experience of it, because when people come to Buddhism from Christianity, the key representative of the objective space of being is God. The representative in the subjective space of being is me. So this relationship between the two is really significant. So I think where this leads people is that there's fear around not-self for a lot of people. People are not fearful of *anicca* because they can see it, and they have experience of the notion of suffering. They have experiences of not being happy, and the notion of 'just when I think I've got my act together, on some level I don't feel happy'. So

²²⁵ This practitioner is a Vipassana teacher with considerable scholarly and meditative experience. Many remarks made by him in classes and workshops address the resistance to change and the desire to cling to forms of self-identification, experienced by practitioners. His comments have suggested that this resistance is responsible for practitioners not accessing the experience of *anatta*.

²²⁶ Mahasi Sayadaw, 1958, *op.cit.*; 1971, *op.cit.*

they've kind of got it, right? The same with impermanence it's pretty obvious. You can see things arising and passing away. It's actually not a threat to my existence that things arise and pass away. What is a threat to my existence is that I don't have everyday experiences of this. Everyday experience provides everyday data, and I reckon this is one of the things you only get by intensive meditation.²²⁷

It appears that the notion of *anatta* and its somewhat anticipated experience, serves as an aim and inspiration for continued practice in that it is taken on as a proposition to work with. In this way it serves the same function as the notion of *emptiness*, dominant in the thought and discourse of the Vajrayana practitioners discussed in Chapter 4. Two further doctrinal frameworks need mentioning in this respect. The first is Mahasi Sayadaw's *Thirteen Stages of Insight*, which practitioners refer to and use mainly as a confirmation of their progress in the practice. The second is the *Noble Eight-Fold Path* and its three groupings, *panna*/wisdom: right view and resolve; *sila*/ethics: right speech, action, and livelihood; *samadhi*/concentration (in this context I take it to refer to meditation generally): right effort, mindfulness and concentration.²²⁸ All participant observation and interview data collected for both centres, BMIMC and Vajrayana Institute, indicate that this doctrine plays a sizeable role in the commitment process for both groups of practitioners. Bhikkhu Bodhi's and Keown's comments, that the path is cumulative, not linear, where the eight factors are practised simultaneously,²²⁹ is relevant to a consideration of the learning process for Vipassana practitioners. Although the tradition holds *samadhi* to refer to concentration and *panna* to wisdom in the sense of insight or Vipassana²³⁰, and Western practitioners come to this understanding with time, in the early stages of involvement, two of the three terms hold slightly different meanings. *Samadhi* appears to refer to both Vipassana, and Metta as a concentration practice, while *panna*/wisdom is understood in the sense of knowledge: the application of Buddhist doctrine to experience. Throughout one's engagement with Vipassana and Buddhism, the combination of *panna*, *sila* and *samadhi* provides continuous orientation to the practice.

5.7 The Four Noble Truths in Concept and Experience

From this perspective, the doctrine of the *Four Noble Truths*, which is an over-arching framework for the interpretation of experience and existence, is probably the one least able to be experienced directly. People come to an appropriation and acceptance of it through reflection on its import. The following practitioner's experience on his

²²⁷ These comments were made alongside considerable discussion about the Western understanding of self, especially in relation to a Christian upbringing. They will be treated more fully in forthcoming chapters.

²²⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005, *op.cit.*, p225. The eight factors are outlined here.

²²⁹ Keown, D. *Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, p84. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *ibid.*

²³⁰ This view was outlined in a *Sutta* Study weekend facilitated by Patrick Kearney on 30-31 August, 2003, at BMIMC.

first retreat indicates how the notion of *dukkha* can be grasped experientially, and how it may lead to an acceptance of the *Four Noble Truths*.

GE: So, with that first retreat, when you said you were starting to get a sense of the Four Noble Truths and the nature of suffering, how did that apply to your meditation?

EBS: I think it was this realization that there was a way of thinking about my existence that I never thought about before, and that if I applied the scientist approach, to just keep collecting data, that it seemed like it all made sense. Because the way I often describe insight to people is you can kind of do it with those dot drawings that the kids have, that if you join them all up according to one-two-three-four-five, it might turn out like it's a donkey, but if you join them up a different way, it's the same dots, all of a sudden you see an elephant. So it's the same data, but you're seeing things quite differently. So for me, notions like the Four Noble Truths. So the notion of suffering is the First Truth. I think the first retreat was mainly around that, but the other Noble Truths are quite ... it takes you a while to really get them, so the notion that the cause of this is craving. So it's like ... to get that, I think you often need a really good sense of suffering—*dukkha* just arising—because then you can watch out for the next bit underneath it, which is the craving. So you can't just go straight to craving. I think it does go one-two-three-four. You've gotta get the picture of *dukkha* in yourself.

GE: In retreats, was that just reflecting on life experience, like watching thoughts and things come up, or was it more to do with physical pain?

EBS: It was more to do with physical, actual experience. So I think in the first retreat, the general notion of *dukkha*. To get that, I need to have a lot of detail, specifics of *dukkha*, to get a general sense of *dukkha*. So I think that Goldstein and Salzburg were very good, the way they were running their retreats, because it's about working at a minute level with pain. So 'Just keep sitting. Just keep watching what the mind does with that pain. Just stay with it a little bit longer. Another ten seconds. Just watch that.' So this notion of working moment-to-moment with what's going on, and seeing moment-to-moment how *dukkha* arises—and it arises everywhere, in your body, in your mind—and it was a sense of being pointed like a scientist would be to the data. Keep looking at it. And don't just understand it theoretically. Find it in the next moment. You'll find it five seconds later, five seconds later, five seconds later, so it's 'keep bringing it back to what's going on now'. This is the sensation.

6 Conclusions

Exploration and discussion in this chapter has focussed largely on learning as the process of attribution of meaning to experiential states. Familiarity with the practices, experiential states and their interpretive frameworks can be seen to

constitute a stock of knowledge that practitioners acquire from their participation,²³¹ learn to work with individually in the practice, and begin to use in reflection upon experience more generally. This stock of knowledge is acquired through two processes: *apprehension* as the experiential identification, labelling, and conceptual categorization of mental states, and *comprehension* as the acquired understanding of the relationships between these categorizations within the Buddhist frame of reference, according to Buddhist terminology and meaning. Apprehension can be seen to take place in three general stages of experiential development and conceptual acquisition, outlined in Section 4 above. The first stage consists of those experiences especially common to new meditators that are attributed to a lack of mindfulness: poor concentration, a distracted mind, reactivity to pain. The second occurs when the development of some mindfulness allows the meditator to note these mental distractions and label and investigate them as mental states. With this degree of mindfulness and skill with labelling established, the meditator begins to notice, explore, and attribute meaning to types of meditative experience, while experientially part of everyday awareness, that have special significance within a Buddhist frame of reference. These experiential types are commonly interpreted as *sukkha*/pleasure, *dukkha*/suffering and *anicca*/impermanence. Generally, experiences belonging to the first two stages are easy to recall and articulate; even the hindrances are within the realm of everyday experience. These later, stage three experiences become harder to discuss without recourse to Buddhist doctrinal terminology, and without conceptual preparation and mediation beforehand.

From an individual perspective, several factors may affect one's progress in learning the practice. In Section 4.1 above, it was shown that learning on a first retreat has two facets. The first is understanding the purpose and structure of the retreat setting and acclimatizing to it, and the second is one's learning and understanding of, and development in, the practice. With respect to the first, in reality it may take a new practitioner more than one and usually several retreats to get used to *being on retreat*, but as was pointed out above, it does not take more than a few days for even the most agitated participant in the group to begin to settle into the routine. The nature and rate of one's development in the practice can be affected by the number, frequency and length of retreats attended. From the above it can be seen that shorter retreats give a taste. A novice learns the basal technique, some of the fundamental concepts and their practical applications. Longer retreats give the mind time to settle and to let go of one's everyday life and mental state. When the mind slows things may come to the surface, and this allows for more prolonged observation. The practitioner may gain a clearer picture of what is normally masked by an everyday mental state. For instance, longer retreats allow more time to identify, observe, and work with the hindrances. However, the learning process is somewhat different for each practitioner. The acquisition of a stock of knowledge will continue with participation in retreats, workshops, weekly meditation sessions, or by attending Buddhist talks and classes.

²³¹ Greil, *op.cit.*

The nature of this stock of knowledge will be affected by: the nature of practical instruction and doctrinal tuition given, what is dominant in practitioners' experiences during a given retreat, practitioners' own responses, and by what supplementary practices and *dhamma* talks they encounter. The process of learning Vipassana must be understood as more than a matter of learning the outer behaviours of a meditator, and learning the concepts and their meanings associated with the practice in the way that one learns a new language.²³² Learning becomes more self-directed by success in accessing states of awareness normally obscured in everyday awareness. Beyond the experience of the distracted mind, the meditator accesses mental states that normally have no meaning or existence outside of everyday life. For instance, many have trouble identifying *mindfulness* initially, as a quality of mind within their own experience. The effort to do so means that one must learn to marry concepts with experience not part of one's normal *taken-for-granted* reality.²³³ This also means that role-learning becomes more self-reflexive without a concrete model for one's action and experience, in the way that Dawson's notion of reflexive role re-enactment suggests, that role-taking becomes increasingly about role-making.²³⁴

²³² See McIntyre, *op.cit.*

²³³ See Schutz, A. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Northwestern University Press, 1967, p74. He defines *taken-for-granted* reality as the level of experience not in need of further analysis. Also see Chapter 1 Section 2.2: *Berger's Phenomenological Sociology*.

²³⁴ Dawson, L. "Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality: Theoretically Elaborating "Active" Conversions", in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29 [2], pp141-63, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1990.

Chapter 3: Self-Transformation Through Vipassana Practice

1 Introduction

This Chapter examines the techniques through which change is produced, experienced, and by their personal application of the technique, attributed meaning by practitioners of Vipassana meditation. Whereas Chapter 2 explored the learning and apprehension process as it occurs in the context of the Vipassana retreat at BMIMC, this chapter explores the continuation and extension of learning through personal application. Realistically, it is artificial to distinguish between the processes of comprehending a new meaning-system and applying its principles and practices to one's personal transformation. As shown in Chapter 2, Section 3.1.1, the retreat setting exposes a practitioner to a specific range of practices, namely Vipassana, Metta, and thought reflection, and to a range of doctrinal constructs and their interrelated meanings from the Pali Canon and its commentarial literature. Thus a practitioner accesses and acquires a new stock of knowledge that includes sets of meaning-constructs and methods for producing and interpreting experiential states. Acquisition is active in that participants are seen to immerse themselves experimentally in the practice and its meaning-making processes. However, an examination of the application of this stock of knowledge to transformation of the self reveals those facets of the new meaning-system that are actively utilized, tested, validated, accepted, and accorded value by the practitioners. In the process, it shows how experimental immersion becomes active appropriation in the way that Wentworth suggests.²³⁵

As asserted by Staples and Mauss, religious change is an act of self-transformation²³⁶. An understanding of the former requires understanding of the means to effect the latter within the context of the religion or tradition concerned. This necessarily requires understanding of the way in which the self in its ordinary and transformed states are conceived within the new frame of reference. For the purposes of objective analysis, conception of self and worldview must be appropriate to the task. In the context of Buddhist systems of meaning and processes of transformation, the representation of self-transformation as identity change²³⁷ is challenged. This view, utilized in conversion studies, is found to be inadequate because of its inability to explain the significance that is attached by practitioners to changes in immediate subjective awareness. Examination of the patterns of personal practice gives a

²³⁵ Wentworth, W. *Context and Understanding: An Inquiry into Socialization Theory*, Elsevier North Holland Inc., 1980.

²³⁶ Staples, C, and Mauss, A. "Conversion or Commitment? A Reassessment of the Snow and Machalek Approach to the Study of Conversion", in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 [2], pp. 133-47, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1987.

²³⁷ Gordon, D. "The Jesus People: An Identity Synthesis", in *Urban Life and Culture* 3 [2], pp159-78, Sage Publications, 1974, pp159-60.

general sense of the orientation of practitioners toward application of techniques. How and why interpretive structures are utilized, and the effects of their use—which includes the nature of as well as the means for change—can reveal much about the underlying reasons for commitment. Discussion in Chapter 6 explores the relationship between recognition of the effect of self-transformative processes and the feeling of acceptance of and commitment to the new perspective.

2 Personal Practice

All of the practitioners interviewed either maintained or attempted to maintain continuity of personal practice. Most of them meditated daily, or from a few to several times a week, usually from twenty minutes to half-an-hour, depending on the inclination of the practitioner and the time available to them. The range was represented by SI who stated, “Normally I sit two hours a day minimum, and I’ve been doing that for seven years. If I don’t practise daily, I’d probably do a practice about four to five times per week”, and HR, who is not strict about daily practice, and just sits ‘as often I can’. In the few weeks preceding interview, she noted that she had felt the impulse to meditate when she needed to settle internally. Descriptions of personal practice show that Vipassana is complemented with Metta and regular or quasi-regular reading periods. Many included descriptions of *everyday* practices: techniques incorporated into everyday activities and contexts. Some practitioners also considered attendance at workshops and retreats as part of personal practice. The following responses are representative of the range of individual patterns of practice.

HD: I don’t have a strong daily practice. I come to the weekly sit here at the Centre. I usually meditate for at least fifteen minutes before I go to bed. I usually do two retreats a year, at least two, so every year I would have done, I suppose, a month of meditation for the last fifteen years.

KT: I meditate regularly; Vipassana, Brahmaviharas; developing the Paramis.

KN: [I] read books, do meditation. Meditation is semi-regular, a couple of times a week, before bed, weekend afternoons. I do Metta on the train.

FV: Vipassana meditation and walking meditation form the main part of my practice. Along with some compassion and lovingkindness practice. If I don’t practice daily, then about four to five times per week. On a Sunday I meet with a few other practitioners and we do a group sit.

SI: I wake up in the morning and I do the *Paramis*. Normally I sit two hours a day minimum, and I’ve been doing that for seven years. I devote a minimum of three hours a day to formal practice.

BM: *Anapannasati*, or mindfulness of breathing. I study a bit for reflection, then take it into meditation. I try to sit a couple of hours each day. I use mindfulness as an ongoing activity, where meditation strengthens the continuity of mindfulness.

MV: I mostly practise *Anapanasati*, Mindfulness of Breathing, moving into what we call *Shikentaza*, just sitting practice, and Metta practice. Maybe six months ago I discontinued that as a regular practice, but I would do Metta practice every day. Part of the practice would be Metta, then I'd go into Mindfulness of Breathing practice.

2.1 Vipassana Practice and Experience

As is evident from the above descriptions, practitioners typically supplement their Vipassana with practice that aims to cultivate wholesome mental and emotional states. Throughout the following discussion it will be evident that the changes that individuals report are attributable to success with these practices. These are predominantly insight-related in that they involve observing and directing internal phenomena that are easily categorized according to the four satipatthanas. Only one practitioner described the kind of experience associated with concentrative or flow experience²³⁸ in a way that suggested that he valued them. He recounted 'seeing beings from other realms with the mind's eye', and 'having a sense of energetic connection with everything'. Although another reported having unusual bodily sensations and visions, experiences such as these, when they occur, are interpreted as meaningless, and simply dismissed by returning to the primary object.

According to Buddhist doctrine, the practices of concentration and insight result in different types of mental functioning and transformation. As a new meditator, one learns the difference between the two in terms of their experiential effects, and in terms of their role in insight practice specifically²³⁹. Students are taught to deal with the role of concentration in the development of mindfulness, how concentration supports insight practice, and how value is attributed to the two practices through understanding the relationship between them. It was explained that although some practitioners report the occasional experience of bliss states, they essentially see these as a byproduct of the development of concentration that occurs through Vipassana

²³⁸ Bedford, S. "Crying Out of Recognition: Experiences with Meditative Practices in a New Religious Movement", in *ARC, The Journal of Religious Studies*, pp119-32, McGill, 24, 1996, p125. During Bedford's research with members of the *i and I Art of Living Foundation*, three of thirteen informants described experiences that were sometimes characterized by states of oneness or flow, 'at one with their surroundings' ... 'oneness' with the rest of creation.

²³⁹ See Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, Wisdom Publications, 1992, pp161-69. He likens the difference between concentration and mindfulness to the difference between a battery and a fine tuner. See Chapter 2, Section 4.3 for a description of my own experience, which highlights the ease with which it is possible to slip into concentration when mindfulness itself is not strong.

practice. Here, its function is in stabilizing the mind for access to deeper mindfulness and insight.

Five practitioners interviewed had learned and developed concentration while practising with another group or in another meditative environment before their association with BMIMC and Vipassana meditation. Some of these incorporated it into their sitting practice occasionally in order to settle the mind. The first, KN, had learned *samatha* practice while in rehabilitation for an alcohol addiction. When I asked her why she had taken up Buddhism and Buddhist meditation, she explained that, during her detoxification, a Buddhist nun had taught her relaxation techniques such as *samatha*, to induce calm. She started using and developing the technique, and in her own words, was 'amazed at what she did on her own'. The instruction was to breathe in and out through the nostrils. When instead she switched attention to the diaphragm, she realized that she was in touch with her feelings, an experience which she later interpreted as *mindfulness of feeling*. This triggered the experience of sobbing, and put her off meditating for a while. The fact that KN was able to acknowledge and release previously disowned emotions, to some degree on her own, is significant. That she did so using concentration as a support for the mind, before focussing on the diaphragm, effectively turned the technique into insight. In this way the development of calm and the capacity to hold the mind on an object led to the therapeutic release of emotion. When the sustained attention was transferred from the nostrils to the diaphragm, it revealed what was normally obscured by the practitioner's habitual state of mind.

The second, HR, had been practising with a Zen teacher, and found herself 'doing something halfway between the two' (concentration and insight). She connected with the Vipassana practice through reading a book wherein the section on Vipassana instructed her to fix attention on whatever comes along rather than on one fixed object. She tried concentration some time later and found it useful for supporting the Vipassana. She found her concentration strengthened and her mind not wandering as much. The third, SI, had experience of Transcendental Meditation²⁴⁰ and Zen before learning Vipassana. She related, "Depending on the day, I'll do concentration sometimes for a long time. If my concentration's poor, I'll do some fast breathing, [and] focus on that just to get myself settled. That's not a Vipassana technique, but something that I've learnt. It helps me get settled really quickly, [and] it really gets me focussed."

The fourth and fifth in this category cited *Anapannasati*/Mindfulness of Breathing, as their main practice, and described it as a combination of concentration and insight. They had both developed this practice in other Buddhist Centres before coming to

²⁴⁰ Layman, E. *Buddhism in America*, Nelson-Hall, 1976, p287. She maintains that some Westerners who have tried Transcendental Meditation come to Buddhism because they want a deeper, more demanding practice. This accords with my observations.

BMIMC. MV described his practice as ‘mostly Anapanasati in a Zen sense’. He relates:

MV: Traditionally in Zen particularly, it’s infamous for the Master or the acolyte who’s looking after the meditation hall to have said, “There’s your cushion. Go and sit on it and work it out for yourself”, and you might get a tiny bit more instruction than that, which is basically, ‘Watch your breath. Count to ten. Stop, and start again. If you realize that your mind has wandered during that one-to-ten, then go back and start at one’. That’s basically all the meditation training you get for quite a while. You struggle with that, and then the Master takes over and says, “Let’s fine tune it a bit”. So having done lots of that, I think most meditators get to the point where they stop counting the breath, and just let that be after a little practice, and just sit and watch the breath: the differences of in- and out-breath. And it starts looking like Vipassana anyway, because instead of looking at the breath you’re looking at lots of different body parts and doing scanning and stuff.

GE: So, it is a mindfulness practice.

MV: Yes. Awareness of the present moment, mindfulness, training the mind. I mean it’s all basically the Dhammapada, the first Chapter, the mind. The mind needs to be trained, and it’s all training the mind to be aware of mind.

In each of these five cases the person had some concentration experience, in one or other meditative setting out of clinical practice, Transcendental Meditation, the Theravadin monastic tradition of Achan Chaa, and two different Zen settings, before coming to BMIMC and learning the Mahasi Vipassana method. Within these, Transcendental Meditation is the only one with exclusive focus on concentration, teaching a well-documented technique that employs a mantra as the concentration object. Of the three people who had experience in Zen, HR and MV combined this with their Vipassana practice, and did not feel conflicted between the two, although HR has taken advice on this matter, and MV’s approach does appear somewhat syncretic. The third, SI, currently practises Vipassana only, and has done so for many years. Mindfulness of Breathing practice is based on the *Anapanasati Sutta*, no.118 in the *Majjhima Nikaya*²⁴¹. Its aim is the perfection of the four *Foundations of Mindfulness*, the seven *Enlightenment Factors*, and clear vision and deliverance. The style and content of the sutta liken it to the *Satipatthana Sutta*. However, by comparison, it places greater emphasis on awareness of breath.²⁴² The statements of BM and MV convey the sense that they both appreciate its inclusion of some concentration.

²⁴¹ Walshe, M (trans.). “Mahasatipatthana Sutta”, in the *Digha Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, 1995, p335-50.

²⁴² Watson, G. *The Resonance of Emptiness: A Buddhist Inspiration for a Contemporary Psychotherapy*, Curzon Press, 2002, p154. Here she comments that the aim of Anapanasati is to take up a witness position towards contents.

2.2 Metta, the Brahmaviharas and the Paramis

In the description of practitioners' patterns of practice outlined in Section 1.1 above, reference was made to some practices other than Vipassana incorporated into the personal schedules of practitioners. These practices, Metta, the Brahmaviharas, and the Paramis, are all notable for their function in developing a range of positive or wholesome mental states, such as faith, joy, and happiness. The four *brahmaviharas*/sublime states of mind, are *metta*/lovingkindness, *karuna*/compassion, *mudita*/sympathetic joy, and *upekkha*/equanimity.²⁴³ The practice consists, starting with oneself as a point of reference for gradual extension, of radiating out to people in the immediate environment—neighbourhood, town, country and world—each of the sublime states in turn.²⁴⁴ Nyanaponika Thera instructs that the extension of these states towards others should be impartial, and, that to achieve this, the four are used as principles of conduct, objects of reflection, and as subjects of methodical meditation. He also correlates meditative development of the sublime states with the four *jhanas*/meditative absorptions, where love, compassion and sympathetic joy produce attainment of the first three, and equanimity leads to the fourth, in which it is the most significant factor.²⁴⁵ This correlation between Brahmavihara and the attainment of *jhana* is not normally included in meditation instruction. Instead, the goal is to produce wholesome mental states, and wholesome or right conduct towards others, in order to counteract egotism.²⁴⁶

In addition to being the first of the Four Brahmaviharas, Metta is one of the Protective Meditations: Buddha meditations, Metta Bhavana, contemplation of the loathsomeness of the body, and mindfulness of death, and one of the Paramis.²⁴⁷ Next to Vipassana, it is the second-most taught meditation at the Centre, and because many practitioners incorporate it into their personal practice, while only a very small number practise the Brahmaviharas or the Paramis, its role in self-transformation is considered much more significant. In Metta practice, thoughts of lovingkindness are directed to four people: oneself, someone for whom one has affection, someone for whom one feels indifference, and someone for whom one feels aversion or dislike. Finally, lovingkindness is directed to all of these people equally. The words said to oneself to accompany the contemplation are, for oneself, 'May I be happy and free from suffering', and for another, 'Just as I wish to be happy and free from suffering,

²⁴³ These states are outlined in Nyanaponika Thera. "The Four Sublime States" (1958), in *The Four Sublime States*, Nyanaponika Thera, and *The Practice of Lovingkindness*, Nanamoli Thera, pp29-57, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, combined edition, 1998, pp11-21. See also Nanamoli Thera, *op.cit.*, 1998, p30.

²⁴⁴ Nyanaponika Thera, *op.cit.*, 1998, p6.

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp4-5. The Pali term *jhana*, the equivalent of the Sanskrit *dhyana*, is often translated as meditative absorption. Attainment of the *jhanas* is the goal of concentration practice.

²⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p3.

²⁴⁷ Keown, D. *Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, p212.

may that being be happy and free from suffering'.²⁴⁸ Nanamoli Thera maintains that it 'gives effect, in some measure, to all members of the Eight-Fold Path but for the first, right view', and therefore its practice alone will not enable one to reach *Nibbana*.²⁴⁹ As frequently stated by teachers, however, it is practised as a complement to mindfulness meditation, both to stabilize the mind and to foster a spirit of lovingkindness towards others.²⁵⁰

Two out of the twenty practitioners interviewed made reference to the Paramis as part of their personal practice, a practice that they both learned from the same teachers. The Paramis are the ten virtuous qualities that are said to lead to Buddhahood in Pali sources. They are (in English) generosity, morality, renunciation, insight, energy, patience, truthfulness, resolution, lovingkindness, and equanimity.²⁵¹ The following excerpts show the application of these practices to self-development, seen in the way in which MV, KT and SI describe their reasons for, and the effects of, balancing Vipassana with these practices.

MV: I recognized quite early on that I have this problem with anger... And I chose to deliberately do Metta practice, lovingkindness practice, as a beginning practice. Every day I'd do a certain portion of the meditation, and when I go on large retreats my first meditation in the morning will be just Metta, a real solid block of Metta meditation, and I've done that for a long time, and I immodestly say that's had a quite good effect.

I asked KT, "What significance does the meditation practice have for you? What role does it play in your day-to-day life?" She responded, "Meditation sets Buddhism apart from from other religions. It helps you to live by the theory". She referred to the practice of Brahmavihara as a practical tool. Because of its 'focus on compassion', it 'balances straight Vipassana, which can reinforce subtle self-centredness', and 'puts my personal story in a wider context. It helps me to see beyond personal manifestation, how people really are, and puts me in touch with suffering, and the four Noble Truths. In the broader context, especially in my role as manager (of the centre, at the time of interview), I see peoples' problems first-hand'. She added that she does a lot of contemplation practice, and was currently developing the Paramis as part of her practice. SI had incorporated the Paramis into her daily practice:

SI: I wake up in the morning and I do the Paramis [quoting the text used]. I say it slowly and quietly, and I really listen to what I'm saying, and then I run through the Paramis according to the last 24 hours, and say with generosity ...

²⁴⁸ See Nyanaponika Thera, *op.cit.*, 1998, p6.

²⁴⁹ Nanamoli Thera, *op.cit.*, 1998, p31.

²⁵⁰ Fronsdal, G. "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness", in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp164-180, University of California Press, 1998, pp173-74.

²⁵¹ Keown, *op.cit.*, p212.

I might pick someone. How could I have been more generous with them?... Or I might pick someone I was too generous with. I go through the people in those 24 hours, always with my family, and then with anyone else who has come into my life, and I find that the same people come up all the time.

GE: So you find that you do watch your natural responses to people?

SI: Yes, I do. I'm getting better at putting them [my responses] on hold, and I try to deal with them with wisdom, and aversion's my big thing.

Clearly the purpose of these practices is to generate wholesome mental states and right action, and to maintain these in the face of hostility from others. They are also practised to counteract the impulses of clinging and attachment to one's self. The fact that practitioners deliberately choose to incorporate these practices, especially Metta, into their regular sitting practice and into their daily activities (see below), highlights the importance for these practitioners of being able to view relationships with others in a non selfcentred way. This is reminiscent of the way in which the practitioners at Vajrayana Institute hold the aim of cherishing others more than oneself as something to aspire to. For both kinds of practitioner, there appears to be a connection, between the development of mindfulness and the development and practice of compassion toward others, that appeals to their own ethical sensibilities. The possibility that the choice of practice expresses their need for an ethically based spiritual practice, one that facilitates the development of a practitioner's inner subjective life in harmony with an ethical foundation for living, is given more attention in Chapter 6.

2.3 Everyday Practices

Everyday practice refers to the application of the formal meditation techniques in everyday life. While practitioners distinguish between these and their sitting practice, they maintain that the effects of formal mindfulness practice, of doctrinal study, and of 'everyday' practices, are not easily separated; that 'the practice doesn't end when one gets up from the meditation cushion'; and that everyday practice is a continuation of the meditation session. RN responded thus when asked how she integrated meditation practice into her daily life:

RN: I suppose on one level there's no distinction between formal practice. I mean practice is practice. It's not 'this is the practice and this is daily life over here'. The practice is being mindful. Vipassana is awareness, and it's mindfulness practice. So it's just about wherever you are and whatever your circumstances, you can practise. For me, that's what I like about the practice. It's not something I go off and do. It's not separate from my daily life, but there's opportunities to intensify the experiences of awareness and deepen the practice by taking those formal opportunities to work with the mind. So integrating those formal experiences into daily life is not an issue, in a sense, because there's no real black-and-white distinction. It's more just using those

skills or the opportunity in the more intense practice, [and] developing those skills that are then applied in other experiences out of the more intense situations. Yes, it feels that the practice is just life.

DN demonstrated how situations in daily life are seen as opportunities for practice:

DN: That's what I'm trying to put now into daily practice. When there's a particular thing that's come up, I go 'How am I relating to this?', and it's usually an anger thing. I actually do a lot of formal practice during the day. Say something comes up, I try to deal with it then, so to me that's formal practice even though it's daily life, and it's remembering to do it. It's like when we focus on the rise and fall of the abdomen, and suddenly we're thinking, we've forgotten to remember to do it. I try to use things to bring me back to the practice.

BM, who spent eight years in a Theravadin monastery as a fully ordained monk, learned to integrate teachings and practice into his daily monastic life. While not bound by the training monastic rules at the time of interview, he reported that he still integrated these things into daily life. The examples he gave were the integration of mindfulness and meditation into daily life and activities, particularly a level of calm that can direct perception and behaviour. He also found that keeping the lay precepts helps the mind to be calm and to refrain from unwholesome activity. In each of the three examples above and the two following, it is suggested that the connection between the two practice contexts, sitting and everyday practice, is the application of mindfulness continued from the former into the latter through one's memory of mindfulness in two senses.

Nyanaponika Thera draws attention to the connection between the two mental functions of memory and attention, both of which are expressed by the Pali word *sati*.²⁵² Here attention is paid to the object of meditation. Memory may have two senses here. The first is remembering both to use the techniques when the opportunity arises, and to apply the mindfulness developed in sitting. The second sense is in that of remembering the quality or level of mindfulness attained in sitting practice previously, and using this as a guide for marking progress. Practitioners expect that the mindfulness reached and applied in everyday practice will not be as deep as in formal sitting and walking. The level of mindfulness attained in everyday practices may be best described as a turning inward of the mind to one's immediate subjective field of experience, creating more of a division between inner and outer phenomenal fields than would be normally maintained in the course of daily life. Ideally, regular sitting practice allows for fewer physical and sensory distractions, allowing the mind to focus exclusively on inner phenomena with greater attention to detail. This difference in the quality of mindfulness distinguishes the two practical contexts.

²⁵² Nyanaponika Thera, *op.cit.*, 1956, p14.

The two following excerpts also show how practitioners may employ different techniques for different purposes. KN's application of techniques consists of: concentration for dealing with anxiety; Vipassana for the goal of enlightenment, and for dealing with people and 'day-to-day stuff'; and Metta for problems with hatred and anger, and for developing the wisdom to change negative views. She had also found that keeping the Five Precepts [she named them as no killing, stealing, lying/false speech, sexual misconduct or taking of intoxicants] helps her maintain an awareness of the consequences of her actions, which helps her to avoid 'making unwholesome choices'. In answer to the question 'What role does the meditation practice play in your day-to-day life?', she said that the awareness and the slowing down of the mind carries over into general day-to-day experience, and further, in slowing down the mind, insight meditation creates a distinction between the watcher and what's happening in the mind. Similarly, SI, a practitioner of many years' experience, demonstrated her use of different practices in different situations:

SI: For the mindfulness I use door handles and water. Normally I sit two hours a day minimum, and I've been doing that for seven years. I devote a minimum of three hours a day to formal practice, and then the other things like standing in a queue, getting into the car, door handles, they're just reminders to come back to the present moment, to pay attention to. Then I read things that are for something different from just meditation, say, looking at discontinuity and watching change, and seeing what happens: what mind-states come out of the change. That's not what I do when I'm standing in the line at Coles. Then I'm looking at patience and tolerance and that sort of stuff.

GE: From what you're saying, in the way you see it, there are two distinct practices for two distinct purposes. But would you say that your mindfulness practice informs your practice of the Paramis; that being aware of your feelings towards people gives you that ...

SI: They are distinct in one way, but it's a bit like saying whether I do concentration or wisdom practice. They both blend together all the time. I think you need the formal practice, to be sitting when things are easy or not easy just as a daily thing, and that just flows into your normal daily life. I just think it's important to have both, and I find, when I'm not sitting, I don't have as good clarity in daily life, and I have never ever found any big insights in daily life that I have not had the opportunity to see in formal sitting.

As noted above, everyday practices are seen fundamentally as opportunities to work with mindfulness, and its relationship to formal sitting is in the application of mindfulness continued from one context to the other. Shaw maintains that the factors of the first *jhana* can be present in daily activities, where the mind and body

are engaged, and one gains pleasure in the activity.²⁵³ The fact that no descriptions of everyday practice referred to concentration or jhanic experience supports the view that, fundamentally, practitioners treat their everyday practice as an extension of their formal mindfulness training. This is supported by Goleman's view that concentration and insight are both facilitated by access concentration, and for successful insight practice, one does best not to proceed to the first jhana.²⁵⁴ Practitioners also treat it as a reinforcement of the sentiments embodied in Metta practice. This point becomes more salient when it is considered that the capacity to practice in an *everyday* setting becomes important for those whose lifestyle limits the amount of time available for regular meditation, and that practitioners feel the need for formal practice and daily life to be more integrated.

3 Categories of Transformation and Interpretive Frameworks

3.1 The *Satipatthanas* as Categories of Change

In keeping with both Buddhist doctrine and the style of practitioners' experiential accounts, the *satipatthanas*: body, feelings, mind and *dhammas*, are treated as categories of transformative experience in the following discussion. Contemplation of the body is the foundation for the practice. The exploration of retreat instruction in Chapter 2 illustrated the primary role of the body in both sitting and walking practice. Both Nyanaponika Thera and Shaw draw attention to the range of basic phenomena that are the subject of training in the practice. Shaw gives them as the contact of the feet on the ground, the movement of the breath in and out of the body, and sensory impressions.²⁵⁵ Nyanaponika Thera's distinction between two aspects of the practice: the cultivation of all four contemplations as they arise in daily experience, and the systematic meditative emphasis on selected objects from the contemplation of the body²⁵⁶, illustrates the emphasis placed on awareness of basic bodily phenomena for the cultivation of mindfulness. KBN's description of his personal practice demonstrates the contemplation of the whole body as an object *per se*, and as a site of sensory awareness:

KBN: Well, I obviously practise Vipassana, which I understand as taking whatever phenomena present themselves as predominant to the attention. So one brings attention to the primary object. I'll expand on this. The primary object is the breathing for me. I'll always look at the breathing, but the breathing is never a very dominant object. It's always something else, and in

²⁵³ Shaw, *op.cit.*, p18. Shaw lists these as initial thought, sustained thought (or examining), joy, happiness, and one-pointedness.

²⁵⁴ See Chapter 2, Section 4.3. Elements of Goleman's description of access concentration could be seen to apply here: the mind fluctuates between factors of absorption and its inner speech, the usual ruminations and wandering thoughts; the meditator is still open to their senses and remains aware of surrounding noises and the body's feelings. Goleman, D. *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience*, Rider and Company, 1978, p12.

²⁵⁵ Shaw, S. *Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of Texts from the Pali Canon*, Routledge, 2006, p78.

²⁵⁶ Nyanaponika Thera. *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A Handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha's Way of Mindfulness*, The Word of the Buddha Publishing Company, 1956, p40.

retreats it's often just the sitting. So I've come to slowly realize that the actual sitting, the contemplation of sitting itself, the whole body sitting, is actually an object, the most common object I've used. So the breathing is somewhere within that and I can as P would put it, zoom in onto the kind of smaller phenomena. The sitting as a whole is what I use, being in that sitting, and within that there are objects within that, so that hardness of the cushion or the seat itself which is earth element, that hardness itself can be an object. One can have one's attention on that quite a lot. It gives you a base to look at other things... So it's the base, the primary object, but in a wider sense, the primary object is the body, not that it's a unified thing. Within the body is a universe of phenomena, and of course you've got awareness of the body, but then there's the mentality that's doing the awareness, so you can be aware of the mind, doing.

As a result of close attention to the body as an object and to the sensory phenomena that take place within it, several meditators report a deepening awareness of bodily processes and a deeper appreciation of the interrelatedness of mind and body. This developed awareness can produce a number of effects, as shown in Chapter 2. Practitioners may connect with the principles of bodily pleasure in meditation, but more noticeably with the principle of *dukkha*/suffering, through bodily discomfort and pain.²⁵⁷ BM noticed a calming of the body-mind experience resulting from his Anapannasati practice, but also registered a sense of suffering arising in the body.

Elements of this improved body-mind connection are seen to relate to attitude changes for some Western practitioners. The following account illustrates the way in which an individual may connect with Vipassana initially as a body-based therapy, and then develop a more holistic appreciation of the practice and its supporting tradition. HR noted that she paid more attention to the mind-body connection as an effect of practice, and noted feeling calmer and more centred in everyday life, which she took to be a 'flow-on' effect. Her interest in Vipassana was precipitated by a sense of frustration with her personal situation at the time. She had been under stress from her job, and had been feeling tired, lonely, and overextended while suffering from a back injury. Feeling that she had lost connection with her centre, she found that she wanted to connect with words such as 'stillness, centre', and identified a 'need for connection with nature in a spiritual way'. She found herself saying, "If I could just get back to yoga and meditation". Yoga had been her only exercise for some time, and she enjoyed the enhanced sense of physical well-being she gained from 'doing the postures better' and 'getting more flexible'. She had liked Vipassana because it didn't contain any ritual, and seemed cerebral at first, but she relates that doing mindfulness practice over several years, and seeing a psychotherapist for about two years, forced her to examine her relationship with her body. In addition to her Vipassana practice, she was currently sitting with a Zen teacher who teaches a form of mindfulness practice. In this practice, noting or

²⁵⁷ See Appendix 7 for HD's description of these phenomena in relation to her Vipassana practice extending over a considerable period of time.

labelling is more specific. For instance, in labelling a feeling, it is not simply labelled as 'feeling' or 'anger', but as feeling anger with 'so-and-so' over 'such-and-such', while checking the body for tension and reaction.

The Western concerns mentioned are about the connection between alternative Western spiritualities and alternative therapies. HR's language echoes some of the thought associated with the current Western interest in and adaptation of indigenous spiritualities and health practices, especially in the way these practices and their salvational goals can offer solutions for the existential anxieties of some Westerners. This is expressed in sentiments such as *enhanced physical well-being* being associated with *self* and *centre*. Significantly, for some individuals these experiences of deeper connection with the body and their apprehension of Buddhist ideas such as *dukkha* and *sukkhā*, and their interpretation according to Buddhist frames of reference, form the basis for the individual's deeper exploration of the Buddhist worldview and eventual commitment as an adherent.²⁵⁸

According to Nyanaponika Thera, the Pali term *vedana*/feeling signifies, in Buddhist psychology, pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent sensations of physical or mental origin. He distinguishes *feeling* in this sense as the first reaction to any sense impression, from the English sense of *emotion*, which he describes as a mental factor of a more complex nature.²⁵⁹ This immediate reaction is contemplated as pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, and its significance is expressed by Analayo as 'to know how one feels'. This reveals the degree to which attitudes and reactions are based on initial affective input".²⁶⁰ *Vedana* occurs in the *Satipatthana Sutta* as the second satipatthana, and in the doctrine of the five *khandhas*/aggregates as the second in the sequence: body/*rūpa*, feelings/*vedana*, apperception and conception/*sanna*, volitional activities/*samkhara*, and awareness or consciousness/*vinnana*.²⁶¹ In a one-day Vipassana workshop theoretical attention was given to the commonalities between the two doctrines.²⁶² The teacher outlined the body-feeling progression common to both doctrines, followed by the comparatively more mentally-oriented factors in both cases: by mind and *dhammas* in the former, and by perception, formations, and consciousness in the latter. Following from this, the bulk of discussion related to the way in which our basic responses to the objects of the senses and internal sensations, mostly pleasant or unpleasant, formed the basis for the more complex constructing activities and processes of the mind. From this perspective the distinction between feeling/*vedana* and the Western appreciation of emotion is an

²⁵⁸ The role of Buddhist doctrine and practice in the decision to commit made by these Vipassana practitioners, is the subject of Chapter 6, Section 1.2: *The Journey from Engagement to Commitment*.

²⁵⁹ Nyanaponika Thera, *op.cit.*, 1956, p48. He also discusses this in relation to the 12-step dependent origination formula.

²⁶⁰ Analayo. *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization*, Windhorse Publications, 2003, p157.

²⁶¹ Hamilton, S. *Identity and Experience: The Constitution of the Human Being According to Early Buddhism*, Luzac Oriental, 1996, p xviii.

²⁶² This workshop took place in early 2005 at the Buddhist Library in Camperdown, Sydney.

important one. The strictly Buddhist purpose of the contemplation of vedana is to bring awareness to the hedonistic quality of their immediate reaction to phenomena.

For many practitioners, contemplating their emotions as a category of mindfulness object allows them to process a range of experiences and responses. This can be seen in the experiences of several whose material has already been presented. HR's description of her Zen practice shows its basic applicability as a mindfulness and clarification practice: to label the feeling as feeling (specific content) with 'so-and-so' over 'such-and-such', and to check the body for its reaction. KN's success with Vipassana, first learnt in a therapeutic context and continued as a spiritual practice, included the experience of reconnection with feelings which were 'frozen' previously. She was exposed to Vipassana originally as part of counselling for addiction management. She understood the statement 'suffering is caused by craving' through her own meditative experience of bare attention to feeling, and through making the personal effort to break the addiction cycle. This practitioner experienced profound change in being able to see beyond the immediate goal of getting over the addiction, and through understanding how the *Four Noble Truths* frame life experience in such a way so as to provide an effective way of dealing with the suffering it produces. In the following excerpt KBN describes his personal orientation to the practice as a technique for dealing with repressed emotion:

KBN: That's why I'm at the point in my practice now, if in a sense my life project's to undo this fearfulness and defensiveness, and don't forget at eleven years of age, I was torn out of my family which had broken up, so I had abandonment experiences. Well. It's all embodied in your body, so in a sense you are learning to love. It is putting aside fear and learning to love; it's unlocking the body in order to be able to do that, so that you get a new relationship to the mind-body process, but the other beautiful thing is, as one breaks down these old fears, one can relate more fully to one's partner; one's mother who abandoned one at ten. To be able to open that stuff up, it's not that one takes an attitude of being compassionate, it's there, and you're able to communicate out of it. So that's the life thing. It's not a compartment at all, the actual focus is living. It's kind of opening up to feeling, and you've got to remember how intellectual my life's been in a sense, and that difficulty that got me into the practice—about relating to others—so it's probably an opening up. It's arriving at compassionate love. You're able to love other people without any fear. It's a long road back to that an initial impulse, so it's giving away fear and defensiveness, but at the same time, the practice is about experiencing those things.

KBN's use of the word feeling to denote his emotions is significant because of his implied equation of the two. His use of phrases such as 'opening up to feeling', and 'embodied in your body', illustrates the therapeutic function that mindfulness of the body and feelings have for him. Throughout my contact with Vipassana practitioners, I observed that individuals held one of two views of their emotional experience. Some noted their states of feeling or emotion and then let the experience

go, with a view to developing equanimity. Others, such as KN and KBN, almost instinctively used the connection with emotion they experienced in meditation to reify it for the purpose of accepting and processing it, and where it is afflictive, to move beyond it. Rubin observes that Buddhist meditation is on occasion therapeutically ineffective, and attributes this to the Buddhist view of afflictive emotions, as defilements needing purification, a view which establishes an aversive relationship to experience, and an ambivalent relationship to emotional life generally.²⁶³ The experiences of KN and KBN appear to demonstrate the converse; both accepted the emotional content of their experience, both pleasant and painful, and learned to relate to it in a new way. This both enhanced their self-esteem, and validated their faith in the practice.

Although the third foundation is called *mind* in the *Satipatthana Sutta*,²⁶⁴ some texts refer to it as *consciousness* instead.²⁶⁵ Bikkhu Bodhi states that mind as an object of contemplation refers to the general state and level of awareness,²⁶⁶ in other words, the quality of mind. Expressed somewhat simply, for practitioners this means to note whether the mind is distracted, agitated or drowsy. Many relate changes they experience to the slowing down of the mind and learning to be more mindful in general. Although this kind of change was explored in Chapter 2 Section 4 in its relationship to learning the technique, it is of interest here in terms of its facilitation of other changes reported by meditators. EC's response to my statement, "What would be useful for me is if you could describe what you think the point of the mindfulness practice is", was the following:

EC: Well. I think that, as they say, the concentration meditation makes you feel great, but I don't feel in the long run it's terribly beneficial, because you're just blotting everything out, and it's almost like escapism, whereas the mindfulness meditation I think, for me it's really helped me be more understanding and compassionate about things because it's looking at things in a different way. You're not fighting, as I said before. When I first started I was fighting with things, whereas now I've learned to accept things more, and I'm sure it's through the meditation, through, like those noises, just accepting that they're there, and they're part of it, and I'm not just buying into it. And I'm sure that's carried through into how I relate to people, and things like that.

Just before this response EC had stated that, when she first began meditating, she could not tolerate any distraction such as noise, and had difficulty being mindful. As

²⁶³ Rubin, J. "A New View of Meditation", in *Journal of Religion and Health*, 40 [1], pp121-28, 2001, p124.

²⁶⁴ Bikkhu Bodhi (ed.). "Satipatthana Sutta", in *Majjhima Nikaya* (The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha), pp145-55, trans. Bikkhu Nanamoli, rev./ed. Bikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, 2001, p150.

²⁶⁵ Silananda. *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, Wisdom Publications, 1990, p93; Soma Thera. *The Way of Mindfulness: the Satipatthana Sutta and Its Commentary*, Buddhist Publication Society, 1999, p128.

²⁶⁶ Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, p1193 (See footnote 154).

is evident from what she says, the mindfulness practice has helped her to develop patience and tolerance in and out of meditation.

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, listed under the fourth satipatthana, the contemplation of *dhammas* are the *Five Hindrances*, the *Five Aggregates*, the *Six Bases*, the *Seven Enlightenment Factors* and the *Four Noble Truths*.²⁶⁷ These categories of meaning are specific to Buddhism,²⁶⁸ and as Buddhist doctrines they are frequently the subjects of *dhamma* talks and new and experienced practitioners alike are exposed conceptually to their meaning and relevance for the practice. However, in order to make sense of the *experience* they refer to, doctrinal familiarization needs to be supplemented with the relevant meditation experiences.²⁶⁹ Two instances demonstrate this clearly. Because of the way in which the doctrine of The Four Noble Truths outlines the Buddhist view of conditioned existence and the path of liberation from it, it is frequently encountered in introductory talks on Buddhism and referred to in other teaching contexts. Initially, it is taken on board conceptually, while a more experiential understanding facilitated by Vipassana practice, comes with the identification of *tanha*/craving and its role in our habitual mental activity.

This point is further highlighted by a consideration of the role of the hindrances in each of the third and fourth satipatthanas, and the relationship between the two. As mental states their recognition and labelling in meditation is an important step in the development of mindfulness.²⁷⁰ In meditation one does not judge their worth, but simply learns not to automatically identify with them and fall under their control. When one learns their meaning in relation to the seven enlightenment factors, one learns to discriminate between wholesome and unwholesome mental states from the Buddhist perspective, and from this, to discriminate between them as qualities to be abandoned and the qualities to be acquired respectively.²⁷¹ Such discrimination involves objectifying these states before they can be conceptualized as classes of objects by the meditator, who then learns how the members of each class are related, and how the two classes relate to each other.

²⁶⁷ *Satipatthana Sutta*, in Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, pp151-54. See also Analayo, *op.cit.*, p19: Fig. 1.2.

²⁶⁸ Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, p1194 (footnote 157).

²⁶⁹ Deatherage's list of the four object types employed in clinical applications of Vipassana includes three corresponding to the first three satipatthanas as outlined above, and a fourth which he calls the objects of one's thought processes. This last category is clearly an adaptation for the clinical context in question. See Deatherage, G. "The Clinical Use of 'Mindfulness' Meditation Techniques in Short-Term Psychotherapy", in *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 7 [2], pp133-143, Transpersonal Institute, 1975, p134.

²⁷⁰ The role of training in working with the hindrances in the development of mindfulness is outlined in Chapter 2, Section 4.5: *Identifying the Hindrances*.

²⁷¹ Nyanaponika Thera, *op.cit.*, 1956, pp51-3. Nyanaponika Thera notes that the five principal hindrances and the seven Enlightenment Factors are the qualities to be abandoned and the qualities to be acquired respectively, and elaborates on this, giving a more detailed account of the philosophy underpinning it.

The more experienced practitioners often referred to insights into aspects of doctrine that come with experience in the practice. From the perspective of the researcher, these insights require prior acquisition of interpretive skills to understand. While talking to RN about her practice, experience and its interpretation, I said, “Well, say experiences with Vipassana. What I’m looking for are links between your experience in Vipassana and how you interpret it, and how it gets carried into your daily life”. She responded:

RN: It’s about purifying the mind, so I suppose, sitting in a formal way and observing the mind, and seeing, I suppose, the teaching of Dependent Origination is something that comes into my mind now, just watching the way things arise and relate to connections between things, the understanding of that and the ability in the more intensive practice to develop equanimity with regard to whatever arises, and detaching and developing that sense of non-self which is a major teaching of the Buddha. I suppose that’s a way, the intensive practice, the opportunity to do that in daily life, bringing it into daily life, just seeing whatever arises in day-to-day life as well as in intensive practice, as being empty of self, and developing more skill in doing that, and developing an equanimity, you know, mind states that are able to observe that without being so influenced by it and reacting to them and attaching to whatever, so for me that’s what the practice is about and purifying the mind so the mind’s not being drawn into anger or greed or being caught so much in the delusion of the self. So it’s about developing more ability to work with equanimity in whatever arises.

While setting out to illustrate the importance of generating the correct mental states with which to work in meditation for her practice, RN also demonstrated how she generated the appropriate view to be used in meditation before the meditative state itself. This is especially evident in her use of the phrase “detaching and developing that sense of non-self which is a major teaching of the Buddha”. This is also illustrated by the way in which she worked with doctrinal principles in meditation to develop equanimity, one of the seven enlightenment factors. Bikkhu Bodhi refers to the Pali term *dhammas*, understood in this context as ‘comprising all phenomena classified by way of the categories of the *dhamma*, the Buddha’s teaching of actuality’.²⁷² Because these experiential categories listed under *dhammas* require more conceptual preparation for identification in a practitioner’s experience, and because they are the categories of Buddhist ideas that comprise its worldview, there comes a point where one must have acquired a comprehensive grasp of several interrelated aspects of Buddhist doctrine in order to identify specific mental states in meditation.

3.2 The Three-fold Categorization of Transformations

Many conversion studies have theorized the conversion process as change to one’s worldview and sense of self. Of theoretical significance is the understanding of how

²⁷² Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, p1194 (see note 157).

such change is facilitated by the socialization process in any particular religious setting. Of particular relevance to a consideration of the Western Buddhist setting is the way in which accepted sociological notions of self as self-concept, and notions of religious change as identity-change, limit appreciation of the complexity of personal changes that occur as a result of Buddhist practice. One of the aims of this section and the following is to illustrate the way in which Buddhist practice leads to changes on subjective and objective levels of self-perception and understanding. With this aim in mind, the immediate task is to categorize the range of changes observed and reported by practitioners.

Practitioners reported the experience of a range of changes resulting from practice. When asked, "How has your meditative experience affected your outlook on life?", BM reported, "A larger capacity to deal with things in daily life", that meditation brings the clarity to enable him to deal with upsetting emotions and to contain them, and he responds to these by 'finding how big you need to be, rather than just reacting'. Meditation cuts down the potential of unwholesome activity, and because of this, he doesn't get so caught up in anger 'coming up in himself'. Instead, he acknowledges it, but then lets it go. KT responded, "I don't take life as seriously. I'm able to 'move through mind-states and emotions much more quickly". She found that she was much more content in herself, had a broader ability to relate to people, and was less judgmental towards others. These kinds of answers are generally typical of the responses to this question.

On examining the interview data for answers to questions as above about the nature of change, and concerning the effects of practising the techniques such as those already explored, it seems that the range of changes reported by practitioners can be grouped into five types, involving change to: 1) body awareness; 2) feeling and emotion, especially habitual responses, and success in dealing more effectively with unwholesome feelings such as anger; 3) the mind and habitual mental states; 4) the *sense of self*, including self-image and self-esteem; and 5) worldview. The categorization of these five types reflects Western rather than Buddhist concerns. This can be seen in the way that the second category contains feeling and emotion, reflecting the way in which affective response is appreciated and labelled by Westerners generally. Similarly, the third category consists of the mind and mental content such as thought, to represent the more Western divide between thought and feeling. The fourth category, the *sense of self*, relates to the object that is to be *refuted* in Buddhist doctrine, the *atman* in Sanskrit, and as such, is the object of deconstruction processes facilitated by Buddhist analytical techniques. The last category, changes to worldview, deals with those changes that occur to one's outlook on reality as a result of the acceptance and internalization of the new religious perspective and its interpretive framework.

It can be seen that the changes belonging to the first three categories: body, feelings, and mind, fit into the categories outlined in the satipatthana system of body, feelings,

mind, and mental objects as discussed above, which describes the self in its sense of subjective immediacy. Accordingly, the range of changes can be condensed into three: 1) changes within one's immediate subjective field of experience; 2) changes to one's sense of self; and 3) changes to one's internal frame of reference, or worldview. Although the data at hand support this three-fold categorization, in reality these transformations are interdependent and therefore mutually reinforcing. For instance, while first-category changes are effected by bare attention to immediate experience such as feeling or emotion, other changes involving one's *sense-of-self* are flow-on effects from these subjective changes. Certain changes, for example, 'becoming more compassionate and less judgmental', which lead to 'better relationships with others', and 'the sense of having more control over one's life', and further, 'various aspects of one's life becoming more integrated' seem to result from a sense of more direction over one's immediate responses to everyday occurrences. These facets of change involve the self as a social being: a self in relation to other selves. This category is elaborated and examined in more detail in Section 3, which is shown to be a consequence of complex interactions between two aspects of self: the field of immediate subjective experience, and the self-concept, the self-as-object. For the present, discussion moves to a consideration of the correspondence between the fourth *Satipatthana*, dhammas, and the third category of change, changes to one's internal frame of reference.

3.3 Interpretive Frameworks for Change and Progress

As explained in Section 2.1 above, *The Satipatthanas as Categories of Change*, the categories of meaning corresponding to *dhammas*: the Five Hindrances, the Five Aggregates, the Six Bases, the Seven Enlightenment Factors and the Four Noble Truths,²⁷³ are specific to Buddhism, as Bhikkhu Bodhi notes.²⁷⁴ Within the three former satipatthanas are objects that occur and are identifiable in common experience, and those that are particular to and made meaningful in terms of Buddhist thought. In his survey of the four satipatthanas, Analayo, perceiving the sequence of contemplations as one of increasing sensitivity, arranges the sequence within each satipatthana into a progressive pattern, from coarse to subtle objects of awareness.²⁷⁵ As a general principle, the coarser objects are those identifiable in immediate experience, and the more subtle are those that require definition and understanding according to their Buddhist frame of reference. For instance, feelings are divided according to affective and ethical quality: pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, and worldly and unworldly respectively. Bikkhu Bodhi gives as the basis for this worldly-unworldly distinction, the experience of joy, grief, and equanimity according to the experience of the householder and the renunciate.²⁷⁶ Similarly,

²⁷³ *Satipatthana Sutta*, in Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, pp151-54. See also Analayo, *op.cit.*, p19: Fig. 1.2.

²⁷⁴ Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, p1194 (footnote 157).

²⁷⁵ Analayo, *op.cit.*, pp19-21. See Fig. 1.2 on p19.

²⁷⁶ Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, p1193, (footnote 52).

mind is divided into ordinary and higher states of mind.²⁷⁷ The purpose of this exercise was to identify the nature of objects utilized in transformation practice, as distinct from the frameworks that facilitate their reinterpretation. In the following, the aim is to explore the process by which change is articulated through Buddhist frameworks of meaning.

