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

1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

3 Religious Foundations and Scriptural Authority

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

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307 During the period of my fieldwork, the Centre was relocated from 22 Linthorpe St, Newtown, to 9 Victoria Square, Ashfield.
308 From the FPMT’s website, www.fpmt.org, visited on 28/12/2006.
309 See VI’s website, www.vajrayana.com.au. The site was visited on 25/1/06, after its then last update on 11/12/05.
310 The detail of Geshe Samten’s education, and information about other teachers, for instance, Ven. Tenzin Chönyi and Renate Ogilvie, and former teachers Logoan Rinpoche and Ven. Jampa Dekyi, are available from VI’s website.
311 From the FPMT’s website, www.fpmt.org, visited on 28/12/2006.
philosophical view of the Middle Way School of Nagarjuna, practises the Bodhisattva path, and includes the *sutra* and *tantra* systems in its teaching and practice. In the FPMT, scriptural authority also rests with the teachers and writings of the Gelugpa school, and especially those of its founder’s two seminal treatises, *The Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* and *The Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*. The teachings and practices at VI are manifestly based on the former treatise.

### 3.1 Doctrinal Foundations

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

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

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

313 *ibid*, p416.

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

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

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

### 3.2 Other Texts and Study Material

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

320 Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (*Lam Rim Chen Mo*), Snow Lion Publications, volume three, 2002. See also Valham, op.cit., who states that practitioners of the third scope make their practice of calm-abiding and analytical meditation on emptiness a cause for enlightenment.
teachings. Teachings by Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa are accessible online at the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, which can be reached via an active link to http://lamayeshe.com from the FPMT website.

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

4 Religious Activity at VI: Teaching and Ritual

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


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

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

4.1 Sutra Recitation, Guru Puja and Tsog

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

325 Tantric initiations are discussed in Chapter 5 Section 3: Tantric Activity at Vajrayana Institute, which deals with the personal practice and self-transformation undergone by these practitioners. They are not open to people who have not taken refuge, and therefore, cannot be considered to be a part of the process of experimental participation.
Lama Zopa Rinpoche has recently suggested that all FPMT Centres recite the Sanghata Sutra 20 times. The recitation of this *sutra* yields enormous benefits for all those who hear or recite it. It is a direct record of a teaching that was given by Buddha Shakyamuni on Vulture’s Peak in Rajagriha, and is one of a special set of *sutras* called *dharma-paryayas*, or transformative teachings, transforming those who hear or recite them. Wherever the Sanghata Sutra is established, the Buddhas are always present. As such, the recitation can bestow a powerful blessing on the place where it is recited.

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

4.2 Ritual Elements Accompanying Teachings

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

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

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

327 An email dated 4/1/2005 stated, “Everyone is invited to join us in praying for all the sentient beings who have died and are suffering so much as a result of the tsunami disaster. Offerings of food and flowers are welcome.”
forehead, throat and heart, and extends the hands forward on the ground to support the body. Then one stretches the entire body on the floor, face down, then touches the crown with the hands in the prayer position, and straightens the arms on the floor, but above the head, and finally arcing them out and down to the waist, tracing large circles on the floor before getting to one’s feet. It is stressed to try not to drop to the knees first, but to drop to the hands.328

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

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

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328 Prostrations were taught during Discovering Buddhism Module 12, and in Practice and Ritual Teachings, June 2005. They are also outlined in McDonald, K. How to Meditate: A Practical Guide, Wisdom Publications, 1984, pp150-51.
329 This list was discussed in Practice and Ritual Teachings, 20 June, 2005. See Appendix 1 for the text of these prayers. They are also in Essential Buddhist Prayers: Kopan Prayer Book, 2001, between pages 4 and 23, and in McDonald, K. How to Meditate: A Practical Guide, Wisdom Publications, Massachusetts, 1984, pp144-147. Pages 148-155 explains why these introductory prayers are done.
331 McDonald, op.cit., p150.
seven limbs are prostration, offering, confession, rejoicing (in the virtues of all beings), requesting the Buddhas not to pass away, requesting the Buddhas to turn the wheel of dharma, and dedication at the end, to ‘put positive imprints in the right direction’. 

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

Following this is the recitation of the Outer Mandala, and Mandala Offering or Inner Mandala. Taken together they function as a way of accumulating merit through the act of sincere offering. The outer mandala is recited while making the hand mandala, which was demonstrated in several teachings that I attended. The symbolic significance of erecting the middle and ring fingers from the base made of the upturned palms and interlaced thumbs, index, and small fingers, is that they represent Mount Meru. Then the offering is visualized as having dissolved and gone to the Triple Gem to the accompaniment of Idam guru ratnam mandalakam niratayami, translated as ‘I send forth this jewelled mandala to you, precious wisdom guru’. According to Lama Tsong-kha-pa, two essential points of the practice are to visualize many mandalas clearly. 

Lama Zopa and McDonald point out that the outer mandala, performed with the intention of mentally transforming the entire universe into a pure realm and offering it to the objects of refuge, accumulates a huge amount of merit, while McDonald adds that the immediate benefit of offering from the heart is alleviation of attachment and miserliness.

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

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


337 McDonald, op.cit., p155.
between them. While through the outer mandala the universe is offered as a pure realm, the substance of the inner mandala brings one’s attention back to the personal sphere of specific mental states to be transformed. This suggests that in the symbolic association of the pure realm with one’s mental states, the latter are transformed.

