Chapter 6: The Nature of Commitment in Vipassana and Vajrayana Contexts

1 Introduction

Chapter 6 is devoted to the exploration of the nature of the commitment process as it is experienced by the practitioners affiliated with both Centres. As outlined in Chapter 1, commitment to the Buddhist worldview and its path is based on the recognition that one has validated and accepted the beliefs, values, and expectations of the new religious reality. This occurs after a process of experimentation in which the claims of the meaning-system are experientially validated against one’s inner understandings and convictions, which themselves become clearer as a result of experimental participation in religious activity. Functionally, the adopted worldview is seen to frame personal experience in a manner that renders it more meaningful. One’s meditative experience and its interpretation according to doctrine must be applicable to the improvement of quality of lived experience; it must be relevant to current life challenges and ethically viable. The model of commitment proposed in Chapter 1 consists of three stages: apprehension and engagement, comprehension, and commitment. As an extension of the exploration of the first two stages outlined in Chapters 2 to 5, this chapter examines the commitment process and the factors influencing it.

In order to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of socialization and commitment as it occurs in the Vipassana and Vajrayana contexts, this chapter also considers how an individual may be predisposed to a Buddhist outlook. Therefore, this chapter also explores individuals’ prior religious conditioning provided by their primary religious socialization and experimental participation in other spiritualities before their Buddhist involvement. This latter examination addresses questions about the nature of the determining factors in movements between groups, the depth of involvement in each case, and how structures of beliefs or assumptions are tested and tried during the experimental process. Accordingly, this chapter takes into account the religious biographies of respondents from early childhood to the time of interview. For ease of analysis and understanding, religious biographies are treated, for the practitioners of both Centres, in three sections: 1) the nature of commitment and the commitment process, 2) religious backgrounds of respondents and their effects, and 3) religious experimentation prior to Buddhist involvement.

2 The Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre

2.1 The Nature of Buddhist Affiliation and Religious Identity

In order to understand the nature of socialization into and commitment to the Theravadin worldview underpinning Vipassana practice, a set of questions was asked of interview respondents to ascertain its characteristics. The question, ‘Do you
consider yourself Buddhist, and if so, why?’, was used to establish what being Buddhist meant to the adherents. Many answered ‘yes’ to the question and gave their reasons, for instance, HD:

HD: Yes, there was a point where I found that I could sincerely prostrate, and say ‘I take refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha,’ and really mean it, and I thought ‘I’ve got some faith now. I’m Buddhist’. And faith is one of those factors that you need for your practice, and so, yeah, I’m a Buddhist.

HD and many others described their commitments as being based on faith or belief in the teachings, and on the value of the practices in their daily lives. HD’s use of the term ‘faith’ may be understood in the specifically Buddhist sense of having faith in awakening to the dharma. Faith is one of the five spiritual faculties held to be necessary to attain Nibbana in early and Theravadin Buddhism. The same sentiments were expressed by others. KN reported that her self-identification as a Buddhist was based on a set of beliefs, viz. in reincarnation; that enlightenment is possible; that the Buddha existed and achieved enlightenment; in the Four Noble Truths, because they are validated in her experience; and because she has experienced the claimed benefits of the practices. Most of those who answered ‘no’ to the question indicated that they did not wish to accept the label of Buddhist. For instance, FV said, “I think I’m reluctant to identify myself as anything in particular. If I were to, it would be Buddhist”, but later said that she had begun to consider herself Buddhist ‘in a quiet kind-of way, just to myself’, during the previous six to eight months. Three adherents, KT, HR and HU said that the social context they found themselves in would determine whether they would outwardly call themselves Buddhist. Significantly, HR was the only respondent of the twenty to have taken refuge formally, which included taking the five lay precepts because she had wanted to make a commitment. Because no refuge ceremony is performed at BMIMC, she found a Theravadin nun to give her refuge. Some found the label to be inadequate in some way. For instance, RN described herself as a seeker for truth:

RN: Oh no. I sort of regard myself as a Buddhist, but I suppose I regard myself more as a searcher for the truth, and I see Buddhism as the means to discover that, through the Buddhist teachings. You know I think perhaps that for me

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478 Abe, M. “Faith and Self-Awakening: A Search for the Category Covering All Religious Life”, in The Eastern Buddhist XXXI [1], pp12-24, The Eastern Buddhist Society, 1998, p15. Abe contrasts this specifically Buddhist sense of faith as awakening to dharma or self-realization of Nirvana, with Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s essentialist notion of faith as a spiritual orientation of the personality and the capacity to relate to the transcendent.

479 ibid., pp16-7. Faith is the first of five, the others being assiduous striving, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, in that order. Also see Keown, D. A Dictionary of Buddhism, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp276-77. Keown states that faith, a prerequisite for embarking on the Eight-Fold Path, must be tested against one’s own experience; there is no doctrine of “salvation by faith in Buddhism”. References from the Pali Suttas

that’s the Buddhist principles of living, the basic teachings as far as taking refuge in Buddhism. So in that sense I’m a Buddhist and that’s how I usually explain myself to people because it’s sort of simpler in a way just to say I’m Buddhist.

Even though RN’s statement may appear contradictory in that she sees herself as a searcher for truth rather than a Buddhist, she also sees Buddhism as the means for discovering the truth. Statements such as these encapsulate the view of commitment that practitioners appear to hold; that it is conditionally based on the capacity of the Buddhist principles to provide a viable interpretive framework for the understanding and negotiation of experience. This is best expressed by EBS, one of the Vipassana teachers at the Centre:

EBS: You know, I’m so inspired by the Buddha’s story, because it’s a story of him following his own instincts. That’s really big for me. So I’ll often say to people, if something came along that gave a better exposition of my own experience, I’d actually swap to that. I’m not attached to Buddhism for Buddhism’s sake. I’m attached to the notion of going with my own experience, trying to make sense of what my life’s about.

This sentiment was expressed by other respondents. EC, while having devoted considerable energy to her practice over the previous four years, was unsure at the time of interview of how she felt about being Buddhist. She simply ‘didn’t know’, although other comments made during the interview showed her commitment to the teachings and practice to have deepened over the four years of her involvement. She commented:

EC: Well, I just think that it’s a good way to live your life. This is why I don’t call myself a Buddhist. I’m not reading the scriptures and finding out about everything that went on in the Buddha’s life, not really into studying it in that way and getting some knowledge. I just look upon it as a really good way to live your life. I find most other religions are quite dogmatic, whereas I don’t find that Buddhism is ... It’s not the scriptures that I read. I’m a practical person rather than a theoretical person.

EC’s approach to being Buddhist, that one should read the scriptures, may reflect her Christian upbringing, which included attending a Christian school. More generally, it demonstrates the way in which understanding of a label or term may conceal the more relevant aspects of an individual’s religious activity.\footnote{Fronsdal, G. “Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”, in The Faces of Buddhism in America, pp. 164-180, University of California Press, 1998. pp169-7. This is in much the same way as people sometimes use the word spiritual in preference to the term religious, because they feel that the latter implies a dogmatic approach and subservience to an outer religious authority. Fronsdal observed that the early American Vipassana students, many of whom were part of the counter-culture movement of the 60s}
evident that the acceptance or rejection of the label Buddhist does not provide a reliable indication of engagement with Buddhist activity, which is more clearly demonstrated in practitioners’ accounts of why they commit to its practice. All of the responses indicated that practitioners had made a minimal commitment to learn about and to apply the teachings and Vipassana technique in their daily lives, committing considerable personal time and mental energy to the endeavour. It is conceivable that the approaches of EC and RN are representative of different stages of progress in the movement from the experimental participant to the committed practitioner. In both cases the individuals’ experiences have been validated, but RN, with more experience, is more prepared to take on Theravada Buddhism’s doctrinal and hierarchical authority.

Respondents were asked three questions related to their own experience and interpretation of the commitment process. These were 1) Was the adoption of Buddhism a process or specific event? 2) Was the adoption a sudden or gradual process? 3) Was there an identifiable turning point? In response to the first two questions, all respondents saw their participation as mainly a process, and all but one saw the process as gradual. BM described his adoption of Buddhism as sudden, being within four months after his visiting a monastery. He was young at the time, twenty one, when he entered the monastery. Two practitioners saw their adoption of Buddhism as a process, but marked by events. In answer to the question, ‘Was the adoption of Buddhism a process or specific event?’, HD answered:

HD: Both. Because there was that immediate hearing about dukkha [a reference to the first teaching she attended] ... It’s like a veil lifted from the eyes, from the mind, but there was also that more gradual faith process happening.

HD had in fact identified two turning points throughout the course of the interview: the realization about dukkha, and that where she realized that she was able to prostrate and know that she meant it. Both of these events had struck her as being significant points of decision. Similarly, HU recalled:

HU: I went to a nearby monastery where there was a Western monk, an American monk, and did a meditation course there. And that was for about eight or nine days, and that was kind of it. I had an experience as if the whole of my body just kind of melted, I guess a powerful experience that was kind of like the hook. It was still in terms of this cosmic consciousness and experiences and things [a reference to an earlier answer], and so I guess that was kind of why I really wanted to keep doing this, to recreate that and to kind of understand it. So, I can’t remember any particular point where I embraced the teachings, it was more just a gradual over a period of time becoming more familiar, and I guess just seeing the truth in them.
While some people did identify one or more event or turning point, these were seen as part of an extended process of understanding and acceptance of the Buddhist tenets. It is significant that time, duration, or in some cases, order of events, does not seem to have been important. Instead, the emphasis was on what was experienced or learnt. Engagement was viewed as a cumulative process of exploration: learning, testing and validating doctrine, practice and experiential norms against their own reasoning and experience. This is evident in the approaches of DN and EC, of thirty and four years’ experience, respectively:

DN: Certainly when I started I was just a meditator, and I was looking for a meditation practice, and I wasn’t a Buddhist. It took a number of years and interactions with monks and personal practice and a number of retreats. At first I was doing at least one ten-day retreat each year, and as time went on I’d do longer and longer retreats. So, in the process of doing annual ten day retreats, after a number of years I just found myself looking at myself as a Buddhist. At first I was obviously not a Buddhist and I wouldn’t allow myself just to say I’m a Buddhist because I was sitting down and doing some chanting and meditation, and taking the precepts. It wasn’t enough for me to identify, so I deliberately didn’t identify, so it took a few years. But that’s been a long time now that I’ve regarded my self as a Buddhist, and sometimes I still challenge that and say ‘what’s that mean’?

EC: I can chart my progression over the last four years or whatever, and it took probably two years of nothing much happening, not much of a shift or anything, just going and listening and stuff. I’d say the last year has been the biggest thing, but I suppose that’s the way with a lot of things, it’s cumulative [italics mine] and the longer you go, the more benefit you get from it.

Other excerpts from EC’s interview transcript indicate that in the four years of her engagement with Vipassana, she has devoted considerable time and effort into attending retreats and teachings, and into developing a personal practice. Although she does not consider herself Buddhist, she clearly believes that Buddhism provides ‘a good way to live your life’. The results of her efforts are of two types. The first is experiential: the development of mindfulness after two years’ effort of seemingly not progressing. The second has to do with changes to her beliefs, attitudes and habitual responses, arising from the combination of the interpretation of experiential states and changes, and reflection on Buddhist principles during dhamma talks and daily activity. These outcomes are illustrated by excerpts in Chapter 3, Section 4. EC’s approach to her practice is illustrative of the approach taken generally, when a student or practitioner has some knowledge and experience on which to reflect, in that the mechanics of the process, whether seen as one seamless accumulation of knowledge and experience, or as sequences of discrete events, or as both, were insignificant in comparison to the substance of learning, experience, and self-transformation.
Because BMIMC does not offer a formal refuge ceremony, there is no overt sign of commitment to Buddhism, and the existence of a point of commitment must be identified by the participants themselves. The nature of responses indicates that in the period from encounter to commitment to Buddhism, their interest, sense of engagement, and commitment to its doctrinal and practical aspects all deepen with exposure. For many of the respondents, this was a process that was visible in hindsight; in that, looking back, they could see changes to their thinking, emotional states and behaviour accompanied by a shift toward acceptance of the Buddhist view. However, the substance of these narratives indicates that applying a stage approach to the interpretation of data is inappropriate. While some respondents’ experiences suggested that the commitment process consisted of two or three stages of increasing intensity of interaction, the bulk of the data supports the view that a gradual process of intensifying engagement culminates in any one of the decision to commit, the recognition that one is, has, committed, or continuing unsurety. Therefore, the data are organized and discussed accordingly, beginning with practitioners’ accounts of their first experiences with Vipassana.

