Chapter 7: Vipassana and Vajrayana Insights in Western Buddhist Experience

1 Introduction

This thesis set out to examine, at two Western Buddhist Centres, the nature of engagement in religious activity, of experience, and of religious change for the participants. Throughout I have accepted Berger and Luckman’s view of a shared reality as one that is maintained by a group consensus, which is expressed by articulation of the reality and the embodiment of that in collective and private discourse and practice.\(^{528}\) Given the differences between the two Buddhist centres in the nature of discourse and practice the thesis must explore two shared realities within the same universe of discourse. Despite the organizational differences in the propagation of religious belief and activity promoted by the two centres, however, consistencies in orientation to Buddhist engagement are exhibited by the practitioners within each centre. This concluding chapter outlines both the nature of those elements found to be central to Buddhist engagement in the Vipassana and Vajrayana forms explored here, and the differences in their manifestation.

2 The Nature of Engagement and Commitment

All of the students, practitioners, and adherents were active participants in their own process. There was no evidence to support the view of the convert as passive who absorbed information without question, assumed by earlier conversion research.\(^{529}\) Participants in the activities of both centres allowed themselves time for exploration, testing and validation of the perspective for themselves. This validation did not result in a ‘change to one’s sense of root reality’\(^{530}\) in an absolute sense, but more in the sense of changing orientation so as to investigate, understand and participate in a lived reality: the sense of immediate reality that they engaged with, involving the effects of their thought and action on others. The Buddhist perspective is utilized by participants to frame their outlooks on the world of human experience and influence, encompassing both the social and natural worlds. Practitioners do not generally concern themselves with questions that derive from the third person scientific perspective, such as the origins and function of the universe. In this sense they avail themselves of Buddhist first-person discourse.


The Buddhist perspective can be seen to frame this world of experience and interaction in a way that is meaningful and ethically satisfying to participants. The Buddhist doctrines are seen to act as cognitive frameworks for the reordering of experience and meaning by participants, and come to be accepted as such after the process of religious experimentation by which the claims of the new meaning-system are experientially validated against their inner understandings and convictions, which themselves become clearer through experimental participation in religious activity. It must be stressed that learning and self-transformation still continue after commitment. Commitment is the end-point of socialization only insofar as the newly-accepted universe of discourse or meaning-system becomes an individual’s primary frame of reference for organizing their view of reality.

From the perspective of the participant, the path to commitment is seen as a process of engagement and familiarization with the material, interwoven with its testing through application to the understanding of lived experience. After a time, the decision to commit is based on the recognition that one’s acquired knowledge of the beliefs, values, and goals of the new religious reality frames personal experience in a manner that renders it more meaningful. The new frame of reference is validated for the individual when they recognize that the application of its principles through practice has brought about self-transformation, and when they come to appreciate that changes have taken place in their habitual thinking in relation to the world. Once this condition is reached, participants either realize that they already feel committed to, or decide to commit to the Buddhist path. Both types of response were expressed by practitioners of both Buddhist outlooks. Participants’ apprehension and appreciation of a point of doctrine which they satisfactorily applied to the negotiation of their own lives did not automatically result in a private or formal commitment to the tradition. Some would recognize the changes described above as having occurred for them, but at the time of interview, would have decided that they were not ready to commit. Here we see two possible responses to a decision-point: belief-commitment or on-going experimental participation. Both can be seen as responses to a point of evaluation and decision-making. In this sense the decision to keep exploring as a response may be seen as keeping one’s options open.

For many of both perspectives there were several decision points concerning their Buddhist involvement. The first was on hearing, for the first time, a teaching or set of teachings which elicited an immediate response and decision to be open to the tradition’s view. This initiated a period of exploration where the student began assimilating more of the Buddhist framework and appreciating the meaning of its whole by understanding the relationships between its parts. This point is highlighted for the Vipassana practitioners in Chapter 3, which demonstrated how they came to appreciate the interrelationships between doctrine, practice, and experiential effects, both in articulating states of awareness and in the transformative results of working with them. It is through learning to interpret these internal states according to Buddhist frameworks that orient them in the practice, that an
appreciation of the frameworks that orient them in the interpretation of reality more generally is derived. The two types of framework are outlined in Chapter 3, Section 2.3.

