



# MONASH University

***The Engagement of Australians of Christian Background with Buddhism in  
Australia: An Exploratory Study of Religious Conversion***

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## **Abstract**

Religious conversion has been widely examined by scholars from different disciplines including anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, psychotherapy and religious studies. Each discipline tends to emphasize certain distinctive aspects of conversion. There have been cross-discipline studies but more often studies focus on conversion from other religious traditions to Christianity. There are some recent studies exploring conversions from Christianity to Buddhism in countries such as the United States of America and Australia, yet the conversion of westerners with specifically Christian background, either Catholic or Protestant, to Buddhism within the specifically Australian context has not been sufficiently studied. The current project is designed to explore this issue.

This research employed Rambo's holistic and stages models for its investigation into the threefold issue: why conversions occurred; how they happened; and what prospects and consequences they brought to the converts. In addition, the thesis also used Colesman's concentric conceptualization model, types of conversion (proposed by Rambo), and conversion motifs (proposed by John Lofland and Norman Skonovd) to develop its approach in forming questions for data collection. All those methodological models worked well together to provide the researcher with a methodological framework to investigate this complex process of conversion. Empirical method and in-depth interviews were chosen for the development of the thesis. Twenty-four respondents were interviewed and audio-recorded. All data was carefully transcribed and analysed.

The findings of this study validate, expand and in some instances, challenge the existing theories of religious conversion. Conversion of Christian Australians to Buddhism normally happened after the converts had already left their Christian tradition, not so much during or immediately after their crisis. While Colesman's concentric model helped formulate the questions for investigation and to develop approaches to identify levels of conversion of each convert, the findings indicated that this model failed to measure the commitment that each convert made in following and practising the Buddhist path. The findings revealed that the Buddhist initiation rite only marked the maturity of conversion when an individual officially

and publicly became a Buddhist. It did not determine the seriousness of commitment to Buddhism that a convert made. The data interestingly showed that both the initiated and uninitiated identified themselves fully Buddhists and had similar level of commitment to learning and practising Buddhism.

The data also showed that conversion from Christianity to Buddhism in Australia includes both tradition transition and dual-belonging. While the former has been long and widely studied, the latter has been recently studied by scholars. The data revealed that the dual-belonging was a form of religious conversion with its distinctive characteristics.

Conversion from Christianity to Buddhism in Australia was a complex and long process. Although each conversion story was a unique case, the findings revealed that this type of conversion carried in itself certain characteristics. Firstly, this conversion was not the outcome of proselytization. Rather, it was the result of the combination between the sense of dissatisfaction of individuals toward the teachings and practices of their Christian tradition and the natural response of their personal spiritual search in the context of interreligious engagement.

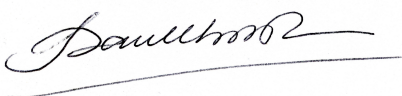
Secondly, conversion to Buddhism never ended but was an on-going and life-long process. It was a process of becoming, which required strict self-discipline in developing Buddhist wisdom, learning skills, practising meditation and living out compassion. In other words, it was an on-going journey to the awakening.

Finally, while the converts were faced with many challenges, they all found a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment from becoming Buddhists in Australia. The challenges were such as allocating time to and understanding certain teachings, including non-self, hell realms and some rituals, to finding a local Buddhist community to associate with, to being discriminated against by local people.

## Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thien Trong Nguyen', is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Print Name: THIEN TRONG NGUYEN

Date: 10<sup>th</sup> July 2019

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## Introduction

### 0.1 Statement of Research Problems

In 1994, the publication of the famous yet controversial book of the late Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, brought much confidence and hope to the Catholic faithful around the world while simultaneously generating tensions in the dialogue between Catholics and Buddhists and negative reactions from scholars and followers of Buddhism. What has become controversial was the view of the Pope on Buddhism and its doctrine of salvation. The text reads:

The *Buddhist doctrine of salvation* constitutes the central point, or rather the only point, of this system. Nevertheless, both the Buddhist tradition and the methods deriving from it have an almost exclusively *negative soteriology*.

The “enlightenment” experienced by Buddha comes down to the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and of suffering for man. To liberate oneself from this evil, one must free oneself from this world, necessitating a break with the ties that join us to external reality – ties existing in our human nature, in our psyche, in our bodies. The more we are liberated from these ties, the more we become indifferent to what is in the world, and the more we are freed from suffering, from the evil that has its source in the world.

Do we draw near to God in this way? This is not mentioned in the “enlightenment” conveyed by Buddha. Buddhism is in large measure an “*atheistic*” system. We do not free ourselves from evil through the good which comes from God; we liberate ourselves only through detachment from the world, which is bad. The fullness of such a detachment is not union with God, but what is called nirvana, a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world. *To save oneself* means, above all, to free oneself from evil by becoming *indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil*. This is the culmination of the spiritual process.<sup>1</sup>

Three years later, in 1997, another controversy arose when the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI later, called Buddhism an “autoerotic spirituality” or “self-absorption spirituality” that seeks “transcendence without imposing concrete

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 1994, <http://ebookbrowse.com/pope-john-paul-ii-crossing-the-threshold-of-hope-pdf-d344346227> (accessed 29 July 2014).

religious obligations.”<sup>2</sup> He also made the point that, by the year 2000, Buddhism would replace Marxism as the church’s biggest foe.<sup>3</sup>

These negative views from the head figures of the Catholic Church about Buddhism have shocked both Buddhists and scholars of religions around the world. However, they have, directly or indirectly, also created an opportunity for both Buddhists and Christians to engage in interreligious dialogue more seriously to better understand each other.

As a Catholic missionary priest who has been involved in interreligious dialogue for a number of years, I have personally been drawn to this invitation with a strong desire to explore different theoretical and practical issues of the two faith traditions, namely Buddhism and Christianity. More particularly, my interest lies in the study of religious conversion, with a focus on the engagement of Australians of Christian background with Buddhism in Australia.

Statistics from studies of religions in Australia have shown that the number of Buddhists in Australia has significantly increased in the last three decades.<sup>4</sup> Causes driving this growth include both the arrival of Buddhist migrants in Australia and the rising number of converts to Buddhism in recent years. My intention here is to study various aspects of the latter phenomenon, more specifically, the reason(s) why Australians of Christian background turn to Buddhism, what happens in the process of such a religious conversion, and the prospects and consequences of the change of faith from Christianity to Buddhism.

## **0.2 Formulation of Questions and Thesis Hypothesis**

For centuries, conversion to Christianity or Catholicism has been a common phenomenon in Christian mission countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia, and also in Christian countries, including Australia. Recent decades, however, have seen a change in Australia’s religious scenario. Studies show that Buddhism in Australia has been developing in both numbers of

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<sup>2</sup> John L. Allen, Jr., “The Truth is Universal, But Other Religions Play a Role,” 1999, [http://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/1999a/022699/022699f.htm](http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/1999a/022699/022699f.htm) (accessed 29 July 2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Desmond Cahill *et al.*, *Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia* (Canberra: Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2004), 34-35.

adherents and diversity of traditions.<sup>5</sup> Studying the changes in Australia's religious and spiritual demography, Bouma observes that "migration has been the major factor in the radical increasing religious diversity in Australia."<sup>6</sup> However, he also argues that "the recent increase among Buddhists cannot entirely be explained by migration"<sup>7</sup> and that there has also been an increase in the numbers of converts. This changing reality of Australian Buddhism poses some questions that this study attempts to answer.

The first question relates to the nature of attraction of Buddhism to Westerners in Australia. More concretely, why have there been increasing numbers of people with Christian background turning to and/or converting to Buddhism, or at least practising Buddhist spirituality these days? In other words, what is it in Buddhism that attracts them? Is it simply a matter of them being attracted to Buddhism because what they have found in it is not offered by Christianity, or are there other factors at play as well?

The second basic question for investigation here is how and what happens in the process of conversion or engagement in terms of both beliefs and practices of faith. This question is concerned with the converts' understanding of the teachings of both traditions, how they engage in the practices of both traditions, and how they understand their own conversion.

The third question for consideration entails an evaluation of the consequences of conversion. In other words, this part will try to articulate both the prospects and the obstacles of the converts' experiences in the process of their conversions. This will be studied in the light of both contemporary Christian mission theology and Buddhist understanding of liberation. Buddhism has long been known as a philosophy or a religion which carries in itself distinctive cultural characteristics and spiritual values. Some of its practices and values may not be compatible with mainstream western Christian values and practices. This incompatibility between the two sets of values and practices, namely Christian and Buddhist, could

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<sup>5</sup>Paul Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia: 1848-1988* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1989); Cristina Rocha and Michelle Barker, eds., *Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>Gary D. Bouma, "Globalization, Social Capital and the Challenge to Harmony of Recent Changes in Australia's Religious and Spiritual Demography: 1947-2001," *Australian Religion Studies Review* 16.2 (2003): 55-68, 59.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

hypothetically cause socio-religious tensions and conflicts among adherents of these two religious traditions. Bearing this hypothesis in mind, I desire to clarify both the prospects and challenges that the converts may encounter in their spiritual life and practice.

Living and working in Australian multicultural and multi-religious contexts, I have been facing the above-mentioned changing realities and challenging questions. The phenomenon of conversion of Christians to Buddhism may indicate hypothetically that Christianity does not satisfy some of its adherents on a certain level, or that Buddhism has something unique to offer them that Christianity lacks in its own set of traditions. This project is therefore an attempt to explore these issues in order to answer the aforementioned questions, with the hope that it may contribute to our understanding of the Catholic Church and other Christian communities regarding the relevance of their faith teachings and practices in today's world.

### **0.3 Thesis Significance**

Various historical and demographical studies of Buddhism have been undertaken.<sup>8</sup> However, empirical studies of conversion to Buddhism in Australia are still a somewhat under-explored issue.<sup>9</sup> Thus far, the two research works that examine certain aspects of conversion to Buddhism in Australia are Amanda Lienau-Purnell's work entitled *Converts to Buddhism: Interpersonal and Worldview Shifts* (2007) and Glenys Eddy's *Becoming Buddhist: Experiences of Socialization and Self-Transformation in Two Australian Buddhist Centres* (2012). Lienau-Purnell studies the interpersonal and worldview shifts of practitioners (both converts and cultural Buddhists) of a small Buddhist centre. The findings confirm that there was a clear shift in the participants' interpersonal relationships and worldview as they engaged in Buddhist training and practices. Lienau-Purnell makes a suggestion for future researches to explore the factors that lead to spiritual searching and conversion, to examine the experience of

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<sup>8</sup> Key works of Buddhism in Australia include: Paul Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1989); Enid L. Adam and Philip J. Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996); Michelle Spuler, *Developments in Australian Buddhism: Facets of the Diamond* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Patricia Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street: Engaged Buddhism in Australia* (Bunbury: Edith Cowan University, 2003); Rocha and Barker, eds., *Buddhism in Australia*; Anna Halafoff et al. (2012), "Buddhism in Australia: An Emerging Field of Study," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 12 (2012): 9-25.

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Spuler, "Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15.1 (2000): 41.



confusion and uncertainty after the conversion, and to offer possible ways of facilitating converts with overcoming any periods of confusion and uncertainty.

Eddy examines what it means to be a Western Buddhist adherent by analysing how Buddhist doctrines and practices are understood and applied by the individual in the Anglo-Australian context. She attempts to provide answers to a basic question: *What does it mean to be a Western Buddhist?* Eddy argues that through socialization and participation in Buddhist study and practice, such as attending courses, retreats and regular meditation, people experience personal self-transformation, and that by making a commitment to following the Buddhist path, by holding certain beliefs and chanting or having active membership in a specific organization, they start identifying themselves as Buddhists.<sup>10</sup>

These are useful works, but they do not deal with the factors that lead to conversions of Australians with Christian backgrounds to Buddhism, which is the focus of this research. In addition, this study also examines how the conversions take place, and the changes in the converts' understanding of spiritual values and practices. Finally, it also explores the benefits that the converts gain as a result of their conversions, and the challenges and difficulties they encounter as a consequence of changing their religious path.

By studying those three aspects of conversion, i.e., the reasons, the process and the benefits and problems in Australia which no study to date has examined, this thesis is significantly unique because it seeks to contribute to a better understanding of conversion from Christianity to Buddhism in the context of a predominantly western-Christian society (Australia). Additionally, the study hopes to raise questions and make practical suggestions to Christian churches, especially the Roman-Catholic Church, regarding their teachings and practices that may cause disconnection in their adherents, disconnection in the sense of a distancing between the adherents and their faith or faith community.

In terms of theories applicable for this study, the research employed mainly Rambo's holistic and stages models for its investigation into the threefold issue: why conversions occurred; how they happened; and what prospects and consequences they brought to the converts. In

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<sup>10</sup> Glenys Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist: Experiences of Socialization and Self-Transformation in Two Australian Buddhist Centres* (London: Continuum, 2012), 207.

addition, the thesis also used Colesman's concentric conceptualization model, types of conversion (proposed by Rambo), and conversion motifs (proposed by John Lofland and Norman Skonovd) to develop its approach in forming questions for data collection. All those methodological models worked well together to provide the researcher with a methodological framework to investigate this complex process of conversion. These theories are discussed at length in Chapter Three.

#### **0.4 Thesis Structure**

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. The first two chapters set the wider and the specific context for the thesis. They chart the development of Buddhism in the West and in Australia. Chapter One presents the historical development of Buddhism in the West. It highlights the early introduction of Buddhism into the West, the development of different Buddhist schools, the emergence of the New Buddhism called Western Buddhism. Chapter One also presents the factors that facilitate the development of Buddhism in the West and the reasons why conversions to Buddhism occur in the West.

Chapter Two focuses specifically on the development of Buddhism in Australia. It offers a brief historical development of Buddhism in Australia including the early arrivals of Buddhist migrant workers from China, Japan, Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century, the waves of refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the twentieth century, and the establishment of Buddhist organisations and councils in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It also explains the characteristics and the process of localisation of Australian Buddhism.

Chapter Three presents theories of religious conversion by examining concepts of conversion, different approaches to religious conversion, presentation and application of Rambo's holistic model of conversion and stages model of conversion, types of conversion, and conversion motifs. It also discusses both Christian and Buddhist understandings of conversion.

Chapter Four presents the methodological framework and the research design. It outlines the research method and design, including the selection of the participants, composition of interview questions, data collection and transcription, and ethical considerations.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven present the findings and analyse the collected data in the light of the proposed questions in Chapter One.

Chapter Five focuses on analysing the reasons and factors that contributed to the conversion of Australian Christians to Buddhism.

Chapter Six analyses the process of this type of conversion. It examines how conversion took place and what was involved when the converts changed their faith.

Chapter Seven presents both the prospect and challenges that the converts had in their conversion from Christianity to Buddhism.

