

# The Vipassana Retreat Experience: A Consideration of the Meditation Retreat as a Religious Paradigm of Travel

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## Introduction

Despite the scarcity of references to meditation retreats in the large volume of research and literature concerning the relationship between modern leisure tourism and forms of religiously motivated travel,<sup>1</sup> the number of meditation retreat centres has increased worldwide in recent decades. Michael Stausberg notes the growth in the international spiritual retreat business since the 1980s,<sup>2</sup> and lists the visitation of retreats as one of the common purposes of religious tourism,<sup>3</sup> itself one of the various forms of contemporary spiritual life that are a result of the increased leisure time available to us in our modern life.<sup>4</sup> Meditation retreats, by their style of presentation and advertisement, may resemble other forms of religious travel. Websites of some Buddhist retreat centres have the facility where the enquirer can download the retreat schedule, whilst others have web pages that advertise forthcoming retreats, almost in the manner of a catalogue from which to browse the types of retreat on offer.<sup>5</sup> Some even have testimonials to the efficacy of particular retreats, seen, for instance, in the *Finding Freedom in the Body: Mindfulness of the Body as a Gateway to Liberation* retreat, held recently between 10 and 15 April 2012, and advertised on the website of the Spirit Rock Meditation Centre.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Boris Vukonic, *Tourism and Religion* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1996); Alex Norman, *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011); and Michael Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, Destinations and Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Vukonic, *Tourism and Religion*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, *Insight Meditation Australia* (2012), at <http://www.insightmeditationaustralia.org/index.html>. Accessed 13/03/2012.

<sup>6</sup> See *Spirit Rock Meditation Centre* (2012), at <http://www.spiritrock.org/>. Accessed 13/03/2012.

Fundamental to the argument of this article, however, is that despite the superficial resemblance of meditation retreats to other forms of religious travel, intensive meditation retreats warrant investigation as specifically *liminal* phenomena, in distinction to other religiously motivated travel phenomena, such as pilgrimage, designated by Turner as *liminoid*.<sup>7</sup> According to the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, the term ‘retreat’ itself is used to denote withdrawal from the world, and a retreat is “a period of days spent apart from the world, in pursuit of religious ends.”<sup>8</sup> A meditation retreat is an opportunity to spend time apart from everyday life during which outside distractions are minimised in order to intensify one’s meditation practice.<sup>9</sup> As this paper illustrates, the primary function of the intensive meditation retreat is to separate the meditator from everyday awareness and facilitate entry into a liminal state. In order to engage in a preliminary analysis of the phenomenon from this perspective, this article limits its subject matter to the intensive vipassana retreat. The primary source material is ethnographic data gathered during fieldwork conducted at the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre (BMIMC), on the outskirts of Sydney, Australia, between 2003 and 2005, and my personal retreat notes from a subsequent retreat I undertook in 2008.

Vipassana meditation is derived from the Theravada Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia, where it has a central soteriological role. Vipassana, a Pali term, is translated into English as ‘insight.’<sup>10</sup> The aim of the vipassana technique of Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, the style of vipassana meditation taught at BMIMC, is the attainment of *nibbana* (Pali for *nirvana*) through the cultivation of *sati*, mindfulness, which Mahasi Sayadaw defines as “concentrated attention,” and Nyanaponika Thera as “bare attention,” “the single minded awareness of what happens at the successive moments of perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind.”<sup>11</sup> Gil Fronsdal refers to the Insight Meditation Movement as a loose-

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<sup>7</sup> Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 253-254.

<sup>8</sup> John Bowker (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 813.

<sup>9</sup> See Sally McAra, *Land of Beautiful Vision: Making a Buddhist Sacred Place in New Zealand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> Gil Fronsdal, ‘Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,’ in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, eds Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 172-173.

<sup>11</sup> Mahasi Sayadaw, *Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages*, trans. U Pe Thin and Myanaung U Tin (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), p. 20; Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A Handbook of Mental Training*

knit lay Buddhist movement taking shape around the practices of vipassana in the West, rather than as a transplant of an Asian Buddhist tradition. The Movement originated in the Theravada Buddhism of Thailand, Burma, and modern India in the 1960s, when Westerners travelling in Asia encountered and began learning vipassana meditation.<sup>12</sup> The Movement has grown in popularity since the 1980s, stimulated by the formation and growth of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts,<sup>13</sup> the Spirit Rock Meditation Centre in Marin County, California,<sup>14</sup> and the formation of meditation centres and sitting groups led by teachers or practitioners affiliated with these two, including the popularity of books and tapes produced by these teachers.<sup>15</sup> Fronsdal sees this movement as part of a larger movement in the West, inclusive of Theravada monks and nuns who teach vipassana within its Theravadin context, Western teachers who isolate it from its traditional framework to varying degrees, and the non-Buddhists teaching mindfulness practices for secular applications such as pain and stress reduction.<sup>16</sup>

Australia has seen similar developments of networks and growth in the number of retreat centres. Insight Meditation Australia is a website for information about Insight meditation teachers and Insight/Mindfulness-retreats in Australia.<sup>17</sup> Two well-known vipassana centres, in the Blue Mountains on the outskirts of Sydney, are the *Dhamma Bhumi* Vipassana Meditation Centre at Blackheath, affiliated with S. N. Goenka,<sup>18</sup> and BMIMC. The formation of the Buddha Sasana Association, which owns and manages BMIMC, has close historical connections with the Insight Meditation Movement in the U.S. The popularity of annual retreats held just outside of Sydney, led by American teachers associated with IMS and Spirit Rock such as Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg, were the impetus for the purchase of land and the building of BMIMC, known formerly as Sasana House. This historical connection is indicative of the two main considerations in the exploration of any form of

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*Based on the Buddha's Way of Mindfulness* (San Francisco and Newburyport: Weiser Books, 1965), pp. 8, 30-36.

<sup>12</sup> Gil Fronsdal, 'Virtues Without Rules: Ethics in the Insight Meditation Movement,' in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, eds Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 285-287.

<sup>13</sup> See *Insight Meditation Society* (2012), at <http://www.dharma.org>. Accessed 13/03/2012.

<sup>14</sup> See *Spirit Rock Meditation Centre*.

<sup>15</sup> Fronsdal, 'Insight Meditation in the United States,' pp. 164-165; Fronsdal, 'Virtues Without Rules,' p. 286.