The process leading to arrival at this appreciation by the Vajrayana practitioners is outlined in Chapter 4, which explored the way in which they began to appreciate the consistency of meaning throughout the teachings after attending different teachings and courses of teachings, and hearing the same doctrines and doctrinal perspectives explained in slightly different ways and contexts. Their way of evaluating the wisdom of the teachings did not involve the intense engagement with their own mental states as it does for the Vipassana practitioners, but does involve reflection on the same areas of life experience and its dilemmas. Both methods lead to an appreciation of the common problems of humanity: the suffering caused by craving and attachment.

Another feature of the nature of commitment itself, where applicable, is that practitioners felt ready to commit to Buddhism formally while being aware that they had much learning and self-transformation still to undergo. In this sense the socialization process is seen as permanently continuing and open-ended. The point of commitment occurs when students feel that they understand enough of the meaning-system, that enough of its import has been validated in their experience for them to take it in as their own. The reason for avoidance of the term internalization is because the process and its decision of commitment do not appear to result in a radical makeover, but instead provide the individual with intimate knowledge of and faith in a frame of reference, and a ground of being from which to act. For this reason, the terms comprehension and validation were deemed to be more appropriate.

The stages of socialization and commitment were derived from the process of acquisition and acceptance of the religious material evident in the data collected from participants by interview. The first stage, apprehension and engagement, corresponds to the process of hearing and responding to teachings, and the decision to learn and understand more of the system of knowledge and practice, as outlined in Chapters 2 and 4. The second stage, comprehension, is a natural consequence of the learning that takes place through religious involvement. This is held to occur when a student begins to organize apprehended elements of doctrine into a comprehended framework of understanding. Comprehension is also aided by the attempt to apply doctrine in the application of practical techniques to lived experience. This was the subject of Chapters 3 and 5. By examining the nature and results of private practice, what is selected by practitioners from their acquired stock of knowledge and applied privately can be determined.

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3 The Role of Doctrine in Socialization

Both forms of Buddhism recognize a textual source as their basis of religious authority. The scriptural basis for Vipassana practice at BMIMC is the *Satipatthana Sutta* from the Majjhima and Digha Nikayas, and the Pali Canon. In the FPMT scriptural authority rests with the writings of the founder of the Gelugpa school, Lama Tsong-kha-pa. At each centre, participants are exposed to a consistent perspective transmitted through oral and written instruction, and practitioners aim to understand and accept it. However, at the individual level the perspective is tested and evaluated rather than accepted without question. Each individual comes to the teaching and practice with a different set of needs and expectations, and different impressions of what Buddhism is. People are free to choose what they accept, initially and for some time to come. This is shown by the small number of respondents who demonstrated a resistance to the teaching of *reincarnation* in the apprehension stage. However, as the transcript excerpts discussed in Chapter 3 Section 2.3, Chapter 4 Section 5.1.2, and in many places throughout Chapter 6 show, once the doctrine of *reincarnation* is understood in relation to others such as the nature of Samsara and the path to Nirvana/Nibbana, practitioners are more willing to accept it as part of their valid stock of knowledge. This demonstrates a significant fact concerning the relationship between doctrinal acquisition and socialization. When the interrelationships between aspects of doctrine become apparent, practitioners are more willing to accept doctrinal positions incapable of direct experiential validation, on the strength of their relation to another which they believe to be true.