The establishment of a relationship between one's experiential development and the increasing reliance on Buddhist doctrine for its articulation, may explain the apparent correspondence between two of the categories of change and the frameworks used to articulate them, namely, category one, subjective self-transformation involving the first three satipatthanas, and category three, changes to one's internal frame of reference, analogous to, but not to be directly equated with the *dhammas*. Part of the experimental immersion process undergone by Westerners includes the test and validation of the frames of reference of the new religion, by applying them to their own transformation. The way in which specific frameworks apply is seen in those aspects of doctrine raised by practitioners as being significant, and utilized for the purpose of interpreting transformative experience generally.

Often when interview respondents were asked about teachings and doctrines that were significant to them, the question was understood to apply to Buddhist activity in general, and answers were not limited to a consideration of formal doctrine. Respondents cited concepts, doctrinal notions and frameworks, and practices. Consider the way in which BM answered the question, "What Buddhist teachings are you drawn to, and what significance do they have for you?" His reply consisted of *Anapannasati*, his main practice, in which his *body-mind experience* was calmed, allowing him to see through habitual patterning, and to feel 'connected to all four foundations of mindfulness'. He also cited the *Eight-Fold Path*, the aspects of which he applies in daily life. Further, he cited its connection to the Four Noble Truths as being significant, and mentioned the relevance of the suttas for 'checking one's practice', and for 'creating ways of perceiving the world'. He saw his Buddhism as grounded in the practice, but used doctrine to orient his practice. His reference to the practice of *Anapannasati* and the Eightfold Path, and the connection between the latter and its broader context of the Four Noble Truths, was indicative of the doctrine-practice relationships that were dominant in his experience and its interpretation, and implied a reflexivity between the two.

This answer was representative of several that suggested the way in which doctrinal frameworks relate to individual thought and practice. Some can be seen to place in an interpretive context the immediate subjective effects of practice, whereas others inform and orient thinking more generally. The former case consists of those that are

²⁷⁷ Analayo, *op.cit.*, p20. The description in of the *Satipatthana Sutta* discusses the mind affected and unaffected by various mental states that correspond to the hindrances. Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, p150; p1193 (note 155).

directly goal-oriented or cause-and-effect related, and are directly involved in the articulation of immediate experience and of observed changes and their significance to practitioners. Examples are the categorization of mental states into wholesome and unwholesome, and the further labelling of unwholesome states as the five hindrances. Witness HR's example of her understanding of the second of the Four Noble Truths, itself a second-type framework, which enabled her to contextualize the five hindrances and further clarify their nature as desire or aversion, a first-category operation. When asked about the significance of meditation for her, she replied, "Stuff around the Four Noble Truths". She explained that when she first met them she had to think about them, but later could see the logic. She reached a point in her meditation practice wherein 'all of the distractions could be sorted into the five hindrances', and with this came the realization that behind them all was either desire or aversion. This she related to the Second Noble Truth, which identifies the origin of suffering as *tanha* / craving²⁷⁸.

Those in the second category, such as Mahasi's *Stages of Insight Knowledge*²⁷⁹ and the three factors of the Noble Eight-Fold Path, are used to orient practitioners' engagement with Buddhist practice more generally. These tend to bring about, or operate as interpretive templates for, change in worldview, the third category of change identified in Section 2.2. These perceptual changes may come about through contemplation of one's experience in two interrelated ways. The first is as a result of learning to interpret experience through Buddhist categories of thought and their interpretive frameworks, and in this sense, the framework is both the mechanism and the end-result. The second is as a result of applying the meditative techniques and noticing the changes to oneself and one's thinking, and finding incentive to take Buddhism more seriously and explore its belief system in more depth. The following accounts by three practitioners, presented in order of years of experience in the practice, describe a variety of changes that may occur to one's reality perspective. Some of these concern the way in which an individual may undergo a change in some aspect of their outlook without involving a major reorientation, while others involve a more definite perceptual shift toward Buddhist ways of thinking. In the first example, EC's personal reflections on a teaching she had attended helped her to deal with some anxiety about death. She was able to benefit from a shift in mental orientation to the reality of the inevitability of death and her fear of it, although still entertaining doubts about the doctrine of reincarnation:

EC: But I remember someone asked at a Buddhist talk, "Can you be a Buddhist and not believe in reincarnation?" And the monk said in a word, "No." I always had real trouble with that, but since going to talks again, and hearing this concept that it's just like a stream of consciousness or something that goes

²⁷⁸ Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, p.29. In the introduction to the *Majjhima Nikaya*, Bikkhu Bodhi refers to the Buddha's identification of the cause of suffering as craving in its three aspects: for sensual pleasures, for being, and for non-being.

²⁷⁹ See Section 2.4: *Mahasi's Thirteen Stages of Insight Knowledge*, below.

on, I still don't know what I believe in, but the funny thing is, I think that's what's happened to me is that a fear of dying has sort of gone ... that somehow that's shifted. You know, maybe if I was in that situation where I thought I was going to die it might be different, but just before all this talk about reincarnation and spirituality going on, I guess there were times when ... but now I don't think like that. There's a shift there somehow, and I don't know where that's going. But that's why I can't say I'm a Buddhist because I can't say, "Well, yes. I do believe in reincarnation".

GE: You certainly sound as if you're willing to entertain some of these ideas.

EC: Yes.

This kind of shift in orientation of a view of reality is also exemplified by the experience of HR. She related that she 'was for a long time a committed materialist'. She found that she currently had 'more of an open mind to seeing other ways rather than a material view of the world'. For example, she was now open to reports of mystical experience. In the experience of HR's related above, she explains that she reached a point where she realized that behind them all of the five hindrances was either desire or aversion. This she related to the second Noble Truth, which identifies the origin of suffering as *tanha*/craving²⁸⁰. Adding that she saw this when large changes were imminent, she noticed her different responses to the sorts of issues that arose. She was more aware of her responses, rather than 'just rushing around doing what has to be done'. In her own words, she was 'not focussed so much in the activity', but was more aware of her own internal state.

As an example of the employment of frameworks for the reinterpretation of experience, it is a specific and clear example of apprehension and use of a major Buddhist doctrine, the Four Noble Truths. Its applicability to the management of HR's internal state in during upheaval is in the way it facilitated the sorting of experience and response into categories of desire and aversion. Although not directly stated, it was suggested that the identification process made facing her own reality more comprehensible and manageable at once by creating objective distance. Reflexively, the exercise of identifying her reactions to change in terms of desire and aversion, exemplified for her how her habitual mental state could be seen in terms of *dukkha* created by *desire for* and *aversion to* certain elements of her experience (the origin of suffering).

Similarly, one of HD's answers to my asking how she incorporated Buddhist thought into her life concerned her appreciation of both attachment and aversion as the source of the three poisons, greed, hatred, and delusion, and the three poisons as a source of suffering in the world.

²⁸⁰ Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, p.29.

HD: It's so ingrained in my life that I hardly know how to answer it. When you view the seven o'clock news on television, you're seeing it from the view of greed, hate, and delusion. A lot of worldly stuff you do automatically view it as greed, hate, and delusion, and you do get less het up about it. It's a source of—because we're not enlightened beings—it's a source of sorrow, perhaps, and that's how you see it and so a lot of the questions people ask and the things that people discuss just seem totally irrelevant to me. You see how deluded people are, and when you say deluded, it sounds very critical or disrespectful or whatever, but it's the Buddhist idea of delusion, that not understanding attachment and aversion, and that everything's impermanent.

In another part of the interview, she explained how she had come to see the world in terms of Samsara:

GE: I'm looking at how people adapt their own Buddhist understanding to their picture of the world. So, can you describe what you actually believe in ... how you see the world?

HD: I suppose I see the world now as Samsara, and as I practise more and more it seems less and less real, but I'm still functioning in it at a certain level. And beings are trapped in it, Samsara, through delusion, this idea of separation that's developed, and I know that the Buddha talked about the arising and waning of world systems and that sort of thing, and I can relate to that, and the fact that it's so hard to say what you believe in when you're a Buddhist.

GE: The Buddhist worldview that you hold, would you say that that's your entire picture of reality, or do you use it as an adjunct to other things? Do you still use bits of your Christian worldview or do you hold a more scientific outlook on the world? Can you get a sense of how they go together, or whether you're purely Buddhist from that perspective?

HD: I'm a dentist, so I've got an interest in science and medicine, so I can definitely suspend Buddhist beliefs and just talk about the body as something solid, in study and in talking to other people and whatever, I can get right back into the conceptual world. But I suppose my view of reality is that everything is arising and passing away according to causes and conditions, and really that's the basis of it.

GE: *Anicca* or impermanence?

HD: Yeah, well that's the karmic aspect to it, *karma*. You know if you see something distressing on the news, some mass suffering or whatever, immediately the mind reflects how. Those people, say, perpetrating the suffering, they'll be born as the people who are suffering, and so it goes on, you can see this cycle.

GE: So if I can rephrase it, and I'm paraphrasing you so feel free to interject, it seems to me that your view of the world is very roughly framed by the notions of Samsara and Nirvana, that there is the suffering world and there is release. Is that a fair comment?

HD: Yes. It's funny, I don't reflect on *Nibbana* very much, but I suppose that's a valid way of putting it because if there's Samsara, there's release from it. It's funny, as I've practised more, and read a bit more, I'm more inclined to believe that practitioners of other religions can ultimately find ... can have insight through their practices as well. I really just rejected Christianity in the past, but I'm much more inclined to see the similarities in religions now, because, yeah, there are some very sincere intelligent practitioners of other religions, and I don't believe that they would be doing it if they weren't getting something out of it.

The above examples all illustrate the way in which a practitioner had gained insight into an aspect of reality from the Buddhist perspective. In the example from EC, and in the first from HR, there was a softening, a loosening of previous thought to do with a facet of human existence, as if initiated by the acceptance and entertainment of other ways of seeing reality. By comparison, from HR's second example, to do with the Four Noble Truths, and in HD's to do with Samsara, there is a definite shift toward interpreting reality in terms of Buddhist doctrine. A way of expressing the difference between these two is suggested by Bedford, who distinguishes between two uses of worldview: an experiential feel for what reality is versus a comprehensive system of beliefs.²⁸¹ It may be that there are several ways in which perceptual shifts can occur. What is suggested here is an initial shift in aspect of experiential feel for reality, followed by the articulation of change in experiential feel in terms of the new belief system. In this way the final result may involve the imposition of formal categorical terminology onto a framework that has already begun to shift. The data suggest that processes such as these would be slow and complex, and would vary between individuals in terms of the beliefs and meditative effects involved. This last consideration is considered in Chapter 6.

Progress on the path to enlightenment in Buddhism is assured by developing the qualities or precepts of the Noble Eight-Fold Path, which are arranged in three groupings: *panna*/wisdom, *sila*/ethics and *samadhi*/concentration. In this context *panna* refers to the wisdom gained through Vipassana or insight practice, and its results.²⁸² From the Buddhist perspective, both Nyanaponika Thera and Griffiths see wisdom as the result of the internalization of Buddhist categories of thought. Nyanaponika Thera states that by constant practice of *Satipatthana*, 'the contents of

²⁸¹ Bedford, *op.cit.*, p126. In her research with the *i and I Art of Living Foundation*, she found the former use to be appropriate to the changes she observed in meditators' outlooks.

²⁸² Griffiths, P. "Concentration or Insight: The Problematic of Theravada Buddhist Meditation-Theory, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 [4], pp605-21, American Academy of Religion, 1981. In this paper Griffiths takes *Vipassana* and *Panna*, Insight and Wisdom respectively, as equivalent terms.

thought will gradually assume the thought-forms of the *Dhamma* in the sense of the Buddha's teaching of actuality and liberation'.²⁸³ Griffiths perceives the practice of Insight as an effective method for 'training the awareness to perceive the universe in accordance with the categories of the *Abhidhamma*, and may be taken as a paradigm example of how insight meditation operates'. This suggests that the Buddhist path to liberation is a process of internalization of the content of the *Abhidhamma*, a process in which experience is reinterpreted according to its framework, expressed somewhat reductively as 'the method of Vipassana is simply a continuous attempt to internalize the categories of Buddhist metaphysics and to make those categories coextensive with the way one perceives the world'.²⁸⁴

To understand this further it is pertinent to examine the Buddhist position on *panna*/wisdom. Both De Wit and Griffiths allude to its intellectual and discursive nature. De Wit describes it as a discriminating awareness of the contribution of our mental sense-faculty from the contributions of our external sense-faculties to our experience of reality. The mental purification process is a cultivation of this awareness. He maintains that our thoughts about experience need not be discarded in the purifying process. Instead, 'through meditation we begin to see that the qualities of phenomenal reality are not contained within the concepts we have about them'.²⁸⁵ Similarly, Griffiths maintains that wisdom involves a discursive and intellectual understanding of how things exist, to the point that 'the ultimate development of wisdom in the state of Nibbana is also discursive'.²⁸⁶ He describes two elements of wisdom as 'seeing as' and 'knowing that', and expresses their intimate relationship as 'concept and reality become fused in the highest development of *panna*', and maintains that 'the element of knowing is never completely transcended in the *Vipassana-Panna* complex of ideas'.²⁸⁷ In summary, Griffiths sees wisdom as a 'discursive knowledge and vision' culminating in Nibbana, which he defines as a 'continuous dispassionate cognitive/intellectual vision of the universe as a causally conditioned flux of point-instants in which there is no continuing principle of individuality'.²⁸⁸ This definition takes account of doctrinal perspectives that one must comprehend in order to see reality from the Buddhist perspective, specifically, the *Three Marks of Existence* and *Dependent Origination*.

3.4 Mahasi's Thirteen Stages of Insight Knowledge

For the Vipassana practitioner, conceptual mapping of the development of *panna*, the process of shaping experience in terms of the Buddhist worldview, would culminate

²⁸³ Nyanaponika Thera, *op.cit.*, 1956, p51.

²⁸⁴ Griffiths, *op.cit.*, p614.

²⁸⁵ De Wit, H. "Transmitting the Buddhist View of Experience", in *On Sharing Religious Experience: Possibilities of Interfaith Mutuality*, pp189-202, Editions Rodopi, 1992, p199.

²⁸⁶ Griffiths, *op.cit.*, p612.

²⁸⁷ *ibid.*, pp612-13.

²⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p613.

in its placement according to Mahasi Sayadaw's *Thirteen Stages of Insight Knowledge*. From the point of view of a Vipassana practitioner who adheres to the traditional Theravadin framework, Thirteen Stages is a significant interpretive framework. It provides the meditator with a guide to the range of experiences encountered in Vipassana practice, and their interpretation in terms of progress on the path. This framework has been referred to variously as Mahasi's 'stages of insight', 'stages of insight knowledge', and the *dukkha nanas*/insight knowledges of suffering. When practitioners make reference to it, it is in the sense of an overall guiding and validating framework for Vipassana-generated experience. The stages themselves are not elucidated in interview, or seen as personal attainments. In this way, use of the thirteen stages as a guide serves to keep practitioners focussed on the goal of practice, enlightenment.

These stages are outlined in the second part of Mahasi Sayadaw's *Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages*²⁸⁹, and in a talk given by U Janaka, a teacher in the tradition, at BMIMC in 1998.²⁹⁰ The Thirteen Stages, consisting of nine mundane and four supramundane stages, are knowledge about: 1) discerning mental and physical phenomena, 2) causal relations or conditionality, 3) comprehension that comprehends all three characteristics of phenomena, 4) corruption of insight (attachment to pleasant experiences, sometimes mistaken for Nibbana), 5) dissolution, 6) fearfulness, 7) misery, 8) desire for deliverance, 9) re-observation (reviewing the three marks experienced at the third stage, comprehension), 10) equanimity, 11) adaptation, 12) maturity, 13) the Path. While both Mahasi Sayadaw and U Janaka describe the earlier stages in some detail, the amount of detail falls away in Mahasi Sayadaw's writing at 5) dissolution, and more sharply at 4) corruption of insight, in U Janaka's. U Janaka describes the first two stages in considerable detail, and the next two in slightly less, possibly because, in U Janaka's experience, this may represent the point at which most meditators' development ends.

Some reports of experience do, however, lend themselves to placement according to these stages. For instance, KN refers to the slowing down of the mind in Insight meditation to create 'a distinction between the watcher and what's happening in the mind', which may correspond to 1) discerning mental and physical phenomena. Both teachers state that at this stage the meditator can differentiate between two types of *nama*: the noting mind and the noted object. The experiences of other practitioners such as HD, KBN, and SI, correspond to stages 2) knowledge of causal relations or conditionality, and 3) comprehending the three characteristics of phenomena, in that their reports contained observations about the arising and

²⁸⁹ Mahasi Sayadaw. *Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages*, trans. U Pe Thin and Myanaung U Tin, Buddhist Publication Society, 1971, pp20-38.

²⁹⁰ This talk is the last in a series of thirteen Dhamma talks by Venerable Chanmay Sayadaw Ashin Janakabhivamsa (U Janaka), which are can be downloaded from the Centre's website at www.meditation.asn.au/talks/html They were downloaded on 28/11/2006.

passing away of phenomena, and overall, two of its three characteristics. The general approach of practitioners such as these is that when their experience can be placed into one of these stages, they simply take it as a sign that 'practice is progressing'. KBN, an experienced practitioner, commented on the stages as a restrictive framework for charting progress, contrasting their guidance with the Zen view of enlightenment. The observations below were made following on from a point about Zen and the nonrational mind.

KBN: It's like a counterpoint to the Mahasi, the Theravadin orthodoxy. It's like this ... bang ... thirteen stages ... bang-bang-bang ... where are you? ... Keep striving. So it's very oppressive to take on that whole apparatus of the Mahasi tradition and its Thirteen Stages of Insight Knowledge, because it discounts the kinds of experiences you might have in everyday life, which are valuable for working with your experience [and] is what the Buddha in my understanding is teaching us: work with your experience.

GE: And so it's not necessarily in a deeply meditative state, but it's how you respond to things?

KBN: No. I'm very convinced that whatever life throws up is grist for the mill, for the practice, and this just isn't in the sitting, because it's awareness of whatever you bring your attention to.

GE: But you look for certain maps within the teachings to give you certain clarity, by the sound of it.

KBN: Oh yeah, the conceptual scheme of the Thirteen Stages of Insight Knowledge I would say is my map as it would be for anybody, but that's on a level of generality.

As Griffiths suggests, treating changes to worldview as the progressive internalization of Buddhist categories of thought, as the process of coming to see an aspect of reality in Buddhist terms—and even placing them according to stages of progress—does not exclude the application of non-Buddhist frameworks to the same experience. However, with one exception, no other interpretations were offered by practitioners.

KBN recounted his experience of chest pain during a long retreat at the Centre, an incident he referred to at least twice during interview. He also explained how he interpreted the pain in terms of "heart chakra stuff", the pain of opening up to his own emotions for others. His use of a Hindu-derived framework to interpret the function of physical sensations in a way that made sense to his own personal goal of emotional growth, shows how practices and frameworks may be adapted for personal enhancement, and raises the need to explore how personal goals affect one's

use of frameworks. RN remarked on the fact that people reach for other frameworks when existing frameworks inadequately articulate experience:

RN: We don't verbalize and use words that we know within a framework that exists out of the Buddhist philosophical understanding to explain something that doesn't really fit into our use of words. So on one level that's the difficulty, to be eloquent enough to speak with the words you've got in your vocabulary anyway, and just using any framework to interpret experiences that don't fit into existing frameworks. Sometimes people develop their own understandings because they have trouble understanding it (experience) through existing frameworks.

It is a given that the aim of Vipassana practice is Nibbana or liberation. According to Griffiths, modern Theravadins regard Vipassana as the way *par excellence* to Nibbana.²⁹¹ However, Nyanaponika Thera sees the practice as having two goals: *Nibbana*, and mindfulness in everyday life.²⁹² All Buddhist doctrine is written from the perspective of attaining enlightenment and liberation from *samsara*. With time, and in the service of more religiously oriented goals, one's thinking tends to become more oriented to the categories of Buddhist doctrine. In order to attain *Nibbana*, there may be more mental and emotional investment in Buddhist interpretive frameworks. With respect to either goal, and practitioners generally aim for both, the important factor is clarity of awareness and its noting. One category of change remains to be explored, the second according to the threefold categorization of change: the *sense-of-self*. The theoretical considerations of this Chapter necessitate examination of the models of the self, from Buddhist and social scientific perspectives, in more detail.

4 The Sense-of-Self

This Section treats both the changes to the sense-of-self undergone by practitioners, and the necessary interpretive frameworks employed by the practitioners themselves and by the researcher to understand this change. The purpose is to describe the interpretive frameworks that are of most value, are most appropriate to the academic purpose of theorizing both the changes to the self and the Buddhist interpretive frameworks employed by practitioners for the purpose of understanding and articulating their own transformation. As stated above, two of the three categories of change involve the self: the self in its subjective immediacy, and the sense-of-self. The following account describes a set of self-reported changes that the practitioner underwent as a result of her engagement with Buddhism. The changes she has identified have taken place as a result of applying some of the Buddhist principles to her everyday habitual thinking. She sees herself as being more tolerant and less judgmental than previously. These changes she attributes to developing mindfulness in everyday life and responding to teachings about compassion. Harvey notes that the final goal of Buddhism is achieved by cultivating wisdom

²⁹¹ Griffiths, *op.cit.*, p611.

²⁹² Nyanaponika Thera, *op.cit.*, 1956, p2.

through meditation, but such wisdom can be initiated by reflection on teachings²⁹³, and it is reinforcement of principles through study and meditation with time that often leads to these changes. EC's account is representative of many who report constructive changes that have occurred to them, to the *me*, in the first person. It shows her identification of constructive changes to the way she sees herself as an objectified being, and it also shows how these changes occurred as a result of study and practice, the cumulative result of four years' activity. This can be seen despite the slight contradiction between the first and second quotes with respect to what she perceives to be the agent of change.

GE: Are there any significant concepts within Buddhism that appeal to you?

EC: I'll tell you what I'm thinking. The compassion side of it is really big for me, and has really helped me, being compassionate and generous I think, having compassion for people. Because I was raised by a very critical mother, and I know I have a critical part of me that is still there, but I find that I'm much more understanding with people than I used to be, and I know for a fact that it's because ... well it's not even the meditation, it's going to the teachings more than the meditation. I know the meditation helps me, but I think getting out there putting these things into practice from what I've heard and just thinking about the concepts, and thinking about how my actions affect other people and being able to see that, and also not being as dogmatic about things. I mean it is hard to explain, but I would say that I've changed a lot in the last few years, and it's probably all due to going these retreats and Buddhist talks and things. And I would say that the talks are probably more important than the meditation... Another thing I've just thought about is being mindful in everyday life—not that I do it all the time—but that thing of noting what's happening, and not buying into it, just noting. And I have always been quite a critical person and get annoyed easily with people doing things, and I don't find that that happens nearly as much any more, because I'm able to look at it, and think 'Mmm, yeah, I'm being impatient again', but not thinking, 'Now stop being impatient. Stop being judgmental and critical. You've got to stop being like this'. I used to give myself a hard time and never got any better. It only got worse. So now I will say things like 'Mmm ... being judgmental. Oh, all right', and I just find increasingly that it's dropping away, that judgment of things and people. So as far as that mindfulness like in everyday life—as I said I don't do it all the time—but I particularly relate it to being judgmental because that is one big issue I've had. And so when I find that I am being judgmental, you know whether it's just walking down the street and thinking, 'Oh my God look at that person's hair!' or something, I'll say 'Mmm. Being judgmental again', and I just find that by doing that, less and less am I noticing these things. I'm just not doing it as much.

This account is representative of many in the literature about religious change involving changes to the self-image or sense-of-self. For instance, Bedford reports a

²⁹³ Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p244.

series of changes to members of the *i and I Art of Living Foundation* as a result of their meditative experiences: their worldview was charged with less negative emotion than previously. They experienced changes in lived reality, and the view of the self became more positive. In sum, the changes indicated a positive relationship with self and reality.²⁹⁴ The account is also representative of those by the practitioners at both BMIMC and Vajrayana Institute. However, as discussion below shows, these changes are the end-product of more complex changes involving both the self in its subjective immediacy and the sense-of-self as a socially objectified being. The appropriate explanatory models of the self in its subjective immediacy and in its socially constituted objectivity are outlined below.

4.1 Buddhist Models of the Absolute, Relative, and Imputed Self

In Buddhism, both reality and the self are spoken about in terms of absolute and relative view. From the Theravadin perspective, absolute reality, the absolute view, is described by the doctrine of the *Three Marks of Existence*, and according to De Wit, relative reality is *Samsara*.²⁹⁵ The ordinary view, the view of the self as solid and unchanging, keeps the individual in *Samsara*. The difference between the absolute and ordinary views, according to De Wit, is how the person is perceived. He refers to these as the enlightened, egoless mode of experience, and the egocentric mode of experience respectively. In the experience of absolute reality, the concept of ego is exposed as having no substance or existence of its own.²⁹⁶ The key to transforming the ordinary into the enlightened view is in understanding what I have chosen to call the relative self, the Buddhist understanding of the person as a set of interrelationships, as outlined in the doctrines of dependent origination, the *khandhas*/aggregates, and the satipatthanas.

The dominant model for the relative self, the model for the self to be transformed, is the notion of person inherent in the satipatthanas, the objects of which according to Nyanaponika Thera, comprise the entire person and that person's whole field of experience.²⁹⁷ As has been noted several times previously, transformation largely affects the body's feelings and emotions, and the mind's mental states and objects, all of which can be seen as facets or sites of transformation in meditation. Mindfulness, Nyanaponika Thera's *bare attention*, involves the singleminded awareness of what happens in the successive moments of perception, ie awareness of the changing discontinuous phenomena of immediate experience.²⁹⁸ To understand the value of such deconstructive practice for the Western Vipassana practitioner, one must appreciate the Buddhist view of the sense-of-self, of the 'I', the object imputed onto

²⁹⁴ Bedford, *op.cit.*, p126.

²⁹⁵ De Wit, *op.cit.*, p196.

²⁹⁶ *ibid.* De Wit's description of absolute and relative reality is akin to the absolute view, *sunyata*/emptiness, and the relative view, dependent origination, spoken about in Gelugpa Tibetan discourse at Vajrayana Institute, a subject for Chapters 4 and 5.

²⁹⁷ Nyanaponika Thera, *op.cit.*, 1956, p40.

²⁹⁸ See Nyanaponika Thera, *op.cit.*, 1956, p17; Watson, *op.cit.*, 2002, p97.

the relative self. From the Buddhist perspective, the transformative process is aimed at realizing the lack of inherent existence in this I imputed onto the relative self, which Buddhist scholars often describe in terms of the five aggregates.

This imputed self or sense-of-self is often equated with what is designated in Western thought by the ego as the representational aspect of the self.²⁹⁹ Both Buddhism and contemporary Western psychology see the self as a construction of the mind.³⁰⁰ Writers such as Epstein and Watson, responding to intellectual confusion over exactly what Buddhist practice aims to accomplish with reference to the self-construct, stress that it aims to deconstruct the representational component of the ego, the internal experience of one's self, not destroy the ego as mediator of the organism's processes in the Freudian understanding.³⁰¹ In this sense, Buddhism aims to transform the view of self as a reified object into a composite of interrelated parts.

4.2 A Contemporary Western View of the Self

As stated in Chapter 1, in order to explain the nature of self-transformation effected by the use of Buddhist doctrinal frameworks and practices, a clear distinction must be made between the self as subject, and the self as object, a basic distinction made by William James.³⁰² James's divisions of self into subject and object, *I the knower* and *me the known*, Watson labels as 'self' and 'self-concept'. This self-concept covers wide ground psychologically, and can be divided into material, social, and spiritual aspects³⁰³, and a *pure ego*, which provides the core sense of continuity in the individual.³⁰⁴ Watson believes that, from all contemporary Western perspectives, models of the self have two levels. The first includes the self-image as process, and contains a simple and implicit notion of self. Possessing inner coherence, it is a rough summary of the self, and is open to the environment. The second is the self-concept as representation, bolstered by language and culture, and both adhered to and affected by emotional components. Here, the self becomes increasingly reified,

²⁹⁹ See Engler, J. "Therapeutic Aims in Psychotherapy and Meditation: Developmental Stages in the Representation of Self", in *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 16 [1], pp25-61, Transpersonal Institute, 1984; Watson, op.cit., 2002; Welwood, J. *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, and the Path of Personal and Spiritual Transformation*, Shambala, 2002; Thupten Jinpa. "The Foundations of a Buddhist Psychology of Awakening", in *The Psychology of Awakening*, pp10-22, Samuel Weiser, 2000.

³⁰⁰ Watson, 2002, op.cit., p94.

³⁰¹ *ibid.*, p116.

³⁰² James, W. *Principles of Psychology*, Harvard University Press, 1983.

³⁰³ See Leary, D. "William James on the Self and Personality: Clearing the Ground for Subsequent Theorists, Researchers and Practitioners", in *Reflections on the Principles of Psychology: William James After a Century*, pp101-37, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990. Leary emphasizes that James' conception of these aspects of the empirical self, the me viewed as material, social, and spiritual, are not ontologically distinctive dimensions of the self, but 'owned' aspects.

³⁰⁴ Watson, op.cit., 2002, p94.

and is considered autonomous.³⁰⁵ It can be seen that James's self-as-subject, the level of immediate subjective experience, belongs in Watson's first level.

Referring to the Buddhist three-fold categorization of change outlined above in Section 2.2, the three types of change are 1) changes within one's immediate subjective field of experience, 2) changes to one's sense of self, and 3) changes to one's outlook on reality, or worldview. In the knower, the self as subject, the immediate field of subjective experience equates with the relative self as it is conceived in Buddhism, and to the first category of change. James's self-as-object, the self-concept and corresponding to Watson's second level, relates to the imputed I, and to the second category of change. To rephrase the statement above, the satipatthanas describe the field of phenomena *within* the person's experience in subjective immediacy. Further, it is suggested that this *self-image as process* is the target of the deconstructive function of *bare attention* as it operates in meditation. The objective of any Buddhist analytical technique is to deconstruct ordinary experience, especially of the sense of a permanent, solid self, into its component interrelated processes. This is the ultimate process aimed for in terms of the changes belonging to the first of the three categories of change outlined above in Section 2.

4.3 The Sense-of-Self and Its Transformations

The second category, changes to the sense-of-self in a holistic sense, rightly consists of the combination of the changes in category one and those that pertain to the self-concept, the self-as-object. Changes to the self-as-object are frequently identified as identity-transformation in conversion literature. Some researchers, for instance, Wilson and Preston, have pointed to the deconditioning processes effected by meditation techniques that underly these changes to one's self-perception. In terms of theoretical understanding however, these approaches do not explain the entire set of changes undergone in order to achieve enduring change to the self in a holistic way. Stated simply, the task here is to show how changes to the subjective and objective selves relate to and reinforce each other. The following excerpt from the interview with EBS is relevant to the self-transformative dimension of the practice because it deals with how the self is understood in this context. We were discussing the importance of developing mindfulness in Vipassana meditation with respect to my own experiential understanding of its relation to the sense-of-self. In my experience and interpretation up to that point, my experience of mindfulness had been linked to a strong sense of 'I'.

GE: I'm very sporadic [in my practice] and I don't normally hold it [mindfulness] for very long. But what I'm confused about is in that knowing [where your mind is placed] is still a sense of I, and it might be just me, [but] I relate to a sense of I very strongly.

³⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p110.

EBS: I think the sense of I is really important, the way you describe that, because I think ... we've just been on holidays, and I was reading this thing to my wife on the plane last night, because I was just reading Freud: *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and in the translator's introduction he says, 'There are a few words that don't translate properly from German into English', and he says 'whatever the word is for self, actually the translation is not self, but *sense-of-self*'. This is really big news, because when you think about Jung, the way the English-speaking people ... you know, Jung's notion of the self, but actually that word is the *sense-of-self*, that's quite different, and that's not a noun anymore. It's almost like a verb. It's kind of a dynamic, the sense-of-self, and I reckon that's the same with Buddhism. What people fight with is this notion of 'is there a me or not-me?' But people don't get it. They go 'There's an I there', but if you kind of go, 'There is nothing you can call an I, but the sense you have of that is really strong, and that's fine, that sense of it. It's OK to have that sense-of-self.

GE: It's the attachment that they're trying to break.

EBS: Yeah, and once you have that notion that 'I have a strong sense-of-self', and so the issue is to be OK about that, that I have a sense-of-self, and in some ways, that enables me to get through life, my everyday life, and it creates coherence in the way I think about whatever this thing is that's me, my relationship to other things and so on, but in time what happens is that sense-of-self dissipates with meditation. That's one of the things that happen.

GE: But it has to be established first. I mean, it's through that sense of I, that I know what mindfulness is. I wouldn't know it otherwise.

EBS: I think you're right. There's something about the development of human beings from late childhood into early adolescence, there's something where this sense-of-self seems to be really important, so this notion that a child could be born, bypass the sense-of-self and be fully enlightened, I don't believe that. Because again, thinking about the relationship in psychology, the development of the human being, what we know about that, and what this whole Buddhist story is about, strikes me that people need to have a reasonably strongly developed sense-of-self in their childhood, adolescence, and perhaps in the early part of their twenties, to then be able to go on to journey, starting to break down this sense-of-self.

This sense-of-self, the sense of I that arises from the combined activity of the aggregates, is the self that is to be deconstructed, the very self that meditators acknowledge attempting to hold onto. Here, RN has commented on the clinging nature of *self*: how the self is often associated with the mind, and about the desire to hold onto mental states, including mindfulness:

RN: In Vipassana, that mindfulness, that's just another object in itself too, so it's not even being attached to that, being attached to your mindfulness, or not even being attached to your mind. That's when it gets quite challenging for me,

because the desire is to hold onto that sense-of-self, and that sense-of-self is often associated with the mind, because there's no where else it could be. If that's not the self and all these bits of the body, then it must be the mind even though it can be on quite subtle levels. You think you're just observing, and then there's the other part of you that's observing the observing, and thinks it's the self.

The following is a very clear and succinct example of how one may see behind the self-images that make up one's social self. Although the meditative process, and the subjective responses such as basic feelings and the labelling underlying the identification of them, are not clearly articulated, it still gives a sense of the practitioner's deconstructive process applied to her self-concept.

When I asked HR if her involvement with Buddhism and Vipassana meditation had resulted in any changes to her worldview, she illustrated instead the changes she had experienced to her 'notion of self', one of the results of which was not taking herself so seriously. In reflecting on the notion of *no-self*, she had 'begun to see things in meditation that [she does] to construct her self-image'. When she sees these things, she 'sees that it is only a construction, not a reality', and she referred to moments when these are seen, 'rather than cogitated about'. An example of this was seeing *mother* as one of the functions she performs, and seeing herself constructing an image of herself as a maternal person. Another example was as *a great intellectual*. The more she meditates she said, 'the harder it is to sustain these views and the attachment to them. They begin to jostle each other'. Acknowledging these constructions has enabled her to 'let go of what we construct around persons and relationships'. HR's example illustrates the way in which change may occur to one's social self-image by the examination of self-as-object. By comparison, KN's example demonstrates how changes are made to the self-image, in this case the establishment of a stronger and more positive sense-of-self, by employing Vipassana techniques to observe, identify, and modify subjective impulses of craving.

KN was a recovering alcoholic, 'in rehab.' when she was first exposed to Vipassana practice. She found that Buddhism refines the skill of watching the mind, a skill she had already learned in rehabilitation. Because of the effect of childhood experiences, she had been diagnosed as *disassociative* with a poor sense-of-self from a psychotherapeutic perspective. In her understanding, dissociation occurs when 'something becomes so painful that you switch out', and 'there is no watcher and no nothing'. She said that mindfulness practice helped her to deal with both dissociation and her alcohol addiction. In the latter case it was by teaching her to label, observe, and to let go of the addictive desire, and by giving her a sense of not having to identify with the desire through the understanding that 'thought, emotion, desire, is not the self'. Indicative of the way she had seen herself was, 'I am a recovering alcoholic'. She said that the practice helped her to move beyond this self-image. Elsewhere in the interview KN described how, while focussing on her breath at the abdomen, she became aware of feelings that were previously 'frozen', and was

able to release them. Taken together, these changes suggest that the negative self-image as an addict was deconstructed and replaced with a positive one, that of someone who was able to identify with her feelings and work with her own inner capabilities and skills, made all the more potent because of her newfound capacity to accept and manage their intensity and emotional charge.

Another aspect of KN's experience is noteworthy because it indicates both how various elements of Buddhist practice work together to reinforce a constructive sense-of-self, based on the changes at the subjective and objective levels above, and also how the the three factors *Panna*, *Sila*, and *Samadhi* of the Noble Eight-Fold Path function in unison as an appealing spiritual discipline for Westerners. This is illustrative of the way in which the ethical dimension to practice enhances the quality of sense-of-self as an integrated being. In response to the question 'What Buddhist meditation techniques do you practise, and what significance do they have for you?', she replied that she kept the five lay precepts, which helped her to avoid 'unwholesome choices' and to avoid those actions that were 'another form of wanting to get away'.³⁰⁶ In her experience slander (of others) results in feeling 'unhappy with yourself'; 'intoxication takes you away from what you should be doing'; 'being wholesome is staying with what is real', and 'telling the truth is real'. When it is remembered that this practitioner had been diagnosed as dissociative, it follows that 'feeling real' is important to her. This example shows how keeping the precepts reinforces a set of values for constructive self-definition at the level of self-concept. Added to this, the mindfulness developed in meditation, the overall level of awareness developed by noting and exploring the objects of practitioners' awareness, can enhance their sense of self-esteem by giving them more sense of self-containment and self-direction, internally and externally. KN remarked several times during the interview, 'awareness allows you to be aware *in* what you're doing'.

KN's approach illustrates how meditation and ethical practice, and the growing understanding of *panna*/wisdom, combine to form a transformative strategy for managing inner and outer life. Many interviews indicated that the opportunity to engage with these aspects of the *Eight-Fold Path*, and to experience their combined effects, results in deeper long-term commitment to the Buddhist path, a subject for exploration in Chapter 6. By contrast with KN's personal situation and experience of self, are those of KBN, who can be seen to have had a strong sense-of-self to begin with, and to be one who was possessed of a value-system that includes seeing himself as a 'nice person'. In his account of how he began meditation as a way of dealing with a personal crisis, the crisis itself did not make him question his values or his identity. He initially responded to its effect by seeking techniques to give him peace of mind. In his account of his application of those, and the effects of meditative experience in his situation, it can be seen that his self-image as a

³⁰⁶ See Chapter 2, Section 3.2.1: *Orientation and Introduction*, for a description of the five lay precepts and the purpose of their keeping for the practice.

reasonable person formed the basis for the deeper subjective adjustments to his coping mechanisms that took place.

GE: Can you tell me in that case if it's not too personal what meditation actually did for you?

KBN: I think it gave me a base for relating to other people. It gave me a way, it was a coping mechanism to begin with, I think. I've got to think back to those experiences, probably more calm, calming type thing, just giving me a way. I think I have to say in retrospect, because many other things have happened since these early experiences, it gave me some armour-plating, really. It's probably a bit paradoxical, a base from which I could deal with these difficulties. And it was obviously ... in retrospect it was about life's adequacies. It's like one's relationship with the world, it can be predicated on a premise that one day gets attacked, and you realize that it's no longer an adequate premise, and I think in this case my premise was that, being relatively friendly with people, being a nice person ... I'm sure it's quite common, and suddenly you run into people who actually mean you harm, and how do you deal with that? I suppose at school I had to deal with the odd bit of bullying. I didn't have well developed defence mechanisms, so I had to find a way of dealing with these people. So the meditation practice helped me, not by giving me a particular way, so much as by giving me some resources, or maybe even buying me time, but certainly delivering me a bit of calm.

GE: So you were able to catch your responses?

KBN: I'm not quite sure what you mean by catch your responses. It was really just dealing with mental anguish I think. One of these people in particular, I think, was the sort of person that would drive people mad, a really nasty piece of work. In retrospect it raised this problem of how do you deal with others who mean you harm? But that's the critical problem for Buddhists, and historically it was. How did monks deal with violence in a way that was consistent with the first precept? So I see this is one of the big problems of living. Buddhism and this problem of others meaning you harm, and then also your anger, things like anger towards others, really negative states. To summarize it really, it was a relating-to-others problem.

GE: So you were able to relate to their anguish, and by accepting it you didn't have to react?

KBN: I suppose I'm the sort of person who takes, if I were to sum up how I dealt with it ... it's like you start to get a feel of rolling with the punches. It's like getting a bit of distance, I suppose, and not taking—I'm sure that this is not what I thought at the time—but in retrospect I think that's what I was doing. 'Cause with time I realized the importance of not-self, stuff that I would never take seriously now, and in fact later in teaching I had similar occurrences, and of course I was doing the meditation practice. It's like you see something coming, and you cut it off before it actually manifests as a bit of harm.

GE: So in that do you mean your response or their behaviour?

KBN: My response to their behaviour. It's not even not tolerating it or even verbalizing that you are not going to tolerate it, you just come back at it in a way that ... no harm done really but the person knows that they're not going to get away with it. As a teacher I didn't have those resources before I was a meditator. Buddhism affected my teaching in another way. It is quite interesting how it affected my professional approach, so that at the end of my career I got seen as somebody who was a Buddhist because of the way he behaved.

The account suggests that throughout this situation, where effectively KBN was being bullied publicly, direct retaliation was not considered as a viable response, in line with his self-image as one who is friendly, accommodating, and somewhat defenceless in the face of aggression. The change that occurred was not directly to the self-image, but to the way in which KBN mediated his internal responses to aggression. He used Vipassana to calm the mind, to give it a sense of space, of freedom from the stress induced by the bullying. It seems that the experience of a gap between the mind and the specific mental content lessened the mind's identification with this content enough for the respondent to be open to other ways of responding to the problem. Being mindful of the doctrine of Anatta in effect reinforced this newfound distance between the observer, the ego and the feelings. How changes are made in this way by fostering a new impersonal relationship between the ego and the feelings is also illustrated in other excerpts from the same interview with KBN. In the first he discusses his experience of the relationship between the ego and the feeling of fear.

GE: That's something that was talked about at Vajrayana Institute recently, was the fact that we are so conditioned to have a defensive ego, that you're supposed to take things personally, and get in there and show people what's what if they offend you.

KBN: That's what the ego is, it's a defensive construct. That's the understanding I've arrived at, anyway. Why are we so afraid to open up, it's fear, sometimes dreadfully limiting fears, but that's just something to work with. It's like what is the nature of that fear that won't allow me to say whatever, it's like the investigation of reality, so even though that's an enlightenment factor, it doesn't mean it's just in the practice, in the sitting, it's in life.

In this second excerpt, he distinguishes between the ego and seeing the feelings that arise as impersonal.

KBN: Actually we haven't talked much about the three characteristics of experience, because the Buddha's theory, the way it is a general theory of experience which says that experience is constituted by these aspects of suffering, impermanence and not-self. The not-self thing, I remember once talking about this once in a discussion group that we had. It's like if you're doing the washing up and you're getting angry with your step-son about something, you see the anger arise, and the fact that you see it arise, it passes away. The fact that you brought attention to it, you've recognized, and you cut it off. That's not-self, that's *sati*, mindfulness. It's a relation of not-self, that it's just a negative reaction.

5 Conclusions

The examples presented above illustrated how self-transformation may involve the sense-of-self in both its subjective, objective, and deeply personal and social aspects. They also show how changes to one's identity, self-esteem, and entire self-concept may be supported by more subjective transformations underneath. Many practitioners like the combination of Vipassana and metta, and the way in which the effects of practice harmonize with their values validates their sense of engagement with and commitment to the practice and to Buddhism. Practitioners expressed strong appreciation for the inclusion of metta on retreats as a compassion practice, but as a concentration practice it also functions to stabilize and quieten the mind. From their Vipassana practice, meditators gain more insight into their internal states and feelings, and learn to modify the expression of their impulses. Many responded to the labelling of pain on physical, emotional, and mental levels as *dukkha*. The combination of practices and their effects can be seen to effect change on both subjective and objective levels. In Vipassana individual internal phenomena, such as the experience of anger or irritability, are treated as impermanent mental states to be observed in terms of its arising and ceasing. Practitioners are directed to note it and therefore frame it in this way, exploring the phenomenon in terms of quality, and its effect on the body and mind, without *buying into the story*, the context of the phenomenon's arising, such as an argument or other occurrence. The 'bare attention', the nonjudgmental awareness brought to bear on the phenomenon, effectively isolates it—whether it be an impulse, feeling, or mental state—from its existential context, so it can be objectified and seen as impersonal.

In terms of describing the transformation that results from the interaction of the relative self and the imputed self, the ego—the self to be denied, in Buddhist thought, between the field of immediate subjective experience in constant flux and the sense-of-self as a solid sense of I—they appear to depend on ultimately redefining the latter in terms of the former. This occurs as a result of meditative insight into the nature of one's experience, which functions to deconstruct the sense-of-self as a solid and permanent core. This process may be concurrent with others that strengthen the self-image, including its sense-of-self-worth and self-esteem. All of this suggests the ways in which transformation may occur, and how it ultimately affects the total sense-of-self. In order to explain the manner of change to identity in

terms of the roles that Buddhist doctrine and practice play in effecting these changes, a theory must account for the mechanisms of change underlying the two types of change perceived in sum. It was seen how the changes experienced by practitioners could be categorized into three types: changes in immediate subjectivity, changes to one's self-concept, and changes to one's internal frame of reference, or worldview. Because of the importance of the first type of change for one's overall sense of well-being and connection with the practice, any theory of religious change needs to be capable of accounting for this aspect of this sense-of-self.

Chapter 4: Interaction, Teaching, and Learning at Vajrayana Institute

1 Introduction

Vajrayana Institute (VI) is a Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist Centre. This chapter explores the ways in which students apprehend the worldview of its parent network of Buddhist centres as that is manifested in the activity of VI. It describes the process of socialization into the formal worldview and shared reality of VI. It does this first from an institutional perspective of its organizational structure and teaching activities, in order to illustrate what is encountered by explorers or seekers, what is immediately visible, and how the shared reality of the group may be initially accessed. Sections 3 and 4 outline the available range of activities—courses, workshops and retreats—and the content of those teaching formats, so as to outline some typical ways into the shared reality. Section 5 describes students' journeys: how they begin to form a picture of this reality-view from the available information and teaching formats. At the end of Section 5, a set of interrelated foundational doctrinal beliefs is presented in order to demonstrate, as much and as generally as possible, what students need to know in order to make their transitions from explorers to practitioners.

This distinction between student and practitioner is artificial. The entire socialization process from encounter to commitment was found to consist of stages that are not always in linear sequence. The stages are necessarily described and explained as discrete and sequential steps in a longer process, but exploration, apprehension, comprehension and commitment may occur concurrently, and may differ in pattern between individuals. What is a commonality between individual experiences of socialization is that, for those who commit to the Buddhist path, the stages are mutually reinforcing. This chapter explores the stages of encounter with and apprehension of the new worldview, from encounter with VI to a nascent sense of the fundamentals of the worldview as an interpretive framework.

Following this chapter, Chapter 5 then explores the application of doctrine and practice to the goal of self-transformation. It was found that acceptance of the framework as one's own view, occurs when students begin to test their responses to doctrine through its practical application to their own lives. An important factor in an individual's learning process is evaluation of newly apprehended material in the light of previously explored religious frameworks and practices. This is treated, in the light of an individual's entire religious biography, in Chapter 6: *The Nature of Commitment in Vipassana and Vajrayana Contexts*.

2 Structure and Organization

Vajrayana Institute is a Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist Centre in Ashfield, an Inner West suburb of Sydney.³⁰⁷ The Centre is part of the *Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition* (FPMT), a worldwide network of 144 Buddhist Centres, study groups, and projects in 31 countries,³⁰⁸ founded by Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, the latter of whom is the current head of the organization.³⁰⁹ The Centre has a director, a board or executive committee, a centre manager, an office manager, and one or two paid administrative staff. Since 1991 the Centre has had a succession of highly revered lamas as resident teachers. The teacher-in-residence from 1991 to 1999 was Geshe Thubten Dawa, who remains affiliated with the Centre and much loved by both older and newer students. Other resident lamas have been Logoan Rinpoche (December 2000 to January 2002), and Geshe Ngawang Samten (August 2003 to the present).³¹⁰ There are also other *sangha* members and practitioners resident at the centre. In addition, there are several (informal) categories of participant. The centre and its activities are open to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Those who wish to become Buddhists may do so by taking part in a formal refuge ceremony, a subject which is discussed in Chapter 6. Apart from the tantric initiations and practices, a subject of Chapter 5, any member of the public is welcome to take part in VI's activities. All participants are also welcome to become members of VI by paying an annual fee.

Primarily a teaching centre, VI provides tuition in the *dharma*, and space for people to learn and practise the *dharma* and to perform service. The website states that the centre offers meditation courses, a weekly program of teachings by a resident Tibetan lama and other monks and nuns, and *pujas* (devotional celebrations of chanting and visualization)³¹¹. In contrast with BMIMC, there are more styles of religious discourse, a richer ritual life, and more opportunities for social interaction in the form of working bees, special projects, and social gatherings for various purposes. Practice-wise, the principal difference between the two centres lies in the nature of their respective religious activities.

3 Religious Foundations and Scriptural Authority

The FPMT views itself as part of the Gelugpa school founded by Lama Tsong-kha-pa. While it holds the teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha as its ultimate source of religious authority, in common with the other Tibetan Buddhist schools, it adheres to the

³⁰⁷ During the the period of my fieldwork, the Centre was relocated from 22 Linthorpe St, Newtown, to 9 Victoria Square, Ashfield.

³⁰⁸ From the FPMT's website, www.fpmt.org, visited on 28/12/2006.

³⁰⁹ See VI's website, www.vajrayana.com.au. The site was visited on 25/1/06, after its then last update on 11/12/05.

³¹⁰ The detail of Geshe Samten's education, and information about other teachers, for instance, Ven. Tenzin Chönyi and Renate Ogilvie, and former teachers Logoan Rinpoche and Ven. Jampa Dekyi, are available from VI's website.

³¹¹ From the FPMT's website, www.fpmt.org, visited on 28/12/2006.

philosophical view of the Middle Way School of Nagarjuna, practises the Bodhisattva path, and includes the *sutra* and *tantra* systems in its teaching and practice.³¹² In the FPMT, scriptural authority also rests with the teachers and writings of the Gelugpa school, and especially those of its founder's two seminal treatises, *The Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* and *The Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*.³¹³ The teachings and practices at VI are manifestly based on the former treatise.

3.1 Doctrinal Foundations

Tsong-kha-pa's *Lam Rim* outlines the characteristic Gelugpa presentation of the path to enlightenment and its stages.³¹⁴ It is based on the earlier work, *A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, by Atisha Dipamkarashrijnana, who is simply referred to as Lama Atisha.³¹⁵ According to Cutler, all the books on the stages of the path from the Gelugpa perspective 'published until now' are derived from Tsong-kha-pa's *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*.³¹⁶ Several *Lam Rim* publications are used by teachers and students, and are kept in stock in the Centre's bookshop. These are Tsong-kha-pa's work (cited above), published in three volumes by the Lam.Rim Chen Mo Translation Committee, *Path to Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism* by Geshe Acarya Thubten Loden, and *Lam Rim Outlines* by Karin Valham, which she describes as a meditation manual. This book renders the *Lam Rim* practices quite accessible by new practitioners. In addition, the Dalai Lama's *Illuminating the Path to Enlightenment*, which is his commentary on Atisha's *Lamp for the Path* and Tsong-kha-pa's *Lines of Experience*, is available by donation.

Valham describes the *Lam Rim* as a set of practices outlining the sutric path. *Lam Rim* texts divide the path to enlightenment into three *scopes*. The small scope is for those who wish to avoid a lower suffering rebirth in a future life, and gain a happy rebirth by learning to live in harmony with the law of karma. The medium scope is for those who desire to be free from *Samsara* by becoming familiar with the path to liberation, and being liberated from ignorance. The great scope is for those who adhere to the Mahayana motivation, also referred to as the *bodhicitta* (spirit of enlightenment) motivation, to attain the state of enlightenment to free all sentient beings from

³¹² Powers, J. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, Snow Lion Publications, 1995, p315. Powers is quoting the Dalai Lama. He also notes that the Gelugpa system of tantric theory is based on the Guhyasamaja, Cakrasamvara, and Kalacakra Tantras. During my time at Vajrayana Institute, I have not heard a reference to the first two, and the Kalacakra is referred to in terms of an initiation. Generally, specific tantric practices, but not texts, are referred to.

³¹³ *ibid.*, p416.

³¹⁴ See Powers, *op.cit.*, especially Chapter 15, for the treatment of *Lam Rim* in the writings of Lama Tsong-kha-pa.

³¹⁵ Powers, *op.cit.*, p418; Geshe Tsultrim Gyeltsen, in the Foreword to Tenzin Gyatso, 2002. The translation of the root text, by Ruth Sonam in Dharamsala in 1997, consists of 68 verses typically of four lines each. In the unpublished version of the root text used in teachings at the Centre, Atisha's dates are given as 982-1054.

³¹⁶ Cutler, J. "Preface". in Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam.Rim Chen Mo)*, Snow Lion Publications, volume 1, 2000, pp9-11.

suffering.³¹⁷ This progression is mirrored in the three volumes of the *Lam Rim* edited by Cutler. The first volume deals with the concerns of the first two scopes, and prepares the practitioner for Mahayana practice by setting out the preliminary practices for the development of *bodhicitta*.³¹⁸ The second volume is devoted to the motivation and practice of the *bodhisattva*,³¹⁹ which Cutler considers to be the heart of the treatise. The third volume deals with the theory and practice of concentration and insight, or calm-abiding and analytical meditation.³²⁰ From the Mahayana perspective, the concerns of the Theravadin tradition would belong to the first two scopes, and the Mahayana's own, concerned with the path of the *bodhisattva*, to the third. Accordingly, teachings and practices at VI contain those of the three scopes, but emphasize the concerns and goals of the great scope: development of compassion and equanimity, generation of *bodhicitta*, and acquisition of a realization of emptiness through development of the doctrinal understanding and meditation practices taught at the Centre.

3.2 Other Texts and Study Material

After the *Lam Rim*, the next most significant text is the *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. Referred to simply as the Heart Sutra, it is part of the *Prajnaparamita*, the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature, whose principal concern is the wisdom generated by perception of the nature of the *dharmas* as emptiness. This view is in opposition to the Mahayana view of the Abhidharma's analysis of reality: that *dharmas* are final realities out of which we construct the world.³²¹ The body of the *sutra* consists of Avalokiteshvara's response to Shariputra's question, 'How should any noble son or noble daughter, who wishes to engage in the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom, train?' The response is that 'they should see perfectly that even the five aggregates are empty of intrinsic existence'.³²² This *sutra* is doctrinally and ritually significant at VI because it outlines the correct view from the Mahayana perspective, and is often referred to in teachings. It is also recited by students at the beginning of many teachings at the Centre to reaffirm this correct view as the goal of practice. All study, ritual, meditation and activity is directed ultimately to this end. Other textual sources of religious authority are writings by the Dalai Lama, Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. These are cited as recommended reading in many

³¹⁷ Valham, K (compiler). *Lam.Rim Outlines: Beginners' Meditation Guide*, Wisdom Publications, 1997. The preface in this publication serves the purpose of outlining the three scopes.

³¹⁸ Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Lam Rim Chen Mo), Snow Lion Publications, volume one, 2000.

³¹⁹ Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Lam Rim Chen Mo), Snow Lion Publications, volume two, 2004.

³²⁰ Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Lam Rim Chen Mo), Snow Lion Publications, volume three, 2002. See also Valham, *op.cit.*, who states that practitioners of the third scope make their practice of calm-abiding and analytical meditation on emptiness a cause for enlightenment.

³²¹ See Williams, P. *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, Routledge, 1989, p43.

³²² Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. *Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings*, Wisdom Publications, 2002 (a). The Heart Sutra is reproduced between pages 59 and 61.

teachings. Teachings by Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa are accessible online at the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, which can be reached via an active link to <http://lamayeshe.com> from the FPMT website.

Throughout their involvement with VI and the FPMT, students are encouraged to engage in a balanced programme of study, reflection and meditation. While it is stressed that meditation plays a vital role in one's development on the path to enlightenment, study and intellectual development is a strong aspect of the Gelugpa lineage and training system. There is a long list of recommended reference material obtainable from the Centre's bookshop or available from its library. Students are encouraged to draw on as much oral and written material as they wish. Other teaching aids, such as prepared course notes and handouts, are used by teachers and students. Most teachings, workshops and seminars are taped and recorded onto CDs that are available to students shortly after the relevant event.