<sup>16</sup> Fronsdal, 'Virtues Without Rules,' p. 287.

<sup>17</sup> See *Insight Meditation Australia*.

<sup>18</sup> See *Vipassana Meditation Centre, Dhamma Bhumi, Blackheath NSW Australia* (2012), at <http://www.bhumi.dhamma.org/>. Accessed 13/03/2012.

religious travel. The first is the physical place or places involved and the activities that take place there, in this case the retreat centre and the retreats it hosts. The second is the nature of the traveller or explorer, in this case, the retreatant. I begin with the first, with an examination of the intensive vipassana retreat in the context of the types of Buddhist meditation retreat on offer.

### **The Types of Buddhist Meditation Retreat Available**

From a survey of information about Buddhist organisations and retreat centres available on the internet, it can be seen that some organisations run more than one type of retreat, which may include workshops, and, further, that retreats appear to fall into two main categories according to the number of meaning-systems drawn upon by the retreat's content. Some retreats are mixed from this perspective, in the sense that they include practices and explanatory frameworks from other traditions apart from Buddhism, or primarily reflect the more secular interests of Westerners. The website of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) lists a *Qi Gong* and Meditation retreat among the several categories of retreat held at their Vijayaloka Retreat Centre just outside of Sydney, which include meditation, Buddhism, meditation and bodywork retreats (a variety of topics, including a *Qi Gong* and meditation retreat), as well as breathworks training (for living well with pain, illness, and stress).<sup>19</sup> The Sydney Zen Centre runs Zen and arts, and Zen and poetry retreats, at its retreat centre Kodoji, as well as other types of workshops and conferences.<sup>20</sup> Many of the insight/mindfulness retreats advertised on the website of Insight Meditation Australia are of this mixed type. For instance, a 'Meditation and Yoga Retreat' is described thus:

[A] festival of body, mind and community, this retreat offers Insight Meditation (vipassana) and Yoga practices as well as in-depth teachings from the Buddhist tradition, a wide range of interesting workshops, inquiry dialogues, bushwalks, Feldenkrais, individual sessions with teachers and delicious meals in a beautiful bush setting.<sup>21</sup>

The second type adheres to a small number of practices belonging to one tradition, and of activities that support the main practice. This is exemplified by the *Sesshin*, run by the Sydney Zen Centre, which, according to one of the

<sup>19</sup> See *Sydney Buddhist Centre: Triratna Buddhist Community* (2012), at <http://www.sydneymbuddhistcentre.org.au/index.php>. Accessed 13/03/2012.

<sup>20</sup> Subhana Barzaghi, 'The Journey of a Lay Female Zen Teacher: "On a Withered Tree a Flower Blooms"', in *Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change*, eds Cristina Rocha and Michelle Barker (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 126.

<sup>21</sup> See '2012 Insight Meditation Australia Retreat Schedule,' *Insight Meditation Australia* (2012), at <http://www.insightmeditationaustralia.org/retreats.html>. Accessed 13/03/2012.

Centre's teachers, Subhana Barzagli, employs the traditional model of the formal seven-day *sesshin*<sup>22</sup> at its retreat centre, Kodoji, north-west of Sydney. On the Sydney Zen Centre's website is the schedule for the recent *sesshin* held between 6 April and 13 April 2012, which includes silent sitting and walking meditation, private interviews with the teachers, daily dharma talk, chanting, mindfulness work practice, vegetarian meals, and Zen training and ritual.<sup>23</sup> An insight meditation retreat held at the Spirit Rock Meditation Centre in May 2012, moreover, "follows the usual vipassana meditation format of sitting and walking in silence, with systematic meditation-instructions."<sup>24</sup> An outstanding quality of this second type of retreat, related to its intensity of focus, is the conducive environment it facilitates for personal transformation by its imposition of social isolation. What makes the intensive meditation retreat so different from the mixed is that outside distractions are minimised as much as possible, including those arising from the group's own organisational and social activities, and its method of re-orienting meditators toward their own inner lives which, in the case of vipassana, includes utilising those internal phenomena seen as distractions to the development of particular mental states as prescribed by the practice. The intensive retreat serves to intensify one's development in a particular meditation technique or set of techniques related to a specific religious worldview, resulting in the refocusing and reframing of sensory and cognitive experience. Whether such retraining has a soteriological or secular goal, the result is enhanced awareness of and intimacy with one's inner world of sensory and cognitive experience.

It is in considering these types of retreats that the term 'isolation' can be seen to apply in two senses. The first pertains to social isolation. Those with the least amount of isolation isolate retreatants from the outside world, but permit social interaction between them. Those that impose the most amount of isolation are those where the retreatant meditates in their room or cell. Comparatively speaking, the vipassana retreats in the style of Mahasi Sayadaw are not conducted in complete isolation given that meditators eat and meditate together. However, isolation from the outside world and from everyday social interaction with other retreatants is imposed by the observance of noble silence, which means no exchange with others, whether in written or spoken form or through body language. It is held to cultivate a calm and peaceful retreat environment, and to foster the deepening of concentration and awareness. For the duration of these retreats, retreatants are asked to turn off

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<sup>22</sup> Barzagli, 'The Journey of a Lay Female Zen Teacher,' p. 126.

<sup>23</sup> *Sydney Zen Centre* (2012), at <http://szc.org.au/>. Accessed 26/03/2012.

<sup>24</sup> 'Residential Retreats,' *Spirit Rock Meditation Centre* (2012), at <https://www.spiritrock.org/retreats>. Accessed 13/03/2012.

mobile phones, or leave them behind along with laptops, iPods, and other communication devices. The second pertains to the nature of the retreat's religious activity. This involves the 'isolation' of core practices, and their foundational doctrines/explanatory frameworks from the gamut of religious activity prescribed by the tradition, to form the content of the retreat.