Hearkening back to the main characteristics of Western Buddhism outlined in Chapter 1 Section 1, it can be seen that the doctrinal, practical, and experiential focus identified by American researchers in the field holds for the affiliates of both BMIMC and Vajrayana Institute. American scholars note that Western Buddhism draws upon the common foundations of all Buddhist schools: the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight-Fold Path, and the meditative practices of mindfulness, concentration, and loving-kindness. All of the experienced students and practitioners of my acquaintance accept a set of basic tenets, and prime among these are the Four Noble Truths and the three marks of existence. These are seen to provide a general orientation to thought and practice.

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533 Also see Chapter 4 Section 5.1.3: An Essential Framework and Its Components, for a discussion of the ways in which specific doctrinal elements may be organized into a working framework by Vajrayana practitioners.

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From this viewpoint, the most influential doctrinal outlook is the *Noble Eight-Fold Path* in its three-fold aspect of *prajña/panna*/wisdom, *sīla*/ethics, and *samādhi*/concentration, as outlined in Chapter 1 Section 2.4. The doctrine itself and the relationship between the three aspects is emphasized in Vipassana practice and its supporting discourse. In the Gelugpa system of the FPMT, these aspects are called the *three higher trainings*.

They are rarely referred to directly in teachings at VI, but their function is seen through their place as three of the six perfections of the *bodhisattva*. The doctrine with equivalent import, and one that is continually referred to in teachings, is the three principles of the path: renunciation, *bodhicitta*, and wisdom-realizing-emptiness. However, the three aspects: concentration, ethics, and wisdom, as they are encountered by novices, provide an initial orientation to the aims and practices of Buddhism.

When individuals are new to either centre, they encounter a belief system in which meditation has a clearly defined purpose: the experiential understanding of wisdom as it is defined by doctrine. They begin to learn about Buddhist ethics as a foundation for the practice and as an aid to developing wisdom. People express an interest in Buddhism that may have a meditative focus at first, but this appreciation grows to include all three aspects. The meditation techniques specific to the particular Buddhist orientation can be seen as a method for applying doctrinal principles to transformation. Central to one’s engagement with Buddhism of both forms is the way in which one develops an appreciation for *sīla*/ethics, which comes to be taken more and more by the practitioners as a foundation for engagement with others. For Vipassana and Vajrayana practitioners alike, the engagement with the meditation-ethics relationship comes to be valued as a specific strategy for living.

Practices that encourage feelings of compassion and lovingkindness are appreciated for the values they embody and the effects they produce. Practitioners find that, in time, their habitual responses toward others change. They experience less reactivity and behave less judgmentally toward others, and have more patience with themselves and others, not out of patronage or tolerance but from a recognition of the commonality of human experience.

For the Vipassana practitioners there is a difference between the way the three aspects work when someone first begins to explore Buddhism, and the way they begin to function when understood from the doctrinal perspective. The relationship between wisdom, ethics, and concentration, in terms of wisdom produced by insight,

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537 Keown, D. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, St Martin’s Press, 1992, p107. Keown sees the following of the Eight-Fold Path as the gradual cultivation of moral and ethical virtue. Also see Gen Lamrimpa, op.cit., pp108-109, for comment on the relationship between ethics and concentrative meditation.
ethics as the foundation for the practice, and concentration as an aid to the effectiveness of these, remains central to the practice indefinitely. For the committed practitioners of both centres, meditation and ethics work together to give a morally viable, practical, and satisfying means of engaging with the world. The doctrine of the Three Marks of Existence is found to orient participants in the practice conceptually and experientially. Impermanence and suffering are easily conceptually grasped, and for the Vipassana practitioners, experientially accessible. How Vipassana practitioners engage with the Theravadin doctrine of *anatta*, and Vajrayana practitioners with the Mahayana doctrine of sunyata/emptiness, is discussed below in Section 5: *The Self and Its Transformations*. The view maintained by both discourses seemed to be that its realization in meditation requires persistence in the practice. Practitioners from both centres attempt to integrate their understanding of this doctrine into everyday life, and the attempt to do so takes them beyond mere attachment to the self towards a more Buddhist understanding of self as a construct.