Finally, Chapter Eight discusses the implications of the findings and suggests possibilities for further research.

## Chapter One

### A Brief Overview of the Historical Development of Buddhism in the West

#### 1.1 Early Contacts

There are claims that Buddhists could have made attempts to reach the West even as early as before the beginning of the Christian era,<sup>11</sup> and that “the Buddha’s life story offered the Christian gospel writers a narrative model for organizing their official versions of the Christ’s biography,” and that Christian monasticism, which developed during the fourth century, “was somehow patterned after Buddhist monasticism.”<sup>12</sup> Some scholars even suggest that Buddha is included in the list of Christian saints – although in a disguised form, as Saint Josaphat.<sup>13</sup> This interpretation, and the other aforementioned speculations, remain controversial because “down to the thirteenth century we have no real record of direct contacts between Europeans and Asian Buddhists; knowledge of Indian and Chinese cultures was to remain almost non-existent in Europe.”<sup>14</sup>

Stephen Batchelor, Jack Maguire and Rupert Gethin agree that officially documented accounts of interactions between Westerners and Buddhists took place in the thirteenth

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the Indian emperor Asoka (272-236 BCE) sent Buddhist missionaries westward along the trade routes that connected Europe and Asia, reaching as far as the Mediterranean coast. Cited from Jack Maguire, *Essential Buddhism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), 159; Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction* (Belmont: Thomson Learning, 2005), 292.

Jack Maguire and Noble Ross Reat also suggest that, in the first century BCE, Milinda, the Greek ruler of north-western India, held a dialogue with the Buddhist monk Magasena, and that he might have even been converted to Buddhism. Cited from Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 159; Noble Ross Reat, *Buddhism: A History* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1994), 279.

<sup>12</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 159; cf. Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction* (Belmont: Thomson Learning, 2005), 292.

<sup>13</sup> The story of Barlaam and Josaphat, which dates back to the Middle Ages, describes them as Christian missionaries in the East. Cited from Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 25.

According to Reat, his name (Josaphat) is a “corruption of the Sanskrit term Bodhisattva [the one who is committed to enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient being]” and his “biography is based on the life of the Buddha.” Cited from Reat, *Buddhism*, 280.

<sup>14</sup> Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 273.

century through increasing trade and missionary activities.<sup>15</sup> Batchelor remarks that it was only in 1255 that Europe “received a first-hand report of Buddhism and its practices” by Franciscan friar William of Rubruck, who encountered Buddhists in the Mongolian capital Karakorum. In 1254, William attempted to convert the Mongol leader to Christianity but failed to achieve that ambition and was expelled from Mongolia after an eight-month stay.<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the trader-adventurer Marco Polo travelled to Asia, where he encountered Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Vajrayana Buddhists in Mongolia, and spoke highly about the Buddha as a holy one.<sup>17</sup>

Alexander Wynne and others, on the other hand, set the official point of contact between Western Europeans and Buddhism in 1497, when Vasco de Gama discovered ocean routes which opened Asia to European religious and commercial interests.<sup>18</sup> At the beginning of the sixteenth century, two Jesuit missionaries, Francis Xavier, who travelled to India and Japan, and Matteo Ricci, who trekked to China, began sending the first Western descriptions of Buddhism.<sup>19</sup> However, Wynne points out that, although there were early initial contacts between Westerners and Buddhists in the sixteenth century, it was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that Buddhism came to the knowledge of the people in the Occident.<sup>20</sup> The first reliable description of Buddhism came from Fr. Ippolito Desideri, who composed an account of his missionary journey to Tibet.<sup>21</sup>

Contacts and interactions between the West and Buddhism have been, for the most part, developed under European colonialism. During the eighteenth century, European countries expanded their territorial claims to India and other Asian countries. In order to achieve the goal of establishing effective colonial rule over new colonies, institutions were founded to

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Wynne, *Buddhism: An Introduction* (New York: I. B. Tauris and Co., 2015); Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 8, 83, 91.

<sup>17</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 160; Reat, *Buddhism: A History*, 280; Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 98.

<sup>18</sup> Wynne, *Buddhism*, 260; Robinson, Johnson, and Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions*, 293.

<sup>19</sup> Reat, *Buddhism*, 280.

<sup>20</sup> Wynne, *Buddhism*, 260.

<sup>21</sup> Reat, *Buddhism*, 280.

study local customs, cultures and religions.<sup>22</sup> According to Baumann, texts and descriptions of Indian religions appeared in literary and academic circles in Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup> The following century witnessed further developments. Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson and Thanissaro Bhikkhu<sup>24</sup> point out that, in 1844, the French philosopher Eugene Burnouf proposed that many forms of Buddhism in Asia developed out of a single tradition from India, and he laid the foundation for Buddhology, which, as the name suggests, engages scholars in the professional study of Buddhism.<sup>25</sup> In this context, Buddhist texts, including the Lotus Sutra (a pivotal text in the Mahayana tradition), were translated, edited and published in English and French, which made Buddhism more widely known in the West.<sup>26</sup> By the late nineteenth century, the West received numerous accounts of Buddhism, and it began to make an impact on Western intellectuals. In some cases, its impact was quite significant: for example, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) declared Buddhism to be the best of all religions.<sup>27</sup>

Contrary to the contacts made with Buddhism by colonial and missionary Westerners through their adventures in Asia, mid-eighteenth-century North America witnessed the first Buddhists, Taoists and Confucians via the first boatload of Chinese men, who were arriving in California in search of gold.<sup>28</sup> By 1870, it was reported that there were 63,199 Chinese immigrants in the country, which encompassed ten percent of the population of California at the time.<sup>29</sup> During the next half-century, hundreds of Buddhist temples and Chinese religious shrines were built throughout the American West. However, without any organized attempt

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<sup>22</sup> Robinson *et al.*, *Buddhist Religions*, 294.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Baumann, "Buddhism in Europe," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 85-105, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction* (Belmont: Thomson Learning, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Eugene Burnouf, *L'Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (Maisonnette: Paris, 1844); Robinson, Johnson, and Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions*, 294-295.

<sup>26</sup> Wynne, *Buddhism*, 261; Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 160-162.

<sup>27</sup> Reat, *Buddhism*, 280.

<sup>28</sup> Wynne, *Buddhism*, 260; Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 165-167.

<sup>29</sup> Wynne, *Buddhism*, 166.

to spread the religion, and the resistance of the local majority Christian people, Buddhism remained largely unknown in America during this time.<sup>30</sup>

During this period, there were two events that significantly modified the reception and status of Buddhism in the West. The first one was the publication of the poem *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold in 1879, where he emphasized the parallels between the lives of Jesus and the Buddha, thereby effectively changing Western negative perceptions of Buddhism. Prior to this publication, Buddhism was more intensively viewed as a passive and life-denying religion.<sup>31</sup> The second event refers to the speeches by Buddhist delegates at the first Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893, which was both the first official representation of Buddhist ideas and its official recognition as a religion in America. Two Buddhist representatives, Anagarika Dharmapala, a Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist, and Shaku Soen, a Zen master, made a strong impact on the audience.

In 1894, writer and publisher Paul Carus published two books, *Karma: A Story of Early Buddhism* and *The Gospel According to Buddha*. In these books, Carus described how he was awakened to Buddhism at the Parliament of World Religions, claiming that Buddhism was compatible with contemporary philosophy and the “Religion of Science,” and that Buddha and Jesus could be seen as “successive saviours of the world.”<sup>32</sup>

Around the same time, Europe also witnessed the first ordinations of European Buddhist converts, Gordon Douglas in 1899, and Allan Bennet McGregor in 1902. In this period first Buddhist societies were also established. Maha Bodhi Society was founded in 1891 by a lay Buddhist, Dharmapala, initially in Colombo, but then it spread to the United States in 1897, Germany in 1911, and England in 1926.<sup>33</sup> The establishment of the Buddhist Society of Britain

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<sup>30</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 166.

<sup>31</sup> James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 56.

<sup>32</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 167-170; Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 57-60.

<sup>33</sup> Baumann, “Buddhism in Europe,” 87; Donald W. Michell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, second ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 359.

and Ireland took place in 1908.<sup>34</sup> As in America, during this early period, Dharmapala was an influential figure in the founding of Buddhism in Europe.

By this time, Buddhism in Europe was still facing difficulties and was not welcome in religious and cultural terms: Buddhism was still considered by Christian theologians as “devastating nihilism” and “wretched pessimism.”<sup>35</sup> European Christians were called upon to “defend your holiest possessions” against Buddhists who were portrayed as “the onrushing legions of the Antichrist.”<sup>36</sup>

## 1.2 Greater Diversity

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Western Buddhism was still predominantly Theravada Buddhism, which was the tradition most commonly encountered by Western colonizers in Asia.<sup>37</sup> It is worthwhile to note that the introduction and establishment of Theravada Buddhism in the West until that time was mainly due to the efforts of Western travellers and intellectuals.<sup>38</sup> They returned from Asia as lay teachers and introduced the *vipassana* form, known as “insight meditation” or “mindfulness” in English.<sup>39</sup> However, this situation started to change at the mentioned 1892 Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago, where Japanese Zen was the first Buddhist tradition that had an impact on a Western audience.<sup>40</sup> As a result, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Buddhism in Europe and especially America started to become more diverse in its traditions or schools.

At the end of the 1920s, *zendos* or meditation halls were established in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and later the Buddhist Society of America was founded in New York City, which was

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<sup>34</sup> Michell, *Buddhism*, 359.

<sup>35</sup> Baumann, “Buddhism in Europe,” 96.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 171.

<sup>38</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Egil Fronsdal, “Theravada Spirituality in the West,” in *Buddhist Spirituality: Later China, Japan, Korea, and the Modern World*, 1999 ed. (New York: Crossroad), 482-496, 482-487.

<sup>40</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 7.



renamed the Zen Institute of America after 1945.<sup>41</sup> Except for Germany, where Buddhism remained predominantly Theravada in orientation, in other Western countries during the first half of the twentieth century, Buddhist teachings were disseminated via the Theosophical Society, which fostered interest in all forms of Buddhism, and “tended to be eclectic and ecumenical rather than to align with any particular sect.”<sup>42</sup>

The immediate post-WW period was a time for the reconstruction of life and social order in the West, with much attention and energy given to building up family life and establishing social stability rather than exploring new religious horizons.<sup>43</sup> Interest in Buddhism during this period came to a halt, and according to Batchelor, it represents the weakest phase of development of Buddhism in the West.<sup>44</sup> By this time, Buddhism had made “only the shallowest penetration of Western culture... there was little appetite... to follow the Buddhist path to its fruition.”<sup>45</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s, a period known as “the culmination of the American Dream,” Theravada Buddhism continued to grow in Western countries, largely due to returning Americans who had fought in Vietnam and Thailand and had encountered Buddhism, as well as the increasing numbers of Western travellers interested in the tradition. Some of them studied Buddhism in Asian countries and came back as Buddhist meditation teachers. It should be noted, however, that at this point in time, Theravada Buddhism in the West was still purely a lay movement.<sup>46</sup>

In the post-war period, America also witnessed the blossoming of Zen. There was the release of U.S. citizens of Japanese descent who were held in Japanese detention camps during the war, as well as the return of U.S. soldiers serving in the Korean War. These groups returned with some exposure to Zen Buddhism. In this period, America also welcomed the return of Zen master Soyen Shaku’s student, D. T. Suzuki, who became known as the “first patriarch of

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<sup>41</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 179.

<sup>42</sup> Fronsdaal, “Theravada Spirituality in the West,” 486.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 35.

<sup>44</sup> Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 326.

<sup>45</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 60-61.

<sup>46</sup> Fronsdaal, “Theravada Spirituality in the West,” 487.

American Zen.”<sup>47</sup> He devoted eight years to teaching at Columbia University and writing books and articles, thereby making Zen more accessible to Westerners.<sup>48</sup> Another Zen master, Nyogen Senzaki – who was another student of Soyen Shaku – also appeared on the American Buddhist scene and made a long-lasting impact on Zen Buddhism in America. Besides offering lectures and guiding meditation, Senzaki also set up over the years many centres which he called “floating Zendo”. Like D. T. Suzuki, Senzaki provided many Westerners with “a taste of real Buddhist meditation.”<sup>49</sup> With the appearance of the counter-cultural movements of the Beat Generation and hippies, Zen Buddhism started entering the mainstream consciousness of Westerners, appearing in literature, art, music, health and many other aspects of life.<sup>50</sup> Western writers on Zen also appeared on the scene: the well-known British Christmas Humphreys, the British-American Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, and many others whose writings and interpretations introduced many people to Zen.<sup>51</sup>

Chinese Buddhism also started to have some impact on the development of American Buddhism in the post-war period. Although it had been present in the United States since the early nineteenth century,<sup>52</sup> It was only in this period that it began to enter the mainstream of society and attract Western converts.<sup>53</sup> In 1968 in San Francisco, Hong Kong monk Xuan Hua founded the first Chinese Buddhist group among non-Chinese, called the Sino-American Buddhist Association.<sup>54</sup> Chinese Buddhism in the West was further developed with the arrival of Vietnamese refugees during the 1970s, a large number of whom practised Chinese Buddhism.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 58.

<sup>48</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 179.

<sup>49</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 59.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 65

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>52</sup> Wynne, *Buddhism: An Introduction*, 206; Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 165-167.

<sup>53</sup> Reat, *Buddhism: A History*, 283.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

During this period, Pure Land,<sup>56</sup> Zen and Nichiren Buddhism (a Japanese Buddhist sect that uses the Lotus Sutra as its central scripture) also came to America and Europe. With the presence of visiting Buddhist teachers from Asia, Zen and *Vipassana* meditation became popular in Europe.<sup>57</sup> It was reported that Nichiren Buddhism attracted a thousand new members per month, many of whom were non-Japanese Americans including Euro-Americans, African Americans and Hispanics. This group was thought to be the largest single denomination of Buddhism in the Western world.<sup>58</sup>

During the 1970s and the 1980s, with the arrival of great numbers of Tibetan, Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian refugees to Western countries – especially to the United States, Australia, Canada and some European countries such as France and Germany – Buddhism in the West experienced great expansion, both in numbers and in diversity. A large proportion of those refugees had Buddhist backgrounds. Ethnic Buddhist communities were established, they built their own temples and engaged ethnic Buddhist monks to minister to their respective communities. Fronsdal observes that most ethnic Buddhist temples and centres limited their service to their own respective groups in order to maintain their cultural and religious heritages and values, and very few of them attempted to reach out beyond their own constituents.<sup>59</sup>

Along with the Zen boom in the 1960s and 1970s, Tibetan Buddhism also attracted many Westerners in both America and Europe. During this period, due to political changes in Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism started to spread to the West, becoming, along with Zen, one of the fastest growing spiritual traditions. All forms of Tibetan Buddhism were introduced into Western countries, including the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand, by mainly Tibetan teachers. Geshe Ngawang Wangyal, from the Geluk lineage,<sup>60</sup> arrived in the U.S. in 1955; Deshung Rinpoche, deriving from the Sakya

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<sup>56</sup> First appearing in China in 179 CE, Pure Land Buddhism emphasizes that through faith in Amitaha's vow, devotees can come into the Pure Land where they will have ideal conditions to obtain enlightenment.