2.2 The Journey from Engagement to Commitment

In making the decision to try Vipassana, participants share the common perception that meditation is beneficial physically, mentally and spiritually. The following excerpt from an interview with HU, a Vipassana teacher in his early fifties, suggests that while changes have occurred during the recent few decades in the specific reasons as to why people initially try meditation, it is generally not out of idle curiosity:

HU: I guess then I was looking at it as a cosmic consciousness kind of thing, and then over time it had a greater depth than that. But that was the hook for me. Interestingly when I look at people who come now, mostly it’s not that that’s bringing them in, it’s suffering that’s bringing them in. I think that there are just people that have crises in their life, whether it’s alcoholism or the death of somebody, or their own mental turmoil, that they come to meditation looking for relief. There is someone who comes to the Monday nights, and she’ll often talk afterwards. She has trouble sleeping, often has panic attacks and you know she’s looking for the meditation to help her with this, and it seems to be to some extent. But it’s not the same cure as taking a pill. And so a number of ... it’s more the older people who are coming for those reasons, but occasionally some of the younger people will come up and talk, and the way they’re talking, it’s not suffering that’s bringing them. There’s a real curiosity.

Volinn, E. “Eastern Meditation Groups: Why Join?”, in Sociological Analysis 46 [2], pp147-56, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1985, p148. Volinn makes this comment in connection with his twelve months of research in an ashram in the New England countryside in the US. The movement towards that he discusses is the desire for an experience of a meditative state, or a sense for the experiential, which he found to be a significant motivator for ashram residents.
Virtually all of the respondents had explored some other form of meditation, including Buddhist forms, before trying Vipassana meditation in another Theravadin setting or at BMIMC. All had begun exploring the alternative spiritual scene in some way, and were motivated to find out more. For some, it is a chance meeting with someone who introduces them to the practice. DN recounts this kind of experience:

GE: What drew you to Vipassana?

DN: Accident, I suppose. That was what presented itself to me. It’s like I said earlier, it’s people in your life. It’s often just individuals who you meet that you make some connection … I met someone whose mother lived next door to me and he came home from travelling after being a monk while he was overseas, and we met and became friends, and he said ‘sit down there and watch your breath, I’ll show you how to meditate’. Up to that point I’d been reading and having an interest in different kinds of philosophies, particularly Krishna Murti, and my friend came along and said, “Here’s a Mahasi Vipassana practice.” So call it fate or karma or whatever. And why did I take up Buddhist study? [in response to my question] Well I think that Buddhist study was a natural extrapolation of the practice. The more I practised, the more I was interested in this and that, and that still happens. I’ve just come back from six months’ practice in Nepal, and re-inspired to study the *suttas*, and just get involved at that level. I’ve done 30 years of practice, but not a lot of that time being a formal book-reading, word-reading student, just dipping in occasionally, that’s all I’ve ever done. But more and more I appreciate the value in the Buddha’s actual words, and some of the old commentaries on the teachings are quite profound.

As this example shows, many people try a Vipassana retreat as an extension of their own explorative process, which includes other forms of Buddhism, other forms of meditation, and alternative health practices. In this instance, DN’s prior reading had already awakened a curiosity about meditation. Many respondents recall with enthusiasm their positive response to their first retreat experience. This was a result of the ability of the teacher or teachers to give clear instruction and explanation in the practice, and also to give *dhamma* talks about subjects of relevance to students’ lived experience. In the following examples it is also clear that participants’ perceptions of these teachers as being genuinely practised in meditation, and in ethical application of the principles, was instrumental in their continued involvement in the practice. KT explained how she ‘spent about a year toe-dipping’. Having tried *Friends of the Western Buddhist Order* and feeling unsure how well aligned it was with Buddhism generally, she decided that she wanted more experience with Buddhism, and did not want to rely on Sangharakshita’s view alone. After trying Zen, and finding that ‘nothing really gelled with these places’, although ‘something was getting through’, she tried a ten-day retreat Vipasanna retreat. She recalls that she found the first two to three days ‘weird’, and she felt unsure about the experience. On the third day, she decided to suspend her doubt because the teachers appeared ‘to know what they are talking about’, and decided to follow their instruction for the extent of the retreat.
After the retreat KT began to explore the practice in earnest. She had been impressed by the way in which they grounded their practice in daily life: the techniques and explanations, and the emphasis on compassion and understanding. This blend of wisdom and compassion appealed to her. Similarly, EBS and HU recalled:

EBS: A friend of mine did a retreat with Goldstein—must have been in 1984—and he gave me The Experience of Insight, and he was going to this retreat. And I went to this retreat, and it completely blew my mind apart. And it just felt like all this searching that I’d been doing was manifest in this interesting experience. I had a lot of confidence in Goldstein, I thought he was a character who as a human being, I hadn’t come across someone like that. He seemed like he had incredible integrity. And Sharon Salzburg was very genuine, I really liked that. So I think because of this situation I saw in Salzburg and Goldstein, they were brilliant, the way they lived their own lives. So I was very impressed by that and basically I just had an incredible experience meditating. I just felt like the structure that was given about the Four Noble Truths, and the nature of suffering, and impermanence, the exploration of self, and the notion of greed, hatred and delusion, and then, the way they can get you to methodically keep looking at this, and see that that’s what’s going on, and relate that to all these experiences. It was one of the most amazing experiences I’ve ever had.

HU: I saw an advertisement for a retreat at Wat Buddha Dharma, and there were two things I was interested in, the retreat and the existence of Wat Buddha Dharma, and so I went out there and did a weekend with Phra Khantipalo. This would have been in the ‘80s I guess, around ‘81. And that was kind of a ‘check it out to see what it’s like’ place, and then there was a ten-day retreat that was advertised with Joseph Goldstein. I must have known about him, I must have read one of his books or something, because I was quite keen to do that. I went and did that retreat, and that put a lot of stuff … I really connected with him and the practice.

The examples above are from practitioners who came to Vipassana after having done some previous exploration of other philosophies and practices, either from within Buddhism, for instance, KT and HU, or within another Western alternative area, for instance, DN largely through reading, and EBS through prior involvements with Kriya Yoga (Ananda Marga) and a local Gurdjieff group. In each case, the respondent found something of philosophical and practical value that became a foundation for further exploration. As Volinn suggests, involvement in meditation-based groups can be seen as movement towards an experience, or a sense for the experiential, instead of fleeing from personal unhappiness. While Volinn’s research indicates that interest by ashram residents was largely limited to the experiential, the interest shown by these Vipassana practitioners is to do with the utilization of meditative experience for understanding and dealing with the generality of life experience. This is an aspiration that some begin to recognize quickly, but that all

484 ibid.
develop in time. Conversely, some encounter Vipassana and its philosophy in the midst of personal unhappiness. Several people told how they took up meditation in order to get peace of mind to deal with a personal difficulty. For instance, an examination of KBN’s transcript excerpt concerning how he took up meditation in response to a crisis at work, reproduced in Chapter 5, Section 4.3, illustrates this, as does SI’s story:

SI: I was having trouble with anxiety and depression, and that’s what really got me into meditating. I sat at the Zen Centre for three and a half years, and noticed absolutely no change in my life at all, neither in meditation nor in daily living. And I went to the Buddhist library and I thought I’ll just see who else is teaching and what’s available, and I ran into Patrick, and I didn’t know he was a teacher, and he talked about the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, and not long after there was a dana day up there and my girlfriend asked me if I wanted to go up, and I walked into the place, and I thought ‘this is for me.’

The two examples cited above, those of KBN and SI, concern their engagement with the practice as a way of coping with personal anguish. However, HD exemplifies the kind of initial response that participants may have on hearing a teaching on a topic that is relevant to their life experiences:

HD: We were going through marriage problems, and we went to a counsellor … [who] referred my husband to a physiotherapist who ran relaxations classes, but who was actually a Tibetan Buddhist. So we started going along to these, and I found him a most admirable person. He recommended that my husband do a meditation retreat with Phra Khantipalo who was visiting Bendigo where we lived, and I went to the Centre to pick my husband up on the last day, and was invited in by the teacher to hear the last bit of the talk. And it was quietly revolutionary to me, and I turned onto it immediately. He was talking about dukkha, which is that bit of unsatisfactoriness and I had recently had a baby, and I don’t know why, but I really thought that all my troubles would disappear when I had a baby, and to be confronted with the fact that it didn’t happen, in fact, things got sort of more complicated even though she was wonderful and we loved her, was, was dukkha, and here was a man who was laying that out to me. So on the basis of that we were prepared to visit Wat Buddha Dharma where he was from, and 18 months later sold up and moved there.

In contradiction of the view of involvement with retreat-type meditative settings as facilitating flight from personal unhappiness, the experiences of these respondents show how learning to identify the mental states and habitual thinking that cause personal unhappiness leads to an intensifying of this movement towards both the experiential and philosophical dimensions of Buddhist activity. More than this, personal unhappiness and its causes are encapsulated by the Buddhist doctrines of the Three Marks of Existence and the Four Noble Truths. Being able to relate one’s own experience to Buddhist doctrine is a factor in the movement from comprehension of doctrine in the abstract to its internalization as accepted truth.
The function of specific meditative experiences and their interpretation in learning the practice and comprehending the fundamentals of its supporting doctrine were outlined in Chapter 2, Section 4. If one perseveres in the face of the initial inability to concentrate the mind, and with the initial aversion to pain, and learns to use these phenomena as meditation objects, one begins to develop mindfulness to the point where different mental states, usually in the form of the hindrances, can be distinguished. At this stage one still has periods of distraction and the mind still loses the object but, through noting and accepting the dominant mental state of the moment, there is a smoother resumption of mindful attention to the primary and secondary objects. With commitment to the practice, the point is reached where the mind can stay with an object and continue to note its qualities, such as its arising and ceasing, without slipping into concentration. This development gives access to deeper insight experiences. As many accounts reproduced in Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate, this level of ability takes several years of commitment to the practice to develop. Typically, one has already identified oneself as a Buddhist before this capacity for experiential insight has been fully realized.485

Of more relevance to the act of commitment is the realization that self-transformation has occurred. This is found to be true for the Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners alike, although their techniques for effecting self-transformation differ in certain ways. In Chapter 3, Section 2.1 the three types of change are outlined as 1) changes within one’s immediate subjective field of experience, 2) changes to one’s sense of self, and 3) changes to one’s outlook on reality, or worldview. Although these transformations are mutually reinforcing in terms of continued learning and internalization, and respondents’ reasons for seeing themselves as committed Buddhists reflect all three types of change, their verbalized responses foreground the changes to do with sense of self, particularly in their management of their mental and emotional life in relation to others. In terms of the definition of internalization and the recognition of its occurrence, the acceptance of the new universe of discourse as one’s own, and its ascendance to the status of primary authority, which occurs first out of recognition that one has changed, or that one has adopted the Buddhist meaning-system and path as one’s own remains unclear. What is clear is that both involve the comprehension and application of principle and practice to the understanding and negotiation of life experience. The principles are those that form the core of Buddhist doctrine: the Three Marks of Existence and the Four Noble Truths.

Discussion until now has defined the process in terms of duration: the process is gradual, involving subtle change over a period of time. Traditionally, researchers who have applied the essentialist definition of religious change as the ‘radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life’, have further described the conversion

485 See Chapter 2, Section 4.6 for a discussion of these types of experience.
process in terms of the completeness of the personal change, itself identified by the
place occupied in the person’s belief system by the new worldview: at the Centre or
the periphery. Nock’s distinction between conversion and adhesion, respectively a
reorientation of the soul and the acceptance of new religions as useful supplements
rather than substitutes, has been usually applied as a two-fold categorization.
Typically, the meditation practices and their interpretive frameworks are not mixed
with other perspectives. Of the twenty interviewed, only one practitioner mixed
Vipassana and Metta practice with others; in this instance with Shikentaza from the
Zen tradition, although his comments suggested that he had moved away from the
Zen practice in recent times. Two of the teachers interviewed practise yoga as a
health technique, but both consider themselves to be Buddhist.