The doctrine of the Four Noble Truths serves as a guide for thought and contemplation until some of its import and conceptual significance as a reality-view begins to be understood by evaluation against experience. Generally, this evaluation occurs through growing appreciation of the *samsaric* world as characterized by the three marks of existence, and a growing appreciation of the way wisdom, ethics and meditation orient one to the practice as discussed above.

4 Doctrinal Instruction and Acquisition

The most significant difference between BMIMC and Vajrayana Institute is in the style of instruction that they offer. BMIMC teaches predominantly one practice and its doctrinal foundations, in a retreat setting which limits the amount of social interaction possible. Conversely, Vajrayana Institute facilitates a range of teaching formats, which students are free to choose from. Operating as a Vipassana meditation centre, BMIMC engenders a practical and experiential emphasis to learning: Buddhist concepts and frameworks are used to interpret immediate experience accessed in Vipassana practice. The frameworks themselves are learned through attending *dhamma* talks given on retreats, participating in private and group student-teacher interviews, attending other courses, and private study and reading.

The style of instruction at BMIMC facilitates the practitioners’ engagement with their immediate subjective field of experience: bodily and sensory impressions, feelings and mental states, doctrinally framed by the four *satipatthanas*. Here, the function of doctrine is to attribute frameworks of meaning to experience. Before this begins to take place, the initial task of the teacher is to orient the student’s mind to the practice, and impart to them the significance of the concept of mindfulness and its successful development. The consistency of approach among Vipassana teachers at the centre was demonstrated in Chapter 2. All retreats catering for beginners to meditation
give sitting and walking instruction. All instruction was imparted with the aim of keeping students engaged as much as possible with their immediate experience, and to teach them how to observe their own experiences. This consistency of approach was evident despite individual differences in the explanation and demonstration of the fundamental principles of observing one’s experience.

At Vajrayana Institute learning occurs largely as a result of attending teachings and engaging in social discourse. Interview data indicated that teachings were more effective in socialization than either the ritual performances or meditation sessions. As indicated in Chapter 4, Section 2.1.1, students’ and practitioners’ experimental interest is more sustained by teachings than by the weekly meditation sessions. While the purposes of the practices are explained in some teachings, it is held that students’ understanding of their purpose and symbolic significance will ripen with the students’ growing experience. Although the division of Vajrayana Institute’s teachings into Western and traditional style creates a somewhat artificial distinction, interview material indicated that students benefitted initially by executing a strategic approach to their attendance. Several differences between them, namely, the level of teacher-student interaction, the inclusion of meditation to illustrate principles in Western teachings, and the seeming amount of assumed prior knowledge required in some traditional teachings, makes the Western teachings appear more accessible initially. Traditional teachings often consist of commentary on a root text and amplification of specific topics or points of doctrine. The Western teachings appear to progress more slowly, give more detailed definitions of concepts, draw illustrations and examples from daily life, and involve more interpersonal interaction. After acquiring some familiarization with doctrine, students’ knowledge and appreciation of its consistency as an integrated meaning-system is consolidated through attending several courses of each type over a period of time, usually one or two years.

Arising from the examination of significant concepts and their means of acquisition in Chapters 2 and 4 was the observation that the types of topic that initially engaged participants were those both fundamental to the Buddhist perspective and common in everyday experience: the nature of mind, suffering, attachment, and the three poisons, especially anger. Vipassana practitioners typically engage initially on hearing a teaching on one of the topics outlined above, or on attending a Vipassana retreat and responding to the quality of instruction given by the teacher, which gives the new student an appreciation of the combination of ethics, meditation, and wisdom supporting the Buddhist framework. With the development of some mindfulness, practitioners begin to identify, distinguish, and direct their mental states. It is significant that there were no instances reported by respondents of feeling committed as a Buddhist practitioner before mindfulness had begun to develop, and some understanding of the mind from the Buddhist view had been gained conceptually and experientially. It is doubtful that a meditator would attain
the deeper insight experiences described by some without considerable commitment
to the practice beforehand.