<sup>57</sup> Michell, *Buddhism*, 359.

<sup>58</sup> Reat, *Buddhism*, 285.

<sup>59</sup> Fronsdal, "Theravada Spirituality in the West," 487.

<sup>60</sup> A lineage in Buddhism is a line of transmission of Buddhist teaching.

lineage, started teaching at University of Washington in 1960; Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche, from the Nyingma lineage, arrived in America in 1968; Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who came from the Kayu lineage, moved to United States in 1969, and Kalu Rinpoche, from the same Order, started teaching Buddhism and founded centres in Canada, France and the U.S. in 1971.<sup>61</sup> Due to political changes in Europe in 1989, eastern European countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and the western parts of the Russian Federation also witnessed a growing interest in both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>62</sup>

The fourteenth Dalai Lama, who is the leader of Tibetan Buddhists, may also be considered a key figure in the growing popularity of Buddhism in the West. He did not publicly appear in the West until the mid-1970s. In 1973, he had his first tour visit of different centres in Europe.<sup>63</sup> After receiving the Noble Peace Prize in 1989, and thanks to his compelling teaching tours in Western countries, plus his various published works on Buddhism – including his most notable book entitled *Ethics for the New Millennium* (1999) – he has since become the leading Buddhist teacher in the West.<sup>64</sup> The Dalai Lama has attempted both to uphold the values of the Tibetan monastic tradition and to adapt Buddhist teachings to Western needs.<sup>65</sup> With his open-mindedness and his flexible approach and ability to adapt Buddhist teachings to different cultural contexts, he has been successful in the West in four areas: “the preservation of Tibetan Buddhist culture... in the exiled Tibetan communities of the West; the lucid and empathetic dissemination of Tibetan Buddhist teachings for the Western Buddhist practitioners; the strengthening of the alliance between Buddhism and the Western scientific community; and the fostering of changes in outlook and practice in order that the Dharma take root in the West.”<sup>66</sup> After two decades of engaging in teaching and promoting Buddhism in the West, a multitude of Tibetan Buddhist centres and groups have been formed, mostly

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<sup>61</sup> Michell, *Buddhism*, 367-368.

<sup>62</sup> Baumann, “Buddhism in Europe,” 93.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>64</sup> Lawrence Sutin, *All is Change: The Two-Thousand-Year Journey of Buddhism to the West* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2006), 320-321.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

by Western converts, outnumbering all other Buddhist traditions in many Western countries.<sup>67</sup>

Together with the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, the arrival and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees has also made a certain impact on the development of Buddhism in the West. Many Vietnamese refugees follow the Mahayana tradition,<sup>68</sup> particularly Zen and Pure Land Buddhism. Though they have been known as a group that focuses on strengthening their ethnic identity through Buddhist practice, a few Vietnamese Buddhist leaders, including Thich Nhat Hanh and Thich Thien-An, have attempted to reach beyond their own communities by establishing meditation centres and offering meditation courses that successfully attract Westerners.<sup>69</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh has established over two hundred Communities of Mindful Living in the United States and Europe<sup>70</sup> and has ordained a number of Westerners in his Order of Interbeing.<sup>71</sup>

In sum, prior to the beginning of the twentieth century, Buddhism in America and Europe was predominantly Theravada. Most Buddhists were converts, belonging to the middle or upper classes and highly educated. Buddhism started to become more diverse at the beginning of the twentieth century when Mahayana Zen entered the Western world, especially in America, via the first Parliament of the World Religions in 1893. However, American Zen began to grow rapidly after the post-WW2 period and boomed during the 1960s and 1970s. In Europe, especially in France, Germany, Great Britain, Netherlands and Switzerland, Zen also became popular during the 1970s and 1980s. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Buddhism in Europe and America (including Canada<sup>72</sup>) and Australia (discussed further in Chapter Two) became more diverse in traditions thanks to the arrival of Buddhist migrants. This includes Pure Land

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<sup>67</sup> Baumann, "Buddhism in Europe," 92.

<sup>68</sup> Known as the "Great Vehicle," this school is typically concerned with personal spiritual practice and the ideal of the bodhisattva.

<sup>69</sup> Donald W. Michell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, second ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 366.

<sup>70</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 435.

<sup>71</sup> Michell, *Buddhism*, 366.

<sup>72</sup> Janet McLellan, *Many Petals of the Lotus: Five Asian Buddhist Communities in Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 12.

Buddhism from Vietnam and various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. By the end of the twentieth century, Buddhism in the West was no longer known as strictly a religion or philosophy of the East, and it was not dominated by any particular Buddhist tradition. Contemporary Westerners tend to view and embrace Buddhism as an alternative path for their spiritual life.

Though Buddhism by the end of the twentieth century had substantially grown in numbers in many European countries, it was still faced with certain obstacles and challenges, especially with its nationally official recognition as a world religion, not a “cult” or a “sect”.<sup>73</sup> European Buddhism was faced with legal restrictions when it strove to establish monasteries or institutions. In many countries, Buddhists had to go through many specific requirements to get access to media, legal recognition, financial support or the right to teach in schools.<sup>74</sup> It also suffered from internal division when it sought to reach a doctrinal standardisation among traditions. Due to the introduction of doctrinal standardisation, many Buddhist groups and centres deliberately left their national organisations.<sup>75</sup>

### **1.3 The Emergence of New Buddhism**

With the introduction of Buddhism in the West, a classification of different types of Buddhism has subsequently been drawn to distinguish between the groups. There are three major forms: traditional Asian Buddhism, which is practised in Asian countries; ethnic Buddhism, which is typical for migrant enclaves in the West; and Western Buddhism, which is mainly practised by Westerners.<sup>76</sup> All these three forms bear different characteristics, but they all share a common goal: to attain liberation from suffering and to become enlightened.

Western Buddhism can be defined both geographically and sociologically. Geographically, Western Buddhism is known as the practice of Buddhism in countries such as America, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland and the United

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<sup>73</sup> Baumann, “Buddhism in Europe,” 98.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. Buddhism in the West still experiences such difficulties.

<sup>76</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 12.

Kingdom. According to Michelle Spuler, this definition is relatively simplistic and problematic because it is difficult to define which countries are “Western.”<sup>77</sup> Sociologically, Western Buddhism is a specific type of Buddhism practised by converts to Buddhism in the West. In scholarly literature, this newly emerged type of Buddhism in the West is known as the “new Buddhism,”<sup>78</sup> or as the “convert Buddhism.”<sup>79</sup> According to James William Coleman, most of the followers of this new Buddhism are wealthy or upper-middle class, liberal and highly educated Anglo-Celtic people, whose main motivation in following the Buddhist path is to seek “spiritual growth.”<sup>80</sup> Coleman also observes that many of these spiritual seekers are somehow involved in psychotherapy, which has a close link with meditation.<sup>81</sup>

In terms of the differences between Western and ethnic Buddhism in the West, each group has certain emphases. For example, while ethnic Buddhists, also known as “Heritage Buddhists”<sup>82</sup> is regarded as having closer links to ethnicity and being more focused on cultural functions than with religious elements, Western converts to Buddhism, known as “convert Buddhists” are believed to focus more on meditation and the study of Buddhist philosophy.<sup>83</sup> Different forms of piety, such as praying, incense and food offering, as well as making material contributions, are commonly practised among ethnic Buddhists as ways of accumulating merits (spiritual credits), whereas meditation and meditation retreats are found to be the central practices of convert Buddhists. Coleman discusses this distinction by stating: “If there is a single characteristic that defines the new Buddhism for most of its members, it is the practice of meditation.”<sup>84</sup> Also, ethnic Buddhism has continued with the patriarchal structure,

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<sup>77</sup> Spuler, *Developments in Australian Buddhism*, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*; Huston Smith and Philip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> Greig N. Hase, “Inclusion and Exclusion in the White Space: An Investigation of the Experiences of People of Color in a Primarily White American Meditation Community,” Doctoral Thesis (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2019), 10.

<sup>80</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 20-21.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>82</sup> Hase, “Inclusion and Exclusion in the White Space,” 10.

<sup>83</sup> Spuler, *Developments in Australian Buddhism*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 14.

and it emphasizes the importance of monastic life over laity life, while convert Buddhism deemphasizes the hierarchical dualities of male/female and monastic/lay, instead promoting the understanding that the pursuit of liberation and the ability to achieve this goal is common to all. On this difference, Coleman remarks: "All in all, the distinction between the monk and the layperson in the new Buddhism is a fuzzy one... In one sense, everyone is a kind of monk, and in another no one is."<sup>85</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, many meditation centres were founded in Western countries by Western lay converts and teachers who had their Buddhist training in Asian Buddhist countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma. Well known among those lay teachers were Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg, who established the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Massachusetts in 1976. Another centre, called Spirit Rock, a sister centre to the IMS, was founded in Marin County, California, in 1987. These centres attracted students from all over the Western world. These returned lay teachers trained other teachers. Thanks to their active involvement in teaching meditation and training disciples, Theravada and Zen Buddhism have enjoyed great success in Western countries.<sup>86</sup>

The new Buddhism is most closely associated with three Buddhist traditions: Zen, Tibetan *Vajrayana* (which uses tantric techniques to obtain enlightenment), and Theravadin *Vipassana* (which uses insight meditation as its technique to obtain enlightenment), which have been practised almost exclusively by convert Buddhists.<sup>87</sup> Of these three traditions, Zen is the oldest and most practised Buddhist tradition in America. As already mentioned, after the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, the Rinzai Zen Buddhist, Soyen Shaku, returned to America to teach Zen in San Francisco in 1905. His Japanese disciples, D. T. Suzuki, Sokei-an Sasaki, Nyogen Sensaki and D. T. Suzuki, also went to America to teach Zen Buddhism. Sokei-an founded the Buddhist Society of America in New York in 1931, which was later renamed the First Zen Institute of America.<sup>88</sup> Another Zen master who became well known to American convert Buddhists was Nyogen Sensaki, who arrived in America in 1905.

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>86</sup> Egil Fronsdaal, "Theravada Spirituality in the West," 489.

<sup>87</sup> Smith and Philip Novak, *Buddhism*.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.



After waiting for seventeen years as his master commanded him to do, Sensaki started teaching Zen. His teaching had a lasting effect on his students, of whom Robert Aitken was one who later became a Zen master. He gathered Zen groups in San Francisco and Los Angeles and set up “floating Zendo” in different areas.<sup>89</sup> D. T. Suzuki is obviously the most famous of these disciples. He arrived in America in 1897 and stayed in the West for fourteen years to teach Zen. Through his teaching and writing, Suzuki “gave the West its first picture of the Zen tradition from someone who spoke from the depths of direct experience.”<sup>90</sup> Many Western convert Buddhists were influenced by him, including Karen Horner, John Cage, Alan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Edward Conze and Christmas Humphreys. Suzuki also attended the World Congress of Faiths in England in 1936, where he met Alan Watts, who was to make a great contribution to literary Zen.<sup>91</sup>

Zen Buddhism became widespread in America in the 1960s and 1970s, largely thanks to Suzuki Roshi, who arrived in San Francisco in 1959 and started teaching Soto Zen Buddhism. Unlike all other Zen masters who followed the Rinzai Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes the great breakthrough to *satori* (perceiving one’s true nature) in their meditation practice, Roshi’s teaching is radical in the sense that practitioners just sit in meditation facing the Zendo walls without expecting to achieve any goal such as the great breakthrough to *satori*. Suzuki Roshi once said: “Enlightenment is not some good feeling or some particular state of mind. The state of mind that exists when you sit in the right posture is, itself, enlightenment.”<sup>92</sup> After twelve years, this Zen tradition became the fastest growing Buddhist lineage in America.<sup>93</sup>

The embrace of Zen in the West reflects a response to the disillusionment with Western cultural, intellectual and religious promises. Instead of relying on faith and a supernatural being to obtain salvation, Zen relies on direct experience and one’s own effort to achieve

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<sup>89</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 59.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64; Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957; Alan W. Watts, *Eastern Wisdom: What is Zen? What is Tao? An Introduction to Meditation*, New York: Fine Communications, 2001.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

enlightenment; in place of taking cultural forms of discourse, Zen transcends words and makes contact with the ineffable.<sup>94</sup> However, the adaptation of Zen in the West involves a certain de-contextualization of Asian cultural elements and practices. Most non-Asian Zen practitioners in the West are middle- or upper-class laypersons who tend to be interested almost exclusively in meditation.<sup>95</sup> In addition, influenced by Western Enlightenment values, which embrace the ideals of democracy and equality, traditional Zen – with its authoritarian, patriarchal and monastic structures – has been greatly challenged in the West. Western Zen communities have struggled with the tradition's unequal distribution of authority and the limited roles of women. Due to scandals in the 1980s and 1990s involving teachers' abuse of power and sexual relationships with students at the San Francisco Zen Centre, Vajradhatu/Shambhala and many other centres<sup>96</sup> introduced changes in leadership style aiming at discouraging the concentration of power, shifting their pedagogy from being "teacher-centred" to "student-centred."<sup>97</sup> The leadership structure changed so that the board of directors is now democratically elected by the Zen Centre's membership, and nominations for the roles of president and abbot/abbess come from a Council of Elders.<sup>98</sup>

Another important changing aspect of Zen in the West is the increasing number of women practitioners, female Zen teachers and leaders who "have been at the forefront of experimenting with less hierarchical Sangha organization, gentler approaches to discipline, and innovation in styles of practice."<sup>99</sup> Some Zen practitioners have become so disillusioned with traditional forms and hierarchy that they ceased to be Zen. Toni Packer, from the Rochester Zen Centre, is an example. She has abandoned most of the elements of traditional Zen and formed her own Sangha, which is not typical Zen but rather "post-Zen."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> David L. McMahan, "Repackaging Zen for the West," in *Westward Dharma*, 218-229, 222.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Sandra Bell, "Scandals in Emerging Western Buddhism," in *Westward Dharma*, 230-242.

<sup>97</sup> McMahan, "Repackaging Zen for the West," 226.

<sup>98</sup> Bell, "Scandals in Emerging Western Buddhism."

<sup>99</sup> McMahan, "Repackaging Zen for the West," 226.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 227-228.

