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.
Acknowledgments

My grateful thanks are due to the practitioners, teachers and administrators of the two Buddhist Centres that permitted me to conduct the research for this thesis. Not only did their kindness enable me to pursue an academic analysis of a subject of interest to me, but also did it gain me stimulating discourse and friendly encounters. In particular I must thank both Venerable Tenzin Chönyi in the Vajrayana Institute and Patrick Kearney, formerly a resident teacher at the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, for their support. No less gratitude is due to the practitioners who willingly gave of their time in interview.

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## Glossary

**Aggregates**  
*Skandha* (Skt). *Khandha* (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.

**Bodhicitta** (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.

**Bodhisattva** (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.

**Brahmaviharas** (Skt, Pali)  
The four sublime states of mind: compassion, lovingkindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

**Concentration**  
*Samatha* (Skt, Pali). The meditation technique used to achieve the state of one-pointedness of mind.

**Dana** (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.

**Dhamma** (Pali)  
*Dharma* (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 *satipatthana* in this work.

**Dukkha** (Pali)  
*Duhkha* (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**  
*Sunyata* (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 *Nirvana* (Skt); the way to *Nirvana* is the Noble Eight-fold Path.

**FPMT**  
The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, a world-wide *Gelugpa* Tibetan organization.

**Gelugpa** (Tib.)  "One of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, founded by Tsong-kha-pa 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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Impression Point</strong></th>
<th>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</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lam Rim</strong></td>
<td>A class of Tibetan literature which outlines the stages of the path to enlightenment. Tsong-kha-pa’s work <em>Lam-rim Chenmo</em> is the foundational text for the FPMT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Madhyamaka (Skt)</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mahayana</strong></td>
<td>One of the three vehicles of Buddhism, emphasizing the values of compassion and insight, and the ideal of the bodhisattva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Metta (Pali)</strong></td>
<td>A meditation based on generation of lovingkindness to all beings equally, in order to develop equanimity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mindfulness</strong></td>
<td><em>Sati</em> (Pali). An alert state of mind cultivated as the foundation for insight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nibbana (Pali)</strong></td>
<td><em>Nirvana</em> (Skt). The goal of the Eightfold Path, attainment of which marks the end of Samsaric existence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Noble Eightfold Path</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Samsara (Skt; Pali)</strong></td>
<td>The cycle of repeated birth and death that human beings undergo until they attain <em>Nirvana</em> (Skt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Satipatthana Sutta</strong></td>
<td>The foundational sutta for the Vipassana method of Mahasi Sayadaw, outlining the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Satipatthanas (Pali)</strong></td>
<td>The foundations of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and <em>dhammas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sutra (Skt)</strong></td>
<td><em>Sutta</em> (Pali). A discourse of the Buddha. In the Pali Canon, texts are grouped in the second of the three pitakas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tantra</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theravada</strong></td>
<td>One of the three vehicles of Buddhism. It is characterized by fidelity to the texts of the Pali Canon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Three Marks of Existence</strong></td>
<td><em>Dukkha, Anitya, Anatman</em> (Skt). <em>Dukkha, Anicca, Anatta</em> (Pali). Translated as suffering, impermanence, not-self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vajrayana (Skt)</strong></td>
<td>Tantric Buddhism: one of the three vehicles of Buddhism, although sometimes thought of as a branch of the Mahayana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VI</strong></td>
<td>The Vajrayana Institute in Sydney, NSW, Australia, a centre affiliated with the FPMT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vipassana (Pali)</strong></td>
<td><em>Vipasyana</em> (Skt). Insight Meditation: the form of meditation practised predominantly at BMIMC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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. 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. Notable publications exploring these are Paul Croucher’s Buddhism in Australia, 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. By comparison with these publications, Patricia Sherwood’s The Buddha is in the Street: Engaged Buddhism in Australia 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

2 Spuler, op.cit.
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. 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 Tibet, several American researchers observe that Western Buddhism draws upon the common foundations of all Buddhist schools: the Four Noble Truths, the Eight-Fold Path, and the meditative practices of mindfulness, concentration, and loving-kindness. According to Conze, Prebish and Coleman, it is characterized by a strong emphasis on doctrinal study and meditation practice. Coleman adds that the central focus of Western Buddhists is ‘direct religious experience and the personal transformation it produces’. 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 practices, and to report having undergone constructive personal changes after intensive meditation practice.

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8 Fronsdal, op.cit., p176.
10 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.
11 Sherwood, op.cit., p29. Sherwood refers to Australians in particular, but the American literature reflects this also.
12 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. 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 religion, 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. 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-derived, 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.


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.

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

traditional Theravadin doctrinal frameworks and motivations appears to reduce Vipassana in the West to a form of therapy\textsuperscript{18}, and similarly, Urban maintains that Tantra may be reduced to a hedonistic and pleasure-affirming spirituality in the West.\textsuperscript{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 culture\textsuperscript{20}, 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 cosmos\textsuperscript{21}, and the self-constructing activity observed in Neo-Paganism.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Fronsdal, \textit{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.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Lyon, D. \textit{Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times}, Polity Press, 2000, pp76-77.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Heelas, P. \textit{The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity}, Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} This was largely by use of Buddhanet, at \url{www.buddhanet.net}
\end{itemize}
Buddhism in the West: Vipassana from the Theravada tradition, and Zen and Tibetan Buddhism from the Mahayana.\textsuperscript{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 Rigpa\textsuperscript{25} (both Tibetan Buddhist, although Gelugpa and Nyingma respectively), and Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (which draws upon the entire Buddhist tradition),\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{27} and although its inclusion would have provided an interesting contrast to the other two, it was decided that the limitations

\textsuperscript{24} See Coleman, 1999, \textit{op.cit.}, p92.
\textsuperscript{25} Rigpa is an international network of meditation centres under the guidance of Sogyal Rinpoche. Its website for the Sydney centre is found at \url{www.rigpa.com.au/sydney.htm}
\textsuperscript{26} The Sydney Buddhist Centre at 24 Enmore Rd, Newtown, is the Sydney centre for the FWBO, the website for which is at \url{www.sydneybuddhistcentre.org.au}
\textsuperscript{27} Its website at \url{www.sydneybuddhistcentre.org.au}, states that the FWBO draws upon the entire Buddhist tradition.
Chapter 1

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. 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. 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


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


\(^{37}\) 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.


