

The Applicability of James' Model of the Self to the Western Buddhist Experience of Self-transformation

Glenys Eddy

University of Sydney

Abstract

Studies of religious conversion in recent decades, which have highlighted the role played by the participant's recognition of personal transformation in the process of religious change, generally theorize such self-transformation as identity change. Models based on this equation are found to be inadequate for explaining the transformative action of Buddhist meditation practice which leads to commitment to Buddhism for many practitioners. Alternatively, some explanatory power is provided by James's model of the self as two discriminated aspects, the self-as-subject and self-as-object, outlined in his *Principles of Psychology*. This paper discusses the model's applicability to data obtained from fieldwork conducted between 2003 and 2005, at two Western Buddhist centres in New South Wales, Australia: the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, and Vajrayana Institute. It outlines the nature of personal change experienced by the practitioners of both groups, through the practice of concentration and analytical meditation techniques, and the application of the corresponding models of the self as interpretive frameworks for experience.

This paper examines the applicability of James's model of the self as two discriminated aspects, the self-as-subject and self-as-object (James 1948: 176; Barresi 2002: 237), to the analysis of self-transformation experiences of Buddhist practitioners from two Western Buddhist centres in the Sydney area of NSW, Australia. The data utilized in this analysis was obtained from fieldwork conducted at the Theravadin Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, and the Gelugpa Tibetan Vajrayana Institute, between 2003 and 2005.¹ Fieldwork consisted of participant observation—participation in and engagement with the activities of both centres—and conducting semi-structured interviews, typically an hour and a half in duration. Respondents' descriptions of the transformative effects of their Buddhist study, practice, and meditation experience made reference to two distinct *senses of self*, that bore resemblance to James's two discriminated aspects, *I the knower* and *Me the known* (referred to throughout as the *I* and the *Me* or self-concept).² James writes, "Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of myself, of my personal existence. At the same time it is I who am aware; so that the total self of me, duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly

¹ This research was undertaken for my thesis during my doctoral candidature with the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments.

² Due to space restrictions, I limit discussion to the conceptions of *I* and *Me* as outlined by James, and to not attempt to explore those of other theorists such as Mead (1934).

subject, must have two discriminated aspects" (James 1948: 176). One was a sense of self defined by their inner field of immediate experience and their familiarity with its contents. The other was the sense of an objectified self as an entity in the social world. While practitioners' experiential descriptions were not consciously cast in terms of two discriminated aspects, the sense of self referred to in their experiential descriptions would often alternate between that of experiencer and coordinator of their mental and emotional states, and that of their personal identity: the type of person they were, the type they wanted to be, and how they saw Buddhist practice facilitating this transition. For practitioners affiliated with both centres, self-transformation, and for many, commitment to Buddhism occurred as a result of observed changes to the self-concept, the objectified sense of self, aided by the identification of positive changes to one's subjective states of thought, feeling, and impulse to action. This paper discusses some of these transformation experiences with a view to outlining the explanatory power of James's model.

The task of this paper is not to prescribe a comprehensive model of the self in its complexity. The paper draws attention purely to the explanatory power of the model in the context of religious conversion studies, which lies in its description of the two discriminated aspects, to provide a clearer understanding of the practitioner's felt sense of self-transformation. Currently, a vast body of research and literature exists on the nature of the self. Contemporary perspectives hold it to be a complex and multifaceted construct as opposed to the earlier "monolithic" view (Fivush and Buckner 1997: 176). James's own model of the self, outlined in his *Principles of Psychology* (James 1983: *The Consciousness of Self*, 279-379) and its abridged version, *Psychology* (James 1948: *The Self*, 176-216) is complex and multi-faceted (however, Watson 2002: 94-110, sees a correspondence between two levels of self-reference in contemporary Western models and James's two discriminated aspects). His model of the self-concept, which he also calls the *Me*, the *self-as-known*, and the *empirical self*, consists of material, social, and spiritual constituents, the feelings and actions they generate, and the interrelationships between them (James 1948: 176-195). The sense-of-self to which the *Me* refers to in this paper is that arising from the sense of ownership of these components as a collectivity (James 1948: 177), referred to by Gecas as "the concept the individual has of himself as a physical, social, and spiritual or moral being (Gecas 1982: 3).