4 Religious Activity at VI: Teaching and Ritual

As indicated in the introduction, the purpose of Chapters 2 and 4 is to document the ways in which participants learn about the belief system of a tradition or organization, and learn to attribute meaning to its doctrine and practice, as the initial phase of socialization into its religious reality. Researchers conceive three ways in which learning occurs in contemplation-based religious groups, as: learning a new role; learning a new symbolic universe in a cognitive way; and apprehending the nonverbal consequences of ritual and meditation. Opinions vary as to the relative significance of these three in a religious setting.³²³ As the following exploration of the range of religious activity at VI will show, the learning process involves all three, combining behavioural, verbal and nonverbal, cognitive and directly experiential elements. However, compared to the more practice-focussed activity at BMIMC, the field of religious and social activity at VI is both more varied and more grounded in verbal discourse. Despite this, in common with the learning process of the Vipassana practitioners, there is the fact that the more overtly behavioural aspect of experimental participation, the roleplay, facilitates the learning that occurs through conceptual and experiential means.³²⁴ It is expected that the following exploration of the range of religious activity on offer, and how participants explore and make sense

³²³ See Preston, D. "Becoming a Zen Practitioner", in *Sociological Analysis* 42[1], pp. 47-56, Association for the Sociology of Religion 1981; "Meditative Ritual Practice and Spiritual Conversion-Commitment: Theoretical Implications Based on the Case of Zen", in *Sociological Analysis* 43 [3], pp. 257-70, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1982.; *The Social Organization of Zen Practice: Constructing Transcultural Reality*, Cambridge University Press 1988. for the third approach.

³²⁴ The conversion theorists who utilize role theory assert that learning and socialization occur through acting the role of the adherent, outwardly conforming to a narrowly prescribed set of role expectations. See Balch, R. "Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult: Implications for the Study of Conversion", in *Sociological Analysis* 41, pp. 137-43, 1980, p142; Wilson, S. "Becoming a Yogi: Resocialization and Deconditioning as Conversion Processes", in *Sociological Analysis* 45 [4], pp301-14, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1984, p302.

of it, demonstrates how doctrinal, practical, and experiential factors combine to facilitate the learning of a new religious reality.

All religious activity at the Centre falls into two categories: teaching and ritual. With respect to teaching, there are two main considerations: the scope of the subject matter and the manner of delivery. All doctrinal material and meditation techniques taught fall within the scope of the *Lam Rim*, and build on its doctrinal foundations. With respect to the second consideration, the Centre uses a variety of teaching formats: classes, retreats, workshops, and discussion groups. By far the most dominant form is the class format. Classes, generally referred to as 'teachings', may be one-offs devoted to a particular topic, and may run for an evening, a half-day, day, or even a weekend. Typically, they are taught as a course of five or six weeks' duration, spread over as much as eighteen months, requiring attendances on one night a week for one-and-a-half hours. There are two styles of class or teaching: Western and traditional/Tibetan-style. The differences between the two, and their import for an understanding of their effect on students' learning and socialization, will be discussed below. Before we consider teaching content and formats, we shall examine the ritual activity and its forms at VI. As we progress through the forms of activity conducted by the Centre, we shall see that in reality, all teaching has a ritual structure and function, and all ritual has a teaching function. The way in which these activities are categorized, and the order in which they are presented, are to aid discussion and explanation throughout this and the following chapters. Included in the category of ritual activities to be discussed here are *pujas*, *sutra* recitations, and those ritual elements that accompany teachings at the Centre.³²⁵

4.1 Sutra Recitation, Guru Puja and Tsog

The organization and facilitation of group rituals are by the experienced, advanced practitioners, and these are also those who, typically, attend and take part in them. In the main, those who attend are not numerous, and newer participants rarely take part. For this reason it can be said that, apart from the ritual aspects of classes and retreats, ritual does not play a part in one's initial participation and experiential learning, although this may change as one progresses through the initial stages of familiarization with the worldview and its meditation practices. Accordingly, these practices are not treated in any detail, but are mentioned briefly in order to provide a complete picture of what is available in terms of religious activity. Apart from recitation of the Heart Sutra at the beginning of teachings, *sutras* are recited occasionally to aid the accomplishment of special tasks or projects. That which I have become familiar with over the last two years is the *Sanghata Sutra*. In an email from the Centre on 1 December 2004 it was written:

³²⁵ Tantric initiations are discussed in Chapter 5 Section 3: *Tantric Activity at Vajrayana Institute*, which deals with the personal practice and self-transformation undergone by these practitioners. They are not open to people who have not taken refuge, and therefore, cannot be considered to be a part of the process of experiential participation.

'Lama Zopa Rinpoche has recently suggested that all FPMT Centres recite the Sanghata Sutra 20 times. The recitation of this *sutra* yields enormous benefits for all those who hear or recite it. It is a direct record of a teaching that was given by Buddha Shakyamuni on Vulture's Peak in Rajagriha, and is one of a special set of *sutras* called *dharmaparyayas*, or transformative teachings, transforming those who hear or recite them. Wherever the Sanghata Sutra is established, the Buddhas are always present. As such, the recitation can bestow a powerful blessing on the place where it is recited'.

On 4 December 2004, it was recited by a group of practitioners, with the specific purpose of clearing obstacles to the building approval by Ashfield council for the new premises at 9 Victoria Square, Ashfield. The text of the *sutra* was divided up into as many sections as there were people to recite it. On this occasion, this meant that ten people had eleven pages each to read through three times. In the following few months, there was an effort to read the *sutra* as many times as possible before the council meeting on 28 June 2005, which was to consider approval for the building renovations.³²⁶ Examples of Guru Puja and Tsog Offerings performed at the Centre are those for 'All Sentient Beings Affected by the Tsunami Disaster', on the 5 January 2005,³²⁷ and for the 70th Birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the 6 July 2005.

4.2 Ritual Elements Accompanying Teachings

These ritual elements consist of bowing as the teacher enters the gompa, prostrations, prayers, and setting the motivation before the teachings, and usually more prayers, dedication of merit, and bowing as the teacher leaves the gompa after teachings.

There are three kinds of prostration: the hands placed at the heart in a prayer position while the person bows slightly, the half-prostration which consists of touching the forehead to the ground, and the full-length, full-body stretch. With the second two, the half- and the full-prostration, the hands are cupped with the thumbs inside bent at the knuckle, which represents the form bodies of the Buddha, and the precious jewel. Then the hands maintaining this position, touch in succession the crown, throat, and heart, representing the body, speech, and mind. Some touch the forehead as well. With the full-length prostration, one crouches after touching the

³²⁶ Emails were sent out on 20/3/2006 to give notice of five recitations to be held between 21 and 30 March, and on 3/6/2005 to give notice of six recitations to be held in June before the council meeting on 28 June 2005. These recitations were to remove obstacles to the successful renovations of the new Centre in Ashfield, and to raise funds for the completion of renovations. The Centre was successful in gaining approval for the renovations, and money was donated by members.

³²⁷ An email dated 4/1/2005 stated, "Everyone is invited to join us in praying for all the sentient beings who have died and are suffering so much as a result of the tsunami disaster. Offerings of food and flowers are welcome."

forehead, throat and heart, and extends the hands forward on the ground to support the body. Then one stretches the entire body on the floor, face down, then touches the crown with the hands in the prayer position, and straightens the arms on the floor, but above the head, and finally arcing them out and down to the waist, tracing large circles on the floor before getting to one's feet. It is stressed to try not to drop to the knees first, but to drop to the hands.³²⁸

During *Practice and Ritual Teachings* in June 2005, a handout about full-length prostrations was given to students, and the three forms of prostration were demonstrated. There was discussion about the meaning and purpose of prostrations, and why to do them. It was explained that in prostrating, one is paying respect to the triple gem, the enlightened mind. One teacher also stated that it is important to do what you feel comfortable with and what you understand. This approach to prostrations is theoretically significant from the view of role theory and, because students are free to choose their own form of prostration according to their own level of understanding and acceptance, it indicates something about the nature of the role expectations in this setting. As a participant observer, and a beginner in terms of schooling in the tradition, I found this comforting both academically and personally. As I looked around the *gompa* on many an occasion, I noticed that students had preferences for styles of prostration. Some students, whom I knew to be both experienced and committed, would somehow manage to do their full-length prostrations in the tiniest of spaces. I myself was happy to place my hands at the heart and bow whenever a teacher entered the *gompa*, and touch my crown throat and heart three times after the teacher had prostrated and sat down. This symbolized my respect for the teacher as a symbol of religious authority, and my respect for the teachings that meant so much to the students that I was both studying and befriending.

In addition to the *Heart Sutra* discussed above, several preliminary prayers are recited before teachings. These are typically the Seven Limb Prayer, the Outer Mandala, the Mandala Offering, and the Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer. Teachings conclude with the dedication of merit, and usually the long life prayer for His Holiness and Lama Zopa.³²⁹ One teacher explained that prayers are said to 'set the mind in the right direction', that 'motivation is important in Tibetan Buddhism', as 'it turns everything into *dharma*.'³³⁰ According to McDonald, the Seven Limb Prayer encapsulates a method for mental purification and accumulation of wisdom.³³¹ The

³²⁸ Prostrations were taught during Discovering Buddhism Module 12, and in *Practice and Ritual Teachings*, June 2005. They are also outlined in McDonald, K. *How to Meditate: A Practical Guide*, Wisdom Publications, 1984, pp150-51.

³²⁹ This list was discussed in *Practice and Ritual Teachings*, 20 June, 2005. See Appendix 1 for the text of these prayers. They are also in *Essential Buddhist Prayers: Kopan Prayer Book*, 2001, between pages 4 and 23, and in McDonald, K. *How to Meditate: A Practical Guide*, Wisdom Publications, Massachusetts, 1984, pp144-147. Pages 148-155 explains why these introductory prayers are done.

³³⁰ In *Practice and Ritual Teachings*, 20 June 2005.

³³¹ McDonald, *op.cit.*, p150.

seven limbs are prostration, offering, confession, rejoicing (in the virtues of all beings), requesting the Buddhas not to pass away, requesting the Buddhas to turn the wheel of dharma, and dedication at the end, to 'put positive imprints in the right direction'.³³² Lama Zopa went through the benefit associated with the practice of each limb, and the mental state or feeling that it remedies. In order, the limbs as remedies are: prostration is the remedy to pride, offering that to miserliness, confession that to negative karma and disturbing thoughts, rejoicing that to jealousy, requesting the Buddhas not to pass away is the remedy to obscurations that prevent one from meeting the Buddha (referring to perceiving the Buddha's true nature), requesting the Buddhas to turn the wheel of *dharma* is the remedy to ignorance, and lastly, dedication is the remedy to heresy (losing faith in or turning away from the path).³³³

Following this is the recitation of the Outer Mandala, and Mandala Offering or Inner Mandala. Taken together they function as a way of accumulating merit through the act of sincere offering. The outer mandala is recited while making the hand mandala, which was demonstrated in several teachings that I attended. The symbolic significance of erecting the middle and ring fingers from the base made of the upturned palms and interlaced thumbs, index, and small fingers, is that they represent Mount Meru. Then the offering is visualized as having dissolved and gone to the Triple Gem to the accompaniment of *Idam guru ratnam mandalakam niratayami*, translated as 'I send forth this jewelled mandala to you, precious wisdom guru'.³³⁴ According to Lama Tsong-kha-pa, two essential points of the practice are to visualize many mandalas clearly.³³⁵ Lama Zopa and McDonald point out that the outer mandala, performed with the intention of mentally transforming the entire universe into a pure realm and offering it to the objects of refuge, accumulates a huge amount of merit, while McDonald adds that the immediate benefit of offering from the heart is alleviation of attachment and miserliness.³³⁶

While performing the Inner Mandala, the practitioner brings to mind those objects for which one can feel attachment, aversion or indifference: people, belongings, one's own body, and other objects, and then visualizes them as having been transformed into pure objects and offered to the buddhas.³³⁷ An examination of the texts of the two prayers suggests a symbolic macrocosmic and microcosmic correspondence

³³² *Practice and Ritual Teachings*, 20 June 2005. Also see Khetsun Sangpo Rinbochay, 1982, chapter 13, Offering Mandala, especially p.156, for a translation of the Seven Limb Prayer by Jeffrey Hopkins, as used in the Nyingma school. The same seven limbs are indicated, but worded a little differently.

³³³ Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, 1996, *op.cit.*, pp10-11.

³³⁴ This translation is given in Thubten Yeshe and Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, "The Yoga Method of the Glorious Supreme Heruka Vajrasattva", in *The Preliminary Practice of Vajrasattva*, pp27-44, FPMT Education Services, 2003. Thubten Yeshe and Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, 2003, p37.

³³⁵ In Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, 1996, *op.cit.*, p11.

³³⁶ Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, 1996, *op.cit.*, p11; McDonald, *op.cit.*, p154.

³³⁷ McDonald, *op.cit.*, p155.

between them.³³⁸ While through the outer mandala the universe is offered as a pure realm, the substance of the inner mandala brings one's attention back to the personal sphere of specific mental states to be transformed. This suggests that in the symbolic association of the pure realm with one's mental states, the latter are transformed.

These are followed by the Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer, recited sometimes in Tibetan and sometimes in English. It is said three times to signify body, speech, and mind. Reciting this can be seen as a reaffirmation of any private or formal intentions and vows. After preliminary prayers, the motivation is set by the teacher. The wording is not always the same, but what is said always conveys the same meaning, that any merit earned by listening to the teachings will be dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings. For example, 'May the merit I gain by listening to these teachings lead to my enlightenment for the benefit of others.' This motivation defines these teachings as Mahayana practice. Teachings are concluded with the dedication of merit and the Bodhicitta Prayer, which, in reminding practitioners of their *bodhicitta* motivation,³³⁹ are largely self-explanatory.

From the tradition's perspective these practices orient the mind towards the dharma, affirm one's refuge commitment (either as a prior undertaking of commitment or as commitment for the duration of the teaching), accumulate merit, and aid the mental purification process. An experienced practitioner would be conscious of these functions by being familiar with the notions and their embodiment in the texts and symbolic gestures. Their performance can also play a role in teaching, transmitting, and reinforcing some core doctrinal notions and key values. With some of these, the meaning is obvious and self-explanatory, such as setting the motivation, and the dedication of merit. With respect to the prostrations and prayers, their meaning is generally not obvious through practice alone, but needs to be acquired through explanation in teachings or in conversation, or through reading. For the newcomer to Tibetan Buddhism, they would be mystifying. However, these preparatory practices can be seen to serve two collective functions. First, they prepare the mind to be receptive, even if this is just a settling and slowing-down effect. Second, these actions can also be seen to delineate and define the ritual space in which teachings and religious activity take place. They give a sense of structure to the day or night's teaching in that they divide ordinary social space from the ritual space of learning and transformation.

³³⁸ See *ibid.*, p154, for McDonald's description of the outer mandala's composition in terms of Abhidharma cosmology, in which Mount Meru is a jewelled mountain in the centre of the universe, and the four continents are realms of human life. See Appendix 1 for the text of these prayers.

³³⁹ *ibid.*, p155.

4.3 Meditation Practice At Vajrayana Institute

A large range of meditation practices is included in the FPMT teachings and literature, and practised at the centre. Meditation practice *per se* takes place in specific teachings where those are relevant, and in designated meditation sessions. There are several ways of classifying the types of meditation practised. Valham divides them into the three scopes according to purpose. Seen in this way, it is clear that the bulk of practices performed in teachings and meditation sessions are related to the great scope, under which Valham places meditations for developing equanimity, generating *bodhicitta*, calm-abiding, and *emptiness* practices.³⁴⁰ McDonald's book *How to Meditate*, used as a meditation text at VI, divides the meditations into four sections: meditations on the mind, analytical meditations, visualization meditations, and devotional practices.³⁴¹ While both classifications follow the purposes to which the meditations are put, McDonald maintains that all meditation techniques can be included under two headings, stabilizing meditation and analytical meditation,³⁴² in line with the accepted Buddhist position. Taking the nature of the meditations typically taught and practised at VI into consideration results in the following three-fold list: concentration practice, analytical meditation, and purification practices, all of which are discussed below. On examining the nature of the range of practices taught, it is clear that most of these are a mixture of three meditative techniques: concentration, analysis, and symbolic manipulation or visualization, working with images of a desired state of affairs.³⁴³ Certain practices from the concentration and analytical categories involve visualization. How meditation techniques are taught and practised in the relevant classes is discussed below in the exploration of teachings.

At its simplest, concentration meditation is the act of focussing exclusively on the sensation of the breath, at the nostrils or the abdomen, to bring the mind to a state of single-pointed awareness. During the short course *Single-Pointed Concentration*, this term was defined as 'the ability to keep the mind focussed on one thing', and similarly, calm-abiding as the ability to 'keep our minds focussed on the object, for however long we like, with physical and mental pliancy'.³⁴⁴ These were distinguished from mindfulness, which is 'knowing that we are keeping the mind on the object'. The aims given by the tradition of developing the practice of calm-abiding are to develop control over the mind, so that it is stable, that is, not distracted by external objects.³⁴⁵ This concentrated mind provides the basis for cultivating *special insight*³⁴⁶ and achieving subtle understandings such as, for instance, realizing

³⁴⁰ These practices are outlined in Valham, *op.cit.*, pp53-81.

³⁴¹ McDonald, *op.cit.*, p8.

³⁴² *ibid.*, p19.

³⁴³ See McDonald, *op.cit.*, p111.

³⁴⁴ This course took place on three consecutive Wednesday nights: 12, 19, 26 May 2004.

³⁴⁵ See McDonald, *op.cit.*, pp19-20.

³⁴⁶ Gen Lamrimpa. *Samatha Meditation: Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on Cultivating Meditative Quiescence*, Snow Lion Publications, 1992, p146.

emptiness. In teachings and meditation sessions, *calm-abiding* meditation is taught and practised in two forms: as breath concentration and deity visualization. As the former it takes the form of focussing the attention at the opening of one of the nostrils, and just being aware of the sensation of the breath at this point. It is performed this way for several minutes at the beginning of some teachings to allow the mind to settle.

The purpose of analytical meditation is to develop special insight, leading to wisdom. According to Lama Tsong-kha-pa, insight is the capacity to distinguish an ultimate or a conventional object, while serenity involves one-pointedness on an object. He states that ‘an undistracted mind is mental one-pointedness, the serenity aspect, while accurate reflection on facts and meanings refers to discerning wisdom, the insight aspect’.³⁴⁷ In order to develop special insight, and wisdom, the mind must be first stabilized by using the above techniques. The analytical practices of this tradition involve placing awareness on objects and examining some characteristic or quality, and may involve the use of imagination or visualization. While their object is either the self or another phenomenon, they may be placed into several categories: meditations on the mind, analysing perceptions or assumptions about existence (for instance: life, suffering, death, human relationships, and our cognitive process) and meditations on *emptiness*.³⁴⁸ While these categories represent the range of analytical practices typically taught at VI, their practice in teachings is determined by the point of doctrine or practice they are illustrating. In my experience with VI’s teaching activities, there are no teachings or courses specifically devoted to analytical practice of similar nature to those mentioned above for concentration practice.

The first category, meditations on the mind, such as meditation on the continuity of the mind, meditation on mind as knower, and meditation on the spacious clarity of the mind,³⁴⁹ do as their titles suggest. They bring the analytical function of the mind to bear on some aspect of itself. An example of a meditation belonging to the second category is the one given in class during the course on *Buddhism and Psychology* in 2003, as its practical component.³⁵⁰ The subject matter was the differences between Buddhism and Western Psychology in approach to the perception of phenomena, and the practical example was the perception of sound. The idea was to focus on sounds in the environment without labelling them, to be aware of the sound without any verbal or conceptual elaboration. Several people found it difficult to *hear* the sound without knowing what it was in advance, without the label or the concept for

³⁴⁷ Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Snow Lion Publications, volume 3, 2002, p14. The actual quote is “concentrations which involve one-pointedness on a virtuous object are classified with serenity”, and “virtuous cognitions that distinguish an ultimate or a conventional object are classified with insight”.

³⁴⁸ McDonald, *op.cit.*, p56.

³⁴⁹ See Appendix 4: *Meditations Taught in Mind and Its Potential*, the first module of *Discovering Buddhism*. The last three of these meditations are analytical meditations.

³⁵⁰ This was during the second class of six.

the sound, as if they needed to impose the label or concept onto the sound in order to make sense of it. Because of this, we were directed to focus on our breathing, and then transfer this awareness to the ears and focus on the sounds in the same way as before. Some people found this slightly easier. The point of the exercise was to draw our attention to how we perceive and conceive objects, and how much we depend on labels for ordering our perception of phenomena.³⁵¹ The teacher outlined the stages of this process as intention, attention, contact, feeling, and discrimination. This meditation had similarities to the Vipassana practice of bare attention, despite the fact that the mind was given an object to focus on, in that the process of deconstruction of experience functioned as a result of the mind's attention to its own constructing activities. This meditation can be seen to belong also to the third category, meditations on *emptiness*.

Meditations on emptiness are of two types: on the emptiness of the person, and on the emptiness of phenomena.³⁵² This class of meditation is designed to deconstruct our ordinary, conventional view of objects. The meditation above exemplifies such deconstruction in meditation as seeing through the way in which the mind labels objects, and then takes them to be the label, in other words, how the ignorant view is acquired.³⁵³ An example of a meditation on the emptiness of the self of some significance is the four-point analysis of *Ascertaining the Non-Existence of a Personal Self*. The four-point analysis consists of identifying the I as the object to be refuted, determining that it has to be either identical with or separate from the aggregates, considering its existence as one of the aggregates, and considering its possible existence as separate from the aggregates.³⁵⁴ This meditation was done in class, and during the retreat for *Discovering Buddhism* module 14, *The Wisdom of Emptiness*.³⁵⁵

Visualization practices may be used for the purposes of concentration and purification. The utilization of visualization in purification practices is for the purpose of creating and working with images of desired outcomes, such as the deities as aspects of our own enlightened nature.³⁵⁶ Of the four meditations outlined in Appendix 4, the first, the nine-round breathing meditation, is a purification practice. It employs the tantric symbolism of the channels, but is done as a *sutra* practice. Deity visualization can be used as a *sutra* or *tantra* practice. In teaching and meditation sessions, it is done as a *sutra* practice. Because practitioners must have taken the relevant tantric initiation in order to perform any deity visualization

³⁵¹ See Gen Lamrimpa. *Realizing Emptiness: Madhayaka Insight Meditation*, B. Alan Wallace translator, Ellen Posman editor, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, Boulder, Colorado, 2nd ed., 2002, pp47-48, for a discussion of how such construction processes occur.

³⁵² Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden. *Path to Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism*, Tushita Publications, Melbourne, 1993, p849.

³⁵³ See Gen Lamrimpa, 2002, *op.cit.*, pp47-48.

³⁵⁴ See McDonald, *op.cit.*, pp60-61, and Valham, 1997, *op.cit.*, pp77-80. See Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, 1993, *op.cit.*, pp849-60, for the background theory and reasoning to the meditation.

³⁵⁵ See Appendix 2.

³⁵⁶ This subject is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

as a tantric practice, which, in some classes of tantra, involves generating oneself as the deity, the deity visualizations are done in class as if the deity is external to the practitioner.³⁵⁷ As a sutra practice, deity visualization can be considered either a concentration or a purification practice. As the former, it is done with the purpose of making the visualization as clear and vivid as possible, and then holding this image for some time. In this way the image becomes the meditation object in place of the breath. The visualization as a purification practice utilizes the image held in concentration for the purpose of planting suggestions into the mind, or placing imprints into it.

The visualization is seen as made of pure light, luminescent and transparent. The deity is at the height of the forehead, as large as possible and facing the practitioner, at a distance of a body length. First the throne is visualized with details specific to the deity, followed by cushions or suitable ornaments. Then the deity is visualized, transparent and made of light, followed by the robes one inch from the body. Next the specific hand gestures are added, followed by implements such as bowls or bells. Finally, personal details such as hair, jewels and facial expressions complete the image. Prayers are recited while holding this image. Following this, the deity's mantra is recited during the active part of the visualization, such as visualizing light (of the appropriate colour) and nectar flowing from the deity's heart to the practitioners, entering and purifying their bodies, speech and mind; and purifying illness, negative karma and obscurations. The deity melts into light and is absorbed into the practitioner. That image may be held for some time. The practitioner may then make a short dedication. This is the basic outline of the deity visualization as it is practised at VI as a sutra or action tantra practice.³⁵⁸

The weekly meditation sessions provide new students with an opportunity to try the various techniques and to sample the practical and experiential dimensions to VI's religious activity. They also provide regular practitioners with the opportunity to develop their practice. The typical session takes about an hour, and includes three different meditations. The first is usually a concentration practice, focussing on the breath for about 10-15 minutes. The two following meditations are left to the teacher's discretion. This is often a visualization, for instance the nine-round

³⁵⁷ This difference was discussed by Geshe Dawa during his commentary on the Guru Yoga of Lama Tsong-kha-pa, a teaching given on 12 July 2003 at the Buddhist library in Camperdown. Also see Preece, R. *The Psychology of Buddhist Tantra*, Snow Lion, New York, 2006 p140. Preece describes this practice as it is done in Kriya, Action Tantra, the lowest of the four classes.

³⁵⁸ By far the most prevalent deity visualization used for teaching purposes is Sakyamuni Buddha, but Vajrasattva, because of his relationship with the function of mental purification, is used on occasion. Valham, 1997, *op.cit.*, pp1-4, contains a Sakyamuni Buddha visualization used as a Lam.Rim preliminary practice. The Centre's bookshop sells small publications which contain preliminary prayers and practices, and visualizations for certain deities. These are either sutra or Kriya (action) tantra practices. Examples are the practices of Shakyamuni Buddha (Wisdom Books, 1996), Vajrasattva (FPMT Education Services, 2003), Medicine Buddha (FPMT Education Services, 2002) and Green Tara (Kopan Monastery, 1991) *sadhanas*.

breathing purification, and a guided deity visualization such as Sakyamuni Buddha or Tara. While there is minimal doctrinal material presented in these sessions, I suspect that many newcomers, depending on their prior exposure to any form of Buddhism, would be struck by the detail and symbolic elaborateness in some of the visualizations, and the purpose of such practices. This was my experience on the first few occasions I attended the meditation sessions, which were my introduction to Tibetan Buddhist meditation.

VI runs several kinds of retreat. When and how often a type of retreat is run depends on the availability and interests of teachers. A *Lam Rim* and Chenrezig Retreat was organized by Tashi Choling Buddhist Institute and members of VI in January 2003 and 2004. On both occasions the teacher was Geshe Dawa. In each case the ten-day retreat comprised two parts. The first was a three-day *Lam Rim* retreat to introduce newer students to the fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism and to allow advanced students to deepen their understanding. The second part consisted of a four-armed Chenrezig initiation followed by a seven-day Chenrezig retreat, involving daily sessions of visualisations and recitation of the mantra *Om mani padme hung*, and commentaries by Geshe Dawa. Participants were permitted to attend either or both parts of the retreat. The retreat held in 2003 included an initiation of Amithaba, the Buddha of Infinite Light.³⁵⁹ Nyung Nae retreats are held periodically over several days.³⁶⁰ These retreats contain practices for accumulating merit and purifying obscurations. They include a period of fasting in which no food or water is taken. There are also retreats devoted to a specific meditation practice, such as nine-day Vipassana retreats, and the two-day Mindfulness retreat in December 2005, led by Venerable Antonio Satta. Most recently in November 2006, a week-long Shamatha retreat was led by B. Alan Wallace. This explored methods for developing calm-abiding, and included instruction in the practice of the Four Immeasurables: loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

5 Teachings and Courses

As discussed above, teachings fall roughly into two distinct styles: Western and traditional Tibetan. Although these two terms are generally not used in formal discourse as it appears in announcements and newsletters, some practitioners have used them in interview to distinguish between the two formats. Both involve listening to teachings from a teacher, and are ideally supplemented by private reading, study, contemplation and meditation. In other words, the principles taught in formal classes are to be understood more deeply through application in private reflection and meditation. The Western style includes the eighteen-month foundational course *Discovering Buddhism*, short courses of five-or-so weeks' duration, such as *Buddhism and Western Psychology*, one-day seminars and workshops, and the weekly meditation classes/sessions. The more traditional

³⁵⁹ This retreat was held from 4 January to 14 January 2003.

³⁶⁰ In 2005, one extended from the evening of Saturday 21 May until the morning of Tuesday 24.

Tibetan-style teachings are given by the resident Lama in Tibetan, and translated into English by a translator who is familiar with the teacher's style and the teaching itself, quite often a root text. The several differences between the two types of teaching affect the way in which, and the extent to which, one is exposed to the worldview of the tradition. These differences are the level of interaction between teacher and student during teachings, the inclusion of meditation practice in Western style teachings, and the amount of prior knowledge required for understanding by each.

The first difference is to do with the level of interaction between teacher and student. The Western style is reminiscent of a classroom where the teacher delivers a lesson which may include exercises, questions from students, and opportunities to clarify points of doctrine. Depending on the style of the teacher, these courses are interactive, engaging, and often fun. The traditional teachings are all of these things, but in a different way. Generally, the atmosphere is more sober and quieter. While a lama may set time aside for questions and answers, generally there are no spontaneous questions or comments from students. This is offset by providing discussion groups for the larger courses such as *Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. Here, students are free to raise topics and questions, clarify points and definitions, and discuss the content of their own experience, and share their own understandings and meanings with other participants.

The second difference is to do with the inclusion of meditation in the Western teachings. The traditional teachings do not contain meditation; with the exception of prayer, the entire time is devoted to teaching and listening. In Western teachings, a short meditation is included often after the preliminary prayers, and again before the concluding prayers and dedication of merit. Sometimes these meditations consist of focussing on the sensation of the breath at the nostrils for a few moments. At other times, after several minutes of watching the breath in order to concentrate the mind, the teacher reads a short passage or a short visualization. The feeling of one of the teachers is that when we listen in this way, we absorb the meaning more deeply. Ideally, the mind is quietened to a degree by the focus on the breath, where mental activity is slowed down and the flow of mental content is restricted, but the mind is still attentive to what is being said. This is a mixture of concentration and analytical meditation. When a meditation is used during a teaching, it is to illustrate a point or principle, and the type of meditation used depends on the topic being considered.

The third difference has to do with the level of prior knowledge or understanding needed by the student. In the Western-style teachings there is little assumed knowledge. Principles are elaborated in detail with more introductory explanation, and illustrated with examples from everyday life. Also, references for further reading are given, and use is made of the teaching aids discussed above, such as notes and handouts. The traditional-style teachings typically consist of the study of a root text over a considerable period of time, or the same kind of intensive study of an aspect of doctrine such as the Three Principles of the Path. Points are often

elaborated by discussing doctrinal and symbolic associations of aspects of the teaching. Compared to the first way, this may come across as a condensed shorthand of sets of meanings, but for a student with existing knowledge, it reinforces meaningful connections between different aspects of the teachings. While all are welcome and encouraged to attend these teachings, as will be discussed shortly, it requires some basic knowledge of Buddhist teachings in order to follow the flow of ideas more effectively.

5.1 Western-style Teachings

The Discovering Buddhism course, affectionately known as DB, consists of fourteen subject areas or *modules*, each of five to six weeks' duration. Listed in general order of presentation, they are: Mind and Its Potential; How to Meditate; Presenting the Path; The Spiritual Teacher; Death and Rebirth; All About Karma; Refuge in the Three Jewels; Establishing a Daily Practice; Samsara and Nirvana; How to Develop Bodhicitta; Transforming Problems; Wisdom of Emptiness; Introduction to Tantra; and Special Integration Experiences. As written in the introductory booklet for the course³⁶¹ and expressed by the teachers, the course is meant to be an introduction to Buddhism, and participants do not need to be Buddhist in order to benefit from the course. As the teacher of the first module *Mind and Its Potential* said on the first night of my attendance at a course, "The purpose of the course is to present Buddhist ideas, not to force people to become Buddhist."³⁶² According to the teachers the course is also designed to be practical, and meant to be applicable to everyday life. Each module lasts for five to six weeks of about one-and-a-half hours on one night a week. The following is an outline of such a night in a Discovering Buddhism module.

Students assemble in the *gompa*. They stand and bow as the teacher enters. After teachers finish their prostrations and sit down, those students who wish to prostrate do so. As mentioned above, prayers are recited and the motivation is set, usually in the manner previously outlined, but occasionally with a variation, such as a reflection about fitting personal motivation into the larger motivation of seeking enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Minds are settled by meditation for a few minutes. The bulk of the classtime is spent in teaching, and discussion, with exercises and further meditations depending on the nature of the class, of the night's topic. The content of teachings is supplemented and reinforced by the discussions and meditation exercises, wherein students both reflect on and apply the conceptual material. Many comments and anecdotes related during discussion are about how to deal with difficult people and situations, and about management of anger and other

³⁶¹ The introductory booklet, called *Discovering Buddhism*, was printed in 2001 by the FPMT Education Department, and is readily available from VI. It contains basic information about the course, and is distributed at the information night held before the commencement of every module.

³⁶² This was on the first night of the second cycle of the course, 13 July 2004.

strong feelings. Many of the answers and suggested strategies concern the practice of patience, compassion, and a view of emptiness in the sense of there being no self to hurt or to take offence. During my attendance of these modules, I observed a similarity of responses in class, the reason for which I suggest lies in what students would consider to be appropriate material for discussion in a class situation. After the setting of homework for the next week, usually reading and meditation exercises, there may be a prayer, but the merit gained by attendance at the teachings is dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings. This always completes the class, and precedes the departure of the teacher.

The last night of the module consists either of an examination or the giving of personal points of view (PPV), and usually both. The PPVs are reports about what students derived from the module, in the form either of essays or of statements about their gains from the course, and what they have liked and disliked. The teachers' purpose in this is to see how participants are reacting to the course and to gauge how they have understood the course content. Generally, people report how they have attempted to apply the principles in their daily lives, and what changes they have noticed in their own thinking, behaviour, and responses to living. This is often focussed on control or direction of their own impulsive responses—such as anger, and its expression or control—and their resulting actions.

Throughout the course that I attended it seemed that students were directed by what they considered appropriate, and always reported what they liked about the course content without revealing what they did not like or find interesting. However, I detected honesty in their reports of the concepts and teachings they did not understand. Usually, a week or so after a module has finished, there is a day or weekend non-residential retreat held at the Centre, consisting of meditations related to the course content.

This covers the course generally. In order to demonstrate how doctrine and practice is presented in teachings, two modules have been selected as examples. These are the fourteenth, *The Wisdom of Emptiness*, and the first, *Mind and Its Potential*, the last and first, respectively, of the first and second cycles of the complete courses. I shall examine how doctrine is demonstrated by discussion, exercises and practice, and therefore, what is available for learning and testing by the student. This will also give an indication of the depth to which these courses go in terms of doctrinal complexity. I also intend to use *Single-Pointed Concentration* as another example of a Western-style course. This course was held on three nights, and focussed exclusively on the practice of concentration and its doctrinal significance and underpinning.

5.2 Traditional-style Teachings

These run for the same time periods as the Western-style teachings, and are given by the resident lama. Examples to be explored are the Wednesday night teachings in

2004, *Atisha's Lamp for the Path* in terms of structure and content of the classes, and their accompanying Friday discussion groups facilitated by Lyndon Brown. I shall also discuss the *Basic Program* which began in 2004. This is meant to give an overview of the entire Gelugpa system, but in more detail than the *Discovering Buddhism* course. In the discussion evening held on 4 March 2004, the content and expectations of the course were outlined. The discussion group for this course is held just prior to the teachings on Thursday nights. This is largely revision of theory in the form of a clarification of meanings of key terms and ideas. It is not intended for the discussion of personal experience.

As discussed above, people are welcome to attend whichever activity they wish. Generally though, people new to the Centre will choose a meditation session or a teaching rather than a *puja*, or a *sutra* recitation. Many attend *Discovering Buddhism* early on, and sometimes one of Geshe Samten's teachings. Whichever teaching they attend first, experimental participation can be seen to begin immediately. From the vantage of role theory, participants begin to learn by assuming the role of student, whose purpose is to learn about the Tibetan Buddhist path as presented by the FPMT. This entails participation in teachings, exercises, discussion groups, and private study and practice, or effectively, everything outlined above. A participant first encounters the ritual elements that accompany teachings.³⁶³ They see others bow as the teacher enters the *gompa*, and regardless of how they feel about it, they follow suit. Then they see others prostrating and praying. During the teaching or meditation session, they encounter Buddhist ideas that may be familiar or unfamiliar. Understanding of the material is supplemented and reinforced by discussions and meditation exercises, wherein the student both reflects on and applies the Buddhist principles to the task of dealing with and transforming problems.

According to the belief system itself, the course content and the ritual structure are meant to initiate and perpetuate mental transformation in the participant, as are the reading and practice to be done privately as 'homework'. Seen from the perspective of the organization, the benefit of learning to utilize these teachings is that, whether individuals become committed Buddhists and members of the Centre's community or not, they will be better equipped to live their lives with less 'suffering'. From the researcher's perspective, the participant-explorer ideally derives an understanding of the worldview and the practical application of its principles, which results in their socialization into the shared reality of the FPMT. The rest of this Chapter addresses the learning aspect of socialization in terms of the way that students acquire a

³⁶³ See Wilson, S. "Becoming a Yogi: Resocialization and Deconditioning as Conversion Processes", in *Sociological Analysis* 45 [4], pp301-14, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1984 p305. Wilson discusses the experimental use of ritual actions as sources of identity change. Wilson's description of initial commitment at the ashram suggests that new people's willingness to experiment provides possible ways of bringing about changes they are seeking.

working knowledge of this shared reality through their involvement in VI's activities.

6 The Participant's Journey: Exploration and Learning

Understanding the learning phase of socialization involves understanding the students' means of access to and apprehension of the perspective. As a novice student as well as a participant-observer I experienced what is encountered by a new participant who is beginning regular attendance at teachings. With time, and exposure to doctrine and practice, a student begins to acquire a structure of assumptions about the nature of reality and the self from an FPMT perspective. However, the doctrinal material takes time to acquire, absorb and understand, and this process of acquisition and comprehension is affected by a number of factors.

The first consideration is how learning is affected by the choice of courses to attend, or how the range of teachings and activities to choose from facilitates exposure to the perspective. Although there is uniformity of teaching style for each class type, the fact that people are free to attend whatever they wish means that they are free to engage with the centre in a variety of ways. Elements of this consideration are how participants begin to explore, what brings them to the centre, why they stay, and what determines their level of participation. There is also the question of how well one relates to the various notions and frameworks of meaning. Do specific ideas 'feel right' or 'gel with' an individual? As we shall see, some concepts are found to be confusing.³⁶⁴

In the same way, we must consider students' responses to the practical or ritual elements of the shared reality. Compared with the sparse ritual dimension to the activities of BMIMC, the ritual activity of Vajrayana Institute appears much more complex and esoteric. A student attends a teaching and encounters an array of prayers in Tibetan or English or both languages, and while the prayer sheets have the prayers in both languages so that the English translations can be followed, it must take some time before the prayers begin to feel familiar, or indeed, to mean anything. A student attends a meditation class (as I did), where the instructions are clear enough, but come the visualization of a deity, it is full of previously unencountered symbolism. This raises the question of how people begin to relate to the ritualistic elements of the Tibetan Buddhist worldview, including the recitation of sutras for specific purposes. Some explanations of ritual practice struck me initially as appealing to *magical* reinterpretations of cause and effect, especially the idea of accruing merit (to be discussed). Generally, people acquire the meanings of ritual actions and symbolism as they interact with older students, and are given the chance

³⁶⁴ There are other related considerations here, such as how one learns to apply the principles through private study and practice, which are the domain of Chapter 5.

to ask questions to clarify their understanding at the occasional classes and short courses on ritual and practice.

6.1 Acquiring an Understanding of the Shared Reality

After some period of involvement with the Centre and engagement with the teachings, it becomes apparent that the teachings and practices contain a congruence of doctrinal stance and meaning. This congruence is not apparent at first. It takes some time to gather enough of a framework of ideas and their meanings through classwork, practice sessions, question-and-answer sessions and the like for that to become so. Social constructionists argue that an individual encounters a culture's or a group's shared reality as a *taken-for-granted* reality, a self-evident fact. One's acceptance of and engagement with this reality-view perpetuates its seeming self-evidence.³⁶⁵ It follows that the shared reality of the FPMT and VI is perpetuated through the continual teaching, apprehension, internalization and embodiment, in thought and action, of the Gelugpa Tibetan worldview as outlined in the Lam Rim. Apprehension of this taken-for-granted reality by a student-practitioner is as a coherent and self-supporting interpretive framework for experience. We shall see that as students begin to test the doctrinal precepts against their experience, and find them to be useful interpretive tools for thought and action, their faith in the validity of the framework—the shared reality—is strengthened. This in turn strengthens the intention to take the Buddhist worldview and path more seriously, and to explore it more thoroughly.³⁶⁶

In order to see how the student begins to explore the teachings and to perceive elements of doctrine as a coherent interpretive framework for experience, it is necessary to understand how students build and organize their stock of knowledge, and why. The meaning and significance that they attribute to specific topics, concepts, and doctrines accords with their understanding of them, and meditation practice and experience is material to their learning, apprehension and comprehension of the teachings. For this reason, what I have referred to as a basic framework of doctrinal notions is outlined and discussed at the end of this Chapter to define the basal premises that a student must begin to understand in order to make sense of the Vajrayana path and its practices.

6.1.1 Acquisition and Apprehension of the Framework

The participant-student is free to choose which courses and teachings to attend. There is no fixed order or curriculum to follow. Typically, the students and practitioners that I interviewed had attended some Western-style and traditional-

³⁶⁵ See Berger, P, and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York, 1966.

³⁶⁶ This validation process through test and evaluation is heavily implicated in students' decisions to take refuge and become Buddhist. This will be explored in Chapter 6.

style teachings. Most had done some of the Discovering Buddhism course. Those who had been involved with the Centre since before 2002, when Discovering Buddhism began, had taken other beginners' courses, and moved on to some of the more advanced courses. Some students had attended the regular meditation classes for a time. In the main, however, students and practitioners tend to go to 'teachings' rather than the weekly meditation sessions or the infrequent courses on meditation (not including the specialized meditation retreats held every so often). AN, who had been coming to VI regularly for about six months at the time of interview, had attended the ten-day *Introduction to Buddhism* course at Kopan Monastery during his travel through Asia. Since his return to Australia and becoming involved with the centre, he had attended a few of the weekend classes, four of the *Discovering Buddhism* modules: Karma, Samsara and Nirvana, How to Develop Bodhicitta, and Transforming Problems, and taken part in some traditional-style teachings: *Atisha's Lamp for the Path*, and the *Thirty Seven Practices of the Bodhisattva*. Such patterns of attendance demonstrate that people try, as part of their exploration of the belief system, a variety of the teachings offered at VI.

6.1.2 "Repetition, Reinforcement, Response"

Learning can be facilitated by repetition: hearing the same information expressed in different ways during continual attendance at teachings until a sense of familiarity with the concepts and their interconnections begins to grow. Some students refer to 'levels' of understanding, for instance, CR:

GE: It's really interesting that you've drawn the distinction between the more traditional and the more Western-focussed teachings.

CR: Yeah, they're both fantastic; they both support each other. In the end it's the more traditional teachings that are the real essence of it, once you get into more serious study.

GE: That's interesting. Can I ask you a question, and you tell me if I'm on the right track? Is it fair to say that the Western style allowed you deeper access so that you could appreciate the more Tibetan style of teaching?

CR: I wouldn't necessarily say it was that, because I think with the Tibetan one, it was just attending those again and again and again, and doing reading, that I got used to the style. I started to understand the terminology, and I started to realize that everytime I heard a teaching, it was presented in a slightly different way, and I always got something from it. I would understand something each time that I mightn't have understood before. I also started to understand the role of imprints, and so I would go to teachings, even though I felt like I wouldn't be able to understand it, for the imprint, so the next time I'd understand a bit more, and the next time a bit more, and some of the quite difficult teachings I've been able to get a bit of an understanding of through that, just going back and listening again and again. So it just kind of goes along

on its own, and it does talk about the practical as well. Because Buddhism is very practical, but it's like they go hand-in-hand. The Western teachings are particularly good for when you are a beginner though. But I went to both hand-in-hand. I didn't feel like I needed to go to one and not the other, although there were times when Geshe-la might have been teaching on something. I do remember times when I went and thought, "I haven't got a clue what this is about", and so I might not go back on that night. They might have offered an introductory course, and then I would have done that. I did some of the introductory courses a couple of times. It was good having teachings on different levels on offer, and it's such a completely different style you can't really compare them.

This excerpt exemplifies the way in which students choose courses in order to flesh out their own understanding and therefore negotiate or direct their own learning. They are prepared to keep attending teachings and courses in the faith that they, by understanding a little at a time, eventually arrive at a clearer understanding of the whole teaching. The excerpt also shows how the notion of *karmic imprints* may be employed as a mental strategy to cope with the feeling of not understanding a teaching.³⁶⁷ They maintain that listening to a teaching will benefit them on some level even if they are not understanding what they are hearing at the time. MM offers an appraisal of her own learning process.

MM: The first course I did was on thought transformation, the seven point mind training, you know, all sentient beings have been my mother³⁶⁸, the equalizing self with others. So I did that and at least I got an intellectual understanding of it because the way it seems to work for me is, because I've got a strong intellectual study background, I seem to need to get an intellectual handle on things first, see how it works and then it will percolate down to the heartfelt level, that seems useful for me. Sometimes I'll get realizations through somebody saying something out of the *sutras*, and I'll think, "Oh yeah. Wow." Often I need this kind of intellectual overview, and then it will percolate down to something that can become a heartfelt practice.

NJ relates that her initial response to teachings at Vajrayana Institute had intellectual, intuitive and strong emotional dimensions. She had been discussing, with a friend, the possibility of taking refuge.

NJ: I remember him saying to me the day after September 11, there was going to be a refuge ceremony at VI, and he said, "You need to take refuge", and I thought, "Yep. That's the right thing to do", and so I did.

GE: How much did you understand of the Buddhist teachings at that stage?

³⁶⁷ Notions such as *karmic imprints* are described at the end of the chapter, as part of the *acquired and apprehended* framework that one begins, with time and experience, to put together.

³⁶⁸ Valham, *op.cit.*, p58. This meditation is classed as a practice for generating *Bodhicitta*.

NJ: I'd done the introductory *Lam Rim* course.

GE: Can you remember what it covered?

NJ: Yeah. Things like, um, the Four Noble Truths, teachings about death, (and) there was a short thing about Tantric practice. There's *karma* and rebirth—it was *Lam Rim*—so it covers the basics, renunciation and *bodhicitta* and wisdom, yeah, and I had a basic idea.

GE: So it tends to give you the basics.

NJ: Yeah the foundation, the structure, but, it just seemed to me, actually I'd never actually connected to something that made as much sense. It really made lots of sense to me, and it made sense with a lot of things I'd thought previously, and I had read about Tibetan Buddhism before all of these things happened years ago. I went to Tibet about seven or eight years ago, and before I went, I read some stuff about Tibetan culture, and I'd read the Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, and I'd read a few other books about Tibetan Buddhism, so I'd had a little bit of an idea, but it was more like a ... this was the first thing I'd come across that had made sense to decide that you fitted into it. I don't know how to put that, really.

GE: So if I understand what you're saying, you got a certain sense of what it was about from the *Lam Rim* teachings?

NJ: Look I don't know. The word intuition isn't a great word, but I think it was much more of an intuitive thing than an intellectual thing. I trust it, the *Lam Rim* made sense, it just made sense, the Buddha, these teachings make sense, they are very practical and useful.

As the three examples above demonstrate, participation in activities and exploration of the material is not directed by mere curiosity. For many, the impetus for further exploration of the teachings is provided by the strong response they had to their first teaching. This teaching provided a solution to a problem they were experiencing, even if awareness of the problem itself, or the extent to which they wanted help with it emerged only while they listened to the teaching. The following examples illustrate how instrumental, because of the intensity of the effect it has on the individual, a first teaching can be in a decision to explore Buddhism. CR recalls her first teaching, the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*.

CR: Anyway, we came and there was a monk teaching, a Western monk, and he was teaching on the Eight Verses of Thought Transformation. It was fantastic. The whole concept was to cherish and to hold most dear the person who has harmed you, you know, the person you've been really kind to who's then harmed you in turn. They're the most precious treasure to be able to see them like this. And I just had this feeling of relief. I thought "Oh! This is the place.

This is what I need to hear.” I love those Eight Verses of Thought Transformation.

GE: It’s really significant, because the impression I’m getting is that you knew how you wanted to deal with it, but you needed validation in some way?

CR: I needed to know how. I knew I didn’t want to hate him, but I didn’t know how not to be caught up in anger. You know ... how exactly to deal with it, and then I walked in and here’s this person talking exactly about that thing, coming to this state of equanimity, and I wanted that with everything, not just with this, but with anything that comes your way in life, whether it’s good or bad. To be in this place, not where you’re indifferent, but where you’re not going up and down like a roller coaster. You’re able to just enjoy things that are there to be enjoyed, but not in a way that makes you attaching and grasping at them, and then ends up causing you more suffering.

And similiarly, another respondent recounted:

RI: The first time I went to VI it was with Geshe Dawa teaching. But I remember clearly, when something popped, feeling very uncomfortable ... this guy talking in Tibetan. I didn’t like being there, felt very embarrassed. So I listened, and tried to listen patiently. Don’t know what the subject was. Actually the topic was anger. Seemed like he was looking at me. Geshe Dawa was basically saying ... it was like he was talking to me and saying ... but the real thing that blew my mind was when he was talking about anger and antidotes, and I had no idea that there were antidotes to anger, various ways to get rid of anger, use antidotes, patience. Wow. Of course patience is the antidote to anger. Impatience is a lack of patience. I just have to be more patient, and I went away thinking, “Wow. A lot of that stuff’s really weird, but that guy really knows what he’s talking about.”

These excerpts illustrate how the individuals concerned responded to teachings that showed them how to deal with difficult emotions. That below outlines AN’s response to the ten-day introductory course at Kopan monastery, to discovering the philosophical and ethical frameworks supporting Buddhist meditation practice. His prior exposure to meditation had been superficial and limited.

AN: But once I went to Kopan I got a bit of exposure, she (the teacher) just basically ran through a lot of different teachings about *bodhicitta*. That was the first time I’d heard about that, and the concept of exchanging self for others and the concept of thinking of others as your mother. And we went into reincarnation, which before that I thought was just a cool idea but didn’t realize there was a whole system of logic behind it and that it really is an argument and not just a New Age catchcry. And so I really got wind of the fact that there is real substance to the study behind it, and it’s not as airy-fairy as images I’d had of it before, and so that sparked off the intellectual side of me that thought,

“Oh. I want to learn more, and it’s not all just waffle. There’s serious stuff here.”

The experiences recounted above, and others recounted in interview, all indicate that the student’s perception of an underlying depth and structure to the belief system, and an underlying truth demonstrated by their own experience of its applicability to their situation, is instrumental in their desire to explore further. For all practitioners, it seems that information is taken in conditionally: conditional upon being shown to be of value, and to be effective in terms of dealing with experience. From here, certain core doctrinal concepts are explored, and incorporated into a stock of knowledge through the process of applying it to a life problem. It is when people hear a teaching, and realize that it applies to some issue or problem in their lives, that the internalization process, the process of making the information *their information*, is begun. These are the concepts that are mentioned as either significant for them, or the exploration and understanding of which has been integral in their initial socialization and later commitment processes.³⁶⁹ When participants have seen both how a teaching or principle can be applied to a problem and be shown to frame experience in a constructive way, they then wish to understand the Buddhist teachings in a more holistic way.

After a time, when some confidence in the belief system has been acquired, it seems that the experiential testing may not be so intense, and students tend to look for coherence between aspects of the belief system as an interpretive framework. At this stage the various ideas must have some meaningful connection between them. Despite the fact that many do not recall their own exploration process in this way, that is, when they began to perceive doctrine as an integrated whole, the content of people’s conversations within the centre shows that this happens. In interview, I asked questions about students’ encounters with Buddhism and Vajrayana Institute, what courses they had done, which they responded to, and how they related to the Buddhist concepts and ideas. Respondents typically found these questions easy to answer. The answers were typically about concepts encountered early, concepts that are either easy or hard to understand, and especially about those that were remembered as being significant because of their practical value, as related above. For instance, MM’s answers included finding the teachings about *karma* ‘hard’ because ‘I have no concrete or tangible proof of it’ (referring to reincarnation), but, because of the way that her reasoning led her to this conclusion, she had no doubt that karma exists in this lifetime. Other important concepts were the six perfections, especially patience, and Bodhicitta motivation. When MM’s entire transcript is examined it can be seen that these are the principles that have helped her reframe her life experience more positively.

³⁶⁹ This can be seen in the interview transcripts of CR and AN specifically.

While not all practitioners demonstrated clear recall of the order of courses they attended, or how their knowledge was acquired, and therefore how concepts began to form a framework, all of the responses discussed above highlight the importance of the way in which concepts were most relevant to dealing with, understanding, and framing their life experience, both immediately and in the long term. So the researcher's question as to how and why students have accumulated a stock of knowledge, how concepts and frameworks are acquired and built on, is answered in terms of problem-solving at first, and then in terms of more general meaning-seeking.

An example of how such recall may exist for a practitioner, of how they may build a working understanding of the path, how their choice of courses and reading material enables them to build on acquired knowledge, is provided by NC. He recalls his early involvement with the Centre's teachings, and the way in which he began to explore and assimilate elements of the doctrinal framework. In 2003 he began attending the Centre, and took the six-week course on Buddhism and Psychology. He then began *Discovering Buddhism*, and completed the modules Introduction to Tantra, Emptiness, Mind and Its Potential, How to Meditate, and Presenting the Path. Before and during this time he had read the Dalai Lama's book on the Lam Rim, the *Path of Bliss* more than once, and had used Kathleen McDonald's book *How To Meditate* intensively for three months. He said to me that ideas about Tantra had suggested the importance of revising renunciation and *bodhicitta*, doctrinal elements he had become familiar with from reading the Path of Bliss. He said, "Introduction to Tantra made me want to go back and get a closer look at Renunciation and Bodhicitta", and further, "Tantra is a really powerful tool to use, but to use it properly, it is important to have these basics of renunciation, *bodhicitta* and emptiness sorted out at least to some degree".

At interview we had a lengthy discussion about how desire is seen from the Tantric perspective, so I think he means to go back and see what renunciation means and how it fits with the Tantric path and view. Teachings from the Introduction to Tantra module, and from the traditional teachings he was concurrently attending on Saturday afternoons,³⁷⁰ were raising questions for him around the correct view of desire, including the use of sexual energy.

6.1.3 An Essential Framework and Its Components

By taking part in teachings and activities, students begin to acquire the stock of knowledge with which to form an interpretive framework for further teachings, for more-complex Buddhist philosophy and for life experience. Throughout my

³⁷⁰ *Introduction to Tantra* began on 27 January 2004. The Saturday afternoon teachings, by Geshe Samten, were on the *Three Principles of the Path* in January, and on the *Thirty Seven Practices of the Bodhisattva* in February.

participant-observation I noticed that certain principles and concepts were dominant and most meaningful in formal discourse, conversation, and interview. They were repeated often in class, and appeared to give most meaning to the material presented in teachings by supporting other points of doctrine and the reasoning behind the Centre's ritual activity. The ideas outlined below are proper to Mahayana thought as it is understood within that system. I have not discussed basic Buddhist doctrine such as the Four Noble Truths, but only the notions that are crucial to an understanding of the viewpoints of this school. All of the notions below fall under one or other of three headings: the three Principles of the Path, the Nature of Mind and Mental Purification, and the Role of the Teacher.³⁷¹ The layout and explanation of the core notions not only reflect what I believe that students need to comprehend as a minimum in order to make sense of doctrine and practice, but also reflect what I found that I needed to clarify for myself before the entire curriculum fell into place.