While many of the practitioners described themselves as Buddhist, it cannot be
assumed to have outlined their senses of root reality. Their day-to-day lives required
them to interact with and negotiate Western styles of thought. Many practitioners
were members of the scientific and medical professions, for instance, HD as a dentist,
SI a health professional, KBT a geologist, and JD a biologist, and therefore schooled
in the Western scientific paradigm. The several who were working or had worked as
psychologists: DN, EBS, and LP, and others would have been educated in the
Western Social Scientific paradigm. These included HR and KBN, university
academics in the discipline of Education before their retirement; RN an adult
educator; KT an architect; HU a solicitor; RL a full-time dhamma teacher who had
studied Law in his early adulthood. These practitioners saw no conflict between
Buddhist and scientific thought. However, it may have been that no direct
paradigmatic conflict to challenge their positions had occurred. Other practitioners:
administrators KN, EJ and EC, and an aged-care worker KM, would have received
more than basic education. It appears that the question of how exclusively
Buddhism provides their sense of root reality is irrelevant to them; Buddhism
appears to describe or map their sense of engagement with the world in terms of
first-person concerns adequately. Beyond this it is difficult to gauge because third-
person concerns, the physical world as a self-evident fact, is part of a taken-for-
granted reality that does not affect their engagement with Buddhism as a first-person
discourse.

Ideally, those who commit to Buddhism have internalized, taken in the Buddhist
worldview and its path as their truth. This is the import of becoming a Buddhist.
One can internalize—accept as true for oneself—a view of reality and its implications
for the person as true, depending on its meeting certain criteria. In this sense a

486 A, Nock. Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo,
Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933, p7; Snow and Machalek, op.cit., p169.
University Press, New York, 2001, p125. Coleman notes that in Shikantaza, the attempt is made
to see experience as it is without imposing an interpretation onto it. This practitioner remarked
in the interview, that “it begins to look like Vipassana after a while anyway.”
religious perspective can be said to be conditionally true. DBT said that he was Buddhist, that he took Buddhism as his view, until something better came along. This view describes the sense in which Buddhism is adopted by some, that it should map experience generally rather than provide it with a system of absolute truth. Adherents were not expecting something to reflect their experience completely. It just had to provide valid interpretive frameworks and strategies for living. For commitment to Buddhism to be continued it must be capable of being sustained by validation of experience through its meaning-system. If such commitment has not occurred to an experienced practitioner, it seems that either that individual has not yet had satisfactory validation, or resists the idea of committing to one tradition or outlook, preferring to remain open to alternatives. According to a definition of commitment based on total or radical change, it can never be complete; the process is open-ended and continual, and conditional upon continued relevance for the individual’s worldview through its validation of experience.

2.3 Religious Background

All but three respondents came from Christian backgrounds. One of the three, EJ, was an indigenous Buddhist from Sri Lanka. She was interviewed because she had re-established her connection with Buddhism through this Western form. Of the two others who were not from Christian backgrounds, KN was raised agnostic and SI answered ‘none’ to religious background. Despite their lack of religious education, both of these reported having been attracted to religion in some form in early life. While still a child, KN asked a neighbour to take her to Sunday school. SI had wanted to become a Catholic nun at fifteen, and remembered developing an interest in Religion and Philosophy while still in her adolescence. The other eighteen respondents were raised in Christian environments, which for some included attending church and a Christian school. The patterns of religious involvement amongst these individuals had varied in intensity and in nature. Several denominations were represented. The majority were Anglican, and some were Catholic, Uniting Church, Presbyterian, or Methodist.

Responses to the question, ‘How did you relate to your religious background?’ entailed three considerations: the amount and nature of recall of events, the strength and nature of belief, and affective response. There was variation among respondents in their ability to recall their religious upbringing. Some answered with a brief statement, and offered a small number of brief memories. Others gave more elaborate descriptions of those circumstances and events that had affected them. With respect to the strength and nature of religious belief held by respondents, and to the strength of feeling for one’s religion as children, a wide range of responses was expressed, from total belief and commitment to total uninterest, and from feeling totally involved to being ‘left cold’. EBS’s experiences were of the former kind:

EBS: I always had a positive relationship to being Catholic, I really enjoyed the ritual, I really liked being an altar boy. I had a strong sense of the spiritual from an early age, and in some ways felt it was a haven for me, given that my family life was a bit disrupted, and I was a fairly sensitive kid. So I had a positive relationship with that. And then at about twelve or thirteen I had a strong sense that the Catholic way of approaching religion as I understood it, which was through my experience of the church and so on, was wrong. I just had a strong inner sense of that, a feeling that … it was the experience that this was not right. What has always fascinated me in retrospect was that I had a sense at that same time that it didn’t mean that the whole area of spirituality was wrong … it was just that that approach was wrong.

GE: Can you remember anything specific about it that you felt was wrong?

EBS: I think it was to do with issues of just believing, the whole notion in Catholicism of the priest knowing what was going on. I think I was starting to have an appreciation that some of the people who were in positions of power, I really didn’t have a lot of respect for.

Other comments of EBS’s indicate that he had a sense for the experiential which he felt the church did not embody despite its ritual. His sundering with his childhood affiliation appears to be a common experience. Many respondents left their Christianity and began to explore other options in their late adolescence and early adulthood. The biography of one practitioner had a pronounced experiential element, which can be seen to have influenced his exploration of Buddhism after leaving Christianity. RL reported having, within a Marist Brothers Catholic setting, a type of spontaneous experience of no-self at sixteen. He described it as the ground falling from under his sense of self. The significance of this experience is its spontaneity, and its lack of prior conditioning within RL’s Catholic setting, wherein there was no prior contact with Buddhism. Pilarzyk refers to experiences of this type as “shock experiences”, as “ruptures in the natural taken-for-granted reality”, and understands them to be part of religious change for some individuals. The memory of this experience became a strong reference point for RL’s questioning of the Christian faith, and his subsequent Buddhist involvement.

In sum, one’s childhood Christianity can be seen to have three influences on later approaches to spiritual involvement and self-discovery: a taste for the experiential in some cases; a preference for what Lofland and Stark called a religious problem-solving perspective; and a respect for an ethical approach to living. The data strongly support the view that the ethical teaching and training provided by a Christian upbringing emerges and becomes more significant as one engages with

Buddhism in adulthood. It is suggested that Christian behavioural ideals are internalized strongly as part of early religious socialization. These ideals find expression through Buddhist practices and doctrinal frameworks in adulthood, especially through compassion practices; ethical elements of meditation practice, such as the five lay precepts taken before and during Vipassana retreats, as outlined in Chapter 2; and through the focus on the three aspects of the Noble Eight-Fold Path: \textit{panna}, \textit{sila}, \textit{samadhi}. One element of several biographies was a description of the way in which the practical application of the ethical dimension in Buddhism enabled individuals to circumvent the authority structure of Christianity that they encountered in their childhood. As HR said, “In Buddhism, it’s what you do. The belief-authority structure is different compared to the Judeo-Christian system.”

2.4 Experimental Histories

The purpose of surveying the previous areas of exploration and involvement by practitioners was to derive an understanding of what leads people to try Buddhism and Buddhist meditation. This Section follows the types of affiliations formed by seekers, and the types of belief and practice responsible for predisposition to and engagement with Buddhism. The principal explorations were: other forms of Buddhism, including Zen, Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, different Theravadin centres, and different teachers, such as Achaan Cha; Eastern-derived meditative and mental hygiene techniques such as Transcendental Meditation, forms of Yoga, and Tai Chi; and some minor involvement with Western Esotericism in that two respondents had been affiliated with local Gurdjieff groups. It appeared that the majority of sampling and exploration had taken place within Western alternative spirituality rather than within mainstream religion. After leaving their childhood Christianity, practitioners followed one of two lines of exploration and involvement.

The first was moving from Christianity straight to an exploration of some form of Buddhism, as seven of the twenty had done. Two of them had strong secular influences in between: KN in rehabilitation, and KBT in the form of education in the hard sciences, which he saw as having a strong effect on his view of reality. Another, artist MV, had travelled in Asia during his adolescence, and there developed ‘a visual taste about Buddhist, Hindu and Confucian culture’. He had developed a Vipassana practice alongside his Zen Buddhism, and undertaken \textit{sutra} studies with local teachers. His description of his personal practice showed it to contain both influences. He was one of two practitioners to do so.

The second was moving from Christianity into an involvement with some form of alternative spirituality before moving on to Buddhism. Twelve of the twenty moved from their childhood Christianity into these practices, predominantly into the meditation-mental hygiene movement as opposed to Western Esotericism. Some examples of engagement were: Yoga, Zen, Vipassana; Transcendental Meditation, Zen, Vipassana; Yoga, Self Transformation (a self-growth movement), Tai Chi and
Vipassana. In several cases Vipassana involvement consisted of exploration with the Wat Buddha Dharma and the Goenka Centre at Blackheath before coming to BMIMC. KM and EBS had been involved with local Gurdjieff groups. EJ, an indigenous Buddhist from Sri Lanka, had read Krishna Murti, and had explored both Siddha Yoga meditation and Western Vipassana with the Goenka method and BMIMC. Many practitioners from both paths had encountered alternative ideas in some form from their reading before their contact with Buddhism, without engaging in other practices or belief systems. DN had read Krishna Murti, Theosophy, Suzuki, some popular Japanese Zen writers, and writings by the Dalai Lama, and although having practised Yoga, RN had read in other religious traditions: Judaism, Sufism and Hinduism at university level.

The progression of involvements or affiliations with spiritualities and groups, as exhibited by the biographies of these practitioners, illustrates some strong characteristics of the process of testing. The first of these involves the aspects of religious activity that are integral to the ongoing experimental process for individuals themselves. The second is to do with the emergence and clarification of one’s needs, values, and sentiments with ongoing participation. For all, the process of experimental immersion has a definite quality and line of trajectory. Individuals’ decisions with respect to selection and testing of a practice or affiliation with a group, and the decision to terminate the contact and move to something else, are based on a criterion or set of criteria that are identified during the trying-out of a practice or a spiritual group. While the language used by some respondents occasionally gave the impression of ‘just trying to get a feel for something’, the reasons for their decisions became clear on explanation. A dominant facet of exploration in experimental journeys was involvement with various forms of meditation. These investigations took place largely in spiritually-oriented contexts, such as Transcendental Meditation and various forms of Yoga.

Each of those practitioners who explored some form of meditation before their exploration of Vipassana expressed their desire for meditation to be practical or applicable in daily life in some way. This is a criterion that seems to have gained increasing clarity in their thinking throughout the progression of their exploration process. While some seekers were simply ‘trying things out’, others by contrast, were initially motivated by a need for a better sense of well-being. As the following narratives will demonstrate, this need for a better sense of well-being may have arisen as a result of physical and mental illness, or from a more general feeling of just needing to find oneself and the answer to life’s problems. However, these narratives show serious engagement with Vipassana to have arisen in connection with the identification of the need for a practice applicable to daily life. From this has arisen the identification of further criteria: to provide techniques with which to enhance direction over one’s mental and emotional life, and to provide a sense of meaning to experience and self-growth.
It is not entirely clear at which point these criteria emerged as important to the individuals concerned. In interview respondents spoke with the wisdom of hindsight, suggesting that the consideration in their descriptions was an articulation of their previous experiences through a Buddhist lens. Often they gave the sense that their perceptions existed during their exploration of other systems, and became more clearly articulated through access to Buddhist ways of thinking. An example is HD, who commented, “I was into Siddha Yoga, and I think it lacks, the meditation is very much concentration, which of course, does suppress the hindrances and you do feel good but the insight doesn’t arise.” Although stated with the view of hindsight employing Buddhist terminology, HD’s remarks indicate that some discrimination has taken place with respect to identifying her desire for a technique which facilitates the development of wisdom.

An instance of an individual ‘just trying things out’, is EC, who expressed the recognition of a growing interest in meditation.

EC: I actually found the relaxation slash meditation part of it [yoga classes] the best part, and after I left that class, I did several others over the years, but I never found one where they emphasized the meditation part of it before, I mean it was called relaxation, but when I look back on it, it was sort of meditation, and it went for quite a while at the beginning and end, so that was a big part of the yoga class, and I had never found that again in a yoga class. It was more for that aspect of it than the postures.