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

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

338 See ibid., p154, for McDonald’s description of the outer mandala’s composition in terms of Abhidharma cosmology, in which Mount Meru is a jewelled mountain in the centre of the universe, and the four continents are realms of human life. See Appendix 1 for the text of these prayers.
339 ibid., p155.
4.3 Meditation Practice At Vajrayana Institute

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

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

\textsuperscript{340} These practices are outlined in Valham, \textit{op.cit.}, pp53-81.
\textsuperscript{341} McDonald, \textit{op.cit.}, p8.
\textsuperscript{342} \textit{ibid.}, p19.
\textsuperscript{343} See McDonald, \textit{op.cit.}, p111.
\textsuperscript{344} This course took place on three consecutive Wednesday nights: 12, 19, 26 May 2004.
\textsuperscript{345} See McDonald, \textit{op.cit.}, pp19-20.
emptiness. In teachings and meditation sessions, calm-abiding meditation is taught and practised in two forms: as breath concentration and deity visualization. As the former it takes the form of focussing the attention at the opening of one of the nostrils, and just being aware of the sensation of the breath at this point. It is performed this way for several minutes at the beginning of some teachings to allow the mind to settle.

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

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

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

\(^{348}\) McDonald, op.cit., p56.

\(^{349}\) See Appendix 4: Meditations Taught in Mind and Its Potential, the first module of Discovering Buddhism. The last three of these meditations are analytical meditations.

\(^{350}\) This was during the second class of six.
the sound, as if they needed to impose the label or concept onto the sound in order to make sense of it. Because of this, we were directed to focus on our breathing, and then transfer this awareness to the ears and focus on the sounds in the same way as before. Some people found this slightly easier. The point of the exercise was to draw our attention to how we perceive and conceive objects, and how much we depend on labels for ordering our perception of phenomena. The teacher outlined the stages of this process as intention, attention, contact, feeling, and discrimination. This meditation had similarities to the Vipassana practice of bare attention, despite the fact that the mind was given an object to focus on, in that the process of deconstruction of experience functioned as a result of the mind’s attention to its own constructing activities. This meditation can be seen to belong also to the third category, meditations on emptiness.

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

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

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355 See Appendix 2.

356 This subject is discussed at length in Chapter 5.
as a tantric practice, which, in some classes of tantra, involves generating oneself as the deity, the deity visualizations are done in class as if the deity is external to the practitioner. As a sutra practice, deity visualization can be considered either a concentration or a purification practice. As the former, it is done with the purpose of making the visualization as clear and vivid as possible, and then holding this image for some time. In this way the image becomes the meditation object in place of the breath. The visualization as a purification practice utilizes the image held in concentration for the purpose of planting suggestions into the mind, or placing imprints into it.

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

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

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

358 By far the most prevalent deity visualization used for teaching purposes is Sakyamuni Buddha, but Vajrasattva, because of his relationship with the function of mental purification, is used on occasion. Valham, 1997, *op.cit.*, pp1-4, contains a Sakyamuni Buddha visualization used as a Lam.Rim preliminary practice. The Centre’s bookshop sells small publications which contain preliminary prayers and practices, and visualizations for certain deities. These are either sutra or Kriya (action) tantra practices. Examples are the practices of Shakyamuni Buddha (Wisdom Books, 1996), Vajrasattva (FPMT Education Services, 2003), Medicine Buddha (FPMT Education Services, 2002) and Green Tara (Kopan Monastery, 1991) *sadhanas*. 
breathing purification, and a guided deity visualization such as Sakyamuni Buddha or Tara. While there is minimal doctrinal material presented in these sessions, I suspect that many newcomers, depending on their prior exposure to any form of Buddhism, would be struck by the detail and symbolic elaborateness in some of the visualizations, and the purpose of such practices. This was my experience on the first few occasions I attended the meditation sessions, which were my introduction to Tibetan Buddhist meditation.

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

5 Teachings and Courses

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

359 This retreat was held from 4 January to 14 January 2003.
360 In 2005, one extended from the evening of Saturday 21 May until the morning of Tuesday 24.
Tibetan-style teachings are given by the resident Lama in Tibetan, and translated into English by a translator who is familiar with the teacher’s style and the teaching itself, quite often a root text. The several differences between the two types of teaching affect the way in which, and the extent to which, one is exposed to the worldview of the tradition. These differences are the level of interaction between teacher and student during teachings, the inclusion of meditation practice in Western style teachings, and the amount of prior knowledge required for understanding by each.

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

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

The third difference has to do with the level of prior knowledge or understanding needed by the student. In the Western-style teachings there is little assumed knowledge. Principles are elaborated in detail with more introductory explanation, and illustrated with examples from everyday life. Also, references for further reading are given, and use is made of the teaching aids discussed above, such as notes and handouts. The traditional-style teachings typically consist of the study of a root text over a considerable period of time, or the same kind of intensive study of an aspect of doctrine such as the Three Principles of the Path. Points are often
elaborated by discussing doctrinal and symbolic associations of aspects of the teaching. Compared to the first way, this may come across as a condensed shorthand of sets of meanings, but for a student with existing knowledge, it reinforces meaningful connections between different aspects of the teachings. While all are welcome and encouraged to attend these teachings, as will be discussed shortly, it requires some basic knowledge of Buddhist teachings in order to follow the flow of ideas more effectively.