### **The Vipassana Meditation Retreat**

Vipassana is a meditation practice derived from the *Sutta Pitaka* of the *Pali Canon*. The *Mahasi* method takes as its foundation the *Satipatthana Sutta* from the *Majjhima Nikaya*. Development of mindfulness is effected by contemplation of the four *satipatthanas*, 'foundations of mindfulness,' outlined as body, feeling, mind, and *dhammas*. This last term, difficult to translate into English accurately, refers to categories of phenomena according to Buddhist doctrine. Mahasi Sayadaw's method utilises two techniques: sitting and walking. The difference between the two lies in the nature of the primary object, the object used to anchor the mind in present experience. Sitting meditation uses the in-and-out movement of the breath as the primary object. Meditators observe the rising and falling of the abdomen while the movement occurs, and note the "rising ... falling ... rising ... falling." Walking meditation invokes contemplation of the actions of stepping. The recommended noting technique is "lifting ... placing," which, with practice, is extended to "lifting ... moving ... placing ... shifting." Meditators may note either the movement itself or the resultant sensations at the soles of their feet. During instruction, the teacher emphasises some basic principles of the Mahasi method: in noting the processes of rising and falling, and lifting and putting, attention is paid to the process of movement, and not the words used to note the movement. When the mind drifts to another object, the drifting should be noted, and then the mind should return to the primary object. In this way, the meditator is trained to make a mental note of each object observed and every item of mental behaviour as it occurs, including thoughts and mental functions.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, therefore, with types of religious travel that expose the traveller to new places and sensory experiences, vipassana retreats limit engagement with the outer world and constrain behaviour and sensory input. All activity focuses on the instruction in and practice of the Vipassana technique. The daily retreat timetable consists of alternating periods of sitting

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<sup>25</sup> For an outline and discussion of the Mahasi Vipassana method, see Mahasi Sayadaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*; Fronsdal, 'Insight Meditation in the United States,' p. 166; and Glenys Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist: Experiences of Socialization and Self-Transformation in Two Australian Buddhist Centres* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), pp. 33-34.

and walking meditation, with regular periods of instruction, and usually a *dhamma* talk in the evenings.<sup>26</sup> Noble silence is observed on nearly all retreats at BMIMC, and everyday tasks such as cooking and cleaning are done slowly and mindfully, with the retreatant making a conscious effort to continue the noting and labelling technique while engaged in these tasks, so that mindfulness is given every opportunity to develop. In addition, the five lay precepts – to abstain from: causing harm to sentient beings; taking what is not given; false speech; sexual misconduct; and alcohol, liquor, and spirits that are a cause of heedlessness – are outlined briefly at the opening session, where teachers will most often explain the principles behind them, rather than merely recommending them as specific rules of behavioural restraint.<sup>27</sup> All participants are expected to commit to the precepts for the duration of the retreat, where their purpose is to support the central focus on mindfulness and the meditation practice, and to foster a clear, open quality of mind on retreat, by discouraging the causes for negative states of mind such as desire or aversion.

During the opening session of the retreat after the manager's introductory talk, most teachers begin with practical instruction in the Mahasi vipassana practice, including a description of the primary and secondary object, and an explanation of the technique for sitting and walking practice. Elsewhere I have discussed the nature of preliminary instruction given on most vipassana retreats at BMIMC that impart the fundamental technique as outlined above.<sup>28</sup> The meditation instruction and exercises given during the morning practice talk on the first day of a nine-day retreat in September 2008 illustrates how a teacher may ground meditators in their own immediate experience.<sup>29</sup> The teacher began with a short explanation of the five aggregates as categories of experience from the Buddha's first-person view of human experience. This was followed by a series of short exercises aimed at the meditator's experiential identification of those aggregates easily amenable to this: body,

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<sup>26</sup> Examples of daily timetables can be found in Joseph Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight: A Simple & Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1976), pp. 5-6; and Steve and Rosemary Weissman, *With Compassionate Understanding: A Meditation Retreat* (St Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1999), p. xiv. See also 'FAQ about Retreats,' *Insight Meditation Society* (2012), at <http://www.dharma.org/meditation-retreats/faq#5>. Accessed 13/03/2012.

<sup>27</sup> See Fronsdal, 'Virtues Without Rules,' pp. 291-299, for his discussion of the use of the precepts on Vipassana meditation retreats. See also Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight*, p. 77.

<sup>28</sup> Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*, pp. 36-48.

<sup>29</sup> The author would like to thank the teacher of this retreat, Mr. Patrick Kearney, for his permission to use this material.

feeling, and mental formations. The first was aimed at instilling an awareness of the division of experience into physical and mental. We were instructed to keep awareness in the body and on our physical experience; for instance, on touch, sound, sight, and internal awareness. The group discussion that followed revealed that we experienced being either in the body or mind. Further, although the attention was meant to be on the body, most people naturally drifted into the mind and preferred being there. The teacher's explanation continued with a brief outline of the body-mind distinction in Buddhist thought: "The body is the first aggregate and the mind is the other four." Moving toward the discussion of the second aggregate feeling, the teacher asked, "What does the mind feel like?" Returning to the body he asked, "What does it feel like?" Some meditators expressed differing responses to how being in the body and mind felt, and preferences for being in one or the other. The teacher then explained that the three categories of experience related to the two aggregates, body and feeling (which is part of mind); pleasant, painful, or neutral related to the three fundamental movements of desire, aversion, and delusion respectively. We were instructed to stay with our experience of body and mind – to keep in touch with feeling in the body and mind – for the rest of the day.

The teacher then introduced more meditation and questions to do with our experience of the fourth aggregate, mental formations. He asked, "Do you drift into the mind, do you make decisions? Are you moved by impulses?" One meditator noted a sequence of mental activity, "evaluation, judgement, decision." At the time, this instruction impressed me in the way it employed a Buddhist doctrinal framework in order to ground meditators in their own immediate experience in such a way that they could both use the technique for self-exploration experientially, and begin to relate Buddhist concepts to the interpretation of experience. However, throughout my period of fieldwork, I noted often that teachers adhered to Mahasi Sayadaw's use of the *Satipatthanas* as outlined in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, as a map or model of immediate experience, rather than employing the aggregates as an interpretive framework for first-person experience. In this instance the teacher, by using exercises related to the first, second, and fourth aggregate, body, feeling and mental formations (omitting perception and consciousness), had covered the same experiential territory as the first three *Satipatthanas*, body, feeling, and mind.

Transformative experiences occurring within the body-mind complex, reported by both relatively new and long-term meditators, involve body,



feeling, and mental states, and the interconnections between them.<sup>30</sup> Experiences especially common to new meditators (although experienced meditators report their continuing occurrence on retreats) may be attributed to a lack of mindfulness: poor concentration, a distracted mind including the inability to stop the internal chatter, and constant distraction by and reactivity to physical pain and strong sensations.<sup>31</sup> With perseverance in the practice and with insight into how the expected retreat behaviours and meditation practices relate to the development of mindfulness, the mind begins to quiet. I often observed a visible change in participants' behaviour two or three days into a nine-day retreat: their slower movement would become more habitual, and those who were absent from some meditation sessions began to attend more.