EC’s interest can be seen to change with her progression through her involvements. First the yoga exposed her to meditation and aroused her interest in it, after which the Vipassana awakened her to the more religious aspects of Buddhism. The excerpts from EC’s transcript in Section 1.1 show her to be representative of practitioners in terms of meditative ability and her capacity and willingness to persevere with the practice.

Conversely, HR originally ‘did meditation because it was with the yoga’. She had been a Hatha Yoga practitioner, and had cultivated an interest in the mind-body complex. She ‘liked working with the body’ and ‘paying attention to the body. Yoga, being her only exercise, had enhanced a sense of physical well-being. She enjoyed a feeling of improved flexibility, and also enjoyed the sense of achievement that she gained from postural improvement. After a 20-year gap, she was feeling the effect of job stress and personal issues, and feeling tired, overextended, and suffering from a back injury, she felt as though she had lost connection with her centre, and wanted to connect with words such as stillness and centre. She found herself saying, “If I could just get back to yoga and meditation”.

After some exploration with Zen and Vipassana at the time of interview, she was committed to the ongoing exploration and application of both practices, being drawn
to Vipassana and to the insight aspect of Zen practice equally. Her current Zen teacher also applied the noting or labelling technique central to the Mahasi practice, but encouraged students to be more explicit with their labelling. For instance, with respect to the labelling of feeling, as opposed to applying the label of feeling or anger, one is encouraged to note, ‘feeling anger with so-and-so over such-and-such’. One is also encouraged to check the body for tension or reaction. HR reported that, some time after beginning Zen, she tried some concentration practice and found it useful for supporting the Insight practice. With her concentration strengthened, she found that ‘her mind did not wander so much’. Another significant aspect to her involvement with Vipassana practice is shown by the fact that although originally drawn to the practice because of her interest in the mind-body complex, and because it ‘didn’t contain any ritual’ and ‘seemed cerebral’, with time and acclimatization it awakened a respect for the more religious elements of Theravadin Buddhism.

A small number of practitioners had achieved some success with concentration practice before trying Vipassana. SI had practised both Transcendental Meditation and Zen. She relates, “I was having trouble with anxiety and depression, and that’s what really got me into meditating. I sat at the Zen Centre for three and a half years, and absolutely no change in my life at all, neither in meditation nor in daily living”. She tried Vipassana because she found the concentration practice that she had successfully developed to be inapplicable to life’s problems. Her personal practice is described in Chapter 3, Section 1. These things showed her to be a strong meditator with many years’ productive experience.

Several practitioners expressed a strong preference for the insight practice with the aim of developing wisdom, as opposed to a concentration technique—facilitating pleasurable feelings and blissful states—that produced no lasting change. This may reveal a significant trend for Theravadin Buddhist practice in the West. However, it must be assessed alongside practitioners who were motivated by a more defined response to the potential for practical application of principles and techniques in everyday life. Thus KT, who reported spending about a year in ‘toe-dipping’ before coming to Vipassana. Significantly, only one practitioner, KM, identified an affinity with concentration practice as opposed to insight, and reported success with integrating the concentration into her daily life, both in terms of achieving a regular practice time and in terms of feeling its effects. One practitioner, KN, had learnt Insight techniques in a therapeutic setting, as part of an alcohol rehabilitation program. Her prior exposure to the technique in this manner is referred to in Chapter 3, Section 4.3. The changes that she described as resulting from her application of mindfulness can be seen to have had a profound effect on her day-to-day functioning and on her self-esteem. Her involvement with BMIMC gave her access to the Buddhist framework to which she had been preconditioned through her meditative experience in rehabilitation.
Two practitioners, KM and EBS, had been involved in local Gurdjieff groups. They both likened aspects of Gurdjieff’s approach to aspects of Vipassana meditation. KM likened the approach to mindfulness, and EBS responded to the notion of ‘being awake’. Significantly, neither respondent would offer any more comment than this, because of the pledge of secrecy that they appeared to have undertaken. EBS relates:

EBS: So the next big marker in my mind was that I got into Gurdjieff when I was about eighteen, and that had a pretty strong impact on me. I was only involved for about a year, but the guy who was running it, I think modelled himself on Gurdjieff. He was quite tough, but I don’t think he was particularly sensitive to what he was doing. I found him quite difficult to deal with. This character was quite famous, I worked out later, in the Australian Gurdjieff world, but again, had a big impact because of that whole notion about being awake, that was Gurdjieff’s big thing, about being awake. These were both very inspiring notions to me but I had a lot of fear around it as well. I think all the way through in the early stages there was this interesting relationship between inspiration and fear for me, because I think I was frightened of where this could go, because I felt quite fragile, so it was a sense that I didn’t really have much in the way of building blocks within myself, so I was really attracted to it, thought there was something incredible here that wasn’t anywhere else, but I was always concerned that if I went too far, that maybe I could lose my mind. So that Gurdjieff experience was a bit like that for me... I had these long conversations with this particular character who was running it, he would have these interviews and, he used to say things like, ‘you have to remember that you have to come every Monday and if you don’t come one Monday you can never come back again’ and this sort of stuff.

GE: So it was coercive?

EBS: It was very coercive.

3 Vajrayana Institute and the Perspective of the FPMT

3.1 The Nature of Commitment and Taking Refuge

In contrast to the Vipassana setting, where commitment concerns the practitioner’s private response, the nature and duration of the process leading to commitment in the Vajrayana setting is more empirically observable. The FPMT refuge ceremony marks one’s identity as a Buddhist, and when one feels ready, one takes refuge. The purpose and significance of the refuge ceremony can be seen in Appendix 14. Essentially, one takes refuge in the dharma. One also takes as many of the Five Lay Precepts as one feels able to keep. The taking of refuge marks one as a Buddhist, as practitioners are told during the ceremony. At the time of interview, almost all respondents had taken refuge. A very small number had not for the reason that they

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did not feel ready. When asked, "Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?", DE responded, "At the moment I don't think so, I'm studying Buddhism. There may be a point where I will say 'I'm a Buddhist'". Similarly, MW responded, "I believe that when the time is right, because of what it’s all based on, it’s a bit silly to take refuge [if you do not feel ready]."

Another reason for this visibility is the clearer recall by the Vajrayana respondents of the events, interactions, circumstances, realizations, or experiential moments, and times of their occurrence that constitute the process. For instance, at the time of interview CR recalled that she had been involved with Vajrayana Institute for six years, and had taken refuge three and a half years earlier, leaving a period of two and a half years in between first coming to Vajrayana Institute and taking refuge. Generally, practitioners identified several events or moments that led to the decision to explore the Buddhist teachings and practices, to do so with more intensity, or to take refuge if this intensification point had already been reached. These characteristics emerged very clearly during the course of interviews. For all Vajrayana practitioners interviewed, the adoption of Buddhism was definitely a culmination of a process of learning and application of the principles and practices, and validation of the import of these against one’s own experience. CR relates, “It was a gradual process that involved checking things out for yourself.” Usually, one spends a period of time before the ceremony deciding whether one is ready to take refuge. For instance, CR continues:

CR: That was after I decided, because when I first came I was just … immediately I could tell it was something that was going to be useful to me in my life. So I kept coming, but I was coming on and off, and I didn’t believe in all the things like karma and rebirth, those sort of things. I wasn’t quite sure about those, I was just listening. So it took me a couple of years before I decided that I wanted to take refuge, and, um, that’s when you decide that you are going to become a Buddhist in a more official kind of way, even though it’s not a big public ceremony.

Despite the fact that VI respondents had clearer recall of the process that led to their formal commitment, and its content, variation existed between individual accounts as to of the number of incidents recalled, and their intensity. As with the BMIMC practitioners, accounts reflected what they considered to be important: what they learnt, how they began to apply it, and what changes were produced as a consequence. Accordingly, my reporting and discussion attempt to reflect these concerns.

3.2 The Journey from Engagement to Commitment

Before their contact with VI, several respondents had explored another Buddhist group, or were familiar with some Buddhist literature. MB had attended teachings for 16 months before taking refuge, but he had been reading Gelugpa Tibetan
Buddhist material, including material by the Dalai Lama, and Kathleen McDonald’s *How to Meditate,* before that, and therefore had some familiarity with the meditations and key Gelugpa concepts and practices. For some respondents, contact with VI was precipitated by dissatisfaction with another form of Buddhism. For others the FPMT was their first experience of Buddhism. The manner of contact with the Centre varied between respondents, variously through: a friend or acquaintance; seeing the newsletter *Vajrayana News*; attending the Buddhist Library in Camperdown, Sydney; travel to another FPMT centre; seeing a brochure in a café; attending an art or cultural exhibition; or through attending a public talk by a popular lineage member such as the Dalai Lama or Ven. Robina Courtin.

After first contact, individuals had usually attended a teaching, course or a workshop. Participants are initially engaged by a teaching, rather than a meditation session or a social activity, which engages them through its relevance to their own life circumstances. Some examples of such first teachings and responses are outlined in Chapter 4, Section 5.1.2. Such teachings as the Eight Verses of Thought Transformation, and the antidotes to negative mental states, have at once practical applicability, ethical appeal and value in terms of learning outcomes, in that their practice results in both non-harm toward others, mental transformation for the student, and provide a philosophy or broader rationale for action. The responses to these early experiences must be seen as positive responses to experimental learning situations as distinct from pre-conversion reactions to crises. The recognition of practical life-enhancing strategies within the Buddhist teachings is the quality that creates initial interest in Buddhist philosophy for participants. It overshadows the view that they are merely seeking a solution to a crisis. Seekers often do not formalize their personal problems before they hear them contextualized within the framework of the Buddhist teachings. When this happens, they are impressed both by the interpretation of the problem and its solution according to Buddhist principles.

AN had been curious about meditation in his early adulthood. Before he went to Asia he saw Buddhism as being ‘New Age, with not much depth’. While travelling in Nepal he did the intensive ten-day Introduction to Buddhism course at Kopan Monastery. Those teachings and practices gave him a sense of depth, history, logic, and of things being well-studied, reasoned, and worked out. Added to those were the qualities that he perceived in the monks and nuns whom he met there. He felt proud that he could sit meditating for an hour, an improvement on his previous


492 See Tweed, T. “Night-Stand Buddhists and other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion”, in *American Buddhism,* pp71-90, Curzon Press, 1999, especially pp74-75. Tweed maintains that many in the West fit the profile of the night-stand Buddhist, a sympathizer who reads Buddhist material and incorporates some practices into their life, without any formal affiliation with Buddhism.

fifteen-minute meditations. The course teacher explained ‘a lot of different teachings about Bodhicitta, and the concept of exchanging self for others, and went into reincarnation’, which he then understood to be supported by ‘a whole system of logic’, and he appreciated it as ‘an argument, and not just a New Age catchcry’.

The capacity of these teachings to engage students also functions to provide the foundation for comprehension of more complex points of doctrine further on. In AN’s case, the same core doctrines of bodhicitta and karma were still significant to him after his exploration in Nepal. His discussion about karma with a resident nun at VI at the time, in which she explained that it was ‘not punitive, not a punishment, not retribution, was significant for him in deepening his understanding of the Buddhist perspective. As indicated several times in Chapter 5, the concepts of karma, renunciation and bodhicitta are integral to an understanding of the FPMT’s Gelugpa worldview. The topics of many first teachings that respondents cite as being influential in their response to Buddhism are those common to human experience: how to manage one’s mental states such as desire, attachment, and especially anger. The Buddhist view is that these are the mental states that keep sentient beings in samsara, the ‘three poisons’ of greed, hatred, and delusion, or desire, anger, and ignorance. It is significant that these foundational topics are given considerable attention in teachings, public talks and the FPMT literature. Although students progress to deeper concepts and doctrinal frameworks, their initial appreciation is related to the applicability of teachings and practices. A significant aspect of AN’s experience is seen in his answers:

GE: Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?

AN: Yeah.

GE: Why?

AN: Um … it was definitely crystallized when I decided to take refuge.