Vajrayana students typically respond to teachings on thought-transformation, anger,
the nature of mind, or to practices such as exchanging self-for-others, which reflect
their everyday experiential and behavioural concerns, and their concerns in relating
to the wider world in a wholesome manner. Motivated by this initial response,
students attend other teachings and begin to acquire more conceptual and
experiential understanding of the Buddhist perspective of the FPMT. Study,
reflection, meditation, and testing of the ideas in everyday life allows students to
evaluate the validity of teachings and practices. With time, students begin to accept
the concepts and their interrelationships as a frame of reference for their own
thought and behaviour.

At Vajrayana Institute, comprehension of the meaning-system as a frame of reference
involves the understanding of some core ideas: karma and reincarnation, the
mindstream and its purification, and the bodhisattva path with its three principles and
six perfections. While the centre’s teaching curriculum covers an extensive range,
those having a profound effect on the individual are the aspects of doctrine that
encapsulate one’s innate desire for mental transformation within a frame of reference
with a more altruistic outlook. These are typically to do with the Mahayana or
bodhisattva motivation, and the development of bodhicitta. More abstract topics are
either investigated after refuge has been taken, or after one has a sufficient
grounding in the basics to have already acquired a frame of reference for the
information. This orientation is also aided by the student’s appreciation of the effects
of meditation practice.

5 Practice and The Role of the Experiential

In support of the findings presented immediately above is the finding that for
commitment to occur, one’s meditative experience and its interpretation according to
doctrine must be applicable to the improvement of quality of lived experience; it
must be relevant to current life challenges and ethically sustainable. While
participants’ initial motivations for religious experimentation may have embodied a
desire for the experiential in terms of experiencing ‘that elusive altered state’, or for
self-growth devoid of any deep religious conviction, they go on to develop an
appreciation and respect for the more religious elements of the Buddhist worldview
through experimental participation. Individual appreciation of practice is almost
solely meditation-based initially, and any appreciation of the exterior ritual elements
tends to develop after one has some feel for the relationship between doctrine and
practice. At BMIMC this ritual consists of taking refuge and precepts on retreats,
whereas Vajrayana Institute maintains a much richer ritualistic focus, comprising
prayer and sutra recitation, pujas of various types—guru, deity, healing—the refuge
ceremony, and tantric initiation. Still, for the practitioners with whom I was most
involved, a feeling for this ritual took some time to develop, and more immediate interest was for the meditations encountered in teachings.

With respect to personal practice, for both types of practitioner practice periods range from half an hour upwards, with some Vipassana practitioners spending longer than an hour a day on practice. Both types of practitioner remarked on occasion that they would ideally do more, but were fitting in their practice around busy schedules. Many Vipassana practitioners incorporate metta, or a similar technique for working on the feelings, into their routine. Vajrayana practitioners almost invariably practise concentration, and usually in the form of deity visualization. Those who have refuge commitments and tantric commitments beyond that, attempt to keep them as much as possible. Both types of practitioner spoke of the practice inside and outside of the formal meditation, referring to the fact that opportunities arise in daily life for practice in terms of being aware of one’s attitudes and mental states. Because of the focus on bare attention to one’s experience fostered by Vipassana practice, practitioners had created their own experientially structured approach to everyday practice. Certain everyday events consisting of routine and repetitive actions were used as mindfulness practices, and the monitoring of one’s responses often led to instant Metta practice. By contrast, Vajrayana practitioners responded to similar emotional situations by being aware of their own responses, and bringing to mind principles held to be applicable to the situation, for instance, reminding themselves that there is no essential self to protect from insult.