After the establishment of some mindfulness, which may occur on the first retreat for some, but more often occurs after the meditator has attended several, meditators reach a point where the mind feels sharper, there are fewer gaps in noting, objects are clearer, and mental states are easier to distinguish and label. As a result of close attention to the body and to the sensory phenomena that take place within it, several meditators reported a deepening awareness of bodily processes and a deeper appreciation of the interrelatedness of mind and body. For some, this led to enhanced awareness of pleasure and pain, and a deeper appreciation of the dominance of the pleasure-pain relationship in our everyday mental life. Some practitioners reported being able to relate to the principle of *dukkha*, often translated as suffering, more intimately, through bodily and mental/emotional discomfort and pain. This experience in turn led to changes to the way people habitually thought about pleasurable and uncomfortable experiences, their responses to these, and the way in which they dealt with these in the everyday world. All of these changes are facilitated by becoming more intimate with one's own experience by a closer examination of the internal phenomena related to body and mind.

### **The Vipassana Retreat as a Liminal Phenomenon**

It is my argument that these retreat-conditions effect an extended period of liminal space and time, the primary characteristic of which is the intense focus on one's subjective states by the replacement of the meditator's everyday cognitive and social reality with the experiential phenomena and interpretive frameworks of the vipassana practice. Victor Turner's use of Arnold van Gennep's concept of *rites de passage* retains its conception as a universal structure for rituals that move participants from one social status or stage of life

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<sup>30</sup> Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*, pp. 80-92.

<sup>31</sup> Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*, pp. 49-52.

onto another.<sup>32</sup> In such rituals individuals or groups are symbolically and often physically separated from their former social state, undergo a period of ritual transition, and are then reincorporated into society in their new status. Of the three phases that mark all rites of passage, Victor and Edith Turner state that:

The first phase comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group, either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from a relatively stable set of cultural conditions (a cultural 'state'); during the intervening liminal phase, the state of the ritual subject becomes ambiguous, he passes through a realm or dimension that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state, he is betwixt and between all familiar lines of classification; in the third phase the passage is consummated and the subject returns to classified secular or mundane social life.<sup>33</sup>

Although intensive vipassana retreats are not formal initiatory rites of passage, they do strongly exhibit the three phases characteristic of the ritual structure, albeit the transition is not in social status, but in our relationship to our immediate somatic, sensory, and cognitive experience underlying our everyday self-awareness. The separation phase can be seen as a boundary marker, the beginning of the process of retreating from the everyday world and one's 'everyday' awareness, marked by a series of events: arrival at the retreat centre, settling into one's room, meeting the other retreatants in the dining hall over supper, walking to the meditation hall, assuming the meditation posture, and listening to the manager's introductory talk, the 'retreat instructions' given by the manager and the teacher, including the explanation of noble silence and how to observe it, and the instruction in the practice, so that one knows what to do for the duration of the retreat. The liminal phase lasts for the duration of the retreat, which may be as short as two days to as long as thirty, from the beginning of noble silence, usually through to the last day.<sup>34</sup> Aggregation or re-integration occurs on the last day when the end of the retreat is marked by a communal lunch, where people are again allowed to talk, make eye contact with each other, and engage in everyday social interaction.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960 [1909]).

<sup>33</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the Dhamma Bhumi Vipassana Meditation Centre's 2012 schedule consists of twenty courses: sixteen ten-day courses, one thirty to forty-five-day course, two three-day courses, and one ten-day course in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. See 'Course Schedule: As Taught by S.N. Goenka in the Tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin,' *Vipassana Meditation Centre, Dhamma Bhumi, Blackheath NSW Australia* (2012), at <http://www.dhamma.org/en/schedules/schbhumi.htm>. Accessed 13/03/2012.

<sup>35</sup> See McAra, *Land of Beautiful Vision*, p. 55, who discusses these three phases in relation to retreats held by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order.

From the description of the retreat format as outlined above, it can be seen that the retreat itself takes place almost solely in the liminal phase. The aim of such extended liminality is to turn essential aspects of everyday life, such as eating, bathing, moving, and breathing, into meditation practice; all mental and physical activity becomes mindfulness practice. The vipassana meditation retreat is not 'retreat from' the typical mental and physical activities of daily life, but a 'seeing into' one's somatic, sensory, emotional, and mental activity that takes place in daily life, with enhanced awareness. At the end of vipassana retreats at BMIMC, teachers often emphasise the retreat as the method for learning and developing the meditation technique in order to reach a level of mindfulness not possible through the maintenance of a practice in daily life, where the intensity and structures of retreat practice cannot be duplicated.<sup>36</sup>

The conception of the vipassana meditation retreat as a liminal phenomenon is further supported by its comparison against the criteria by which the Turners classify types of transformative religious activities. They contrast pilgrimage with monasticism and mysticism, where mysticism is seen as interiorised pilgrimage (and where pilgrimage is seen as exteriorised mysticism), where monastic contemplatives and mystics make interior salvific journeys daily.<sup>37</sup> In the case of the intensive retreat, the potential for this interior salvific journey is extended over a period of several days. Indeed, Alex Norman's discussion of travellers' experiences while walking the pilgrim route to Santiago (the *Camino*) highlights several characteristics in common with the silent intensive meditation retreat. The appreciation for the solitude, freedom from everyday tasks that are seen as distracting and consuming but not fulfilling, and the feeling for life as "in the moment,"<sup>38</sup> is an effect of the experience of mindfulness reported by vipassana meditators, exemplified by David Cooper's description of being in the moment where "every moment of mindfulness was complete in itself."<sup>39</sup> The difference between the two situations is that whilst this experience may be the result of the individual

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<sup>36</sup> Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*. See also Davis's research within the Soto Zen community in Jikishoan, Melbourne, in Leesa Davis, 'Soto Zen in Australia: Tradition, Challenges and Innovations,' in *Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change*, eds Cristina Rocha and Michelle Barker (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 6-7; Michael Winkelmann and Jill Dubisch, 'Introduction: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage,' in *Pilgrimage and Healing*, eds Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelmann (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), p. xii.