AN’s choice of words carries the sense of his using available linguistic tools in achieving a transformation when he decided to take refuge, as it had done for others before him. Staples and Mauss view the use of certain kinds of language and rhetoric as a means to achieve a transformation of self, as opposed to Snow and Machalek, who hold that the conversion rhetoric reflects underlying change that has already occurred.494

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494 Staples and Mauss, 1987, op.cit., p145. Snow and Machalek, 1984, op.cit. The former paper is a critique of the position outlined in the latter paper.
Chapter 6

The strongest support for the view of Staples and Mauss is provided by the narrative of MN, which differs markedly from those of others. MN had been suffering from anxiety and depression, and after a period of searching she began to feel determined to become ordained as a nun. In her own words, she felt desperate. On encountering VI and its religious program, and receiving instruction from sangha members, she realized that she had held an idealized picture of spending her time as a nun in a serene environment. Having become ordained, she faced the challenge of undertaking religious practices that she felt no affinity with. However, when in the role as a nun she began teaching meditation in the community, and visiting terminally ill patients in hospices. During our interview she spoke openly about her identification of her need to be needed and useful, which she believed had caused her illness. She found that her role as a nun legitimated her desire to help others and her fulfilment of this desire. While this narrative is atypical, it illustrates the way in which a role or status change may effect a positive transformation.

Throughout the examination of commitment narratives for the Vajrayana practitioners, cases can be found to support both views, quite conceivably related to the way in which the refuge ceremony, or an ordination ceremony, can be utilized by the practitioners: as an external sign of internal commitment, or as an anticipated rite of transformation. From the perspective of the FPMT, it is most conceivably seen as both. One takes refuge in the dharma as one’s guide on the path to enlightenment, but this action itself can be seen to create merit and purify one’s mindstream. This illustrates both the socially functional role of ceremonies such as refuge and ordination, and their legitimation by the belief system. The significance for both AN and MN is that these ceremonies appear to have been taken in the expectation of change. In his interview, AN, despite his careful evaluation of the teachings and practices, gave no indication of feeling his commitment as a conviction in the way that others had. It was as if his taking refuge was still part of his experimental immersion.

For a small number of practitioners, encounter with Buddhism and the FPMT is a quite different experience, consisting of intense emotional reactions to various aspects of Buddhist culture and symbolism, the descriptions of which are reminiscent of encounters with the numinous. MW recalls three specific events or

495 See Wilson, S. “Becoming a Yogi: Resocialization and Deconditioning as Conversion Processes”, in Sociological Analysis 45 [4], pp301-14, Association for the Sociology of Religion, 1984, p305. In this context, transformation may be seen to have more than one meaning. There is the change in religious status that comes with becoming a Buddhist. There is the kind of change that the worldview prescribes: wholesome actions accrue merit. There is also change in the sense that Wilson alludes to in his comment about people’s experimental approach to ritual that provides opportunities to take part in activities inconsistent with their established self-images, in the hope of bringing about personal change. This kind of anticipated change seems to be directed toward one’s internal sense-of-self. In the ritual context of taking refuge, the anticipated change is definitely to do with one’s orientation to commitment; as if the new role of being Buddhist intensifies one’s commitment.
encounters that ignited her interest in Buddhism. She went to the Art Gallery of NSW to see a Buddhism exhibition, and several events occurred quite quickly:

MW: ... and I was really struck by the beautiful pageantry, especially the Vajrasattva statue. I had one of those things, you know one of those ‘Oh my God’ moments. The chant master from the Gyuto monks gave a presentation on what Buddhism was about, a very simple presentation, and I almost cried because you know I was going through a divorce and life was not going to plan. I was just hanging on every word, and then I heard Robina Courtin. So I had about three moments. I saw the statue, and it had been quite dehumanizing working in the corporate world. I had to put on the persona ... and then to hear this guy talking about love and loving yourself. I went along to Robina’s weekend seminar, and started doing Discovering Buddhism in June or July.

At the time of interview MW had not taken refuge, and was still exploring. She was one of a small number to accord aesthetic elements an influence in their decisions to explore Buddhism. The aesthetic dimension—apart from practitioners’ aesthetic appreciation of the deity iconography used in ritual—as it is encompassed by the chanting, in the imagery within decorations and in the *sutras,* appears to have been incidental to the process in almost all other Vajrayana biographies.

The tantric-type experiences of two practitioners before their involvement with the FPMT and VI need to be considered in terms of their effect on the course of exploration, and future practical orientation of the two individuals. Both had begun exploring Buddhism in its Theravadin form. Both had their experiences in a Theravadin monastery while they were learning meditation: breath concentration and Vipassana respectively. Excerpts from the lengthy original interview transcripts are in Appendix 12: *Tantric Shock Experiences Prior to Involvement with Vajrayana Institute.* In both cases the nature of the experience is unusual for a Theravadin setting, and describes body-based experience that one would normally associate with Tantric practice. For NJ the experience at Bundanoon, near Sydney, and again at the Root Institute in Bodghaya, India, did not recur. However, her other experiences from around that time show similarities to MW’s responses to Buddhist iconography and symbolism discussed above, but that the former’s were much more intense. NJ recalled that, while still in India:

NJ: I was reading Lama Yeshe’s book *Introduction to Tantra* while sitting in this cafe, and I turned the book over and saw his face [in the dustjacket photo], and I just started to sob in the cafe. These things kept happening. Someone started

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496 Effort has been made to preserve the surrounding context for the two experiences related in these excerpts. These experience are also discussed in Chapter 5 in the context of the two individuals’ orientation to sutric and tantric practice, and their ethical outlook. During the interview with MM we had been discussing the relationship between taking vows and Tantric practice, which is how the discussion of this experience originated.
reading the *King of Prayers*, and I just lost it, I became so emotional. It was a really powerful experience, but I didn’t understand why ...

These experiences did not automatically lead the respondents to take refuge. They spent time in learning and familiarization with the teachings and practices before they made the decision to take refuge. For both, however, this exploratory period was a relatively short several months. After returning from India and attending the introductory Lam Rim course at VI, NJ took refuge. Similarly, after her experience, MM began to explore Tibetan Buddhism, and after feeling dissatisfied with the approach at one centre (which she did not name), she tried and committed to the Discovering Buddhism course at VI. As noted above, these experiences are atypical. The more usual are akin to that described by CR:

CR: In January there was a Western monk teaching on the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*. It was fantastic. The whole concept was to cherish and to hold most dear the person who has harmed you, you know, the person you’ve been really kind to who’s then harmed you in turn, they’re the most precious treasure to be able to see them like this. And I just had this feeling of relief, I thought ‘Oh, this is the place, this is what I need to hear’ ... And I kept coming back. In the Easter of that year I went on a retreat with Geshe Dawa, up in the mountains, and he was talking about emptiness and things that were a lot more advanced. Even though I couldn’t quite get it all I could certainly get enough to make it such a worthwhile experience, and I was starting to get more of an understanding of where Buddhism was coming from.

The effect, for CR, was of hearing and relating to the teaching on thought transformation, as outlined in Chapter 4, Section 2.1.2, with evident application to her life, in this instance to the task of transforming strong negative emotions. This is one of several significant events or moments for CR. Another involved stories she had heard about the psychic abilities of the lamas. Several respondents reported occurrences in which a lama had looked straight at them during a class about a subject with direct application to the respondent’s state of mind at the time. Such stories are regarded as ‘proof’ of the lama’s ability to see one’s internal state, and therefore as evidence of the efficacy of the techniques of mental purification. Another event for CR was the taking of refuge and vows, which for her involved an examination of her responses to the Buddhist belief system, especially the doctrinal framework of *karma* and *reincarnation*, as related above in Section 2.1.1. CR’s experience echoes the experiences of many who report two or three moments or points of significance. However, invariably, the initial feeling of connection with a teaching does not precipitate commitment. There was no report of a sudden decision.

When novices begin to attend teachings at the centre they quickly become aware of the variety of teachings on offer, and many begin with one or two courses in order to gain awareness, first of the nature of basic principles, and second of more intricate
and deeper views of the meaning-system. These correspond to apprehension and beginning-comprehension stages, respectively. In practice, the process of acquisition happens gradually, and practitioners do not expect to become experts quickly. The interview material indicated that experimental participation became commitment even while the participant was conscious that they were and would be learning about the meaning-system for some time yet. Commitment is made when participants know that their comprehension of the worldview is able to be used as a viable interpretive framework.

While allowing for individual variation, two factors are observed to influence the decision to commit. First, students reach a point whereat they begin to see how significant ideas fit together. Following this is a growing appreciation of the consistency of thought behind the teachings. Second, exposure to further applicable teachings, and the observation that change to themselves is beginning, often prompts them to take refuge. This self-transformation may involve change to their inner states, in terms of more mental or emotional clarity, or a better sense of well-being, or changes to outer behaviour observable by others. NC’s encounter with, exploration of and commitment to the perspective of the FPMT gives a clear example of the difference between comprehension of the meaning-system in formulating a framework of ideas, and commitment to its aims, after recognition that self-transformation has occurred.

NC had read some Buddhist literature after some unsatisfactory involvement with EST and Life Skills, and then decided to search out a centre. He sought out Queer Dharma, but after a brief period, decided not to become involved because he considered that it was not well-run. He wanted to investigate Tibetan Buddhism because he had heard that it was ‘intellectual and complex’, and looked forward to the challenge of using his intellect and analytical skills. The first course he attended at VI was Buddhism and Western Psychology in mid-2003. He recalls, “Because I’d read those books, things just started dropping into place straight away”. He reread the Dalai Lama’s book containing a short series of discourses on the Lam Rim, and remembers being engaged by the concept of renunciation. During a business trip to Malaysia for several months, he read Kathleen McDonald’s How To Meditate, and said that “For three months those meditations were my practice”. On returning to Australia he began Discovering Buddhism. He recalled that the module on Tantra ‘made me want to go back and get a closer look at Renunciation and Bodhicitta’. He also expressed appreciation of the notions of emptiness and compassion, and how all of these notions interconnected. He attended the Discovering Buddhism modules Emptiness, Mind and Its Potential, How to Meditate, Presenting the Path, and ‘the Saturday teachings by Geshe Samten’. His interview transcript shows that he

497 For the Vipassana practitioners, this point was where they began to experience and understand some of the deeper experiential aspects. Although this was discussed in Chapter 4, it is important to note it here because this stage has so much influence on progression to the formal commitment stage for the Vajrayana practitioners.
understood the interconnections between core Mahayana ideas, and acquired a framework for them quite quickly. This included comprehending the ethical aspect and its reasoning. The point that distinguished internalization from commitment is demonstrated by:

NC: ... the answer’s probably different before I took refuge and now, because the decision to take refuge was because I think I’d seen enough practical impact on my life, over the last year particularly, to develop the confidence that there was good practical application, and I’m a practical person. To me, the value is in seeing tangible differences, so I thought that ... I got the point where I thought, ‘Well. This is well worth me committing to more, and I’ll get more benefit by committing more, so that’s what got me to decide, and I think since taking refuge, the thing that changed over the last couple of months is a real deepening of that sense of refuge. So if you talk about conversion, that’s probably happened I’d say, around taking refuge, since the refuge ceremony about two months ago.  

It is at this moment of self-reflection, when seekers look back over the period of involvement and see the constructive changes that have occurred to thought and behaviour, that they either decide to take refuge, or make a conscious decision not to commit yet. In either case, the moment of self-reflection marks a definite active decision.

When the definition of commitment is restricted to commitment to the worldview and spiritual path of the tradition concerned, the dominant areas of religious activity involved in socialization are: the doctrinal or philosophical, the social or interpersonal, and the practical and experiential. In this Buddhist context the dominant factor in commitment is the comprehension and internalization of the framework of ideas. Although Smart defines the doctrinal or philosophical and the ethical as two separate dimensions of religious activity, in this religious context their interrelatedness is significant for the meaning-making and maintenance activities of students. In Chapters 4 and 5 it was shown that the practical and experiential dimensions of activity facilitate internalization of the framework. While some practitioners may go on to develop a strong and regular meditation practice, for many students practice is not deeply implicated in the initial stages of encounter and investigation. Some may try the meditations and come to pujas, but these things are seen mainly as the practical side to the teachings and as ways to accumulate merit.

498 The rest of this excerpt dealing with the opening up of a sense of spaciousness felt by NC on performing his refuge commitments is discussed in Chapter 5, Section 2.1.