The two discriminated aspects do not suggest ontological distinctiveness in any philosophical or religious sense. James emphasizes that they are discriminated aspects and "not things" (see James 1948: 176, and Leary 1990: 107-08, for more discussion about this point). There is no equivalent for the Buddhist conceptions of *Anatta* (no inherently existing self) or *Sunyata* (usually translated as Emptiness) in James's model. James describes the *I* as "that which at any given moment is conscious" and "the passing state of consciousness itself" (James 1948: 195-196). Although this description may resemble the Buddhist view of consciousness as the flow of experience (Williams and Tribe 2000: 63), the purpose of the present discussion is to demonstrate the utility of theorizing the latter in terms of the former for the purpose of theoretical understanding. The two internally discriminated aspects are merely illustrative of the individual's experience of self. Theorizing the transformation process in terms of the interaction between the discriminated aspects, the *I* and the *Me*, has more explanatory power for the data under consideration than models which reduce the self-transformation experienced in religious settings with changes to one's religious identity.

Sociological approaches to religious conversion tend to emphasize the role of the

self-concept and its manner of transformation above the role of the *I* as observer and processor of immediate experience. Conversion theorists in the 1970s and 1980s borrowed from social constructionist thought on the nature of self, encompassed by a set of interpretive sociological theories: socialization theory, symbolic interactionism and role theory. These hold the self-concept to be formed through internalizing representations of the self and its nature, derived from social interaction that takes place during primary socialization into one's social group (Mead 1934: 164). Accordingly, religious conversion has been equated with resocialization into a new religious reality and its prescription of identity (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 144), providing the religious participant with both a new religious worldview and identity. The self-transformation that is observed to take place in religious settings is frequently reported and analysed in terms of the self-concept (Staples and Mauss 1987: 137). This approach to religious change is utilized in studies of Westerners who adopt Buddhism as their religion of choice. While the categorization of religious affiliation and identity styles into ascription and choice or achievement has been criticized for its over-simplicity (Cadge and Davidman 2006: 23-24), it is employed by scholars of the West's adoption of Buddhism to distinguish *cradle* from *convert* Buddhists, where *cradle* Buddhism maintains an ethnic group's cohesive way of life and heritage, and *convert* Buddhism's function is transformative, providing an alternative religious identity by facilitating a shift in worldview. The former is identity continuity and maintenance while the latter is identity transformation (Coleman 1999: 91; Numrich 2000: 194-195; Prebish 1998: 1).

With the change in thought about the religious actor from that of purely passive recipient to active seeker that has taken place over recent decades, some researchers have theorized the conversion process as the process of truth-seeking and self-discovery enabled by religious roleplay. Changes to one's identity are seen as facilitated through enacting the role of the religious adherent (Lofland and Skonovd 1981: 378-379). In the Buddhist settings considered here, this means to take on the role of the meditator: to practise the meditation techniques and to interpret their effects according to doctrine. In the process of such learning and practice, one becomes intimate with the phenomena that comprise one's field of immediate experience, and the sense of personal ownership of and identification with this field, as illustrated below. As a participant observer and seeker/sympathizer, I attended teachings, took part in retreats and workshops, engaged with the practices, and attempted to take on the role of the committed practitioner. I learned quickly that enacting the role of the meditator in Buddhist settings involves paying close attention to the nature of the internal phenomena that comprise one's sense of self. It also involves learning to interpret this personal experience according to Buddhist doctrine.