Another Buddhist tradition that has been adopted and practised widely by Western Buddhist converts is Tibetan *Vajrayana*. Tibetan Buddhism was first made known to the West as early as the end of the eighteenth century by Father Ippolito Desideri's account of his journey to Tibet.<sup>101</sup> It became increasingly familiar largely due to works by Alexandra David-Neel and by W. Y. Evans-Wentz.<sup>102</sup> However, it was not until the 1970s that this branch of Buddhism was taught and practised in the west by Tibetan monks. According to Coleman, "[t]oday, roughly a third of the Buddhist meditation centres in North America follow some kind of Tibetan tradition, and many of those who practise in other traditions have come to see the Tibetan Dalai Lama as the living symbol of the Buddhist faith."<sup>103</sup>

Tibetan Buddhism is known as one of the most complex religious tantric system, with various images of deities, colourful costumes, exotic rituals, devotions and mysterious elements. These characteristics were, to some extent, maintained in the West; as Coleman observes: "the western groups that follow the Tibetan tradition maintain an air of the exotic and mysterious that is not found in Zen and Vipassana."<sup>104</sup> Coleman compares the characteristics of the former with the two latter paths: "If the tone of Zen and Vipassana can be said to be cool, then Vajrayana is hot."<sup>105</sup> Another striking practice of the Vipassana is that the highest teachings of this tradition should be kept secret and they cannot be fully learned without a qualified teacher who transmits the teachings to students in face-to-face oral fashion. This practice creates a kind of "guru devotion," where students are expected to worship their guru as a higher being, even as a living Buddha.<sup>106</sup> Western students normally find this a difficult practice. The stages of training in this tradition are also arduous and require much patience on the part of students and practitioners.

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<sup>101</sup> Reat, *Buddhism*, 280.

<sup>102</sup> Alexandra David-Neel, *Initiations and Initiates in Tibet* (New York: University Books, 1959); David-Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971); David-Neel, *My Journey to Lhasa* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); W. Y. Evans-Wentz, comp. and ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960); cf. Lawrence Sutin, *All is Change*.

<sup>103</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 103.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>106</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 105.

Beginners are required to spend a lengthy period – two or more years – to pass the preliminary stage known as *ngondro*, which involves hundreds of thousands of prostrations with tantric prayers or mantras, offering one hundred thousand *mandalas* (a sacred symbol or a spiritual and ritual practice, repeating a million times supplication to their guru), and finally spending several months in a solitary or group retreat. After completing the *ngondro* (the preliminary, preparatory practices or disciplines), students receive the empowerment known as *abhisheka*, which authorises them to practise visualization (a meditation technique to enhance consciousness, self-awareness and focusing the mind). In this stage, students are expected to attend many specialised retreats and take vows. For those who wish to take monastic vows, they are encouraged to commit themselves to practise visualization day-and-night for three years, three months and three days. Again, for most Western students, they find it difficult to visualize themselves as some sort of god. However, some Western practitioners find this practice beneficial.<sup>107</sup> It has been noted that, in the West, Tibetan Buddhism has taken a Western approach by teachers of *Dzogchen*, known as “great perfection.”<sup>108</sup> This approach does not require long years of preliminary practices or special preparation. *Dzogchen* has become popularly followed by Western students and practitioners.<sup>109</sup>

The newest stream of Western Buddhism is *Vipassana*, from the Theravada tradition in the southern part of Asia. *Vipassana* is known as being more strictly derived from the Buddha’s original teachings. Scholars note that, unlike the Zen and Tibetan traditions – which were brought to the West by Asian teachers – *Vipassana* teachings were brought back to the West by Westerners who had their training in India, Thailand and Burma.<sup>110</sup> In the West, this tradition has shifted itself away from the emphasis on the doctrinal, ritual, faith and monastic elements of the Theravada tradition to personal and transformative experiences of awakening. This process is called “adaptation” or “indigenization” of the religion.<sup>111</sup> Going through the process of adaptation and indigenization, *Vipassana* is presented in a relatively

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>110</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 8; Smith and Novak, *Buddhism*, 173.

<sup>111</sup> Spuler, *Developments in Australian Buddhism*, 98-132.

non-sectarian manner, and the practice of meditation has tended to be self-contained. This approach is considered suitable even to those who are not interested in Buddhism as such.<sup>112</sup> *Vipassana* is generally known as the most secular and most Western style of Buddhism, having “the lightest cultural baggage from the East.”<sup>113</sup> In this sense, *Vipassana* seems to have broken away from Theravada Buddhism in the West.

As a result, Theravada Buddhism in the West remains predominantly a lay movement with an emphasis on *Vipassana* practice. Until the mid-1980s, the teachings of *Vipassana* in the West tended to focus less on the ethical dimension and is less dualistic than those of the Southeast Asian Theravada tradition.<sup>114</sup> Instead of focusing on ultimate spiritual goals such as *nirvana*, i.e., ending the cycles of death and rebirth and obtaining the stages of sainthood, the Western approach emphasizes the importance of the immediate benefits of mindfulness and the restoration of one’s relationship with the world. The differences in approach and technique are obvious between the Southeast Asian and Western pathways. Yet, according to Fronsdal, it is still too early to claim that new traditions of Western Buddhism have fully emerged.<sup>115</sup>

Besides teaching meditation, guiding retreats, training teachers and building centres, some effort has gone into founding monastic communities in the West. In 1979, the first monastery called Chithurst was founded in West Sussex, England, by an ordained Westerner named Achaan Sumedha, who was trained in Burma.<sup>116</sup> By 1990, three more monastic centres were established in London, in which both monks and nuns resided. Subsequently, more monastic communities were built in Switzerland, Italy and the United States.<sup>117</sup>

Scholars suggest that a strand of Western Buddhism, which is called Triyana, is today identifiable in the West.<sup>118</sup> The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), for example, was founded in 1967 by an English Buddhist monk, Sangharakshita, who was sent to India as

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<sup>112</sup> Fronsdal, “Theravada Spirituality in the West,” 489.

<sup>113</sup> Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 8.

<sup>114</sup> Fronsdal, “Theravada Spirituality in the West,” 492.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 490.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 490-491.

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Singleton, *Religion, Culture and Society: A Global Approach* (New Delhi: Sage, 2014), 210.

a military serviceman, where he left his unit and immersed himself in learning and practising Buddhism for twenty-one years before becoming a Buddhist monk.<sup>119</sup> This Order adapts the traditional structures of Buddhism to suit contemporary needs, drawing its teaching from all Buddhist schools. It is financially self-reliant, and it focuses on being an agent for social change. Though the FWBO is independent of any Asian branch of Buddhism, it “has a distinctly Theravada cast.”<sup>120</sup> Members of the FWBO are free to choose whatever lifestyle, either celibate or married, community life or family life, that allows them to best live out their commitment to the Three Jewels, to which Buddhists *Go for Refuge*. This process is duly discussed, but may be briefly defined here in terms of the three aspects of this process: Going for Refuge to the Buddha, the Enlightened teacher; Going for Refuge to the Dharma or his teaching of the way leading to Enlightenment; and Going for Refuge to the Sangha or the community of those practicing the path that leads to total liberation.<sup>121</sup> Going for Refuge takes place at a formal ordination rite, where a new name is given to the candidate and vows as well as precepts (moral conducts) are taken. The ordained receive the title *Dhamachari* for males and *Dhamucharini* for females.<sup>122</sup> One year after the establishment of the Order, Sangharakshita ordained nine men and three women to form the nucleus of the Order known as the *Western Buddhist Order*, which has been described as “a free association of aspiring individuals who come together voluntarily out of a common commitment to the development of individuality.”<sup>123</sup> The FWBO has been perceived as a self-enclosed body that has limited interaction with the wider Buddhist community.<sup>124</sup>

## 1.4 Becoming Global

With the globalization of the world, Buddhism has also gradually become globalized. Globalization marks a new beginning which represents “a definite break with the past that

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<sup>119</sup> Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 323-332.

<sup>120</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 177.

<sup>121</sup> Christopher Lamb, “Conversion as a Process Leading to Enlightenment: The Buddhist Perspective,” in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, eds. Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant (New York: Cassell, 1999), 75-88, 79.

<sup>122</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 177.

<sup>123</sup> Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 333-336.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

precludes a return to traditional religion and value systems.”<sup>125</sup> This decisive break with the past “can have quite deleterious effects: it de-traditionalizes in the sense of fragmenting unities of experience, truth, and wisdom that took thousands of years to evolve.”<sup>126</sup> Globalization has had many consequences for religions, including religious pluralism, relativism and tolerance. Wade Clark Roof succinctly explains this mixed and paradoxical reality:

It [globalization] creates a condition for living on the edge in a way that humanity has never lived before, yet at the same time creates possibilities for greater global solidarity. It threatens inherited religious beliefs and customs, yet can produce universal theodicies and religious symbolism.... It uproots tradition, yet in the process provokes powerful yearning for wisdom from the past.<sup>127</sup>

The effect of globalization has no doubt helped the process of expanding Buddhism. Buddhism’s globalization is a complex process that can be examined from three perspectives: Buddhism’s modernization, westernization and world-wide presence, all of which are interrelated. Historically, Buddhism’s modernization is associated with colonialism. Prior to the nineteenth century, Buddhism expanded only within Asian countries, with strong emphases on monastic life and traditional teachings and practices. Modernization began during the colonial period in the nineteenth century as responses of Asian-Buddhist reformers (such as Anagarika Dharmapala in Sri Lanka) to a crisis of legitimacy brought by colonialism. The response aimed to strengthen national identity and religion, but in the process, it also revitalized Buddhism.<sup>128</sup> Similar reactions took place in Burma, China and Japan. The revitalization movements claimed that Buddhism was compatible with modern science – “a scientific religion containing the highest individualistic altruistic ethics”<sup>129</sup> – the Buddha being a kind of “scientist” who dealt with natural laws, laws of causality and evolution.

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<sup>125</sup> Dennis Rochford, “Postmodernity, Religion and Youth,” *Compass* 32 (1998): 33-37, 35.

<sup>126</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 74.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> McMahan, “Buddhist Modernism,” 162.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

At the same time, these movements also challenged Christian beliefs, such as a personal God, the biblical creation account, heaven and hell, the resurrection of the dead, and so on. While attempting to combat the mainstream Western representation of Buddhism as a passive, pessimistic, ritualistic, superstitious and nihilistic religion, these revitalizing movements also focused on promoting Buddhism as an activist, optimistic and ethical religion. In addition, some Western apologists for Buddhism, such as Henry Steel Olcott, Paul Carus and others, became somewhat instrumental in the expansion of Buddhist modernism. As a result, by the early twentieth century, Buddhism became widely known in the West as a rational, empirical and ethical religion free from ritualistic and dogmatic practices.<sup>130</sup>

In this process of modernizing Buddhism, the westernization of Buddhism also took place. To secure Buddhism as a meaningful tradition in the modern world, both Asian Buddhist reformers and Western Buddhist sympathizers deployed the Western Reformation idea of anti-clericalism and anti-ritualism (given the primacy of meditation over rituals and other culturally-influenced practices), as well as the rationalism and empiricism of the Enlightenment, to reconstruct Buddhism as a modern, cosmopolitan, rational, empirical, humanistic and ethical religion.<sup>131</sup> Buddhism was fashioned with different characteristics compared to its Asian expressions. Baumann spells out six characteristics of Western Buddhism: an emphasis on lay practice and participation; the critical evaluation of women's roles; the application of democratic and egalitarian principles; the close linkage to Western psychological concepts; the conceptualization of socially engaged Buddhism; and the creation of ecumenical, non-sectarian tradition.<sup>132</sup>

The globalization of Buddhism is also characterized by its global representation. With the increased number of Asian Buddhist migrants arriving at different continents and the mobility of Asian and Western Buddhist teachers, monks, nuns and missionaries, Buddhism has been globally expanded. Besides Asia and Western societies – including Europe, America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia – where Buddhism has been extensively researched, recent

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-64.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>132</sup> Rocha, "Buddhism and Globalization," 296.



studies have shown that Buddhism has expanded to other parts of the globe, including South Africa, Brazil and Israel.<sup>133</sup>

Of course, key economic circumstances and technological advances have facilitated globalization. Global travel has become more affordable and more accessible, with the consequence of more Buddhist teachers from different countries who belong to different traditions are able to offering Buddhist training courses in the West. Additionally, the Internet revolution and digital technologies allow many Buddhist teachers to offer online training and courses. In “Buddhism and Globalization”, Cristina Rocha draws upon Arjun Appadurai’s concept of global cultural flow with five “scapes”<sup>134</sup> to highlight the influence of travel and technology on the growth of Buddhism, as well as additional facilitators: *ethnoscapes*, the shifting landscape of people across culture and borders; *technoscapes*, the transmission of culture through technology; *mediascapes*, the electronic capabilities of production and dissemination of information through media; *ideoscapes*, the global flow of ideologies; and *financescapes*, the global movement of money, including currency, trade and commodity.<sup>135</sup> While *ethnoscapes*, which involves flows of immigration, is considered the main driver for globalizing Buddhism, the other “scapes” – especially *technoscapes* and *mediascapes* – have also effectively contributed to the dissemination of Buddhism.

Charles S. Prebish notes that the emergence of and interest in Buddhism’s globalisation created an important turning point for the development of Western Buddhism since 2000s when a new online journal called the *Journal of Global Buddhism* was founded which has committed almost exclusively to the investigation of Western Buddhism.<sup>136</sup> Tomalin, Starkey and Halafoff suggest that “Buddhism under the impact of globalisation requires a new framework to better understand Buddhism at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” and that

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<sup>133</sup> Michel Clasquin, “Buddhism in South Africa,” in *Westward Dharma*, 152-162; Frank Usarski, “Buddhism in Brazil,” in *Westward Dharma*, 163-176; Lionel Obadia, “Buddhism in the Promised Land,” in *Westward Dharma*, 177-188.

<sup>134</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 7.2-3 (1990): 295-310.

<sup>135</sup> Rocha, “Buddhism and Globalization,” 298.