<sup>38</sup> Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>39</sup> David A. Cooper, *Entering the Sacred Mountain: A Mystical Odyssey* (New York: Bell Tower, 1994), p. 131.

pilgrim's engagement with their journey, the intensive meditation retreat is designed for the specific purpose of instilling the experience of mindfulness in the meditator. This experience may *happen* to the pilgrim during the journey, but is effectively the journey's destination for the meditator; from the vantage-point of mindfulness, the meditator can then go on to explore other transformative mental states.

Fronsdal highlights two characteristics of the Insight meditation movement that further suggest the movement's identification with forms of traditional monasticism: the predominance of laypeople engaged in meditative practices traditionally associated with monastics, and the important role of the five lay precepts in residential retreats as another characteristic of this movement, in contrast to their virtual absence within the movement's 'literature' until 1999.<sup>40</sup> Further, the Turners' distinction between liminal and liminoid phenomena is useful for further understanding the nature of liminality in this instance. The Turners classify pilgrimage as a liminoid phenomenon, meaning that it has traits in common with, but not identical to, certain liminal, threshold-crossing, rituals. They maintain that both rites of passage and pilgrimage involve: a temporary separation from mundane existence, the experience of *communitas*, and "a ritualised re-enactment of correspondences between a religious paradigm and shared human experiences."<sup>41</sup>

From an historical perspective, Turner's observation that genres of modern industrial leisure have liminoid features<sup>42</sup> is revealing. His theory that pilgrimage replaces the rites of passage found in pre-industrial societies in the historical or soteriological religions, as the primary locus of liminality and *communitas*,<sup>43</sup> leaves aside initiation rites as they occur in the 'world religions' such as Christianity and Buddhism, but points to a significant feature of all popular religious and quasi-religious travel. Researchers note that the rigid dichotomies between pilgrim and tourist, pilgrimage and tourism, are difficult to maintain, as the distinction between them has become blurred in travel

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<sup>40</sup> Fronsdal, 'Virtues Without Rules,' pp. 286, 292.

<sup>41</sup> See Deana Weibel, 'Of Consciousness Changes and Fortified Faith: Creativist and Catholic Pilgrimage at French Catholic Shrines,' in *Pilgrimage and Healing*, eds Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelman (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), p. 119, who refers to Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 253-254. See also Winkelman and Dubisch, 'Introduction,' p. xii.

<sup>42</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, p. 253.

<sup>43</sup> Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman, 'Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism,' in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, eds Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 3.

practice as it takes place in the 'postmodern' world.<sup>44</sup> Pilgrimage has come to be seen as both a traditional practice, and as both an expression of contemporary spirituality<sup>45</sup> and a style of travel experience.<sup>46</sup> The key basis for distinction between them has involved assumptions about the beliefs and motivations of travellers. Whilst, according to Stausberg, pilgrimage provides a frame for specific motivations, expectations, and experiences, it is currently accepted that pilgrims travel for mixed motivations, including making contact with the sacred, fulfilling a vow, seeking healing for physical or spiritual ailments, marking a life passage, doing penance, affirming cultural identity, and for simple curiosity.<sup>47</sup> Due to the mix of religious and secular concerns that drive participation in both pilgrimage and spiritual tourism, they appear to share a liminoid nature when compared to the purely liminal quality of vipassana meditation retreats. The major motivation for participation in these retreats, at least initially, is exploration of meditation, whether this is out of interest in Buddhist meditation or in the acquisition of self-transformation techniques more generally. These 'mixed' motivations of the novice meditator may resemble those attributed to pilgrims and spiritual tourists, and all may be alike in their search for liminal or 'threshold-crossing' experience.

These mixed motivations are also reflected in the kinds of activities and venues studied within sub-disciplinary branches of tourism studies such as health tourism and New Age tourism. Under the general heading of 'health tourism,' Melanie Smith and Laszlo Puczko distinguish between health tourism as "engaging in healthy activities in a leisure setting in a location that is not at home," and wellness tourism, where the participant seeks both a sense of overall wellbeing in body, mind, and spirit, and self-responsibility for one's health leading to a better quality of life.<sup>48</sup> Their wellness tourism consists of holistic, leisure and recreation, and medical wellness categories and associated activities. Of these, meditation retreats can be seen to belong to their holistic

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<sup>44</sup> See Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, pp. 93-99, for his discussion of the current debates surrounding this dichotomy.

<sup>45</sup> Winkelman and Dubisch, 'Introduction,' p. ix.

<sup>46</sup> William H. Swatos, Jr. and Luigi Tomasi, 'Epilogue: Pilgrimage for a New Millennium,' in *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety*, eds William H. Swatos, Jr. and Luigi Tomasi (Westport and London: Greenwood, 2002), p. 208.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of various individuals' motivations for undertaking pilgrimage, see Winkelman and Dubisch, 'Introduction,' pp. xiii-xi; Badone and Roseman, 'Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage,' p. 2; and Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, pp. 53, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Melanie Smith and Laszlo Puczko, *Health and Wellness Tourism* (Oxford and Burlington: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2009), pp. 3-5.

group, which includes yoga and meditation.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Dallen Timothy and Paul Conover identify at least four types of tours or activities associated with New Age tourism: education, health, spiritual growth/personal development, and volunteer tourism. Their categories of health and spiritual growth tourism focus on activities such as yoga and meditation that emphasise getting travellers “to engage with their inner selves through spiritual experience” as opposed to “mere escapism.”<sup>50</sup>

This style of activity shares with the intensive meditation retreat the emphasis on the destination rather than on the journey undertaken to reach it. The wellness tourism industry has given rise to publications such as *Healthy Travel*, a book of “quality health destinations” offering experiences for the mind, body, and spirit, for those seeking these while travelling in Australia and Bali,<sup>51</sup> and Barbara Hasslacher’s *Sanctuaries*, devoted to two types of centre: spiritual retreat centres and health centres.<sup>52</sup> The descriptions of the activities offered at these destinations indicate their similarity to the ‘mixed’ retreats discussed above. However, it is doubtful that these venues and the activities they host duplicate the conditions for intensive practice and focus facilitated by the intensive meditation retreat, conditions which include education in the practice’s soteriological framework and behavioural constraints such as observance of precepts and noble silence. The effect of these conditions on the meditator during the course of a retreat is not conveyed by their brief descriptions in wellness tourism literature, such as the two publications cited above. In *Healthy Travel*, the ten-day vipassana retreat at the *Dhamma Bhumi* Centre in Blackheath is described as “ten days in a silent meditation retreat with very early morning starts, many hours of sitting and light vegetarian meals.”<sup>53</sup> Despite the commonality of focus on the destination as opposed to the journey undertaken to reach it, the intensive meditation retreat is simply qualitatively different to events that offer relaxation techniques for enhancing one’s sense of wellbeing in a ‘relaxed’ environment.