For the practitioners of the two Buddhist orientations, the intended outcome of practice is two-fold. The traditional textual sources and doctrinal and practical instruction at both centres, advise that the goal of Theravadin Vipassana meditation practice is Nibbana, and the goal of practice from the Mahayana view is the realization of the inherent emptiness of all phenomena. Some respondents stated this as their goal explicitly and some did not. The second is the enhancement of quality of life in this life, in samsara, on mental, emotional, and physical levels. While Western Buddhists may appear to focus on the latter goal at the expense of the former, practitioners’ own accounts suggest that the two are mutually reinforcing in their capacity to provide a strong and sustainable motivation for practice. Observation of improvement in the quality of mental and emotional life validates for practitioners the efficacy and worth of the teachings and practices, and in turn, reinforces their faith in the worldview of their organization. Both perspectives, the Vipassana and the Vajrayana, emphasize the practice of mental purification for the production of wholesome mental states. The practitioners of both value the aspects of meditation that calm and focus the mind such as the Metta that complements the Vipassana, and the variety of practices done at Vajrayana Institute that encourage

positive feelings towards others, for instance, the practice of exchanging oneself for others.

While the relationship between meditative experience and the personal transformation it produces is heavily implicated in practitioners’ decisions to commit to the Buddhist path as demonstrated in Chapter 6, it must be stressed that for respondents generally, commitment is the beginning of their progress on the path to enlightenment, not the end-point of experimentation. It is difficult to state with certainty whether practitioners’ observations of and enthusiasm for personal transformation and the techniques utilized to achieve it, overshadowed considerations of longer-term goals when responding to questions about concepts, doctrines and practices of importance to them. Added to which, an important methodological consideration is the extent to which the group of respondents from each centre represent the overall characteristics of the centre’s participants, as discussed in Chapter 1 Section 3.2. What can be concluded with certainty is that the two goals are related for practitioners generally, although variations may exist among individuals as to the relative importance of each.

If the practices and the successful attainment of their aims are conceived of in terms of efficacy and sentiment or value, then the above becomes clearer. Some practices, aspects of practice, and their embodiment of doctrinal strategies could be seen to be efficacious. They produced effects that could be noted and felt within a reasonable time: from immediately to several days or months. Some of these also appealed to one’s sentiments or values. For instance, practitioners expected that some effects of practice, such as attaining Nibbana or realizing sunyata/emptiness, would become evident in the long term, and accordingly, did not see these as realistic short-term attainments, but instead viewed them as worthwhile ambitions because of the orientation these postulated attainments maintained toward ongoing commitment. It is this combination of efficacy and sentiment that can be viewed as a significant driving force in the lives of these practitioners. These sentiments themselves reflect the way in which the Buddhist principles relate to one’s own values. In this sense, one’s values are articulated by Buddhist doctrine and given practical expression through its meditation and ritual techniques as much as they are shaped by it.

A significant difference in approach to meditation practice maintained by the two Buddhist orientations is created by the technique-oriented approach in Vipassana that emphasizes the development of mindfulness through payment of attention to the present, and the Mahayana focus at Vajrayana Institute on the Bodhisattva motivation of attaining enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Vipassana aims to develop mindfulness through the practice of what Nyanaponika Thera
describes as bare attention to immediate experience.\textsuperscript{539} The definite focus on immediate awareness in the present, with the aim of modifying and purifying their mental states, encourages a focus on the immediate present. By contrast, meditation at Vajrayana Institute emphasizes the development of concentration to calm the mind, and to make one’s visualizations clearer for success in deity yoga. Living according to the bodhisattva motivation highlights the relationship between motivation and the creation of karma. Consequently, Vajrayana practitioners place more emphasis on the creation of the right conditions for what they desire for the future. A wholesome motivation is important for working with desire in both sutric and tantric practice. First, desire is utilized by the bodhisattva motivation for enlightenment, and channelled into the development of the six perfections. Although not evident in practitioner reports, Tantra uses desire directly, and much discussion in Chapter 5 addressed the manner in which the practitioner is ethically prepared to work with deity yoga. It is highly significant that both types of practitioner consider bliss states as pleasant by-products of concentration practice, but value the development of meditative stability for its contribution to the attainment of enlightenment and self-development.

