Chapter 3: Self-Transformation Through Vipassana Practice

1 Introduction

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

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

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

2 Personal Practice

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

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

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

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

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

SI: I wake up in the morning and I do the Paramis. Normally I sit two hours a day minimum, and I’ve been doing that for seven years. I devote a minimum of three hours a day to formal practice.
BM: Anapannasati, or mindfulness of breathing. I study a bit for reflection, then take it into meditation. I try to sit a couple of hours each day. I use mindfulness as an ongoing activity, where meditation strengthens the continuity of mindfulness.

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

2.1 Vipassana Practice and Experience

As is evident from the above descriptions, practitioners typically supplement their Vipassana with practice that aims to cultivate wholesome mental and emotional states. Throughout the following discussion it will be evident that the changes that individuals report are attributable to success with these practices. These are predominantly insight-related in that they involve observing and directing internal phenomena that are easily categorized according to the four satipatthanas. Only one practitioner described the kind of experience associated with concentrative or flow experience\(^\text{238}\) in a way that suggested that he valued them. He recounted ‘seeing beings from other realms with the mind’s eye’, and ‘having a sense of energetic connection with everything’. Although another reported having unusual bodily sensations and visions, experiences such as these, when they occur, are interpreted as meaningless, and simply dismissed by returning to the primary object.

According to Buddhist doctrine, the practices of concentration and insight result in different types of mental functioning and transformation. As a new meditator, one learns the difference between the two in terms of their experiential effects, and in terms of their role in insight practice specifically\(^\text{239}\). Students are taught to deal with the role of concentration in the development of mindfulness, how concentration supports insight practice, and how value is attributed to the two practices through understanding the relationship between them. It was explained that although some practitioners report the occasional experience of bliss states, they essentially see these as a byproduct of the development of concentration that occurs through Vipassana.

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

\(^\text{239}\) See Henepola Gunaratana, Mindfulness in Plain English, Wisdom Publications, 1992, pp161-69. He likens the difference between concentration and mindfulness to the difference between a battery and a fine tuner. See Chapter 2, Section 4.3 for a description of my own experience, which highlights the ease with which it is possible to slip into concentration when mindfulness itself is not strong.
practice. Here, its function is in stabilizing the mind for access to deeper mindfulness and insight.

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

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

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

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240 Layman, E. *Buddhism in America*, Nelson-Hall, 1976, p287. She maintains that some Westerners who have tried Transcendental Meditation come to Buddhism because they want a deeper, more demanding practice. This accords with my observations.
BMIMC. MV described his practice as ‘mostly Anapanasati in a Zen sense’. He relates:

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

GE: So, it is a mindfulness practice.

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

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

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

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

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

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\(^{244}\) Nyanaponika Thera, op.cit., 1998, p6.

\(^{245}\) ibid., pp4-5. The Pali term jhana, the equivalent of the Sanskrit dhyana, is often translated as meditative absorption. Attainment of the jhanas is the goal of concentration practice.

\(^{246}\) ibid., p3.

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

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

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

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

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

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251 Keown, op.cit., p212.
I might pick someone. How could I have been more generous with them?… Or I might pick someone I was too generous with. I go through the people in those 24 hours, always with my family, and then with anyone else who has come into my life, and I find that the same people come up all the time.

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

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

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

2.3 Everyday Practices

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As noted above, everyday practices are seen fundamentally as opportunities to work with mindfulness, and its relationship to formal sitting is in the application of mindfulness continued from one context to the other. Shaw maintains that the factors of the first jhana can be present in daily activities, where the mind and body
are engaged, and one gains pleasure in the activity. The fact that no descriptions of everyday practice referred to concentration or jhanic experience supports the view that, fundamentally, practitioners treat their everyday practice as an extension of their formal mindfulness training. This is supported by Goleman’s view that concentration and insight are both facilitated by access concentration, and for successful insight practice, one does best not to proceed to the first jhana. Practitioners also treat it as a reinforcement of the sentiments embodied in Metta practice. This point becomes more salient when it is considered that the capacity to practice in an everyday setting becomes important for those whose lifestyle limits the amount of time available for regular meditation, and that practitioners feel the need for formal practice and daily life to be more integrated.