5.1 Western-style Teachings

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

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

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

362 This was on the first night of the second cycle of the course, 13 July 2004.
strong feelings. Many of the answers and suggested strategies concern the practice of patience, compassion, and a view of emptiness in the sense of there being no self to hurt or to take offence. During my attendance of these modules, I observed a similarity of responses in class, the reason for which I suggest lies in what students would consider to be appropriate material for discussion in a class situation. After the setting of homework for the next week, usually reading and meditation exercises, there may be a prayer, but the merit gained by attendance at the teachings is dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings. This always completes the class, and precedes the departure of the teacher.

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

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

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

### 5.2 Traditional-style Teachings

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

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

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

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362 See Wilson, S. “Becoming a Yogi: Resocialization and Deconditioning as Conversion Processes”, in *Sociological Analysis* 45 [4], pp301-14, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1984 p305. Wilson discusses the experimental use of ritual actions as sources of identity change. Wilson’s description of initial commitment at the ashram suggests that new people’s willingness to experiment provides possible ways of bringing about changes they are seeking.
working knowledge of this shared reality through their involvement in VI’s activities.

6 The Participant’s Journey: Exploration and Learning

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

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

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

364 There are other related considerations here, such as how one learns to apply the principles through private study and practice, which are the domain of Chapter 5.
to ask questions to clarify their understanding at the occasional classes and short courses on ritual and practice.

6.1 Acquiring an Understanding of the Shared Reality

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

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

6.1.1 Acquisition and Apprehension of the Framework

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

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366 This validation process through test and evaluation is heavily implicated in students’ decisions to take refuge and become Buddhist. This will be explored in Chapter 6.
style teachings. Most had done some of the Discovering Buddhism course. Those who had been involved with the Centre since before 2002, when Discovering Buddhism began, had taken other beginners’ courses, and moved on to some of the more advanced courses. Some students had attended the regular meditation classes for a time. In the main, however, students and practitioners tend to go to ‘teachings’ rather than the weekly meditation sessions or the infrequent courses on meditation (not including the specialized meditation retreats held every so often). AN, who had been coming to VI regularly for about six months at the time of interview, had attended the ten-day Introduction to Buddhism course at Kopan Monastery during his travel through Asia. Since his return to Australia and becoming involved with the centre, he had attended a few of the weekend classes, four of the Discovering Buddhism modules: Karma, Samsara and Nirvana, How to Develop Bodhicitta, and Transforming Problems, and taken part in some traditional-style teachings: Atisha’s Lamp for the Path, and the Thirty Seven Practices of the Bodhisattva. Such patterns of attendance demonstrate that people try, as part of their exploration of the belief system, a variety of the teachings offered at VI.

6.1.2 “Repetition, Reinforcement, Response”

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

GE: It’s really interesting that you’ve drawn the distinction between the more traditional and the more Western-focussed teachings.

CR: Yeah, they’re both fantastic; they both support each other. In the end it’s the more traditional teachings that are the real essence of it, once you get into more serious study.

GE: That’s interesting. Can I ask you a question, and you tell me if I’m on the right track? Is it fair to say that the Western style allowed you deeper access so that you could appreciate the more Tibetan style of teaching?

CR: I wouldn’t necessarily say it was that, because I think with the Tibetan one, it was just attending those again and again and again, and doing reading, that I got used to the style. I started to understand the terminology, and I started to realize that everytime I heard a teaching, it was presented in a slightly different way, and I always got something from it. I would understand something each time that I mightn’t have understood before. I also started to understand the role of imprints, and so I would go to teachings, even though I felt like I wouldn’t be able to understand it, for the imprint, so the next time I’d understand a bit more, and the next time a bit more, and some of the quite difficult teachings I’ve been able to get a bit of an understanding of through that, just going back and listening again and again. So it just kind of goes along
on its own, and it does talk about the practical as well. Because Buddhism is very practical, but it’s like they go hand-in-hand. The Western teachings are particularly good for when you are a beginner though. But I went to both hand-in-hand. I didn’t feel like I needed to go to one and not the other, although there were times when Geshe-la might have been teaching on something. I do remember times when I went and thought, “I haven’t got a clue what this is about”, and so I might not go back on that night. They might have offered an introductory course, and then I would have done that. I did some of the introductory courses a couple of times. It was good having teachings on different levels on offer, and it’s such a completely different style you can’t really compare them.

This excerpt exemplifies the way in which students choose courses in order to flesh out their own understanding and therefore negotiate or direct their own learning. They are prepared to keep attending teachings and courses in the faith that they, by understanding a little at a time, eventually arrive at a clearer understanding of the whole teaching. The excerpt also shows how the notion of karmic imprints may be employed as a mental strategy to cope with the feeling of not understanding a teaching.\textsuperscript{367} They maintain that listening to a teaching will benefit them on some level even if they are not understanding what they are hearing at the time. MM offers an appraisal of her own learning process.

MM: The first course I did was on thought transformation, the seven point mind training, you know, all sentient beings have been my mother\textsuperscript{368}, the equalizing self with others. So I did that and at least I got an intellectual understanding of it because the way it seems to work for me is, because I’ve got a strong intellectual study background, I seem to need to get an intellectual handle on things first, see how it works and then it will percolate down to the heartfelt level, that seems useful for me. Sometimes I’ll get realizations through somebody saying something out of the sutras, and I’ll think, “Oh yeah. Wow.” Often I need this kind of intellectual overview, and then it will percolate down to something that can become a heartfelt practice.

NJ relates that her initial response to teachings at Vajrayana Institute had intellectual, intuitive and strong emotional dimensions. She had been discussing, with a friend, the possibility of taking refuge.