The three principles of the path are *renunciation*, *bodhicitta*, and correct view or *wisdom-realizing-emptiness*. They are three qualities or attributes of the Mahayana practitioner that need to be developed in order to reach enlightenment. A cornerstone of Buddhist thought is that Samsaric life is characterized by suffering. The basis for the motivation to develop these principles is in understanding the nature of suffering. Renunciation and bodhicitta are defined by Powers as the definite intention to leave cyclic existence, and generating the intention to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, respectively.³⁷²

Part of the commentary to the Medicine Buddha Initiation conferred by Geshe Dawa in 2005 addressed the principle and practice of developing renunciation from the experience and understanding of the suffering nature of samsara.³⁷³ The Geshe's translator began by stating that the sutric or tantric practitioner should have three qualities: renunciation, bodhicitta, and right view. Renunciation should be a definite conviction: 'When one thinks about the suffering nature of Samsara, one develops renunciation.' 'It is hard to develop renunciation if you do not see the suffering nature of Samsara.' He went on to say that when one experiences difficulty and hard situations, one wants to get out of them. The Mahayana teaching maintains that when one can see similar situations in others, this transforms slowly into Bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is developed with the method of lovingkindness and compassion. In the same way that one's understanding of renunciation is the path to liberation, one's development of bodhicitta is the 'path to the perfect state of enlightenment'. Throughout my involvement with VI, I found that students understood these two concepts easily enough—and were willing to accept them as motivations for practice

³⁷¹ In his section on distinctive Gelugpa practices, Powers outlines roughly the same doctrinal points: the three principles of the path, how to develop compassion, and the nature of mind. He goes over these sections in more detail. See Powers, *op.cit.*, pp416-29.

³⁷² Powers, *op.cit.*, p417.

³⁷³ This initiation took place on 30 April 2005, at the Buddhist Library in Camperdown, Sydney.

quite quickly—because they related to the doctrine of the suffering nature of samsara, which made sense in terms of their own life experiences.

Emptiness and compassion are the two characteristics of the enlightened mind of the buddha. Powers relates that, in Tsong-kha-pa's view, training in wisdom and the cultivation of compassion are associated,³⁷⁴ and indeed this is constantly reinforced as a fundamental principle in teachings. Although the term 'emptiness' refers to the lack of inherent existence of all dependently originated phenomena, the term is most commonly used in discourse to signify the *emptiness of self* of any inherent existence. The Gelugpa refer to emptiness and dependent origination as the absolute and relative view of phenomena generally, including the self. In *Discovering Buddhism*, students were encouraged to think of a phenomenon in terms of dependent origination, expressed as 'View it as a dependent origination, dependently arisen through causes and conditions'. Similarly, with the self, the absolute view is emptiness. The relative view, the self as dependently originated, is represented doctrinally by the aggregates and dependent origination.³⁷⁵ The 'I' that appears as permanent and self-existent in one's ordinary experience, labelled the ego in Western psychology, is imputed onto the aggregates. The enlightened view is seeing this 'I' as a construction, as being empty of inherent existence, as the product of the interdependent interaction of the aggregates.

Meditations on emptiness are outlined in the literature, and sometimes taught and practised in teachings. However, little reference was made to them in interview. When practitioners were asked about which Buddhist concepts they responded to, or that had significance for them, a notable absence was the concept of Emptiness. Instead, they spoke of *karma* and *reincarnation*, thought transformation and *bodhicitta*. The answer to this may lie in the fact that people try to work with the notion of emptiness conceptually, and this is hard to do when one does not have a clear sense of the term. When discussion has focussed on the notion of emptiness in teachings, students typically refer to the emptiness of self, and the way in which this idea of no permanent or essentially-existing self may be used as a mental strategy for stopping one's 'self-cherishing' and defensiveness in relationships with others, especially during conflict. This strategy suggests that doctrinal notions need to be applicable to one's circumstances. Students appear to relate more easily to terms such as *karma*, and spiritual aspirations such as thought transformation and *bodhicitta*, that are more applicable to the interpretation of their immediate experience. In addition, as the section on meditations taught and practised at Vajrayana institute indicated, analytical meditation tends to be overshadowed by concentration and visualization practices, which may be perceived as being more directly applicable to managing one's mental and emotional life.

³⁷⁴ Powers, *op.cit.*, p426.

³⁷⁵ This subject will be discussed at length in Chapter 5, which is devoted to the techniques and results of self-transformation.

Gilgen and Cho believed that reasonable agreement exists among scholars that the Eastern system is monistic or non-dualistic in nature, and the Western outlook is primarily dualistic.³⁷⁶ In the West there is a tendency to think in terms of a Creator and a created,³⁷⁷ and as will be noted in Chapter 6, almost without exception, the students and practitioners that I interviewed came from Christian backgrounds. The notion of emptiness is conceptually abstract, and according to doctrine, not amenable to immediate meditative exploration

In many of the teachings I have attended, the nature of mind is defined as clear and knowing. Clarity in this context means the capacity of the mind to perceive the emptiness of existence.³⁷⁸ The teachings hold that to come to know one's own mind as clear and knowing, one must purify one's mindstream and accumulate merit.³⁷⁹ Several sources cite Manjushri's advice to Lama Tsong-kha-pa: "To attain spiritual realizations one must combine meditation on the path to enlightenment with purification, accumulation of merit, and praying to one's guru as a Buddha".³⁸⁰ The accepted wisdom of practitioners is that the attainment of enlightenment does not occur by study and meditation alone, but must be accompanied by actions that result in mental purification and merit accumulation. Terms such as these: karmic imprints, karmic seeds and the conditions for their ripening, creating merit, removing obscurations, purifying, and the mindstream or mental continuum are heard frequently in teachings and in conversations at VI, and form part of its discourse. What struck me, as both a participant observer and a religious seeker, was the ambiguity with which these terms were often used. It became evident that in order to understand the reasoning behind the idea of mental purification that is embodied in many of the practices, one must understand its relationship the notion of *karma*.

³⁷⁶ Gilgen, A, and Cho, J. "Questionnaire to Measure Eastern and Western Thought", in *Psychological Reports* 44, pp. 835-41, Psychological Reports, 1979. p835.

³⁷⁷ This point was explored by Geshe Samten in the refuge ceremony that took place on 19 June 2005. See Appendix 7 for an outline of his commentary.

³⁷⁸ In the *Buddhism and Western Psychology* course held in 2003, this subject was discussed from the Buddhist and Western psychological perspectives on the first night, where the clear and knowing nature of mind was contrasted with Western scientific realism. Other courses such as *Mind and Mental Events* go into the nature of mind and awareness in great depth. One such course which took place on Mondays between 8 September and 27 October 2003, studied traditional Awareness and Knowledge texts (Lo Rig) as presented in *Mind in Tibetan Buddhism* by Venerable Lati Rinpoche and other sources.

³⁷⁹ See Thubten Yeshe. *Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2004, pp131-32. Geshe Dawa's commentary on the Lam.Rim, given over two and a half-days during the second annual Lam Rim and Four-Armed Chenrezig retreat in January 2004, discussed the purification of negative karma and the accumulation of merit as significant aspects of the path to enlightenment.

³⁸⁰ See Ribush in the Editor's Introduction, Lama Thubten Yeshe, 2004, *op.cit.*, pp1-4. See also Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, *Wish-Fulfilling Golden Sun*, 2000, p 10; McDonald, *op.cit.*, p150.

The doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation and their relationship to the nature of cyclic existence and its six realms are referred to frequently in teachings. However, the notion implicit in the use of terms such as creating karmic imprints, accruing merit, and removing obscurations to omniscience, is that of the mindstream or mental continuum, which is the agent which carries *karma* from one life to the next, and therefore creates the conditions for future lives. This continuum is affected by *karma*, and while it is clear and knowing, this nature is obscured by karmic imprints caused by unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind. In order to reveal this clear and knowing nature of mind, the mental continuum must be purified of obscurations or karmic imprints. Before this process is described it must be pointed out that, in this Western Buddhist context, there is a way in which the notions of *karma* and reincarnation may be isolated from each other. Some of the practitioners I have interviewed stated that they ‘have trouble with reincarnation’, although they appear to accept the notion of *karma*. The following shows how some students may accept the notion of *karma* without necessarily accepting the doctrine of reincarnation:

MM: The ones I find hard are the teachings on *karma*, and yet at the same time, strangely, I find it difficult because I have no concrete or tangible proof of it, beyond what I’ve already told you. And I’m at the point, like a lot of the teachers say, “You may as well behave as if *karma* exists, because if at the end of your life you’ve done that, you’ve lived an ethical life. If it did exist, and you got to the end of your life and you’d behaved as if it didn’t, then you’d be in a lot of suffering.” That’s something I could get my head around. But I have no doubt in my mind that *karma* exists in this lifetime. I’ve got to the point, particularly with anger—I think this is very much a stage of my own practice—that if I let fly with my partner, I think I suffer more than he does. And it motivates me to do something about it. I can see that any action has a result.”

GE: So, it’s not *karma* you have an issue with so much as reincarnation?

MM: Yes, that’s right. I think a lot of Westerners would be similar to me. If I’ve come to appreciate other things as being true for myself through experience, probably further down the track, and I suspect you need to be a long-term practitioner before you can do that, that will reveal itself to me too, and it will reveal itself in a way that’s appropriate. So I’m willing to say that I’ve got an open mind on reincarnation, but certainly that in this lifetime, yes, I can see *karma* happening. The part I find consoling about *karma*, I mean I find I go through things now where I still get into ‘poor me’ victim stuff when something gross happens to me, but now at least further down the track maybe at two or three weeks distance I think but actually *karma* does give me succour about this.

Another practitioner said, “Well, to be a Buddhist, you have to believe in reincarnation. It makes the whole thing work”. The terms *karma* and reincarnation have become virtually part of the language. While Westerners in general have become familiar with them, and many may even entertain a belief in them as

Campbell suggests,³⁸¹ the transcript excerpt above illustrates that students question concepts and doctrines that they encounter, and do not accept them blindly. It also shows that they are capable of discriminating between notions that appeal directly to their experience and reasoning, and those that they find unsupportable, at least initially. The way that *karma* may be conceptually isolated from reincarnation, from a Western practitioner's perspective, is understandable in terms of the narrative of purification, or revealing an essential nature within oneself, which underpins much Western alternative spirituality. While there may be a seeming contradiction between a conditional acceptance of the emptiness of self and the purification of something pure that has become defiled, this in itself indicates the way in which the mind will attempt to make sense of new material according to existing understandings. For many with a Christian background, it makes sense to leave reincarnation out of the picture initially, and come to terms with a purification process in the context of one lifetime.

Many of the practices are for the purpose of accumulating merit. It was said by one teacher, that while the idea of merit was 'complex', simply expressed, "It puts positive tendencies put on the mind".³⁸² In teachings and in casual conversations, it is express that just hearing a teaching accrues merit, purifies negative *karma*, and 'gives you the imprint' so that one can have deeper realizations. One may generate merit through all good action and receive it through past good actions. I have felt on occasion that the two notions, accumulation of merit and mental purification, are used somewhat interchangeably in a form of mental shorthand, to express the idea that progress on the path involves some positive and committed action on the part of the aspirant. While one may get the impression that the understanding of merit and its accumulation is akin to the idea of a 'piggy-bank', where merit from wholesome action is accumulated to offset negative karma accumulated by unwholesome action, I suspect that practitioners' understandings come to be more in terms of the affect of actions on one's mindstream or mental continuum. Although the notion of accumulating merit and the ways of doing this are referred to frequently, the notion and process of purification is given much more formal treatment in doctrine and teachings.

Whenever I have heard the notion of purification being spoken about at the centre, I have tended to think of transforming mental tendencies, our habitual responses to

³⁸¹ See Campbell, C. "The Easternization of the West", in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, pp. 35-48, Routledge, 1999. Campbell linked clusters of terms entering the English language to do with both environmentalism and consciousness-raising with the rise of new social movements. Specifically, he believes a connection exists between the rise of mystical religion over church and sect religion as defined by Troeltsch, and the increase of belief in a life-force and in reincarnation.

³⁸² This comment was made during *Practice and Ritual Teachings*, devoted to questions and answers about why certain things are done, on Monday 20 June 2005.

things. I asked CR, “If I said two words to you, (attaining) enlightenment, or purification? Are they the same thing, or are they different?” She responded:

CR: Ah, I haven’t really talked about purification. Actually, they’re different. Purification is one of the things on the way to enlightenment. So on the one hand you are ... I’ve been talking about developing qualities. But the other thing you’re doing is purifying negativities, so, the less room there is for negativities the more room for positive qualities, and that is something that is really important to me because there are things that I’ve done in my past. And one of the things that’s really great about Buddhism is this idea that there’s no karma that’s too heavy that it can’t be purified. But it’s also an idea that’s different to Catholicism. Whereas in Catholicism you were going to someone and confessing your sins, but you were asking for forgiveness from an outside God, and then boomf! The forgiveness would come down on you or whatever. Now, sometimes with Buddhist purification practices it might look to an outsider that it’s the same thing. You know, say, you’re doing your Vajrasattva purification practice and you’re visualizing the deity on the crown of your head and raining down nectar and purifying. In fact all of the visualizations that you do of a deity do involve that aspect of being purified of negativities.

With respect to the process of purification, in teachings reference is often made to the Four Opponent Powers. These are: the power of dependence or reliance, the power of regret or release, the power of the remedy, and the power of restraint. The power of reliance is going for refuge and generating *bodhicitta*. In this way, the object of refuge, the three jewels, becomes the object of non-generation of non-virtuous *karma*, and refuge becomes a foundation of purification. The idea behind the power of regret is that the nature of regretting non-virtuous action is virtuous. The power of application of the antidote involves dedicating one’s virtue, obtained by performing practices—ideally several practised simultaneously—towards purifying non-virtuous *karma*. These practices include meditating on *bodhicitta* or emptiness, reciting *sutras* or *mantras*, making prostrations and building *stupas*. The power of the promise means to promise to oneself not to engage in the negative action again.³⁸³

From this it can be seen that all of the meditations and ritual practices described above are purificatory actions. What determines their efficacy from the Mahayana perspective is the motivation with which they are done. Any action may be considered a small, medium, or large scope practice, depending as one’s motivation is for a better rebirth, liberation from *samsara*, or attainment of enlightenment to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings. In a sense, the impression that purification in all its ways is valued more highly than meditation may be conveyed by Ribush’s statement that, “Without purifying your mind to prepare it for spiritual realizations, you will make little progress toward enlightenment.”³⁸⁴ I have heard

³⁸³ The four opponent powers are explained in Lama Yeshe, 2004, *op.cit.*, pp11-14. These comments were made as part of Geshe Dawa’s teaching during the Lam Rim retreat, in January 2004.

³⁸⁴ Ribush, in Thubten Yeshe, 2004, *op.cit.*, ppxx.

this expressed on occasion by practitioners as ‘You need to purify in order to get realizations’. Lama Yeshe relates the resistance that some feel towards meditation to negative karmic imprints in the mind. He says, “To meditate is not enough. You have to purify the hindrances and accumulate merit”, signifying the nature of the close relationship between the three actions of meditation, purification, and the accumulation of merit.³⁸⁵

Another doctrinal aspect that needs to be considered here is how the three aspects of the Eightfold path: wisdom, ethics and concentration—known as the three higher trainings in this system—are applied in practice. The ethical dimension is implicit in all action performed with the Mahayana motivation to attain enlightenment for the sake of others. The point of taking vows, and making refuge and initiation commitments, is to reinforce one’s motivation continually, and therefore to ensure that every action becomes a way of accumulating merit and purifying the mental continuum. The above discussion summarizes the way in which the mindstream and its purification is understood by practitioners generally, but in varying degrees of complexity.³⁸⁶

From the foregoing it is suggested that, while practitioners will come to understand the same basic doctrinal notions and their meanings, not everyone embraces the perspective entirely in the same way. For instance, all seem to accept the doctrine of *karma*, including the idea of accruing merit, but some do not accept the idea of reincarnation. To be made clear in the next Chapter is the fact that the ethical dimension seems to be accepted universally. The liking for compassion practices, coupled with the attempt to act from the position of understanding emptiness, which is expressed in the acceptance of the notion of *bodhicitta*, appear to orient these practitioners in their engagement with Buddhism generally.

7 Conclusions

This Chapter has explored how the student begins to engage with the shared reality at Vajrayana Institute through attending teachings and other activities, and how they begin to acquire the meaning of core terms and concepts that begin to form an interpretive framework. It was found that students initially begin to explore and test concepts applicable to their own life experience and perceived problems. Once a small set of ideas is validated as viable and useful in this way, the student begins to explore the doctrinal architecture more widely in order to see how different parts of

³⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p132.

³⁸⁶ More complex doctrinal positions are elaborated in writings, and occasionally in teachings. For instance, see Ribush, in Lama Yeshe, 2004, *op.cit.*, ppxx-xxi, where he explains how the four opponent powers relate to the four kinds of karma. He says that each of the four opponent powers counters one of the four negative karmic results, but these understandings are not necessary for engagement with the tradition’s practices, and have intellectual significance for those students who care to study a little deeper.

the framework fit together. Although my natural inclination was to attempt to establish an order to the acquisition of specific concepts and their meanings, in both temporal and hierarchical terms,³⁸⁷ students' own accounts of their learning indicated that this level of synthesis was attainable in only a small number of cases, and, in the light of information and exposition presented in the chapters to come, was unnecessary.

³⁸⁷ I designate these two terms to mean the following. Temporal order is the order of acquisition of concepts based on encounter with material in teachings. Hierarchical order is based on the order in which sets of related meanings are acquired, and would examine the nature of the dominant meaning-structures involved in the learning phase, and how these relate to immediate religious and existential needs of the participants. As the material suggests, what drives the learning is discovering, initially, that concepts and techniques can be applied to one's own experience.

Chapter 5: The Practice of Self-Transformation at Vajrayana Institute

1 Introduction

This chapter examines the techniques through which change is produced, experienced and—by their personal application of the technique—attributed meaning by practitioners at VI. Whereas Chapter 4 explored the learning and apprehension processes as they occur in the context of Vajrayana practice at VI, this chapter explores the continuation and extension of learning through personal application, and is therefore a continuation of Chapter 4. It is also the equivalent of Chapter 3 in terms of its examination of the nature of the shared reality that is constituted through personal practice and its aims and effects, as a means to understanding differences that may occur between formal experimental learning and personal application. The focus of this chapter is the nature of the results obtained from the personal application of practices taught at VI, how the practices fit with the framework and the soteriological goal of the tradition, and the uses to which these same practices are put by the practitioners themselves.

An exploration of practitioners' patterns of practice reveals both how regularly they practice and what they select from the range of practices taught at VI. Further, practitioners' views of the significance of terms, teachings, and practices, and their meanings, gives an understanding of how they put the framework together to create and maintain meaning for themselves. In the Gelugpa Tibetan context, all processes of self-transformation are easily seen as processes of mental purification, where the mind gradually comes to see reality from the view of enlightenment. The topic of personal practice, in terms of what is done and why, is significant because it indicates both the value that these practices have for the practitioners in terms of reaching strictly religious and more secular goals—although the two are related—and how meaning is derived and maintained at the individual level. Examining the techniques, processes and goals of self-transformation, will shed light on the above concerns.

Ideally, and somewhat artificially, this stage of socialization, representing the time between initial learning and experimentation as a student, and the time, if it comes, when the decision is made to commit to a Buddhist way of life, is where much of the testing and evaluating takes place. Tantric practice is included here despite the fact that one is expected to take refuge and become a Buddhist before engaging in tantric activity. In a linear chronological approach to socialization, discussion of *Tantra* would logically follow Chapter 6, after the discussion of the commitment. Because tantric activity at VI is of a highly practical nature in terms of its transformative techniques and effects, it is discussed in this chapter.

2 Personal Practice

From interview material and conversations with practitioners it is clear that many students *attempt* to establish a daily practice. Some are dedicated to their daily practice and set time aside for it. Others try to keep up regular practice, but find it difficult. It is significant that some practitioners do not meditate much at all. It seems that whatever the reason for this is, for example, lack of time, it is equally true that they believe that meditation is not the only way to purify the mind, because doing good deeds, thinking positively toward others and other like actions creates the merit needed, or creates the right karmic imprints to have obscurations removed, or to have realizations. In this sense, these practitioners rely as much on the purification of *karma* and the accumulation of merit as they do on the direct development of their meditative ability and the wisdom it brings.

Many of the practitioners whom I interviewed made it clear that their descriptions of their daily practice routine were descriptions of what they did under ideal conditions. They stressed that sometimes 'life got in the way' of their meditation practice, and they ended by not meditating as much as they would have liked. Another thing to note is that some admitted freely that there were many times when their practice commitments were either done in a rush, or with a distracted mind. What I observed about the desire for and the attempt at regularity is that it served to remind individuals about their intention toward self-transformation.

2.1 Patterns and Styles of Personal Practice

Ideally, practitioners spend up to an hour a day in their practice, whether this be quiet reflection, meditation practice, tantric commitments, or reciting the refuge prayer and vows. The following examples show a range of orientations to practice. The first two are tantric initiates, and the third is a sutric practitioner who has recently taken refuge.

NJ: I've taken Kalachakra Tantra initiation. Traditionally the practice is done three times during the day and three times during the night, and that's a lifetime commitment. I do mantras, not because of my commitments, but because they are beneficial tools we have been given. At the moment I'm doing a Sakyamuni Buddha visualization to develop my concentration. I do half-an-hour at minimum. I read the King of Prayers every night.

CR: I now have a set practice that takes me about an hour a day, but it's not a sitting down and meditating on the breath practice. My daily practice takes me about an hour. So it's like Medicine Buddha and White Tara and Green Tara, Kalachakra initiation, Cittamani Tara which is a higher yoga Tantra of Green Tara.

AN: I start usually with the breathing to focus, and usually it's a breathing out all the mess, the impurities and the obstructions and stuff and breathing in

calm,³⁸⁸ just as a centring thing, and yeah, I usually do the exchanging self for others or a compassion one.

From the accounts of personal practice given in interviews, it seems that the preferred meditation styles are concentration and visualization. A small number of practitioners perform analysis, but this is significantly less popular. Many sutric and tantric practitioners favour concentration in the form of deity visualization. Many respondents stated that they practised concentration in order to make their deity visualizations clearer and sharper. Beyond the goal of improving the quality of their meditation, the intention is to create the karmic conditions necessary to accumulate the merit to attain realizations.

2.2 Orientation to Practice

According to the Tibetan Buddhist worldview of the FPMT, actions and mental states are categorized as wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral or undetermined. The latter are seldom referred to in discourse at the centre, and for practitioners' purposes of progress on the path to enlightenment, all actions are seen as wholesome or unwholesome, virtuous or non-virtuous, and accordingly create positive or negative karma.³⁸⁹ The process of mental purification is meant to reverse the effect of previous negative action, and replace tendencies in that direction with positive ones. All virtuous action, for instance, performing *pujas*, reciting the refuge prayer, study, meditation practice, and virtuous action in daily life, is thought to result in the accumulation of merit, the first of two collections, merit and wisdom, amassed by the practitioner when they enter this path. This is the first of five paths that constitute the path to enlightenment: *accumulation, preparation, seeing, meditation, and no more learning*.³⁹⁰ CR's comments here, "Really for me the whole reason I'm doing those practices is to give my mind some sort of imprints that are going to help me in various situations in my life, and help me to be a better person", and elsewhere, illustrate both the emphasis placed on the purpose of mental purification for success on the path to enlightenment, and on the importance of the Bodhisattva motivation for the aspiring practitioner.

³⁸⁸ This is a reference to the *nine round breathing* meditation outlined in Appendix 9. AN's account of his experience with his daily refuge commitment is discussed in this chapter, Section 1.2.

³⁸⁹ Writings by Buddhist academics and by authors from within the tradition typically discuss two categories of action: virtuous and non-virtuous. See Powers, J. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, Snow Lion Publications, 1995, p80. However, in the *Discovering Buddhism* module *Introduction to Tantra*, the teacher referred to a third category, that of neutral actions where neither positive nor negative karma is created, because the mind is totally passive during these actions. These include sneezing and fainting.

³⁹⁰ See Powers, *op.cit.*, pp80-85, for a discussion of the five Buddhist paths, and especially p80 for his discussion of the *Path of Accumulation*. Also see Hopkins, J. *The Tantric Distinction*, Wisdom Publications, revised edition, 1994, p39.

This emphasis on purification *per se* within this form of Buddhism appears to have produced two interesting effects. First, the concentration and purification practices, especially the deity visualizations, tend to dominate practice in teachings and meditation classes at the Centre, and analytical meditation, while taught, is under-represented in individual preferences. This is despite that Tsong-kha-pa's *Lam Rim* teaches that practice in *stabilizing* and *analytical* meditation—concentration and insight—must be balanced in order to attain enlightenment.³⁹¹ It appears that, for some students, the path is more easily approached in terms of the purifying action of active imagination of a deity, wherein the role of concentration for focussing the mind is easily understood. It may be thought that the analytical meditations on *emptiness* can be postponed until enough mental purification has taken place for realizations of *emptiness* to occur more easily. NJ expressed the view that “You have to work your way to particular levels of realization” in order to have a realization of *emptiness*. Some time after the interview, I asked her if there was anything she could add to the previous discussion about her impressions of the analytical meditation we had explored in *Grounds and Paths*, the course we had both attended in the previous November.³⁹² She responded, “Well, you have to have a good degree of concentration to do those meditations. I am building up my concentration”.³⁹³

Second, when students and practitioners do not find adequate time to meditate, their desire for practice may be satisfied by the performance of meritorious works, with the view that the same merit will be accumulated by virtuous action. This can be seen to act as a psychological safety net for assuaging the guilt that arises from failing to meditate. In cases where lay vows are broken or commitments are not kept, adherents are told that they can ‘purify their vows’ by using the *Four Opponent Powers*. Practitioners feel that it is important to keep their commitments, which may consist of prayers, mantra recitations and deity visualizations, ideally treated as forms of meditation. By their own admissions, however, these are often done in a rush, and from their perspective it is better to keep their commitments with a distracted mind than not at all. The reasoning employed here has appeal for practitioners who attempt to maintain a commitment to the path while accommodating the demands of a busy life. Several practitioners described how they create opportunities in spare moments throughout the day for practice. CR expressed these sentiments in her description of her attempts to keep her regular tantric commitments:

CR: But it's really good not to not do the commitments. I've spoken to people. Everyone has said, this is from Geshe Logoan Rinpoche, to everybody, if you've made the commitment it's very important to keep it, it's not something to

³⁹¹ Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Snow Lion Publications, volume 3, 2002, p14.

³⁹² Hopkins, J. *Meditation on Emptiness*, Wisdom Publications, rev. ed., 1996, p44-6.

³⁹³ The original interview took place on 15 January, 2004. NJ offered these additional comments on 11 February, when I asked her whether there was more she could add to her account of her experience with analytical meditation.

lightly not do. And I know that sometimes when I haven't done them, it's because I've chosen to watch television or read, or do something else instead first, and I've left it until 11 o'clock at night when I'm exhausted, and then I've fallen asleep doing them. Because I worried about you know I've got a busy life. And Lama Zopa said the same thing. You can say the Sadhanas, if you know them off by heart. You can say them walking along to the bus stop. You can say them on the train. I do my practice on the train coming up here because it's over an hour, the train trip, and so I just sit there. I get my mala out, and do it. It's not as ideal as sitting in my Gompa, obviously. I'm not concentrating as well, but that's the way I can do it. At least, the good thing about having commitments is I'm doing something. If I didn't have those commitments I'd do nothing. There'd be days I'd do nothing, and sometimes, there have been times when I feel the commitments, which I freely made myself were like a burden. I've had that sort of like, 'Oh no. I've got to get through this. I haven't done my practice yet.

Similar sentiments are expressed by another practitioner. In describing his approach to and experience with performing his daily refuge commitments, BM relates candidly how considerations of motivation and discipline overshadow the meditative aspect of the practice.

AN: That's what I really welcomed about the refuge undertaking is that you bow to the Buddha, you do the prostrations and do the refuge prayer three times in the morning and at night, and I thought, 'Oh that's great because I'll meditate', but what I end up doing is just doing that and thinking, 'Oh well. That's enough. I don't have to sit and meditate', so in a way it's been very good because I've done it every single day, and it takes a minute or so. I've got a little altar at home, which is good in terms of focussing for the day, so that's been really useful because I start and end the day with that, but in a way it's substituted whatever practice I would have done, so I don't end up sitting very much.

GE: OK, so that obviously sets you for the day, as you said, so how do you feel when you're doing it, what kind of state are you in?

AN: I'm getting more strict with myself because a lot of the time I'm finding ... because especially in the morning I'll just be doing it and thinking about other stuff, I'll find I've done two, but not mindfully at all, so I'll make myself do it again and say it properly to make sure the motivation's there and it's not just ... because I remember that I did that with all the Christian prayers. Just recited them, so it's good. It is a way of making myself, especially on certain mornings when you realize that your head is just running everywhere else but there, so in a way it's a bit of a centering, and a testing of how centred I am that morning, because sometimes I am focussed automatically without effort.

GE: You've obviously reached a point where you're making yourself do it properly, so do you feel better for it? Are you feeling any particular benefits?

AN: I like the continuity and commitment, because there'll be times when I've jumped into bed, and forgotten, and each time I've made myself get up and do it. So yeah, that fact that it gives a bit of structure to the day, so at night I find it's helpful because it makes me, when I'm saying 'to act for the liberation of all sentient beings', I'm actually at the same time trying to dedicate all the merits of that day, of how I tried to act for the benefit of others. It kind of does make me do a stocktake, whereas in the morning it's setting the motivation for the day 'cause I'm really cloudy in the morning and I would probably go through to ten or eleven without even thinking, whereas this does make me think about how I'm going to act during the day, because unless I did that, I would just act without being really mindful or thinking.

GE: Your commitment to this particular practice, you're basically renewing your refuge twice a day, why are you doing it?

AN: There are reason on both sides of that. One is that I said I would in a special ceremony, and that has to do with my guru devotion, so I guess that's more the schoolchild in me, because no one actually asks, but I would always think if they did, these are people I wouldn't want to lie to, I would want to be able to say 'yes' because I said I would. In terms of willpower I usually let myself off the hook, so I'm enjoying the benefits of not letting myself off, so there are disciplinary benefits, and all the mental benefits which I hadn't really thought about much. I hadn't really thought about whether it makes me calmer or the mental space. I don't think I've ever gone 'I'll feel better after I do this' or 'I'll feel calmer'. They're definitely the products of it. So it would be more the motivation and the discipline and the content. Yeah, I guess it could be peace of mind, because I realize I don't have peace of mind until I do it. I don't entertain the possibility of not doing it.

In AN's view, the commitment will keep him motivated because he has given his word to keep it. In this sense the motivation itself becomes the focus of practice as opposed to the meditation. This is similar to other responses about personal practice, and given that Westerners are attempting to develop a practice in the midst of leading busy lives, AN's response is understandable. However, by contrast, NC's approach to and experience of the refuge commitment is based in its performance as a meditation, and not as an obligation. As described in his transcript excerpt in Section 2.1 below, his practice produces a sense of *spaciousness*, of opening up, which gives him 'a deepening sense of refuge'. The two accounts demonstrate how practitioners may value different aspects of a practice because of their experience with it. The former approach has more to do with keeping the commitment, while the impetus for the latter is more to do with the effects of practice itself. These two different approaches to devotional ritual also highlight two different orientations to practice generally.

This difference has two possible causes. The first involves how one understands the purpose of practice. The fact that both practitioners believe that meditation is good for them is expressed in various ways throughout their interview transcripts.

However, while the former allows his relationship to his practice to become fused with the feeling of simply needing to keep his commitments, the latter's motivation is a result of his experiential engagement with the practice itself. NC had done some study and practice and had developed a rudimentary Buddhist frame of reference for the interpretation of meditative experience before his involvement in VI's courses. The second involves one's understanding of the role of the teacher as the voice of religious authority. If this may be taken to indicate response to authority generally, the ten years' difference in age between NC and AN (NC is the elder) may be a contributing factor to the difference between a comparatively externalized voice of authority (AN) and an internalized one. While age and stage of life may be one of many reasons for this difference of response to authority, they possibly lie outside the scope of this thesis, and therefore, only those factors supported by the data at hand will be explored. However, the effect of religious authority on socialization and its stages needs to be considered because of its emphasis as a causative factor in both conversion studies and studies of new religious movements.

According to the view of the FPMT, a practitioner needs to have a teacher or guru in order to practise successfully. Several writers allude to Tsong-kha-pa's statement that one must purify, accrue merit, and pray to one's guru as a Buddha in order to reach enlightenment.³⁹⁴ The Discovering Buddhism module *The Spiritual Teacher* is devoted to outlining the nature of the teacher-student relationship required for successful Buddhist practice, including the qualities that a student should look for in a spiritual teacher.³⁹⁵ This lineage and its view of the path provides many role models of authority to guide motivation and attainment: buddhas, bodhisattvas, lineage founders and leaders, lamas and their disciples, and teachers at FPMT Centres. While buddhas and bodhisattvas can be seen as models of the enlightened being, local lamas, geshe, Sangha members and lay teachers can all be seen as authority figures in a more immediate sense. Although there is an underlying, and at times overt, tone of *you must do what your guru tells you to do*, I have observed from students' responses in teachings, in conversation, and in interview, that individual responses to the role of the teacher vary. Some acknowledge the position of teacher and simply pay respect to the person who occupies the position, while others exhibit more of a tendency to cast *their* teacher or guru in the role of parent or therapist.

Heelas's notion of *detraditionalization* as it applies to Western sentiment, involves a shift of authority from without to within; its *voice* is displaced from established

³⁹⁴ See Ribush in the Editor's Introduction, Thubten Yeshe. *Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification*, Wisdom Publications, 2004, pp1-4. See also Thubten Zopa. *The Wish-Fulfilling Golden Sun of the Mahayana Thought Training*, original publication details unknown, republished for Kachoe Zung Juk Ling Nunnery, 2000, p 10; McDonald, K. *How to Meditate: A Practical Guide*, Wisdom Publications, 1984, p150.

³⁹⁵ See Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden. *Path to Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism*, Tushita Publications, 1993, Chapter 5. The recommended text for the Discovering Buddhism module is Berzin, A. *Relating to a Spiritual Teacher: Building a Healthy Relationship*, Snow Lion Publications, 2000.

sources to the *self*, with a corresponding decline of belief in the pre-given or natural order of things.³⁹⁶ It is suggested that Heelas's thought, that as sociocultural beings our voices of authority have been acquired in terms of established values and practices³⁹⁷ extends to the way in which established authority *per se* has been internalized as a value. The nature of individual response to religious authority may be affected by age, level of psychological maturity, and response to prior religious conditioning. However, respondents have indicated that they accept a teacher's authority if the teacher appears to embody the religious ideals of the FPMT, and practitioners accept the lineage leaders and teachers as representatives of religious authority. If the decision is made to take refuge and later, Tantric initiation, the decision to accept the guru's authority is formalized. From my own observations, the lama or geshe as a symbol of religious authority, and as a representation of the enlightened mind, becomes a strong influence, from philosophical and ethical perspectives, in the deliberations and actions of students. This influence extends to the adherent's involvement with Tantra practice.

2.3 Orientation To Tantra

According to scholars and practitioners alike, Tantric Buddhism is held to be a method for attaining enlightenment within the Mahayana view. According to Ray, Tantra has its own way of articulating Mahayana philosophy in the context of Tantric meditation.³⁹⁸ Wayman believes that the terminology in the Buddhist Tantras makes sense if one sees them as reflecting Buddhist tenets from the *Abhidharma* or from the Mahayana presentation in the *Madhyamika* and *Yogacara* schools.³⁹⁹ In the introductory section of the *Lam Rim*, Tsong-kha-pa outlines his division of the Mahayana into two: the *prajnaparamita* method—the part that is not tantric—and the *mantra* method, which is strictly Tantric.⁴⁰⁰ Teachers and practitioners hold to the view that Tantra is another path to enlightenment within the Mahayana orientation.⁴⁰¹ Ideally, all Mahayana Buddhists practise the bodhisattva motivation, the greater scope according to the *Lam Rim*, which is to attain enlightenment for the sake of relieving the suffering of all sentient beings.⁴⁰² According to Kelsang Gyatso,

³⁹⁶ Heelas, P. "Introduction: On Differentiation and Dedifferentiation", in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, pp1-18, Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

³⁹⁷ *ibid.*

³⁹⁸ Ray, R. *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*, Shambala, 2001, pp91-2. Ray's discussion includes the relationship of the teachings of the second turning to Tantra. See also Wayman, 1980, p359 for a discussion of the parallel history of Buddhist Tantra and Buddhist Mahayana.

³⁹⁹ Wayman, A. *The Buddhist Tantras: Light on Indo-Tibetan Esotericism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, pp3-4.

⁴⁰⁰ Also see Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p4.

⁴⁰¹ See Hopkins, in Tenzin Gyatso, Tsong-ka-pa, and Hopkins, J. *Deity Yoga In Action and Performance Tantra*, Jeffrey Hopkins ed./trans., Snow Lion Publications, 1987, p207. Hopkins expresses the view that "Tantra is the six perfections plus deity yoga".

⁴⁰² See Chapter 4, Section 2.1 for discussion of this perspective and how it allows for *lesser* motivations of the small scope: the desire for better samsaric conditions and the medium scope of the desire for liberation from *Samsara*.

the *Lam Rim* instructions enable one to engage in a meditation practice with any one of the three levels of motivation, but the three are progressive: each one lays foundations for the next.⁴⁰³ However, Tantric practice proceeds from the *assumption* that the practitioner operates from the bodhisattva motivation: the intention to attain full Buddhahood in order to help to end the suffering of all sentient beings.⁴⁰⁴

From the import of teachings and in conversations, it is clear that one must be ethically prepared for tantric practice. Received wisdom holds Tantra to be the quick way to enlightenment, but one must have the Mahayana motivation and be committed to the *bodhisattva* path. It is also emphasized that one must not 'get carried away with Tantra', and that sutric study and practice continue to serve as a foundation for progress on the path when one becomes a tantric practitioner. It is important to note that Tantra without proper ethical training and without the correct motivation is considered dangerous. One teacher said, "You are stirring up energies that you can't control".⁴⁰⁵ Tulku Thondup explains the expected ethical orientation in terms of simultaneous practice of the three vehicles: living physically according to the moral codes embodied in the *pratimoksa* disciplines, mentally maintaining *bodhisattva* aspirations and practices, and beyond that taking the tantric view of everything as the path of pure nature.⁴⁰⁶

Within the FPMT, in order to take tantric initiation and practise Tantra practitioners are expected to have taken refuge, signalling their commitment to the Mahayana Buddhist path. As the teacher of *Introduction to Tantra* said, "Taking an initiation implies that one is taking vows, and is therefore a Buddhist".⁴⁰⁷ The refuge commitment is sealed by the new adherent's taking as many of the five *pratimoksa* vows as they feel able to keep, but it was explained during a teaching that, ideally, Buddhists are expected to undertake to refrain from killing as a minimum. This refuge commitment means that some ethical discipline is put into place before Tantric practice is undertaken. Within the Mahayana vehicle, tantric practice is founded on the three principles of the path: renunciation, *bodhicitta*, and wisdom-realizing *emptiness*. In teachings from *Introduction to Tantra* and in the commentary to the Medicine Buddha initiation in May 2005,⁴⁰⁸ both teachers highlighted the need to develop *bodhicitta*. In the former, the teacher stated that the first gate to Tantra is 'absolutely flawless *bodhicitta* motivation'.⁴⁰⁹ Similarly, the *Vajra* master of the Medicine Buddha initiation stated that one must "have a good crop of *bodhicitta*". In

⁴⁰³ Kelsang Gyatso. *The Meditation Handbook*, New Age Books, 2002, pp6-7.

⁴⁰⁴ Tsong-kha-pa. *Preparing for Tantra: The Mountain of Blessings*, the Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1995.

⁴⁰⁵ This was explained in the Discovering Buddhism module *Introduction to Tantra*.

⁴⁰⁶ Tulku Thondup. "Foreword", in Ray, *op.cit.*, ppviii-ix.

⁴⁰⁷ The nature of this commitment was outlined during the retreat for this module on Sunday 7 March 2004 at Vajrayana Institute in Newtown NSW.

⁴⁰⁸ This was held at the Buddhist Library, Church St, Camperdown NSW. The *Vajra* master was Geshe Dawa, a former resident Geshe at Vajrayana Institute.

⁴⁰⁹ From *Introduction to Tantra*, 27 January 2004.

the commentary after the initiation he elaborated on the three qualities necessary in a tantric practitioner. Renunciation must be a definite conviction; when one thinks about the suffering nature of *Samsara*, one develops renunciation and seeks the path to liberation.⁴¹⁰ It is hard to develop renunciation if the suffering nature of *Samsara* is not seen and accepted. In difficult and onerous situations, one wishes to get out of them, and one can see the same needs and desires in others. This transforms slowly into *Bodhicitta*, which is developed with the method of lovingkindness and compassion. On my asking one Tantric initiate, “What is your personal belief system?”, she responded:

CR: Well, I suppose I just believe. It’s believing that the purpose of life is to develop your qualities, to help all beings; that there is a reason for being here which I used to be not sure of, and that reason is to be of service of help to others. And that the way to do that is to ... you do have to develop your own quality, because I can’t help others the way I am, not properly. I can try but I don’t really know how, and quite often I get it wrong. I get angry, I have all those things happen, so, but also I don’t think that everybody has to be a Buddhist, to reach, um, to reach a state of, you know, of enlightenment. I’m sure you do need to be towards the end, but I’m not sure ... but I think, to develop qualities anyway, and to be of benefit in the world, and to be a good and loving person. There are many paths to that.

GE: And so your purpose in being a Buddhist is for those things you just stated. It sounds to me like you’re working towards enlightenment, but these other qualities ...

CR: That’s the only reason for reaching enlightenment ... is to be like a Buddha and to come back and to teach, and to help.

Another factor important for understanding practitioners’ orientations to tantra is the way in which it is routinely spoken about and regarded. In conversation, while it may be discussed as something extra to *sutra* practice, it is not promoted as something to be held in awe. Those students who show an interest in *tantra* want to know how it relates to Buddhism more broadly, and do not set out to find easy access to its secrets or display morbid curiosity.⁴¹¹ Amongst the participants at Vajrayana Institute the tantric practitioners are not obvious. Respondents would reveal their tantric involvement in interview rather than in ordinary conversation.

⁴¹⁰ See the transcript excerpt in Section 3.3 for NC’s description of his attempt to reconcile the two different approaches to desire expressed by the idea of renunciation and by Tantra. *Wisdom-realizing-Emptiness* and its import are discussed in Section 2.2 and Section 4.

⁴¹¹ Urban, H. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, University of California Press, 2003. In this book, Urban suggests that the appropriation of Tantra by modern Western culture is largely as a form of spiritual hedonism. However, his book reflects an emphasis on the appropriation of Hindu Tantra by the West. Guenther believes that the word Tantrism has become almost synonymous with Hindu Tantra, and more is known about it than Buddhist Tantra. See Guenther, H. *The Tantric View of Life*, Shambala Publications, 1972, p2.

This approach is demonstrated in the orientation to *tantra* displayed by two committed practitioners before and after they were initiated. NJ and MM had very strong experiences in meditation, coincidentally both in Theravadin Buddhist settings, that are reminiscent of Tantric experience, although in different ways.⁴¹² In both cases these experiences were at odds with the meditative settings in which they occurred, and prompted the two seekers to find satisfactory explanations for their experience. After finding FPMT Centres, the Root Institute in India and Vajrayana Institute respectively, and beginning to investigate the Gelugpa Tibetan system, both became involved with Vajrayana Institute and took on volunteer administration duties. They also settled into a routine of sutric study and practice in order to broaden their understanding of Buddhism.⁴¹³ Given this and the fact that they do not consider their levels of practice special or advanced, it can be accepted that practitioners work within the doctrinal and ethical frameworks of Mahayana Buddhism.

For practical purposes two differences appear to exist between *sutra* and *tantra* practice. The first is the tantric emphasis on working with desire. While *sutra* uses the energy of lovingkindness and compassion, *tantra* uses the energy of desire and craving or attachment. *Tantra* is not in itself virtuous, nor essentially pure, but it becomes pure with the right motivation, which means utilizing the desire for enlightenment in order to attain it. More specifically, for higher tantric practice, it refers to transforming the energy of the desire for the partner into other emotional qualities such as the desire for enlightenment and compassion. In this way, a selfish desire based on craving is transformed into a selfless desire.⁴¹⁴ The second difference has to do with the nature of the deity visualization employed for ritual purposes. In the commentary to the *Medicine Buddha* initiation conferred on 30 April 2006, Geshe Dawa explained that in *sutra* practice the practitioner remains an ordinary being, but in *tantra* the practitioner arises as the deity, and the place or setting becomes the pure realm. The outcome is bringing on the path, and enlightenment is involved in the moment of sitting. Similarly it was explained in *Introduction to Tantra* that *sutra* is the causal vehicle. It creates the causes for enlightenment, and *tantra* is the resultant vehicle, wherewith the result is taken into the path.

3 Aims, Techniques and Outcomes of Sutra Practice

This Section examines those practical activities that belong to the category of sutric practice as distinct from tantric practice. In terms of the nature of the experience derived from the practice, material from interview shows that practitioners relate mainly to concentration-type experiences, the transformative function of which is in the interpretation attributed to such experience. Certainly in interview I did not hear

⁴¹² See Appendix 12.

⁴¹³ Transcript excerpts describing these experiences are found in Appendix 12.

⁴¹⁴ This was outlined in the Discovering Buddhism module *Introduction to Tantra*, January-February 2004.

of any experiences equivalent to the reports of the Vipassana practitioners concerning the increase in depth or clarity of awareness typical of analytical practice. Section 2.3 relates and discusses the nature of personal change and growth that is derived from non-meditative practice: from study and application of the principles in personal reflections.

3.1 *Samatha*/Single-Pointed Concentration

According to Gelugpa doctrine the primary aim of cultivating *Samatha* is the attainment of liberation and full awakening or buddhahood so as to be of service to others. Gen Lamrimpa and Geshe Tashi Tsering both outline three levels of motivation: a fortunate rebirth; to attain liberation or Nirvana; and to attain full awakening.⁴¹⁵ These correspond to the three scopes of the *Lam Rim*. The two writers also draw attention to subsidiary effects and benefits of *Samatha* practice: the development of psychic powers and other forms of heightened awareness,⁴¹⁶ and control of mind and body.⁴¹⁷ Anecdotes about feats performed by highly-developed lamas are part of the shared reality of the FPMT, to the point whereat some practitioners' perceptions of their extraordinary abilities have been instrumental in those practitioners' decisions to become Buddhist. However, while the cultivation of psychic abilities is accepted and spoken about freely at Vajrayana Institute, such cultivation is not seen as the goal of practice. All doctrine about *samatha* cultivation that is taught at the Centre is either directed toward training the mind in the practice of calm-abiding, or toward providing students with a conceptual understanding of the stages of progress in development. The relevant aspects of doctrine include the absorptions: the levels and states of meditative stabilization; the faults; and their antidotes.

In their personal practices, practitioners employ *samatha* for the same purposes and uses it is put to in teachings: to settle the mind initially, and to develop the ability to keep a focussed mind on the object of attention. This is to ensure greater success with other meditation techniques such as visualization or purification practices, or analytical meditation, as explained in Chapter 4.⁴¹⁸ Here, concentrating on the breath is used to focus the mind so that one's visualizations, usually deity visualizations, will be clearer and more sustained. The image of the deity or meditation object must be clear and relatively stable for effective use in purification exercises. CR commented while we were discussing her approach to deity visualization:

⁴¹⁵ Gen Lamrimpa. *Samatha Meditation: Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on Cultivating Meditative Quiescence*, B. Alan Wallace trans., Snow Lion Publications, 1992, p20; Tashi Tsering. *The Theory and Practice of Mahamudra*, Chenrezig Institute Publications, 2002, p37.

⁴¹⁶ Gen Lamrimpa, 1992, *op.cit.*, p16.

⁴¹⁷ Tashi Tsering, *op.cit.*, p37.

⁴¹⁸ See Chapter 4, Section 3.3: *Meditation Practice at Vajrayana Institute*.

CR: The higher tantra practitioners—people who have been doing it for a long time—yeah, they can do incredible things with energy channels in their body, that are going to help them to be able to have an ultimate realization of *emptiness*, to control their rebirths. Believe me, I can't control anything. I'm at the stage of trying to get my visualizations to be clearer. So, when I said before that I didn't meditate on the breath, that would be a good thing for me to do because it would help me to be able to keep my ... my single-pointed concentration that I'm practising usually involves the visualization of a deity and saying your *mantra*, so I might do a *sadhana* and the visualization of a deity. While I'm visualizing the deity I'm saying the mantra, and at the same time I'll be visualizing something like sending out light to all sentient beings. The rays of light might have the particular deity on it so it goes to the crown of all sentient beings' head, and white nectar or something comes down into them, purifying them of all negativity, bringing them every happiness, so you know, the visualizations, it's always related to the world, it's not somebody sitting on a cloud being happy. The deity's always emanating out, and it might be bringing people in.

GE: It's Mahayana motivation!

CR: Yes, it's always about that. I really do like saying the mantras. Some people prefer just doing the breathing, but meditating on the breath is nothing. The only purpose of meditating on the breath is to be able to stabilize your mind so that you can meditate on something like a deity or something. But ultimately what you're trying to have this single-pointed concentration for is the understanding of reality, which is *emptiness*. This is the whole purpose of it, so you can single-pointedly concentrate on your understanding of that. and then have a direct realization of reality.

GE: You need to be able to hold your mind on it.

CR: Yes. So my understanding is that a lot of this, all of this visualization ends up ... that's the ultimate goal.

GE: So you are not interested in bliss states just for themselves?

CR: Um no, it's a bit pointless. It's completely pointless.

The same practitioner experienced the effects of concentration practice while doing a *sadhana*. Although the experience she describes was generated during a Tantra practice, the experience itself is germane to the discussion. I had asked her whether any of her experiences in meditation had been striking in some way.

CR: I think what I was referring to earlier.

GE: The retreat?

CR: Yes, because that was during the sessions where it comes to the point, like you've done this whole Sadhana which includes various bits and pieces, then your visualizing, which is meditating. You're visualizing the deity and saying the *mantra*. We might be saying that, we might be doing that for half an hour or longer. The sessions were quite long when we'd be going through that section, and just that really intense feeling of actually becoming one with the deity, of actually being the deity, and being able to send out rays of love to other beings, to all other beings, to the entire universe.

GE: What did the state feel like? Can you describe it?

CR: It was just, it just felt, um, you just kind of totally ... it's like when you, well for me, I really love drawing for instance, and when I get caught up in ... I went to life drawing classes for a while, and when I was caught up in that it was like nothing else existed. It was like, you know, the whole, the rest of the world just disappears, you're just caught up in the thing. It was like that, just being there, one with this experience and not, not aware of noises or of anything going on outside or discomfort or anything. Just, you know in this moment, like being in, completely in the present moment. I was thinking too at Kopan monastery we used to do a meditation on the breath, it was on the different channels and that one with Geshe Dawa that also involved visualizing various energy channels, going through the different *chakras*, so that was Cittamani Tara. So at Kopan again, that visualizing the energy channels by breathing in through one channel and then breathing out through the other, and then through the central channel, you can just ... become sort of one with the moment, and also get quite an expansive feeling of the mind. It's not like you are restricted within this skull, it's doing that medit. ... we did meditations on the mind where you are imagining the nature of the mind and the mind just goes out, you know, it's just a very expansive and open kind of feeling, and it's sort of about making that connection, too, like even though you're there, one with the moment, but it's like this incredible connectedness ...

Practitioner NC reported experiencing a mental opening up, a sense of spaciousness while doing his refuge commitments. While a discussion of the Refuge Ceremony, in its function as a rite of passage signalling one's willing identification as a Buddhist is in Chapter 6,⁴¹⁹ NC's account demonstrates how the daily performance of the refuge commitment can be seen as a transformative practice:

NC: And I think, since taking refuge, the thing that changed over the last couple of months is a real deepening of that sense of refuge. One of the things that really changed, like in the morning I'll do prostrations and a refuge prayer, I'll spend a few minutes without doing a formal prayer, just thinking about the Buddha, *dharma* and Sangha, and what opens up in my mind now when I do that is very different. There's a real spacious ... like when I'm focussing on the Buddha, *dharma*, Sangha, there's a real spacious lightness that opens up, so

⁴¹⁹ See Appendix 10: Refuge Teachings.

there's this actual sense that happens now of that in the refuge. So since taking refuge the thing that changed most is my faith that those things offer refuge has become internalized. So if you talk about conversion, that's probably happened since the refuge ceremony about two months ago. But it's probably really only in the last four weeks that that thing has changed.

GE: So that sense of spaciousness? You used that word before.

NC: Yeah, that sense of spaciousness and lightness and all the sort of qualities I'll get on a good day if I'm doing a meditation on *emptiness*. In my mind when I'm doing it, 'cause I'm thinking 'OK, Buddha, *dharma*, Sangha', in my mind that's what appears around them. My previous going for refuge prayer was fairly ... it was heartfelt and sincere, but it didn't have the same effect on my mind. When it happened, I wondered whether it was an impact of the formal ceremony, or was the impact of the continued practice. I don't know. I'm sure making the commitment makes it easier for my mind to settle down. It's funny, I'm quite practical and I'm much more likely to explain things in psychological terms than in religious terms, but because it was quite a significant difference, there was obviously something. My mind decided it was ready to view things differently or ... I can't quite put my finger on it.

Although the first example is a deity visualization and the second involves the performance of refuge commitments, there is a similarity in the descriptions given by the two respondents. CR refers to an expansive feeling of the mind while NC describes an internal spaciousness, which are descriptive of concentration-type experience. It is possible that practitioners are familiar with the mental sensation of slowing down when the amount of mental content and its momentary processing is restricted by the concentration on the breath or the visualization⁴²⁰ What is significant about these two reports is the way in which the two practitioners have attributed a transformative function or meaning to the experience. CR's was to do with the way the experience took her outside the sense of being *restricted within this skull*, and while her own evaluation does not appear to reach beyond this sense, it is conceivable that repetitions of this type of experience over a period of time might affect the way one habitually sees oneself. NC, on the other hand, connects the sense of spaciousness to his deepening sense of faith in refuge, which he connects in turn to the growing ease with which his mind settles down. These accounts suggest that concentration-type experience does have a transformative function in this meditative setting, because of the uses to which it is put.

⁴²⁰ See Gen Lamrimpa, 1992, *op.cit.*, p20. Gen Lamrimpa defines the attainment of *Samatha*,/ quiescence, in terms of access concentration to the first *dhyana* (*jhana* in Pali), the first meditative stabilization. He gives its prerequisite as the turning away from sensual desires. The experience of a fundamental sense of mental focus has been discussed in several places with respect to practice, for instance in Chapter 2 in the context of everyday practices, the practices modified by Vipassana practitioners for use in routine activity.

3.2 Analytical Meditation

Emptiness is the central doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism. While it is but one of the three principles of the Mahayana path to enlightenment, it is the core notion supporting the whole framework of meaning. According to Hopkins, 'Phenomena are empty of a mode of being called inherent, objective, or natural existence'. The 'concept refers to our ordinary sense of the way things exist.' He refers to the middle way, the refutation of both inherent existence and total non-existence, and states that 'It is possible to realize a sense of valid, nominal existence through gaining the understanding that *emptiness* is an elimination only of inherent existence.⁴²¹ VI's teachings stress that the *emptiness* referred to is the lack of *inherent* existence of a phenomenon *from its own side*, and that all phenomena are subject to causes and conditions, and do not inherently or unchangingly exist. It is also stressed that *this does not mean that we do not actually exist*. We merely do not exist in the way that we seem to.⁴²² The view of the self between essentialism and nihilism is the correct view. *Emptiness*, ultimate truth, dependent origination and relative truth operate as a model for how the self is constructed.⁴²³

Hopkins' statement, that '*Emptiness* becomes the context within which a yogi purifies his perception'⁴²⁴ is useful for understanding the approach taken to *Emptiness*, meditation. One is given a conceptual description or definition of what is to be realized in meditation before one has the realization. The meditation outlined in Hopkins' *Meditations on Emptiness* and referred to in other texts, is used in teachings at Vajrayana Institute, although infrequently.⁴²⁵ During my time of participant observation at the Centre, this meditation was led twice: in *Mind and Mental Events* in 2003, and in the Discovering Buddhism module *Wisdom of Emptiness* in 2004. The purpose of the meditation is to create a shift in the meditator's perception of self. NC was one practitioner who found the analytical meditations interesting and useful. I asked him:

GE: When you're talking about doing the meditations on *emptiness*, which ones are they?

⁴²¹ Hopkins, G. *Meditation on Emptiness*, Wisdom Publications, 1996, p9; p11.

⁴²² Italics mine. Some teachers do stress this in the hope that students get the right understanding. This is not a nihilist position. See Gen Lamrimpa. *Realizing Emptiness: Madhyamaka Insight Meditation*, B. Alan Wallace translator, Snow Lion Publications, 2nd ed., 2002, pp99-100, for his discussion of the *Middle Way* as the avoidance of the extremes of substantialism and nihilism.