It must be emphasized that practice, experience, and doctrinal interpretation all contributed to the self-transformation for practitioners affiliated with both centres. This process begins by becoming familiar with the meditation techniques and their effects. In studies that directly equate religious conversion with identity change, it is often difficult to see any transformation of the participant beyond their learning to think about reality, including the nature of self, in terms of a new interpretive framework. As the examples further down illustrate, the doctrines of *Anatta*/no inherently-existing self and *Sunyata*/the inherent emptiness of all phenomena, can be seen to play a role in the self-transformation experienced by practitioners at BMIMC and Vajrayana Institute respectively. However, while learning to interpret one's sense of self according to a new framework will effect changes to one's self-concept, it is

the particular effects of Buddhist analytical meditation that change the *I*: the sense of self derived from the sense of intimacy with one's internal field of activity. The resultant self-transformation may be seen as due to the process of self-reflexivity which emanates from the dialectic between the *I* and the *Me*, as expressed by Gecas (Gecas 1982: 3).

All Buddhist meditation practice is seen as either concentration, practice for stilling the mind, or insight, practice for observing the mind and attaining the correct view of self and phenomena from the Buddhist perspective (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 38; Harvey 1990: 244-257; Tenzin Palmo 2002: 87, 105; Tsong-kha-pa 2002: 14; Williams and Tribe 2000: 81). This involves understanding the nature of *Samsara*, cyclic existence, as characterised by three marks: suffering, impermanence, and no inherently-existing self (Harvey 1990: 52). Doctrinal and practical instruction at both centres aims to facilitate this perceptual shift in the practitioner's view of self and phenomena. Core Buddhist teachings, for instance, Dependent Origination, and the view of the person as the interplay of the five interdependent and constantly changing aggregates—material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 26-27, 152; Harvey 1990: 49-50)—are taught at both centres to emphasize the nature of self as a construction imputed onto momentary, constantly changing mental states. The sense of self-permanence arising from the interplay of the aggregates, is often described in everyday language as *me*, or *myself*. The objective of Buddhist analytical techniques is to deconstruct experience of self as permanent and unitary into the processes that give rise to it. The meditation techniques taught at both centres involve paying close attention to the phenomena arising within one's immediate field of subjective experience. Accordingly, for each centre I first outline the essential doctrinal and practical foundations that provide the conceptual and practical framework for the transformation experiences in question, and then present pertinent examples of transformation experience from interview transcripts which illustrate the way in which the two senses of self appear to interact in the transformation process.

The Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre (BMIMC) in Medlow Bath NSW, teaches *Vipassana* or Insight meditation in the tradition of the Burmese monk, Mahasi Sayadaw (see the centre's website at www.meditation.asn.au). Teaching and practice occurs predominantly in a silent retreat setting consisting of meditation instruction, practice, and a daily *dhamma* talk which typically discusses principles of Buddhist teaching and practice. Mahasi Sayadaw's method is based upon the *Satipatthana Sutta* from the Pali Canon (*Satipatthana Sutta*, in Bikkhu Bodhi 2001: 145-155). While the ultimate aim of Vipassana meditation is the attainment of *Nibbana* (*Satipatthana Sutta*, in Bikkhu Bodhi 2001: 145; Nyanaponika Thera 1956: 2), the more immediate aim is the development of *mindfulness*—defined by Mahasi Sayadaw as concentrated attention (Mahasi Sayadaw 1971: 20). Many practitioners liken this to Nyanaponika Thera's term *bare attention*, which is a “bare and exact registering of the object” (Nyanaponika Thera 1956: 19). By directing participants to be aware of whatever mental or bodily experience is predominant in each moment, the immediate aim is to train the mind to observe and note the succession of physical and mental phenomena that appear to it.

To develop mindfulness Mahasi Sayadaw's method makes use of two types of object: primary and secondary, and two meditation techniques: sitting and walking. Sitting meditation uses the in and out movement of the breath as *primary object*. Meditators observe the rising and falling of their abdomens while the movement occurs, noting 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 resulting sensations from the soles of the feet as the primary object. The secondary object in both cases is any object, other than the primary one, that appears to the mind (this method is outlined in Mahasi Sayadaw 1958, 1971). Once any secondary object is noted, the meditator returns to the primary object. With practice, remembering to return to the primary object ensures that the meditator remains mindful. With the development of mindfulness, the meditator gains the capacity to hold the mind on any object and observe its experiential quality.