NJ: I remember him saying to me the day after September 11, there was going to be a refuge ceremony at VI, and he said, “You need to take refuge”, and I thought, “Yep. That’s the right thing to do”, and so I did.

GE: How much did you understand of the Buddhist teachings at that stage?

\textsuperscript{367} Notions such as karmic imprints are described at the end of the chapter, as part of the acquired and apprehended framework that one begins, with time and experience, to put together.

\textsuperscript{368} Valham, op.cit., p58. This meditation is classed as a practice for generating Bodhicitta.
NJ: I’d done the introductory Lam Rim course.

GE: Can you remember what it covered?

NJ: Yeah. Things like, um, the Four Noble Truths, teachings about death, (and) there was a short thing about Tantric practice. There’s karma and rebirth—it was Lam Rim—so it covers the basics, renunciation and bodhicitta and wisdom, yeah, and I had a basic idea.

GE: So it tends to give you the basics.

NJ: Yeah the foundation, the structure, but, it just seemed to me, actually I’d never actually connected to something that made as much sense. It really made lots of sense to me, and it made sense with a lot of things I’d thought previously, and I had read about Tibetan Buddhism before all of these things happened years ago. I went to Tibet about seven or eight years ago, and before I went, I read some stuff about Tibetan culture, and I’d read the Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, and I’d read a few other books about Tibetan Buddhism, so I’d had a little bit of an idea, but it was more like a … this was the first thing I’d come across that had made sense to decide that you fitted into it. I don’t know how to put that, really.

GE: So if I understand what you’re saying, you got a certain sense of what it was about from the Lam Rim teachings?

NJ: Look I don’t know. The word intuition isn’t a great word, but I think it was much more of an intuitive thing that an intellectual thing. I trust it, the Lam.Rim made sense, it just made sense, the Buddha, these teachings make sense, they are very practical and useful.

As the three examples above demonstrate, participation in activities and exploration of the material is not directed by mere curiosity. For many, the impetus for further exploration of the teachings is provided by the strong response they had to their first teaching. This teaching provided a solution to a problem they were experiencing, even if awareness of the problem itself, or the extent to which they wanted help with it emerged only while they listened to the teaching. The following examples illustrate how instrumental, because of the intensity of the effect it has on the individual, a first teaching can be in a decision to explore Buddhism. CR recalls her first teaching, the Eight Verses of Thought Transformation.

CR: Anyway, we came and there was a monk teaching, a Western monk, and he was teaching on the Eight Verses of Thought Transformation. It was fantastic. The whole concept was to cherish and to hold most dear the person who has harmed you, you know, the person you’ve been really kind to who’s then harmed you in turn. They’re the most precious treasure to be able to see them like this. And I just had this feeling of relief. I thought “Oh! This is the place.
This is what I need to hear.” I love those Eight Verses of Thought Transformation.

GE: It’s really significant, because the impression I’m getting is that you knew how you wanted to deal with it, but you needed validation in some way?

CR: I needed to know how. I knew I didn’t want to hate him, but I didn’t know how not to be caught up in anger. You know ... how exactly to deal with it, and then I walked in and here’s this person talking exactly about that thing, coming to this state of equanimity, and I wanted that with everything, not just with this, but with anything that comes your way in life, whether it’s good or bad. To be in this place, not where you’re indifferent, but where you’re not going up and down like a roller coaster. You’re able to just enjoy things that are there to be enjoyed, but not in a way that makes you attaching and grasping at them, and then ends up causing you more suffering.

And similarly, another respondent recounted:

RI: The first time I went to VI it was with Geshe Dawa teaching. But I remember clearly, when something popped, feeling very uncomfortable ... this guy talking in Tibetan. I didn’t like being there, felt very embarrassed. So I listened, and tried to listen patiently. Don’t know what the subject was. Actually the topic was anger. Seemed like he was looking at me. Geshe Dawa was basically saying ... it was like he was talking to me and saying ... but the real thing that blew my mind was when he was talking about anger and antidotes, and I had no idea that there were antidotes to anger, various ways to get rid of anger, use antidotes, patience. Wow. Of course patience is the antidote to anger. Impatience is a lack of patience. I just have to be more patient, and I went away thinking, “Wow. A lot of that stuff’s really weird, but that guy really knows what he’s talking about.”

These excerpts illustrate how the individuals concerned responded to teachings that showed them how to deal with difficult emotions. That below outlines AN’s response to the ten-day introductory course at Kopan monastery, to discovering the philosophical and ethical frameworks supporting Buddhist meditation practice. His prior exposure to meditation had been superficial and limited.

AN: But once I went to Kopan I got a bit of exposure, she (the teacher) just basically ran through a lot of different teachings about bodhicitta. That was the first time I’d heard about that, and the concept of exchanging self for others and the concept of thinking of others as your mother. And we went into reincarnation, which before that I thought was just a cool idea but didn’t realize there was a whole system of logic behind it and that it really is an argument and not just a New Age catchcry. And so I really got wind of the fact that there is real substance to the study behind it, and it’s not as airy-fairy as images I’d had of it before, and so that sparked off the intellectual side of me that thought,
“Oh. I want to learn more, and it’s not all just waffle. There’s serious stuff here.”