⁴²³ *ibid.*, p24. Gen Lamrimpa discusses the difference between definitive and provisional sutras according to the Prasangika system, where the former are the sutras whose chief and explicit topic is *emptiness*. *Emptiness* is the definitive meaning. The provisional sutras contain conventional truths and provide provisional meaning.

⁴²⁴ Hopkins, 1996, *op.cit.*

⁴²⁵ This meditation is outlined in Hopkins, 1996, *op.cit.*, pp44-46. Hopkins himself refers to the sevenfold reasoning of Chandrakirti. See also p10 for the reasoning and sets of reasonings used to reflect on the impossibility of inherent existence. The meditation is also referred to in Gen Lamrimpa, 2002, *op.cit.*, p99.

NC: I do the one where you go through trying to locate the self physically, and then mentally, and then there's another one that I read in a book where you're trying to look back at the meditator, look back at myself, look back and try to locate the meditator, and then just visualizing all of the body parts and all the mental faculties spreading out and then just reside in that *emptiness*. The thing is going through trying to locate it and then looking back at the self who is thinking, and that's when I get a sense of there isn't anything. So the other one, I do this when I'm running, saying, well, 'If there was an existent self, permanent, who was running, if it was a part of the body, then it would be always running, the whole thing about it can either be part of the body or separate from the body, it can't be both. So I do that when I'm running, look back at the aggregates moving.

GE: So, it's trying to give yourself a particular perspective.

NC: You're going through all those logical reasons about why, how, and where the self doesn't exist, and so just going through those logical steps of, 'Well I can't locate it. ... It's not there. ... It's not in my thoughts, and then, looking back at me who's thinking all those things ...

No other student or practitioner interviewed offered a description of this meditation, and therefore, there is no other experiential report to compare it with. It has been suggested elsewhere that students find the concept of *emptiness* difficult to grasp. The *Discovering Buddhism* students gave me the sense that they think that if they are to understand *emptiness* at all, it will likely be some time after they have acquired more knowledge and skill in meditation. They do not appear to entertain the idea that they could grasp it at this point in their exposure to the teachings. Ray's observation that most Westerners have trouble understanding the connection between *emptiness* teachings and the practical spiritual life is supported by my findings from interview data, that people relate to those concepts to do with one's ethical orientation to the world, Samsaric life, such as *bodhicitta*.⁴²⁶ The way in which students notionally accept and work with the concept of *emptiness* is outlined in Chapter 4 Section 5.1.3, where their employment of its statement of truth was used as a strategy for dealing with difficult relationships. In the section immediately below, this strategy is treated as a transformative technique in its own right. Further theoretical evaluation of this point follows.

3.3 Transformative Activity Outside the Meditation Setting

Many practitioners see that their Buddhist practice is more than just the formal practice period each day or in retreat, and that it also consists of practice outside of

⁴²⁶ Ray, *op.cit.*, p95. Here Ray explains how the teachings on *emptiness* make the bodhisattva path possible. The bodhisattva's understanding that all phenomena are inherently empty, makes their exposure to so much suffering in Samsara bearable.

the formal meditation context. The study of Buddhist texts and reading material, including quiet reflection on the teachings, may be considered a different orientation to practice within the membership. This results in the acquisition of Buddhist interpretive frameworks, which are then applied to the interpretation and understanding of life situations according to the Buddhist outlook. As outlined in Chapter 4 Sections 2.1 and 2.2, Vajrayana Institute stocks a wide range of relevant reading material, from primary doctrinal material such as several versions of the *Lam Rim* by lineage founders and members, to meditation manuals and prayer books. While it may seem that textual study as support for learning and practice does not deserve special attention because it is expected of serious students, it is singled out because it seems to reflect a preferred and deliberate orientation to practice by a handful of adherents. Two in particular told me in interview that they do not meditate, despite one of them being a Tantric initiate. Their grounding in the practice appears to be through textual study.⁴²⁷

In addition, reading is set as homework in the Western teachings such as *Discovering Buddhism*. Many practitioners report the derivation of benefit from such study. Regardless of the depth of reading and textual study, attempting to see a personal problem and its solution from a Buddhist perspective is part of the experimental process; it allows the student to try out the framework or meaning-system for themselves. From the view of a self-transformation technique, applying a Buddhist interpretation to a problem is an effective way of trying and testing Buddhist doctrine and its practical application. Many observe changes resulting from reading and personal reflection in the way that DE relates:

DE: I've just been getting more and more out of listening and thinking, and it's beginning to change my thoughts. When I have derogatory thoughts about somebody, now I notice and think 'You don't actually have to say that'. You treat somebody in a particular way and they respond.

4 Tantric Activity at Vajrayana Institute

4.1 The Nature of Tantric Initiation and Commitment

In Section 1.2.1 it was explained that one is expected to take refuge before one takes Tantric initiation, ensuring that both an ethical orientation and a *bodhicitta* motivation are in place before engagement in Tantric activity.⁴²⁸ The Sanskrit term *Abhiseka*

⁴²⁷ Samuel, G. *Civilized Shamans*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993; Samuel, G. *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*, Ashgate, 2005. Samuel identifies two orientations within Western Tibetan Buddhism, the textual and the yogic, in contrast to the Shamanic and the Clerical he identifies in Tibetan societies.

⁴²⁸ See Tenzin Gyatso, in Tenzin Gyatso, Tsong-ka-pa, and Hopkins, J. *Deity Yoga In Action and Performance Tantra*, Snow Lion Publications, 1987, pp15-16. Here the Dalai Lama outlines the vows for each of the four classes of Tantra. Those engaged in Action and Performance Tantra take the Bodhisattva vows: eighteen root vows and maintenance of the aspirational mind of enlightenment, while those engaged in Yoga and Highest Yoga take Tantric Vows.

means empowerment or conferral of power. Tantric initiation empowers one to do the tantric practices of a specific deity. For instance, taking a *Vajrasattva* initiation empowers one to do the practices of *Vajrasattva* at the appropriate level. It is understood within the tradition that an initiation may be taken as an empowerment that comes with commitments, or as a blessing. In the latter case, one accumulates merit by attending the initiation and listening to the commentary given by the Vajra master, but does not become empowered to do the tantric practice. The practitioner decides which of the two options they choose by either reciting or not reciting the vows at a certain point in the initiation. I have heard it said that practitioners have been initiated accidentally by inadvertently repeating the vows along with other initiands. This can result in practitioners' being initiated into tantric practices that they feel they are not duly prepared for, or being given commitments that they know they cannot keep. Comments from some practitioners indicate the way in which safety guards may be built into the system. RI told me that you have to have very good visualization, 'otherwise it's just like a blessing'. This was meant in the sense that if you do not have success with visualization during the initiation, then you have not been initiated. Further to this was the question whether one is really initiated by going through the motions, by not feeling connected to the proceedings. RI also volunteered that what you hear and understand during the ritual determines the effect that the practice has on you and on what you should do, especially in the way you interpret the commitment instructions given.

When one takes initiation, instruction about practice comes in the form of imposed commitments. At interview, those respondents who indicated that they were tantric initiates also explained that they took their commitments seriously, even though they often found them hard to keep. Occasionally, they would indicate the mental strategies they put in place in order to keep themselves motivated. For instance CR explained,

CR: At least, the good thing about having commitments is I'm doing something. If I didn't have those commitments I'd do nothing, there'd be days I'd do nothing... But it's really good not to not do the commitments. I've spoken to people, everyone has said, this is from Geshe, from Logoan Rinpoche, to everybody, if you've made the commitment, it's very important to keep it, it's not something to lightly not do.⁴²⁹

One of the significant aspects of tantric practice spoken about, in *Introduction to Tantra* and in conversation, is that the initiand is not told before the initiation is taken what the commitment will be. To my knowledge the commitment is determined by the *Vajra* master, and anecdotal evidence suggests that it may be unexpectedly light, as, 'Try to say the deity's mantra as many times as you can during the week', or very heavy, by comparison. A commitment may be as finite as, 'Do one thousand

⁴²⁹ Also see CR's transcript excerpt in Section 1.2, this chapter.

mantras', or seemingly infinite, 'Do (a specified number) every day for the rest of your life'. This can be seen as a psychological safetyguard in two ways. First, it has the effect of warning off the idly curious. Second, the fact that practitioners are given commitments and are expected to keep them maintains an approach of seriousness toward tantra, and helps committed practitioners to maintain their motivation to practice.⁴³⁰ However, if they fail to keep their commitments they can purify, using the *Four Opponent Powers*, or renew their vows by taking another initiation.

The Discovering Buddhism module *Introduction to Tantra*⁴³¹ is designed to impart an awareness of the basics of tantric practice and to convey the seriousness with which it is to be undertaken. The four classes of tantra, Action, Performance, Yoga and Highest Yoga, were described very briefly to outline how each class builds on the skills and knowledge acquired through practice of the preceding. Action tantras involve the use of *mudras*/hand gestures and recitation of mantras. One is helped in the practice of this lowest class of *tantra* by being connected with external things. The teacher compared the energy used with the energy we use when smiling and laughing. In action tantra when we meditate on the deity, we do not arise as the deity.

Compared with the focus on external things in action *tantra*, performance *tantra* concentrates more on mental activity, and begins to use the energy of desire.⁴³² Comments by the teacher indicated this class of *tantra* to be concerned with visualizing the consort deity with desire, and arising as the deity, even if that is of the opposite sex. The third class, *yoga tantra*, uses visualization of the purification of body, speech, and mind. The meditation practice concerns visualization of the self as the deity informing all our acts. In this way it is a purifying, de-coarsifying practice. *Highest yoga tantra* was described as the system of highest possible development, wherein each deity has a subtle specialty. This class makes use of the system of *chakras*, the winds and the three wind channels (central and two side-channels).⁴³³

For reasons of secrecy the teacher did not elaborate on the practical aspects of *highest yoga tantra* beyond this point. She gave additional theoretical information about the interlinking of generation and completion stages with the grounds and paths, and

⁴³⁰ See Tsong-kha-pa. *Tantric Ethics: An Explanation of the Precepts for Buddhist Vajrayana Practice*, Gareth Sparham trans., Wisdom Publication, 2005, pp115-31. Chapter 5 of this book, *How to Keep a Tantric Ordination*, is a commentary on the consideration of thinking about the benefits of protecting, and the penalties of not protecting the vows.

⁴³¹ The module that I attended was taught in February 2004.

⁴³² Hopkins, in Tenzin Gyatso, Tsong-ka-pa, and Hopkins, J. *Deity Yoga In Action and Performance Tantra*, Jeffrey Hopkins ed./trans., Snow Lion Publications, 1987, p210. Hopkins refers to techniques revolving around and using the bliss arising from the desire for male-female union, which can be seen as an extension of the 'smiling' and 'looking with desire' metaphor used to describe action and performance tantra respectively.

⁴³³ See Appendix 9, *Meditations Taught in Mind and Its Potential*. The Nine Round Breathing meditation is outlined here.

about the correspondence of stages in the death process in the meditation with the Buddha bodies that the fully enlightened being assumes at entry to Buddhahood.⁴³⁴ Enough information was given to form an intellectual grasp of significant aspects of practical developments throughout the sequence of the four tantra classes, instance the progressive intimacy between practitioner and deity, but without being able to derive appreciation of the experiential states involved.

4.2 The Maintenance of Secrecy

From this it can be seen that Vajrayana Institute's teachings maintain and propagate an attitude of seriousness and respect toward *tantra*. In the manner of its self-representation, it attempts neither to conceal deliberately nor to reveal anything more than practitioners need to know in order to understand the relationship between the sutric and tantric paths. Thus the subject does not attract idle curiosity from newer participants. Initiations, when they occur, are advertised in the newsletter and by email. During the time of my involvement with the Centre, a handful of initiations involving *Medicine Buddha*, *Chenrezig*, *Tara*, and *Vajrasattva* were held. I believe that these were all action tantras. From time to time the *Vajrayogini* self-initiation, a highest *yoga tantra*, is advertised in the newsletter, but I have neither seen nor heard any other reference to this deity at the Centre. Because only action tantra initiations are visible, one has to think that higher tantric activity is successfully kept private between the guru and student, and, I suspect, between a small group of older, more experienced students. Accordingly, Tantric practitioners do not discuss their tantric involvement. In interview some were willing to reveal which initiations they had taken, but very little else. They successfully keep much of what they do secret. When I asked them about their daily practice and meditative experience, they tell me as much as they feel that I need to know, and they relate this within the context of their commitment to Buddhism generally. As BP commented, "When I first started coming I didn't realize that you're not meant to blah on about what initiations you've taken. You're meant to just go along ... I mean it is meant to be a private thing, but because it's for your project, I'll discuss it."

Another aspect of the secrecy surrounding Buddhist Tantra is perpetuated by its own *experiential* emphasis. As indicated by the descriptions of the four classes of tantra above, it is by nature an experiential practice, and understanding of its meaning is derived from its performance.⁴³⁵ This suggests that there is no intentionally concealed secret. This idea is supported by other characteristics of the practice. Ray notes that one must receive initiation before being given permission, texts, and practice instructions.⁴³⁶ However, as Wayman notes, *sadhanas* contain the bare description of the deity; their texts do not contain enough practical detail for informed practice. In this way the texts have the secrecy of obscurity, and the guru is

⁴³⁴ See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.* His table on p33 contains this kind of information.

⁴³⁵ Guenther, 1972, *op.cit.*, pix; Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p62.

⁴³⁶ Ray, *op.cit.*, p113.

meant to supply the missing detail.⁴³⁷ Wayman's point supports my own experience with initiations held at VI. The *sadhanas* outline what to say and visualize, but nothing else. The fact that some of these practices are available as booklets on sale in the bookshop⁴³⁸ indicates that they have no secret that can be disclosed in a text.

Whenever the buddhas, buddha families, *bodhisattvas* and deities were discussed at the Centre I noted a lack of systematization or categorization of these beings and their qualities. The Buddha families and their sets of correspondences were sometimes briefly referred to in teachings, but not studied in any systematic way. In interview I was puzzled at first when respondents were not forthcoming with this kind of information about the deities' symbolic associations. After they had told me what practices they did, I would ask them about the meanings of the deities, and they knew that *Chenrezig* is compassion, *Tara* is compassionate action, and *Vajrasattva* is mental purification.⁴³⁹ According to Wayman, although Westerners want to know the meaning of the deities and their mantras, the deities do not have meanings in the Western sense of intellectual understanding. Such meanings arise through the regular practice and service of the deity.⁴⁴⁰ This is exemplified by some of the instruction given during a Medicine Buddha Practice day, the schedule for which is given in Appendix 15: *Schedule for the Medicine Buddha Practice Day, 28 May 2005*.⁴⁴¹ The convenor stated at one point that the medicine Buddha is the archetypal healing energy in all of us. Sometimes in the visualizations she gave some direction such as to *try to feel the presence of the Medicine Buddhas*, and mentioned that throughout the literature their names and colours are not always consistent.

The lack of public visibility of initiations of higher status than action tantra is congruent with informal discourse among practitioners themselves. One never hears discussion of the nature of visualizations, or experiences that practitioners may have of the three higher classes of *tantra*. Two connected issues, the existence of such secrecy and the public nature of those initiations that are visible, may reveal the intent of the Vajra master with respect to the capacities of practitioners. Ray comments that lamas will sometimes give public initiations, even to those with no preparation, thinking of them as ceremonial blessings, sowing positive karmic seeds which will ripen in the future.⁴⁴² He contrasts these with the private initiations

⁴³⁷ See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, especially pp41, 55 and 60. In this vein, he also says that the sexual symbolism itself is not the secret.

⁴³⁸ One such booklet is Ngawang Losang Tempa Gyaltzan. *Medicine Buddha Sadhana*, trans. Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, FPTM Education Services, rev. ed., 2002.

⁴³⁹ Lama Thubten Yeshe. *Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification*, Wisdom Publications, 2004, p287. Vajrasattva is the male meditational deity symbolizing the inherent purity of all buddhas. His practice removes obstacles created by negative karma and breaking vows.

⁴⁴⁰ See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p54; pp20-1. Here Wayman refers to a correspondence between the five Dhyani Buddhas, the five *skandhas*/aggregates and five corporeal centres, and he discusses the references to such correspondences in the *Guhyasamajatantra* and *Pindikramasadhana*.

⁴⁴¹ This was held on 28 May 2005, following a Medicine Buddha initiation given by Geshe Dawa at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown on 30/04/2005.

⁴⁴² Ray, *op.cit.*, p114.

between teacher and student, wherein the commitments are held to be different.⁴⁴³ Added to that is the current fashion for serial initiation. Several of my respondents were 'serial initiates' as seen from the list of initiations that they had taken and had attempted to keep commitments for, for example, 'Kalachakra and two Vajrasattvas', 'One Thousand-arm Chenrezig, Four-arm Chenrezig and Green Tara'. CR, quoted in Section 1.1, said that her daily practice, consisting of 'Medicine Buddha' and 'White Tara' and 'Green Tara', 'Kalachakra' initiation and 'Cittamani Tara', which is a higher *yoga tantra* of 'Green Tara', took her about an hour. From the religious perspective, multiple initiations may be seen to allow the practitioner to accumulate merit by attending blessings periodically. Pragmatically, it is conceivable that serial initiation allows Western practitioners the opportunity to renew vows on occasion, and to restate their commitment to the path.

4.3 Understanding the Nature of Deity and Deity Yoga

During *Introduction to Tantra* the teacher explained that the basis of *tantra* is to access the pure Buddha mind; that 'the idea behind visualizing the deities is that you are getting in touch with what's already there'.⁴⁴⁴ CR said:

CR: All these deities are just emanations; different emanations of the Buddha. It might seem like to people that there are all these weird goddesses and gods or something that you're paying homage to, but it's all just different emanations of the Buddha and that's really different aspects of your own Buddha nature. One might be enlightened action; one might be ultimate compassion. They're just different aspects of the qualities that you want to develop.

It is held that visualization of deities stimulates the growth of corresponding potencies already latent in the practitioner's own mind,⁴⁴⁵ which, according to Lama Yeshe, has the underlying nature of essential clarity and purity.⁴⁴⁶ Practitioners typically both relate to deity visualization and practise it as a concentration practice. Ideally, tantric practitioners are meant to have achieved some success with both concentration and analytical meditation before they enter tantric practice. According to Wayman, 'Contemplation of the yoga of the deity is meant to bring about the complete characteristics of calming, and one is meant to have the voidness contemplation'.⁴⁴⁷ The Dalai Lama holds the view that Action and Performance Tantra are practical for many people because 'although they involve meditation on *emptiness* and on a deity, they are yogas in which the mind's realizing *emptiness* does not manifest as a deity. The meditator is mainly concerned with achieving clarity of

⁴⁴³ *ibid.*, pp198-99.

⁴⁴⁴ I attended *Introduction to Tantra* in February 2004.

⁴⁴⁵ Harvey, 2000, *op.cit.*, p141.

⁴⁴⁶ Lama Thubten Yeshe. *Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification*, Wisdom Publications, 2004.

⁴⁴⁷ See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, pp110-11 for these comments, and Ray, *op.cit.*, p177.

appearance of a divine body, mantra letters and so forth, and thus cannot *mainly* meditate on *emptiness*'.⁴⁴⁸

It is evident from conversations and interviews with practitioners that many have not attained this meditative stability, although they strive for it, and work to strengthen it, using deity visualizations as a concentration exercise. This is exemplified in CR's transcript excerpt in Section 2.1, in which she discusses her use of concentration in order to make her deity visualizations clearer. By keeping commitments and doing the *sadhana* of a deity, intention toward enlightenment is expressed and reinforced. In practical terms, these tantric practitioners have a fundamental understanding of the path and its grounding in the *bodhisattva* motivation. This excerpt illustrates the approach to practice and self-development held by those who practise deity yoga:

CR: One of the things I like is that when you've taken a highest yoga initiation you can then imagine yourself as the deity. You can arise as the deity, and so it's this whole idea of doing that because you're imagining what you will become in the future, and bringing that result into the present, and the purpose of that is to try and remind yourself in your day-to-day life of who you actually are, and who you actually can become, not puffing yourself up and being proud or whatever, and a lot of the time I don't remember it at all, to be honest. I think just by familiarizing my mind with it again and again, by doing this daily practice, then hopefully, I'll be more likely when I'm in a situation where I could yell at someone or get upset or angry or whatever, that I'll have a bit more to draw on, to pull me back from that, so I can deal with things more compassionately, more kindly, so it's kinder on them.

It is significant that CR articulates the connection between her habitual states of mind and the purpose behind her practice of deity yoga. She is honest about her tendency to express anger and her forgetfulness in employing techniques for managing it at the time. However, her expressed intention, that she remind herself of her true nature as distinct from its habitual outer manifestation, is representative of the way in which the deities are meant to be understood and practised. Harvey notes that unwholesome mental states, such as anger, are seen as distortions of the mind's underlying intrinsic purity. The deities symbolize the positive energies that the impurities may be transmuted into.⁴⁴⁹

One important consideration for understanding practitioners' existential reality involves the way that they view the dualistic notion of purity-impurity in relation to the nature of deity. The Dalai Lama maintains that in all four *tantras* the body is divine,⁴⁵⁰ suggesting that the appropriate view of the body is as a purified body. He

⁴⁴⁸ Tenzin Gyatso, 1987, *op.cit.*, p15.

⁴⁴⁹ Harvey, 2000, *op.cit.*, p141.

⁴⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p9.

states that in Action tantra ‘one is meant to cultivate self-generation, but some cannot’, and he believes that this is why most action tantras do not clearly present deity yoga. His statement that ‘one must be able to maintain the view of being a deity and having a divine body’, and ‘must remain free from conceptions of ordinariness and of inherent existence’,⁴⁵¹ even in action tantra, indicates the ideal consciousness of a practitioner. The Dalai Lama draws attention to the emphasis placed on physical cleanliness, the external activities of cleanliness in action tantras.⁴⁵² Without explanation as to why, at the beginning of the Medicine Buddha initiation, which I attended three times, initiands—regardless of whether they intended to take initiation as a blessing or as an empowerment—washed their mouths with saffron water before they entered the room. Ideally, one must be able to see oneself as a divine, and therefore, as a purified being. Practically speaking, one must believe in one’s ability to realize one’s own Buddha-nature and its inherent *emptiness*. While practitioners can see their Buddha-nature as an inner potential and as a model for their own development, as has already been demonstrated, realizing *emptiness*—conceptually or experientially—is difficult here. Perceiving the desire energy itself as pure may present difficulties for some Westerners.

There appear to be two interrelated problems concerning the correct way to view desire for *tantra* practice. The first is in seeing it as essentially pure, and the second is in engaging with it without becoming lost in its energy. Here there is a seeming contradiction between the ‘Hinayana view’ and the Tantric view. Tulku Thondup outlines the essential differences between the Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana views. Hinayana practitioners avoid encounter with the sources of negative mentalities and emotions. Mahayana practitioners apply the right antidotes to negative concepts and emotions and their sources. Vajrayana practitioners accept and transmute negative concepts, emotions and their sources into enlightened wisdom.⁴⁵³ Although this statement is biased toward the Mahayana view, it is clear that one must be able to identify clearly, accept the nature of and deal effectively with mental and emotional impulses in day-to-day existence before one can use them effectively for higher training. From this it is clear how prior *sutra* training establishes the right mental orientation to Tantric practice. However, I have witnessed discussion at the centre wherein it is clear that students have both ambiguous and ambivalent responses to the nature of desire and its treatment. Some of this vacillation is suggested by Buddhist doctrine itself. It may be confusing for some practitioners, especially if they are relatively new to Buddhism, to hear desire spoken about alongside the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion, sometimes also expressed as desire, aversion and ignorance.

Such people may find it difficult to discriminate repression from the suppression—to check and contain the impulse—needed as a precursory step for the kind of

⁴⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp11-12.

⁴⁵² *ibid.*, p17.

⁴⁵³ Tulku Thondup, in Ray, *op.cit.*, ppviii-ix.

transformation in which one expresses an instinctual energy, such as desire, with the appropriate motivation in a specific ritual context. It may be difficult to conceive of using the basic energy of desire without labelling it as unwholesome. In addition, as Guenther notes, in the Tantric view body and mind are seen as interdependent and interpenetrating. The whole person is given equal value, as opposed to the higher value placed on the mind in Western thought generally. In his view the extreme dualism of body and mind has led to the body's being treated with aversion.⁴⁵⁴ These concerns are echoed in the following conversation that I had with NC, who had expressed an interest in Tantra, about the way to view and deal with desire. He was recounting the answer to a question he had asked the resident Geshe about the nature of desire and attachment.

NC: What I understand now as true, complete renunciation is a very profound position, a profound understanding that everything in our existence is a form of suffering, and Geshe Samten said that when you have true renunciation, your desire for liberation ... it won't be intellectual, it will be an urge.

GE: It will just be an urge that will consume you?

NC: Yes. It's not something that you'll have to think about. It'll just be there. I'd been having trouble with the whole. It's a pretty enormous way to be thinking, to get to the point that you can accept that even, because I always go back to the point of, 'Oh. Look at the sunset, it's beautiful', and I know it's not going to last, but ten minutes is lovely and, you know, even that pleasure ... Say an enlightened being was there, they would take pleasure, because they're not in Samsara once they're enlightened. But, it's a hard concept to, um ...

GE: So, did he actually say things like it doesn't mean that you can't enjoy pleasurable things, but you just don't get attached to them?

NC: Not on that night particularly. He did say that it doesn't mean that you give everything up, because if you say that everything's suffering, you can understand where people go off on that tangent, this extreme of giving everything up, you can understand where they get that from. If they know that you're still able to do things without attachment, it's a tricky one to get. The example I use with myself, I used to be quite overweight and I used to eat a lot, and now when I look back at my relationship with food, it was greedy, attachment, it was not really satisfying. I'd eat but it wouldn't really satisfy me. I was eating for the wrong reasons, and it was a real grasping relationship with food, whereas now I love to cook, and I love food, and I prepare food for people, I get a real enjoyment out of it, but there isn't this greedy grasping thing. So I'd sort of used that as an example with myself, like a renouncing of food as a source of pleasure and satisfaction, by grasping at it but now that I've given it up, I now enjoy it more than I used to.

⁴⁵⁴ Guenther, *op.cit.*, pp6; 8-9.

GE: It seems to be something about the nature of that extreme grasping, that pushes the pleasure away. It's an odd one.

NC: Exactly, it pushes the pleasure away. You see that clearly. It's when we grasp at things, there's that addictive quality of wanting it ... it pushes the pleasure out. And then there's that other fear in your head, but if I give up the grasping will I lose it?. How can I give up the grasping? There's one thing that I always want to ask about, but I'm too embarrassed to ask about, is sex, you know, because it's got to be one of the biggest grasping things. But I think that renunciation is getting to the point where you can ... The idea in Tantra of using desire, I've never really understood in Tantra how that works. The one thing that has become clear to me is that if you can enjoy things without grasping at them, and you are really freeing up your attitude towards them, then there's enjoyment. But where's the desire? If you free up your grasping, isn't your desire dropping away? That's how I feel about it. When I think about it with all sorts of desires, I try to recognize it for what it is, and I suppose if you can use the desire and recognize what it is, and mentally say 'I want to bring this desire into the path and dedicate it toward the path', that's given me something to think about.

These comments reflect NC's understanding of desire and its renunciation, after considerable reflection on his prior approaches and behaviours related to desire and craving. His new understanding was a result of incorporating, after the recognition that the impulses were capable of modification, the Buddhist position into his own thought. Bodily and mental impulses, the sources of attachment and aversion, need to be seen simultaneously as pure and as things to be renounced. The ideal state of preparation for tantric practice—being accomplished in concentration and insight, and having a view of one's body and mind as pure and divine—is an aspirational attainment rather than a reality. It must be considered that the *bodhisattva* path, as a prerequisite to tantric practice, orients the mind toward attainment of the appropriate view of self within a framework of compassionate and ideally selfless motivation. This ensures the practitioner's self-discipline with respect to influence—of the internal field of bodily, emotional, and mental energy—on the reification and inflation of the ego.

As one would expect, with a practice that is meant to be secret, no one really spoke about tantric experiences. Two practitioners reported striking experiences that occurred to them in Theravadin Buddhist settings before they had made contact with Tibetan Buddhism. They are significant because the experiences themselves, though very different, lend themselves to a Tantric interpretation because of the imagery used to describe the experience, and the intensity of the experience conveyed by the two individuals. The individual context for both was one of extreme emotion. Both had been dealing with highly emotionally charged situations before the experience occurred during meditation practices of different natures. The transcript excerpts are presented in Appendix 12. As one can see, the symbolism used to describe the experience is tantric in nature. These examples are discussed in Chapter 6 Section 2.2

with respect to the effect of these experiences on the individuals' subsequent decisions about Buddhist exploration and commitment.

5 The Self and Its Transformations

5.1 The Transformative Techniques and Their Effects

For many, the Mahayana motivation to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings expresses the goal of practice. Often the more short-term goal is the improvement of one's mental and emotional life. Practitioners have often expressed the sentiment that by working on themselves they improve their relationships with others, and in this way they are working toward alleviating suffering. From this, more immediate personal goals can be seen to support the ultimate goal expressed by the Mahayana motivation. One experienced practitioner, CR, said of her commitment:

CR: It's believing that the purpose of life is to develop your qualities, to help all beings, that there is a reason for being here—which I used to be not sure of—and that reason is to be of service of help to others, and that the way to do that is to, you do have to develop your own quality because I can't help others the way I am, not properly. I can try but I don't really know how, and quite often I get it wrong.

According to the outlook of the FPMT, all practice done with a Mahayana motivation can be seen to be transformative in some way. Although McDonald's book divides the meditations into four sections, viz. meditations on the mind, analytical meditations, visualization meditations and devotional practices,⁴⁵⁵ she maintains that all meditation techniques are either single-pointed concentration or analytical meditation,⁴⁵⁶ supporting the widely accepted view of all Buddhist meditation as fundamentally either concentration or insight. Concentration and *analytical* meditation are prescribed as greater scope practices in the *Lam Rim*.⁴⁵⁷ However, the commonality between virtually all of the practices employed by Vajrayana students to effect transformation is the use of visualization, and this mainly through concentration practice. Although concentration is practised by using the breath or a deity image as the meditation object, most practitioners reported incorporating deity visualization into their personal practice. Regardless of which technique was used, the general effect is a calming influence on the mind, which improves the individual's focus and sense of mental well-being.

⁴⁵⁵ McDonald, *op.cit.*, p8.

⁴⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p19.

⁴⁵⁷ Tsong-kha-pa, *op.cit.*, 2002. The entire third volume of the three volumes of Tsong-kha-pa's *Lam Rim* is devoted to exposition of concentration and wisdom, the last two of the Six Perfections of the bodhisattva.

Those concentration-type experiences that were reported by practitioners, namely NC's experience of *spaciousness* contributing to a deeper sense of refuge, and CR's *expansive feeling of the mind* during a sadhana and while doing a channel-clearing, were notable for their transformative effects. Csikszentmihalyi and Bedford comment on the positive psychological changes, complex in nature, that result from these types of experience.⁴⁵⁸ In particular, CR's experiential account echoes Csikszentmihalyi's description of flow experience. The purely psychological benefit of concentration experience can be seen alongside another aspect of this experience. The sense of self depicted in these experiences seems to be one of enhanced interiority rather than sacrality; it does not have the overlay of sacrality that many new age or Western alternative practices assume. This interiority is not rarefied or essentialized. It is more a case of the mind's relaxing, loosening up, letting go of content, emptying, not of disengaging from its concerns. It is more an extension of one's sense of self, rather than a rarefication.

The devotional practices, which include the refuge prayer,⁴⁵⁹ seem to function principally to reaffirm one's outlook and to reinforce one's motivation for self-transformation. Much of the material presented in this chapter, and in Chapter 4, emphasizes the importance of correct motivation for this form of Buddhism, in such a way that it seems more highly regarded than meditative attainment. This is reflected at interview by the subtle conveyance of a sense of achievement in maintaining an attitude of altruistic motivation despite not having meditated as much as one might. The fact that many practitioners report personal change as an effect of their Buddhist involvement generally—study and reflection on specific situations—without describing any substantial meditative input, suggests that the majority of changes occur as a result of strategies employed in everyday awareness rather than as a consequence of an altered awareness generated in meditation.

Many of the changes reported by practitioners concern the use of mental strategies for managing their feelings, especially anger and defensiveness, and for managing their habitual mental states. They report feeling generally calmer and more content in themselves. For many practitioners the ability to deal with negative feelings was an important achievement for them, but in comparison to the changes achieved by the practice of bare attention to one's immediate experience in order to note the impulse to action before it manifests, the Vajrayana practitioners achieve similar results by the use of suggestion, by holding images of the desired result. Using images of the self, much change can be seen to occur by direct reflection on and modification to the self concept. Before these processes are discussed, the relevant

⁴⁵⁸ Csikszentmihalyi, M. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, HarperPerennial, 1991, p41; Bedford, S. "Crying Out of Recognition: Experiences with Meditative Practices in a New Religious Movement", in *ARC, The Journal of Religious Studies*, pp119-32, McGill, 24, 1996, p126. Here Csikszentmihalyi explains that flow experience has an integrating effect on the self because consciousness is unusually well-ordered during states of concentration.

⁴⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p144.

models of the self from the Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist and Western academic perspectives, are outlined. This is done in order to establish what is meant to be transformed through practice, how this transformation occurs, and how change and its mechanisms are to be treated theoretically in the context of *socialization* research.

5.2 Vajrayana Models of the Self

Understanding the self and its transformations from the Buddhist perspective in terms of three aspects: the imputed, relative, and absolute, is discussed in Chapter 3 with respect to its explanatory power for the kinds of self-transformation effected by Vipassana practice. These aspects are respectively: the solid and continuous sense of I equated with the Western *ego*, the relative self as depicted by the principle of dependent origination, and the self in the absolute sense, *anatta* in Theravadin thought and *sunyata/emptiness* in Mahayana thought. However, in contrast with the Theravadin view presented at BMIMC, the FPMT presents a more conceptually elaborate view of the self, and the terms 'absolute', 'relative' and 'imputed' are used frequently in courses such as *Discovering Buddhism* and *Buddhism and Western Psychology*. Conversation, class discussions and interview material demonstrate that students do not naturally think in terms of the threefold model of the self. As previously related, the notion of *emptiness* appears to be held as a conditional belief; it is held to be true on the condition that the individual will one day have a direct realization of it, and therefore validate it for themselves. The notion of a changeable mindstream able to be affected by thought and action appears to operate as a conception of the subject of transformation. In this way, the views of the ultimate and relative selves are accommodated conceptually. Generally, the concept of Buddha-nature appears to function as a commonsense view.

In the Gelugpa system there are two ways of perceiving and working with the absolute view: *emptiness* as the impersonal absolute, and the Buddha as a model of the enlightened being, one who has realized *emptiness*. Students' appreciations of the nature of *emptiness* as lacking inherent existence were explored in Chapter 4, and in Section 3.3 above with respect to the nature of deity. The buddha-nature is said to be of the nature of *emptiness*. The use of the term Buddha-nature may give the impression of something capable of reification, and it is possible that being unfamiliar with the notion of *emptiness* that deity images are meant to embody, might lead some students to think in terms of an essentialized, holy being, at least initially. The use of buddha, *bodhisattva*, deity images, and images of one's guru are meant to remind oneself of aspects of one's own buddha-nature being inherently empty. However, cognitively speaking, one must first be able to see Buddha-nature as a quality or set of qualities belonging to a Buddha, more specifically Sakyamuni Buddha, a fully enlightened being, in order to see the model of the enlightened being as representing oneself. This involves reification to the degree necessary to objectify the image, to see it as a discrete object.

Teachings often make the distinction between the ultimate and relative views. The former is seeing the self as inherently empty. The latter is seeing it in terms of *a dependent arising*,⁴⁶⁰ that is, as a set of interdependent causes and conditions. Watson notes that the Gelugpa distinguish between the essential self which is to be denied, and the transactional self: the sense of self as we experience it, which is produced by the interplay of the aggregates.⁴⁶¹ This relative or transactional self is frequently understood and expressed in terms of the aggregates and dependent origination in the literature. In *Discovering Buddhism* module 9, *Samsara and Nirvana*, the twelve-step formula of dependent origination was presented as describing the nature of cyclic existence, *samsara*, and explaining how the person may both remain in and be liberated from *samsara*. It is significant that teaching and instruction in both Centres, VI and BMIMC, rarely discuss the doctrine of the aggregates beyond a brief mention. The notion of the person employed in Vipassana practice is framed by the four *satipatthanas*, and other notions are dominant in FPMT discourse: the principle of dependent origination, and *mind and body* to signify the aggregates. This is significant because of the reference to the five aggregates in the Heart Sutra, used to explain the *emptiness* of phenomena. The doctrine of dependent origination is used in its more general sense, that phenomena are impermanent and subject to causes and conditions. Similarly, *nama-rupa*/mind and body appear to be used to signify the subjective field of mental and bodily phenomena that give rise to the sense of I.

The sense of self or I, our own sense of self, the object designated by I which feels solid and continuous, is imputed onto the relative view. Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden further divides this imputed I into two.⁴⁶² He states that the self, the sense of I, is of two types. The first is the I imputed onto its base, the five aggregates, and exists conventionally as a dependent arising. The second type of I arises from the superposition of inherent existence onto the first type. It is the second type that is inherently empty. Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden states that the first type exists relatively. To refute this 'I' is to take the nihilist position.⁴⁶³ Watson's generalized two-level model of the self,⁴⁶⁴ outlined in Chapter 3, Section 3.2, may be applied to the understanding of the data of these Vajrayana practitioners to equal effect. Two aspects of her model relate to the sense of self. The first, in her Level 1 and corresponding to James' self-as-subject, deals with self-image as process. It consists of a simple but coherent notion of self, open to the environment. This aspect appears to correspond to the I imputed onto the aggregates that Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden describes,⁴⁶⁵ the I that when refuted leads to nihilism. This I is ultimately

⁴⁶⁰ This term was used frequently in *Discovering Buddhism* teachings during my period of fieldwork, to denote the relative view of the self.

⁴⁶¹ Watson, 2000, *op.cit.*, p31; Watson, G. *The Resonance of Emptiness: A Buddhist Inspiration for a Contemporary Psychotherapy*, Curzon Press, 2002, pp96-7.

⁴⁶² Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, *op.cit.*, pp851-52.

⁴⁶³ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ Watson, 2002, *op.cit.*, p110.

⁴⁶⁵ Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, *op.cit.*, pp851-52.

meant to be seen as a dependent arising, but the Gelugpa view holds it to be real, nonetheless.

Aspects of the Vajrayana practices involve the field of immediate subjective experience. At least two already considered can be seen to involve this subjective field: the four-point analysis of the *emptiness* of self meditation, and the deity yoga of the three higher *tantras*. Discussion above has already alluded to how mental and bodily energy may be directed, depending on the kinds of concepts embodied in the images. One can only assume that in higher Tantric practice practitioners are meant to focus directly on their experience of particular feelings and mental states while they make the visualizations.

Watson's second level is the self-concept as representation, which is bolstered by language and culture, and becomes increasingly reified. It is considered autonomous, but is adhered to and affected by emotional components. It also includes James's pure egoic component of the objective self, which he considers to provide the core sense of continuity in the individual.⁴⁶⁶ Buddhist doctrine and contemporary Western thought both see this core sense of continuity as a construct of the mind.⁴⁶⁷ This is the I that is imputed onto the I arising from the interplay of the aggregates, as Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden stresses.

This distinction between the two imputed senses of *I* from the Gelugpa perspective, and the two sites of self-awareness as understood by Watson, clarifies misapprehensions about the different aims of Buddhism and psychotherapy that sometimes occur in the literature. Concern has been expressed about the misunderstood differences between the aims of Western psychotherapy and Buddhist meditation by Western practitioners, claiming that it might lead to perception that the notion of *emptiness* means non-existence. Comparing the two approaches, many scholars agree that Buddhism assumes a strong and healthy ego-structure to begin with, whereas much Western psychology aims to strengthen it. Although some have seen the two goals as incompatible, several researchers, including Epstein and Watson, maintain that this view is reversible when the terminology has been clarified. Engler observes that meditation requires a mature level of ego organization,⁴⁶⁸ something that Watson believes is necessary before this ego-organization, the sense-of-self, can be safely seen as a construct, adding that without a firm basis of mental health, it is possible to confuse pre- and trans-egoic

⁴⁶⁶ Again, see Watson, 2002, *op.cit.*, p110. On p94 Watson explains her labelling of James's two components of the self, subject and object, as 'I the knower' and 'me the known', as self and self-concept, and holds them to refer to the 'field of immediate subjectivity' and the 'self as seen as an object distinct from its environment' respectively.

⁴⁶⁷ See Watson, 2002, *op.cit.*, p94.

⁴⁶⁸ Engler, J. "Therapeutic Aims in Psychotherapy and Meditation: Developmental Stages in the Representation of Self", in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 16 [1], pp25-61, Transpersonal Institute, 1984, p26; Watson 2002, *op.cit.*, p93.

states in meditation.⁴⁶⁹ The aim of Buddhist insight is to deconstruct the self-representation, the autonomous and reified way in which we see and treat ourselves, and not to destroy it.⁴⁷⁰

5.3 The Sense-of-Self and Its Transformations

Berger and Luckmann, in their treatment of socialization, refer to aspects of the person or self, such as immediate body experience, which are never completely socialized in the sense that their experience is somehow outside of what can be socially constituted through the use of language.⁴⁷¹ As outlined in Chapter 1, Section 2.2, scholars of social constructionism and its related subdisciplines of socialization theory and symbolic interaction, focus on the formation of the self-concept or representation through socialization. These theories have difficulty in successfully accommodating the subjective field of experience and its role in personal change. It seems that the changes commonly reported by practitioners, such as more effective management of negative feelings, are effected in the subjective field in terms of internal recognition and checking of the impulse, but managed more broadly and in an continuing manner by the way in which people wish to see themselves objectively. In contrast with the purely analytical approach to meditation taken in Vipassana, primarily dealing with the self-as-subject, the practitioner at Vajrayana Institute is given role-models with which to work, in the form of Sakyamuni Buddha, and the families of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and tantric deities. In purification practice involving visualization they use the imagination to suggest a desired state of affairs, and here negative feeling is regarded as unwholesome. The deities used for practice embody symbolic representations of qualities belonging to enlightened, undefiled beings, who serve as role-models for the practitioner's desired state of mind. As explained in Chapter 4, by this stage the practitioner has acquired a structure of understandings about the path to enlightenment, and therefore is familiar with the ideas symbolized by the buddha and deity images. This demonstrates how changes implicating the self as both subject and object can occur.

During the *Buddhism and Western Psychology* course in 2003,⁴⁷² the teacher applied Horney's psychoanalytic perspective to the understanding of the relative and imputed selves, with the aim of clarifying the nature of self-attachment and self-

⁴⁶⁹ Watson, *op.cit.*, p121; p159.

⁴⁷⁰ Watson agrees with Epstein's view that the contradiction between ego and Buddhist self is *easily negated* once it is understood that the "target of Buddhist insight is not the ego in a Freudian sense, but the self-concept, the representational component of the ego". See Watson, 2002, *op.cit.*, p116. See also Imamura, R. "Buddhist and Western Psychotherapies: An Asian American Perspective", in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp228-237, University of California Press, 1998, p235.

⁴⁷¹ Berger, P, and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday & Company, 1966.

⁴⁷² These classes were given during July and August 2003.

cherishing.⁴⁷³ The relative and imputed selves correspond to Horney's real and idealized selves, respectively. The teacher explained that an aim of psychotherapy was to develop the relative or real self,⁴⁷⁴ and to lessen identification with and attachment to the idealized self: the image of our *ideal* self. Although Horney's clinical view differs marginally from the view asserted here, the teacher was making use of the concept of the idealized self to illustrate the way in which we develop an over-attachment to this sense of self, resulting in 'neurotic egocentricity' or 'neurotic pride'.⁴⁷⁵ The aim of Buddhist practice is to deconstruct the *imputed* self, that is, the sense of permanence created by the interplay of the aggregates comprising the relative self.

6 Conclusions

In the same way that the Vipassana practitioners were seen to undergo concurrent processes of strengthening the self-image and deconstructing the sense of self as a solid and permanent core, similar effects can be observed to occur for the Vajrayana practitioners, but as a result of the engagement with a different set of techniques. These are primarily in the use of suggestion through imagining a desired state-to-be, and prime among these is deity visualization to stimulate growth of desirable qualities that are considered to be latent in the practitioner's mind.⁴⁷⁶ The practitioners of this school have a strong inclination toward concentration and purification, in line with the emphasis on balancing meditation with virtuous action aimed at purification of the mindstream. Compared to the Vipassana practitioners, whose training is specifically in the analytical method of observing the arising and ceasing of the first three *satipatthanas*—sensations, feelings, and mental states—delineating the field of immediate subjectivity—it seems that, in general, Vajrayana practitioners may achieve outwardly similar modifications by concentrative visualization of deities as models of the perfected personality. Almost all of the meditative experience discussed in Sections 2 and 3 above, which deal with the aims, techniques, and outcomes of Sutra and Tantra practice, is related to concentration practice. Many of the transformative experiences that practitioners report may appear somewhat limited in scope and effect compared to those reported by the more experienced Vipassana practitioners, but as explained in Chapter 1 Section 3.2, the majority of Vajrayana practitioners who made themselves available for interview were known to me through interaction in introductory courses such as *Discovering Buddhism*, or through programs of *sutra* study. I had almost no knowledge of, and very limited social access to the more experienced tantric practitioners, and therefore, I must allow for the possibility that my data for the activity at VI is skewed in that it

⁴⁷³ Horney, K. *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, Norton, 1970. The teacher referred to this publication.

⁴⁷⁴ Horney, *op.cit.*, p17. Horney defined this real self as 'that central inner force' ... 'which is the deep source of growth'.

⁴⁷⁵ The teacher drew our attention to pride as one of the Six Root Delusions, the other five being desirous attachment, anger, ignorance, doubt and deluded view. These are described in Geshe Acharya Thubten Lodon, *op.cit.*, pp417-37.

⁴⁷⁶ Harvey, 2000, *op.cit.*, p141.

may largely represent the experiences and transformations of practitioners in the relatively early phases of exploration of and commitment to the Buddhist path.

This last point is important to bear in mind when one considers the purpose of practice within the FPMT: to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. While not all interview respondents from Vajrayana Institute explicitly stated their commitment to the cultivation of *bodhicitta* or to the *bodhisattva* motivation, this motivation is continually expressed in collective activity at the Centre—such as reciting the refuge prayer at the beginning of teachings as related in Chapter 4 Section 3.2—and personally by keeping commitments. For all adherents this involves reciting the refuge prayer daily⁴⁷⁷, and for Tantric practitioners, keeping the commitments given in initiation. In addition, practitioners privately engage with those practices and virtuous actions that they know will facilitate their eventual attainment of the goal of enlightenment. As stated, many aim for regularity in their practice, but the demands and time constraints of a contemporary Western lifestyle often interfere with establishing the degree of regularity that practitioners would like.

For the practitioner, transformation and progress on the path is reflexively monitored through changes to the *imputed* self or self-concept. From the Buddhist perspective, the practitioner aims to see the *imputed* and *relative* selves as inherently empty, but from a social-scientific perspective, visible change is equated with transformations of the self-concept, which can be seen to occur as result of the interplay of deconstructive and reconstructive processes. As discussed above in Section 4.1, many of the changes reported by practitioners concern the use of mental strategies for managing feelings, especially anger and defensiveness, and for managing habitual mental states more generally. These transformations take place within the personal field of immediate subjectivity, the *relative* self, and their objectification is felt as change to their sense-of-self, their self-concept. For the practitioners concerned, these are tangible results and therefore signify that progress is being made. In this way a practitioner's sense-of-self, including concerns for the quality of one's mental life and personal relationships, is his or her testing ground. Concomitant with practice of the path to enlightenment—informed by one's continuous learning and increasing comprehension of the Buddhist path—is the continual testing of the information contained in teachings and texts against one's own life experience. The way in which this learning, testing, and change affects one's decision to commit to the Vajrayana Buddhist path and to the FPMT is the subject of Chapter 6.

⁴⁷⁷ Taking refuge and vows are discussed in Section 1.3 above, *Orientation to Tantra*. Also see Appendix 8 for the *Refuge and Bodhicitta* prayer.

Chapter 6: The Nature of Commitment in Vipassana and Vajrayana Contexts

1 Introduction

Chapter 6 is devoted to the exploration of the nature of the commitment process as it is experienced by the practitioners affiliated with both Centres. As outlined in Chapter 1, commitment to the Buddhist worldview and its path is based on the recognition that one has validated and accepted the beliefs, values, and expectations of the new religious reality. This occurs after a process of experimentation in which the claims of the meaning-system are experientially validated against one's inner understandings and convictions, which themselves become clearer as a result of experimental participation in religious activity. Functionally, the adopted worldview is seen to frame personal experience in a manner that renders it more meaningful. One's meditative experience and its interpretation according to doctrine must be applicable to the improvement of quality of lived experience; it must be relevant to current life challenges and ethically viable. The model of commitment proposed in Chapter 1 consists of three stages: apprehension and engagement, comprehension, and commitment. As an extension of the exploration of the first two stages outlined in Chapters 2 to 5, this chapter examines the commitment process and the factors influencing it.

In order to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of socialization and commitment as it occurs in the Vipassana and Vajrayana contexts, this chapter also considers how an individual may be predisposed to a Buddhist outlook. Therefore, this chapter also explores individuals' prior religious conditioning provided by their primary religious socialization and experimental participation in other spiritualities before their Buddhist involvement. This latter examination addresses questions about the nature of the determining factors in movements between groups, the depth of involvement in each case, and how structures of beliefs or assumptions are tested and tried during the experimental process. Accordingly, this chapter takes into account the religious biographies of respondents from early childhood to the time of interview. For ease of analysis and understanding, religious biographies are treated, for the practitioners of both Centres, in three sections: 1) the nature of commitment and the commitment process, 2) religious backgrounds of respondents and their effects, and 3) religious experimentation prior to Buddhist involvement.

2 The Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre

2.1 The Nature of Buddhist Affiliation and Religious Identity

In order to understand the nature of socialization into and commitment to the Theravadin worldview underpinning Vipassana practice, a set of questions was asked of interview respondents to ascertain its characteristics. The question, 'Do you

consider yourself Buddhist, and if so, why?', was used to establish what being Buddhist meant to the adherents. Many answered 'yes' to the question and gave their reasons, for instance, HD:

HD: Yes, there was a point where I found that I could sincerely prostrate, and say 'I take refuge in the Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*,' and really mean it, and I thought 'I've got some faith now. I'm Buddhist'. And faith is one of those factors that you need for your practice, and so, yeah, I'm a Buddhist.

HD and many others described their commitments as being based on faith or belief in the teachings, and on the value of the practices in their daily lives. HD's use of the term 'faith' may be understood in the specifically Buddhist sense of having faith in awakening to the *dharma*.⁴⁷⁸ Faith is one of the five spiritual faculties held to be necessary to attain Nibbana in early and Theravadin Buddhism.⁴⁷⁹ The same sentiments were expressed by others. KN reported that her self-identification as a Buddhist was based on a set of beliefs, viz. in reincarnation; that enlightenment is possible; that the Buddha existed and achieved enlightenment; in the Four Noble Truths, because they are validated in her experience; and because she has experienced the claimed benefits of the practices. Most of those who answered 'no' to the question indicated that they did not wish to accept the label of Buddhist. For instance, FV said, "I think I'm reluctant to identify myself as anything in particular. If I were to, it would be Buddhist", but later said that she had begun to consider herself Buddhist 'in a quiet kind-of way, just to myself', during the previous six to eight months. Three adherents, KT, HR and HU said that the social context they found themselves in would determine whether they would outwardly call themselves Buddhist. Significantly, HR was the only respondent of the twenty to have taken refuge formally, which included taking the five lay precepts because she had wanted to make a commitment.⁴⁸⁰ Because no refuge ceremony is performed at BMIMC, she found a Theravadin nun to give her refuge. Some found the label to be inadequate in some way. For instance, RN described herself as a seeker for truth:

RN: Oh no. I sort of regard myself as a Buddhist, but I suppose I regard myself more as a searcher for the truth, and I see Buddhism as the means to discover that, through the Buddhist teachings. You know I think perhaps that for me

⁴⁷⁸ Abe, M. "Faith and Self-Awakening: A Search for the Category Covering All Religious Life", in *The Eastern Buddhist* XXXI [1], pp12-24, The Eastern Buddhist Society, 1998, p15. Abe contrasts this specifically Buddhist sense of faith as awakening to *dharma* or self-realization of Nirvana, with Wilfred Cantwell Smith's essentialist notion of faith as a spiritual orientation of the personality and the capacity to relate to the transcendent.

⁴⁷⁹ *ibid.*, pp16-7. Faith is the first of five, the others being assiduous striving, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, in that order. Also see Keown, D. *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp276-77. Keown states that faith, a prerequisite for embarking on the Eight-Fold Path, must be tested against one's own experience; there is no doctrine of "salvation by faith in Buddhism". References from the Pali Suttas

⁴⁸⁰ Keown, D. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1992, p29. Keown outlines the five lay precepts.

that's the Buddhist principles of living, the basic teachings as far as taking refuge in Buddhism. So in that sense I'm a Buddhist and that's how I usually explain myself to people because it's sort of simpler in a way just to say I'm Buddhist.

Even though RN's statement may appear contradictory in that she sees herself as a searcher for truth rather than a Buddhist, she also sees Buddhism as *the* means for discovering the truth. Statements such as these encapsulate the view of commitment that practitioners appear to hold; that it is conditionally based on the capacity of the Buddhist principles to provide a viable interpretive framework for the understanding and negotiation of experience. This is best expressed by EBS, one of the Vipassana teachers at the Centre:

EBS: You know, I'm so inspired by the Buddha's story, because it's a story of him following his own instincts. That's really big for me. So I'll often say to people, if something came along that gave a better exposition of my own experience, I'd actually swap to that. I'm not attached to Buddhism for Buddhism's sake. I'm attached to the notion of going with my own experience, trying to make sense of what my life's about.

This sentiment was expressed by other respondents. EC, while having devoted considerable energy to her practice over the previous four years, was unsure at the time of interview of how she felt about being Buddhist. She simply 'didn't know', although other comments made during the interview showed her commitment to the teachings and practice to have deepened over the four years of her involvement. She commented:

EC: Well, I just think that it's a good way to live your life. This is why I don't call myself a Buddhist. I'm not reading the scriptures and finding out about everything that went on in the Buddha's life, not really into studying it in that way and getting some knowledge. I just look upon it as a really good way to live your life. I find most other religions are quite dogmatic, whereas I don't find that Buddhism is ... It's not the scriptures that I read. I'm a practical person rather than a theoretical person.

EC's approach to being Buddhist, that one should read the scriptures, may reflect her Christian upbringing, which included attending a Christian school. More generally, it demonstrates the way in which understanding of a label or term may conceal the more relevant aspects of an individual's religious activity.⁴⁸¹ In these instances it is

⁴⁸¹ Fronsdal, G. "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness", in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp. 164-180, University of California Press, 1998. pp169-7. This is in much the same way as people sometimes use the word spiritual in preference to the term religious, because they feel that the latter implies a dogmatic approach and subservience to an outer religious authority. Fronsdal observed that the early American Vipassana students, many of whom were part of the counter-culture movement of the 60s

evident that the acceptance or rejection of the label Buddhist does not provide a reliable indication of engagement with Buddhist activity, which is more clearly demonstrated in practitioners' accounts of why they commit to its practice. All of the responses indicated that practitioners had made a minimal commitment to learn about and to apply the teachings and Vipassana technique in their daily lives, committing considerable personal time and mental energy to the endeavour. It is conceivable that the approaches of EC and RN are representative of different stages of progress in the movement from the experimental participant to the committed practitioner. In both cases the individuals' experiences have been validated, but RN, with more experience, is more prepared to take on Theravada Buddhism's doctrinal and hierarchical authority.

Respondents were asked three questions related to their own experience and interpretation of the commitment process. These were 1) Was the adoption of Buddhism a process or specific event? 2) Was the adoption a sudden or gradual process? 3) Was there an identifiable turning point? In response to the first two questions, all respondents saw their participation as mainly a process, and all but one saw the process as gradual. BM described his adoption of Buddhism as sudden, being within four months after his visiting a monastery. He was young at the time, twenty one, when he entered the monastery. Two practitioners saw their adoption of Buddhism as a process, but marked by events. In answer to the question, 'Was the adoption of Buddhism a process or specific event?', HD answered:

HD: Both. Because there was that immediate hearing about *dukkha* [a reference to the first teaching she attended] ... It's like a veil lifted from the eyes, from the mind, but there was also that more gradual faith process happening.