3 Categories of Transformation and Interpretive Frameworks

3.1 The Satipatthanas as Categories of Change

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

257 See Appendix 7 for HD’s description of these phenomena in relation to her Vipassana practice extending over a considerable period of time.
labelling is more specific. For instance, in labelling a feeling, it is not simply labelled as ‘feeling’ or ‘anger’, but as feeling anger with ‘so-and-so’ over ‘such-and-such’, while checking the body for tension and reaction.

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

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

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258 The role of Buddhist doctrine and practice in the decision to commit made by these Vipassana practitioners, is the subject of Chapter 6, Section 1.2: The Journey from Engagement to Commitment.
259 Nyanannika Thera, op.cit., 1956, p48. He also discusses this in relation to the 12-step dependent origination formula.
262 This workshop took place in early 2005 at the Buddhist Library in Camperdown, Sydney.
important one. The strictly Buddhist purpose of the contemplation of vedana is to bring awareness to the hedonistic quality of their immediate reaction to phenomena.

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

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

KBN’s use of the word feeling to denote his emotions is significant because of his implied equation of the two. His use of phrases such as ‘opening up to feeling’, and ‘embodied in your body’, illustrates the therapeutic function that mindfulness of the body and feelings have for him. Throughout my contact with Vipassana practitioners, I observed that individuals held one of two views of their emotional experience. Some noted their states of feeling or emotion and then let the experience
go, with a view to developing equanimity. Others, such as KN and KBN, almost instinctively used the connection with emotion they experienced in meditation to reify it for the purpose of accepting and processing it, and where it is afflictive, to move beyond it. Rubin observes that Buddhist meditation is on occasion therapeutically ineffective, and attributes this to the Buddhist view of afflictive emotions, as defilements needing purification, a view which establishes an aversive relationship to experience, and an ambivalent relationship to emotional life generally.263 The experiences of KN and KBN appear to demonstrate the converse; both accepted the emotional content of their experience, both pleasant and painful, and learned to relate to it in a new way. This both enhanced their self-esteem, and validated their faith in the practice.

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

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

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

266 Bikkhu Bodhi, op.cit., 2001, p1193 (See footnote 154).
is evident from what she says, the mindfulness practice has helped her to develop patience and tolerance in and out of meditation.

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

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

\(^{267}\) Satipatthana Sutta, in Bikkhu Bodhi, op.cit., 2001, pp151-54. See also Analayo, op.cit., p19: Fig. 1.2.


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

\(^{270}\) The role of training in working with the hindrances in the development of mindfulness is outlined in Chapter 2, Section 4.5: Identifying the Hindrances.

\(^{271}\) Nyanaponika Thera, op.cit., 1956, pp51-3. Nyanaponika Thera notes that the five principal hindrances and the seven Enlightenment Factors are the qualities to be abandoned and the qualities to be acquired respectively, and elaborates on this, giving a more detailed account of the philosophy underpinning it.
The more experienced practitioners often referred to insights into aspects of doctrine that come with experience in the practice. From the perspective of the researcher, these insights require prior acquisition of interpretive skills to understand. While talking to RN about her practice, experience and its interpretation, I said, “Well, say experiences with Vipassana. What I’m looking for are links between your experience in Vipassana and how you interpret it, and how it gets carried into your daily life”. She responded:

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

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

### 3.2 The Three-fold Categorization of Transformations

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

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

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

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

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

### 3.3 Interpretive Frameworks for Change and Progress

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

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273 *Satipatthana Sutta*, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, 2001, pp151-54. See also Analayo, *op.cit.*, p19: Fig. 1.2.
275 Analayo, *op.cit.*, pp19-21. See Fig. 1.2 on p19.
mind is divided into ordinary and higher states of mind. The purpose of this exercise was to identify the nature of objects utilized in transformation practice, as distinct from the frameworks that facilitate their reinterpretation. In the following, the aim is to explore the process by which change is articulated through Buddhist frameworks of meaning.