The effect of meditative experience on commitment varies between practitioners. For some, after the initial stages of encounter and the decision to explore, their meditation practice and experience becomes an integral part of their Buddhist involvement and its expression in their daily life. The social or interpersonal dimension, comprising religious authority figures such as sangha members and lay teachers, and other students and adherents, can be seen to facilitate the socialization process. Many students are attracted to the presentation style and personal qualities of particular teachers, and inasmuch as this influences their deeper investigation of the perspective, or their decision to commit to it, the authority figures act as facilitators, not causal agents. The teachers appear to function more by helping adherents to keep their commitment, or as the outer representation of the inner refuge object. This section has outlined the nature of the commitment process as a recognition of shifts in thought—in interpretive framework—and behaviour, and a decision based on these shifts. The following two sections show how these shifts and decisions relate to religious background and prior religious experimentation.

3.3 Religious Background

All but one of the respondents from the FPMT had a Christian background. Of the denominations of Christianity represented: Catholic (eight of 18), Anglican (four) and Orthodox (one Ukrainian and one Serbian), and Protestantism, the majority had been either Catholic or Anglican. The one respondent who answered ‘none’ to religious background also reported that, as a child of about seven, after being exposed to the Anglican faith taught in the English public school system, she sought religious education in Catholicism at the local presbytery. Her Catholic affiliation lasted into her early adulthood. For all of those raised as Catholics, except for one, KI, Catholicism remained the dominant, if not only, religious influence throughout their childhood and early adolescence. EF recounted:

EF: … It was the only thing we knew. It wasn’t just a Sunday thing. It was in your whole life, really. … It was just part of our growing up. I mean, it was totally part of our life, in that we had prayers in the house. In my house, my mother was very religious, so we said the Rosary every evening, and every time you went out the door you were sort of sprinkled with Holy Water. And Sunday, as a young person, was very much involved in the Church.

Although nearly all those of Catholic upbringing went to church and received a Catholic education, the intensity of personal involvement varied. For instance, NJ said, “Now I can see how much Christian ideas influenced me because I’m part of this culture, but growing up, I didn’t feel a strong connection to it at all”, while AN said, “I don’t have any bitter rejections of it”. Those who came from a Protestant denomination were, in general, exposed to more variability in religious influence. Sometimes this was occasioned by attending a church or school from another denomination, owing to availability and location. MVR was ‘brought up Presbyterian’, but ‘went to Anglican schools’. Sometimes this was because of the
differing outlooks of parents. RI’s religious affiliation was Presbyterian, but he felt more drawn to his intuitive mother’s and grandmother’s view of the world, which was to ‘believe in a lot of things that I can’t see, can’t hear, can’t touch’. In short, he ‘preferred their tea leaves to God’. MW, from the Orthodox Church, recalled going to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with her father, but also described her mother as a religious seeker who explored both Baptist and Christadelphian forms of Christianity. Often the content of respondents’ recollections reflected most strongly their parents’ dominant concerns. WR, from a Serbian Orthodox background, could remember going to religious rituals, being impressed by the liturgy, helping her grandmother prepare the food for special feast days, and listening to the discussions of politics and ethics in the house, but not hearing any discussion of scripture.

Although some recalled enjoying the social part of religious life more vividly than the scriptures, several adherents told of the constancy with which the ethical aspect of Christianity seemed to surround them. MC recalled memories from his adolescence, and MN described the nature of the Christian beliefs that she held into her early adulthood, and up to the time that she was married with two small children.

MC: Yeah, I started going to the Uniting Church. I had a girlfriend that went to the same group. It was a far more social environment and experience. I met an awful lot of people outside of school, that would have been Year Eight. We used to go on trips everywhere, so I was actually going to a different church to the one my family went to. That was the year that the three churches … all joined together, within a year of that. But then again, I didn’t go to the services, I just went to the study groups and things like that.

GE: And when you went to the study groups, was it for social interaction?

MC: Almost totally social interaction, but it was still with … I mean there’s got to have been an awful lot of … ethics that was going on, morality and practice. I mean it’s always there. It’s just a part of the way they all interacted with each other, even in a social environment, because there were a lot of older people who were driving people around and doing other things, so you basically, difficult to remember exactly how much …

MN: I believed in Christianity, and definitely in the Ten Commandments, and that children needed some sort of religious upbringing …

GE: So, you believed in God and Jesus?

MN: No, I didn’t believe there was a Creator. I did not believe in Adam and Eve. However, I did feel that there was some sort of spiritual being that we could pray to in a time of need, but I didn’t worry whether he answered my prayers or not. Now, of course being a Buddhist, you’re actually making life
positive for yourself... ‘Obey your parents’ was very important to me. Stealing, killing, the Ten Commandments were very, very important. I think they were more important to me as a way of life than as a religious concept. I don’t believe in Moses or the Bible, but I think the Ten Commandments ... they were ideals that I wanted to follow my life through, just another thing, like parent-children discipline would rub off onto your children.

3.4 Experimental Histories

Apart from the moral or ethical training that have brought with them from their original Christian socialization, it appears that respondents’ approach to Buddhism was influenced by aspects of philosophy and practice acquired from previous experimental affiliations before their involvement with Buddhism. Most respondents had explored (see above) some or other spiritual milieu from the contemporary Western alternative scene. These included other forms of Western Buddhism such as Queer Dharma, Goenka Vipassana, and Zen; forms of Eastern-derived meditation and mental health practice such as Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, and Tai Chi; Western Esotericism and its off-shoots, such as Theosophy, Spiritualism and Occultism; and courses given by self-growth organizations such as Landmark Forum (EST). The meditative-mental hygiene category is under-represented, and the self-growth/New Age category is the most represented.

The same two kinds of path from childhood Christianity to Buddhism taken by the Vipassana practitioners were also taken by the Vajrayana practitioners. Nine of the Vajrayana practitioners interviewed: NJ, AN, RI, MVR, MW, EF, MF, KD, and ER had passed straight from Christianity into Buddhism. Four of these (NJ, AN, RI, EF) had met other religious ideas in their travels, but had no other religious affiliations. Two (RI, MVR) had read about Western Esotericism without affiliating with a group. The second route, from Christianity to Buddhism by way of some form of alternative spirituality, had been taken by seven (CR, LL, LLM, VP, MB, BC, and LB). Of these, one had been involved in meditation-mental hygiene (Transcendental Meditation), and with four others (BP, MM, MN, NC, DE), had been actively exploring in groups and organizations in the self-growth-New Age category. Two (WR and MC) were loosely connected to Western Esotericism or Occultism by their interests, reading habits, and contacts. As a generality, it appeared that these Vajrayana practitioners had moved within the Western Alternative Reality tradition either by means of a fluid association with esoteric influences having no stated organizational affiliation (with Western Esotericism/Occultism), or as active participants in self growth-New Age groups.

Examination of the experimental or explorative journeys of these seekers clearly shows that exploration within Western Alternative Spirituality involves both active participation in groups and courses, and personal exploration of and through reading material. Because some practitioners discussed influences as ideas and areas of interest, and not in terms of practice or group attendance, one can conclude that
they had not actively participated in a group or organization. This is most noticeable in Western Esotericism. Because of the manner of reporting, in some cases it is difficult to determine the number of affiliations an individual had had, but it is evident that practitioners had been exposed to many spiritual ideas through their reading and travel. This latter is a significant exposure. Some (NJ, AN, MM, MVR, and DE) had visited meditation centres and/or gone on retreats during travel overseas, and some (RI, EF, and WR) had been influenced by Eastern religious ideas during visits to Asian countries on business.

3.4.1 Personal Journeys and Orientations

The explorational path of some shows a prior orientation toward alternative reality tradition in some observable form. Two practitioners (MVR and WR) had explored some facet of Western Esotericism beforehand. For MVR, from a Protestant Christian background, and with an interest in mysticism, religion and psychology, this was through reading. She did not mention any prior group affiliations. She was drawn to the symbolic systems of Tarot and of Jungian psychology. She was drawn to what she perceived as being the philosophical wisdom contained in the symbol system of the Tarot. Despite that, she reported that she felt as though this did not contain the depth of wisdom she wanted, describing that as ‘a ground of being’—a term she borrowed from Paul Tillich—for which she had sought deliberately. What appeared to have attracted her to Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhism was the way in which its particular understanding of ground of being, that is Emptiness and Dependent Origination as ultimate and relative selves, work with other aspects of the perspective.

VP was one of two practitioners attracted to various forms of the metaphysical subculture that have their origins in late nineteenth-century occultism and spiritualism. Her interests included healing, reincarnation, psychics such as Edgar Cayce, Tarot, colours, auras, and a variety of psychic phenomena and abilities. Both practitioners appeared to have been drawn to a local FPMT centre initially by their perception of the healing abilities of a local geshe. As they became more familiar with Mahayana Buddhism, their orientation shifted to include appreciation of its ethical approach and its focus on compassion, which then could harness and use their interest in healing. Both have taken refuge, and call themselves Buddhist. In conversation, both give the impression that their entry into Buddhism was facilitated by similarities between notions of healing using colours in occultism and the Gelugpa systems of colour correspondences for the deities.

Several of the Vajrayana practitioners had explored self-growth organizations, but these appeared not to have had any lasting effect. Two had explored Landmark Forum or EST, and reported having a virtually identical response to it. Both recognized in hindsight that it contained ideas that were akin to Emptiness, but both
were put off by the selfish emphasis it placed on “I” or “me”. CR and NC offered these comments about their experiences:

CR: I did a whole lot of courses at Landmark Education, you know, Forum. They were fantastic for me at the time, and a lot of it I’ve discovered since, was borrowed from Buddhism. Concepts akin to the idea of emptiness, and this idea that things don’t exist in this concrete way, but in the end it just seemed empty, because it didn’t have thousands of years of wisdom, didn’t have a Buddha. It came out of America, it came out of Werner Erhardt who had read a lot of books. When I was doing these personal development courses, after a while I started to get really sick of them, because it just seemed to be focussed on me, me, me, even though they were talking about being of service in the world, there was that, but it still seemed to be very I-centred.

NC: A lot of what it talks about is really about Emptiness. The final thing they say is that you and your life is empty and meaningless. They’ve got a slightly different slant on it, but the effect of it, when they do it in the course is that you’re left there with a hollow blank feeling, the same sort of feeling that (inaudible) when you’re doing meditations on emptiness. I think within about a year, the whole New Age thing, the thing it lacked to me … it all seemed quite selfish, you know. How can I be happier. ... How can I be richer. It was all very self-centred. To me that seemed a bit hollow.

The expressed dislike for the emphasis on self suggests that this aspect of EST philosophy facilitated some self-examination by the two seekers, and this prompted them to leave. The identification of both characteristics by CR and NC can be seen as the expression of preconditions for their future involvement with Mahayana Buddhism. The aspect of EST discourse that they likened to Emptiness (but did not describe in detail) struck a positive note with both, while the emphasis on me was the opposite. Insofar as they both went on to explore and commit to a tradition that accommodates both of these conditions, it can be seen that their involvement with EST supplied the opportunity for them to explore their own ideological and religious needs. Though both CR’s and NC’s manner of expression suggests that the identification of both personal needs and desirable qualities of a spiritual discipline is retrospective, the explorative histories of these seekers show how a set of needs, identified during the passage of time, act as a set of prerequisites or preconditions for the next, in this case Buddhist, involvement. NC said that he learned from EST to accept that everything in his life was his responsibility, but felt that the shortcoming was that ‘it brings you up to this point where you’re feeling great, but doesn’t give a lot of skills to make changes happen in your mind that stay and last.’ After exploring Life Skills, his dissatisfaction with the self-centred approach of these kinds of organizations led him to read Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese Christian mystic, because, in NC’s words, ‘he talks about focussing on other people rather than focussing on yourself’. Moments later in the interview he said that he wanted Tibetan Buddhism because he’d heard it was intellectual and complex, and wanted the analysis and use of intellect.
NC’s statements reveal a set of conditions he was looking for that emerged from his interaction with these groups and ideas. First, he wanted a discipline that gave him techniques to effect enduring personal transformation. Second, he seems to have accepted the notion that life is inherently empty and meaningless, although this latter is not the Buddhist meaning of Emptiness or sunyata. Third, he accepted responsibility for his own life. Fourth, he realized that he wasn’t happy with a selfish approach, and fifth, he wanted something that engaged his intellect. All of these issues pre-existed his encounter with Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhism, which can be seen to facilitate satisfaction of these wants. First, all of the meditative and contemplative exercises within Buddhism are techniques for effecting enduring self-transformation, and they work as part of an integrated and coherent religious system with a clearly articulated philosophy. Second, at the centre of this system is the notion of emptiness, the view that all phenomena are empty of inherent, unchanging existence, and exist according to causes and conditions. Third, in the Buddhist view—Theravada and Mahayana alike, despite the seemingly endless dispute about self-liberation vs the bodhisattva ideal—one is ultimately responsible for one’s own mental purification and attainment of enlightenment. Fourth, the Mahayana perspective highlights compassionate action towards others, and fifth, the Gelugpa lineage is distinguished from other Tibetan Buddhist lineages because of its emphasis on intellectual understanding and debate as a necessary mental training.