HD had in fact identified two turning points throughout the course of the interview: the realization about *dukkha*, and that where she realized that she was able to prostrate and know that she meant it. Both of these events had struck her as being significant points of decision. Similarly, HU recalled:

HU: I went to a nearby monastery where there was a Western monk, an American monk, and did a meditation course there. And that was for about eight or nine days, and that was kind of it. I had an experience as if the whole of my body just kind of melted, I guess a powerful experience that was kind of like the hook. It was still in terms of this cosmic consciousness and experiences and things [a reference to an earlier answer], and so I guess that was kind of why I really wanted to keep doing this, to recreate that and to kind of understand it. So, I can't remember any particular point where I embraced the teachings, it was more just a gradual over a period of time becoming more familiar, and I guess just seeing the truth in them.

and70s, distanced themselves from mainstream religion, and described their involvement with Buddhist practice as spiritual rather than religious.

While some people did identify one or more event or turning point, these were seen as part of an extended process of understanding and acceptance of the Buddhist tenets. It is significant that time, duration, or in some cases, order of events, does not seem to have been important. Instead, the emphasis was on what was experienced or learnt. Engagement was viewed as a cumulative process of exploration: learning, testing and validating doctrine, practice and experiential norms against their own reasoning and experience. This is evident in the approaches of DN and EC, of thirty and four years' experience, respectively:

DN: Certainly when I started I was just a meditator, and I was looking for a meditation practice, and I wasn't a Buddhist. It took a number of years and interactions with monks and personal practice and a number of retreats. At first I was doing at least one ten-day retreat each year, and as time went on I'd do longer and longer retreats. So, in the process of doing annual ten day retreats, after a number of years I just found myself looking at myself as a Buddhist. At first I was obviously not a Buddhist and I wouldn't allow myself just to say I'm a Buddhist because I was sitting down and doing some chanting and meditation, and taking the precepts. It wasn't enough for me to identify, so I deliberately didn't identify, so it took a few years. But that's been a long time now that I've regarded my self as a Buddhist, and sometimes I still challenge that and say 'what's that mean'?

EC: I can chart my progression over the last four years or whatever, and it took probably two years of nothing much happening, not much of a shift or anything, just going and listening and stuff. I'd say the last year has been the biggest thing, but I suppose that's the way with a lot of things, it's *cumulative* [*italics mine*] and the longer you go, the more benefit you get from it.

Other excerpts from EC's interview transcript indicate that in the four years of her engagement with Vipassana, she has devoted considerable time and effort into attending retreats and teachings, and into developing a personal practice. Although she does not consider herself Buddhist, she clearly believes that Buddhism provides 'a good way to live your life'. The results of her efforts are of two types. The first is experiential: the development of mindfulness after two years' effort of seemingly not progressing. The second has to do with changes to her beliefs, attitudes and habitual responses, arising from the combination of the interpretation of experiential states and changes, and reflection on Buddhist principles during *dhamma* talks and daily activity. These outcomes are illustrated by excerpts in Chapter 3, Section 4. EC's approach to her practice is illustrative of the approach taken generally, when a student or practitioner has some knowledge and experience on which to reflect, in that the mechanics of the process, whether seen as one seamless accumulation of knowledge and experience, or as sequences of discrete events, or as both, were insignificant in comparison to the substance of learning, experience, and self-transformation.

Because BMIMC does not offer a formal refuge ceremony, there is no overt sign of commitment to Buddhism, and the existence of a point of commitment must be identified by the participants themselves. The nature of responses indicates that in the period from encounter to commitment to Buddhism, their interest, sense of engagement, and commitment to its doctrinal and practical aspects all deepen with exposure. For many of the respondents, this was a process that was visible in hindsight; in that, looking back, they could see changes to their thinking, emotional states and behaviour accompanied by a shift toward acceptance of the Buddhist view. However, the substance of these narratives indicates that applying a stage approach to the interpretation of data is inappropriate. While some respondents' experiences suggested that the commitment process consisted of two or three stages of increasing intensity of interaction, the bulk of the data supports the view that a gradual process of intensifying engagement culminates in any one of the decision to commit, the recognition that one is, *has*, committed, or continuing unsurety. Therefore, the data are organized and discussed accordingly, beginning with practitioners' accounts of their first experiences with Vipassana.

2.2 The Journey from Engagement to Commitment

In making the decision to try Vipassana, participants share the common perception that meditation is beneficial physically, mentally and spiritually. The following excerpt from an interview with HU, a Vipassana teacher in his early fifties, suggests that while changes have occurred during the recent few decades in the specific reasons as to why people initially try meditation, it is generally not out of idle curiosity:⁴⁸²

HU: I guess then I was looking at it as a cosmic consciousness kind of thing, and then over time it had a greater depth than that. But that was the hook for me. Interestingly when I look at people who come now, mostly it's not that that's bringing them in, it's suffering that's bringing them in. I think that there are just people that have crises in their life, whether it's alcoholism or the death of somebody, or their own mental turmoil, that they come to meditation looking for relief. There is someone who comes to the Monday nights, and she'll often talk afterwards. She has trouble sleeping, often has panic attacks and you know she's looking for the meditation to help her with this, and it seems to be to some extent. But it's not the same cure as taking a pill. And so a number of ... it's more the older people who are coming for those reasons, but occasionally some of the younger people will come up and talk, and the way they're talking, it's not suffering that's bringing them. There's a real curiosity.

⁴⁸² Volinn, E. "Eastern Meditation Groups: Why Join?", in *Sociological Analysis* 46 [2], pp147-56, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1985, p148. Volinn makes this comment in connection with his twelve months of research in an ashram in the New England countryside in the US. The *movement towards* that he discusses is the desire for an experience of a meditative state, or a *sense for the experiential*, which he found to be a significant motivator for ashram residents.

Virtually all of the respondents had explored some other form of meditation, including Buddhist forms, before trying Vipassana meditation in another Theravadin setting or at BMIMC. All had begun exploring the alternative spiritual scene in some way, and were motivated to find out more. For some, it is a chance meeting with someone who introduces them to the practice. DN recounts this kind of experience:

GE: What drew you to Vipassana?

DN: Accident, I suppose. That was what presented itself to me. It's like I said earlier, it's people in your life. It's often just individuals who you meet that you make some connection ... I met someone whose mother lived next door to me and he came home from travelling after being a monk while he was overseas, and we met and became friends, and he said 'sit down there and watch your breath, I'll show you how to meditate'. Up to that point I'd been reading and having an interest in different kinds of philosophies, particularly Krishna Murti, and my friend came along and said, "Here's a Mahasi Vipassana practice." So call it fate or *karma* or whatever. And why did I take up Buddhist study? [in response to my question] Well I think that Buddhist study was a natural extrapolation of the practice. The more I practised, the more I was interested in this and that, and that still happens. I've just come back from six months' practice in Nepal, and re-inspired to study the *sutras*, and just get involved at that level. I've done 30 years of practice, but not a lot of that time being a formal book-reading, word-reading student, just dipping in occasionally, that's all I've ever done. But more and more I appreciate the value in the Buddha's actual words, and some of the old commentaries on the teachings are quite profound.

As this example shows, many people try a Vipassana retreat as an extension of their own explorative process, which includes other forms of Buddhism, other forms of meditation, and alternative health practices. In this instance, DN's prior reading had already awakened a curiosity about meditation. Many respondents recall with enthusiasm their positive response to their first retreat experience. This was a result of the ability of the teacher or teachers to give clear instruction and explanation in the practice, and also to give *dhamma* talks about subjects of relevance to students' lived experience. In the following examples it is also clear that participants' perceptions of these teachers as being genuinely practised in meditation, and in ethical application of the principles, was instrumental in their continued involvement in the practice. KT explained how she 'spent about a year toe-dipping'. Having tried *Friends of the Western Buddhist Order* and feeling unsure how well aligned it was with Buddhism generally, she decided that she wanted more experience with Buddhism, and did not want to rely on Sangharakshita's view alone. After trying Zen, and finding that 'nothing really gelled with these places', although 'something was getting through', she tried a ten-day retreat Vipassana retreat. She recalls that she found the first two to three days 'weird', and she felt unsure about the experience. On the third day, she decided to suspend her doubt because the teachers appeared 'to know what they are talking about', and decided to follow their instruction for the extent of the retreat.

After the retreat KT began to explore the practice in earnest. She had been impressed by the way in which they grounded their practice in daily life: the techniques and explanations, and the emphasis on compassion and understanding. This blend of wisdom and compassion appealed to her. Similarly, EBS and HU recalled:

EBS: A friend of mine did a retreat with Goldstein—must have been in 1984—and he gave me *The Experience of Insight*,⁴⁸³ and he was going to this retreat. And I went to this retreat, and it completely blew my mind apart. And it just felt like all this searching that I'd been doing was manifest in this interesting experience. I had a lot of confidence in Goldstein, I thought he was a character who as a human being, I hadn't come across someone like that. He seemed like he had incredible integrity. And Sharon Salzburg was very genuine, I really liked that. So I think because of this situation I saw in Salzburg and Goldstein, they were brilliant, the way they lived their own lives. So I was very impressed by that and basically I just had an incredible experience meditating. I just felt like the structure that was given about the Four Noble Truths, and the nature of suffering, and impermanence, the exploration of self, and the notion of greed, hatred and delusion, and then, the way they can get you to methodically keep looking at this, and see that that's what's going on, and relate that to all these experiences. It was one of the most amazing experiences I've ever had.

HU: I saw an advertisement for a retreat at Wat Buddha Dharma, and there were two things I was interested in, the retreat and the existence of Wat Buddha Dharma, and so I went out there and did a weekend with Phra Khantipalo. This would have been in the '80s I guess, around '81. And that was kind of a bit of a 'check it out to see what it's like' place, and then there was a ten-day retreat that was advertised with Joseph Goldstein. I must have known about him, I must have read one of his books or something, because I was quite keen to do that. I went and did that retreat, and that put a lot of stuff ... I really connected with him and the practice.

The examples above are from practitioners who came to Vipassana after having done some previous exploration of other philosophies and practices, either from within Buddhism, for instance, KT and HU, or within another Western alternative area, for instance, DN largely through reading, and EBS through prior involvements with Kriya Yoga (Ananda Marga) and a local Gurdjieff group. In each case, the respondent found something of philosophical and practical value that became a foundation for further exploration. As Volinn suggests, involvement in meditation-based groups can be seen as *movement towards* an experience, or *a sense for the experiential*, instead of fleeing from personal unhappiness.⁴⁸⁴ While Volinn's research indicates that interest by ashram residents was largely limited to the experiential, the interest shown by these Vipassana practitioners is to do with the utilization of meditative experience for understanding and dealing with the generality of life experience. This is an aspiration that some begin to recognize quickly, but that all

⁴⁸³ Goldstein, J. *The Experience of Insight*, Shambala Publications, 1976.

⁴⁸⁴ *ibid.*

develop in time. Conversely, some encounter Vipassana and its philosophy in the midst of personal unhappiness. Several people told how they took up meditation in order to get peace of mind to deal with a personal difficulty. For instance, an examination of KBN's transcript excerpt concerning how he took up meditation in response to a crisis at work, reproduced in Chapter 5, Section 4.3, illustrates this, as does SI's story:

SI: I was having trouble with anxiety and depression, and that's what really got me into meditating. I sat at the Zen Centre for three and a half years, and noticed absolutely no change in my life at all, neither in meditation nor in daily living. And I went to the Buddhist library and I thought I'll just see who else is teaching and what's available, and I ran into Patrick, and I didn't know he was a teacher, and he talked about the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, and not long after there was a *dana* day up there and my girlfriend asked me if I wanted to go up, and I walked into the place, and I thought 'this is for me.'

The two examples cited above, those of KBN and SI, concern their engagement with the practice as a way of coping with personal anguish. However, HD exemplifies the kind of initial response that participants may have on hearing a teaching on a topic that is relevant to their life experiences:

HD: We were going through marriage problems, and we went to a counsellor ... [who] referred my husband to a physiotherapist who ran relaxations classes, but who was actually a Tibetan Buddhist. So we started going along to these, and I found him a most admirable person. He recommended that my husband do a meditation retreat with Phra Khantipalo who was visiting Bendigo where we lived, and I went to the Centre to pick my husband up on the last day, and was invited in by the teacher to hear the last bit of the talk. And it was quietly revolutionary to me, and I turned onto it immediately. He was talking about *dukkha*, which is that bit of unsatisfactoriness and I had recently had a baby, and I don't know why, but I really thought that all my troubles would disappear when I had a baby, and to be confronted with the fact that it didn't happen, in fact, things got sort of more complicated even though she was wonderful and we loved her, was, was *dukkha*, and here was a man who was laying that out to me. So on the basis of that we were prepared to visit Wat Buddha Dharma where he was from, and 18 months later sold up and moved there.

In contradiction of the view of involvement with retreat-type meditative settings as facilitating flight from personal unhappiness, the experiences of these respondents show how learning to identify the mental states and habitual thinking that cause personal unhappiness leads to an intensifying of this movement towards both the experiential and philosophical dimensions of Buddhist activity. More than this, personal unhappiness and its causes are encapsulated by the Buddhist doctrines of the Three Marks of Existence and the Four Noble Truths. Being able to relate one's own experience to Buddhist doctrine is a factor in the movement from comprehension of doctrine in the abstract to its internalization as accepted truth.

The function of specific meditative experiences and their interpretation in learning the practice and comprehending the fundamentals of its supporting doctrine were outlined in Chapter 2, Section 4. If one perseveres in the face of the initial inability to concentrate the mind, and with the initial aversion to pain, and learns to use these phenomena as meditation objects, one begins to develop mindfulness to the point where different mental states, usually in the form of the hindrances, can be distinguished. At this stage one still has periods of distraction and the mind still loses the object but, through noting and accepting the dominant mental state of the moment, there is a smoother resumption of mindful attention to the primary and secondary objects. With commitment to the practice, the point is reached whereat the mind can stay with an object and continue to note its qualities, such as its arising and ceasing, without slipping into concentration. This development gives access to deeper *insight* experiences. As many accounts reproduced in Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate, this level of ability takes several years of commitment to the practice to develop. Typically, one has already identified oneself as a Buddhist before this capacity for experiential insight has been fully realized.⁴⁸⁵

Of more relevance to the act of commitment is the realization that self-transformation has occurred. This is found to be true for the Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners alike, although their techniques for effecting self-transformation differ in certain ways. In Chapter 3, Section 2.1 the three types of change are outlined as 1) changes within one's immediate subjective field of experience, 2) changes to one's sense of self, and 3) changes to one's outlook on reality, or worldview. Although these transformations are mutually reinforcing in terms of continued learning and internalization, and respondents' reasons for seeing themselves as committed Buddhists reflect all three types of change, their verbalized responses foreground the changes to do with sense of self, particularly in their management of their mental and emotional life in relation to others. In terms of the definition of internalization and the recognition of its occurrence, the acceptance of the new universe of discourse as one's own, and its ascendancy to the status of primary authority, which occurs first out of recognition that one has changed, or that one has adopted the Buddhist meaning-system and path as one's own remains unclear. What is clear is that both involve the comprehension and application of principle and practice to the understanding and negotiation of life experience. The principles are those that form the core of Buddhist doctrine: the Three Marks of Existence and the Four Noble Truths.

Discussion until now has defined the process in terms of duration: the process is gradual, involving subtle change over a period of time. Traditionally, researchers who have applied the essentialist definition of religious change as the 'radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life', have further described the *conversion*

⁴⁸⁵ See Chapter 2, Section 4.6 for a discussion of these types of experience.

process in terms of the completeness of the personal change, itself identified by the place occupied in the person's belief system by the new worldview: at the Centre or the periphery. Nock's distinction between conversion and adhesion, respectively a reorientation of the soul and the acceptance of new religions as useful supplements rather than substitutes,⁴⁸⁶ has been usually applied as a two-fold categorization. Typically, the meditation practices and their interpretive frameworks are not mixed with other perspectives. Of the twenty interviewed, only one practitioner mixed Vipassana and Metta practice with others; in this instance with *Shikentaza*⁴⁸⁷ from the Zen tradition, although his comments suggested that he had moved away from the Zen practice in recent times. Two of the teachers interviewed practise yoga as a health technique, but both consider themselves to be Buddhist.

While many of the practitioners described themselves as Buddhist, it cannot be assumed to have outlined their senses of root reality. Their day-to-day lives required them to interact with and negotiate Western styles of thought. Many practitioners were members of the scientific and medical professions, for instance, HD as a dentist, SI a health professional, KBT a geologist, and JD a biologist, and therefore schooled in the Western scientific paradigm. The several who were working or had worked as psychologists: DN, EBS, and LP, and others would have been educated in the Western Social Scientific paradigm. These included HR and KBN, university academics in the discipline of Education before their retirement; RN an adult educator; KT an architect; HU a solicitor; RL a full-time *dhamma* teacher who had studied Law in his early adulthood. These practitioners saw no conflict between Buddhist and scientific thought. However, it may have been that no direct paradigmatic conflict to challenge their positions had occurred. Other practitioners: administrators KN, EJ and EC, and an aged-care worker KM, would have received more than basic education. It appears that the question of how exclusively Buddhism provides their sense of root reality is irrelevant to them; Buddhism appears to describe or map their sense of engagement with the world in terms of first-person concerns adequately. Beyond this it is difficult to gauge because third-person concerns, the physical world as a self-evident fact, is part of a taken-for-granted reality that does not affect their engagement with Buddhism as a first-person discourse.

Ideally, those who commit to Buddhism have internalized, taken in the Buddhist worldview and its path as *their* truth. This is the import of becoming a Buddhist. One can internalize—accept as true for oneself—a view of reality and its implications for the person as true, depending on its meeting certain criteria. In this sense a

⁴⁸⁶ A, Nock. *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933, p7; Snow and Machalek, *op.cit.*, p169.

⁴⁸⁷ Coleman, J. *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, p125. Coleman notes that in *Shikantaza*, the attempt is made to see experience as it is without imposing an interpretation onto it. This practitioner remarked in the interview, that "it begins to look like Vipassana after a while anyway."

religious perspective can be said to be conditionally true. DBT said that he was Buddhist, that he took Buddhism as his view, until something better came along. This view describes the sense in which Buddhism is adopted by some, that it should map experience generally rather than provide it with a system of absolute truth.⁴⁸⁸ Adherents were not expecting something to reflect their experience completely. It just had to provide valid interpretive frameworks and strategies for living. For commitment to Buddhism to be continued it must be capable of being sustained by validation of experience through its meaning-system. If such commitment has not occurred to an experienced practitioner, it seems that either that individual has not yet had satisfactory validation, or resists the idea of committing to one tradition or outlook, preferring to remain open to alternatives. According to a definition of commitment based on total or radical change, it can never be complete; the process is open-ended and continual, and conditional upon continued relevance for the individual's worldview through its validation of experience.

2.3 Religious Background

All but three respondents came from Christian backgrounds. One of the three, EJ, was an indigenous Buddhist from Sri Lanka. She was interviewed because she had re-established her connection with Buddhism through this Western form. Of the two others who were not from Christian backgrounds, KN was raised agnostic and SI answered 'none' to religious background. Despite their lack of religious education, both of these reported having been attracted to religion in some form in early life. While still a child, KN asked a neighbour to take her to Sunday school. SI had wanted to become a Catholic nun at fifteen, and remembered developing an interest in Religion and Philosophy while still in her adolescence. The other eighteen respondents were raised in Christian environments, which for some included attending church and a Christian school. The patterns of religious involvement amongst these individuals had varied in intensity and in nature. Several denominations were represented. The majority were Anglican, and some were Catholic, Uniting Church, Presbyterian, or Methodist.

Responses to the question, 'How did you relate to your religious background?' entailed three considerations: the amount and nature of recall of events, the strength and nature of belief, and affective response. There was variation among respondents in their ability to recall their religious upbringing. Some answered with a brief statement, and offered a small number of brief memories. Others gave more elaborate descriptions of those circumstances and events that had affected them. With respect to the strength and nature of religious belief held by respondents, and to the strength of feeling for one's religion as children, a wide range of responses was expressed, from total belief and commitment to total uninterest, and from feeling totally involved to being 'left cold'. EBS's experiences were of the former kind:

⁴⁸⁸ Heirich, M. "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion", in *American Journal of Sociology* 83 [3], pp653-80, University of Chicago Press, 1977.

EBS: I always had a positive relationship to being Catholic, I really enjoyed the ritual, I really liked being an altar boy. I had a strong sense of the spiritual from an early age, and in some ways felt it was a haven for me, given that my family life was a bit disrupted, and I was a fairly sensitive kid. So I had a positive relationship with that. And then at about twelve or thirteen I had a strong sense that the Catholic way of approaching religion as I understood it, which was through my experience of the church and so on, was wrong. I just had a strong inner sense of that, a feeling that ... it was the experience that this was not right. What has always fascinated me in retrospect was that I had a sense at that same time that it didn't mean that the whole area of spirituality was wrong ... it was just that that approach was wrong.

GE: Can you remember anything specific about it that you felt was wrong?

EBS: I think it was to do with issues of just believing, the whole notion in Catholicism of the priest knowing what was going on. I think I was starting to have an appreciation that some of the people who were in positions of power, I really didn't have a lot of respect for.

Other comments of EBS's indicate that he had a sense for the experiential which he felt the church did not embody despite its ritual. His sundering with his childhood affiliation appears to be a common experience. Many respondents left their Christianity and began to explore other options in their late adolescence and early adulthood. The biography of one practitioner had a pronounced experiential element, which can be seen to have influenced his exploration of Buddhism after leaving Christianity. RL reported having, within a Marist Brothers Catholic setting, a type of spontaneous experience of *no-self* at sixteen. He described it as the ground falling from under his sense of self. The significance of this experience is its spontaneity, and its lack of prior conditioning within RL's Catholic setting, wherein there was no prior contact with Buddhism. Pilarzyk refers to experiences of this type as "shock experiences", as "ruptures in the natural taken-for-granted reality", and understands them to be part of religious change for some individuals.⁴⁸⁹ The memory of this experience became a strong reference point for RL's questioning of the Christian faith, and his subsequent Buddhist involvement.

In sum, one's childhood Christianity can be seen to have three influences on later approaches to spiritual involvement and self-discovery: a taste for the experiential in some cases; a preference for what Lofland and Stark called a religious problem-solving perspective; and a respect for an ethical approach to living. The data strongly support the view that the ethical teaching and training provided by a Christian upbringing emerges and becomes more significant as one engages with

⁴⁸⁹ Pilarzyk, T. "Conversion and Alternation Processes in the Youth Culture: A Comparative Analysis of Religious Traditions", in *Pacific Sociological Review* 21 [4], pp. 379-405, Pacific Sociological Association, 1978, p. 398.

Buddhism in adulthood. It is suggested that Christian behavioural ideals are internalized strongly as part of early religious socialization. These ideals find expression through Buddhist practices and doctrinal frameworks in adulthood, especially through compassion practices; ethical elements of meditation practice, such as the five lay precepts taken before and during Vipassana retreats, as outlined in Chapter 2; and through the focus on the three aspects of the Noble Eight-Fold Path: *panna*, *sila*, *samadhi*. One element of several biographies was a description of the way in which the practical application of the ethical dimension in Buddhism enabled individuals to circumvent the authority structure of Christianity that they encountered in their childhood. As HR said, "In Buddhism, it's what you do. The belief-authority structure is different compared to the Judeo-Christian system."

2.4 Experimental Histories

The purpose of surveying the previous areas of exploration and involvement by practitioners was to derive an understanding of what leads people to try Buddhism and Buddhist meditation. This Section follows the types of affiliations formed by seekers, and the types of belief and practice responsible for predisposition to and engagement with Buddhism. The principal explorations were: other forms of Buddhism, including Zen, Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, different Theravadin centres, and different teachers, such as Achaan Cha; Eastern-derived meditative and mental hygiene techniques such as Transcendental Meditation, forms of Yoga, and Tai Chi; and some minor involvement with Western Esotericism in that two respondents had been affiliated with local Gurdjieff groups. It appeared that the majority of sampling and exploration had taken place within Western alternative spirituality rather than within mainstream religion. After leaving their childhood Christianity, practitioners followed one of two lines of exploration and involvement.

The first was moving from Christianity straight to an exploration of some form of Buddhism, as seven of the twenty had done. Two of them had strong secular influences in between: KN in rehabilitation, and KBT in the form of education in the hard sciences, which he saw as having a strong effect on his view of reality. Another, artist MV, had travelled in Asia during his adolescence, and there developed 'a visual taste about Buddhist, Hindu and Confucian culture'. He had developed a Vipassana practice alongside his Zen Buddhism, and undertaken *sutra* studies with local teachers. His description of his personal practice showed it to contain both influences. He was one of two practitioners to do so.

The second was moving from Christianity into an involvement with some form of alternative spirituality before moving on to Buddhism. Twelve of the twenty moved from their childhood Christianity into these practices, predominantly into the meditation-mental hygiene movement as opposed to Western Esotericism. Some examples of engagement were: Yoga, Zen, Vipassana; Transcendental Meditation, Zen, Vipassana; Yoga, Self Transformation (a self-growth movement), Tai Chi and

Vipassana. In several cases Vipassana involvement consisted of exploration with the Wat Buddha Dharma and the Goenka Centre at Blackheath before coming to BMIMC. KM and EBS had been involved with local Gurdjieff groups. EJ, an indigenous Buddhist from Sri Lanka, had read Krishna Murti, and had explored both Siddha Yoga meditation and Western Vipassana with the Goenka method and BMIMC. Many practitioners from both paths had encountered alternative ideas in some form from their reading before their contact with Buddhism, without engaging in other practices or belief systems. DN had read Krishna Murti, Theosophy, Suzuki, some popular Japanese Zen writers, and writings by the Dalai Lama, and although having practised Yoga, RN had read in other religious traditions: Judaism, Sufism and Hinduism at university level.

The progression of involvements or affiliations with spiritualities and groups, as exhibited by the biographies of these practitioners, illustrates some strong characteristics of the process of testing. The first of these involves the aspects of religious activity that are integral to the ongoing experimental process for individuals themselves. The second is to do with the emergence and clarification of one's needs, values, and sentiments with ongoing participation. For all, the process of experimental immersion has a definite quality and line of trajectory. Individuals' decisions with respect to selection and testing of a practice or affiliation with a group, and the decision to terminate the contact and move to something else, are based on a criterion or set of criteria that are identified during the trying-out of a practice or a spiritual group. While the language used by some respondents occasionally gave the impression of 'just trying to get a feel for something', the reasons for their decisions became clear on explanation. A dominant facet of exploration in experimental journeys was involvement with various forms of meditation. These investigations took place largely in spiritually-oriented contexts, such as Transcendental Meditation and various forms of Yoga.

Each of those practitioners who explored some form of meditation before their exploration of Vipassana expressed their desire for meditation to be practical or applicable in daily life in some way. This is a criterion that seems to have gained increasing clarity in their thinking throughout the progression of their exploration process. While some seekers were simply 'trying things out', others by contrast, were initially motivated by a need for a better sense of well-being. As the following narratives will demonstrate, this need for a better sense of well-being may have arisen as a result of physical and mental illness, or from a more general feeling of just needing to find oneself and the answer to life's problems. However, these narratives show serious engagement with Vipassana to have arisen in connection with the identification of the need for a practice applicable to daily life. From this has arisen the identification of further criteria: to provide techniques with which to enhance direction over one's mental and emotional life, and to provide a sense of meaning to experience and self-growth.

It is not entirely clear at which point these criteria emerged as important to the individuals concerned. In interview respondents spoke with the wisdom of hindsight, suggesting that the consideration in their descriptions was an articulation of their previous experiences through a Buddhist lens. Often they gave the sense that their perceptions existed during their exploration of other systems, and became more clearly articulated through access to Buddhist ways of thinking. An example is HD, who commented, "I was into Siddha Yoga, and I think it lacks, the meditation is very much concentration, which of course, does suppress the *hindrances* and you do feel good but the *insight* doesn't arise." Although stated with the view of hindsight employing Buddhist terminology, HD's remarks indicate that some discrimination has taken place with respect to identifying her desire for a technique which facilitates the development of wisdom.

An instance of an individual 'just trying things out', is EC, who expressed the recognition of a growing interest in meditation.

EC: I actually found the relaxation slash meditation part of it [yoga classes] the best part, and after I left that class, I did several others over the years, but I never found one where they emphasized the meditation part of it before, I mean it was called relaxation, but when I look back on it, it was sort of meditation, and it went for quite a while at the beginning and end, so that was a big part of the yoga class, and I had never found that again in a yoga class. It was more for that aspect of it than the postures.

EC's interest can be seen to change with her progression through her involvements. First the yoga exposed her to meditation and aroused her interest in it, after which the Vipassana awakened her to the more religious aspects of Buddhism. The excerpts from EC's transcript in Section 1.1 show her to be representative of practitioners in terms of meditative ability and her capacity and willingness to persevere with the practice.

Conversely, HR originally 'did meditation because it was with the yoga'. She had been a Hatha Yoga practitioner, and had cultivated an interest in the mind-body complex. She 'liked working with the body' and 'paying attention to the body. Yoga, being her only exercise, had enhanced a sense of physical well-being. She enjoyed a feeling of improved flexibility, and also enjoyed the sense of achievement that she gained from postural improvement. After a 20-year gap, she was feeling the effect of job stress and personal issues, and feeling tired, overextended, and suffering from a back injury, she felt as though she had lost connection with her centre, and wanted to connect with words such as stillness and centre. She found herself saying, "If I could just get back to yoga and meditation".

After some exploration with Zen and Vipassana at the time of interview, she was committed to the ongoing exploration and application of both practices, being drawn

to Vipassana and to the insight aspect of Zen practice equally. Her current Zen teacher also applied the noting or labelling technique central to the Mahasi practice, but encouraged students to be more explicit with their labelling. For instance, with respect to the labelling of feeling, as opposed to applying the label of *feeling* or *anger*, one is encouraged to note, 'feeling anger with so-and-so over such-and-such'. One is also encouraged to check the body for tension or reaction. HR reported that, some time after beginning Zen, she tried some concentration practice and found it useful for supporting the Insight practice. With her concentration strengthened, she found that 'her mind did not wander so much'. Another significant aspect to her involvement with Vipassana practice is shown by the fact that although originally drawn to the practice because of her interest in the mind-body complex, and because it 'didn't contain any ritual' and 'seemed cerebral', with time and acclimatization it awakened a respect for the more religious elements of Theravadin Buddhism.

A small number of practitioners had achieved some success with concentration practice before trying Vipassana. SI had practised both Transcendental Meditation and Zen. She relates, "I was having trouble with anxiety and depression, and that's what really got me into meditating. I sat at the Zen Centre for three and a half years, and absolutely no change in my life at all, neither in meditation nor in daily living". She tried Vipassana because she found the concentration practice that she had successfully developed to be inapplicable to life's problems. Her personal practice is described in Chapter 3, Section 1. These things showed her to be a strong meditator with many years' productive experience.

Several practitioners expressed a strong preference for the insight practice with the aim of developing wisdom, as opposed to a concentration technique—facilitating pleasurable feelings and blissful states—that produced no lasting change. This may reveal a significant trend for Theravadin Buddhist practice in the West. However, it must be assessed alongside practitioners who were motivated by a more defined response to the potential for practical application of principles and techniques in everyday life. Thus KT, who reported spending about a year in 'toe-dipping' before coming to Vipassana. Significantly, only one practitioner, KM, identified an affinity with concentration practice as opposed to insight, and reported success with integrating the concentration into her daily life, both in terms of achieving a regular practice time and in terms of feeling its effects. One practitioner, KN, had learnt Insight techniques in a therapeutic setting, as part of an alcohol rehabilitation program. Her prior exposure to the technique in this manner is referred to in Chapter 3, Section 4.3. The changes that she described as resulting from her application of mindfulness can be seen to have had a profound effect on her day-to-day functioning and on her self-esteem. Her involvement with BMIMC gave her access to the Buddhist framework to which she had been preconditioned through her meditative experience in rehabilitation.

Two practitioners, KM and EBS, had been involved in local Gurdjieff groups. They both likened aspects of Gurdjieff's approach to aspects of Vipassana meditation⁴⁹⁰. KM likened the approach to mindfulness, and EBS responded to the notion of 'being awake'. Significantly, neither respondent would offer any more comment than this, because of the pledge of secrecy that they appeared to have undertaken. EBS relates:

EBS: So the next big marker in my mind was that I got into Gurdjieff when I was about eighteen, and that had a pretty strong impact on me. I was only involved for about a year, but the guy who was running it, I think modelled himself on Gurdjieff. He was quite tough, but I don't think he was particularly sensitive to what he was doing. I found him quite difficult to deal with. This character was quite famous, I worked out later, in the Australian Gurdjieff world, but again, had a big impact because of that whole notion about being awake, that was Gurdjieff's big thing, about being awake. These were both very inspiring notions to me but I had a lot of fear around it as well. I think all the way through in the early stages there was this interesting relationship between inspiration and fear for me, because I think I was frightened of where this could go, because I felt quite fragile, so it was a sense that I didn't really have much in the way of building blocks within myself, so I was really attracted to it, thought there was something incredible here that wasn't anywhere else, but I was always concerned that if I went too far, that maybe I could lose my mind. So that Gurdjieff experience was a bit like that for me... I had these long conversations with this particular character who was running it, he would have these interviews and, he used to say things like, 'you have to remember that you have to come every Monday and if you don't come one Monday you can never come back again' and this sort of stuff.

GE: So it was coercive?

EBS: It was very coercive.

3 Vajrayana Institute and the Perspective of the FPMT

3.1 The Nature of Commitment and Taking Refuge

In contrast to the Vipassana setting, where commitment concerns the practitioner's private response, the nature and duration of the process leading to commitment in the Vajrayana setting is more empirically observable. The FPMT refuge ceremony marks one's identity as a Buddhist, and when one feels ready, one takes refuge. The purpose and significance of the refuge ceremony can be seen in Appendix 14. Essentially, one takes refuge in the *dharma*. One also takes as many of the Five Lay Precepts as one feels able to keep. The taking of refuge marks one as a Buddhist, as practitioners are told during the ceremony. At the time of interview, almost all respondents had taken refuge. A very small number had not for the reason that they

⁴⁹⁰ See Puttick, E. "Gurdjieff and Ouspenski Groups", in *Encyclopedia of New Religions*, pp. 327-29, Christopher Partridge editor, Lion Publishing, 2004, p327. Puttick refers to Gurdjieff's technique for achieving awakening as self-remembering, a close observation of inner states.

did not feel *ready*. When asked, “Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?”, DE responded, “At the moment I don’t think so, I’m studying Buddhism. There may be a point where I will say ‘I’m a Buddhist’”. Similarly, MW responded, “I believe that when the time is right, because of what it’s all based on, it’s a bit silly to take refuge [if you do not feel ready].”

Another reason for this visibility is the clearer recall by the Vajrayana respondents of the events, interactions, circumstances, realizations, or experiential moments, and times of their occurrence that constitute the process. For instance, at the time of interview CR recalled that she had been involved with Vajrayana Institute for six years, and had taken refuge three and a half years earlier, leaving a period of two and a half years in between first coming to Vajrayana Institute and taking refuge. Generally, practitioners identified several events or moments that led to the decision to explore the Buddhist teachings and practices, to do so with more intensity, or to take refuge if this intensification point had already been reached. These characteristics emerged very clearly during the course of interviews. For all Vajrayana practitioners interviewed, the adoption of Buddhism was definitely a culmination of a process of learning and application of the principles and practices, and validation of the import of these against one’s own experience. CR relates, “It was a gradual process that involved checking things out for yourself.” Usually, one spends a period of time before the ceremony deciding whether one is ready to take refuge. For instance, CR continues:

CR: That was after I decided, because when I first came I was just ... immediately I could tell it was something that was going to be useful to me in my life. So I kept coming, but I was coming on and off, and I didn’t believe in all the things like *karma* and rebirth, those sort of things. I wasn’t quite sure about those, I was just listening. So it took me a couple of years before I decided that I wanted to take refuge, and, um, that’s when you decide that you are going to become a Buddhist in a more official kind of way, even though it’s not a big public ceremony.

Despite the fact that VI respondents had clearer recall of the process that led to their formal commitment, and its content, variation existed between individual accounts as to of the number of incidents recalled, and their intensity. As with the BMIMC practitioners, accounts reflected what they considered to be important: what they learnt, how they began to apply it, and what changes were produced as a consequence. Accordingly, my reporting and discussion attempt to reflect these concerns.

3.2 The Journey from Engagement to Commitment

Before their contact with VI, several respondents had explored another Buddhist group, or were familiar with some Buddhist literature. MB had attended teachings for 16 months before taking refuge, but he had been reading Gelugpa Tibetan

Buddhist material, including material by the Dalai Lama, and Kathleen McDonald's *How to Meditate*,⁴⁹¹ before that, and therefore had some familiarity with the meditations and key Gelugpa concepts and practices.⁴⁹² For some respondents, contact with VI was precipitated by dissatisfaction with another form of Buddhism. For others the FPMT was their first experience of Buddhism. The manner of contact with the Centre varied between respondents, variously through: a friend or acquaintance; seeing the newsletter *Vajrayana News*; attending the Buddhist Library in Camperdown, Sydney; travel to another FPMT centre; seeing a brochure in a cafe; attending an art or cultural exhibition; or through attending a public talk by a popular lineage member such as the Dalai Lama or Ven. Robina Courtin.

After first contact, individuals had usually attended a teaching, course or a workshop. Participants are initially engaged by a teaching, rather than a meditation session or a social activity, which engages them through its relevance to their own life circumstances. Some examples of such first teachings and responses are outlined in Chapter 4, Section 5.1.2. Such teachings as the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*, and the antidotes to negative mental states, have at once practical applicability, ethical appeal and value in terms of learning outcomes, in that their practice results in both non-harm toward others, mental transformation for the student, and provide a philosophy or broader rationale for action. The responses to these early experiences must be seen as positive responses to experimental learning situations as distinct from pre-conversion reactions to crises. The recognition of practical life-enhancing strategies within the Buddhist teachings is the quality that creates initial interest in Buddhist philosophy for participants. It overshadows the view that they are merely seeking a solution to a crisis.⁴⁹³ Seekers often do not formalize their personal problems before they hear them contextualized within the framework of the Buddhist teachings. When this happens, they are impressed both by the interpretation of the problem and its solution according to Buddhist principles.

AN had been curious about meditation in his early adulthood. Before he went to Asia he saw Buddhism as being 'New Age, with not much depth'. While travelling in Nepal he did the intensive ten-day Introduction to Buddhism course at Kopan Monastery. Those teachings and practices gave him a sense of depth, history, logic, and of things being well-studied, reasoned, and worked out. Added to those were the qualities that he perceived in the monks and nuns whom he met there. He felt proud that he could sit meditating for an hour, an improvement on his previous

⁴⁹¹ McDonald, K. *How to Meditate: A Practical Guide*, Robina Courtin editor, Wisdom Publications, Massachusetts, 1984.

⁴⁹² See Tweed, T. "Night-Stand Buddhists and other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion", in *American Buddhism*, pp71-90, Curzon Press, 1999, especially pp74-75. Tweed maintains that many in the West fit the profile of the night-stand Buddhist, a sympathizer who reads Buddhist material and incorporates some practices into their life, without any formal affiliation with Buddhism.

⁴⁹³ See Lofland, J, and Stark, R. "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective", in *American Sociological Review*, pp862-75, 1965.

fifteen-minute meditations. The course teacher explained 'a lot of different teachings about Bodhicitta, and the concept of exchanging self for others, and went into reincarnation', which he then understood to be supported by 'a whole system of logic', and he appreciated it as 'an argument, and not just a New Age catchcry'.

The capacity of these teachings to engage students also functions to provide the foundation for comprehension of more complex points of doctrine further on. In AN's case, the same core doctrines of *bodhicitta* and *karma* were still significant to him after his exploration in Nepal. His discussion about karma with a resident nun at VI at the time, in which she explained that it was 'not punitive, not a punishment, not retribution, was significant for him in deepening his understanding of the Buddhist perspective. As indicated several times in Chapter 5, the concepts of *karma*, renunciation and *bodhicitta* are integral to an understanding of the FPMT's Gelugpa worldview. The topics of many first teachings that respondents cite as being influential in their response to Buddhism are those common to human experience: how to manage one's mental states such as desire, attachment, and especially anger. The Buddhist view is that these are the mental states that keep sentient beings in *samsara*, the 'three poisons' of greed, hatred, and delusion, or desire, anger, and ignorance. It is significant that these foundational topics are given considerable attention in teachings, public talks and the FPMT literature. Although students progress to deeper concepts and doctrinal frameworks, their initial appreciation is related to the applicability of teachings and practices. A significant aspect of AN's experience is seen in his answers:

GE: Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?

AN: Yeah.

GE: Why?

AN: Um ... it was definitely crystallized when I decided to take refuge.

AN's choice of words carries the sense of his using available linguistic tools in achieving a transformation when he decided to take refuge, as it had done for others before him. Staples and Mauss view the use of certain kinds of language and rhetoric as a means to achieve a transformation of self, as opposed to Snow and Machalek, who hold that the conversion rhetoric reflects underlying change that has already occurred.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹⁴ Staples and Mauss, 1987, *op.cit.*, p145. Snow and Machalek, 1984, *op.cit.* The former paper is a critique of the position outlined in the latter paper.

The strongest support for the view of Staples and Mauss is provided by the narrative of MN, which differs markedly from those of others. MN had been suffering from anxiety and depression, and after a period of searching she began to feel determined to become ordained as a nun. In her own words, she felt desperate. On encountering VI and its religious program, and receiving instruction from *sangha* members, she realized that she had held an idealized picture of spending her time as a nun in a serene environment. Having become ordained, she faced the challenge of undertaking religious practices that she felt no affinity with. However, when in the role as a nun she began teaching meditation in the community, and visiting terminally ill patients in hospices. During our interview she spoke openly about her identification of her need to be needed and useful, which she believed had caused her illness. She found that her role as a nun legitimated her desire to help others and her fulfilment of this desire. While this narrative is atypical, it illustrates the way in which a role or status change may effect a positive transformation.

Throughout the examination of commitment narratives for the Vajrayana practitioners, cases can be found to support both views, quite conceivably related to the way in which the refuge ceremony, or an ordination ceremony, can be utilized by the practitioners: as an external sign of internal commitment, or as an *anticipated* rite of transformation. From the perspective of the FPMT, it is most conceivably seen as both. One takes refuge in the *dharma* as one's guide on the path to enlightenment, but this action itself can be seen to create merit and purify one's mindstream.⁴⁹⁵ This illustrates both the socially functional role of ceremonies such as refuge and ordination, and their legitimation by the belief system. The significance for both AN and MN is that these ceremonies appear to have been taken in the expectation of change. In his interview, AN, despite his careful evaluation of the teachings and practices, gave no indication of feeling his commitment as a conviction in the way that others had. It was as if his taking refuge was still part of his experimental immersion.

For a small number of practitioners, encounter with Buddhism and the FPMT is a quite different experience, consisting of intense emotional reactions to various aspects of Buddhist culture and symbolism, the descriptions of which are reminiscent of encounters with the numinous. MW recalls three specific events or

⁴⁹⁵ See Wilson, S. "Becoming a Yogi: Resocialization and Deconditioning as Conversion Processes", in *Sociological Analysis* 45 [4], pp301-14, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1984, p305. In this context, transformation may be seen to have more than one meaning. There is the change in religious status that comes with becoming a Buddhist. There is the kind of change that the worldview prescribes: wholesome actions accrue merit. There is also change in the sense that Wilson alludes to in his comment about people's experimental approach to ritual that provides opportunities to take part in activities inconsistent with their established self-images, in the hope of bringing about personal change. This kind of anticipated change seems to be directed toward one's internal sense-of-self. In the ritual context of taking refuge, the anticipated change is definitely to do with one's orientation to commitment; as if the new role of being Buddhist intensifies one's commitment.

encounters that ignited her interest in Buddhism. She went to the Art Gallery of NSW to see a Buddhism exhibition, and several events occurred quite quickly:

MW: ... and I was really struck by the beautiful pageantry, especially the Vajrasattva statue. I had one of those things, you know one of those 'Oh my God' moments. The chant master from the Gyuto monks gave a presentation on what Buddhism was about, a very simple presentation, and I almost cried because you know I was going through a divorce and life was not going to plan. I was just hanging on every word, and then I heard Robina Courtin. So I had about three moments. I saw the statue, and it had been quite dehumanizing working in the corporate world. I had to put on the persona ... and then to hear this guy talking about love and loving yourself. I went along to Robina's weekend seminar, and started doing Discovering Buddhism in June or July.

At the time of interview MW had not taken refuge, and was still exploring. She was one of a small number to accord aesthetic elements an influence in their decisions to explore Buddhism. The aesthetic dimension—apart from practitioners' aesthetic appreciation of the deity iconography used in ritual—as it is encompassed by the chanting, in the imagery within decorations and in the *sutras*, appears to have been incidental to the process in almost all other Vajrayana biographies. .

The tantric-type experiences of two practitioners before their involvement with the FPMT and VI need to be considered in terms of their effect on the course of exploration, and future practical orientation of the two individuals. Both had begun exploring Buddhism in its Theravadin form. Both had their experiences in a Theravadin monastery while they were learning meditation: breath concentration and Vipassana respectively. Excerpts from the lengthy original interview transcripts are in Appendix 12: *Tantric Shock Experiences Prior to Involvement with Vajrayana Institute*.⁴⁹⁶ In both cases the nature of the experience is unusual for a Theravadin setting, and describes body-based experience that one would normally associate with Tantric practice. For NJ the experience at Bundanoon, near Sydney, and again at the Root Institute in Bodghaya, India, did not recur. However, her other experiences from around that time show similarities to MW's responses to Buddhist iconography and symbolism discussed above, but that the former's were much more intense. NJ recalled that, while still in India:

NJ: I was reading Lama Yeshe's book *Introduction to Tantra* while sitting in this cafe, and I turned the book over and saw his face [in the dustjacket photo], and I just started to sob in the cafe. These things kept happening. Someone started

⁴⁹⁶ Effort has been made to preserve the surrounding context for the two experiences related in these excerpts. These experience are also discussed in Chapter 5 in the context of the two individuals' orientation to sutric and tantric practice, and their ethical outlook. During the interview with MM we had been discussing the relationship between taking vows and Tantric practice, which is how the discussion of this experience originated.

reading the *King of Prayers*, and I just lost it, I became so emotional. It was a really powerful experience, but I didn't understand why ...

These experiences did not automatically lead the respondents to take refuge. They spent time in learning and familiarization with the teachings and practices before they made the decision to take refuge. For both, however, this exploratory period was a relatively short several months. After returning from India and attending the introductory *Lam Rim* course at VI, NJ took refuge. Similarly, after her experience, MM began to explore Tibetan Buddhism, and after feeling dissatisfied with the approach at one centre (which she did not name), she tried and committed to the *Discovering Buddhism* course at VI. As noted above, these experiences are atypical. The more usual are akin to that described by CR:

CR: In January there was a Western monk teaching on the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*. It was fantastic. The whole concept was to cherish and to hold most dear the person who has harmed you, you know, the person you've been really kind to who's then harmed you in turn, they're the most precious treasure to be able to see them like this. And I just had this feeling of relief, I thought 'Oh, this is the place, this is what I need to hear' ... And I kept coming back. In the Easter of that year I went on a retreat with Geshe Dawa, up in the mountains, and he was talking about emptiness and things that were a lot more advanced. Even though I couldn't quite get it all I could certainly get enough to make it such a worthwhile experience, and I was starting to get more of an understanding of where Buddhism was coming from.

The effect, for CR, was of hearing and relating to the teaching on thought transformation, as outlined in Chapter 4, Section 2.1.2, with evident application to her life, in this instance to the task of transforming strong negative emotions. This is one of several significant events or moments for CR. Another involved stories she had heard about the psychic abilities of the lamas. Several respondents reported occurrences in which a lama had looked straight at them during a class about a subject with direct application to the respondent's state of mind at the time. Such stories are regarded as 'proof' of the lama's ability to see one's internal state, and therefore as evidence of the efficacy of the techniques of mental purification. Another event for CR was the taking of refuge and vows, which for her involved an examination of her responses to the Buddhist belief system, especially the doctrinal framework of *karma* and *reincarnation*, as related above in Section 2.1.1. CR's experience echoes the experiences of many who report two or three moments or points of significance. However, invariably, the initial feeling of connection with a teaching does not precipitate commitment. There was no report of a sudden decision.

When novices begin to attend teachings at the centre they quickly become aware of the variety of teachings on offer, and many begin with one or two courses in order to gain awareness, first of the nature of basic principles, and second of more intricate

and deeper views of the meaning-system. These correspond to apprehension and beginning-comprehension stages, respectively. In practice, the process of acquisition happens gradually, and practitioners do not expect to become experts quickly. The interview material indicated that experimental participation became commitment even while the participant was conscious that they were and would be learning about the meaning-system for some time yet. Commitment is made when participants know that their comprehension of the worldview is able to be used as a viable interpretive framework.

While allowing for individual variation, two factors are observed to influence the decision to commit. First, students reach a point whereat they begin to see how significant ideas fit together. Following this is a growing appreciation of the consistency of thought behind the teachings.⁴⁹⁷ Second, exposure to further applicable teachings, and the observation that change to themselves is beginning, often prompts them to take refuge. This self-transformation may involve change to their inner states, in terms of more mental or emotional clarity, or a better sense of well-being, or changes to outer behaviour observable by others. NC's encounter with, exploration of and commitment to the perspective of the FPMT gives a clear example of the difference between comprehension of the meaning-system in formulating a framework of ideas, and commitment to its aims, after recognition that self-transformation has occurred.

NC had read some Buddhist literature after some unsatisfactory involvement with EST and Life Skills, and then decided to search out a centre. He sought out Queer Dharma, but after a brief period, decided not to become involved because he considered that it was not well-run. He wanted to investigate Tibetan Buddhism because he had heard that it was 'intellectual and complex', and looked forward to the challenge of using his intellect and analytical skills. The first course he attended at VI was Buddhism and Western Psychology in mid-2003. He recalls, "Because I'd read those books, things just started dropping into place straight away". He reread the Dalai Lama's book containing a short series of discourses on the Lam Rim, and remembers being engaged by the concept of renunciation. During a business trip to Malaysia for several months, he read Kathleen McDonald's *How To Meditate*, and said that "For three months those meditations were my practice". On returning to Australia he began Discovering Buddhism. He recalled that the module on Tantra 'made me want to go back and get a closer look at Renunciation and Bodhicitta'. He also expressed appreciation of the notions of emptiness and compassion, and how all of these notions interconnected. He attended the Discovering Buddhism modules Emptiness, Mind and Its Potential, How to Meditate, Presenting the Path, and 'the Saturday teachings by Geshe Samten'. His interview transcript shows that he

⁴⁹⁷ For the Vipassana practitioners, this point was where they began to experience and understand some of the deeper experiential aspects. Although this was discussed in Chapter 4, it is important to note it here because this stage has so much influence on progression to the formal commitment stage for the Vajrayana practitioners.

understood the interconnections between core Mahayana ideas, and acquired a framework for them quite quickly. This included comprehending the ethical aspect and its reasoning. The point that distinguished internalization from commitment is demonstrated by:

NC: ... the answer's probably different before I took refuge and now, because the decision to take refuge was because I think I'd seen enough practical impact on my life, over the last year particularly, to develop the confidence that there was good practical application, and I'm a practical person. To me, the value is in seeing tangible differences, so I thought that ... I got the point where I thought, 'Well. This is well worth me committing to more, and I'll get more benefit by committing more, so that's what got me to decide, and I think since taking refuge, the thing that changed over the last couple of months is a real deepening of that sense of refuge. So if you talk about conversion, that's probably happened I'd say, around taking refuge, since the refuge ceremony about two months ago.⁴⁹⁸

It is at this moment of self-reflection, when seekers look back over the period of involvement and see the constructive changes that have occurred to thought and behaviour, that they either decide to take refuge, or make a conscious decision not to commit yet. In either case, the moment of self-reflection marks a definite active decision.

When the definition of commitment is restricted to commitment to the worldview and spiritual path of the tradition concerned, the dominant areas of religious activity involved in socialization are: the doctrinal or philosophical, the social or interpersonal, and the practical and experiential. In this Buddhist context the dominant factor in commitment is the comprehension and internalization of the framework of ideas. Although Smart defines the doctrinal or philosophical and the ethical as two separate dimensions of religious activity,⁴⁹⁹ in this religious context their interrelatedness is significant for the meaning-making and maintenance activities of students. In Chapters 4 and 5 it was shown that the practical and experiential dimensions of activity facilitate internalization of the framework. While some practitioners may go on to develop a strong and regular meditation practice, for many students practice is not deeply implicated in the initial stages of encounter and investigation. Some may try the meditations and come to *pujas*, but these things are seen mainly as the practical side to the teachings and as ways to accumulate merit.

⁴⁹⁸ The rest of this excerpt dealing with the opening up of a sense of spaciousness felt by NC on performing his refuge commitments is discussed in Chapter 5, Section 2.1.

⁴⁹⁹ Smart, N. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*, Fontana Press, 1997. Smart's dimensional analysis of worldviews is outlined on pp8-11.

The effect of meditative experience on commitment varies between practitioners. For some, after the initial stages of encounter and the decision to explore, their meditation practice and experience becomes an integral part of their Buddhist involvement and its expression in their daily life. The social or interpersonal dimension, comprising religious authority figures such as *sangha* members and lay teachers, and other students and adherents, can be seen to facilitate the socialization process. Many students are attracted to the presentation style and personal qualities of particular teachers, and inasmuch as this influences their deeper investigation of the perspective, or their decision to commit to it, the authority figures act as facilitators, not causal agents. The teachers appear to function more by helping adherents to keep their commitment, or as the outer representation of the inner refuge object. This section has outlined the nature of the commitment process as a recognition of shifts in thought—in interpretive framework—and behaviour, and a decision based on these shifts. The following two sections show how these shifts and decisions relate to religious background and prior religious experimentation.

3.3 Religious Background

All but one of the respondents from the FPMT had a Christian background. Of the denominations of Christianity represented: Catholic (eight of 18), Anglican (four) and Orthodox (one Ukrainian and one Serbian), and Protestantism, the majority had been either Catholic or Anglican. The one respondent who answered 'none' to religious background also reported that, as a child of about seven, after being exposed to the Anglican faith taught in the English public school system, she sought religious education in Catholicism at the local presbytery. Her Catholic affiliation lasted into her early adulthood. For all of those raised as Catholics, except for one, KI, Catholicism remained the dominant, if not only, religious influence throughout their childhood and early adolescence. EF recounted:

EF: ... It was the only thing we knew. It wasn't just a Sunday thing. It was in your whole life, really. ... It was just part of our growing up. I mean, it was totally part of our life, in that we had prayers in the house. In my house, my mother was very religious, so we said the Rosary every evening, and every time you went out the door you were sort of sprinkled with Holy Water. And Sunday, as a young person, was very much involved in the Church.

Although nearly all those of Catholic upbringing went to church and received a Catholic education, the intensity of personal involvement varied. For instance, NJ said, "Now I can see how much Christian ideas influenced me because I'm part of this culture, but growing up, I didn't feel a strong connection to it at all", while AN said, "I don't have any bitter rejections of it". Those who came from a Protestant denomination were, in general, exposed to more variability in religious influence. Sometimes this was occasioned by attending a church or school from another denomination, owing to availability and location. MVR was 'brought up Presbyterian', but 'went to Anglican schools'. Sometimes this was because of the

differing outlooks of parents. RI's religious affiliation was Presbyterian, but he felt more drawn to his *intuitive* mother's and grandmother's view of the world, which was to 'believe in a lot of things that I can't see, can't hear, can't touch'. In short, he 'preferred their tea leaves to God'. MW, from the Orthodox Church, recalled going to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with her father, but also described her mother as a religious seeker who explored both Baptist and Christadelphian forms of Christianity. Often the content of respondents' recollections reflected most strongly their parents' dominant concerns. WR, from a Serbian Orthodox background, could remember going to religious rituals, being impressed by the liturgy, helping her grandmother prepare the food for special feast days, and listening to the discussions of politics and ethics in the house, but not hearing any discussion of scripture.

Although some recalled enjoying the social part of religious life more vividly than the scriptures, several adherents told of the constancy with which the ethical aspect of Christianity seemed to surround them. MC recalled memories from his adolescence, and MN described the nature of the Christian beliefs that she held into her early adulthood, and up to the time that she was married with two small children.