Following on from this, the nature of place is the first of some significant differences between pilgrimages and intensive vipassana meditation retreats, which highlight more clearly the quality of liminality facilitated by

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<sup>49</sup> See Smith and Puczko, *Health and Wellness Tourism*, p. 7, for a visual representation of the spectrum of health tourism (Figure 1.2).

<sup>50</sup> Dallen J. Timothy and Paul J. Conover, ‘Nature Religion, Self-Spirituality and New Age Tourism,’ in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, eds Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 144-145.

<sup>51</sup> Jesse Chapman, *Healthy Travel* (Marrickville: Choice Books, 2002), p. vii.

<sup>52</sup> Barbara Hasslacher, *Sanctuaries: Spiritual and Health Retreats in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific* (Marrickville: Choice Books, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Chapman, *Healthy Travel*, p. 170.

these retreats and the retreat centres that host them. The first, in common with pilgrimage, is to do with the symbolic nature of space, and the way in which the location of the retreat centre suggests a break from the everyday built-up environment.

As Stausberg notes, tourism is a “spatial practice.”<sup>54</sup> Lee Gilmore refers to spatial metaphors inherent in theories of liminality.<sup>55</sup> With religiously motivated travel such as pilgrimage, the specific nature of place during the journey and at the destination is symbolically significant. Discussing “simple,” “ethnic,” and “tribal” religions, David Sopher refers to the ritualisation of local territory, the “sacred pattern in symbolically transforming the earth space” where, referring to Eliade, “territory is made a cosmos.”<sup>56</sup> Some retreats take place in centres devoted almost entirely to retreat activity, for example BMIMC. Other centres host retreats as one of a range of religious activities offered by the centre. For instance, the Vajrayana Institute, a Tibetan Buddhist centre in Ashfield, Sydney, runs non-residential (day-time only) retreats at their premises, and hires premises for their larger, longer live-in retreats. Whilst Turner notes that some pilgrimage centres are located at the societal centre, more typically they are “out there.”<sup>57</sup> These Buddhist retreat centres are typically located away from the city, just outside of suburban areas on the outskirts of Sydney. BMIMC is located at Medlow Bath, in the Blue Mountains about 100 kilometres west of Sydney. The *Dhamma Bhumi* Centre is at Blackheath, the next town along, travelling west. Other retreat centres on Sydney’s outskirts are: Rigpa’s centre at Myall Lakes, Sydney Zen Centre’s Kodoji, and Vijayaloka Retreat Centre at Minto, an outer suburb of Sydney, belonging to the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO).

The descriptions of these retreat centres on their websites often emphasise the functional residential buildings surrounded by countryside or bushland, suggestive of a simple culture-nature dichotomy, seen in the distinction between built-up and open space. This suggests a simulation and symbolisation of the urbanised everyday versus the natural unspoilt. Travel to these locations, on the outskirts of the city and far enough away from the city centre and immediately surrounding suburbs, yet close enough to built-up areas

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<sup>54</sup> Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, p. 75.

<sup>55</sup> Lee Gilmore, ‘Embers, Dust and Ashes: Pilgrimage and Healing at the Burning Man Festival,’ in *Pilgrimage and Healing*, eds Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelmann (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), p. 166.

<sup>56</sup> David Sopher, *Geography of Religions* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 47.

<sup>57</sup> Victor Turner, ‘The Center Out There: Pilgrim’s Goal,’ *History of Religions*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1973), pp. 228-229; Erik Cohen, ‘Pilgrimage Centers: Concentric and Excentric,’ *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1992), p. 35; Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, p. 95.

so that help is at hand if needed, symbolises the journey into one's inner 'natural' phenomenal territory, leaving behind the built-up world of social construction. According to Turner and Turner, the pilgrimage, the journey itself, becomes increasingly circumscribed by symbolic structures such as religious buildings, images, statues, and sacralised features of the topography.<sup>58</sup> The meditation hall at BMIMC is functionally, if not somewhat sparsely, decorated. The colours of the walls, ceiling, and carpet are pleasant and neutral. There are meditation cushions and a small number of chairs. There are two statues: of the Buddha and of Mahasi Sayadaw. High in the wall in the direction of the teacher's chair and the two statues is a stained glass circular mural containing the Pali words for wisdom, ethics and concentration/meditation, *panna*, *sila*, and *samadhi*, the three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Other qualities of the vipassana retreat highlight its dissimilarities to liminoid phenomena. Several researchers refer to the non-liturgical, even touristic or carnivalesque, features of pilgrimage, such as sightseeing, markets, fairs, and festivals.<sup>59</sup> Whilst the 'mixed' retreats referred to above facilitate social interaction and may contain recreational or even carnivalesque elements, the intensive retreats do not. There are no social activities or celebrations of any kind. Another difference is the notable absence of *communitas*. Key concepts in Turner's analysis of rites of passage and pilgrimage are liminality and *communitas*, where the liminal stage is characterised by *communitas*, a sense of commonality among participants.<sup>60</sup> *Communitas* is described by Turner and Turner as a sense of commonality between and connection with others, a "quality of full communication or communion between people that spontaneously arises in different situations, circumstances or groups."<sup>61</sup> Norman observes that pilgrimages may foster both solitude and *communitas*,<sup>62</sup> and Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman observe that a sense of liminal separation from everyday life and a sense of *communitas* are a potential but not inevitable feature of pilgrimage.<sup>63</sup> Especially in the case of silent retreats where sharing of meditative experiences is impossible beyond the occasional

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<sup>58</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, p. 10; Winkelman and Dubisch, 'Introduction,' p. xii.

<sup>59</sup> Badone and Roseman, 'Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage,' p. 4; Winkelman and Dubisch, 'Introduction,' p. xv; Gilmore, 'Embers, Dust and Ashes,' p. 166.

<sup>60</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 2, 6-7; Winkelman and Dubisch, 'Introduction,' p. xii.

<sup>61</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, p. 250; Weibel, 'Of Consciousness Changes and Fortified Faith,' p. 118.

<sup>62</sup> Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, pp. 47-66.