According to the *Satipatthana Sutta* and the Vipassana method of Mahasi Sayadaw, all objects that appear to the mind are categorized into one of the four *Satipatthanas*, usually translated as *foundations of mindfulness*: the body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas* (sometimes translated into English as phenomena or *mind-objects*, but often left untranslated. See Soma Thera 1999: 133; Analayo 2003: 19). Both the literature and the centre’s teachers emphasize the body as the foundation of the practice; early mindfulness training involves the contact of the feet on the ground, the movement of the breath in and out of the body, and sensory impressions (Nyanaponika Thera 1956: 40; Shaw 2006: 78). Feeling refers to the hedonistic tone of a sensation and is noted as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. While many practitioners tend to label and describe their emotions as feeling, the relevant interview data shows that these emotions fall within the second and third *Satipatthanas*: feelings and mental states. From the Buddhist perspective, contemplation of the mind involves identifying, and noting, one’s current mental state as one of the hindrances: desire, aversion, tiredness or laziness (usually translated as sloth and torpor), restlessness and remorse, and doubt (*Satipatthana Sutta*, in Bikkhu Bodhi 2001: 150-152). The purpose of learning to identify and label one’s mental states is to become more aware of their quality, both during meditation and in everyday life. Several practitioners noted the positive change in the quality of their habitual mental states over time.

The following interview excerpt (interview date: 1 June 2003) illustrates personal transformation as a product of the transformative dialogue or interchange between the *I* and the self-concept. KN became a committed Buddhist after noting the profound changes she had undergone as a result of Buddhist practice and study. She had learned *Samatha* or concentration practice from a Buddhist nun as a relaxation technique, as part of her detoxification, while in rehabilitation for an alcohol addiction. The instruction was to breathe in and out through the nostrils. When instead she switched attention to the diaphragm, she had the experience of being “in touch with her feelings” which had been “previously frozen”, an experience which she later interpreted as *mindfulness of feeling*. The release of previously disowned emotions triggered the experience of sobbing which she found therapeutic. KN had used concentration as a support for the mind before focussing on the diaphragm, which for her, effectively turned the concentration technique into insight or analytical practice. In this way the development of calm and the capacity to hold the mind on an object revealed what was normally obscured by the practitioner’s habitual state of mind.

Because of the effect of childhood experiences, KN had been diagnosed as *disassociative* with a poor *sense-of-self* from a psychotherapeutic perspective. According to her understanding, dissociation occurs when ‘something becomes so

painful that you switch out', and 'there is no watcher and no nothing'. She reported that mindfulness practice had helped her to deal with her alcohol addiction by teaching her to label, observe, and to let go of the addictive desire, and by giving her the choice of not identifying with it through the understanding that 'thought, emotion, desire, is not the self'. Indicative of the way she had seen herself was, 'I am a recovering alcoholic'. She said that the practice helped her to move beyond this self-image. Taken together, these changes suggest that the negative self-image as an addict was deconstructed and replaced with a positive one, that of someone who was able to identify her feelings and work with her own inner capabilities and skills, made all the more potent because of her newfound capacity to accept and manage their intensity and emotional charge. The mindfulness developed in meditation, the level of awareness developed by observing and exploring the field of internal phenomena, brings these and the related sense of I into sharper focus. This can enhance one's sense of self-esteem by providing a stronger sense of self-understanding, self-containment and self-direction. Support for the new self-concept was provided by another aspect of practice, that of *Sila* or ethics, one of the three factors of the *Noble Eight-Fold Path: Panna, Sila, and Samadhi*: wisdom, ethics and concentration. KN kept the five lay precepts, which helped her to avoid 'unwholesome choices' and actions that were 'another form of wanting to get away'. In her experience slander (of others) results in feeling 'unhappy with yourself'; 'intoxication takes you away from what you should be doing'; 'being wholesome is staying with what is real', and 'telling the truth is real'. When it is remembered that this practitioner had been diagnosed as dissociative, it follows that 'feeling real' is important to her. This example shows how keeping the precepts reinforces a set of values for constructive self-definition at the level of self-concept.