The experiences recounted above, and others recounted in interview, all indicate that the student’s perception of an underlying depth and structure to the belief system, and an underlying truth demonstrated by their own experience of its applicability to their situation, is instrumental in their desire to explore further. For all practitioners, it seems that information is taken in conditionally: conditional upon being shown to be of value, and to be effective in terms of dealing with experience. From here, certain core doctrinal concepts are explored, and incorporated into a stock of knowledge through the process of applying it to a life problem. It is when people hear a teaching, and realize that it applies to some issue or problem in their lives, that the internalization process, the process of making the information their information, is begun. These are the concepts that are mentioned as either significant for them, or the exploration and understanding of which has been integral in their initial socialization and later commitment processes. When participants have seen both how a teaching or principle can be applied to a problem and be shown to frame experience in a constructive way, they then wish to understand the Buddhist teachings in a more holistic way.

After a time, when some confidence in the belief system has been acquired, it seems that the experiential testing may not be so intense, and students tend to look for coherence between aspects of the belief system as an interpretive framework. At this stage the various ideas must have some meaningful connection between them. Despite the fact that many do not recall their own exploration process in this way, that is, when they began to perceive doctrine as an integrated whole, the content of people’s conversations within the centre shows that this happens. In interview, I asked questions about students’ encounters with Buddhism and Vajrayana Institute, what courses they had done, which they responded to, and how they related to the Buddhist concepts and ideas. Respondents typically found these questions easy to answer. The answers were typically about concepts encountered early, concepts that are either easy or hard to understand, and especially about those that were remembered as being significant because of their practical value, as related above. For instance, MM’s answers included finding the teachings about karma ‘hard’ because ‘I have no concrete or tangible proof of it’ (referring to reincarnation), but, because of the way that her reasoning led her to this conclusion, she had no doubt that karma exists in this lifetime. Other important concepts were the six perfections, especially patience, and Bodhicitta motivation. When MM’s entire transcript is examined it can be seen that these are the principles that have helped her reframe her life experience more positively.

369 This can be seen in the interview transcripts of CR and AN specifically.
While not all practitioners demonstrated clear recall of the order of courses they attended, or how their knowledge was acquired, and therefore how concepts began to form a framework, all of the responses discussed above highlight the importance of the way in which concepts were most relevant to dealing with, understanding, and framing their life experience, both immediately and in the long term. So the researcher’s question as to how and why students have accumulated a stock of knowledge, how concepts and frameworks are acquired and built on, is answered in terms of problem-solving at first, and then in terms of more general meaning-seeking.

An example of how such recall may exist for a practitioner, of how they may build a working understanding of the path, how their choice of courses and reading material enables them to build on acquired knowledge, is provided by NC. He recalls his early involvement with the Centre’s teachings, and the way in which he began to explore and assimilate elements of the doctrinal framework. In 2003 he began attending the Centre, and took the six-week course on Buddhism and Psychology. He then began Discovering Buddhism, and completed the modules Introduction to Tantra, Emptiness, Mind and Its Potential, How to Meditate, and Presenting the Path. Before and during this time he had read the Dalai Lama’s book on the Lam Rim, the Path of Bliss more than once, and had used Kathleen McDonald’s book How To Meditate intensively for three months. He said to me that ideas about Tantra had suggested the importance of revising renunciation and bodhicitta, doctrinal elements he had become familiar with from reading the Path of Bliss. He said, “Introduction to Tantra made me want to go back and get a closer look at Renunciation and Bodhicitta”, and further, “Tantra is a really powerful tool to use, but to use it properly, it is important to have these basics of renunciation, bodhicitta and emptiness sorted out at least to some degree”.

At interview we had a lengthy discussion about how desire is seen from the Tantric perspective, so I think he means to go back and see what renunciation means and how it fits with the Tantric path and view. Teachings from the Introduction to Tantra module, and from the traditional teachings he was concurrently attending on Saturday afternoons, were raising questions for him around the correct view of desire, including the use of sexual energy.

6.1.3 An Essential Framework and Its Components

By taking part in teachings and activities, students begin to acquire the stock of knowledge with which to form an interpretive framework for further teachings, for more-complex Buddhist philosophy and for life experience. Throughout my

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370 Introduction to Tantra began on 27 January 2004. The Saturday afternoon teachings, by Geshe Samten, were on the Three Principles of the Path in January, and on the Thirty Seven Practices of the Bodhisattva in February.
participant-observation I noticed that certain principles and concepts were dominant and most meaningful in formal discourse, conversation, and interview. They were repeated often in class, and appeared to give most meaning to the material presented in teachings by supporting other points of doctrine and the reasoning behind the Centre’s ritual activity. The ideas outlined below are proper to Mahayana thought as it is understood within that system. I have not discussed basic Buddhist doctrine such as the Four Noble Truths, but only the notions that are crucial to an understanding of the viewpoints of this school. All of the notions below fall under one or other of three headings: the three Principles of the Path, the Nature of Mind and Mental Purification, and the Role of the Teacher. The layout and explanation of the core notions not only reflect what I believe that students need to comprehend as a minimum in order to make sense of doctrine and practice, but also reflect what I found that I needed to clarify for myself before the entire curriculum fell into place.

The three principles of the path are renunciation, bodhicitta, and correct view or wisdom-realizing-emptiness. They are three qualities or attributes of the Mahayana practitioner that need to be developed in order to reach enlightenment. A cornerstone of Buddhist thought is that Samsaric life is characterized by suffering. The basis for the motivation to develop these principles is in understanding the nature of suffering. Renunciation and bodhicitta are defined by Powers as the definite intention to leave cyclic existence, and generating the intention to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, respectively.