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

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

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

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

Those in the second category, such as Mahasi’s Stages of Insight Knowledge279 and the three factors of the Noble Eight-Fold Path, are used to orient practitioners’ engagement with Buddhist practice more generally. These tend to bring about, or operate as interpretive templates for, change in worldview, the third category of change identified in Section 2.2. These perceptual changes may come about through contemplation of one’s experience in two interrelated ways. The first is as a result of learning to interpret experience through Buddhist categories of thought and their interpretive frameworks, and in this sense, the framework is both the mechanism and the end-result. The second is as a result of applying the meditative techniques and noticing the changes to oneself and one’s thinking, and finding incentive to take Buddhism more seriously and explore its belief system in more depth. The following accounts by three practitioners, presented in order of years of experience in the practice, describe a variety of changes that may occur to one’s reality perspective. Some of these concern the way in which an individual may undergo a change in some aspect of their outlook without involving a major reorientation, while others involve a more definite perceptual shift toward Buddhist ways of thinking. In the first example, EC’s personal reflections on a teaching she had attended helped her to deal with some anxiety about death. She was able to benefit from a shift in mental orientation to the reality of the inevitability of death and her fear of it, although still entertaining doubts about the doctrine of reincarnation:

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

278 Bikkhu Bodhi, op.cit., 2001, p.29. In the introduction to the Majjhima Nikaya, Bikkhu Bodhi refers to the Buddha’s identification of the cause of suffering as craving in its three aspects: for sensual pleasures, for being, and for non-being.
279 See Section 2.4: Mahasi’s Thirteen Stages of Insight Knowledge, below.
on, I still don’t know what I believe in, but the funny thing is, I think that’s what’s happened to me is that a fear of dying has sort of gone … that somehow that’s shifted. You know, maybe if I was in that situation where I thought I was going to die it might be different, but just before all this talk about reincarnation and spirituality going on, I guess there were times when … but now I don’t think like that. There’s a shift there somehow, and I don’t know where that’s going. But that’s why I can’t say I’m a Buddhist because I can’t say, “Well, yes. I do believe in reincarnation”.

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

EC: Yes.

This kind of shift in orientation of a view of reality is also exemplified by the experience of HR. She related that she ‘was for a long time a committed materialist’. She found that she currently had ‘more of an open mind to seeing other ways rather than a material view of the world’. For example, she was now open to reports of mystical experience. In the experience of HR’s related above, she explains that she reached a point where she realized that behind them all of the five hindrances was either desire or aversion. This she related to the second Noble Truth, which identifies the origin of suffering as \textit{tanha}/craving\textsuperscript{280}. Adding that she saw this when large changes were imminent, she noticed her different responses to the sorts of issues that arose. She was more aware of her responses, rather than ‘just rushing around doing what has to be done’. In her own words, she was ‘not focussed so much in the activity’, but was more aware of her own internal state.

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

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

\textsuperscript{280} Bikkhu Bodhi, \textit{op.cit.}, 2001, p.29.
HD: It’s so ingrained in my life that I hardly know how to answer it. When you view the seven o’clock news on television, you’re seeing it from the view of greed, hate, and delusion. A lot of worldly stuff you do automatically view it as greed, hate, and delusion, and you do get less het up about it. It’s a source of—because we’re not enlightened beings—it’s a source of sorrow, perhaps, and that’s how you see it and so a lot of the questions people ask and the things that people discuss just seem totally irrelevant to me. You see how deluded people are, and when you say deluded, it sounds very critical or disrespectful or whatever, but it’s the Buddhist idea of delusion, that not understanding attachment and aversion, and that everything’s impermanent.

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

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

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

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

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

GE: Anicca or impermanence?

HD: Yeah, well that’s the karmic aspect to it, karma. You know if you see something distressing on the news, some mass suffering or whatever, immediately the mind reflects how. Those people, say, perpetrating the suffering, they’ll be born as the people who are suffering, and so it goes on, you can see this cycle.
GE: So if I can rephrase it, and I’m paraphrasing you so feel free to interject, it seems to me that your view of the world is very roughly framed by the notions of Samsara and Nirvana, that there is the suffering world and there is release. Is that a fair comment?