HR's example illustrates the way in which change may occur to one's self-concept, by the examination of the various images and social roles that comprise it (interview date: 1 July 2003). When asked whether her involvement with Buddhism and Vipassana meditation had resulted in any changes to her worldview, she illustrated instead the changes she had experienced to her 'notion of self', one of the results of which, was not taking herself so seriously. In reflecting on the notion of *no-self*, she had 'begun to see things in meditation that [she does to] construct her self-image'. When she sees these things, she 'sees that it is only a construction, not a reality', and she referred to moments when these are seen, 'rather than cogitated about'. An example of this was seeing *mother* as one of the functions she performs, and seeing herself constructing an image of herself as a maternal person. Another example was as *a great intellectual*. The more she meditates she said, "the harder it is to sustain these views and the attachment to them. They begin to jostle each other". Acknowledging these constructions has enabled her to "let go of what we construct around persons and relationships".

Although the meditative process and its immediate experiential effects are not as clearly articulated in HR's example, her description does convey a sense of the effect of the insight technique applied to the analysis of her self-image *per-se* and her attachment to it. Elsewhere during the interview, HR demonstrated her understanding of how the Vipassana technique enables the clearer, sharper identification of mental states and processes. A commonality of both examples is their illustration of the change to the self-concept brought about by working with the doctrine of *Anatta*, expressed by KN as the doctrine of *no-self*. This provides the practitioner with a conceptual strategy for seeing behind the apparent solidity of the self-concept, and in the process loosens their identification with its contents. This is illustrated by HR's

letting go of identification with the various roles that comprise her self-image, and by KN's loosening of the personal identification with thought, emotion and desire. Both examples illustrate the way in which changes to the self-concept are aided by the process of first identifying and exploring the quality of the content of their inner phenomenal field, and then 'loosening the grip' of attachment.

The second centre, the Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayana Institute (VI) in Ashfield, Sydney, is affiliated with the worldwide *Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition* (FPMT), a Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist school, which bases its scriptural authority in the writings of Lama Tsong-kha-pa, the Gelugpa school's founder (see the institute's website at www.vajrayana.com.au). There are two styles of Buddhist teaching at VI: Western and traditional Tibetan. Both involve listening to a teacher, and are ideally supplemented by private reading, study, contemplation and meditation. The more traditional Tibetan-style teachings are given by the resident Lama in Tibetan, and translated into English by a translator who is familiar with the teaching. These teachings typically focus on a root text or an aspect of doctrine over a period of weeks or even months. By comparison with the Western-style teachings, which provide more teacher-student interaction and some meditation practice in class, these teachings tend to assume some prior knowledge of Buddhist thought. Although not restricted in their choice of teaching, newer participants generally attend some introductory, Western-style courses such as the eighteen-month foundational course *Discovering Buddhism*, or *Buddhism and Western Psychology* of five-or-so weeks' duration, and other weekly meditation classes. These teachings include a range of concentration and analytical practices, following the teaching of Tsong-kha-pa's *Lam Rim*, that practice in stabilizing/concentration and analytical/insight meditation must be balanced in order to attain enlightenment (Tsong-kha-pa 2002: 14).

Western-style teachings most often include concentration practice, in the form of a breath meditation (observing the breath at the nostrils) or a deity visualization where a deity image is used as the meditation object, and sometimes both. Most practitioners report incorporating both techniques into their personal practice. Regardless of which technique is used by the practitioner, the general effect appears to be a calming influence on the mind, which improves the individual's focus and sense of mental well-being. While these practitioners do not refer to a new sense-of-self or to specific transformations associated with concentration practice, its key effect appears to be the experience of one's own mental continuum largely free of the habitual mental clutter of everyday life, which allows for a new sense of interior spaciousness for the meditator. Experiential reports offered by several Vajrayana practitioners during fieldwork brought to mind Csikszentmihalyi's description of flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1991: 41). The fact that Csikszentmihalyi holds flow experience to have an integrating effect on the self, because consciousness is unusually well-ordered during states of concentration, is significant in light of the fact that many of the practitioners I interviewed reported concentration-type as opposed to analytical-type experiences (to be discussed presently). One striking example is provided by CR, who had the following experience while doing a deity visualization.