MC: Yeah, I started going to the Uniting Church. I had a girlfriend that went to the same group. It was a far more social environment and experience. I met an awful lot of people outside of school, that would have been Year Eight. We used to go on trips everywhere, so I was actually going to a different church to the one my family went to. That was the year that the three churches ... all joined together, within a year of that. But then again, I didn't go to the services, I just went to the study groups and things like that.

GE: And when you went to the study groups, was it for social interaction?

MC: Almost totally social interaction, but it was still with ... I mean there's got to have been an awful lot of ... ethics that was going on, morality and practice. I mean it's always there. It's just a part of the way they all interacted with each other, even in a social environment, because there were a lot of older people who were driving people around and doing other things, so you basically, difficult to remember exactly how much ...

MN: I believed in Christianity, and definitely in the Ten Commandments, and that children needed some sort of religious upbringing ...

GE: So, you believed in God and Jesus?

MN: No, I didn't believe there was a Creator. I did not believe in Adam and Eve. However, I did feel that there was some sort of spiritual being that we could pray to in a time of need, but I didn't worry whether he answered my prayers or not. Now, of course being a Buddhist, you're actually making life

positive for *yourself*... 'Obey your parents' was very important to me. Stealing, killing, the Ten Commandments were very, very important. I think they were more important to me as a way of life than as a religious concept. I don't believe in Moses or the Bible, but I think the Ten Commandments ... they were ideals that I wanted to follow my life through, just another thing, like parent-children discipline would rub off onto your children.

3.4 Experimental Histories

Apart from the moral or ethical training that have brought with them from their original Christian socialization, it appears that respondents' approach to Buddhism was influenced by aspects of philosophy and practice acquired from previous experimental affiliations before their involvement with Buddhism. Most respondents had explored (see above) some or other spiritual milieu from the contemporary Western alternative scene. These included other forms of Western Buddhism such as Queer Dharma, Goenka Vipassana, and Zen; forms of Eastern-derived meditation and mental health practice such as Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, and Tai Chi; Western Esotericism and its off-shoots, such as Theosophy, Spiritualism and Occultism; and courses given by self-growth organizations such as Landmark Forum (EST). The meditative-mental hygiene category is under-represented, and the self-growth/New Age category is the most represented.

The same two kinds of path from childhood Christianity to Buddhism taken by the Vipassana practitioners were also taken by the Vajrayana practitioners. Nine of the Vajrayana practitioners interviewed: NJ, AN, RI, MVR, MW, EF, MF, KD, and ER had passed straight from Christianity into Buddhism. Four of these (NJ, AN, RI, EF) had met other religious ideas in their travels, but had no other religious affiliations. Two (RI, MVR) had read about Western Esotericism without affiliating with a group. The second route, from Christianity to Buddhism by way of some form of alternative spirituality, had been taken by seven (CR, LL, LLM, VP, MB, BC, and LB). Of these, one had been involved in meditation-mental hygiene (Transcendental Meditation), and with four others (BP, MM, MN, NC, DE), had been actively exploring in groups and organizations in the self-growth-New Age category. Two (WR and MC) were loosely connected to Western Esotericism or Occultism by their interests, reading habits, and contacts. As a generality, it appeared that these Vajrayana practitioners had moved within the Western Alternative Reality tradition either by means of a fluid association with esoteric influences having no stated organizational affiliation (with Western Esotericism/Occultism), or as active participants in self growth-New Age groups.

Examination of the experimental or explorative journeys of these seekers clearly shows that exploration within Western Alternative Spirituality involves both active participation in groups and courses, and personal exploration of and through reading material. Because some practitioners discussed influences as ideas and areas of interest, and not in terms of practice or group attendance, one can conclude that

they had not actively participated in a group or organization. This is most noticeable in Western Esotericism. Because of the manner of reporting, in some cases it is difficult to determine the number of affiliations an individual had had, but it is evident that practitioners had been exposed to many spiritual ideas through their reading and travel. This latter is a significant exposure. Some (NJ, AN, MM, MVR, and DE) had visited meditation centres and/or gone on retreats during travel overseas, and some (RI, EF, and WR) had been influenced by Eastern religious ideas during visits to Asian countries on business.

3.4.1 Personal Journeys and Orientations

The explorational path of some shows a prior orientation toward alternative reality tradition in some observable form. Two practitioners (MVR and WR) had explored some facet of Western Esotericism beforehand. For MVR, from a Protestant Christian background, and with an interest in mysticism, religion and psychology, this was through reading. She did not mention any prior group affiliations. She was drawn to the symbolic systems of Tarot and of Jungian psychology. She was drawn to what she perceived as being the philosophical wisdom contained in the symbol system of the Tarot. Despite that, she reported that she felt as though this did not contain the depth of wisdom she wanted, describing that as ‘a ground of being’—a term she borrowed from Paul Tillich—for which she had sought deliberately. What appeared to have attracted her to Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhism was the way in which its particular understanding of ground of being, that is Emptiness and Dependent Origination as ultimate and relative selves, work with other aspects of the perspective.

VP was one of two practitioners attracted to various forms of the metaphysical subculture that have their origins in late nineteenth-century occultism and spiritualism. Her interests included healing, reincarnation, psychics such as Edgar Cayce, Tarot, colours, auras, and a variety of psychic phenomena and abilities. Both practitioners appeared to have been drawn to a local FPMT centre initially by their perception of the healing abilities of a local *geshe*. As they became more familiar with Mahayana Buddhism, their orientation shifted to include appreciation of its ethical approach and its focus on compassion, which then could harness and use their interest in healing. Both have taken refuge, and call themselves Buddhist. In conversation, both give the impression that their entry into Buddhism was facilitated by similarities between notions of healing using colours in occultism and the Gelugpa systems of colour correspondences for the deities.

Several of the Vajrayana practitioners had explored self-growth organizations, but these appeared not to have had any lasting effect. Two had explored Landmark Forum or EST, and reported having a virtually identical response to it.. Both recognized in hindsight that it contained ideas that were akin to Emptiness, but both

were put off by the selfish emphasis it placed on “I” or “me”. CR and NC offered these comments about their experiences:

CR: I did a whole lot of courses at Landmark Education, you know, Forum. They were fantastic for me at the time, and a lot of it I’ve discovered since, was borrowed from Buddhism. Concepts akin to the idea of emptiness, and this idea that things don’t exist in this concrete way, but in the end it just seemed empty, because it didn’t have thousands of years of wisdom, didn’t have a Buddha. It came out of America, it came out of Werner Erhardt who had read a lot of books. When I was doing these personal development courses, after a while I started to get really sick of them, because it just seemed to be focussed on me, me, me, even though they were talking about being of service in the world, there was that, but it still seemed to be very I-centred.

NC: A lot of what it talks about is really about Emptiness. The final thing they say is that you and your life is empty and meaningless. They’ve got a slightly different slant on it, but the effect of it, when they do it in the course is that you’re left there with a hollow blank feeling, the same sort of feeling that (inaudible) when you’re doing meditations on emptiness. I think within about a year, the whole New Age thing, the thing it lacked to me ... it all seemed quite selfish, you know. How can I be happier. ... How can I be richer. It was all very self-centred. To me that seemed a bit hollow.

The expressed dislike for the emphasis on self suggests that this aspect of EST philosophy facilitated some self-examination by the two seekers, and this prompted them to leave. The identification of both characteristics by CR and NC can be seen as the expression of preconditions for their future involvement with Mahayana Buddhism. The aspect of EST discourse that they likened to *Emptiness* (but did not describe in detail) struck a positive note with both, while the emphasis on *me* was the opposite. Insofar as they both went on to explore and commit to a tradition that accommodates both of these conditions, it can be seen that their involvement with EST supplied the opportunity for them to explore their own ideological and religious needs. Though both CR’s and NC’s manner of expression suggests that the identification of both personal needs and desirable qualities of a spiritual discipline is retrospective, the explorative histories of these seekers show how a set of needs, identified during the passage of time, act as a set of prerequisites or preconditions for the next, in this case Buddhist, involvement. NC said that he learned from EST to accept that everything in his life was his responsibility, but felt that the shortcoming was that ‘it brings you up to this point where you’re feeling great, but doesn’t give a lot of skills to make changes happen in your mind that stay and last.’ After exploring Life Skills, his dissatisfaction with the self-centred approach of these kinds of organizations led him to read Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese Christian mystic, because, in NC’s words, ‘he talks about focussing on other people rather than focussing on yourself’. Moments later in the interview he said that he wanted Tibetan Buddhism because he’d heard it was intellectual and complex, and wanted the analysis and use of intellect.

NC's statements reveal a set of conditions he was looking for that emerged from his interaction with these groups and ideas. First, he wanted a discipline that gave him techniques to effect enduring personal transformation. Second, he seems to have accepted the notion that life is inherently empty and meaningless, although this latter is not the Buddhist meaning of Emptiness or *sunyata*. Third, he accepted responsibility for his own life. Fourth, he realized that he wasn't happy with a selfish approach, and fifth, he wanted something that engaged his intellect. All of these issues pre-existed his encounter with Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhism, which can be seen to facilitate satisfaction of these wants. First, all of the meditative and contemplative exercises within Buddhism are techniques for effecting enduring self-transformation,⁵⁰⁰ and they work as part of an integrated and coherent religious system with a clearly articulated philosophy. Second, at the centre of this system is the notion of *emptiness*, the view that all phenomena are empty of inherent, unchanging existence, and exist according to causes and conditions. Third, in the Buddhist view—Theravada and Mahayana alike, despite the seemingly endless dispute about self-liberation vs the *bodhisattva* ideal—one is ultimately responsible for one's own mental purification and attainment of enlightenment. Fourth, the Mahayana perspective highlights compassionate action towards others, and fifth, the Gelugpa lineage is distinguished from other Tibetan Buddhist lineages because of its emphasis on intellectual understanding and debate as a necessary mental training.

4 The Nature of Commitment: Some Comparisons

The purpose of this section is to outline the salient features of the exploration, socialization, and commitment process, through a comparison of the experiences of the practitioners affiliated with both Centres. At the time of interview, respondents had either committed to Buddhism, that is, actively chosen to take on the Buddhist perspective of the Centre, or had decided to remain a student, committed to ongoing participation in the Centre's activities, and to the study and application of teachings or practices. Commitment was understood by Vipassana practitioners as the recognition that at some point a change in orientation had occurred; that at some point they had accepted the Buddhist principles as true for them. Conversely, the decision to commit for Vajrayana practitioners was marked by the taking of refuge. In both cases, commitment is an active process of exploration and decision making, based on the capacity of the Buddhist worldview and its practices to map personal experience, to aid its interpretation and negotiation by providing lived experience with meaning. Before we take a deeper look at the particulars of the socialization and commitment process, we shall review data on religious background and experimental histories.

⁵⁰⁰ This is the purpose of Chapter 5, to explain how enduring self-transformation is effected by the various ritual and meditative exercises.

4.1 A Comparison of Backgrounds

Virtually all of the respondents were from a Christian background. While most were Anglican or Catholic, other denominations were represented also. Individual responses to early religious socialization were broadly favourable, neutral, or unfavourable, and in some cases, not particularly detailed. The dominance of a Christian upbringing in the lives of these practitioners is understandable when it is considered that modern Australia is an originally and predominantly Christian country. It is made significant by the fact that Australia is also a secular society in which many people profess no religious affiliation. The fact that two out of the twenty Vipassana practitioners, and the one Vajrayana practitioner who reported having no familial religious influence, developed an interest in religion at an early age, suggests that the exposure to the existence of religious ideas generally, rather than to any specific ideology or tradition, may be a causative factor for seekerhood.

It appears that all practitioners were conditioned to the idea of a religious outlook early in life. The three who had no exposure to religion in their family environment, KN, SI, and ML, were curious enough to instigate their own religious exploration before reaching adulthood, at the ages of approximately nine, fifteen, and seven respectively. The accounts of these three indicate that they did not acquire a religious perspective from their family environment, but were exposed to religious ideas in their wider social environments such as school and circles of acquaintances, which were Christian. It is deduced that the curiosity was with their positive interpretations of other people's actions—going to church and to Sunday school—rather than with Christianity *per se*. Significantly, in each case, these individuals became actively involved in religious exploration and activity. Added to this is that nearly all respondents engaged in religious or spiritual exploration, or in self-development activities, in their early adulthood.

In this way, practitioners' early religious socialization can be seen to condition them to a style of perception and deliberation founded in a transcendent frame of reference, akin to Lofland and Stark's notion of a religious problem-solving perspective, introduced in 1965.⁵⁰¹ In line with this notion, exploration was ideologically or experientially motivated; the ideologies explored were religious or spiritual, not political or to do with purely secular, pragmatic, this-worldly concerns. The notion that these individuals were predisposed to interpret reality and experience according to a transcendent frame of reference is supported by a number of considerations. Practitioners' experimental journeys consisted of movement between organizations with transcendent worldviews. Seekers moved on from their childhood Christianity to explore other worldviews: those of Buddhism, spiritual

⁵⁰¹ Lofland and Stark, 1965, *op.cit.* Possession of a religious problem-solving perspective as opposed to another type, for instance a political one, was one of the predisposing factors to religious conversion, according to their Worldsaver model, generated by their research on the Divine Precepts, the early form of the Unification Church.

traditions and practices, or self-growth organizations. Those who tried the self-growth area likened it to New Age thought, and went on to explore other spiritual practices. Even one, RN, who saw herself as a seeker for truth rather than as a Buddhist, chose a religious perspective as her primary view and means of ongoing seekership.

In all forms of Buddhism, commitment to ethical thought and behaviour is central.⁵⁰² The discussion in previous chapters of the data to do with the motivation for Buddhist study and practical application may give the impression that practitioners' concerns were largely this-worldly, and used Buddhist techniques in order to improve the quality of this life without taking the doctrines of *karma*, reincarnation, or enlightenment into account. However, the interview material also highlights the search for answers and coping strategies that were framed by a religious perspective. Added to which, regardless of the stated goal of practice, Buddhism allows for this-worldly and transcendent goals, although it encourages the latter.⁵⁰³ The interview material also highlights the emphasis placed on ethics through the practice of compassion, attention to right speech and action, devotion to the development of equanimity, and particularly—for Vajrayana practitioners—through fostering the *bodhisattva* motivation.

Ethical practices are completely integrated with other meditative techniques aimed at attaining enlightenment in the views of both Buddhist forms. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, many Westerners find the Buddhist combination of ethics and meditation appealing. The respect for an ethically-motivated life, and the desire for an ethically grounded framework for thought and behaviour, appears to have been engendered by practitioners' Christian upbringing, and continues to provide an orientation to the world and a rationale for putting personal beliefs and values into practice. Many agreed with the ethical sentiments of Christianity, but remembered having a negative reaction when those around them espoused moral values they did not practise. Many felt that Christianity did not provide a method for ethical practice, in contrast to Buddhism, where the practice of ethics is inextricably bound to the practice of meditation and the development of insight.

4.2 Experimental Histories

The explorational journeys of respondents were seen to take one of two paths to reach Buddhism. The first, with the exception of one who spent time in rehabilitation, moved from Christianity straight into a form of Buddhism, albeit that

⁵⁰² Preliminary research with the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order had shown ethics to be highly important to that group also. See Chapter 1 Section 1.1: *The Western Buddhist Ethnographic Field*, for the reasons why this group was not included in the study.

⁵⁰³ See Hopkins, J. *Meditation on Emptiness*, Wisdom Publications, rev. ed., 1996, p32, for his discussion of the two general motivations: the wish to attain liberation from cyclic existence, and the motivation of a better rebirth.

most of these individuals explored at least one other form of Buddhism before settling into a pattern of study and practice with either BMIMC or VI. The second route was from Christianity through various forms of alternative spirituality into Buddhism. In both cases, prior exploration of other areas of Buddhism included some well-known traditions and organizations, and some well-known teachers. Exploration also included crossing the Theravada-Mahayana divide. Explorative histories and decisions did not indicate a direct link between one's original Christian denomination and the forms of Buddhism explored and eventually adopted. Choices of groups and practices were determined by access to other groups through prior knowledge and contacts. One obvious difference between the two paths is the stance taken toward authority. Many forms of self-growth movement and alternative spirituality have been labelled self-religions by Heelas, because of their apparent reliance on inner guidance rather than on external religious authority.⁵⁰⁴ Similarly, Sutcliffe and Bowman define the common feature of alternative spirituality in comparison with official religion to be a preference for the ideals of self-determination and agency over institutional membership and ideological boundary.⁵⁰⁵ Conversely, those who take the first route may be expressing the need for a clearly defined authority structure, and a textual basis for study and practice.

It is conceivable that the needs for defined authority and textual foundation are recognized by the seekers of both routes; these are offered by both forms of Buddhism in the form of refuge in the Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*. According to Sharf, historical and ethnographic evidence places the privileging of experience with certain Twentieth-Century Asian reform movements, especially those urging a return to Zazen or Vipassana. While he does not dispute the possible experience of altered states, he suggests instead that such discourse functions ideologically and performatively 'in the interests of legitimation and institutional authority'.⁵⁰⁶ This can be seen to operate within the FPMT and VI, as described in Chapters 4 and 5, where the emphasis appears to be on motivation and faith rather than on meditative prowess.

An overview of the experimental affiliations of Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners highlights a difference in preference between the two categories of practitioner. Pre-Vipassana exploration tended toward the Eastern meditative techniques such as Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, and Tai Chi, and pre-Vajrayana, slightly more toward self-growth movements and Western Esotericism.

⁵⁰⁴ Hedges, E, and Beckford, J. "Holism, Healing, and the New Age", in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, pp169-87, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p172. They believe the label to be appropriate for the alternative forms of spirituality that encourage practitioners to rely on inner guidance rather than on external texts and authorities.

⁵⁰⁵ Sutcliffe, S, and Bowman, M. "Introduction", in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, pp1-13, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p8.

⁵⁰⁶ Sharf, R. "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience", in *Numen* 42, pp228-83, E.J. Brill, 1995, p228. He claims that the role of experience in the history of Buddhism has been greatly exaggerated in contemporary scholarship.

While both paths involved the exploration of ideas, Vipassana practitioners had been more involved with the exploration of practice using altered experiential states. These techniques provide access to and development in one of the two meditation techniques: concentration or insight, although those practitioners concerned, were experienced in concentration before coming to BMIMC. The Vajrayana practitioners who showed an interest in Western Occultism or Esotericism exhibited an affinity for the kind of associational or symbolic thought that occurs in Western Esoteric belief-systems such as Astrology, Magic and Alchemy, although as noted in Chapter 5, Section 3.2, the Tibetan system does not emphasize the conceptual aspect of knowledge, but the direct experience of the deity through practice. Although it is a minor trend, it may be one way in which the passage from Western Esotericism into Vajrayana Buddhism facilitates the transition from conceptual learning to a more experiential orientation.

The substance of practitioners' reasons for choices, and of the significance they attribute to their experiences, indicates that it is in the nature of their concerns to value experience and self-knowledge above that of validating the truth-claims of organizations and their authorities. What appears to be missing is methodical investigation of the frameworks of ideas and historical backgrounds of the groups and areas that practitioners explored.⁵⁰⁷ It was as though the dominant impulse was to sample the group's meaning-system and practice for what could be comprehended and applied to one's own experience,⁵⁰⁸ as opposed to seeking an ultimate view of reality or questioning the reality behind the power-structure.

For those practitioners who commit to Buddhism, it is reasonable to deduce that commitment marks the transition from seeker to serious Buddhist practitioner. Ellwood maintains that membership in groups that facilitate the phenomenon of seekership, allowing people to 'try' before they commit, simply reaffirms the seekerhood status of participants without leading to radical change.⁵⁰⁹ Clearly this is an accepted approach to religious involvement within Western alternative spiritual groups. However, while Western Buddhism also facilitates this experimental

⁵⁰⁷ These affiliations were, in the main, very limited to one group or manifestation of Western Esotericism. There was no in-depth exploration of philosophy, and no movement between related groups in order to indulge in deeper exploration of the area. For instance, Kevin Tingay outlines a taxonomy of movements related to Theosophy. See Tingay, K. "Madame Blavatsky's Children: Theosophy and Its Heirs", in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, pp37-50, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p40. My own personal experience of this area of Western spirituality is that seekers typically move from one group to another, forming opinions through direct comparison. Although this issue is a complex one, I am still struck by the lack of any deep or broad affiliations by these individuals. Affiliations were limited to one group.

⁵⁰⁸ Heelas, P. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p18. Heelas' comparison between EST seminars and Gurdjieff's approach highlights their common focus on placing lived experience above dogma.

⁵⁰⁹ See Ellwood, R. *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America*, University of Chicago Press, 1979, p10. Also see Richardson, 1985, p.170. He maintains that 'appropriate behaviour does not mean total commitment'.

approach, the phenomenon of seekerhood itself is not native to Buddhist thought, and both centres promote the view that mental transformation does not result from casual or infrequent effort. Commitment also involves the acceptance of the new religious perspective as an internal frame of reference, and as the gateway between discrete universes of discourse grounded in very different views of reality.

Gaining access to information about the activities of Western Buddhist groups is easy, and therefore, what is on offer is easily assessed. Buddhist centres in Sydney share the same advertising means, and present as options within the same religious supermarket.⁵¹⁰ Two significant questions that must be asked, are 'Why Buddhism and not something else?', and 'Why this particular form of Buddhism?' Part of the answer lies, I maintain, in the contemporary nature of seekerhood itself. Sutcliffe contrasts two views of the seeker: Lofland and Stark's emphasis on the seeker's difficulties and discontent, and Straus's focus on the seeker as active creator of life change.⁵¹¹ The quest or project becomes both to find and actively create solutions to difficulties, without becoming enmeshed in religiously authoritative and hierarchical structures before one is sure that what is on offer is both efficacious and ethically satisfactory.

As outlined in Chapters 2 and 4, the approach of each Centre facilitates the needs of participant explorers. Both Centres offer a teaching and participatory style that allows for an individual pace of acclimatization and participation. For the reasons above, investigation of Buddhism is part of a natural progression in individual explorations, for example, from Transcendental Meditation to Vipassana, if the motivation is to find a practice that is more applicable to daily life. This suggests that the religious counterculture facilitates access to Buddhism generally, but for individual reasons. Through ongoing socialization, the nature of individual belief and aims of practice become gradually oriented to a Buddhist view, especially toward its ethical outlook and doctrines of mental transformation. Many demonstrated their willingness to accept the authority of the *dharma*, almost in contradiction to the current of alternative self-religion, which places the source of authority within the individual.

4.3 The Commitment Process

An examination of the interview data from both types of practitioner identified the same core characteristics as descriptors of the commitment process. It is felt to be a process of intensifying involvement with the principles and practices. It takes from

⁵¹⁰ Both BMIMC and VI have the same advertising means and methods: both have their own website, are listed on Buddhanet, in the phonebook, in the Buddhist library newsletter, in pamphlets and posters. While BMIMC's website is more comprehensive in its coverage of various activities, both websites give activity schedules and contact details.

⁵¹¹ Sutcliffe, S. "Wandering Stars: Seekers and Gurus in the Modern World", in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, pp17-36, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p29.

months to years for practitioners, but it is empirically observable as a series of events or decision points, as opposed to one *turning* point. However, in noting the process of deepening commitment to their perspective, practitioners were not usually aware of more than a few events that had led to the decision to commit, or to the recognition that commitment had taken place. Self-transformation is observed to be more-or-less incremental during the period. There were no reports of sudden, dramatic change in self-concept or identity, but rather an awareness that a more subtle type of change had occurred to habitual mental and emotional states. The experience of both types of practitioner demonstrated a strong relationship between recognition that self-transformation had occurred—that one had already accepted the Buddhist outlook to some degree—and that one was either committed to it or wished to commit because of it.

Of all the ways in which researchers attempt to describe and define the essential nature of change, the categorization approach has traditionally dominated, taking for its definitive character the notion of radical personal change. Chapter 1 referred to a number of scholars who have applied Nock's, Berger's and Travisano's dual category system to religious data, in order to determine change as complete or partial. Of the two forms, conversion and alternation as defined by Berger and Luckmann⁵¹², Travisano⁵¹³ and Pilarzyk⁵¹⁴, the view of alternation is better suited to describing the observed nature of change.

Some of the qualities that are often taken to indicate complete conversion are not demonstrated by either category of practitioner. Apart from the difficulty of determining whether a complete transformation of the individual's worldview has occurred, the data in question indicate that the identification of self-transformation is more significant in people's decisions. What they comprehend of the new meaning-system appears plausible in the light of its perceived efficacy. Acceptance and belief still remain conditional on the intactness of the plausibility structure. Some of the qualities that Pilarzyk attributes to alternation apply to both categories of Western Buddhist. First, there is a milder cognitive transformation than is expected with cases of conversion, accompanied by gradual and easy changes in lifestyle, meaning, and identity. These transitions are not all-inclusive and do not prohibit the utilization of other organizing principles or frameworks in the reinterpretation of subjective reality,⁵¹⁵ although there is a difference exists between the two Buddhist perspectives in this respect. At BMIMC Vipassana is taught within the Theravadin

⁵¹² Berger, P, and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York, 1966, p144.

⁵¹³ Travisano, R. "Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations", in *Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction*, pp594-606, Xerox College Publishing, 1970.

⁵¹⁴ Pilarzyk, T. "Conversion and Alternation Processes in the Youth Culture: A Comparative Analysis of Religious Traditions", in *Pacific Sociological Review* 21 [4], pp379-405, Pacific Sociological Association, 1978, p383.

⁵¹⁵ *ibid.*

framework of meaning, where the aim is the development of mindfulness and insight. This does not prevent the application of the meditation technique to secular purposes. Although at VI the point of taking refuge is to acknowledge the Dhamma as the supreme authority, this does not prohibit other religious involvement.

4.3.1 The Nature of Religious Affiliation, Identity, and Biography

Although there is no prohibition against other belief systems, it is usual that after practitioners have committed, Buddhism becomes their primary, if not only, religious involvement. Of utmost significance for understanding the nature of commitment, in both Buddhist settings, is the fact that those who saw themselves as Buddhists did so on the foundation of their belief in the tradition's worldview, and faith in its salvational path. The reports of respondents allow the confident assertion that participants engage with Buddhism because of an interest in Buddhist teachings, practices, and sentiments. Differences between practitioners lie in their affinity for certain aspects of the meaning-system. From what respondents say at interview, their beliefs are not syncretic, and Buddhism is not adopted as an adjunct to other belief systems, which fits the view of conversion held by Nock as 'a change in one's sense of root reality', and by Snow and Machalek as 'the adoption of a new universe of discourse as one's primary authority'. While a small number are initially curious about meditation, with exposure, the interest of practitioners turns to philosophical and ethical concerns.

In their attempt to isolate the true convert, Snow and Machalek postulated four rhetorical indicators of conversion status: four properties of speech and reasoning; biographical reconstruction; adoption of a master attribution scheme; suspension of analogical reasoning; and embrace of a master role.⁵¹⁶ Biographical reconstruction involves a dismantling of the past and its reconstitution within a new religious or ideological meaning-system and its vocabulary of motives.⁵¹⁷ However, the radical reorganization and reinterpretation of the past that is held to occur is not expressed in the present respondents' accounts, the nature of which suggest instead that identity is partially integrated into a new set of meanings, as Pilarzyk's notion of alternation suggests.

⁵¹⁶ Snow, D, and Machalek, R. "The Convert as a Social Type", in *Sociological Theory*, pp259-92, American Sociological Association, 1983, pp266-70; Snow, D, and Machalek, R. "The Sociology of Conversion", in *Annual Review of Sociology* 10. pp167-90, Annual Reviews Inc., 1984, pp173-74. Staples and Mauss concluded from their study of Christian evangelicals that only one of these four rhetorical indicators applied: biographical reconstruction. See Staples and Mauss, 1987, p133.

⁵¹⁷ Snow and Machalek, 1983, *op.cit.*, pp266-67; 1984, p173; Berger, P. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, Penguin Books, 1963, pp75-6; Beckford, J. "Accounting for Conversion", in *British Journal of Sociology* 29 [2], pp249-62, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

If we apply to the two sets of reports Beckford's *logic of congruence*, that the features of the actor's account are made congruent with the group's ideological rationale,⁵¹⁸ the most likely ideological rationale to employ would be that individuals reached a point of renunciation and began to crave enlightenment. This was simply not reported by the Vipassana practitioners. The most applicable part of FPMT doctrine in this instance would be experience of the awakening of the Bodhisattva motivation before taking refuge. While one or two brief references were made to the realization of this awakening in hindsight, they were not made with the intensity that both Berger and Beckford assert as implicit in retrospective accounts. Similarly, the other three rhetorical indicators, adoption of a master attribution scheme,⁵¹⁹ suspension of analogical reasoning,⁵²⁰ and embrace of a master role wherein converts introject the convert role and see themselves in terms of that role, were not found to apply to these respondents.

Practitioners observe that personal transformation results from applying the teachings and techniques in personal practice, which has a significant influence on commitment. Practitioners from both Centres describe the same set of changes. These include feeling less judgmental, and more tolerant of others, feeling more compassion, and gaining the capacity to deal with anger and negative mental states in a more satisfactory manner. Staples and Mauss see conversion as primarily a process of self-transformation: a change in one's self-concept,⁵²¹ as opposed to the four rhetorical indicators proposed by Snow and Machalek.

Chapters 3 and 5 are devoted entirely to the exploration of the effects of self-transformative practices in the Vipassana and Vajrayana contexts respectively. Each of these chapters concluded that the techniques effect transformation on two personal levels: the self in its subjective immediacy, and the objectified self, both contributing to the total sense of self. One highly significant characteristic that greatly influences the nature of commitment in both Buddhist contexts is the apparent view of practitioners that validation of experience and personal conviction is more important than defining or consolidating one's identity, although this is also effected as an aspect of the total transformation process. For this reason, it is held

⁵¹⁸ Beckford, *op.cit.*, pp260-61.

⁵¹⁹ Snow and Machalek hold the attribution to refer to the cognitive process by which people form causal interpretations of the behaviour of self, others, and world. They argue that conversion involves the adoption of one causal and pervasive scheme to inform all causal attributions; matters that were previously inexplicable or ambiguous are now clearly understood. Snow and Machalek, 1983, *op.cit.*, pp269-70.

⁵²⁰ Because converts perceive their worldviews as unique, they show subsequent reluctance to use analogic metaphors to talk about their beliefs and practices.

⁵²¹ Staples, C, and Mauss, A. "Conversion or Commitment? A Reassessment of the Snow and Machalek Approach to the Study of Conversion", in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 [2], pp133-47, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1987, p137. They use the term self-transformation to distinguish self-concept change from other, more routine changes to self-concept, such as role changes and life-cycle changes.

that theoretical approaches to the nature of transformation processes in Western Buddhism need to consider the whole person, and not just the aspect that is both visible and modified in social interaction.⁵²² Further discussion of this topic is presented in the concluding Chapter 7, where it is argued that the capacity of Buddhist techniques to create deep and sustainable change according to an ethical framework accounts for much of Buddhism's popularity in the West.

4.3.2 Commitment

My derivation and outline of three elements of commitment *in a continuum of stages*, viz. apprehension and engagement, comprehension, and commitment, results from two key observations about what practitioners learn and how they respond to it. The substance of this learning was explored in Chapters 2 to 5, wherein the relationship between the *apprehension* of key ideas, and their *comprehension* as an integrated framework was established.⁵²³ The assertion of separate elements of *comprehension* and *commitment* rests on the observation that the decision to commit is strongly linked to the recognition that self-transformation *has already begun*. This recognition validates practitioners' faith in the principles and practices that they have applied.

The raw data of respondents' accounts, independent of the application of the staged model outlined above, indicate that changes in the nature and intensity of commitment to the worldview of the centre occur over a period of months to years. The realization or decision itself is a conscious product of reflection on principles and the results of practice. While these responses vary in intensity, the experiences related by respondents, with a few notable exceptions, have the quality of quiet illumination as opposed to the intense emotion that is traditionally held to accompany conversions. While individual variation occurs in terms of duration, intensity, and in the particular doctrinal meanings and practices involved in individual commitment processes, virtually all respondents described their process as gradual and cumulative, with the majority seeing it as marked by two or three points of change.

Some of these points have the quality expressed by Stromberg's notion of impression point in their almost instantaneous perception of self, symbol and commitment. However, others instead are better described by Pilarzyk's notion of *shock* experiences.⁵²⁴ Pilarzyk refers to emotionally-charged experiences possessing

⁵²² Sociological approaches tend to define the self as identity or self-concept. Buddhist analytical techniques involve the sense of self in its subjective immediacy, which is instrumental in utilizing Buddhist transformative techniques. See Wilson, *op.cit.* Wilson's view of deconditioning, the changing of old ways of seeing the self through deconstruction of identity and role expectations, deals exclusively with the self-concept at the objective level.

⁵²³ The identification of these stages and their distinction arises from the material and its analysis presented in those chapters.

⁵²⁴ Pilarzyk, *op.cit.*, p398; 403. Pilarzyk's attention to shock experiences arises from his perception that sociological perspectives on conversion grounded in structural functionalism have stressed

intrinsic spiritual or existential significance for the convert quite separate from group constraints. To him they are natural products of movement between logically contradictory meaning systems which, as Berger notes, are radical attempts to reorganize everyday life. However, in converse to Berger's emphasis of the individual's need for a cognitive redefinition of reality in order to justify a new worldview,⁵²⁵ the more striking experiences reported by respondents suggests that these *shock* experiences provide the impetus for meaning-seeking activity and change, as opposed to justifying change that has already occurred. The three experiences that fit this description, the experience of no-self and the two that I designate as pre-tantric experience, all occurred before the respondents' contact with the Buddhist framework of ideas that best explains them. In all three cases, this explanatory framework, when it is comprehended provides the necessary plausibility structure for the individual's self-understanding and change. VI can be seen to provide the required plausibility structure for the tantric-like experiences of NJ and MM, and similarly, the Theravadin worldview of Vipassana meditation for RL's spontaneous experience of no-self.

It must be stressed that while individual experiences vary according to the dominance of intellectual or experiential quality, the majority are described as being predominantly intellectual or cognitive in character. Some individuals responded to visual images and cultural symbolism they encountered, but these did not have the shock quality of those outlined above. Early experiences in both Vipassana and Vajrayana settings consisted of strong responses to the content of a teaching or a meditation that appealed to intellect and feeling. Numerous descriptions above illustrate the way in which these responses lead to mental and emotional receptivity to more of the surrounding framework of ideas, a receptivity that leads to the later acceptance of Buddhism.⁵²⁶

Distinguishing between points that either lead to commitment or symbolize the commitment itself, and those that occur around the time of encounter with Buddhism, highlights an otherwise hidden aspect of socialization into Western Buddhism. While these radical experiential events remain in the minority, their occurrence may be obscured by accounts of Buddhist religious change that describe the nature of this change as a quiet transition. These events, especially the two tantric-oriented experiences, the experience of intense emotional and bodily responses that lend themselves to a Tantric explanation, occurred in contexts of emotional intensity, the existence of which can be interpreted as both a precipitant

the importance of social processes, and not paid attention to those experiences that appear to disrupt the routine aspect of everyday life. Pilarzyk's attention to this phenomenon arose from his study of the Divine Light Mission in the 1970s, and from his observations concerning Premies' initial spiritual shock experiences in the knowledge session.

⁵²⁵ *ibid.*, p382.

⁵²⁶ Those of Vipassana meditators HD, HU, and EBS, and Vajrayana students CR, AN and RI are in this category.

and an effect of the event. It is conceivable that these shock experiences seldom occur. The majority of *engagement* experiences consist of the strong but serene response described as "quiet illumination" to the presentation of fundamental Buddhist ideas. In many of these cases the participant does not become aware of, nor actively problematize their question or circumstance until they hear it expressed in the framework of ideas presented in the teachings.⁵²⁷ However, as asserted above, these experiences become encapsulated in a plausibility structure that contains the original rupture in taken-for-granted reality, validates the initial occurrence, and encourages practitioners' subsequent interpretation and acceptance as experientially normal for that perspective. With respect to this last, both Buddhist perspectives discourage their use as sources of attachment and pride.

⁵²⁷ Neither do these situations fit Pilarzyk's description of the antecedents of conversion, attempts to reinterpret a period prior to contact as one of partial or total discontentment, crisis, alienation, or suffering. Pilarzyk, *op.cit*, p380.

Chapter 7: Vipassana and Vajrayana Insights in Western Buddhist Experience

1 Introduction

This thesis set out to examine, at two Western Buddhist Centres, the nature of engagement in religious activity, of experience, and of religious change for the participants. Throughout I have accepted Berger and Luckman's view of a shared reality as one that is maintained by a group consensus, which is expressed by articulation of the reality and the embodiment of that in collective and private discourse and practice.⁵²⁸ Given the differences between the two Buddhist centres in the nature of discourse and practice the thesis must explore two shared realities within the same universe of discourse. Despite the organizational differences in the propagation of religious belief and activity promoted by the two centres, however, consistencies in orientation to Buddhist engagement are exhibited by the practitioners within each centre. This concluding chapter outlines both the nature of those elements found to be central to Buddhist engagement in the Vipassana and Vajrayana forms explored here, and the differences in their manifestation.

2 The Nature of Engagement and Commitment

All of the students, practitioners, and adherents were active participants in their own process. There was no evidence to support the view of the convert as passive who absorbed information without question, assumed by earlier conversion research.⁵²⁹ Participants in the activities of both centres allowed themselves time for exploration, testing and validation of the perspective for themselves. This validation did not result in a 'change to one's sense of root reality'⁵³⁰ in an absolute sense, but more in the sense of changing orientation so as to investigate, understand and participate in a lived reality: the sense of immediate reality that they engaged with, involving the effects of their thought and action on others. The Buddhist perspective is utilized by participants to frame their outlooks on the world of human experience and influence, encompassing both the social and natural worlds. Practitioners do not generally concern themselves with questions that derive from the third person scientific perspective, such as the origins and function of the universe. In this sense they avail themselves of Buddhist first-person discourse.

⁵²⁸ Berger, P, and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday & Company, 1966.

⁵²⁹ Rambo, L. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University Press, 1993, p59.

⁵³⁰ Travisano, R. "Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations", in *Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction*, pp594-606, Xerox College Publishing, 1970; Heirich, M. "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion", in *American Journal of Sociology* 83 [3], pp653-80, University of Chicago, 1977.

The Buddhist perspective can be seen to frame this world of experience and interaction in a way that is meaningful and ethically satisfying to participants. The Buddhist doctrines are seen to act as cognitive frameworks for the reordering of experience and meaning by participants, and come to be accepted as such after the process of religious experimentation by which the claims of the new meaning-system are experientially validated against their inner understandings and convictions, which themselves become clearer through experimental participation in religious activity. It must be stressed that learning and self-transformation still continue after commitment. Commitment is the end-point of socialization only insofar as the newly-accepted universe of discourse or meaning-system becomes an individual's primary frame of reference for organizing their view of reality.

From the perspective of the participant, the path to commitment is seen as a process of engagement and familiarization with the material, interwoven with its testing through application to the understanding of lived experience. After a time, the decision to commit is based on the recognition that one's acquired knowledge of the beliefs, values, and goals of the new religious reality frames personal experience in a manner that renders it more meaningful. The new frame of reference is validated for the individual when they recognize that the application of its principles through practice has brought about self-transformation, and when they come to appreciate that changes have taken place in their habitual thinking in relation to the world. Once this condition is reached, participants either realize that they already feel committed to, or decide to commit to the Buddhist path. Both types of response were expressed by practitioners of both Buddhist outlooks. Participants' apprehension and appreciation of a point of doctrine which they satisfactorily applied to the negotiation of their own lives did not automatically result in a private or formal commitment to the tradition. Some would recognize the changes described above as having occurred for them, but at the time of interview, would have decided that they were not ready to commit. Here we see two possible responses to a decision-point: belief-commitment or on-going experimental participation. Both can be seen as responses to a point of evaluation and decision-making. In this sense the decision to keep exploring as a response may be seen as keeping one's options open.

For many of both perspectives there were several decision points concerning their Buddhist involvement. The first was on hearing, for the first time, a teaching or set of teachings which elicited an immediate response and decision to be open to the tradition's view. This initiated a period of exploration where the student began assimilating more of the Buddhist framework and appreciating the meaning of its whole by understanding the relationships between its parts. This point is highlighted for the Vipassana practitioners in Chapter 3, which demonstrated how they came to appreciate the interrelationships between doctrine, practice, and experiential effects, both in articulating states of awareness and in the transformative results of working with them. It is through learning to interpret these internal states according to Buddhist frameworks that orient them in the practice, that an

appreciation of the frameworks that orient them in the interpretation of reality more generally is derived. The two types of framework are outlined in Chapter 3, Section 2.3.

The process leading to arrival at this appreciation by the Vajrayana practitioners is outlined in Chapter 4, which explored the way in which they began to appreciate the consistency of meaning throughout the *teachings* after attending different teachings and courses of teachings, and hearing the same doctrines and doctrinal perspectives explained in slightly different ways and contexts. Their way of evaluating the wisdom of the teachings did not involve the intense engagement with their own mental states as it does for the Vipassana practitioners, but does involve reflection on the same areas of life experience and its dilemmas. Both methods lead to an appreciation of the common problems of humanity: the suffering caused by craving and attachment.

Another feature of the nature of commitment itself, where applicable, is that practitioners felt ready to commit to Buddhism formally while being aware that they had much learning and self-transformation still to undergo. In this sense the socialization process is seen as permanently continuing and open-ended.⁵³¹ The point of commitment occurs when students feel that they understand enough of the meaning-system, that enough of its import has been validated in their experience for them to take it in as their own. The reason for avoidance of the term *internalization* is because the process and its decision of commitment do not appear to result in a radical makeover, but instead provide the individual with intimate knowledge of and faith in a frame of reference, and a ground of being from which to act. For this reason, the terms *comprehension* and *validation* were deemed to be more appropriate.

The stages of socialization and commitment were derived from the process of acquisition and acceptance of the religious material evident in the data collected from participants by interview. The first stage, *apprehension and engagement*, corresponds to the process of hearing and responding to teachings, and the decision to learn and understand more of the system of knowledge and practice, as outlined in Chapters 2 and 4. The second stage, *comprehension*, is a natural consequence of the learning that takes place through religious involvement. This is held to occur when a student begins to organize apprehended elements of doctrine into a comprehended framework of understanding. *Comprehension* is also aided by the attempt to apply doctrine in the application of practical techniques to lived experience. This was the subject of Chapters 3 and 5. By examining the nature and results of private practice, what is selected by practitioners from their acquired stock of knowledge and applied privately can be determined.

⁵³¹ Paloutzian, R. *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, Allyn and Bacon, 1996.

3 The Role of Doctrine in Socialization

Both forms of Buddhism recognize a textual source as their basis of religious authority. The scriptural basis for Vipassana practice at BMIMC is the *Satipatthana Sutta* from the *Majjhima* and *Digha Nikayas*, and the Pali Canon.⁵³² In the FPMT scriptural authority rests with the writings of the founder of the Gelugpa school, Lama Tsong-kha-pa. At each centre, participants are exposed to a consistent perspective transmitted through oral and written instruction, and practitioners aim to understand and accept it. However, at the individual level the perspective is tested and evaluated rather than accepted without question. Each individual comes to the teaching and practice with a different set of needs and expectations, and different impressions of what Buddhism is. People are free to choose what they accept, initially and for some time to come. This is shown by the small number of respondents who demonstrated a resistance to the teaching of *reincarnation* in the apprehension stage. However, as the transcript excerpts discussed in Chapter 3 Section 2.3, Chapter 4 Section 5.1.2, and in many places throughout Chapter 6 show, once the doctrine of *reincarnation* is understood in relation to others such as the nature of *Samsara* and the path to *Nirvana/Nibbana*, practitioners are more willing to accept it as part of their valid stock of knowledge⁵³³. This demonstrates a significant fact concerning the relationship between doctrinal acquisition and socialization. When the interrelationships between aspects of doctrine become apparent, practitioners are more willing to accept doctrinal positions incapable of direct experiential validation, on the strength of their relation to another which they believe to be true.

Harkening back to the main characteristics of Western Buddhism outlined in Chapter 1 Section 1, it can be seen that the doctrinal, practical, and experiential focus identified by American researchers in the field holds for the affiliates of both BMIMC and Vajrayana Institute. American scholars note that Western Buddhism draws upon the common foundations of all Buddhist schools: the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Noble Eight-Fold Path*, and the meditative practices of mindfulness, concentration, and loving-kindness.⁵³⁴ All of the experienced students and practitioners of my acquaintance accept a set of basic tenets, and prime among these are the *Four Noble Truths* and the three marks of existence. These are seen to provide a general orientation to thought and practice.

⁵³² Bhikkhu Bodhi. "Satipatthana Sutta", in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, 2nd ed., 2001, pp145-55.

⁵³³ Also see Chapter 4 Section 5.1.3: *An Essential Framework and Its Components*, for a discussion of the ways in which specific doctrinal elements may be organized into a working framework by Vajrayana practitioners.

⁵³⁴ Fronsdal, G. "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness", in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp164-180, University of California Press, 1998, p176; Rawlinson, A. *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*, Open Court Publishing, 1997; Coleman, J. "The New Buddhism: Some Empirical Findings", in *American Buddhism*, pp91-99, Curzon Press, 1999, pp97-8.

From this viewpoint, the most influential doctrinal outlook is the *Noble Eight-Fold Path* in its three-fold aspect of *prajna/panna/wisdom*, *sila/ethics*, and *samadhi/concentration*, as outlined in Chapter 1 Section 2.4. The doctrine itself and the relationship between the three aspects is emphasized in Vipassana practice and its supporting discourse. In the Gelugpa system of the FPMT, these aspects are called the *three higher trainings*.⁵³⁵ They are rarely referred to directly in teachings at VI, but their function is seen through their place as three of the six perfections of the *bodhisattva*.⁵³⁶ The doctrine with equivalent import, and one that is continually referred to in teachings, is the three principles of the path: renunciation, *bodhicitta*, and wisdom-realizing-emptiness. However, the three aspects: concentration, ethics, and wisdom, as they are encountered by novices, provide an initial orientation to the aims and practices of Buddhism.

When individuals are new to either centre, they encounter a belief system in which meditation has a clearly defined purpose: the experiential understanding of wisdom as it is defined by doctrine. They begin to learn about Buddhist ethics as a foundation for the practice and as an aid to developing wisdom. People express an interest in Buddhism that may have a meditative focus at first, but this appreciation grows to include all three aspects. The meditation techniques specific to the particular Buddhist orientation can be seen as a method for applying doctrinal principles to transformation. Central to one's engagement with Buddhism of both forms is the way in which one develops an appreciation for *sila/ethics*, which comes to be taken more and more by the practitioners as a foundation for engagement with others. For Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners alike, the engagement with the meditation-ethics relationship comes to be valued as a specific strategy for living.⁵³⁷ Practices that encourage feelings of compassion and lovingkindness are appreciated for the values they embody and the effects they produce. Practitioners find that, in time, their habitual responses toward others change. They experience less reactivity and behave less judgmentally toward others, and have more patience with themselves and others, not out of patronage or tolerance but from a recognition of the commonality of human experience.

For the Vipassana practitioners there is a difference between the way the three aspects work when someone first begins to explore Buddhism, and the way they begin to function when understood from the doctrinal perspective. The relationship between wisdom, ethics, and concentration, in terms of wisdom produced by insight,

⁵³⁵ Geshe Acharya Thubten Lodon. *Path to Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism*, Tushita Publications, 1993, pp480-84. Also see Gen Lamrimpa. *Realizing Emptiness: Madhyamaka Insight Meditation*, Snow Lion Publications, 2nd edition, 2002, p108.

⁵³⁶ Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Snow Lion Publications, volume 2, 2004; volume 3, 2002.

⁵³⁷ Keown, D. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, St Martin's Press, 1992, p107. Keown sees the following of the Eight-Fold Path as the gradual cultivation of moral and ethical virtue. Also see Gen Lamrimpa, op.cit., pp108-109, for comment on the relationship between ethics and concentrative meditation.

ethics as the foundation for the practice, and concentration as an aid to the effectiveness of these, remains central to the practice indefinitely. For the committed practitioners of both centres, meditation and ethics work together to give a morally viable, practical, and satisfying means of engaging with the world. The doctrine of the Three Marks of Existence is found to orient participants in the practice conceptually and experientially. Impermanence and suffering are easily conceptually grasped, and for the Vipassana practitioners, experientially accessible. How Vipassana practitioners engage with the Theravadin doctrine of *anatta*, and Vajrayana practitioners with the Mahayana doctrine of *sunyata*/emptiness, is discussed below in Section 5: *The Self and Its Transformations*. The view maintained by both discourses seemed to be that its realization in meditation requires persistence in the practice. Practitioners from both centres attempt to integrate their understanding of this doctrine into everyday life, and the attempt to do so takes them beyond mere attachment to the self towards a more Buddhist understanding of self as a construct.

The doctrine of the Four Noble Truths serves as a guide for thought and contemplation until some of its import and conceptual significance as a reality-view begins to be understood by evaluation against experience. Generally, this evaluation occurs through growing appreciation of the *samsaric* world as characterized by the three marks of existence, and a growing appreciation of the way wisdom, ethics and meditation orient one to the practice as discussed above.

4 Doctrinal Instruction and Acquisition

The most significant difference between BMIMC and Vajrayana Institute is in the style of instruction that they offer. BMIMC teaches predominantly one practice and its doctrinal foundations, in a retreat setting which limits the amount of social interaction possible. Conversely, Vajrayana Institute facilitates a range of teaching formats, which students are free to choose from. Operating as a Vipassana meditation centre, BMIMC engenders a practical and experiential emphasis to learning: Buddhist concepts and frameworks are used to interpret immediate experience accessed in Vipassana practice. The frameworks themselves are learned through attending *dhamma* talks given on retreats, participating in private and group student-teacher interviews, attending other courses, and private study and reading.

The style of instruction at BMIMC facilitates the practitioners' engagement with their immediate subjective field of experience: bodily and sensory impressions, feelings and mental states, doctrinally framed by the four *satipatthanas*. Here, the function of doctrine is to attribute frameworks of meaning to experience. Before this begins to take place, the initial task of the teacher is to orient the student's mind to the practice, and impart to them the significance of the concept of mindfulness and its successful development. The consistency of approach among Vipassana teachers at the centre was demonstrated in Chapter 2. All retreats catering for beginners to meditation

give sitting and walking instruction. All instruction was imparted with the aim of keeping students engaged as much as possible with their immediate experience, and to teach them how to observe their own experiences. This consistency of approach was evident despite individual differences in the explanation and demonstration of the fundamental principles of observing one's experience.

At Vajrayana Institute learning occurs largely as a result of attending teachings and engaging in social discourse. Interview data indicated that teachings were more effective in socialization than either the ritual performances or meditation sessions. As indicated in Chapter 4, Section 2.1.1, students' and practitioners' experimental interest is more sustained by *teachings* than by the weekly meditation sessions. While the purposes of the practices are explained in some teachings, it is held that students' understanding of their purpose and symbolic significance will ripen with the students' growing experience. Although the division of Vajrayana Institute's teachings into Western and traditional style creates a somewhat artificial distinction, interview material indicated that students benefitted initially by executing a strategic approach to their attendance. Several differences between them, namely, the level of teacher-student interaction, the inclusion of meditation to illustrate principles in Western teachings, and the seeming amount of assumed prior knowledge required in some traditional teachings, makes the Western teachings appear more accessible initially. Traditional teachings often consist of commentary on a root text and amplification of specific topics or points of doctrine. The Western teachings appear to progress more slowly, give more detailed definitions of concepts, draw illustrations and examples from daily life, and involve more interpersonal interaction. After acquiring some familiarization with doctrine, students' knowledge and appreciation of its consistency as an integrated meaning-system is consolidated through attending several courses of each type over a period of time, usually one or two years.

Arising from the examination of significant concepts and their means of acquisition in Chapters 2 and 4 was the observation that the types of topic that initially engaged participants were those both fundamental to the Buddhist perspective and common in everyday experience: the nature of mind, suffering, attachment, and the three poisons, especially anger. Vipassana practitioners typically engage initially on hearing a teaching on one of the topics outlined above, or on attending a Vipassana retreat and responding to the quality of instruction given by the teacher, which gives the new student an appreciation of the combination of ethics, meditation, and wisdom supporting the Buddhist framework. With the development of some mindfulness, practitioners begin to identify, distinguish, and direct their mental states. It is significant that there were no instances reported by respondents of feeling committed as a *Buddhist* practitioner before mindfulness had begun to develop, and some understanding of the mind from the Buddhist view had been gained conceptually and experientially. It is doubtful that a meditator would attain

the deeper insight experiences described by some without considerable commitment to the practice beforehand.

Vajrayana students typically respond to teachings on thought-transformation, anger, the nature of mind, or to practices such as exchanging self-for-others, which reflect their everyday experiential and behavioural concerns, and their concerns in relating to the wider world in a wholesome manner. Motivated by this initial response, students attend other teachings and begin to acquire more conceptual and experiential understanding of the Buddhist perspective of the FPMT. Study, reflection, meditation, and testing of the ideas in everyday life allows students to evaluate the validity of teachings and practices. With time, students begin to accept the concepts and their interrelationships as a frame of reference for their own thought and behaviour.

At Vajrayana Institute, comprehension of the meaning-system as a frame of reference involves the understanding of some core ideas: *karma* and *reincarnation*, the mindstream and its purification, and the *bodhisattva* path with its three principles and six perfections. While the centre's teaching curriculum covers an extensive range, those having a profound effect on the individual are the aspects of doctrine that encapsulate one's innate desire for mental transformation within a frame of reference with a more altruistic outlook. These are typically to do with the Mahayana or *bodhisattva* motivation, and the development of *bodhicitta*. More abstract topics are either investigated after refuge has been taken, or after one has a sufficient grounding in the basics to have already acquired a frame of reference for the information. This orientation is also aided by the student's appreciation of the effects of meditation practice.

5 Practice and The Role of the Experiential

In support of the findings presented immediately above is the finding that for commitment to occur, one's meditative experience and its interpretation according to doctrine must be applicable to the improvement of quality of lived experience; it must be relevant to current life challenges and ethically sustainable. While participants' initial motivations for religious experimentation may have embodied a desire for the experiential in terms of experiencing 'that elusive altered state', or for self-growth devoid of any deep religious conviction, they go on to develop an appreciation and respect for the more religious elements of the Buddhist worldview through experimental participation. Individual appreciation of practice is almost solely meditation-based initially, and any appreciation of the exterior ritual elements tends to develop after one has some feel for the relationship between doctrine and practice. At BMIMC this ritual consists of taking refuge and precepts on retreats, whereas Vajrayana Institute maintains a much richer ritualistic focus, comprising prayer and *sutra* recitation, *pujas* of various types—guru, deity, healing—the refuge ceremony, and tantric initiation. Still, for the practitioners with whom I was most

involved, a feeling for this ritual took some time to develop, and more immediate interest was for the meditations encountered in teachings.

With respect to personal practice, for both types of practitioner practice periods range from half an hour upwards, with some Vipassana practitioners spending longer than an hour a day on practice. Both types of practitioner remarked on occasion that they would ideally do more, but were fitting in their practice around busy schedules. Many Vipassana practitioners incorporate *metta*, or a similar technique for working on the feelings, into their routine. Vajrayana practitioners almost invariably practise concentration, and usually in the form of deity visualization. Those who have refuge commitments and tantric commitments beyond that, attempt to keep them as much as possible. Both types of practitioner spoke of the practice inside and outside of the formal meditation, referring to the fact that opportunities arise in daily life for practice in terms of being aware of one's attitudes and mental states. Because of the focus on *bare attention* to one's experience fostered by Vipassana practice, practitioners had created their own experientially structured approach to *everyday* practice.⁵³⁸ Certain everyday events consisting of routine and repetitive actions were used as mindfulness practices, and the monitoring of one's responses often led to instant *Metta* practice. By contrast, Vajrayana practitioners responded to similar emotional situations by being aware of their own responses, and bringing to mind principles held to be applicable to the situation, for instance, reminding themselves that there is no essential self to protect from insult.