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4 Mahasi’s Thirteen Stages of Insight Knowledge

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

These stages are outlined in the second part of Mahasi Sayadaw’s *Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages*, and in a talk given by U Janaka, a teacher in the tradition, at BMIMC in 1998. The Thirteen Stages, consisting of nine mundane and four supramundane stages, are knowledge about: 1) discerning mental and physical phenomena, 2) causal relations or conditionality, 3) comprehension that comprehends all three characteristics of phenomena, 4) corruption of insight (attachment to pleasant experiences, sometimes mistaken for Nibbana), 5) dissolution, 6) fearfulness, 7) misery, 8) desire for deliverance, 9) re-observation (reviewing the three marks experienced at the third stage, comprehension), 10) equanimity, 11) adaptation, 12) maturity, 13) the Path. While both Mahasi Sayadaw and U Janaka describe the earlier stages in some detail, the amount of detail falls away in Mahasi Sayadaw’s writing at 5) dissolution, and more sharply at 4) corruption of insight, in U Janaka’s. U Janaka describes the first two stages in considerable detail, and the next two in slightly less, possibly because, in U Janaka’s experience, this may represent the point at which most meditators’ development ends.

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

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290 This talk is the last in a series of thirteen Dhamma talks by Venerable Chanmay Sayadaw Ashin Janakabhivamsa (U Janaka), which are can be downloaded from the Centre’s website at www.meditation.asn.au/talks/html They were downloaded on 28/11/2006.
passing away of phenomena, and overall, two of its three characteristics. The general approach of practitioners such as these is that when their experience can be placed into one of these stages, they simply take it as a sign that ‘practice is progressing’. KBN, an experienced practitioner, commented on the stages as a restrictive framework for charting progress, contrasting their guidance with the Zen view of enlightenment. The observations below were made following on from a point about Zen and the nonrational mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 The Sense-of-Self

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

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291 Griffiths, op.cit., p611.
through meditation, but such wisdom can be initiated by reflection on teachings\textsuperscript{293}, and it is reinforcement of principles through study and meditation with time that often leads to these changes. EC’s account is representative of many who report constructive changes that have occurred to them, to the me, in the first person. It shows her identification of constructive changes to the way she sees herself as an objectified being, and it also shows how these changes occurred as a result of study and practice, the cumulative result of four years’ activity. This can be seen despite the slight contradiction between the first and second quotes with respect to what she perceives to be the agent of change.

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{293} Harvey, P. \textit{An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices}, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p244.
series of changes to members of the *i and I Art of Living Foundation* as a result of their meditative experiences: their worldview was charged with less negative emotion than previously. They experienced changes in lived reality, and the view of the self became more positive. In sum, the changes indicated a positive relationship with self and reality.294 The account is also representative of those by the practitioners at both BMIMC and Vajrayana Institute. However, as discussion below shows, these changes are the end-product of more complex changes involving both the self in its subjective immediacy and the sense-of-self as a socially objectified being. The appropriate explanatory models of the self in its subjective immediacy and in its socially constituted objectivity are outlined below.

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

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

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

295 De Wit, *op.cit.*, p196.
296 *Ibid.*. De Wit’s description of absolute and relative reality is akin to the absolute view, *sunyata/emptiness*, and the relative view, dependent origination, spoken about in Gelugpa Tibetan discourse at Vajrayana Institute, a subject for Chapters 4 and 5.
the relative self. From the Buddhist perspective, the transformative process is aimed at realizing the lack of inherent existence in this I imputed onto the relative self, which Buddhist scholars often describe in terms of the five aggregates.

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

4.2 A Contemporary Western View of the Self

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

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301 ibid., p116.