GE: What did the state feel like? Can you describe it?

CR: It was just, it just felt, um, you just kind of totally ... it's like when you, well for me, I really love drawing for instance, and when I get caught up in ... I went to life drawing classes for a while, and when I was caught up in that it was like nothing else existed. It was like, you know, the whole, the rest of the world just disappears, you're just caught up in the thing. It was like that, just being there, one with this experience and not, not aware of

noises or of anything going on outside or discomfort or anything. Just, you know in this moment, like being in, completely in the present moment. (Interview date: 3 March 2004).

Concentration practice is typically associated with the experience of bliss-states. Interview respondents from both centres stated that they do not seek bliss states as ends in themselves, but instead see them as a sign of progress more generally. It is noteworthy that several Vipassana practitioners reported having bliss states during Vipassana practice, which they interpret as pleasure, *sukkha*. The only concentration practice taught at BMIMC is *Metta* (Lovingkindness) meditation. The ultimate function of *Metta*, where feelings of lovingkindness are held for oneself, a friend, stranger, and an enemy, is to transform habitual attitudes so as to hold all beings as of equal value. In interview, Vipassana practitioners expressed strong approval for the development of equanimity and compassion for others that it engenders, and did not associate its practice with the experience of bliss particularly. In their personal practices, the Vajrayana practitioners employ concentration for the same purposes as its formal utility in teachings: to settle the mind initially, and to develop the ability to keep a focussed mind on the object of attention. This is to ensure greater success with analytical practices which are employed for the purpose of transforming the meditator's view of the self.

For the purpose of instruction, the FPMT presents a conceptually elaborate view of the self, outlined as three views, *absolute*, *relative* and *imputed*, in some of the introductory courses (these ideas were explored during teachings on *the Wisdom of Emptiness*, held between 11 May and 15 June 2004). The absolute view is that of *Wisdom-Realizing-Emptiness*, the relative is that conveyed by doctrines such as the aggregates and the principle of Dependent Origination. The imputed is the sense-of-self, the object designated by *me* which feels solid and continuous, which is habitually imputed onto the relative view. Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden (1993: 851-52) further divides this imputed view or sense of self into two. The first is the sense of self imputed onto the five aggregates, and exists conventionally as a dependent arising. The second arises from the superposition of inherent existence onto the first. According to Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, it is the second type that is inherently empty.

There are two ways of perceiving and working with the absolute view: *emptiness* as the impersonal absolute, and the Buddha as a model of the enlightened being, one who has realized *emptiness*. With respect to the first, the realization of *emptiness*, is the goal of cultivating wisdom, the purpose of analytical practice, and occurs by facilitating a perceptual shift in the meditator's mind, from the imputed to the relative to the absolute view. Hopkins' statement (1996), that '*emptiness* becomes the context within which a yogi purifies his perception', is useful for understanding the approach taken to *emptiness* meditation. One is given a conceptual description or definition of what is to be realized in meditation before one has the realization. The meditation outlined in Hopkins' *Meditations on Emptiness* and referred to in other texts, is used in teachings at Vajrayana Institute, although infrequently (see Hopkins 1996: 44-46, for a description). The notion of *emptiness* appeared to be held as a conditional belief by my interview respondents: to be true on the condition that the individual will one day have a direct realization of it after their mind has been purified enough to understand it. The notion of a changeable mindstream able to be affected by thought and action, a sense of the relative view, appears to operate as a conception of the subject of transformation. In this way practitioners accommodate the absolute and relative views conceptually. NC, one interview respondent to practice *Emptiness*

meditation, responded with the following when I asked him about it.