Part of the commentary to the Medicine Buddha Initiation conferred by Geshe Dawa in 2005 addressed the principle and practice of developing renunciation from the experience and understanding of the suffering nature of samsara. The Geshe’s translator began by stating that the sutric or tantric practitioner should have three qualities: renunciation, bodhicitta, and right view. Renunciation should be a definite conviction: ‘When one thinks about the suffering nature of Samsara, one develops renunciation.’ ‘It is hard to develop renunciation if you do not see the suffering nature of Samsara.’ He went on to say that when one experiences difficulty and hard situations, one wants to get out of them. The Mahayana teaching maintains that when one can see similar situations in others, this transforms slowly into Bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is developed with the method of lovingkindness and compassion. In the same way that one’s understanding of renunciation is the path to liberation, one’s development of bodhicitta is the ‘path to the perfect state of enlightenment’. Throughout my involvement with VI, I found that students understood these two concepts easily enough—and were willing to accept them as motivations for practice.

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371 In his section on distinctive Gelugpa practices, Powers outlines roughly the same doctrinal points: the three principles of the path, how to develop compassion, and the nature of mind. He goes over these sections in more detail. See Powers, op.cit., pp416-29.
373 This initiation took place on 30 April 2005, at the Buddhist Library in Camperdown, Sydney.
quite quickly—because they related to the doctrine of the suffering nature of samsara, which made sense in terms of their own life experiences.

Emptiness and compassion are the two characteristics of the enlightened mind of the Buddha. Powers relates that, in Tsong-kha-pa’s view, training in wisdom and the cultivation of compassion are associated, and indeed this is constantly reinforced as a fundamental principle in teachings. Although the term ‘emptiness’ refers to the lack of inherent existence of all dependently originated phenomena, the term is most commonly used in discourse to signify the emptiness of self of any inherent existence. The Gelugpa refer to emptiness and dependent origination as the absolute and relative view of phenomena generally, including the self. In Discovering Buddhism, students were encouraged to think of a phenomenon in terms of dependent origination, expressed as ‘View it as a dependent origination, dependently arisen through causes and conditions’. Similarly, with the self, the absolute view is emptiness. The relative view, the self as dependently originated, is represented doctrinally by the aggregates and dependent origination. The ‘I’ that appears as permanent and self-existent in one’s ordinary experience, labelled the ego in Western psychology, is imputed onto the aggregates. The enlightened view is seeing this ‘I’ as a construction, as being empty of inherent existence, as the product of the interdependent interaction of the aggregates.

Meditations on emptiness are outlined in the literature, and sometimes taught and practised in teachings. However, little reference was made to them in interview. When practitioners were asked about which Buddhist concepts they responded to, or that had significance for them, a notable absence was the concept of Emptiness. Instead, they spoke of karma and reincarnation, thought transformation and bodhicitta. The answer to this may lie in the fact that people try to work with the notion of emptiness conceptually, and this is hard to do when one does not have a clear sense of the term. When discussion has focussed on the notion of emptiness in teachings, students typically refer to the emptiness of self, and the way in which this idea of no permanent or essentially-existing self may be used as a mental strategy for stopping one’s ‘self-cherishing’ and defensiveness in relationships with others, especially during conflict. This strategy suggests that doctrinal notions need to be applicable to one’s circumstances. Students appear to relate more easily to terms such as karma, and spiritual aspirations such as thought transformation and bodhicitta, that are more applicable to the interpretation of their immediate experience. In addition, as the section on meditations taught and practised at Vajrayana institute indicated, analytical meditation tends to be overshadowed by concentration and visualization practices, which may be perceived as being more directly applicable to managing one’s mental and emotional life.

375 This subject will be discussed at length in Chapter 5, which is devoted to the techniques and results of self-transformation.
Gilgen and Cho believed that reasonable agreement exists among scholars that the Eastern system is monistic or non-dualistic in nature, and the Western outlook is primarily dualistic. In the West there is a tendency to think in terms of a Creator and a created, and as will be noted in Chapter 6, almost without exception, the students and practitioners that I interviewed came from Christian backgrounds. The notion of emptiness is conceptually abstract, and according to doctrine, not amenable to immediate meditative exploration.

In many of the teachings I have attended, the nature of mind is defined as clear and knowing. Clarity in this context means the capacity of the mind to perceive the emptiness of existence. The teachings hold that to come to know one’s own mind as clear and knowing, one must purify one’s mindstream and accumulate merit. Several sources cite Manjushri’s advice to Lama Tsong-kha-pa: “To attain spiritual realizations one must combine meditation on the path to enlightenment with purification, accumulation of merit, and praying to one’s guru as a Buddha.” The accepted wisdom of practitioners is that the attainment of enlightenment does not occur by study and meditation alone, but must be accompanied by actions that result in mental purification and merit accumulation. Terms such as these: karmic imprints, karmic seeds and the conditions for their ripening, creating merit, removing obscurations, purifying, and the mindstream or mental continuum are heard frequently in teachings and in conversations at VI, and form part of its discourse. What struck me, as both a participant observer and a religious seeker, was the ambiguity with which these terms were often used. It became evident that in order to understand the reasoning behind the idea of mental purification that is embodied in many of the practices, one must understand its relationship the notion of karma.