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

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

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

4.3 The Sense-of-Self and Its Transformations

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

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

305 ibid., p110.
EBS: I think the sense of I is really important, the way you describe that, because I think ... we’ve just been on holidays, and I was reading this thing to my wife on the plane last night, because I was just reading Freud: *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and in the translator’s introduction he says, ‘There are a few words that don’t translate properly from German into English’, and he says ‘whatever the word is for self, actually the translation is not self, but sense-of-self’. This is really big news, because when you think about Jung, the way the English-speaking people ... you know, Jung’s notion of the self, but actually that word is the sense-of-self, that’s quite different, and that’s not a noun anymore. It’s almost like a verb. It’s kind of a dynamic, the sense-of-self, and I reckon that’s the same with Buddhism. What people fight with is this notion of ‘is there a me or not-me?’ But people don’t get it. They go ‘There’s an I there’, but if you kind of go, ‘There is nothing you can call an I, but the sense you have of that is really strong, and that’s fine, that sense of it. It’s OK to have that sense-of-self.

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

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

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

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

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

RN: In Vipassana, that mindfulness, that’s just another object in itself too, so it’s not even being attached to that, being attached to your mindfulness, or not even being attached to your mind. That’s when it gets quite challenging for me,
because the desire is to hold onto that sense-of-self, and that sense-of-self is often associated with the mind, because there’s no where else it could be. If that’s not the self and all these bits of the body, then it must be the mind even though it can be on quite subtle levels. You think you’re just observing, and then there’s the other part of you that’s observing the observing, and thinks it’s the self.

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

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

KN was a recovering alcoholic, ‘in rehab.’ when she was first exposed to Vipassana practice. She found that Buddhism refines the skill of watching the mind, a skill she had already learned in rehabilitation. Because of the effect of childhood experiences, she had been diagnosed as disassociative with a poor sense-of-self from a psychotherapeutic perspective. In her understanding, dissociation occurs when ‘something becomes so painful that you switch out’, and ‘there is no watcher and no nothing’. She said that mindfulness practice helped her to deal with both dissociation and her alcohol addiction. In the latter case it was by teaching her to label, observe, and to let go of the addictive desire, and by giving her a sense of not having to identify with the desire through the understanding that ‘thought, emotion, desire, is not the self’. Indicative of the way she had seen herself was, ‘I am a recovering alcoholic’. She said that the practice helped her to move beyond this self-image. Elsewhere in the interview KN described how, while focussing on her breath at the abdomen, she became aware of feelings that were previously ‘frozen’, and was
able to release them. Taken together, these changes suggest that the negative self-image as an addict was deconstructed and replaced with a positive one, that of someone who was able to identify with her feelings and work with her own inner capabilities and skills, made all the more potent because of her newfound capacity to accept and manage their intensity and emotional charge.

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

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

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306 See Chapter 2, Section 3.2.1: Orientation and Introduction, for a description of the five lay precepts and the purpose of their keeping for the practice.
reasonable person formed the basis for the deeper subjective adjustments to his coping mechanisms that took place.

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

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

GE: So you were able to catch your responses?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5 Conclusions

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

In terms of describing the transformation that results from the interaction of the relative self and the imputed self, the ego—the self to be denied, in Buddhist thought, between the field of immediate subjective experience in constant flux and the sense-of-self as a solid sense of I—they appear to depend on ultimately redefining the latter in terms of the former. This occurs as a result of meditative insight into the nature of one’s experience, which functions to deconstruct the sense-of-self as a solid and permanent core. This process may be concurrent with others that strengthen the self-image, including its sense-of-self-worth and self-esteem. All of this suggests the ways in which transformation may occur, and how it ultimately affects the total sense-of-self. In order to explain the manner of change to identity in
terms of the roles that Buddhist doctrine and practice play in effecting these changes, a theory must account for the mechanisms of change underlying the two types of change perceived in sum. It was seen how the changes experienced by practitioners could be categorized into three types: changes in immediate subjectivity, changes to one’s self-concept, and changes to one’s internal frame of reference, or worldview. Because of the importance of the first type of change for one’s overall sense of well-being and connection with the practice, any theory of religious change needs to be capable of accounting for this aspect of this sense-of-self.