<sup>136</sup> Charles S. Prebish, “Online Peer-Reviewed Journals in Buddhism: the Birth of the Journal of Buddhist Ethics and Global Buddhism,” in *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, Eds. Grieve, P. Gregory and Daniel Veidlinger (New York: Routledge, 2015), 79-92, 86.

contemporary Buddhism “might best be described as ultramodern Buddhism.”<sup>137</sup> Applying the framework of ultramodern Buddhism to Buddhist women’s digital activism, they observe that old divisions between Western and Asian Buddhists, lay people and ordained people (monastic lifestyle), male and female, scholars and practitioners, are becoming increasingly blurred and outdated.<sup>138</sup>

Today, in this world of cyber-communication, digital Buddhism has become a virtual reality. Scholars who study digital Buddhism explore how digital Buddhism has been introduced, received and practised in the Western world.<sup>139</sup> Daniel Veidlinger indicates that “Buddhism is gaining popularity among Internet users much faster than any other major religions.”<sup>140</sup> Rachel Wagner and Christopher Accardo, through their study of how Buddhist apps (applications) influence the Buddhist teaching and practices, state that in this digital age “Dharma teachings are, in fact, very much shaped by their digital environment”<sup>141</sup> and that “many of the [Buddhist] apps appeal specially to religious seekers... who dabble in Buddhism do not necessarily follow recognizable or prescribed Buddhist practices, but instead view the Dharma as a spiritual buffet.”<sup>142</sup> With their affordability and availability in various languages, Buddhist apps have become one’s personal, portable, and “a realistic , and interactive Buddhist alter in the palm of your hand”<sup>143</sup> which “exhibits an eclectic blend of Zen, Tibetan

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<sup>137</sup> Emma Tomalin *et al*, “Cyber Sisters: Buddhist Women’s Online Activism and Practices,” *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, Volume 6 (2015): 29.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>139</sup> Gregory P. Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger, eds. *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Daniel Veidlinger, “The Madhyama Is the Message: Internet Affordance of Anatman and Pratitya Samutpada,” in *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, Eds. Grieve, P. Gregory and Daniel Veidlinger (New York: Routledge, 2015), 117-133; Rachel Wagner and Christopher Accardo, “Buddhist Apps: Skilful Means or Dharma Dilusion?” In *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, 134-152. Eds. Gregory P. Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger. New York: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>140</sup> Daniel Veidlinger, “The Madhyama Is the Message: Internet Affordance of Anatman and Pratitya Samutpada,” 118.

<sup>141</sup> Rachel Wagner and Christopher Accardo, “Buddhist Apps: Skilful Means or Dharma Dilusion?,” 134.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

and Theravadan Buddhist symbols.”<sup>144</sup> This reality has changed, to some extent, the way Buddhism is learned and practised in this digital age: “the Dharma can be learned [and practised] alone... even while working out at the gym or commuting to the office.”<sup>145</sup>

In short, Buddhism has become a global religion through the interrelated processes of modernization, westernization and globalization. In this complex process of globalization, which requires both interactions and adaptations, a plurality of Buddhist traditions have emerged. Buddhism has become more diverse by the presence of different traditions in one country or even in one city. This has resulted in a global Buddhism which tends to seek ecumenism, unity and engagement.

### **1.5 Factors Facilitating the Development of Buddhism in the West**

Various factors have been at play in the positive reception and growth of Buddhism in the West. According to Batchelor, the three main factors that facilitated the reception of Buddhism in the West were the emergence of the rationalist Enlightenment, the decline of religious authority, and the consolidation of colonialism.<sup>146</sup> The rationalist Enlightenment movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to a rapid increase in scientific knowledge and philosophical rationality. Reason and rationality “weakened reliance on authoritative ‘revelation’ in religious matters,”<sup>147</sup> replaced superstitions, and promised liberation from “the irrationalities of myth, religions, superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures.”<sup>148</sup> This rationality, as pointed out by Batchelor, “created the environment in which religions, including non-Christian traditions, could become objects of reasoned analysis and study.”<sup>149</sup> Ongoing scientific discoveries during this period assisted people in better understanding the natural

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>146</sup> Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 231.

<sup>147</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 419.

<sup>148</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), 12.

<sup>149</sup> Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 231.

laws of the universe and various aspects of human nature, offering them opportunities to challenge religious truths. Many long-held religious truths were challenged through demands for exploration and explanation. Philosophies of different kinds, including Buddhist philosophy, were publicly introduced, undermining people's dependence on traditional religions.<sup>150</sup>

Speaking directly to the ways in which the Enlightenment contributed to the introduction of Buddhism to the West, Robinson, Johnson and Bhikkhu specify four reasons: it provided the rationale for the collection, translation and study of Buddhist texts and other related materials; it opened the minds of Westerners to the possibility that Buddhism might be a useful contribution to their spiritual growth; it invited Westerners to look to Buddhism as a potential means of healing; and it offered Westerners a capacity to adapt and alter Buddhism, thereby allowing it to contribute to the resolution of their own cultural crisis.<sup>151</sup>

Recalling Batchelor's third key factor for the development of Buddhism in the West, the eighteenth century was also a time of colonial expansion. European countries expanded their colonial territories to Asia and other parts of the world. Acquisition of the traditions, customs and religions of the colonized demanded studies. Texts, including Buddhist scriptures, were translated and sent to the West: "Europe was to receive a steady flow of translated Indian texts, which were to have a profound impact in challenging the West's sense of its own uniqueness."<sup>152</sup> These changes set up the context for Buddhism's exposure and development in the West.

Further factors also facilitated Buddhism in the West. One of these was the rise of Buddhist societies and organizations. These included the Asiatic Society of Calcutta (established by English Judge Sir William Jones in 1784),<sup>153</sup> the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (founded by Henry Colebrook in 1823), and the American Oriental Society (1842).<sup>154</sup> The Theosophical Society, established in New York in 1875 by Colonel Henry Steele Olcott and

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Robinson *et al.*, *Buddhist Religions*, 294.

<sup>152</sup> Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 232.

<sup>153</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 161; Wynne, *Buddhism*, 260.

<sup>154</sup> Wynne, *Buddhism*, 260.

Madame Blavatsky, was a significant contributor in this regard, developing branches in America, Britain, India and Sri Lanka, and has been successful in introducing both Hindu and Buddhist concepts to people in the West.<sup>155</sup> The Maha Bhodi Society, which is recognized as the first formal Buddhist organization in the West, was established by Don David Hewayitarne, a Sri Lankan layperson later known as Anagakita Dharmapala (1864-1933), who, under the influence of Olcott and Blavatsky, became the most influential Buddhist missionary in the West.<sup>156</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century in Europe, particularly in England and Germany, a similar process took place regarding the formation and development of Buddhism there. In 1881, Rhys Davids founded the Pali Text Society in London, which was to translate the work of the Pali Canon (the earliest surviving record of the Buddha's teachings) into English.<sup>157</sup> It was reported that, by 1930, most of the Pali Canon had been published both in Romanised Pali editions and in English texts which familiarised many Europeans and Americans – most of whom were educated and upper-class people – with Buddhist concepts and practices.<sup>158</sup> By 1889, Englishman Alan Bennet, who had travelled to Sri Lanka to study Buddhism and was ordained in 1902 in Burma under the name of Anada Metteya, formed the International Buddhist Society for the purpose of promoting Buddhism in Europe. In 1903, Karl Seidenstuecker founded the first Buddhist society in Germany, which hosted the first Buddhist Congress in Europe. In 1904, another German, Anton Geuth, after being ordained in Sri Lanka, established a monastery in Sri Lanka which housed many Western monks who went there for studies and training.

Another key factor facilitating the development of Buddhism in the West was individual writers and artists. Through the various works of certain writers, Buddhism began to become gradually known to the public in the West, beginning in the early nineteenth century. As previously intimated, in Schopenhauer's two-volume work, *The World as Will and Representation*, the author makes references to Buddhism as "the best religion."<sup>159</sup> I also previously referred to Burnouf and his 1844 book, whose translated title is *An Introduction to*

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<sup>155</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 421.

<sup>156</sup> Fronsdal, "Theravada Spirituality in the West.", 484-485.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 250-271; Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 420.

*the History of Indian Buddhism*. The work contained a full translation of the Lotus Sutra, part of which was translated into English in the same year and incorporated into an article by a self-taught student of Buddhism, Elisabeth Palmer Peabody: the article was the first printed appearance of the Dharma (the Buddhist teachings) in the English language.<sup>160</sup> The famous epic poem of Sir Edwin Arnold in 1879, entitled *The Light of Asia* (already mentioned earlier in this chapter), became a key source of transmission of Buddhist concepts in Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth century, as it offered Western readers a biography of the Buddha “that fitted in well with the humanistic and rational currents of Victorian thought.”<sup>161</sup>

The works of the two poets, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, who were influenced by Zen concepts, also brought readers an awareness of Buddhist spirituality of nature and ecology.

<sup>162</sup> Other influential books include Hermann Oldenberg’s *The Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order* (1882) and T. W. Rhys Davids’ *Buddhism* (1912).<sup>163</sup> Max Müller’s fifty-volumed *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910) also familiarised Western readers with the rational and humanistic view of the Buddha and his teachings.<sup>164</sup> Other writers who introduced Westerners to Buddhist concepts and practices were Hermann Hesse, who wrote the influential *Siddhartha* (1922), Carl Jung, who linked symbolic dreams with Tibetan *mandalas* (spiritual and ritual symbol that represents the universe) (1953), and Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* (1958), which introduced readers to the Zen way of life.<sup>165</sup>

Artists, including painters and composers, were also the transmitters of Buddhist philosophy and spirituality to people in the West. Listed here are several names of them whose works were influenced by Buddhism, especially Zen: Impressionists including Édouard Manet (1832-83) and Whistler (1834-1903); post-impressionist including Van Gogh; modern artists

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<sup>160</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 162.

<sup>161</sup> Fronsdal, “Theravada Spirituality in the West,” 483.

<sup>162</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 267.

<sup>163</sup> Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, trans. William Hoey (London: Williams and Norgate, 1882); T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism* (London: Society for Christian Promoting Knowledge, 1912).

<sup>164</sup> Max Müller, ed., *Sacred Books of the East*, 50 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879-1910); cf. Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 162; Fronsdal, “Theravada Spirituality in the West,” 483.

<sup>165</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha* (New York: New Directions, 1922); Carl G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 12. Second ed. London: Routledge: 1980; Kerouac, Jack. *The Dharma Bums*. New York: Viking Press, 1958; cf. Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 267.

including Odilon Redon (1840-1916), Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908).<sup>166</sup> Fenollosa became a Buddhist whose works expressed mystical merging of Christ and Buddha as in *into the silence of Nirvana's glory*, where there is no more West and no more East. For Fenollosa, the religion of this new age would be the religion of art.<sup>167</sup> Some American artists were also known in the circle of those who worked with Buddhist concepts: abstract impressionists including Carl Andre, Robert Motherwell, and Jackson Pollock.<sup>168</sup> Composer John Cage (1912-1992) was known by his work *Seasons* which was influenced by Zen Buddhism. Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) was the first European painter who carefully studied and creatively manipulated elements of traditional Buddhist iconography.<sup>169</sup> Roerich was well known for stage design which blended a variety of Western, Russian, and Oriental styles, especially traditional Tibetan Buddhist iconography. His great works included *Prince Igor* (1909) and *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913), *Treasure of the World – Chintamani* (1924).<sup>170</sup>

In 1999, the London Buddhist Arts centre was founded under the support of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). Members of this organisation published a magazine, *Urthona*, specifically focused on Buddhism and the arts.<sup>171</sup>

To the factors already discussed, we should also add those identified by Carole M. Cusack: Western celebrity patronage (perhaps the most famous is the actor Richard Gere), Buddhist celebrities (including the immense popularity of the fourteenth Dalai Lama), and the manipulation of the image of Buddhism to fit the pressing intellectual and social issues of the time.<sup>172</sup>

## 1.6 Why Do Conversions to Buddhism Occur in the West?

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<sup>166</sup> Ian Harris, "A 'Commodious Vicus of Recirculation': Buddhism, Art, and Modernity," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 365-382, 367-369.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>172</sup> Carole M. Cusack, "The Western Reception of Buddhism: Celebrity and Popular Cultural Media as Agent for Familiarisation," *Australian Religious Studies Review* 24.3 (2011): 297-316.

Scholars of religious studies in general and Buddhist studies in particular have mainly focused their studies on the development of Buddhism in Western countries and on issues related to the adaptation of Buddhism to its new environments. There are no studies that specifically deal with issues relating to why Christian Westerners convert to Buddhism, how this type of conversion happens, the benefits converts experience, and the challenges they encounter from converting to Buddhism.

Through his work *Essential Buddhism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs and Practices*, Maguire offers some observations on why Westerners convert to Buddhism. For him, the most common reason has been “an individual’s desire to reclaim the kind of spiritual grounding he or she once had in the past.”<sup>173</sup> This explanation, however, is too general. It fails to comprehensively explain how the spiritual grounding was lost, instead claiming that some people lost their faith or renounced it as they matured, or that their religious upbringing was “interrupted or invalidated” by changes to their families’ circumstances (such as divorce), or by changing from one community to another, or by their addiction to drugs and other things.<sup>174</sup> Another prominent reason that Maguire posits is people’s negative experiences of church doctrines and beliefs about the creator God, original sin, Judgement Day, God’s Chosen People, papal infallibility, gender discrimination, judgemental attitudes, and so on.<sup>175</sup> For Maguire, triggers for conversion to Buddhism are both negative (e.g., a critical illness, a sudden loss of love, fortune, or security, a feeling of disgust with greed, anger or ignorance, etc.) and positive (e.g., a new love, the birth of a child, and other enriching experiences).<sup>176</sup> Maguire also suggests that typically converts rejected Christianity before they accepted Buddhism, which “offered a distinctly different context... to experience their spirituality.”<sup>177</sup>

Other scholars have investigated religious identity as one aspect of religious conversion. Thomas Tweed discusses the complexity of religious identity by referring to four modes in which people adhere to different traditions in their religious practices: (1) the functionality of

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<sup>173</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 194.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.



religion, as in the case of a Japanese person who can be married in the Shinto tradition and memorialized in Buddhism; (2) the diverse cultural contexts where people draw on varied practices from multiple traditions, as in the case of Chinese people who turn to Buddhist *bodhisattvas* (the ones who have taken the great vow to liberate all sentient beings from suffering and guide them to enlightenment), Confucian sages, and Taoist immortals, as well as a host of other human and superhuman exemplars who have emerged from vernacular religious traditions; (3) the religious hybridity where people combine in practice more than one tradition and identify themselves as Buddhist-Christians or vice versa; and (4) the complexity that converts face in their journey of conversion, since “conversion involves a more or less (often less) complete shift of beliefs and practices. The old tradition never fades completely; the new one never shapes exclusively.”<sup>178</sup> Exploring this complicatedness of religious identity, Tweed concludes that “religious identity is usually complex. Ambivalence is the norm” and that “this has implication for the study of Buddhist adherents in the West.”<sup>179</sup>

In his article “Who is a Buddhist?” Coleman discusses the question of Buddhist religious and spiritual identity in the context of Western Buddhism. He observes that it is a great challenge to identify someone as a Buddhist from identifying factors, such as spiritual versus religious claims, the growth of secular Buddhism, and the doctrine of attachment. Regarding the first factor, Coleman notices that someone may call him/herself spiritual but not religious. Coleman also observes that secular Buddhists reject being labelled as a religious group. Finally, the doctrine of attachment teaches Buddhist practitioners to let go of the self by dropping, one-by-one, all identifications, beliefs and assumptions. On this point, it is worth quoting Jack Cornfield:

It is important to realize that to identify oneself as a meditator or a spiritual person or even a Buddhist can be another way we get caught or lose [our] true balance. . . The purpose of meditation is not to create a new spiritual identity, nor to become the most meditative person on the block, who tells other people how they should live. The practice is to let go.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Thomas Tweed, “Who is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures,” in *Westward Dharma*, 17-33, 19.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Coleman, “Who is a Buddhist?.” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 32 (2012): 33-37, 35.