4 The Nature of Commitment: Some Comparisons

The purpose of this section is to outline the salient features of the exploration, socialization, and commitment process, through a comparison of the experiences of the practitioners affiliated with both Centres. At the time of interview, respondents had either committed to Buddhism, that is, actively chosen to take on the Buddhist perspective of the Centre, or had decided to remain a student, committed to ongoing participation in the Centre’s activities, and to the study and application of teachings or practices. Commitment was understood by Vipassana practitioners as the recognition that at some point a change in orientation had occurred; that at some point they had accepted the Buddhist principles as true for them. Conversely, the decision to commit for Vajrayana practitioners was marked by the taking of refuge. In both cases, commitment is an active process of exploration and decision making, based on the capacity of the Buddhist worldview and its practices to map personal experience, to aid its interpretation and negotiation by providing lived experience with meaning. Before we take a deeper look at the particulars of the socialization and commitment process, we shall review data on religious background and experimental histories.

500 This is the purpose of Chapter 5, to explain how enduring self-transformation is effected by the various ritual and meditative exercises.
4.1 A Comparison of Backgrounds

Virtually all of the respondents were from a Christian background. While most were Anglican or Catholic, other denominations were represented also. Individual responses to early religious socialization were broadly favourable, neutral, or unfavourable, and in some cases, not particularly detailed. The dominance of a Christian upbringing in the lives of these practitioners is understandable when it is considered that modern Australia is an originally and predominantly Christian country. It is made significant by the fact that Australia is also a secular society in which many people profess no religious affiliation. The fact that two out of the twenty Vipassana practitioners, and the one Vajrayana practitioner who reported having no familial religious influence, developed an interest in religion at an early age, suggests that the exposure to the existence of religious ideas generally, rather than to any specific ideology or tradition, may be a causative factor for seekerhood.

It appears that all practitioners were conditioned to the idea of a religious outlook early in life. The three who had no exposure to religion in their family environment, KN, SI, and ML, were curious enough to instigate their own religious exploration before reaching adulthood, at the ages of approximately nine, fifteen, and seven respectively. The accounts of these three indicate that they did not acquire a religious perspective from their family environment, but were exposed to religious ideas in their wider social environments such as school and circles of acquaintances, which were Christian. It is deduced that the curiosity was with their positive interpretations of other people’s actions—going to church and to Sunday school—rather than with Christianity per se. Significantly, in each case, these individuals became actively involved in religious exploration and activity. Added to this is that nearly all respondents engaged in religious or spiritual exploration, or in self-development activities, in their early adulthood.

In this way, practitioners’ early religious socialization can be seen to condition them to a style of perception and deliberation founded in a transcendent frame of reference, akin to Lofland and Stark’s notion of a religious problem-solving perspective, introduced in 1965. In line with this notion, exploration was ideologically or experientially motivated; the ideologies explored were religious or spiritual, not political or to do with purely secular, pragmatic, this-worldly concerns. The notion that these individuals were predisposed to interpret reality and experience according to a transcendent frame of reference is supported by a number of considerations. Practitioners’ experimental journeys consisted of movement between organizations with transcendent worldviews. Seekers moved on from their childhood Christianity to explore other worldviews: those of Buddhism, spiritual

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501 Lofland and Stark, 1965, *op.cit.* Possession of a religious problem-solving perspective as opposed to another type, for instance a political one, was one of the predisposing factors to religious conversion, according to their Worldsaver model, generated by their research on the Divine Precepts, the early form of the Unification Church.
Traditions and practices, or self-growth organizations. Those who tried the self-growth area likened it to New Age thought, and went on to explore other spiritual practices. Even one, RN, who saw herself as a seeker for truth rather than as a Buddhist, chose a religious perspective as her primary view and means of ongoing seekership.

In all forms of Buddhism, commitment to ethical thought and behaviour is central.\textsuperscript{502} The discussion in previous chapters of the data to do with the motivation for Buddhist study and practical application may give the impression that practitioners' concerns were largely this-worldly, and used Buddhist techniques in order to improve the quality of this life without taking the doctrines of *karma*, reincarnation, or enlightenment into account. However, the interview material also highlights the search for answers and coping strategies that were framed by a religious perspective. Added to which, regardless of the stated goal of practice, Buddhism allows for this-worldly and transcendent goals, although it encourages the latter.\textsuperscript{503} The interview material also highlights the emphasis placed on ethics through the practice of compassion, attention to right speech and action, devotion to the development of equanimity, and particularly—for Vajrayana practitioners—through fostering the *bodhisattva* motivation.

Ethical practices are completely integrated with other meditative techniques aimed at attaining enlightenment in the views of both Buddhist forms. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, many Westerners find the Buddhist combination of ethics and meditation appealing. The respect for an ethically-motivated life, and the desire for an ethically grounded framework for thought and behaviour, appears to have been engendered by practitioners' Christian upbringing, and continues to provide an orientation to the world and a rationale for putting personal beliefs and values into practice. Many agreed with the ethical sentiments of Christianity, but remembered having a negative reaction when those around them espoused moral values they did not practise. Many felt that Christianity did not provide a method for ethical practice, in contrast to Buddhism, where the practice of ethics is inextricably bound to the practice of meditation and the development of insight.

### 4.2 Experimental Histories

The explorational journeys of respondents were seen to take one of two paths to reach Buddhism. The first, with the exception of one who spent time in rehabilitation, moved from Christianity straight into a form of Buddhism, albeit that

\textsuperscript{502} Preliminary research with the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order had shown ethics to be highly important to that group also. See Chapter 1 Section 1.1: *The Western Buddhist Ethnographic Field*, for the reasons why this group was not included in the study.

most of these individuals explored at least one other form of Buddhism before settling into a pattern of study and practice with either BMIMC or VI. The second route was from Christianity through various forms of alternative spirituality into Buddhism. In both cases, prior exploration of other areas of Buddhism included some well-known traditions and organizations, and some well-known teachers. Exploration also included crossing the Theravada-Mahayana divide. Explorative histories and decisions did not indicate a direct link between one’s original Christian denomination and the forms of Buddhism explored and eventually adopted. Choices of groups and practices were determined by access to other groups through prior knowledge and contacts. One obvious difference between the two paths is the stance taken toward authority. Many forms of self-growth movement and alternative spirituality have been labelled self-religions by Heelas, because of their apparent reliance on inner guidance rather than on external religious authority. Similarly, Sutcliffe and Bowman define the common feature of alternative spirituality in comparison with official religion to be a preference for the ideals of self-determination and agency over institutional membership and ideological boundary. Conversely, those who take the first route may be expressing the need for a clearly defined authority structure, and a textual basis for study and practice.

It is conceivable that the needs for defined authority and textual foundation are recognized by the seekers of both routes; these are offered by both forms of Buddhism in the form of refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. According to Sharf, historical and ethnographic evidence places the privileging of experience with certain Twentieth-Century Asian reform movements, especially those urging a return to Zazen or Vipassana. While he does not dispute the possible experience of altered states, he suggests instead that such discourse functions ideologically and performatively ‘in the interests of legitimation and institutional authority’. This can be seen to operate within the FPMT and VI, as described in Chapters 4 and 5, where the emphasis appears to be on motivation and faith rather than on meditative prowess.

An overview of the experimental affiliations of Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners highlights a difference in preference between the two categories of practitioner. Pre-Vipassana exploration tended toward the Eastern meditative techniques such as Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, and Tai Chi, and pre-Vajrayana, slightly more toward self-growth movements and Western Esotericism.

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504 Hedges, E, and Beckford, J. “Holism, Healing, and the New Age”, in Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality, pp169-87, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p172. They believe the label to be appropriate for the alternative forms of spirituality that encourage practitioners to rely on inner guidance rather than on external texts and authorities.


506 Sharf, R. “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience”, in Numen 42, pp228-83, E.J. Brill, 1995, p228. He claims that the role of experience in the history of Buddhism has been greatly exaggerated in contemporary scholarship.
While both paths involved the exploration of ideas, Vipassana practitioners had been more involved with the exploration of practice using altered experiential states. These techniques provide access to and development in one of the two meditation techniques: concentration or insight, although those practitioners concerned, were experienced in concentration before coming to BMIMC. The Vajrayana practitioners who showed an interest in Western Occultism or Esotericism exhibited an affinity for the kind of associational or symbolic thought that occurs in Western Esoteric belief-systems such as Astrology, Magic and Alchemy, although as noted in Chapter 5, Section 3.2, the Tibetan system does not emphasize the conceptual aspect of knowledge, but the direct experience of the deity through practice. Although it is a minor trend, it may be one way in which the passage from Western Esotericism into Vajrayana Buddhism facilitates the transition from conceptual learning to a more experiential orientation.

The substance of practitioners’ reasons for choices, and of the significance they attribute to their experiences, indicates that it is in the nature of their concerns to value experience and self-knowledge above that of validating the truth-claims of organizations and their authorities. What appears to be missing is methodical investigation of the frameworks of ideas and historical backgrounds of the groups and areas that practitioners explored. It was as though the dominant impulse was to sample the group’s meaning-system and practice for what could be comprehended and applied to one’s own experience, as opposed to seeking an ultimate view of reality or questioning the reality behind the power-structure.

For those practitioners who commit to Buddhism, it is reasonable to deduce that commitment marks the transition from seeker to serious Buddhist practitioner. Ellwood maintains that membership in groups that facilitate the phenomenon of seekership, allowing people to ‘try’ before they commit, simply reaffirms the seekerhood status of participants without leading to radical change. Clearly this is an accepted approach to religious involvement within Western alternative spiritual groups. However, while Western Buddhism also facilitates this experimental

507 These affiliations were, in the main, very limited to one group or manifestation of Western Esotericism. There was no in-depth exploration of philosophy, and no movement between related groups in order to indulge in deeper exploration of the area. For instance, Kevin Tingay outlines a taxonomy of movements related to Theosophy. See Tingay, K. “Madame Blavatsky’s Children: Theosophy and Its Heirs”, in Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality, pp37-50, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p40. My own personal experience of this area of Western spirituality is that seekers typically move from one group to another, forming opinions through direct comparison. Although this issue is a complex one, I am still struck by the lack of any deep or broad affiliations by these individuals. Affiliations were limited to one group.


509 See Ellwood, R. Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America, University of Chicago Press, 1979, p10. Also see Richardson, 1985, p.170. He maintains that ‘appropriate behaviour does not mean total commitment’.
approach, the phenomenon of seekerhood itself is not native to Buddhist thought, and both centres promote the view that mental transformation does not result from casual or infrequent effort. Commitment also involves the acceptance of the new religious perspective as an internal frame of reference, and as the gateway between discrete universes of discourse grounded in very different views of reality.

Gaining access to information about the activities of Western Buddhist groups is easy, and therefore, what is on offer is easily assessed. Buddhist centres in Sydney share the same advertising means, and present as options within the same religious supermarket. Two significant questions that must be asked, are ‘Why Buddhism and not something else?’ and ‘Why this particular form of Buddhism?’ Part of the answer lies, I maintain, in the contemporary nature of seekerhood itself. Sutcliffe contrasts two views of the seeker: Lofland and Stark’s emphasis on the seeker’s difficulties and discontent, and Straus’s focus on the seeker as active creator of life change. The quest or project becomes both to find and actively create solutions to difficulties, without becoming enmeshed in religiously authoritative and hierarchical structures before one is sure that what is on offer is both efficacious and ethically satisfactory.