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377 This point was explored by Geshe Samten in the refuge ceremony that took place on 19 June 2005. See Appendix 7 for an outline of his commentary.
378 In the Buddhism and Western Psychology course held in 2003, this subject was discussed from the Buddhist and Western psychological perspectives on the first night, where the clear and knowing nature of mind was contrasted with Western scientific realism. Other courses such as Mind and Mental Events go into the nature of mind and awareness in great depth. One such course which took place on Mondays between 8 September and 27 October 2003, studied traditional Awareness and Knowledge texts (Lo Rig) as presented in Mind in Tibetan Buddhism by Venerable Lati Rinpoche and other sources.
The doctrines of **karma** and reincarnation and their relationship to the nature of cyclic existence and its six realms are referred to frequently in teachings. However, the notion implicit in the use of terms such as creating karmic imprints, accruing merit, and removing obscurations to omniscience, is that of the mindstream or mental continuum, which is the agent which carries **karma** from one life to the next, and therefore creates the conditions for future lives. This continuum is affected by **karma**, and while it is clear and knowing, this nature is obscured by karmic imprints caused by unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind. In order to reveal this clear and knowing nature of mind, the mental continuum must be purified of obscurations or karmic imprints. Before this process is described it must be pointed out that, in this Western Buddhist context, there is a way in which the notions of **karma** and reincarnation may be isolated from each other. Some of the practitioners I have interviewed stated that they 'have trouble with reincarnation', although they appear to accept the notion of **karma**. The following shows how some students may accept the notion of karma without necessarily accepting the doctrine of reincarnation:

MM: The ones I find hard are the teachings on **karma**, and yet at the same time, strangely, I find it difficult because I have no concrete or tangible proof of it, beyond what I’ve already told you. And I’m at the point, like a lot of the teachers say, “You may as well behave as if **karma** exists, because if at the end of your life you’ve done that, you’ve lived an ethical life. If it did exist, and you got to the end of your life and you’d behaved as if it didn’t, then you’d be in a lot of suffering.” That’s something I could get my head around. But I have no doubt in my mind that **karma** exists in this lifetime. I’ve got to the point, particularly with anger—I think this is very much a stage of my own practice—that if I let fly with my partner, I think I suffer more than he does. And it motivates me to do something about it. I can see that any action has a result.”

GE: So, it’s not **karma** you have an issue with so much as reincarnation?

MM: Yes, that’s right. I think a lot of Westerners would be similar to me. If I’ve come to appreciate other things as being true for myself through experience, probably further down the track, and I suspect you need to be a long-term practitioner before you can do that, that will reveal itself to me too, and it will reveal itself in a way that’s appropriate. So I’m willing to say that I’ve got an open mind on reincarnation, but certainly that in this lifetime, yes, I can see **karma** happening. The part I find consoling about **karma**, I mean I find I go through things now where I still get into ‘poor me’ victim stuff when something gross happens to me, but now at least further down the track maybe at two or three weeks distance I think but actually **karma** does give me succour about this.

Another practitioner said, “Well, to be a Buddhist, you have to believe in reincarnation. It makes the whole thing work”. The terms **karma** and reincarnation have become virtually part of the language. While Westerners in general have become familiar with them, and many may even entertain a belief in them as
Campbell suggests, the transcript excerpt above illustrates that students question concepts and doctrines that they encounter, and do not accept them blindly. It also shows that they are capable of discriminating between notions that appeal directly to their experience and reasoning, and those that they find unsupportable, at least initially. The way that karma may be conceptually isolated from reincarnation, from a Western practitioner’s perspective, is understandable in terms of the narrative of purification, or revealing an essential nature within oneself, which underpins much Western alternative spirituality. While there may be a seeming contradiction between a conditional acceptance of the emptiness of self and the purification of something pure that has become defiled, this in itself indicates the way in which the mind will attempt to make sense of new material according to existing understandings. For many with a Christian background, it makes sense to leave reincarnation out of the picture initially, and come to terms with a purification process in the context of one lifetime.

Many of the practices are for the purpose of accumulating merit. It was said by one teacher, that while the idea of merit was ‘complex’, simply expressed, “It puts positive tendencies put on the mind”. In teachings and in casual conversations, it is express that just hearing a teaching accrues merit, purifies negative karma, and ‘gives you the imprint’ so that one can have deeper realizations. One may generate merit through all good action and receive it through past good actions. I have felt on occasion that the two notions, accumulation of merit and mental purification, are used somewhat interchangeably in a form of mental shorthand, to express the idea that progress on the path involves some positive and committed action on the part of the aspirant. While one may get the impression that the understanding of merit and its accumulation is akin to the idea of a ‘piggy-bank’, where merit from wholesome action is accumulated to offset negative karma accumulated by unwholesome action, I suspect that practitioners’ understandings come to be more in terms of the affect of actions on one’s mindstream or mental continuum. Although the notion of accumulating merit and the ways of doing this are referred to frequently, the notion and process of purification is given much more formal treatment in doctrine and teachings.

Whenever I have heard the notion of purification being spoken about at the centre, I have tended to think of transforming mental tendencies, our habitual responses to

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381 See Campbell, C. “The Easternization of the West”, in New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response, pp. 35-48, Routledge, 1999. Campbell linked clusters of terms entering the English language to do with both environmentalism and consciousness-raising with the rise of new social movements. Specifically, he believes a connection exists between the rise of mystical religion over church and sect religion as defined by Troeltsch, and the increase of belief in a life-force and in reincarnation.