To avoid problems of identification or categorization, Coleman suggests substituting the question of whether one is/is not a Buddhist with different concepts, such as “Buddhist practitioners” or “followers of the Buddhist Dharma,” and to examine the levels of their involvement in Buddhist spiritual practices.<sup>181</sup>

In *Converts to Buddhism* (2007), Amanda Lienau-Purnell examines interpersonal and worldview shifts that Buddhist converts and born-Buddhists encountered during their participation in learning and practising Buddhist teachings at a small Buddhist community in the United States. Her findings showed that there was a positive change in the participants’ understanding of their interpersonal relationships within the community.<sup>182</sup> However, in their relationships with the “Majority Religious Culture,” the participants showed their hesitation in sharing their religious identity.<sup>183</sup> Her findings also reveal that there was a clear change in the participants’ worldview, especially their understanding of God, reality, the material world, and the self.<sup>184</sup> These findings contribute significantly to the understanding of religious conversion, especially the spiritual development of people in practising Buddhism. However, Lienau-Purnell’s book (which is based on her doctoral research) does not address the motives of conversion to Buddhism, and she limits the scope of her study to one Buddhist community.

Finally, studies of the New Age movement, in discussing religious conversion, emphasize the importance of religious personal experience more so than religious belonging or membership. Andrew Singleton, for example, is convinced that Buddhist spirituality fits well with the New Age movement, which reflects the element of a “spiritual marketplace.”<sup>185</sup> This movement highlights the fact that religious seekers enjoy their freedom to choose whatever tradition suits their personal preferences, and to engage in any religious path that answers best to their religious longing and to the enrichment of their spiritual life. In contrast to this New Age style, an Australian study by Tim Phillips and Haydn Aarons on the reflexive spiritual engagement of Australian Buddhism shows that, instead of taking the New Age attitude in their pursuit of

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>182</sup> Amanda Lienau-Purnell, *Converts to Buddhism: Interpersonal and Worldview Shifts* (Milton Keynes: Lighting Source, 2007), 91-101.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-103.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-113.

<sup>185</sup> Singleton, *Religion, Culture and Society*, 223.

spiritual nourishment (which is normally a short-term attachment involving multiple religious engagements), Western/Australian Buddhists tend to have a more narrowly focused involvement and long term engagement.<sup>186</sup>

## **1.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has covered crucial periods of the historical development of Buddhism in the Western countries and highlighted the factors that facilitated both the growth of Buddhism and conversion of Western people to this religion.

The introduction and development of Buddhism in Western countries have been enduring tasks, evolving through different stages, ranging from initial contacts in the thirteenth century through trades and missionary work, to the expansion of colonialism to Asian countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when more systematic studies of Buddhism were conducted and documents on Buddhism were published in the West. The two marking points for Buddhism to be widely known in the West were the first Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893 and the first ordinations of European Buddhist converts, Gordon Douglas in 1899, and Allan Bennet McGregor in 1902.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, especially after the WWII, with the returns of Americans who had fought in Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Thailand and had encountered Buddhism, as well as with the increasing numbers of Western travellers interested in the tradition, Buddhism in the West began to become more diverse in traditions. The growth of Buddhism in the West was further developed by new settlements of Asian Buddhist migrants and refugees. Migration flows caused significant changes in the West, including: an increasing number of followers of Buddhist practitioners; the development of temples, meditation centres and schools; growing diversity in terms of traditions, rituals and worshipping styles; peace and justice engagements; and health, educational and social services. All these advancements have brought Buddhism in Western countries to a new phase where Buddhist philosophy and spirituality has had an obvious impact on the lives of many individuals, communities and societies.

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<sup>186</sup> Tim Phillips and Haydn Aarons, "Choosing Buddhism in Australia: Towards a Traditional Style of Reflexive Spiritual Engagement," *The British Journal of Sociology* 56.2 (2005): 215-232.

The Chapter has also presented the effects of the globalisation of Buddhism in the West. Due to the adaptable nature of Buddhism and thanks to the assistance of technologies, Buddhism has quickly become globalised through the process of modernisation and westernisation. It is known as ultramodern Buddhism which gradually transform the divisions between Western and Eastern, laity and monastic, etc. The development of Buddhism in the West continues to develop further in this digital world where more Buddhist practitioners enjoy flexibility and accessibility to Buddhist teachings and practices online at their convenience.

The chapter has slightly explored some factors for the development of Buddhism in the West and reasons for conversion of Westerners to Buddhism. It noted that the changing social-cultural contexts that caused crises about the meaning of life and faith changed their ways of living, thinking, making sense of their life and faith, worshipping, and so on. Robert Wuthnow describes these changes, stating that:

The emergence of a global world, an influx of new immigrants and cultures, widespread changes in values and beliefs, the immense role of the media and visual imagery in shaping contemporary life, an expanding consumer-oriented culture targeting the self as an arena for marketing, the erosion of many traditional forms of community – all point to a major realignment in religion and culture.<sup>187</sup>

Faced with this changing reality, people start searching for spiritualities to make sense of their lives/world. The traditional religions that people felt at home with in the pre-WW2 period had become more difficult to sustain, and people began to experience a sense of spiritual homelessness. The paradigm shift of spirituality from being dwelling-oriented to seeking-oriented and practice-oriented intensified from the 1970s. Spiritual seekers and practitioners began to draw on Eastern traditions, including Buddhism. Individuals took the initiative in gaining an interest in Buddhist philosophy and spirituality, and they embraced Buddhism as an alternative to Christian faith. This has often occurred on a small scale and in an informal manner. In this form of engagement, the publishing of works such as books, articles and poems played a major and effective role. People were introduced to Buddhist thought and spirituality by reading books and poems about Buddhist philosophy and spirituality. This factor is described by Cusack as the popular cultural transmission of information about the

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<sup>187</sup> Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 8.

religion.<sup>188</sup> Its Western beginnings were humble in scope, being limited to the Theravada tradition. Yet its influence was considerable in terms of its twofold impact on the spiritual life of both Asian and Western societies. On the one hand, it offered an alternative spiritual path to Westerners who found themselves disconnected from Christian traditions. On the other hand, it encouraged Buddhism in Asia to return to its origins through its connection with sacred texts, and to be more open and inclusive to laypeople in their spiritual practices.

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<sup>188</sup> Cusack, "The Western Reception of Buddhism," 297.

## Chapter Two

### An Overview of the Historical Development of Buddhism in Australia

Since the focus of the study of this thesis is set in the Australian context, in this chapter I present a relatively detailed historical development of Buddhism in Australia. First, I provide historical facts, beginning with those related to the early arrivals of Buddhist immigrants in the nineteenth century up to the establishment of ecumenical Buddhist societies. Second, I include a discussion of the characteristics of Buddhism in Australia, according to both its migrant and Western variants. Third, I explore the issues of the adaptation and localization of Buddhism in Australia. Finally, I briefly examine the existing scholarly research on the topic of conversion to Buddhism in Australia.

#### 2.1 Historical Development

According to Spuler's "Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia" (2000) and Rocha and Barker's *Buddhism in Australia* (2011), the development of Buddhism in Australia may be divided into six chronologically significant periods: the first arrivals of Chinese, Sri Lankan and Japanese Buddhist labourers in the nineteenth century; the forming of the first Buddhist organizations in the 1920s; the first visits of Buddhist teachers to Australia in the 1950s; the first resident teachers and the establishment of the first monasteries in the 1970s; the arrivals of Asian refugees from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Tibet in the the 1970s; and the emergence of ecumenical Buddhist societies in the 1980s and the 1990s.<sup>189</sup>

It has been suggested by some writers that Buddhism was probably the first non-indigenous religion which reached Australia. As part of his in-depth historical research on Buddhism in Australia, Paul Croucher notes that, between 1405 and 1433, the Chinese Ming emperors sent ships to explore the South, and several ships seems to have reached the Aru Islands (north of Arnhem Land) around 1408 and again in 1414.<sup>190</sup> However, the first officially documented

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<sup>189</sup> Spuler, "Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia"; Rocha and Barker, eds., *Buddhism in Australia*.

<sup>190</sup> Paul Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 2; Enid L. Adam and Philip J. Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996), 6.

arrivals of Chinese Buddhists who worked as labourers originate from 1848.<sup>191</sup> And it seems that these Chinese were not purely Buddhist by religious identity but followed a mixture of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, which Croucher calls “a kind of nature polytheism.”<sup>192</sup>

After the first Chinese arrivals in the 1870s and 1880s, Australia witnessed the arrival of Japanese and Sinhalese immigrants in considerable numbers.<sup>193</sup> The first Japanese who came to Australia were a troupe of jugglers and acrobats.<sup>194</sup> Approximately 3600 Japanese Buddhists came to work in the pearling industry in northern parts of Australia, and roughly 500 Sinhalese people settled and worked in sugarcane plantations in Mackay and Burnet (north Queensland). Many of the Sinhalese moved to Thursday Island, where they formed a Buddhist community, built a small temple and planted two *Bodhi* tree saplings – an important symbol in Buddhist tradition.<sup>195</sup> This new settlement is viewed as a remarkable step in the development of Buddhism in Australia because – unlike Chinese immigrants and their “nature polytheism” – the Japanese and Sinhalese immigrants viewed themselves as exclusively Buddhists.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of Buddhists on Thursday Island outnumbered the European population.<sup>196</sup> These first Buddhist settlers, however, were quite harshly treated by the government. Notwithstanding his interest in Buddhism (discussed below), Alfred Deakin, Australia’s second prime minister, was a key advocate of the draconian Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 for “fear of economic competition” with Asians.<sup>197</sup> In 1947, the number of Buddhists in Australia dropped to 411 people mainly of Chinese, Japanese and Sinhalese origin.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 2.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

It is worth mentioning here that the formation of Western Buddhism in Australia is linked with the introduction of theosophy in Australia. Three years after the establishment of the Theosophical Society (1882) overseas, Emma Harding Britten, an American member of the Society, brought theosophy to Australia through her lecturing tour. Theosophy was welcomed in Australia: the first branch of the Theosophical Society was founded in Tasmania in 1889, followed by a branch established in Melbourne in 1890.<sup>199</sup>

At this time, Buddhism started becoming more widely known: in 1891, Colonel Olcott toured Australia for several months delivering lectures on Buddhism. His lectures in Melbourne were chaired by Alfred Deakin, who was an active member of the Theosophical Society and the president of the Melbourne Spiritualists Association; he later became Australian Prime Minister for three terms, between 1903 and 1910. As mentioned, Deakin was against Asian immigration, but he was also very interested in Buddhism and had travelled to Sri Lanka and India to study Buddhist spirituality in 1890. As a result of his time spent in these two Buddhist countries, he wrote a book entitled *Temple and Tomb in India* (1893), in which he expresses great sympathy towards Buddhism,<sup>200</sup> and, as noted earlier, Western literature about this tradition facilitated its recognition and growth.

And so, by the end of the nineteenth century, Buddhism or rather its Western version started to take root in Australia. However, its growth was hampered by “Australian Theosophists [who] had great difficulty in coming to terms with the concept of *anatta* [non-self which means that everything is connected to everything else or there is no permanent self]<sup>201</sup>, and with Buddhistic non-theism.”<sup>202</sup> This caused a remarkable shift away from Buddhism towards Hinduism and Christianity. By the turn of the twentieth century, Western Buddhism in Australia remained in its infancy.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Buddhism in Australia entered its second phase: the arrival of Buddhist monks delivering lectures and establishing communities. The first

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<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>200</sup> Alfred Deakin, *Temple and Tomb in India* (Melbourne: Melville, Mullen and Slade, 1893); cf. Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 10.

<sup>201</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha As Brothers* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1999), 22.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



monk to arrive in Australia was the Englishman E. H. Stevenson, who was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1908. In 1910, he lectured in different Australian cities, including Perth, Adelaide, Ballarat and Sydney, but it seems that his lectures did not leave a big impression on attendees.<sup>203</sup> In 1915, five German Buddhist monks, along with over 300 other lay Buddhist Germans, arrived in Sydney. They formed a small community at Trial Bay, north of Newcastle. This *sangha*, however, did not last long. Around 1925, the first Melbourne Buddhist group called *The Little Circle of the Dharma* was established by three Buddhist converts, namely, Max Tayler, Max Dunn and David Maurice, who followed the Theravada tradition.<sup>204</sup> Another attempt to form a Buddhist group in Melbourne occurred in 1938, under the guidance of Leonard Bullen. The group was called *The Buddhist Study Group* and its aim was to “promote Buddhism as a workable psychology adaptable for modern problems.”<sup>205</sup> According to Spuler, this group was attracted to Buddhism due is “to the rational-humanistic side of the teachings or to their artistic manifestations” and is “the first evidence of secularisation of Buddhism in Australia.”<sup>206</sup> However, the outbreak of the Second World War terminated the group’s work.<sup>207</sup>

During the Second World War, Australians – much like Americans and other Westerners – did not typically engage with Buddhism. There was, however, some individual interest from figures like Les Oates and Len Henderson, who learned about Zen Buddhism in Japan, or George Johnston, who engaged with Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet.<sup>208</sup> Generally speaking, “most students of Buddhism were isolated individuals, in many ways out of their element in a considerably different cultural milieu.”<sup>209</sup> After the War, interest in Buddhism was rekindled in 1951 when two small groups were formed in Sydney and Melbourne, thanks to the work of David Maurice and Marie Byles.<sup>210</sup> Marie Byles was an internationally recognized Buddhist

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<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>204</sup> Adam and Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia*, 7-8.

<sup>205</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 28.

<sup>206</sup> Spuler, “Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia,” 35.

<sup>207</sup> Adam and Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia*, 8.