6 The Self and Its Transformations

A strong influence on practitioners’ decision to commit to Buddhism was their own observations that self-transformation had occurred as a result of Buddhist study and practice. In order to conceptualize the nature of this change clearly, discussion in Chapters 3 and 5 outlined the three views of the self from the Buddhist perspective: the absolute and relative views, and the imputed I. The absolute view is represented by the doctrines of anatta and sunyata/emptiness within Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism respectively. The relative view, the view of the self as dependent on causes and conditions, is represented by specific doctrinal outlooks in discourse at both centres. The Theravadin view of Vipassana is based on the four satipatthanas, but is also denoted by the doctrine of the three marks of existence, and by that of the aggregates. The doctrine of dependent origination is more commonly referred to at Vajrayana Institute, both in its twelve-stage formula, and as a more general notion of the self as a continually changing mindstream affected by karma. From the Madhyamika perspective, realizing emptiness involves integrating both absolute and conventional views of the self into one’s understanding; the assertion that there is no truly existent self avoids the extreme of substantialism, and the acceptance of the conventional nature of existence, avoids the extreme of nihilism.\textsuperscript{540}

The Theravada and Mahayana perspectives hold in common the view that the individual attributes a unitary self to the sense of I created by the interplay of


\textsuperscript{540} Gen Lamrimpa, op.cit., pp99-100.
impersonal phenomena. The insight of Vipassana practice and the Special Insight of Gelugpa analytical practice is the view of the self as inherently devoid of essential existence. The goal of Vipassana is to realize the view of Samsara as bearing the three marks of existence. The goal of emptiness meditation from the Madhyamika position of the Gelugpa school is to realize the emptiness of the person and the emptiness of phenomena, namely the five aggregates. According to Tsong-kha-pa, “virtuous cognitions that distinguish an ultimate or a conventional object are classified with insight”. Watson’s model of the self based on her synthesis of contemporary views, posits two levels, each with inner coherence. The first includes the self-image as process, and the second is the self-concept as representation, which seems reified and autonomous to the individual. The aim of both practices is to shift awareness beyond the sense of self imputed onto the subjective field of impersonal phenomena, onto the field itself, where one ideally sees that this phenomenal field, described as the four satipathanas in Vipassana practice and typically as the five skandhas/aggregates in Mahayana thought, is empty of inherent and unchanging existence. The sense-of-self that these practices aim to deconstruct appears to be that represented by Watson’s second level. As outlined in Chapter 5 Section 4.2: Vajrayana Modifications of the Self, Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden divides the imputed I into two. The first is the I imputed onto its base, the five aggregates, and exists conventionally as a dependent arising. The second arises from the superposition of inherent existence onto the first, and is inherently empty. Some Vipassana teachers and experienced practitioners refer to the shifting sense-of-self in meditation, and it is conceivable that awareness moves between the objectified self-concept and the functional, processual sense of self which Watson equates with the Freudian conception of the ego as mediator of the organism’s processes. From the perspective of the sociological approach to religious change, the self of interest is the self-concept. For the practitioners of both forms of Buddhism the transformed sense-of-self is effected by transformative interaction between the selves as subject and object.

When the Vipassana and Gelugpa approaches are compared in terms of epistemological starting point, meditative experience as opposed to a conceptual view respectively, no real difference is suggested. In a talk on Vipasyana meditation, Venerable Antonio Satta contrasted two fundamentally different approaches to meditation found within the Buddhist traditions. With the first, to which the Gelugpa tradition belongs, a view is generated conceptually first and then it is taken into the meditation. The second type focusses on “what is there”, and generates a view based on meditation; the view is derived from the meditation. His examples of