- NC: I do the one where you go through trying to locate the self physically, and then mentally, and then there's another one that I read in a book where you're trying to look back at the meditator, look back at myself, look back and try to locate the meditator, and then just visualizing all of the body parts and all the mental faculties spreading out and then just reside in that *emptiness*. The thing is going through trying to locate it and then looking back at the self who is thinking, and that's when I get a sense of there isn't anything. So the other one, I do this when I'm running, saying, well, 'If there was an existent self, permanent, who was running, if it was a part of the body, then it would be always running, the whole thing about it can either be part of the body or separate from the body, it can't be both. So I do that when I'm running, look back at the aggregates moving.
- GE: So, it's trying to give yourself a particular perspective.
- NC: You're going through all those logical reasons about why, how, and where the self doesn't exist, and so just going through those logical steps of, 'Well I can't locate it. ... It's not there. ... It's not in my thoughts, and then, looking back at me who's thinking all those things ... (Interview date: 7 December 2004).

The second way of working with the absolute view, that of the Buddha-nature, involves employing a model of the self based on the view of the Buddha as an enlightened human being. The *buddha-nature* and the deities are said to be of the nature of *emptiness*, and as such, are representations of our true nature (Tenzin Palmo 2002: 240). During the short course *Introduction to Tantra* the teacher explained that the basis of *Tantra* is to access the pure Buddha mind; that 'the idea behind visualizing the deities is that you are getting in touch with what's already there' (held between 27 January and 25 February 2004). It is held that visualization of the deities stimulates the growth of corresponding potencies already latent in the practitioner's own mind (Harvey 2000), which, according to the FPMT's founder Lama Yeshe, has the underlying nature of essential clarity and purity (Thubten Yeshe 2004). Practitioners see the Buddha and deity images from this point of view. In interview, CR said:

- CR: All these deities are just emanations; different emanations of the Buddha. It might seem like to people that there are all these weird goddesses and gods or something that you're paying homage to, but it's all just different emanations of the Buddha and that's really different aspects of your own Buddha nature. One might be enlightened action; one might be ultimate compassion. They're just different aspects of the qualities that you want to develop. (Interview date: 3 March 2004).

The buddha, *bodhisattva*, deity images, and images of one's guru, can be seen as symbols of the transformed self, in that they are ultimately of the nature of *emptiness*, and are meant to remind oneself of aspects of one's own buddha-nature as being inherently empty. In this way, the model of the ideal self as it is understood according to Mahayana Buddhist soteriology, is employed by practitioners as an idealized self-concept. According to Tenzin Palmo, the deities can be seen in two ways. Eastern Buddhists see the deities as outside themselves while Westerners see them as purely mental concepts. She herself sees them as both expressions of mental states, for instance, Chenrezig as compassionate nature of mind, and as forces outside the mind, (Tenzin Palmo 2002: 238-239). Nevertheless, one must first be able to see the Buddha-nature as a quality or set of qualities belonging to a Buddha or bodhisattva, a

fully enlightened being, in order to see the model of the enlightened being as representing oneself. This involves objectifying the image, before seeing it as one's own ideal self-image.

Of the two ways of working with the absolute view, emptiness as the context for self-purification, the practitioners I interviewed did exhibit a preference for deity visualization over the more directly introspective analytical practices, although some practised both. The difference between using imagination-based techniques and those that utilize more immediate subjective experience such as the analytical practice outlined in Hopkins (1996: 44-46) and described above, is that the former employs a constructed self-concept and the latter employs a technique of self-deconstruction, although both operate from the same assumption about reality, that of inherent emptiness. Several other analytical meditations taught at the centre involve a combination of visualization, bare attention to internal states, and discursive reflection about present and past states. As discussed above, most Vajrayana practitioners I interviewed also tended to prefer concentration practice for calming the mind, and deity visualization has been known to produce concentrative effects. This collection of practices means that practitioners employ a mixture of experientially deconstructive and conceptually constructive processes in their meditations.