<sup>208</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 30-32.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

advocate. Though she never considered herself a Buddhist, she was always known as “a Buddhist at heart.”<sup>211</sup> On the other hand, Maurice was the first Australia-born Buddhist; he was ordained in Burma and worked as the editor of a well-known Buddhist magazine called *Light of the Dhamma*.<sup>212</sup> Maurice also published *The Lion’s Roar* (1962), an anthology of the Pali Canon.<sup>213</sup> He was also one of the most important bridge-builders between different Buddhist groups in Australia.<sup>214</sup>

The third phase of the development of Buddhism in Australia was marked with the first visits by overseas teachers, including: sister Dhammadinna, an American-born Buddhist nun who arrived in 1952; the ordained Buddhist monk U Thittila, from the Burmese Theravada tradition, who arrived in 1954; and the Venerable Narada Thera, who visited in 1955. According to Spuler, Dhammadinna’s visit resulted in the formation of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales in 1952, the first enduring Buddhist society in Australia.<sup>215</sup> However, Croucher argues that the date of the establishment of this Society was 4 May 1953, and attributes its establishment to the efforts of Leo Berkely and Marie Byles.<sup>216</sup> Croucher claims that Dhammadinna’s presence in Australia “aroused some interest when the Buddhist societies were getting off the ground” but ultimately “had little real influence on the course of Australian Buddhism.”<sup>217</sup> A different story emerges with U Thittila, whose tour had a great impact on Australian Buddhism organizations: the membership of both societies doubled, with one hundred members in Sydney and forty in Melbourne. Another important visiting teacher was the Venerable Narada Thera, who came to Sydney from Sri Lanka. It is reported

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<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>212</sup> This magazine was published quarterly by the Union of Burma Buddha Sasana Council from 1952 until 1963 as a way of spreading the Buddhist Dharma teachings.

<sup>213</sup> David Maurice, *The Lion’s Roar: An Anthology of the Buddha’s Teachings Selected for the Pali Canon* (London: Riders and Co., 1962).

<sup>214</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 27.

<sup>215</sup> Spuler, “Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia,” 35.

<sup>216</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 42.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

that his lectures attracted hundreds of people, and his visit resulted in the establishment of a Buddhist Society in Tasmania.<sup>218</sup>

This period, especially from 1954 till 1956, is characterized as the “halcyon for Australian Buddhism, with eminent visitors lecturing to packed auditoriums and receiving wide media attention, with a number of Australians becoming monks in Asia, and with the societies experiencing a considerable growth.”<sup>219</sup> There was also growing interest in other Buddhist traditions and lineages, thanks to visiting teachers from a variety of traditions. In 1958, the Buddhist Federation of Australia was formed and became a member of the World Federation of Buddhists.<sup>220</sup> Hillary Carey notes that, during this period, Buddhist study groups and societies were formed in most states of Australia whose membership comprised of a diverse group of bohemians and intellectuals.<sup>221</sup>

The late 1950s and 1960s witnessed further strengthening of Australian Buddhism, but mainly through the efforts of its own members. The first committee meeting of the Buddhist Federation of Australia took place in Sydney on 30 August 1959. As a result, more Buddhist study and meditation groups were organized and run by local Buddhists; more publications on Buddhist issues were circulated to the public; and many Australian Buddhists took teaching roles at Buddhist centres. However, it was also a period when “[m]any people drifted away, and for those who remained to hold the lotus in place there was an air of disappointment in the late 1950s: no one had become ‘enlightened’, and most of those who had entered the order in Asia came back either sick, or slightly off the rails.”<sup>222</sup>

The next significant phase of Australian Buddhism was marked by the first resident teachers and the establishment of Buddhist monasteries. In 1971, Venerable Somaloka, a Sri Lankan monk, arrived in Australia and took up residence in Rose Bay, New South Wales. In 1973, the first Buddhist monastery was opened in Katoomba, west of Sydney. Under Somaloka’s

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<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>220</sup> Spuler, “Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia,” 35.

<sup>221</sup> Hilary M. Carey, *Believing in Australia: A Cultural History of Religions* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 150.

<sup>222</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 59-79.

leadership, this monastery, however, became “something of a cult” and had “a poor reputation in the Buddhist world as being exclusive and unfriendly.”<sup>223</sup>

In 1974, another Buddhist monastery was established in Stanmore, New South Wales, by Thai-trained monk Khantipalo Thera who was “highly respected amongst Australian Buddhist for his refined scholarship and wealth of experience in the Dharma” and became one of the “most influential ‘patriarchs’ of recent Australian Buddhism”.<sup>224</sup> Khantipalo introduced so many hundreds of Australian to Thai Forest Buddhist practice. According to Khantipalo, there were “as many as 200 Australians [who] may be ordained as monks, for various periods of time.”<sup>225</sup> The Forest meditation centres of north-east Thailand were known as popular destinations for Australians who “probably make up half” of all the western monks in Thailand.<sup>226</sup> Under the influence of Khantipalo, more temples were opened in other parts of Australia: Wat Rattanapradeepa was opened in Adelaide in 1985; Wat Dhamarangsee was opened in Melbourne in 1986.<sup>227</sup>

It has been noted that during the 1970s period “very few Australians went to Asia... to investigate Buddhism.”<sup>228</sup> However, there were well-known Australian writers and artists who were influenced by Buddhist philosophy, including David Foster and Colin Johnson.<sup>229</sup> Buddhism-influenced writers also came onto the scene during this period, including Christopher Koch, Judith Wright, Michael Dransfield and Vicki Viidikas, no doubt influencing others to explore Buddhism.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>224</sup> Spuler, “Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia,” 35; Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 90-91.

<sup>225</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 90.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>228</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 89.

<sup>229</sup> David Foster, *The Pure Land* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1974); Colin Johnson, *Wild Cat Falling* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965); Johnson, *The Song Circle of Jacky and Selected Poems* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1986).

<sup>230</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 88.

As previously noted, the spread of Buddhism in the 1970s and 1980s was also helped by the large numbers of refugees who were arriving from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Tibet, with many of them identifying themselves as Buddhists. With the presence of Buddhists from such diverse ethnicities and traditions, Australian Buddhism entered another phase. As the migrant Buddhists grew in population, they became more structured, with many organizations being established and temples being built for various ethnic Buddhist groups. There were Vietnamese, Burmese, Thai, Sri Lankan, Malaysian, Cambodian, Laotian and Tibetan Buddhist societies and bodies. Among these ethnic Buddhist groups, Tibetan Buddhists grew very quickly in numbers and were the most successful in attracting Australian converts.<sup>231</sup>

Another significant development of Australian Buddhism was the establishment of ecumenical Buddhist groups, whose aim was to assist Australian Buddhists from different traditions to promote the teachings of the Buddha and to represent Buddhist communities at different levels of government.<sup>232</sup> In addition to the already mentioned Buddhist Federation of Australia (founded in 1958), the Buddhist Council of Brisbane was established in 1982, the Buddhist Council of New South Wales was formed in 1985,<sup>233</sup> the Buddhist Council of Victoria and the Buddhist Council of Western Australia were both established in 1995, followed by the Buddhist Council of Queensland in 1999, and the Buddhist Council of South Australia in 2005.<sup>234</sup>

During the 1990s, the Buddhist percentage of the Australian population had grown to a considerable number (1.1%), and the tradition continued attracting more Western converts. Despite these developments, Buddhism in Australia largely remained an ethnic religion rather

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<sup>231</sup> Adam and Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia*, 11.

<sup>232</sup> Diana Cousens, "The Buddhist Council of Victoria and the Challenges of Recognizing Buddhism as a Religion in Australia," in *Buddhism in Australia*, 157-161, 157.

<sup>233</sup> Spuler, "Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia," 36-37.

<sup>234</sup> Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils, <http://www.buddhistcouncil.org.au> (viewed February 2018).

than a world religion.<sup>235</sup> Reports show that among 200,000 who identified as Buddhists in 1996, only one in thirteen were Westerners.<sup>236</sup>

The situation changed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The growth rate of Australian Buddhists jumped rapidly, from 200,000 (1.1%) in 1996 to 360,000 (1.9%) in 2001. It even outnumbered Baptists by 50,000.<sup>237</sup> Responding to this trend, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that “Not even migration patterns, however, can account for the growth in Buddhism.”<sup>238</sup> Nevertheless, immigration has played a role: Australia is one of the four popular countries of destination for Buddhist migrants, the other three being the United States, Canada and Germany.<sup>239</sup> The growing presence of these Buddhist migrants has changed the religious landscape of Western countries, including Australia. In 2011 Buddhism was the largest non-Christian religion in Australia, with 528,977 Buddhists constituting 2.5% of the total population (Islam totalled 2.2%, Hinduism 1.3 %, and Judaism 0.5%).<sup>240</sup> Among the total over 100,000 Buddhists described themselves as having Australian or European ancestry.<sup>241</sup> That number grew to more than 163,000 in the last census despite the fact that Buddhism shifted to the second largest of the non-Christian religions.<sup>242</sup>

Hence, as is the case with the US and Europe, Australian Buddhism can generally be divided into two groups, namely, migrant Buddhists mainly from Asian countries, and Western

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<sup>235</sup> Carey, *Believing in Australia*, 151.

<sup>236</sup> Phillips and Aarons, “Choosing Buddhism in Australia,” 220.

<sup>237</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 June 2002, “While Christianity Declines, Buddhism Grows Rapidly,” <https://www.smh.com.au/national/while-christianity-declines-buddhism-grows-rapidly-20020618-gdfdjy.html> (accessed 13 November 2018).

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> Pew Research Center, “Table Estimated Number of Immigrants by Religious Affiliation,” 8 March 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/03/08/table-estimated-number-of-immigrants-by-religious-affiliation/> (accessed 25 June 2019).

<sup>240</sup> Philip J. Hughes *et al.*, *Australia’s Religious Communities: Facts and Figures* (Melbourne: Christian Research Association, 2012).

<sup>241</sup> Philip J. Hughes *et al.*, *Australia’s Religious Communities*, 31.

<sup>242</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia – Stories from the Census 2016,” 28 June 2017,

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Religion%20Data%20Summary~70> (accessed 13 November 2018).

Buddhists, mostly people of Christian background who converted to Buddhism. In his preliminary survey of Buddhism in Australia, Lama Choedak Rinpoche notes that Western people interested in Buddhism are mostly educated intellectuals who are attracted to Buddhism because of its promotion of non-violence, peace and compassion, acquiring a loving, tolerant and compassionate lifestyle, and meditational approach, which offers practitioners practical tools to relieve suffering.<sup>243</sup> Conservative, traditional Asian Buddhists, however, are facing a score of challenges ranging from the secularization of monastic and celibate life, attachment to cultural Buddhism, observance of vegetarianism, and competing understandings of the human body and sexual conduct.<sup>244</sup> While Rinpoche encourages Asian Buddhists to be tolerant and open-minded in adapting to western cultural values while nurturing core Buddhist teachings, he also asks Western Buddhists to be patient in learning and practising Buddhism, and to avoid rushing “to have their own form of Buddhism without a sound understanding.”<sup>245</sup>

We may summarize the historical development of Buddhism in Australia as a variegated history. Buddhists were present in the mid-nineteenth century due to the arrival of Chinese workers, and their number actually increased toward the end of that century. However, after 1911, their numbers gradually decreased due to the introduction and strengthening of the “White Australia Policy.” From constituting 0.07% of the total population in 1911, when Buddhism was first included in the census, it dropped to 0.01% in 1947. After the abolition of this immigration policy in 1973, Buddhists were again included in the national census, and in 1981, they constituted 0.24% of the population. That percentage has been increasing ever since (1986: 0.52%; 1991: 0.83%; 1996: 1.1%; 2001: 1.9%; 2011: 2.5%; 2016: 2.4%).

## **2.2 Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia**

Michelle Barker and Cristina Rocha make the following point regarding the nature – or natures – of Buddhism in Australia:

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<sup>243</sup> Lama Choedak Rinpoche, “Challenges of Teaching Buddhism in Contemporary Society,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 162-166, 162.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

Buddhism in Australia shares many characteristics in common with Buddhists in other Western countries. However, localization and adaptations also reflect differences due to historical, geographic and political factors. Buddhism in Australia can be seen to have been influenced by the specifics of the Australian situation, its proximity to Asia, its multiculturalist policies and its relationships with Buddhism in Europe and America. The result is the existence of many Buddhisms in Australia; traditions that are in a state of change.<sup>246</sup>

As Barker and Rocha indicate, the majority of these Buddhisms mirror certain aspects of Western Buddhism in general, which Spuler further identifies these traits in terms of a diversity of traditions, an emphasis on laity and democratic principles, evidence of secularization, and social engagement.<sup>247</sup> These characteristics have attracted significant scholarly interest generating a number of studies which illuminate the particularities of Western Buddhism within the specifically Australian context. David Bubna-Litic and Winton Higgins, for example, studied the process of localization and adaptation of some Buddhist communities in Sydney, which also brought to light the emergence of secular insight practices (agnosticism, scepticism, etc.) as a result of that process.<sup>248</sup> Leesa Davis has examined how Soto Zen teaching and practice at the Jikishoan Centre adapts itself to the Australian context, observing that Jikishoen:

has diverged from traditional Japanese orientations by beginning to have women in teaching positions, by forging ecumenical links with other Buddhist and religious organizations and by social engagement which are outreach programs in prisons and teaching in a drug rehabilitation centre, all of which has been mirrored in the transplantation and development of Zen in the United States and Europe.”<sup>249</sup>

The particular difference to Zen in the United States and Europe is that the Sydney Centre has smaller student numbers and very limited financial support, which results in a greater

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<sup>246</sup> Michelle Barker and Cristina Rocha, “Introduction,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 1-19, 15.

<sup>247</sup> Spuler, “Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia,” 38-40.

<sup>248</sup> David Bubna-Litic and Winton Higgins, “The Emergence of Secular Insight Practice in Australia,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 23-35.

<sup>249</sup> Leesa S. Davis, “Soto Zen in Australia: Reassessing the Relationship Between Gender, Religion and Power Relations,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 36-48, 45.



obligation on the *sangha* to contribute to the financial well-being of both the teacher and the body, which is not the case in the United States and Europe.<sup>250</sup>

Particularly interesting are the studies on the ordination of women, a phenomenon exemplifying the Australian tendency to embrace lay people and incorporate democratic principles into Buddhist thinking and practice. Nagasuri, for example, writes about the ordination of Australian women by women into the Western Buddhist Order (WBO), also known as the Triratna Buddhist Order. The Order was founded by Sangharakshita in England in 1967, introduced to Australia in 1980, and has garnered its reputation as an ecumenical movement.<sup>251</sup> Nagasuri is an ordained member of the Triratna Order in Australia, describing herself and other ordained members as “being neither monastic nor lay – of being *in* the world and not *of* it.”<sup>252</sup> As an ordained person, she has experienced some difficulties from eastern monks – and even Western Buddhist practitioners from Europe – who find the practice of ordaining women by women in Australia perplexing and confronting.<sup>253</sup> On the other hand, Nagasuri points out that WBO practitioners are well accepted and included among inter-Buddhist circles in Australia.<sup>254</sup>

Subhana Barzaghi is another prominent woman in Australian Buddhism who, in recounting her “journey of a lay female Zen teacher,” describes how Western Zen Buddhism has been adapted to the Australian cultural context:

The new flowering of western Zen generally is changing as a result of a variety of cultural forces including a growing movement of lay practitioners, family practice, psychology and psychotherapy, environmental concerns and deep ecology, feminism, egalitarian principles, democratic decision-making processes and community management of its organizations.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 115.