<sup>63</sup> Badone and Roseman, 'Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage,' pp. 4, 18n2.



group interview,<sup>64</sup> *communitas* is completely absent. Throughout my period of fieldwork with BMIMC, no respondent discussed any form of group feeling or sense of community while on retreat. Their descriptions of their retreat experience were solely to do with their own internal experience and state of mind. If any kind of *communitas* can be said to exist, it would be an 'ideal' *communitas*, perhaps dependent on the view of the triple gem, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, to which one goes for refuge.

Lastly, intensive retreats can be seen to possess an initiatory quality thought to be absent from pilgrimage. Using Christian pilgrimage as the example, Turner believes that the initiatory quality of pilgrimage is its initiation to, not through, a threshold, where "initiation is conceived of as leading to a deeper level of religious participation."<sup>65</sup> These retreats lead one to a threshold in terms of gaining access to Buddhist techniques of transformation and their informing doctrinal framework, but they also lead one through a threshold because of the nature of the vipassana technique itself. Even for a novice meditator, the vipassana meditation retreat is an initiation into a deeper intimacy with one's own experience, where one begins to learn how to transform one's mental state by learning the practice, as shown by discussion of the meditation experiences and their effects above.

The capacity of these intensive retreats to facilitate this initiation into a deeper sense of intimacy with one's experience is further demonstrated by a consideration of the way in which these retreats are set up to ensure the maintenance of liminality throughout the duration of the retreat. Gilmore makes reference to "liminoid threshold metaphors," such as "a line drawn in the desert sand" in order to symbolise "entrance into the liminoid zone."<sup>66</sup> In my experience, there is no need to consciously 'mark' or 'symbolise' entrance into the liminal zone; the journey inward commences with the first meditation session after instruction or beginning of noble silence, whichever comes first. Keith Egan refers to Nancy Frey's discussion of people who walk the pilgrim route to Santiago over a number of years, rather than in a single journey, in order to experience the pilgrimage as a rite of passage, and notes that in this form of transition the liminal and the everyday 'leak' into each other over a period of years.<sup>67</sup> Due to the behavioural conditions put in place, such as the

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<sup>64</sup> Michal Pagis, 'Producing Intersubjectivity in Silence: An Ethnographic Study of Meditation Practice,' *Ethnography*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2010), p. 309.

<sup>65</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, pp. 14-15; Winkelmann and Dubisch, 'Introduction,' p. xiii.

<sup>66</sup> Gilmore, 'Embers, Dust and Ashes,' p. 166.

<sup>67</sup> Keith Egan, 'Review of *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety*,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 43, no. 1

observance of precepts and noble silence, there is minimal ‘leaking’ of the everyday into the liminal space that is the retreat. Retreats may be from two days to three months’ duration, and except for some shorter two-day beginner retreats where some talking may be permitted, these retreats observe noble silence and at least the five lay precepts, and other behavioural conditions such as adhering to the agreed schedule. Whilst on retreat at BMIMC, one is encouraged, but not pressured, into adhering to the schedule, and if one chooses not to, there is little for one to do beyond sleeping or going for a walk, and these must be done in silence. The imposed liminality is maintained throughout, and unless one receives an urgent telephone call, needs to break noble silence, or leave the retreat centre for any reason, the only way to escape the imposed liminality is by thinking about life in the everyday world.

### **Who Tries These Retreats? Characteristics of the Retreatant**

Boris Vukonic refers to various categories of participant, from the adherent to the atheist, who exhibits various types and levels of intensity of religious behaviour and belief. Their orientation in this respect will affect the type of religious content, if any, they expect at the destination.<sup>68</sup> Stausberg refers to cases where tourists who do not travel for religious reasons, but after exposure to religious locations or activity, develop an interest in religion, spirituality, or meditation.<sup>69</sup> For some, spirituality is concerned with identity, well-being and healing, and entails the search for meaning, authenticity, the sacralisation of the self or the subjective life, or the need for periodic spiritual self-renewal.<sup>70</sup> Any one of these may lead a traveller to seek out a meditation retreat in Asia, and many try a meditation retreat as part of their journey of self-discovery, either in their own country or as part of their travels in Asia, and find the encounter awakens an interest.<sup>71</sup> Referring to the Turners’ view of liminality as

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(2004), p. 152. See also Nancy L. Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>68</sup> Vukonic, *Tourism and Religion*, pp. 69-71. See also Luigi Tomasi, ‘Homo Viator: From Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism via the Journey,’ in *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety*, eds William H. Swatos, Jr. and Luigi Tomasi (Westport and London: Greenwood, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, pp. 15, 88.

<sup>70</sup> Badone and Roseman, ‘Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage,’ pp. 2, 5; Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, pp. 112, 117.

<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, Glenys Eddy, ‘The Kopan Experience as Transformative Experience: An Exploration of Participant Responses to the Ten-Day *Introduction to Buddhism* Course at Kopan Monastery, Nepal,’ in *Journeys and Destinations: Studies in Travel, Identity, and Meaning*, ed. Alex Norman (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing,

not only transition, but also potentiality, 'what may be,' Badone maintains that the perceived potential for self-renewal increases when one is removed from the structures of everyday social interaction.<sup>72</sup> The quest for spiritual knowledge and/or self-transformation, the two strong motives behind religious seeker-hood and travel that I refer to above, are seen to be inseparable in the context of the exploration of the vipassana retreat. The way in which the retreatant takes up an exploratory position towards the practice and its interpretive framework, and engages in religious role-play by taking on the role of the meditator in order to explore it from the inside, generates a process of testing the Buddhist interpretive framework against the meditator's own lived experience. Part of this lived experience is the personal change that has resulted from the application of the meditation technique to the understanding of and direction over one's mental states.

Elsewhere I have illustrated the socialisation process into what is referred to above as the Insight Meditation Movement as this process appears to operate at BMIMC.<sup>73</sup> Three loose categories of retreatant can be distinguished according to retreatants' familiarity with the practice and its supporting doctrinal framework: the novice, the returning retreatant as one who has tried several retreats and has committed time and resources into an exploration of the practice, and the seasoned vipassana meditator/retreatant of ten to thirty years' experience. All three types are concerned with the concurrent exploration of the practice, and their own development and self-transformation; however, two significant differences exist between them. First, differences exist between meditators in terms of their practical and experiential development. These include the meditator's ability to be mindful and in their understanding of the technical aspects of the practice. The seasoned meditator is more self-directed in their practice than someone with little experience, and has more understanding of the states of mind that arise in meditation and their import. The second is to do with the degree of socialisation into the practice and its interpretive framework more generally. The seasoned meditator in this context has much more knowledge of the *dhamma*, and more understanding of Buddhist belief and practice, acquired over years of engagement with it. By comparison, the novice meditator has to begin to learn the practical technique

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forthcoming). This paper explores the responses of Western participants to an introductory ten-day course on Tibetan Buddhism that finished with a three-day retreat.