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’.

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. Travisano’s definition of conversion as a ‘radical
reorganization of identity, meaning, and life’, and Heirich’s as ‘the process of
changing a sense of root reality’, were frequently employed in scholarly research
during the 1970s and ‘80s. Categorizations of conversion types based on the
distinction between complete or partial internal movement, typically take Nock’s
conversion/adhesion distinction, or symbolic interactionist Richard Travisano’s
conversion/alternation distinction as their foundation. Much research has been
based on the traditional implication of radical personal change at the heart of
conversions. 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. Second is the

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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
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 Travisano, R. “Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations”, in *Social
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
48 Travisano, 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.
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
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’, Richardson posits an alternative active paradigm which questions the traditional assumption of a passive subject and a deterministic model.

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. 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. 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 data—but also in models of conversion based on coercion, deprivation and neediness, and on the assumption of psychological pathology or unstable identity. This includes literature devoted to the study of the recruitment mechanisms utilized by religious groups to ensure commitment, such as the forming of cult-affective bonds and the severment of beyond-group ties.

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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.


59 The 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. A notable example is Lofland and Skonovd’s conception of six conversion motifs, 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’.

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.


Lofland and Stark, 1965, op.cit.

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 Interindivudual (experimental/social drift — emphasis on situational context); Passive Interindivudual (revivalist/socialization/deprivation/coercive).

Lofland and Skonovd, op.cit. Their six conversion motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalseist, 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.

Lofland and Skonovd, op.cit.
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.

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’. Interview data from adherents of both Buddhism 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.

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

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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.

unity to the perceiver’. 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.’ 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’. 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 rhetoric, 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 transformation, and not the result of one.

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70 ibid.
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 itself\(^73\), 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 \textit{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 \textit{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, propagating, 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

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\(^{73}\) Lofland and Skonovd, \textit{op.cit.}, p383.
\(^{76}\) Smart, \textit{op.cit.}, p1.
\(^{78}\) Smart, \textit{op.cit.}, pp1-2.
Theory and Reference Group Theory,\textsuperscript{81} is the notion of socialization.\textsuperscript{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’.\textsuperscript{83} Berger explains the social world in the ideal situation of a closed system or culture in terms of a three-step dialectic, namely \textit{externalization}, \textit{objectivation} and \textit{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.\textsuperscript{84} Berger and Luckmann refer to processes of resocialization as they occur in a religious setting as \textit{alternations}, instances of near-total transformation\textsuperscript{85}, which Berger defines as ‘the possibility to choose between varying and sometimes contradictory systems of meaning’.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{preceding} structure of subjective reality. According to the authors’ perspective, the most complete case of alternation


\textsuperscript{82} See Preston, D. \textit{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.


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

\textsuperscript{85} Berger and Luckmann, \textit{op.cit.}, p144.


\textsuperscript{87} Berger and Luckmann, \textit{op.cit.}, p144.
as resocialization into a new meaning-system would involve a near-total transformation of subjective consciousness, which they see as impossible. 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.

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 view—but more recently can be seen to be embodied in the religious counterculture—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.


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.

this culture is the religious seeker who effects exploration and change, thereby negotiating his or her own religious identity. 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.

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’. 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’. 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 beliefs, 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. 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.
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 style, 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. 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. Conversely, supporting his argument for a ‘socialization as interaction’

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’. 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. 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. 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’.


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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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. Wilson\textsuperscript{106}, Preston\textsuperscript{107} and Volinn\textsuperscript{108} 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.\textsuperscript{109} In his later work he draws attention to the nature of desocialization processes in Zen Buddhism.


\textsuperscript{106} Wilson, 1984, \textit{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.


\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{109} Preston, 1981, \textit{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, \textit{op.cit.}
facilitated by these body-based techniques as 'unlearning' rather than relearning.\textsuperscript{110} McIntyre explored the learning process for Vipassana practitioners as their assuming the role of the meditator\textsuperscript{111}. 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.\textsuperscript{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

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{110} Preston, 1988, \textit{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.
\item \textsuperscript{111} McIntyre, J. “On Becoming a Meditator: Adult Learning and Social Context”, in \textit{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.
\item \textsuperscript{112} Dawson, 1990, \textit{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.
\end{itemize}
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’.\textsuperscript{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 knowledge\textsuperscript{114},
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

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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: duhkha/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. 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. 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

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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 retreats\(^\text{117}\), 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. 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., 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

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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 entire 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. 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

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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\textsuperscript{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, \textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{121} Stromberg, 1985, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{122} McCutcheon, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{123} See Chapter 2 Section 4.3: The Distinction Between Concentration and Insight Practice for a description of another such impression point.
\textsuperscript{124} See Chapter 2 Section 4.5: Identifying the Hindrances, for a discussion of the nine-day retreat held in April 2004.
\textsuperscript{125} Eddy, G. \textit{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 loving-kindness 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,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 they 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,\textsuperscript{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


\textsuperscript{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. 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.

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.