545 *ibid.*, p116.
the latter were Dzogchen, Mahamudra, and Vipasyana.\(^{546}\) The Gelugpa practice aims to find the I within the phenomenal field in order to negate it. Here the imputed self is the initial meditation object. The emptiness meditation discussed in Chapter 4 Section 3.3: Meditation Practice at Vajrayana Institute, and Chapter 5 Section 2.2: Analytical Meditation, the four-point analysis of Ascertaining the Non-Existence of a Personal Self, consists of identifying the I as the object to be refuted, determining that it has to be either identical with or separate from the aggregates, then considering its existence as one of the aggregates, and finally considering its possible existence as separate from the aggregates.\(^{547}\)

In Theravadin Vipassana, after the establishment of mindfulness, one observes the phenomenal field as delineated by the four satipatthanas, in terms of their arising and ceasing. Practitioners typically report experiences of dukkha/suffering and anicca/impermanence, and occasionally some relate experiences of anatta, involving subtle changes in awareness. One teacher who attempted to give me an understanding of the shift in perception experienced by some practitioners, explained that in meditation, instead of the sense of “I am seeing”, one has the sense of “just seeing”, that awareness shifts from the self-as-subject to the perceptual process itself. In both practices, the shift in experiential understanding involves a shift of experiential location from the imputed I onto the impersonal phenomenal field. Analytical practice, whether Vipassana or Special Insight, can be seen as an ongoing project of deconstruction of the experience of self.

The changes that occur to the self-concept, James’ notion of the self-as-object, me-the-known,\(^{548}\) are conceived as the cumulative effects of changes made to the self-as-subject through meditative practice, and changes brought about by study, reading, and private reflection. The net effect is internal changes to thought and feeling, and changes visible in behaviour and the expression of thought and feeling. It is this outer embodiment that is perceived as identity change. It can be seen that change of this type is contributed to by changes to self in its subjective immediacy, and in its aspect of objective identity. It is the recognition of change at both levels that provides the sense of self-authenticity that practitioners value. Theorizing change in this way utilizes both sociological and psychological notions of self or person, which maintain their particular theoretical focus on identity as objective location in the world\(^{549}\) and personality respectively.\(^{550}\)

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\(^{546}\) This talk, given at Vajrayana Institute in Newtown on Friday 7 January 2005, preceded a weekend Vipasyana retreat led by Venerable Antonio.


\(^{548}\) James, W. Principles of Psychology, Harvard University Press, 1983.


Change at the level of objectivity is seen to involve changes to one’s self-concept or self-image, often equated with social identity in studies of religious conversion. However, in the context of Buddhist practice, this level of change is supported by changes to habitual subjective response, such as changes to mental and emotional states. Much reported self-transformation involves transforming one’s habitual reactions to situations and learning not to identify with negative mental and emotional states. While the approach in Vipassana meditation is to observe the arising and passing of all emotional states, the approach at Vajrayana is not to entirely dismiss unwholesome states, but to transmute them by the use of antidotes and appropriate meditations. In this way, changes in the way practitioners wish to see themselves, for instance as calm, patient, accepting and compassionate, are authenticated by salient changes to their habitual mental and emotional functioning. This sense of authentic transformation is a strong motivator for commitment.

One final point needs to be made about the nature of this self in transformation. The kinds of changes that individuals willingly undergo reflect something of the values that are important to them. The point has been made above about the appeal of Buddhist practice in both efficacy and value. One of the values held by practitioners to emerge throughout discussion in this thesis is that of living an ethical life. Keown sees Buddhism as a response to an ethical problem, about the best kind of life for humanity to lead, and practitioners adopt Buddhism as an answer to that problem. But in considering that an ethical motivation seems to support one’s desire for self-transformation, there arises the problem of how a Western Buddhist fulfills the urge for personal growth in a religious culture that advocates renunciation. As highlighted above, Buddhism has appeal to Westerners through the combination of meditation and ethics it supports. Western Buddhism, through its focus on not-self and compassion, can be seen as both a furtherance of individualistic humanism and a reaction against the excesses of that view.

552 Keown, op.cit., p1.