<sup>72</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, p. 3; Ellen Badone, 'Crossing Boundaries: Exploring the Borderlands of Ethnography, Tourism and Pilgrimage,' in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, eds Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 184.

<sup>73</sup> Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*, pp. 31-106.

and begin to make meaning of the resultant experience to acquire an interpretive framework. As Patrick Kearney notes, “in Australia most people begin their insight practice with no cultural background within which they can locate what they are doing, and no prior commitment to Buddhism.”<sup>74</sup> Here, he maintains, “meaning becomes paramount,” because the encounter with meditation practice is often part of a broader search for meaning, and practitioners “want to understand what they are doing and why in terms already culturally familiar.” Here, teachers are tasked with introducing the cultural background to the method.<sup>75</sup>

Harkening back to the Turners’ conception of liminality as potentiality – as “what may be”<sup>76</sup> – at some point, “what may be” changes into “what actually occurred.” This transformation occurs as the meditator becomes more competent in the technique and learns to apply the doctrinal and practical principles to the understanding of their own life-experience. This leads to one or several decision-points about the truth of the Buddhist path, and the nature of the meditator’s commitment to it. Seasoned meditators may or may not be committed Theravadin Buddhists, although my data indicated that nearly all were, but all were certainly conversant in the doctrinal foundations of the practice such as the *Satipathana Sutta*, and used these as a guide to practice and to living. For instance, Fronsdal maintains that because of the intensive meditation schedule and the almost complete absence of speech on retreats, for most people the retreat format rather than the precepts delimit their behaviour.<sup>77</sup> This may appear so regardless of the differences between meditators in terms of experience, but seasoned meditators would be very familiar with the five lay precepts due to their years of listening to and reading explanations of them, and chanting them in the mornings on retreats. Some respondents told me that they needed to feel “ethically prepared” for a retreat beforehand. Here, I am in agreement with Leesa Davis and Barzagli; being a practising Buddhist cannot be reduced to being a meditator, and Buddhism cannot be simply equated with mindfulness training.<sup>78</sup> Data obtained from my fieldwork at BMIMC illustrated how one may undergo effective socialisation by appropriation of one or a set of related Buddhist principles, by participation

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<sup>74</sup> Patrick Kearney, ‘Transformations of Insight,’ in *Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change*, eds Cristina Rocha and Michelle Barker (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 110.

<sup>75</sup> Kearney, ‘Transformations of Insight,’ p. 110.

<sup>76</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Fronsdal, ‘Virtues Without Rules,’ p. 292.

<sup>78</sup> Davis, ‘Soto Zen in Australia,’ p. 41; Barzagli, ‘The Journey of a Lay Female Zen Teacher,’ p. 128.

in one longer retreat, or in several.<sup>79</sup> Over several years a meditator may come to understand and accept much of the supporting doctrinal framework to the practice. For the more experienced meditators and Buddhist adherents, through familiarity with the vipassana retreat format and content, as a rite of passage it will be more 'routine' than for a new meditator, though it will be no less potent in terms of its transformative capacity. My respondents had come to expect that each retreat will be different; different mental states and meditation objects will dominate their experience, and there would be a period of adjustment to the retreat-conditions, where they would need time to 'slow down' and leave the outside world behind.

### **Conclusion**

A brief survey showed contemporary Western Buddhist meditation retreats to be either *mixed*, that is, to include practices and explanatory frameworks from other traditions or to reflect Western secular interests, or *intensive*, to adhere to one or a small number of practices aimed at bringing about the soteriological goal of the tradition for the meditator. Due to the restrictions of space, this paper's subject matter was confined to the exploration of the intensive vipassana retreat. The fundamental argument advanced is that despite the superficial resemblance of meditation retreats to other forms of religious travel, intensive meditation retreats warrant investigation as specifically *liminal* phenomena, in contrast to the *liminoid* quality of other religiously motivated travel phenomena, such as pilgrimage. The vipassana retreat strongly exhibits the three phases characteristic of the passage-ritual structure: separation, *limen*, and aggregation. Separation from everyday awareness is marked by a series of events beginning with arrival at the retreat centre, and ending with the beginning of noble silence, which also marks entry into the liminal phase. Aggregation begins when people are again allowed to talk, make eye contact with each other, and engage in everyday social interaction.

The liminal phase, the longest phase of the retreat, was found to resonate with Turner and Turner's notion of mysticism as interiorised pilgrimage practised by monastics.<sup>80</sup> The way in which the vipassana practice, behavioural constraints such as the observance of noble silence and the five precepts, and the performance of mindfulness tasks aided the slowing down and refocusing of awareness, was discussed. The close observation of somatic, sensory, emotional, and mental phenomena facilitated changes to the way in which meditators experienced and related to these phenomena in the context of

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<sup>79</sup> Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*, pp. 31-106.

<sup>80</sup> See Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, p. 33.

their everyday life, such as a deeper appreciation of the dominance of the pleasure-pain relationship in habitual thought and action. The conception of the Vipassana meditation retreat as a liminal phenomenon was further clarified by the presence or absence of characteristics of liminoid phenomena. These were the absence of the carnivalesque features often associated with pilgrimage, the absence of *communitas*, and the absence of the social interaction that may foster it among participants, but the presence of an initiatory quality not associated with pilgrimage, initiation *through* a threshold.

The purpose of the analysis undertaken above, whilst limited to the intensive vipassana retreat here, is intended to have broader applications, and it is hoped that the extended liminality theory may be tested against other forms of intensive retreat, such as the Zen *sesshin*, in the future. A fruitful area of research into the intensive meditation retreat as a *purely liminal phenomenon* within the contemporary spiritual supermarket is suggested by the exploration here, of the way in which liminality is produced and maintained over many days by the interaction of retreatants' expectations with the technical aspects of the practice concerned, and the nature of the specific behavioural restrictions imposed by the tradition.