382 This comment was made during Practice and Ritual Teachings, devoted to questions and answers about why certain things are done, on Monday 20 June 2005.
things. I asked CR, "If I said two words to you, (attaining) enlightenment, or purification? Are they the same thing, or are they different?" She responded:

CR: Ah, I haven't really talked about purification. Actually, they're different. Purification is one of the things on the way to enlightenment. So on the one hand you are ... I've been talking about developing qualities. But the other thing you're doing is purifying negativities, so, the less room there is for negativities the more room for positive qualities, and that is something that is really important to me because there are things that I've done in my past. And one of the things that's really great about Buddhism is this idea that there's no karma that's too heavy that it can't be purified. But it's also an idea that's different to Catholicism. Whereas in Catholicism you were going to someone and confessing your sins, but you were asking for forgiveness from an outside God, and then boom! The forgiveness would come down on you or whatever. Now, sometimes with Buddhist purification practices it might look to an outsider that it's the same thing. You know, say, you're doing your Vajrasattva purification practice and you're visualizing the deity on the crown of your head and raining down nectar and purifying. In fact all of the visualizations that you do of a deity do involve that aspect of being purified of negativities.

With respect to the process of purification, in teachings reference is often made to the Four Opponent Powers. These are: the power of dependence or reliance, the power of regret or release, the power of the remedy, and the power of restraint. The power of reliance is going for refuge and generating bodhicitta. In this way, the object of refuge, the three jewels, becomes the object of non-generation of non-virtuous karma, and refuge becomes a foundation of purification. The idea behind the power of regret is that the nature of regretting non-virtuous action is virtuous. The power of application of the antidote involves dedicating one's virtue, obtained by performing practices—ideally several practised simultaneously—towards purifying non-virtuous karma. These practices include meditating on bodhicitta or emptiness, reciting sutras or mantras, making prostrations and building stupas. The power of the promise means to promise to oneself not to engage in the negative action again.

From this it can be seen that all of the meditations and ritual practices described above are purificatory actions. What determines their efficacy from the Mahayana perspective is the motivation with which they are done. Any action may be considered a small, medium, or large scope practice, depending as one's motivation is for a better rebirth, liberation from samsara, or attainment of enlightenment to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings. In a sense, the impression that purification in all its ways is valued more highly than meditation may be conveyed by Ribush's statement that, "Without purifying your mind to prepare it for spiritual realizations, you will make little progress toward enlightenment." I have heard

\[\text{383}\] The four opponent powers are explained in Lama Yeshe, 2004, \textit{op.cit.}, pp11-14. These comments were made as part of Geshe Dawa's teaching during the Lam Rim retreat, in January 2004.

this expressed on occasion by practitioners as ‘You need to purify in order to get realizations’. Lama Yeshe relates the resistance that some feel towards meditation to negative karmic imprints in the mind. He says, “To meditate is not enough. You have to purify the hindrances and accumulate merit”, signifying the nature of the close relationship between the three actions of meditation, purification, and the accumulation of merit.\textsuperscript{385}

Another doctrinal aspect that needs to be considered here is how the three aspects of the Eightfold path: wisdom, ethics and concentration—known as the three higher trainings in this system—are applied in practice. The ethical dimension is implicit in all action performed with the Mahayana motivation to attain enlightenment for the sake of others. The point of taking vows, and making refuge and initiation commitments, is to reinforce one’s motivation continually, and therefore to ensure that every action becomes a way of accumulating merit and purifying the mental continuum. The above discussion summarizes the way in which the mindstream and its purification is understood by practitioners generally, but in varying degrees of complexity.\textsuperscript{386}

From the foregoing it is suggested that, while practitioners will come to understand the same basic doctrinal notions and their meanings, not everyone embraces the perspective entirely in the same way. For instance, all seem to accept the doctrine of \textit{karma}, including the idea of accruing merit, but some do not accept the idea of reincarnation. To be made clear in the next Chapter is the fact that the ethical dimension seems to be accepted universally. The liking for compassion practices, coupled with the attempt to act from the position of understanding emptiness, which is expressed in the acceptance of the notion of \textit{bodhicitta}, appear to orient these practitioners in their engagement with Buddhism generally.

7 Conclusions

This Chapter has explored how the student begins to engage with the shared reality at Vajrayana Institute through attending teachings and other activities, and how they begin to acquire the meaning of core terms and concepts that begin to form an interpretive framework. It was found that students initially begin to explore and test concepts applicable to their own life experience and perceived problems. Once a small set of ideas is validated as viable and useful in this way, the student begins to explore the doctrinal architecture more widely in order to see how different parts of

\textsuperscript{385} \textit{ibid.}, p132.

\textsuperscript{386} More complex doctrinal positions are elaborated in writings, and occasionally in teachings. For instance, see Ribush, in Lama Yeshe, 2004, \textit{op.cit.}, ppxx-xxi, where he explains how the four opponent powers relate to the four kinds of karma. He says that each of the four opponent powers counters one of the four negative karmic results, but these understandings are not necessary for engagement with the tradition’s practices, and have intellectual significance for those students who care to study a little deeper.
the framework fit together. Although my natural inclination was to attempt to establish an order to the acquisition of specific concepts and their meanings, in both temporal and hierarchical terms,387 students' own accounts of their learning indicated that this level of synthesis was attainable in only a small number of cases, and, in the light of information and exposition presented in the chapters to come, was unnecessary.

387 I designate these two terms to mean the following. Temporal order is the order of acquisition of concepts based on encounter with material in teachings. Hierarchical order is based on the order in which sets of related meanings are acquired, and would examine the nature of the dominant meaning-structures involved in the learning phase, and how these relate to immediate religious and existential needs of the participants. As the material suggests, what drives the learning is discovering, initially, that concepts and techniques can be applied to one's own experience.