As outlined in Chapters 2 and 4, the approach of each Centre facilitates the needs of participant explorers. Both Centres offer a teaching and participatory style that allows for an individual pace of acclimatization and participation. For the reasons above, investigation of Buddhism is part of a natural progression in individual explorations, for example, from Transcendental Meditation to Vipassana, if the motivation is to find a practice that is more applicable to daily life. This suggests that the religious counterculture facilitates access to Buddhism generally, but for individual reasons. Through ongoing socialization, the nature of individual belief and aims of practice become gradually oriented to a Buddhist view, especially toward its ethical outlook and doctrines of mental transformation. Many demonstrated their willingness to accept the authority of the dharma, almost in contradiction to the current of alternative self RELigion, which places the source of authority within the individual.

4.3 The Commitment Process

An examination of the interview data from both types of practitioner identified the same core characteristics as descriptors of the commitment process. It is felt to be a process of intensifying involvement with the principles and practices. It takes from

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510 Both BMIMC and VI have the same advertising means and methods: both have their own website, are listed on Buddhanet, in the phonebook, in the Buddhist library newsletter, in pamphlets and posters. While BMIMC’s website is more comprehensive in its coverage of various activities, both websites give activity schedules and contact details.

months to years for practitioners, but it is empirically observable as a series of events or decision points, as opposed to one turning point. However, in noting the process of deepening commitment to their perspective, practitioners were not usually aware of more than a few events that had led to the decision to commit, or to the recognition that commitment had taken place. Self-transformation is observed to be more-or-less incremental during the period. There were no reports of sudden, dramatic change in self-concept or identity, but rather an awareness that a more subtle type of change had occurred to habitual mental and emotional states. The experience of both types of practitioner demonstrated a strong relationship between recognition that self-transformation had occurred—that one had already accepted the Buddhist outlook to some degree—and that one was either committed to it or wished to commit because of it.

Of all the ways in which researchers attempt to describe and define the essential nature of change, the categorization approach has traditionally dominated, taking for its definitive character the notion of radical personal change. Chapter 1 referred to a number of scholars who have applied Nock’s, Berger’s and Travisano’s dual category system to religious data, in order to determine change as complete or partial. Of the two forms, conversion and alternation as defined by Berger and Luckmann, Travisano and Pilarzyk, the view of alternation is better suited to describing the observed nature of change.

Some of the qualities that are often taken to indicate complete conversion are not demonstrated by either category of practitioner. Apart from the difficulty of determining whether a complete transformation of the individual’s worldview has occurred, the data in question indicate that the identification of self-transformation is more significant in people’s decisions. What they comprehend of the new meaning-system appears plausible in the light of its perceived efficacy. Acceptance and belief still remain conditional on the intactness of the plausibility structure. Some of the qualities that Pilarzyk attributes to alternation apply to both categories of Western Buddhist. First, there is a milder cognitive transformation than is expected with cases of conversion, accompanied by gradual and easy changes in lifestyle, meaning, and identity. These transitions are not all-inclusive and do not prohibit the utilization of other organizing principles or frameworks in the reinterpretation of subjective reality, although there is a difference exists between the two Buddhist perspectives in this respect. At BMIMC Vipassana is taught within the Theravadin

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515 *ibid.*
framework of meaning, where the aim is the development of mindfulness and insight. This does not prevent the application of the meditation technique to secular purposes. Although at VI the point of taking refuge is to acknowledge the Dhamma as the supreme authority, this does not prohibit other religious involvement.

### 4.3.1 The Nature of Religious Affiliation, Identity, and Biography

Although there is no prohibition against other belief systems, it is usual that after practitioners have committed, Buddhism becomes their primary, if not only, religious involvement. Of utmost significance for understanding the nature of commitment, in both Buddhist settings, is the fact that those who saw themselves as Buddhists did so on the foundation of their belief in the tradition’s worldview, and faith in its salvational path. The reports of respondents allow the confident assertion that participants engage with Buddhism because of an interest in Buddhist teachings, practices, and sentiments. Differences between practitioners lie in their affinity for certain aspects of the meaning-system. From what respondents say at interview, their beliefs are not syncretic, and Buddhism is not adopted as an adjunct to other belief systems, which fits the view of conversion held by Nock as ‘a change in one’s sense of root reality’, and by Snow and Machalek as ‘the adoption of a new universe of discourse as one’s primary authority’. While a small number are initially curious about meditation, with exposure, the interest of practitioners turns to philosophical and ethical concerns.

In their attempt to isolate the true convert, Snow and Machalek postulated four rhetorical indicators of conversion status: four properties of speech and reasoning: biographical reconstruction; adoption of a master attribution scheme; suspension of analogical reasoning; and embrace of a master role.\(^{516}\) Biographical reconstruction involves a dismantling of the past and its reconstitution within a new religious or ideological meaning-system and its vocabulary of motives.\(^{517}\) However, the radical reorganization and reinterpretation of the past that is held to occur is not expressed in the present respondents’ accounts, the nature of which suggest instead that identity is partially integrated into a new set of meanings, as Pilarzyk’s notion of alternation suggests.

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If we apply to the two sets of reports Beckford’s logic of congruence, that the features of the actor’s account are made congruent with the group’s ideological rationale, the most likely ideological rationale to employ would be that individuals reached a point of renunciation and began to crave enlightenment. This was simply not reported by the Vipassana practitioners. The most applicable part of FPMT doctrine in this instance would be experience of the awakening of the Bodhisattva motivation before taking refuge. While one or two brief references were made to the realization of this awakening in hindsight, they were not made with the intensity that both Berger and Beckford assert as implicit in retrospective accounts. Similarly, the other three rhetorical indicators, adoption of a master attribution scheme, suspension of analogical reasoning, and embrace of a master role wherein converts introject the convert role and see themselves in terms of that role, were not found to apply to these respondents.

Practitioners observe that personal transformation results from applying the teachings and techniques in personal practice, which has a significant influence on commitment. Practitioners from both Centres describe the same set of changes. These include feeling less judgmental, and more tolerant of others, feeling more compassion, and gaining the capacity to deal with anger and negative mental states in a more satisfactory manner. Staples and Mauss see conversion as primarily a process of self-transformation: a change in one’s self-concept, as opposed to the four rhetorical indicators proposed by Snow and Machalek.

Chapters 3 and 5 are devoted entirely to the exploration of the effects of self-transformative practices in the Vipassana and Vajrayana contexts respectively. Each of these chapters concluded that the techniques effect transformation on two personal levels: the self in its subjective immediacy, and the objectified self, both contributing to the total sense of self. One highly significant characteristic that greatly influences the nature of commitment in both Buddhist contexts is the apparent view of practitioners that validation of experience and personal conviction is more important than defining or consolidating one’s identity, although this is also effected as an aspect of the total transformation process. For this reason, it is held

519 Snow and Machalek hold the attribution to refer to the cognitive process by which people form causal interpretations of the behaviour of self, others, and world. They argue that conversion involves the adoption of one causal and pervasive scheme to inform all causal attributions; matters that were previously inexplicable or ambiguous are now clearly understood. Snow and Machalek, 1983, op.cit., pp269-70.
520 Because converts perceive their worldviews as unique, they show subsequent reluctance to use analogic metaphors to talk about their beliefs and practices.
that theoretical approaches to the nature of transformation processes in Western Buddhism need to consider the whole person, and not just the aspect that is both visible and modified in social interaction. Further discussion of this topic is presented in the concluding Chapter 7, where it is argued that the capacity of Buddhist techniques to create deep and sustainable change according to an ethical framework accounts for much of Buddhism’s popularity in the West.

4.3.2 Commitment

My derivation and outline of three elements of commitment in a continuum of stages, viz. apprehension and engagement, comprehension, and commitment, results from two key observations about what practitioners learn and how they respond to it. The substance of this learning was explored in Chapters 2 to 5, wherein the relationship between the apprehension of key ideas, and their comprehension as an integrated framework was established. The assertion of separate elements of comprehension and commitment rests on the observation that the decision to commit is strongly linked to the recognition that self-transformation has already begun. This recognition validates practitioners’ faith in the principles and practices that they have applied.

The raw data of respondents’ accounts, independent of the application of the staged model outlined above, indicate that changes in the nature and intensity of commitment to the worldview of the centre occur over a period of months to years. The realization or decision itself is a conscious product of reflection on principles and the results of practice. While these responses vary in intensity, the experiences related by respondents, with a few notable exceptions, have the quality of quiet illumination as opposed to the intense emotion that is traditionally held to accompany conversions. While individual variation occurs in terms of duration, intensity, and in the particular doctrinal meanings and practices involved in individual commitment processes, virtually all respondents described their process as gradual and cumulative, with the majority seeing it as marked by two or three points of change.

Some of these points have the quality expressed by Stromberg’s notion of impression point in their almost instantaneous perception of self, symbol and commitment. However, others instead are better described by Pilarzyk’s notion of shock experiences. Pilarzyk refers to emotionally-charged experiences possessing

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522 Sociological approaches tend to define the self as identity or self-concept. Buddhist analytical techniques involve the sense of self in its subjective immediacy, which is instrumental in utilizing Buddhist transformative techniques. See Wilson, op.cit. Wilson’s view of deconditioning, the changing of old ways of seeing the self through deconstruction of identity and role expectations, deals exclusively with the self-concept at the objective level.

523 The identification of these stages and their distinction arises from the material and its analysis presented in those chapters.

524 Pilarzyk, op.cit., p398; 403. Pilarzyk’s attention to shock experiences arises from his perception that sociological perspectives on conversion grounded in structural functionalism have stressed
intrinsic spiritual or existential significance for the convert quite separate from group constraints. To him they are natural products of movement between logically contradictory meaning systems which, as Berger notes, are radical attempts to reorganize everyday life. However, in converse to Berger’s emphasis of the individual’s need for a cognitive redefinition of reality in order to justify a new worldview, the more striking experiences reported by respondents suggests that these shock experiences provide the impetus for meaning-seeking activity and change, as opposed to justifying change that has already occurred. The three experiences that fit this description, the experience of no-self and the two that I designate as pre-tantric experience, all occurred before the respondents’ contact with the Buddhist framework of ideas that best explains them. In all three cases, this explanatory framework, when it is comprehended provides the necessary plausibility structure for the individual’s self-understanding and change. VI can be seen to provide the required plausibility structure for the tantric-like experiences of NJ and MM, and similarly, the Theravadin worldview of Vipassana meditation for RL’s spontaneous experience of no-self.

It must be stressed that while individual experiences vary according to the dominance of intellectual or experiential quality, the majority are described as being predominantly intellectual or cognitive in character. Some individuals responded to visual images and cultural symbolism they encountered, but these did not have the shock quality of those outlined above. Early experiences in both Vipassana and Vajrayana settings consisted of strong responses to the content of a teaching or a meditation that appealed to intellect and feeling. Numerous descriptions above illustrate the way in which these responses lead to mental and emotional receptivity to more of the surrounding framework of ideas, a receptivity that leads to the later acceptance of Buddhism.

Distinguishing between points that either lead to commitment or symbolize the commitment itself, and those that occur around the time of encounter with Buddhism, highlights an otherwise hidden aspect of socialization into Western Buddhism. While these radical experiential events remain in the minority, their occurrence may be obscured by accounts of Buddhist religious change that describe the nature of this change as a quiet transition. These events, especially the two tantric-oriented experiences, the experience of intense emotional and bodily responses that lend themselves to a Tantric explanation, occurred in contexts of emotional intensity, the existence of which can be interpreted as both a precipitant

525 ibid., p382.
526 Those of Vipassana meditators HD, HU, and EBS, and Vajrayana students CR, AN and RI are in this category.
and an effect of the event. It is conceivable that these shock experiences seldom occur. The majority of engagement experiences consist of the strong but serene response described as “quiet illumination” to the presentation of fundamental Buddhist ideas. In many of these cases the participant does not become aware of, nor actively problematize their question or circumstance until they hear it expressed in the framework of ideas presented in the teachings.\textsuperscript{527} However, as asserted above, these experiences become encapsulated in a plausability structure that contains the original rupture in taken-for-granted reality, validates the initial occurrence, and encourages practitioners’ subsequent interpretation and acceptance as experientially normal for that perspective. With respect to this last, both Buddhist perspectives discourage their use as sources of attachment and pride.

\textsuperscript{527} Neither do these situations fit Pilarzyk’s description of the antecedents of conversion, attempts to reinterpret a period prior to contact as one of partial or total discontentment, crisis, alienation, or suffering. Pilarzyk, op.cit, p380.