For the practitioners of the two Buddhist orientations, the intended outcome of practice is two-fold. The traditional textual sources and doctrinal and practical instruction at both centres, advise that the goal of Theravadin Vipassana meditation practice is *Nibbana*, and the goal of practice from the Mahayana view is the realization of the inherent *emptiness* of all phenomena. Some respondents stated this as their goal explicitly and some did not. The second is the enhancement of quality of life *in this life*, in *samsara*, on mental, emotional, and physical levels. While Western Buddhists may appear to focus on the latter goal at the expense of the former, practitioners' own accounts suggest that the two are mutually reinforcing in their capacity to provide a strong and sustainable motivation for practice. Observation of improvement in the quality of mental and emotional life validates for practitioners the efficacy and worth of the teachings and practices, and in turn, reinforces their faith in the worldview of their organization. Both perspectives, the Vipassana and the Vajrayana, emphasize the practice of mental purification for the production of wholesome mental states. The practitioners of both value the aspects of meditation that calm and focus the mind such as the *Metta* that complements the Vipassana, and the variety of practices done at Vajrayana Institute that encourage

⁵³⁸ Coleman, J. *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, Oxford University Press, p110.

positive feelings towards others, for instance, the practice of exchanging oneself for others.

While the relationship between meditative experience and the personal transformation it produces is heavily implicated in practitioners' decisions to commit to the Buddhist path as demonstrated in Chapter 6, it must be stressed that for respondents generally, commitment is the beginning of their progress on the path to enlightenment, not the end-point of experimentation. It is difficult to state with certainty whether practitioners' observations of and enthusiasm for personal transformation and the techniques utilized to achieve it, overshadowed considerations of longer-term goals when responding to questions about concepts, doctrines and practices of importance to them. Added to which, an important methodological consideration is the extent to which the group of respondents from each centre represent the overall characteristics of the centre's participants, as discussed in Chapter 1 Section 3.2. What can be concluded with certainty is that the two goals are related for practitioners generally, although variations may exist among individuals as to the relative importance of each.

If the practices and the successful attainment of their aims are conceived of in terms of efficacy and sentiment or value, then the above becomes clearer. Some practices, aspects of practice, and their embodiment of doctrinal strategies could be seen to be efficacious. They produced effects that could be noted and felt within a reasonable time: from immediately to several days or months. Some of these also appealed to one's sentiments or values. For instance, practitioners expected that some effects of practice, such as attaining *Nibbana* or realizing *sunyata*/emptiness, would become evident in the long term, and accordingly, did not see these as realistic short-term attainments, but instead viewed them as worthwhile ambitions because of the orientation these postulated attainments maintained toward ongoing commitment. It is this combination of efficacy and sentiment that can be viewed as a significant driving force in the lives of these practitioners. These sentiments themselves reflect the way in which the Buddhist principles relate to one's own values. In this sense, one's values are articulated by Buddhist doctrine and given practical expression through its meditation and ritual techniques as much as they are shaped by it.

A significant difference in approach to meditation practice maintained by the two Buddhist orientations is created by the technique-oriented approach in Vipassana that emphasizes the development of *mindfulness* through payment of attention to the present, and the Mahayana focus at Vajrayana Institute on the Bodhisattva motivation of attaining enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Vipassana aims to develop mindfulness through the practice of what Nyanaponika Thera

describes as *bare attention* to immediate experience.⁵³⁹ The definite focus on immediate awareness in the present, with the aim of modifying and purifying their mental states, encourages a focus on the immediate present. By contrast, meditation at Vajrayana Institute emphasizes the development of concentration to calm the mind, and to make one's visualizations clearer for success in deity yoga. Living according to the *bodhisattva* motivation highlights the relationship between motivation and the creation of *karma*. Consequently, Vajrayana practitioners place more emphasis on the creation of the right conditions for what they desire for the future. A wholesome motivation is important for working with desire in both sutric and tantric practice. First, desire is utilized by the *bodhisattva* motivation for enlightenment, and channelled into the development of the six perfections. Although not evident in practitioner reports, Tantra uses desire directly, and much discussion in Chapter 5 addressed the manner in which the practitioner is ethically prepared to work with *deity yoga*. It is highly significant that both types of practitioner consider bliss states as pleasant by-products of concentration practice, but value the development of meditative stability for its contribution to the attainment of enlightenment and self-development.

6 The Self and Its Transformations

A strong influence on practitioners' decision to commit to Buddhism was their own observations that self-transformation had occurred as a result of Buddhist study and practice. In order to conceptualize the nature of this change clearly, discussion in Chapters 3 and 5 outlined the three views of the self from the Buddhist perspective: the absolute and relative views, and the imputed *I*. The absolute view is represented by the doctrines of *anatta* and *sunyata*/emptiness within Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism respectively. The relative view, the view of the self as dependent on causes and conditions, is represented by specific doctrinal outlooks in discourse at both centres. The Theravadin view of Vipassana is based on the four *satipatthanas*, but is also denoted by the doctrine of the three marks of existence, and by that of the aggregates. The doctrine of dependent origination is more commonly referred to at Vajrayana Institute, both in its twelve-stage formula, and as a more general notion of the self as a continually changing mindstream affected by *karma*. From the Madhyamika perspective, realizing emptiness involves integrating both absolute and conventional views of the self into one's understanding; the assertion that there is no truly existent self avoids the extreme of substantialism, and the acceptance of the conventional nature of existence, avoids the extreme of nihilism.⁵⁴⁰

The Theravada and Mahayana perspectives hold in common the view that the individual attributes a unitary self to the sense of *I* created by the interplay of

⁵³⁹ Nyanaponika, Thera. *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha's Way of Mindfulness*, The Word of the Buddha Publishing Company, 2nd ed., 1956, pp17-8.

⁵⁴⁰ Gen Lamrimpa, *op.cit.*, pp99-100.

impersonal phenomena. The insight of Vipassana practice and the *Special Insight* of Gelugpa analytical practice is the view of the self as inherently devoid of essential existence. The goal of Vipassana is to realize the view of Samsara as bearing the three marks of existence. The goal of *emptiness* meditation from the Madhyamika position of the Gelugpa school is to realize the emptiness of the person and the emptiness of phenomena, namely the five aggregates.⁵⁴¹ According to Tsong-kha-pa, “virtuous cognitions that distinguish an ultimate or a conventional object are classified with insight”.⁵⁴² Watson’s model of the self based on her synthesis of contemporary views, posits two levels, each with inner coherence. The first includes the self-image as process, and the second is the self-concept as representation, which seems reified and autonomous to the individual.⁵⁴³ The aim of both practices is to shift awareness beyond the sense of self imputed onto the subjective field of impersonal phenomena, onto the field itself, where one ideally sees that this phenomenal field, described as the four *satipatthanas* in Vipassana practice and typically as the five *skandhas*/aggregates in Mahayana thought, is empty of inherent and unchanging existence. The sense-of-self that these practices aim to deconstruct appears to be that represented by Watson’s second level. As outlined in Chapter 5 Section 4.2: *Vajrayana Modifications of the Self*, Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden divides the imputed I into two.⁵⁴⁴ The first is the I imputed onto its base, the five aggregates, and exists conventionally as a dependent arising. The second arises from the superposition of inherent existence onto the first, and is inherently empty. Some Vipassana teachers and experienced practitioners refer to the shifting sense-of-self in meditation, and it is conceivable that awareness moves between the objectified self-concept and the functional, processual sense of self which Watson equates with the Freudian conception of the ego as mediator of the organism’s processes.⁵⁴⁵ From the perspective of the sociological approach to religious change, the self of interest is the self-concept. For the practitioners of both forms of Buddhism the transformed sense-of-self is effected by transformative interaction between the selves as subject and object.

When the Vipassana and Gelugpa approaches are compared in terms of epistemological starting point, meditative experience as opposed to a conceptual view respectively, no real difference is suggested. In a talk on *Vipasyana* meditation, Venerable Antonio Satta contrasted two fundamentally different approaches to meditation found within the Buddhist traditions. With the first, to which the Gelugpa tradition belongs, a view is generated conceptually first and then it is taken into the meditation. The second type focusses on “what is there”, and generates a view based on meditation; the view is derived from the meditation. His examples of

⁵⁴¹ Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden. *Path to Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism*, Tushita Publications, Melbourne, 1993, p849. Also see Gen Lamrimpa, *op.cit.*, p86.

⁵⁴² Tsong-kha-pa, 2002, *op.cit.*, p14.

⁵⁴³ Watson, G. *The Resonance of Emptiness: A Buddhist Inspiration for a Contemporary Psychotherapy*, Curzon Press, 2002, p110.

⁵⁴⁴ Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, 1993, *op.cit.*, pp851-52.

⁵⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p116.

the latter were *Dzogchen*, *Mahamudra*, and *Vipasyana*.⁵⁴⁶ The Gelugpa practice aims to find the *I* within the phenomenal field in order to negate it. Here the imputed self is the initial meditation object. The *emptiness* meditation discussed in Chapter 4 Section 3.3: *Meditation Practice at Vajrayana Institute*, and Chapter 5 Section 2.2: *Analytical Meditation*, the four-point analysis of *Ascertaining the Non-Existence of a Personal Self*, consists of identifying the *I* as the object to be refuted, determining that it has to be either identical with or separate from the aggregates, then considering its existence as one of the aggregates, and finally considering its possible existence as separate from the aggregates.⁵⁴⁷

In Theravadin Vipassana, after the establishment of *mindfulness*, one observes the phenomenal field as delineated by the four *satipatthanas*, in terms of their arising and ceasing. Practitioners typically report experiences of *dukkha*/suffering and *anicca*/impermanence, and occasionally some relate experiences of *anatta*, involving subtle changes in awareness. One teacher who attempted to give me an understanding of the shift in perception experienced by some practitioners, explained that in meditation, instead of the sense of “I am seeing”, one has the sense of “just seeing”, that awareness shifts from the self-as-subject to the perceptual process itself. In both practices, the shift in experiential understanding involves a shift of experiential location from the imputed *I* onto the impersonal phenomenal field. Analytical practice, whether Vipassana or Special Insight, can be seen as an ongoing project of deconstruction of the experience of self.

The changes that occur to the self-concept, James’ notion of the self-as-object, me-the-known,⁵⁴⁸ are conceived as the cumulative effects of changes made to the self-as-subject through meditative practice, and changes brought about by study, reading, and private reflection. The net effect is internal changes to thought and feeling, and changes visible in behaviour and the expression of thought and feeling. It is this outer embodiment that is perceived as identity change. It can be seen that change of this type is contributed to by changes to self in its subjective immediacy, and in its aspect of objective identity. It is the recognition of change at both levels that provides the sense of self-authenticity that practitioners value. Theorizing change in this way utilizes both sociological and psychological notions of self or person, which maintain their particular theoretical focus on *identity* as objective location in the world⁵⁴⁹ and *personality* respectively.⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁶ This talk, given at Vajrayana Institute in Newtown on Friday 7 January 2005, preceded a weekend Vipasyana retreat led by Venerable Antonio.

⁵⁴⁷ See Hopkins, G. *Meditation on Emptiness*, Wisdom Publications, 1996, pp44-46. Gen Lamrimpa, op.cit., p99; McDonald, op.cit., pp60-61, and Valham, K. 1997, pp77-80. See Geshe Acharya Thubten Lodon, 1993, *op cit.*, pp849-60, for the background theory and reasoning to the meditation.

⁵⁴⁸ James, W. *Principles of Psychology*, Harvard University Press, 1983.

⁵⁴⁹ Berger and Luckmann, 1966, op.cit., p122.

⁵⁵⁰ Stone, G, and Faberman, H. “The Self”, in *Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction*, pp367-72, Gregory P. Stone and Harvey A. Farberman eds, Xerox College Publishing, 1970. pp367-68.

Change at the level of objectivity is seen to involve changes to one's self-concept or self-image, often equated with social identity in studies of religious conversion. However, in the context of Buddhist practice, this level of change is supported by changes to habitual subjective response, such as changes to mental and emotional states. Much reported self-transformation involves transforming one's habitual reactions to situations and learning not to identify with negative mental and emotional states. While the approach in Vipassana meditation is to observe the arising and passing of all emotional states,⁵⁵¹ the approach at Vajrayana is not to entirely dismiss unwholesome states, but to transmute them by the use of antidotes and appropriate meditations. In this way, changes in the way practitioners wish to see themselves, for instance as calm, patient, accepting and compassionate are authenticated by salient changes to their habitual mental and emotional functioning. This sense of authentic transformation is a strong motivator for commitment.

One final point needs to be made about the nature of this self in transformation. The kinds of changes that individuals willingly undergo reflect something of the values that are important to them. The point has been made above about the appeal of Buddhist practice in both efficacy and value. One of the values held by practitioners to emerge throughout discussion in this thesis is that of living an ethical life. Keown sees Buddhism as a response to an ethical problem, about the best kind of life for humanity to lead,⁵⁵² and practitioners adopt Buddhism as an answer to that problem. But in considering that an ethical motivation seems to support one's desire for self-transformation, there arises the problem of how a Western Buddhist fulfills the urge for personal growth in a religious culture that advocates renunciation. As highlighted above, Buddhism has appeal to Westerners through the combination of meditation and ethics it supports. Western Buddhism, through its focus on not-self and compassion, can be seen as both a furtherance of individualistic humanism⁵⁵³ and a reaction against the excesses of that view.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵¹ Rubin, J. "A New View of Meditation", in *Journal of Religion and Health* 40 [1], pp121-28, 2001, p124.

⁵⁵² Keown, *op.cit.*, p1.

⁵⁵³ King, S. *Buddha Nature*, State University of New York Press, 1991, pp169-71.

Appendix 1: Interview Respondents

At Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre

Respondent	Sex	Age	Occupation	Interview date
BM	M	early 30s		30.05.2003
KT	F	38	Architect	30.05.2003
KN	F	37	Office Assistant	01.06.2003
HR	F	early 50s	Academic	01.07.2003
HD	F	early 50s	Dentist	04.08.2003
DN	M	late 50s	Psychologist	19.08.2003
RN	F	mid 50s	TAFE Teacher	19.08.2003
KBN	M	early 60s	Academic	05.09.2003
SI	F	58	Housewife	16.09.2003
LP	F	45	Psychologist	13.11.2003
KBT	M	late 30s	Geologist	13.11.2003
EJ	F	early 50s	Public Servant	16.11.2003
MV	M	early 40s	Artist	31.01.2004
EBS	M	47	Psychologist	15.07.2004
FV	F	40s		09.08.2004
KM	F	early 50s	Aged-Care Worker	13.08.2004
RL	M	mid 50s	Dhamma Teacher	18.08.2004
EC	F	53	Administrative Officer	17.11.2004
JD	M	late 50s	Biologist	25.11.2004
HU	M	50	Solicitor	30.11.2004

At Vajrayana Institute

Respondent	Sex	Age	Occupation	Interview date
NJ	F	early 30s		15.01.2004
CR	F	50	Business Manager	03.03.2004
AN	M	26	Administrative Officer	08.03.2004
MM	F	early 50s	TAFE Teacher	15.03.2004
RI	M	36	Archeologist	24.03.2004
MVR	F	early 70s	Buddhist Nun	26.03.2004
MW	F	41	Corporate Executive	19.06.2004
KI	F	48	Corporate Executive	08.08.2004
EF	F	early 60s	Accountant	14.08.2004
NM	M	30	Construction Worker	20.08.2004
MF	F	50	Carer	14.09.2004
KD	F	50	Carer	14.09.2004
ML	F	early 50s		11.11.2004
MN	F	late 50s	Buddhist Nun	22.11.2004
ER	F	50s	Psychologist	03.12.2004
WR	F	48	Business Manager	06.12.2004
NC	M	36	Gym Instructor	07.12.2004
DE	F	early 50s	Actress	08.12.2004
MC	M	40	Web Designer	14.12.2004

Appendix 2: Beginners Weekend Meditation Workshop Schedule, 29-30 May 2004

Saturday

9.30-10.00 am	Introductory Talks
10.00-11.15 am	Awareness Exercises
11.15-11.45 am	Morning Tea
11.45-12.45 pm	Meditation
12.45-2.00 pm	Lunch and Rest
2.00-3.30 pm	Meditation / Awareness
3.30-4.00 pm	Afternoon Tea
4.00-5.30 pm	Meditation, Questions and Answers
5.30 -7.00 pm	Supper
7.00-8.00 pm	Dhamma Talk
9.00 pm	Tea
9.30 pm	Bed

Sunday

7.00-8.30 am	Meditation / Awareness
8.30-10.00 am	Breakfast and Chores
10.00-11.00 am	Awareness
11.00-12.30 pm	Meditation
12.30-2.00 pm	Lunch
2.00-3.30 pm	Meditation
3.30-4.00 pm	Questions and Answers
4.00-4.30 pm	Cleanup and Finish

Appendix 3: Long-Weekend Retreat Schedule, 12-15 June 2004

Friday

7.45-8.00 pm	Manager's Talk
8.00-9.00 pm	Introductory Talk, Precepts, and Preliminary Instruction
9.00 pm	Bed or Further Practice

Saturday

6.00-6.45 am	Wake Up and Walking
6.45-7.30 am	Sitting
7.30-8.30 am	Breakfast
8.30-9.30 am	Instruction/Precepts
9.30-10.15 am	Walking
10.15-11.00 am	Sitting
11.00-11.30 am	Walking
11.30-12.30 pm	Sitting
12.30-2.00 pm	Lunch and Rest
2.00-2.45 pm	Walking
2.45-3.30 pm	Sitting
3.30-5.30 pm	Group Interview in Interview Room
5.30-6.30 pm	Supper
6.30-7.00 pm	Walking
7.00-8.00 pm	Dhamma Talk
8.00-8.30 pm	Walking
8.30-9.15 pm	Sitting
9.15 pm	Bed or Further Practice

Sunday

6.00-6.45 am	Wake Up and Walking
6.45-7.30 am	Sitting
7.30-8.30 am	Breakfast
8.30-9.30 am	Instruction/Precepts
9.30-10.15 am	Walking
10.15-11.00 am	Sitting
11.00-11.30 am	Walking
11.30-12.30 pm	Sitting
12.30-2.00 pm	Lunch and Rest
2.00-2.45 pm	Walking
2.45-3.30 pm	Sitting
3.30-4.30 pm	Walking (Individual Interviews, 3.30 to 5.30)
4.30-5.30 pm	Sitting
5.30-6.30 pm	Supper
6.30-7.00 pm	Walking
7.00-8.00 pm	Dhamma Talk
8.00-8.30 pm	Walking
8.30-9.15 pm	Sitting
9.15 pm	Bed or Further Practice

Monday

6.00-6.45 am	Wake Up and Walking
6.45-7.30 am	Sitting
7.30-8.30 am	Breakfast
8.30-9.00 am	Walking
9.00-10.00 am	Sitting
10.00-10.30 am	Walking
10.30-11.30 am	Dhamma Talk and Questions
11.30-12.30 pm	Manager's Closing Talk and Cleanup
12.30 pm	Lunch and Finish

**Appendix 4: Daily Schedule for 15-16 February during Four-Day
Retreat, 14-17 February 2004**

6.00 am	Wake
6.30 am	Posture and Flexibility Session
7.30 am	Sitting
8.30 am	Breakfast
9.30 am	Practice Talk
10.00 am	Walking
10.30 am	Sitting
11.00 am	Walking
11.30 am	Sitting
12.00 noon	Walking
12.30 pm	Lunch and Rest
2.30 pm	Walking
3.00 pm	Sitting
3.30 pm	Walking
4.00 pm	Sitting
4.30 pm	Walking
5.00 pm	Sitting or Beginner's Mind Group
5.30 pm	Walking
6.00 pm	Supper
7.30 pm	Dhamma talk
8.30 pm	More Practice or Bed

Interviews, for those who wanted them, were scheduled mainly in the afternoon.

**Appendix 5: Schedule for Days 3 -9, April 25-May 1, during Nine-Day
Retreat, 23 April-2 May 2004**

5.00 am	Wake Up
5.45 am	Sitting
6.30 am	Walking
7.00 am	Sitting
7.30 am	Breakfast
9.30 am	Walking
10.00 am	Talk given by the Teachers, and Sitting
10.45 am	Sitting or Standing
10.55 am	A Talk
11.00 am	Walking
11.30 am	Lunch
1.30 pm	Walking
2.15 pm	Sitting or Standing
3.15 pm	Walking
4.00 pm	Sitting
4.45 pm	Sitting or Standing
5.00 pm	Walking
5.45 pm	Light Dinner
7.15 pm	Sitting
7.45 pm	Standing or Walking
8.15 pm	A Talk
afterwards	Optional Meditation or Sleep

Appendix 6: Practice Instruction Given During the Nine-Day Retreat, April-May 2004

Mindfulness and Investigation of Hindrances

First, note the hindrance, eg desire, or more specifically, planning, etc. You may have to note it a few times. Try not to push it away, suppress it, or indulge it. If it disappears, note its characteristic of impermanence. Return to the breath or footsteps.

If there is strong attachment, and noting does not help to let it go, then investigate not in a thinking way, or by building a story about it, but instead let the hindrance be the object of awareness as it is manifesting in the body.

After first noting the hindrance, bring the attention to the body. Observe the sensations of tension, tightness, etc. When strong fear, worry, desire and so on are present, run attention through the body; observe all parts and regions that have reacted from the thoughts in the mind. Continue to observe all areas of tension or uncomfortable sensation. The mind may gradually become interested in the body and become more objective, no longer 'feeding' the hindrance or distracting thoughts, but observing their effect on the body. The understanding of the unsatisfactoriness of attachment to the hindrance may arise, and also Compassion for ourselves. When it passes, return to the breath, walking, and so on.

Special Hints about Walking

Sleepiness: walk more quickly, with broader awareness.

Restlessness, with lots of thinking: walk more slowly, observing changes in sensations of feet and legs (close-up awareness).

Anger and frustration: walk more gently and gracefully, after observing the result of anger on walking.

Working With Unpleasant Physical Sensations

First try to treat them similarly to wandering thoughts.

When aversion develops toward one, change your attention to the sensation itself.

Soften your awareness around them. Observe their characteristics: size, shape

When aversion, fear or worry develop strongly toward it, then change your attention to the aversion, fear, worry, as they manifest in the body

Observe the physical reactions throughout the body: tensions, tightening, or merely changes in body posture; hands, arms, stomach, chest, neck, face, everywhere. Note and feel the reactions, then try to relax.

When aversions etc develop strongly, and limits of concentration and energy have come, sit just a little more: one minute, thirty seconds, ten breaths

Check sensation, decide whether you still wish to move

Note to yourself, "I feel that I have worked as best I can at this time. Rather than build more and more aversion, I will change my posture and start again on the breathing."

When changing posture, continue to observe sensation

When sensation has faded away, start again on observing the breath

Keep in mind: gently, gently

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Mindfulness of the Body:

- Breath, postures, activities
- Body as a collection of parts: bones, hair, blood, teeth etc.
- Cemetery contemplation, "Verily my body is of the same nature: such it will become and cannot escape from it."
- Body manifesting in four elements: earth, water, wind, fire. Be aware of sensations in the body.

Mindfulness of Feeling (Vedana):

- Awareness of a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling arising in the mind due to the contact of the six senses with their object.
- Watching impermanence of feeling and trying not to react unwisely.

Mindfulness of States of Mind:

- Overall state of mind through which we colour our experience.
- Bare awareness; watching impermanence.

Mindfulness of Mind Objects:

Five hindrances, and knowing:

- when they are present
- when they are absent
- how they arise

- how to let go of them if they have arisen

so as to:

- develop understanding of how they won't arise in the future.

Five aggregates:

The Mind/Body as a process, arising and passing, as:

- Body
- Consciousness: knowing quality of mind arising when the senses contact their objects
- Vedana: feeling
- Perception: labelling process
- Mental formations: thoughts, emotions,

and focussing on problems that arise dependent on contact of the senses with their objects.

Seven factors of enlightenment:

- mindfulness
- investigation of mental objects
- energy
- joy
- tranquillity
- concentration
- equanimity,

and knowing

- when they are present
- when they are absent
- how they can arise
- how to develop them.

Four Noble Truths:

- Existence of unsatisfactoriness
- Cause: ignorance, unwise reaction and craving
- Fading away: develop WISDOM, giving up unwise reaction and craving
- How to do it: the Path; methods of mental development.

Appendix 7: Excerpt from original transcript of Experiences with Vipassana

From an interview on 4 August 2003:

HD: My experiences so far I sort of put into three stages. It's just totally arbitrary and probably in a few years it'll be different. There was this beginning stage. I regard my self as not being very good at it. I was the sort of person who had to move every ten minute. I suffered extreme pain. I could not follow two breaths in a row. I'd go to the teacher and they'd be very encouraging. My husband he seemed to be quite natural at it, and seemed to have good concentration. And I think it was only the fact that I was going along to the American teachers who I could relate to and who talked about pain ... I gave someone my car keys on my first retreat so I couldn't run away. They had group interviews, and I'd see that everyone was struggling the same as I was, so I kept at it, not very well. I'd skip a lot of the walking sessions and do my laundry, and I'd read, and I'd go and look at the notice board and the time. But for some reason I kept going. I don't know why. So every time one of those teachers would come out to Australia, I'd do a ten-day retreat ... The Vipassana method is very straightforward, very clear, and I clicked with it straight away as far as understanding the instructions. So there was that period, and I suppose on my first few retreats I didn't see any benefits at all. For some reason I kept going and then I suppose a little bit of concentration started to develop. I'd do a ten-day here and a twenty-day there, and I still thought I was hopeless, but I kept doing it, and then I did start to notice that I could use pain. I used to get a sheet of pain in my back as a concentration object. Then I noticed that the pain was not constant; that when I watched it it would break up, and there would be vibration in the pain. I think I remember telling the teachers that some of the vibrations are painful and some aren't. So that was quite exciting, and I sensed that the teachers ... they would say 'Oh, keep going' I sensed that they were pleased with that ... and so I kept going, and on one retreat I was able ... it was just fantastic. I was just flying. I found I could be mindful all day long. Every morning I woke up and I could feel more sensations than the day before; feel sensations between the sensations and it was just amazing. I had so much energy. I didn't need to sleep. I would go to hall at three or four in the morning ... and I'd observe many aspects to the rising and falling. And this is the most memorable occasion of any retreat I've ever done: as I was watching the rising and falling one afternoon, I used to do extremely slow walking meditation ... like we're taking an hour to do ten metres. It was just incredible because I could see all these minute sensations and, yeah, one afternoon I was doing meditation ... and suddenly nausea started overwhelming me. It was just extremely unpleasant, and not only nausea, but fear as well. Just extreme fear, and I thought it might pass ... I couldn't eat anything, and when I was asleep I couldn't sleep. I'd turn over and my body was just vibration. I was just so frightened. I didn't understand why I was frightened because I'd been feeling all these vibrations before and ... and the next day I asked for an interview with the teacher and she was very happy, even though I kept saying 'I can't handle this, it's just awful. I can't sleep; I can't do anything', and she said 'Oh, you're right. Just go for walks ...

GE: Did she give you any explanation?

HD: She did not. She just said, "Very good, you've been working very hard", and that was all. I could tell she was pleased that happened ... She (Sharon Salzburg) and Joseph used to teach together. I just love him—he's fantastic—but I suppose I had this more connection with her. I asked to speak to her rather than him about this, and of course, when I got home (that was towards the end of the retreat) and I couldn't do any more of the retreat, I just went for walks.

GE: Was this during your second period or the first?

HD: This was the beginning of what I call the second ... well no, in the second period when everything got more exciting, and interesting and fascinating, and it was really pleasant. The body's really pleasant ... really nice sensations in the body, and when you come out of it, the world looks wonderful; food tastes incredible; you're seeing sensations arising in the body, so the taste of food just springs onto your tongue; and you go outside and a warm breeze hits you, and it's like velvet. It's wonderful.

GE: So you feel more sensitized to everything?

HD: Oh yeah. You're a bit off-balance, because it's so intense, but it's just a wonderful thing. It's really a turning point. You'd never say, "I'm not going to meditate" after that. You just couldn't. And then this terrible thing happens, and it's like a slap in the face. You'll get other people and they won't emphasize that stage the way I am, but because of my karma or whatever, that's the way it developed for me, and maybe for other people it would be more gradual. I was doing this intensely slow walking meditation, and some people don't do slow walking, so perhaps the whole thing would be different for them. Then the Dukkha decade followed—that was the third stage, which was basically the nineties I suppose—and yeah, I did read about it in books when I came back. I realized there was a stage called disillusion, where the yogi has to be very encouraged because it's very unpleasant. But everything got back on an even keel, but when I did the three-month retreat in America a large part of that was very unpleasant sensations in the body. And the teachers would say "Oh, there are all kinds of dukkha", and from talking to Patrick I believe that this stage of where you're gaining insight into dukkha very strongly is very short for some people, and very intense and long for others. It depends on you and your karma.

GE: You were just saying that you feel your meditation is changing again.'

HD: Yes. Of course it would have been changing all the time, but more subtly, and it's changed enough now so that I can see a new pattern with it.

GE: What seems to be emerging at the moment?

HD: A lot of changeability, even from one sit to another when I'm doing intensive practice. There's a sitting where there may be a lot of pain in the body; another sitting where there's pleasant sensations in the body, not quite as rapid as this, but ... another sitting where there's a lot of equanimity. Where the object of meditation is very easy to discern: the breath or whatever, or sensations, generally sensations in the body, and the hindrances are not present. There's no sleepiness or restlessness or doubt, or desire or aversion, and it's extremely nice to experience that. And other sittings where there's very little sensation in the body, and everything's frustrating. You can't find an object. And so it seems to go in a bit of a circle. My natural inclination is to think 'Oh, your practice is hopeless. You're not getting anywhere, but in fact, discussing it with other people, it is actually progressing. It's just spiralling, or something like that is happening, and the mind is actually reviewing desire, aversion, and all these other things with a view to giving it up, releasing it ... There's an understanding that these things are not to be clung to. These things are suffering, and all the suffering that we're experiencing is the mind becoming ready for a moment of Nibbana. No way you can experience that moment without, apparently, a lot of insight into suffering [and] experience of suffering.

Appendix 8: Prayers for Before and After Teachings⁵⁵⁵

1 Seven Limb Prayer

Reverently I prostrate with my body, speech and mind,
And present clouds of every type of offering, those actually performed and mentally transformed.

I declare all my negative actions accumulated since beginningless time

And rejoice in the merit of all holy and ordinary beings.

Please remain until samsara ends

And turn the wheel of dharma for all sentient beings.

I dedicate the merit created by myself and others to the great enlightenment

2 Outer Mandala

This ground, anointed with perfume, strewn with flowers,

Adorned with Mount Meru, four continents, the sun and the moon.

I imagine this as a buddha-field and offer it.

May all living beings enjoy this pure land.

3 Mandala Offering (Inner Mandala)

The objects of my attachment, aversion and ignorance — friends, enemies and strangers

And my body, wealth and enjoyments;

Without any sense of loss I offer this collection.

Please accept it with pleasure and bless me with freedom from the three poisons.

4 Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer

I go for Refuge until I am enlightened

To the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly

By the merit I create by listening to the Dharma,

May I become a Buddha to benefit all sentient beings.

5 Dedication of Merit

Through this virtuous action

May I quickly attain the state of a guru-buddha

And lead every living being without exception,

Into that pure land.

⁵⁵⁵ These prayers can be found in the Kopan Prayer Book, 2001, and in McDonald, 1984.

6 Bodhicitta Prayer

May the supreme jewel bodhicitta
That has not arisen, arise and grow;
And may that which has arisen not diminish
But increase more and more.

7 Long Life Prayer for His Holiness

In the land encircled by snow mountains
You are the source of all happiness and good;
All-powerful Chenrezig, Tenzin Gyatso,
Please remain until samsara ends.

Appendix 9: Meditations Taught in *Mind and Its Potential*

Nine-Round Breathing Meditation

Preparation: Start by focussing on your physical body, finding the most beneficial position with your spine straight and erect, a position in which you can be aware and awake, but not stiff or rigid. Feel the weight of your body, its substance and earthy character. Become present in the moment and place where you are.

Motivation: Create an altruistic motivation for the meditation session. Think that you are meditating not just for your own individual benefit, but you are taking the time now to meditate and develop your mind to reach the state of enlightenment where you can most skillfully benefit all beings.

Begin by visualizing the three psychic channels within our body through which the wind energy moves. The channels are round and hollow, the size of a straw, and very fine, smooth, flexible, and luminous. The central channel is blue, the right channel is red, and the left channel is white. The left and right channels run from the left and right nostrils down along the spine to end four fingerwidths below the navel. The blue central runs from a point midway between the eyebrows, down along the spine also to the point four fingerwidths below the navel. For this meditation, visualize that the ends of the right and left channels join the central channel at this point four fingerwidths below the navel.

Holding the left nostril closed with an index finger, inhale slowly and fully through the right nostril, sending the breath all the way down to the end of the right channel. Imagine that the breath flows from the right into the left channel as you move your index finger to hold the right nostril closed. Now exhale slowly and fully through the left nostril. As the breath leaves the left nostril, imagine that all impurities (such as distraction and mental dullness) are expelled with the breath.

Repeat twice (three breaths in all), inhaling through the right nostril and exhaling through the left.

Now reverse the process. Holding the right nostril closed with your index finger, take a deep breath through the left nostril, sending the breath all the way down to the end of the left channel. As the breath moves into the right channel, move your index finger to hold the left nostril closed. Exhale slowly and fully through the right nostril, imagine that all impurities are expelled with the breath.

Repeat twice (three breaths in all), inhaling through the left nostril and exhaling through the right.

Now inhale slowly and deeply through both nostrils, sending the air down the side channels. The breath is then exhaled up the central channel. Breathe out, expelling all impurities through both nostrils. Repeat twice (three breaths in all).

Now imagine that the three channels are completely clean and luminous. Keep breathing gently and evenly, imagining your breath flowing freely through the channels.

Meditation on the Continuity of the Mind

Preparation: Start with a five-minute breathing meditation. Focus the attention on the breath (the sensation of the breath flowing in and out of the nostrils). Let all thoughts go, like clouds floating in the sky. If distractions arise, be aware of them without getting involved and without judgement, then gently bring the attention back to the breath.

Motivation: When the mind is calm and quiet and you feel relaxed and focussed, create an altruistic motivation for the meditation session. Think that you are meditating not just for your own individual intellectual and emotional benefit, but you are taking the time now to meditate and develop your mind to reach a state where you can benefit all beings.

Bring to mind your state of mind at some time during the day, such as before you sat down to meditate. Then follow the flow of your mind moments backwards through time, earlier and earlier in the day. For example, start with your state of mind at breakfast this morning and follow your consciousness backward from there. Irrespective of the contents of your mind (whether thoughts or perceptions, or memories or sensations) follow the trail of your conscious processes backward through time moment by moment to the immediately preceding moment and before that and before that.

Continue to follow your consciousness backward, observing the relationship between each conscious moment. Does each moment of consciousness exist independently of the moments before and after it? How is each mind moment related to the mind moment that came before it? To the one after it?

Follow your consciousness backward through time, from today, through yesterday, to the day before that. Then move further and further into the past, following your conscious flow backward into last month, last year into your childhood.

Observe closely how each moment of mind arises. Where does it come from? Is each moment of conscious activity linked to the previous moment or not? What seems to be the cause of each moment in that stream of moments?

Trace your consciousness through your childhood, into your infancy, right up to the moment of your birth (with practice in meditation, you may start to actually be able to remember these periods of your life. If you cannot, it is sufficient to extrapolate your current experience and to use your imagination about those early years).

Try to follow your mental processes back even further, through the process of being born, back into the womb. Then follow your experience even further back to the moment of your conception to before you were conceived.

Dedication: Now dedicate any benefit you have gained from doing this meditation towards attaining a perfect state of mind where you can benefit countless beings.

Meditation on Mind as Knower

Purpose: The purpose of doing this meditation is for the practitioner to develop an awareness and experience of the mind as a “knower” of experience. It is also helpful to begin to distinguish the mind from the body/brain and to develop a greater appreciation for the vast awareness, knowledge, and experience of which the mind is capable. It is a meditation on the relative nature of the mind as “clear and knowing”, with emphasis placed on “knowing”. The following meditation could take anywhere from 15-30 minutes, however, it is best to start with a short and well-focussed meditation, and build from there.

Begin with a short meditation on the breath, either counting to 21, doing 9-round breathing etc., to calm the mind. Set the motivation by generating the mind of entrustment in the objects of Refuge and cultivating the wish to attain the state of enlightenment in order to be of benefit to others. It is impossible to help others without understanding and then subduing their mind. It is impossible to understand and help others’ minds without understanding and subduing my own! Therefore, I am going to do this meditation on the “knowing” nature of mind, that by becoming a master of my own mind I can be of best benefit to myself and others.

Concentrate on the breath for a few minutes allowing the mind to become focussed. Now slowly move your attention from the breath, and simply become aware — become aware of sounds, smells, shapes, colours, tactile sensations, tastes, thoughts. Do this slowly, giving yourself a chance to really take it all in. You do not need to look around with the eyes or move the body, just use the power of mind and awareness and take in the scope of what the mind is *knowing* just as we sit here (pause for a few minutes).

Notice how the mind appears to reside within the body (pause). Now, notice how the scope of mind’s awareness and knowing extend far beyond the physical limits of the body. Generate an awareness of the mind as distinct from the body. Notice the differentiation between the physical world and the mind that is knowing it (pause for a few minutes).

Rest in this awareness of the mind as knowing as much as possible, without going into details about the phenomena coming into awareness, just staying with the mere experience of knowing phenomena (pause).

Some teachings compare the mind to a mirror. As you continue this meditation, see if you can note this reflective quality of mind, that which is simply knowing experience without generating it, just reflecting what is arising naturally (pause).

Try to keep the mind as expansive as possible, staying open to the fullness of what the mind can be aware of, can know, simultaneously. If you find yourself getting disoriented, you can always go back to concentration on the breath, however focus on the mind being aware of the breath, rather than the breath itself. Maintain awareness of the reflective, expansive, knowing quality of the mind (pause).

Now, slowly bring your attention back to the weight of the body sitting on the cushion, in this mediation place. Allow the mind to settle back into the breath. Be determined to practise this awareness of the mind as *knowing* phenomena as you go about your daily affairs.

Dedication: By virtue of having made this effort to become more acquainted with my mind, may I soon become a master of mind, having generated all positive qualities and removed all negativities and obscurations. may I swiftly awaken to the state of supreme enlightenment and lead all other beings to that supreme state.

Meditation on the Spacious Clarity of the Mind

Preparation: Start with a five-minute breathing meditation. Focus the attention on the breath (the sensation of the breath flowing in and out of the nostrils). Let all thoughts go, like clouds floating in the sky. If distractions arise, be aware of them without getting involved and without judgement, then gently bring the attention back to the breath.

Motivation: When the mind is calm and quiet and you feel relaxed and focussed, create an altruistic motivation for the meditation session. Think that you are meditating not just for your own individual intellectual and emotional benefit, but you are taking the time now to meditate and develop your mind to reach the state of enlightenment where you can most skilfully benefit all beings.

Once you have generated a strong altruistic motivation, bring your mind back to the breath, focussing primarily on the rolling rhythm of your breathing. Don't control your breathe in any way. Just breathe naturally. Allow your attention to float on the breath, similar to floating on the surface of the ocean, rolling with the swells of the waves. Your attention should be soft and fluid, rolling on the rhythm of your natural breathing process. Again, if distractions arise and lead your attention away, simply note what has happened with calm detachment and without judgement, then gently bring your attention back to your breath. Meditate in this way for a few minutes, until you feel you are fully focussed and present with your breathing.

Then, very gently, broaden your field of attention to the space of awareness itself in which you are perceiving your breath. Instead of focussing on the object of your awareness, (ie, your breath), focus instead on the awareness itself, what is perceiving.

Your mind is like a huge empty sky of spacious awareness, and like the objects that we sense and are conscious of are like clouds floating through that sky. If we identify with the clouds, then we lose all sense of the vastness of the sky, our clear, spacious, knowing mind.

Identify yourself with that spacious knowing clarity in which everything you perceive appears. Simply observe whatever comes into the clear space of your mind — sounds, thoughts, body sensations, emotions — whatever comes into your mind, just let it arise, observe it, and then let it pass away.

Simply observe. This is the clear, knowing nature of your mind. Identify with this. All other thoughts and emotions simply arise and pass away.

Whatever appears — let it arise — be aware — and let it pass away.

You are the sky. You are the spacious clarity of your mind. There is space — you have space to choose which thoughts to follow, and which thoughts to let go.

Dedication: Now dedicate any benefit you have gained from doing this meditation towards attaining a perfect state of mind where you can benefit countless beings.

Appendix 10: Refuge Teachings, Sunday 19 June 2005

Going for Refuge

Refuge is the door by which we enter the Buddhist teachings. It is important to know from the beginning what Refuge is. The process of taking Refuge is common to all spiritual traditions. However, the way in which you go for Refuge, and the objects of Refuge are different. In other traditions, the Refuge objects are external to ourselves, separate from us, and different from our own mental continuum, for example, a creator god. The Buddhist object of Refuge is not separate from our own mindstream. How is the way of going for Refuge different from other traditions?. They have causes of fear, faith, belief, but only this faith is not enough to serve as the protection. Where there is no understanding of the causes, there is no protection. We must understand the causes for protection. The causes are fear, and conviction or belief. The first, fear, is fear of suffering, of samsara, and fear of lower rebirth. The second, conviction, is the conviction that the objects of Refuge can protect us from suffering and lower rebirth. The quality of Refuge depends on how well we understand the causes.

We can have different types of Refuge in our minds dependent on causes. An example of such a cause is the fear of suffering. Then this is a lower scope Refuge, the belief that the triple gem can protect us. The cause of fear of all suffering is a middle scope Refuge. The cause of fear of suffering of samsara, and abiding in Nirvana for peace for oneself, then this is a large scope Refuge. If you change the cause, then you will change the result. In order to understand Refuge, you must understand the causes; you must also understand the objects. The Buddha is one who eliminated all faults, and achieved all good qualities. A reference is "Compendium of Valid Cognition". In this Dharmakirti says that the Buddha is a being who is enlightened, who understands all phenomena. The point of transforming, through practice enlightenment and omniscience came about. Transformation comes about through great compassion, emptiness through this, eliminating all faults and cultivating good qualities. Dharmakirti says, "to this being I prostrate".

This marks Buddhism out as distinct. The Buddha started out like us, but was transformed. In other traditions the object of Refuge is a god who was always a god, who has not passed through a transformation. This enlightened being teaches the Refuge. The actual Refuge is the Dharma, the truth of cessation, the truth of the path. When realizations of this are generated in the mind, these act as our Refuge. The Refuge is the generation of these realizations in our own mind. The dharma is the real Refuge. The Sangha are friends, helpers, but not the actual Refuge. The Arya beings have direct realizations of the path in their own mindstream. Knowing what these objects are is important; recognizing the way they provide the causal and the resultant Refuge. The causal Refuge is the three jewels in the mindstream of someone external to us, not the actual Refuge. For example, the causal Buddha is the Buddha himself. The actual Buddha Refuge, the Buddha we will become, is the resultant Refuge. When we say "I go for Refuge to the Buddha", we mean by generating the Buddha in our mindstream, we take Refuge in this. By going for Refuge in the dharma,

we mean we will achieve those realizations. By going for Refuge in the Sangha, I am saying I will become that Arya being myself.

When we generate the Buddha in our mindstream, then we will have achieved a state of protection from all suffering and achievement of Nirvana only for ourselves. By saying that we have this Buddha potential or Buddha nature in our mindstream, this mind has this clear light nature; delusions and obstructions are pollutants that can be removed. The reason that we can know that delusions and faults aren't inherent, is if they were, they would always be there, and we can see their arising and ceasing. Because they aren't truly existent within the mind, then it's possible to remove or purify them; there is a more fundamental nature of the mind.

Normally, we would discuss other sections of the Refuge teaching such as why the objects are worthy, and things in more detail, but there is no time today. I will give advice that comes with taking Refuge; great benefit comes from taking the advice.

First, this is what not to do, to abandon.

- 1 After having taken Refuge in the Buddha, take no Refuge in other gods. If we do, then the reason for Refuge to stop suffering, then we believe the other gods can do it as well. Our belief that the three jewels can protect us, then it starts to weaken this conviction.
- 2 Having taken Refuge in the dharma, then we should abandon harming all sentient beings. We should abandon the ten non-virtuous actions; abandoning in body, speech, and mind.
- 3 Having taken Refuge in the Sangha, we should abandon the company of negative friends, and give up non-Buddhist practices.

This is what to do, what to cultivate.

- 1 Treat all images of the Buddha as the actual Buddha. Treat them with respect, make offerings to them. This increases our own merit.
- 2 With respect to the Dharma, treat scriptures, even one word, like the actual Dharma. Lama Tsong Khapa said every word of teaching is a way to lead every sentient being to a realization of Dependent Arising, and lead them to enlightenment.
- 3 With respect to the Sangha, see all ordained people as Arya beings. This will increase our merit.

This is general advice that refers to all of the jewels.

- 1 Go for Refuge, then you should remember the good qualities of the jewels. Remember the difference between Buddhist and non-Buddhist objects of Refuge.
- 2 Remember the great kindness of the three jewels. Make offerings; whatever action we do, if we make offerings, we increase merit.

- 3 Remember the positive qualities of leading others to take Refuge; we stop others from performing negative actions.
- 4 In the morning and evening, recite the Refuge prayer three times, "I go for Refuge until I am enlightened ". This contains both the Refuge and bodhicitta prayer.
- 5 No matter what, do not give up Refuge.
- 6 Whatever we do, make it a positive action. When we do it, rely on the three jewels. In doing this, it removes obstacles and becomes a virtuous action.

There are eight benefits of having remembered the good qualities.

- 1 We become a Buddhist.
- 2 We become a suitable base for future commitments and vows.
- 3 Our Refuge becomes the cause to purify negativities.
- 4 You are able to increase merit.
- 5 Humans and non-humans have no power to harm you. Taking Refuge puts a stop to others generating harmful thoughts toward us. Follow the path of non-harm shortcircuits others.
- 6 Refuge prevent the causes for being born in the lower realms.
- 7 Refuge creates the causes for us to be born as humans or gods (abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions can be a cause for 6 or 7).
- 8 It is easy to achieve temporary and ultimate goals, a better rebirth as in 7, and the ultimate goal of enlightenment respectively.

Appendix 11: Medicine Buddha Practice Day,⁵⁵⁶ 28 May 2005

First Session

Mahayana Precepts and Prayers⁵⁵⁷

Practice: Medicine Buddha Sadhana⁵⁵⁸

Second Session

Prostrations to the thirty five Buddhas⁵⁵⁹

Medicine Buddha Sadhana

Third Session

Prostrations to the thirty five Buddhas

Medicine Buddha Sadhana

Fourth Session

Medicine Buddha Sadhana: concentrating more on the visualization

After Lunch

Medicine Buddha Puja: making offerings to the Medicine Buddha⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁶ This Medicine Buddha practice day was held at Vajrayana Institute, 22 Linthorpe St, Newtown, on 28 May 2005, between 5.30 am and 2.00 pm. The facilitator was Margaret Castles.

⁵⁵⁷ These were given by Geshe Samten at 5.30 am.

⁵⁵⁸ This practice followed the issue to each participant of *The Healing Buddha: A Practice for the Prevention and Healing of Disease*.

⁵⁵⁹ The prostrations to the 35 Buddhas and other prayers are in the FPMT Prayer Book Volume 1.

⁵⁶⁰ The Medicine Buddha Puja is in the FPMT Prayer Book Volume 2.

Appendix 12: Tantric Shock Experiences Before Involvement with Vajrayana Institute

Example 1

Date of interview 15 January 2004

NJ: I took Refuge just over two years ago. Prior to that, it was about six or ten months when I was really confused about things, 'cause I travelled to India where all this stuff happened and I got confused, because I'd never seen myself as a religious person, and that was really not how I saw myself at all.

GE: So, can I go into what happened?

NJ: Well before I went, actually I had a really bad period in my life, this was before my trip to India. And when I think back too, like when you asked that other question about religious history, even though I never connected to those things when I was a kid, I think in my early 20s I remember travelling overseas, and I remember feeling very lost inside myself, very empty, and being quite distressed about it. And that was the first wave, looking back, thinking I was looking for something else. Something was missing, a simple way to put it, and I didn't know what was going on. Then I travelled and bummed around and did all sorts of things for a long time, and then I had, it was probably about four or five years ago, I had a really bad patch in my life. Nothing traumatic happened, but a series of things, I was a bit of a mess. I went to this Buddhist monastery that I'd been to with a friend previously, a Thai Buddhist monastery south of Sydney. It's a beautiful, peaceful place and I went there for New Year and ended up going back and doing my own little retreat for ten days, and learning about the meditation. Just because it was such a great place, and I realized that having that mental space would be good for me after having that junk happen in my life. And when I was there meditating, really interesting things happened for me at that time. The first thing that happened, my mother was really ill, and that was something that had been very difficult for me, and it's always been hard to handle, and then I went there, I'd been looking after her for a fortnight before I went to Bundanoon, I'd been reading about Metta, and I was in the temple one day, this was after I'd been there for a week or something, and there was a monk there, and he was answering people's questions after lunch, and I was vacuuming the temple, and he motioned me over, so I went over and sat down, and he said, 'you have a question', and I didn't have a question that I was aware of, so I asked a question about Metta to be polite, and he didn't answer the question about Metta, he answered a question he could see that I had, but I wasn't aware of, and it was about loving people too much and not being able to find a space between, and he went, I can't even remember the words he used, but I felt like he saw what this thing was that I was struggling with, about Mum being so sick, it was like he could read it, and the problem I was having with it. It was like he spoke to my heart, it was really extraordinary, and I was, I was so overwhelmed that I had to leave, I sobbed for about an hour. The next day when I saw him I thanked him, and I lost it again. And then it was after that, I'm sure that it had something to

do, and it was when I was meditating afterwards. I was in the temple one day, and it was the most amazing experience of meditating, and all of this energy started to move through my body, and it was like a volcano, it was very powerful, and it started to come through the floor, and I was having orgasms in the temple over and over, and with all these Theravadin monks sitting up there. And everytime I sat down in the temple this would happen, and the sooner in the meditation, it would get stronger, and I'd never experienced that before.

GE: What sort of meditation were you doing before it happened?

NJ: Just mindfulness of the breath, which is what the monks down there teach you how to do. So I had no context for this experience, I knew it was OK, I could handle it, but it was really powerful, and I'd never experienced it before, and it blew me away, but I felt so amazing for those days down there, so content and peaceful, and it was just a really powerful experience. And then when I came back to Sydney, it continued for a few days, and then as I got back into my life here, it wasn't possible because my concentration wasn't the same. But I didn't connect to the teaching very much down there, although the meditation practice made a lot of sense on some level. And then I went on this trip to India, still iffy about these things that had happened, and I hadn't found my feet yet, so my Dad lent me some money to go to India for a holiday, and when I was on the plane, I met this Canadian woman, I said to her, 'I think I'm going to go and do some meditation before my trip because I'll relax', and she said oh you should go to this place in Bodghaya, and she gave the phone number for the Root Institute, which is one of the FPMT places. When I got to Delhi I rang them, and they had a course starting in about five days. I didn't know anything about FPMT or Mahayana Buddhism, and I went down there, it was a retreat where there was teaching and meditation, and it was fantastic, and this thing that had been happening in Bundanoon started to happen again, and because it started to happen again, I thought about it again and even though we weren't doing the same meditation, the abbot of His Holiness's monastery was there, and he was teaching on the Heart Sutra everynight. I went to that every night, I couldn't understand anything but I just felt like I had to be there, and also the teaching for the course, it just made sense in some ways. It just made sense to be there, and because this thing started to happen again, although not as powerfully as in Bundanoon, I'd mentioned it to one of the friends I'd met there, and she said 'Oh my goodness, you should talk to our teacher about it and he'll be able to tell you what to do. So I did go and talk to him, and he was really helpful, he helped me to realize that in the Tibetan system they have explanations for these things and it makes sense to them, like this stuff on an energetic level, that there are various practices where people use this energy in their practice. And this is all completely new to me. He told me that I was really fortunate, not many meditators have this experience, and that I should go and talk to a meditator about it, like a lama. So he referred me to this lama in Dharamsala... So I went up to Dharamsala, and it was just great. I met all these westerners who were Buddhist practitioners, But it felt like I was arriving, like a coming home somehow, it was really strange... And he'd referred me to this lama who wasn't there, but I'd also spoken to a nun at the Root Institute, and she'd said to me 'if you go up there and you get the chance, you can talk to Tenzin Palmo about these things', and I had met a bunch of people who were going to see Tenzin Palmo and they invited me along. And so

off I went, and I got to talk to her privately, and she was really helpful, and she explained it to me from another perspective, and how these things fit into the western Buddhist system and told me what I should do, and she gave me the name of a rinpoche in Australia who she thought would be able to teach me, and I had no idea at the time, and no context for this, and perhaps the people I was talking to thought I understood more of the bigger context of Tibetan Buddhism than I did, but really I didn't have a clue, and then I left Dharamsala and had a week in Rajasthan before I came home, because I had to go and digest what had happened, because it felt much bigger, and I couldn't accommodate it in my mind.

Example 2

Date of interview 15 March 2004

MM: They say that the attainments in Tantra more than anything, are based on keeping the vows on moral discipline, which is basically the ethics of body, speech, and mind. And I think it's good that the training for that is slow and progressive, otherwise you could blow yourself apart. I know that energy we have in the central channel, and what happened to me before, and you don't want to misuse it. It's not something you want to push, you want to have a respect for it. And these days I feel fairly grateful even though at the time, what happened to me was a traumatic experience.

GE: Can you go into that?

MM: I'll say exactly what happened. It was physical, and it was emotional, and it was spiritual as well. And it was a phenomenon that happened for about ten days, between about eleven o'clock at night and three in the morning when I was by myself and most vulnerable.

GE: When was this?

MM: It was when I was doing the Vipassana retreat in India in 1988. I did three ten-day retreats fairly close together, and I specifically remember that it happened after I decided, this is what I'm talking about, about pushing the string taut, doing things when you're not ready. I had decided that rather than sit cross-legged, I would be like the very advanced Japanese student that I was very impressed by, and would sit on my heels, and I think doing that in a cell, in the dark, eleven hours a day was just a bit silly. And what happened was, I started to get an energy that first came out of my third eye, and it was like a very strong vibration, like a sort of low speed dentist drill, and there was a buzzing sound, and it started to go all through my skull, and down my jaw, and then it seemed to vibrate through my bones, I felt it down my arms, and there was a strong buzzing sound, all my nerves were on fire, and I mean, when you think back on it, and think about kundalini experiences that other people describe, and I've read books about this, and thought 'wow I would like to be powerful like that'. I was kind of attracted to people talking about kundalini experiences, and I believe this is what it was, because it made them charismatic and powerful, and at the time I had very little self-esteem, and I felt worthless, and I

think that's something that some of us struggle with daily anyway, because we're human beings. But at the time it was very raw, and I thought if I can be a really good meditator than I'll be better than everybody else, and I'll attract people to me because I'll be so powerful. Well, that motivation got debunked real fast when this happened. After this happened and it was very frightening, there was a sort of a big snaking feeling that went like this from my pelvis, it was as if a sort of fiery snake-type thing went up my back starting at my pelvis. All the nerves around my pelvis seemed to be totally on fire at the back of the pelvis. Then I started to get all of this, it's interesting because it opened in the sixth chakra, between the brows first, very strongly. Then the fire seemed to go all down my arms, and every single chakra that I knew about, I forgot to tell you, this is important, I had actually had a Reiki initiation, and I had been practising Reiki in 1967, and the openings actually corresponded to Reiki points, which were the different chakras. Simultaneously I had an emptying of every single unpleasant emotion that you would not like to experience, they were so intense, anger, intense abandonment, intense suffering, mainly those three. And terror, terror, I guess that's the bottom chakra opening. Terror of what was happening to me, and the fact that I couldn't control it, and terror that it would become more and more intense. And at its height, this opening was a bit like if you imagine a garden hose turned on full pelt from the lowest chakra, but instead of water coming out of it at full speed, it was electricity. And this happened to me, I mean I'd sit in anticipation in my room at night, waiting for it to happen, and that was the fear of fear, and the fear of fear was worse than anything else that happened, and I remember thinking I feel like Lucifer cast out of heaven, and it really did feel like being cast out of heaven into hell. And I guess in the light of what we have been studying at VI, that kind of hell realm experience was fairly intense, and it went on for about ten days and then subsided. I think the second day that happened I went to the teacher, and the teacher I hate to say, was not helpful. He said, 'have you been practising kundalini meditation?' And I said, 'no, I haven't', and I realized about a year afterwards that I'd been doing Reiki and other things. He said, 'were you walking around when Vipassana was given?' And I was ... I was out in the garden. And he basically said that the way you deal with it is by observing the sensation at the palms of your hands, and the soles of your feet, which was a bit like turning on a tap to empty.

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