Many of the changes reported by practitioners from both centres were the outcomes of strategies employed for managing their habitual mental and emotional states, especially anger and defensiveness. They reported feeling generally calmer and more content in themselves with exposure to their centre's teachings and practices. With respect to the sense of self-transformation reported by both types of practitioner (bracketing any consideration of how such change reflects individual progress along the Buddhist path), it would appear that the end-result of practice is more or less the same for the two forms of Buddhism. Vipassana and FPMT practitioners learn to interpret their experience according to the doctrines of *Anatta* and *Sunyata*/Emptiness respectively. This interpretive context effects a loosening of the identification with and attachment to the contents, for instance mental states and social roles, of one's self-concept. However, for the two groups of practitioner interviewed, some differences in practical orientation are noteworthy. By comparison with the Vipassana practice of mindfulness or bare attention, the moment-to-moment noting of immediate experience, which leads to the identification and transformation of habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting, the set of practices taught at Vajrayana Institute may achieve similar ends by the combined use of imagination of deity images as the ideal self-concept, and discursive reflection upon life experience encouraged by listening to teachings. One must also account for any potentially integrating effect on the sense of self due to concentration practice (Csikszentmihalyi 1991: 41), taught as *Metta* meditation at BMIMC and emphasized in the FPMT curriculum.

The end result of Buddhist practice is to transform the self-concept by facilitating a perceptual shift in the practitioner's view of self, from unitary and permanent to not essentially-existent and in flux. The interview data discussed, as representative of the group of practitioners interviewed, indicates that change may occur in one of two aspects of self-functioning: to the *I*, one's awareness of subjective functioning, or to the *Me*, the self-concept. The key to understanding the explanatory power of James's model of discriminated aspects for the data concerned, lies in its explanation of change within each of these two aspects. As discussed above, James describes the self-concept as the collection of material, social and spiritual constituents, and associated feelings and actions (James 1948: 177; see especially the diagram in 1948;

195 and 1983: 313). One of these, spiritual self-seeking, includes every intellectual, moral or spiritual impulse towards psychic progress (James 1948: 184-185). It may be that this impulse, akin to that identified as *religious seekerhood* by researchers (Lofland and Skonovd 1981: 378-379), finds a suitable outlet in the context of those groups that facilitate experimental religious roleplay. Following from this, it can be seen that changes to one's self-concept in a religious context, reported as religious identity change in conversion studies, result from the recontextualization of this self-concept according to the new group's interpretive framework.

With respect to transformation to the *I* aspect, I contend that the practitioner's felt sense of transformation does not originate from here alone, but results from a reflexivity between changes to functioning in both discriminated aspects. As discussed above, analytical practices train the meditator to shift awareness from the sense-of-self as a solid and permanent core, to the interplay of underlying phenomena, the components of the *I*. Outside of the meditation context when the meditator attempts to describe their self-transformative experience, they cannot help but express changes to internal states and impulses in terms of ownership, although the committed Buddhist would instantly attempt to see these seemingly owned phenomena without attachment. Despite seeing the self as the continual interplay of impermanent phenomena (the relative view according to FPMT teachings), the meditator nonetheless still needs to function socially through the medium of personal identity. James attributes the sense of personal identity to the observation that "thoughts seem to belong to a thinker" (James 1948: 201; James 1983: 314), that past and present states of consciousness have a functional identity in that "each successive mental state appropriates the past *Me*" (James 1948: 202-203), the empirical aggregate of things objectively known (James 1948: 215). Change occurs to the sense of *I* with changes to the nature of one's habitual mental states, and one's sense of self-direction over them as opposed to being under their control. The practitioner then feels themselves to be transformed at the level of the self-concept, because what the individual perceives as self, its content, has changed. This reflexivity between the discriminated aspects James describes as "identity of *I* with *Me*", "an ineradicable dictum of common-sense" (James 1948: 176. Also see Gecas 1982: 3, who describes this relationship as a dialectic), I contend is responsible for the felt sense of self-transformation in the practitioners concerned. This identity is so intrinsic that the instant one experiences a change in awareness, this change is appropriated as *Me*.

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