<sup>252</sup> Nagasuri, “Ordaining Women in Australia,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 119-123, 121.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-122.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>255</sup> Subhana Barzaghi, “The Journey of a Lay Female Zen Teacher: ‘On a Withered Tree a Flower Blooms,’” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 124-133, 124.

Barzaghi also points out that localized “Australian Zen” “has formed a budding relationship with indigenous spirituality... which overall gives it “a different shape and flavour to its traditional Asian or other western counterparts.”<sup>256</sup> Despite these adaptations, which moved Australian Zen away from monastic lifestyle, Barzaghi holds that Australian Zen “has remained true to the heart of the original teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha.”<sup>257</sup>

In contemporary Australia, a number of women are drawn to the “Green Tara” tradition, which is a Tibetan Buddhist practice that involves making various ritual offerings to Tara, the most popular female deity of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. According to tradition, Tara made a vow to always incarnate in a female form in order to work for the benefit of all sentient beings.<sup>258</sup> According to Ruth Fitzpatrick, by contesting the patriarchal history of religions and suggesting a need to reframe and reapply an understanding of the notion of “self,” Tara practice enables women “to access forms of sacred power through redefining their selves, while also articulating an emphasis on compassionate engagement with others.”<sup>259</sup>

Another important aspect of Buddhism in Australia is “engaged Buddhism,” which has become another attractive field of study. In *The Buddha is in the Street* (2003), Patricia Sherwood, examines the contribution of Buddhist practices to social change and wellbeing in Australia. While “Buddhism is often seen as a practice for individual stress management, a way for achieving inner peacefulness, quietness, withdrawal from the world and all its demands,” it also “forms a mosaic of socially engaged and socially transforming practices initiated formally by Buddhist organizations and informally by individuals influenced by Buddhist philosophy.”<sup>260</sup> Sherwood is herself a practitioner of engaged Buddhism. Besides researching and writing on Buddhism in Australia, she founded Sophia College in 2002, an accredited institution and a not-for-profit educational company. The College offers training

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<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>258</sup> Ruth Fitzpatrick, “Green Tara in Australia: Reassessing the Relationship Between Gender, Religion and Power Relations,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 49-59, 49.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>260</sup> Patricia Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street: Engaged Buddhism in Australia* (Bunbury: Edith Cowan University, 2003), 1-3.

courses in Western Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.<sup>261</sup> The courses involve a combination of Buddhist psychology and different schools of western psychotherapy. According to both Michelle Spuler and Patricia Sherwood, engaged Buddhism has made significant contributions to Australian life in areas such as mental health services (including psychotherapy and counselling), movements for human rights, peace, and the environment, as well as the education sector and prison chaplaincy services.<sup>262</sup>

The influence of Buddhist philosophy on the mental health professions in Australia has been recognized as “having a significant impact on the delivery of mental health services... particularly in the psychotherapy and counselling area.”<sup>263</sup> In fact, it is a process of mutual enrichment between the Buddhist and western traditions: “many psychotherapists are discovering the usefulness of Buddhist insights and practices in their therapeutic work while the tradition of western psychotherapy is influencing the development and presentation of Buddhist psychology in Australia.”<sup>264</sup> Psychiatrists, psychotherapists and psychologists have widely incorporated Buddhist spirituality into their professional practices. Both Buddhist philosophical concepts (such as interconnectedness/interbeing and non-attachment), methods of meditation and mindfulness, and the foregrounding of spiritual emotions (loving-kindness, compassion, forgiveness) are used as effective tools for healing or easing suffering and overcoming negative feelings and experiences.

The human rights movements in Australia has been influenced by Buddhist teachings of non-violence and interdependence, notices Sherwood. In the last few decades, Australia has witnessed the emergence of organized movements which advocate and promote human rights and peace in different countries, particularly Tibet, Burma and Vietnam. The Australia-Tibet Council was established to “raise the public awareness of the appalling travesty of human rights in Tibet, and to encourage the government and community to take positive action to support the Tibetans’ rights.”<sup>265</sup> Burmese support groups throughout Australia,

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<sup>261</sup> Patricia Sherwood, “Educating for Wisdom and Compassion Mind,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 143-147.

<sup>262</sup> Michelle Spuler, *Developments in Australian Buddhism*; Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*.

<sup>263</sup> Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*, 71.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

strongly influenced by Buddhist non-violent philosophy, have worked in association with international institutions such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation to address human rights abuses in Burma, protect Burmese refugees, and try to restore democracy in the country.<sup>266</sup> The federal body of the Vietnamese Community in Australia, which is a member of the international Free Vietnam Alliance, operates at both state and national levels to “seek the peaceful democratisation of Vietnam by lobbying and bringing international pressure to bear on the Vietnamese communist government leadership to abandon its authoritarian rule.”<sup>267</sup> Strongly influenced by the Buddhist worldview of non-violence and compassion, it has striven to work for “the establishment of a pluralistic democracy, the establishment of Freedom and human rights, the implementation of social justice policies in the country and the establishment of a market economy... as well as the rights of all boat people seeking asylum in Australia.”<sup>268</sup> The fight for human rights in Australia is, according to Sherwood, “always marked by the Buddhist qualities of recognition of the interdependence of all beings, respect for human differences, non-violent demonstration, lobbying and education of the public as well as the attempts to resolve conflict through dialogue and changes on consciousness.”<sup>269</sup>

The peace movement in Australia also carries marks of Buddhist influence. The mindfulness meditation method introduced by influential Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh “has had a profound influence on the Buddhist Peace movement in Australia.”<sup>270</sup> The peace-making process, as noted by Sherwood regarding the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh, starts within oneself: “those in the peace movement [have] to become aware of the enemy within who is the one that must first be defeated.... In preparation for outer peacemaking activities, inner peacemaking activities are undertaken.”<sup>271</sup> A number of Australian Buddhist peace activists have taken this approach seriously to the extent that they have undertaken training in mindfulness as preparation for their involvement in peace-making in Australia. Conflict

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<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-70.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

resolution workshops and peacemaking programs, have been offered to Australian people throughout the country.<sup>272</sup>

In the early 1970s, Australia witnessed emerging connections between the Buddhist movement and the environmental and peace movements. It was a time of unprecedented social change in Australian history. The election of Gough Whitlam in 1972 marked the beginning of this change. Whitlam made a serious commitment to social justice and welfare legislation, with which he “began the reconciliation process with Australian indigenous people, and acknowledged environmental issues and rights.”<sup>273</sup> It was the right moment for Buddhism to flourish in Australia. With the influence of the Buddhist philosophy of the interconnectedness of all living beings, the environmental movement was introduced by the Australian hippie community which “was fuelled largely by the young, affluent, educated, middle class who valued peace, love and mother nature.”<sup>274</sup> Sherwood proposes that, while not all members of the environmental movement in Australia are Buddhist, those who are seriously committed to the environment activism have found motivation in a worldview of interconnectedness and the interbeing of all living things.<sup>275</sup>

Chaplaincy is another area that Buddhism has actively been engaged in Australia. Venerable Robina Courtin is recognized for providing counselling to prisoners both in Australia and abroad. An Australian-born Buddhist nun belonging to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Robina Courtin “has humanized Buddhism, made it more accessible and within reach for people with normal conditions and failings.”<sup>276</sup> Anna Halafoff claims that Courtin has been “challenging prevalent notions of what a Buddhist in Australia ought to be like.”<sup>277</sup> Courtin is the founder of the Liberation Prison Project, which has offices and branches in the U.S., Australia, Mongolia, Spain and Mexico, and the body has transformed thousands of lives through its humanized version of Buddhist teachings. Another prominent Australian Buddhist involved in

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<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>276</sup> Cited in Halafoff, “Venerable Robina Courtin,” 151.

<sup>277</sup> Halafoff, “Venerable Robina Courtin,” 151.

chaplaincy work is Thich Thong Phap, originally an Anglo-Australian Christian who became ordained as a monk in the Vietnamese Zen Buddhism and who has volunteered as a chaplain at Flinders University in South Australia. However, unlike some Buddhist chaplains at universities who limit their role to teachers of meditation, he engages in a variety of activities, such as providing counselling services to students, participating in multi-faith projects and interfaith activities, and occasionally organising Buddhist seminars and meditation.<sup>278</sup>

In practice, there have been various Buddhist bodies in Australia which are extensively involved “in a range of social welfare and educational activities.”<sup>279</sup> These socially engaged activities of Buddhist organizations are classified according to two types, namely “soft”/ “mindfulness-based” and “hard”/ “service-based.”<sup>280</sup> Some operating activities include education of the adult public and children, working with the sick in hospitals and hospices, working with the sick and dying in the community and in palliative care, visiting prisons, working with drug addicts, fundraising for the poor and needy both in Australia and overseas, speaking up for human rights and against oppression, and promoting compassionate activities on behalf of non-human sentient beings. These services are operated under a wide range of Buddhist organizations, including Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the Tara Project Australia, the Buddha Light International Association, the Tzu Chi Compassion Relief Foundation, Buddhist Peace and Fellowship, Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, the Buddhist Societies of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, the Association of Engaged Buddhists, the Cittamina and Karuna Hospices, and the Linh Son Buddhist Congregation. These facts prove that “Buddhism is not otherworldly,” as misunderstood by many Australians, but concretely, extensively, and recognizably contributes to Australian social, educational, environmental and health services.<sup>281</sup>

### **2.3 Localization of Buddhism in Australia**

As already mentioned in relation to Buddhism’s adaptation to Australian socio-cultural and religious contexts, the tradition has gradually become part of the religious landscape of

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<sup>278</sup> Thich Thong Phap, “Being All of Who I Am,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 153-156, 156.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

Australia. In this process of localization, it has encountered certain issues, ranging from recognition of its organizations by the government to certain matters related to the construction of temples. Diana Cousens, for example, mentions that the government of Australia was slow in recognizing the Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils (FABC) – or any other Buddhist body – as bodies which can perform “wedding ceremony for Buddhists and a system of training marriage celebrants,”<sup>282</sup> all of which “need to be instituted in order for Buddhism to be recognized as a religion in Australia.”

Buddhism has been regarded by both Australian politicians and the majority Christian population as an exotic and peaceful tradition, and a resource of cultural enrichment, which can contribute to the policy of Australian multiculturalism and in some instances also as a source of revenue for cultural and economic benefits.<sup>283</sup> Sally McAra, for example, investigated the process surrounding the construction of the Tibetan “Great Stupa of Universal Compassion,” which took place in the late 1990s in Bendigo, Victoria. Although the building was quite large and its architecture unusual, the planning application was passed by the city council without any objections. McAra argues that the approval was due to the perception by the council that the temple would enrich the multicultural diversity of the city.<sup>284</sup> She also claims that while the Buddhist leaders’ vision of the temple was of a space providing spiritual benefits to the local residents (such as purification and *dharma* learning), the civil leaders were more interested in the temple’s contribution to Bendigo’s general cultural, social and economic capital.<sup>285</sup>

A similar thinking seems to have been behind the 1990s construction of Nan Tien Temple, one of the world’s largest Buddhist temples, located in Berkeley, Wollongong, New South Wales. Gordon Waitt’s research demonstrates that the decision to locate the temple in that particular area had more to do with multiculturalism and tourism marketing than with the

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<sup>282</sup> Diana Cousens, “The Buddhist Council of Victoria and the Challenges of Recognizing Buddhism as a Religion in Australia,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 157-161, 157.

<sup>283</sup> Sally McAra, “Buddhifying Australia: Multicultural Capital and Buddhist Material Culture in Rural Victoria,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 63-73; cf. Gordon Waitt, “Locating a Buddhist Temple in Wollongong, New South Wales,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 74-85.

<sup>284</sup> McAra, “Buddhifying Australia,” 63-64.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

number of Buddhist residing in Berkeley.<sup>286</sup> The temple was described “as a mechanism with which to revitalize the Wollongong economy along cultural capital lines” and “as a significant cultural and tourist development to the benefit of the ‘community’ of Wollongong.”<sup>287</sup> Buddhism was simply viewed as an “exotic extra,” adding to the multicultural diversity, rather than a religion in its own right.<sup>288</sup>

Despite these somewhat problematic reasons for supporting temple-building, Buddhism has benefited from the support. Buddhist centres are flourishing. According to John Skennar, Western Sydney now has two types of Buddhist establishments, namely, both temples and house-temples or meditation centres. Temples, as pointed out by Skennar, do not serve as some kind of churches but are actually living cultural centres with a whole complex of different parts which accommodate various functions, ranging from residential accommodation for monks and nuns to social, cultural, educational and religious activities.<sup>289</sup> Temples such as these have been designed and built in traditional Asian styles, with a monks’ residence, community hall, shrine room, stupas (a mound-like commemorative monument normally housing the sacred relics associated with the Buddha or saintly persons that is used as a place of meditation), gardens and onsite parking, all of which effectively cater for gatherings and celebrations. Skennar also points out that there have been smaller Buddhist centres recently developed in Western Sydney, such as house temples or meditation centres, which are not places of worship like larger temples, but are residences for monks and nuns are also places where people can come for meditation, pastoral care and spiritual guidance.<sup>290</sup> There is similar development occurring in the state of Victoria. Cousens reports that, in 2011, the Buddhist Council of Victoria alone was associated with approximately 40 member temples which provided personnel and programs for education, prisons and hospitals.<sup>291</sup> As is often/always the case, some of the smaller house centres which have become more popular

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<sup>286</sup> Gordon Waitt, “Locating a Buddhist Temple in Wollongong,” 74.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>289</sup> John Skennar, “Sydney, a City Growing Within: The Establishment of Buddhist Centres in Western Sydney,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 86-94, 88.

<sup>290</sup> Skennar, “Sydney, a City Growing Within,” 92.

<sup>291</sup> Cousens, “The Buddhist Council of Victoria,” 159.



among Buddhist practitioners, attracted the attention of their respective city councils and immediate neighbours.<sup>292</sup> The responses ranged from hostility to acceptance, and Skennar argues that new models of Australian suburban life need to be in place to accommodate the changes.<sup>293</sup>

Whereas large temples are normally constructed with funding from overseas countries (such as China or Taiwan), most small Buddhist temples and meditation centres in Australia are financed and constructed by individuals or small groups of Buddhist practitioners. Ekai Korematsu, for example, a Japanese Zen teacher, also known as Ekai-osho, came with his Australian wife to Melbourne where they settled permanently in the late 1990s. As he began to develop a Soto Zen teaching program, in 1998 he converted his home garage into a *zendo* for Zen practice. One year later, he founded a Zen community called Jikishoan, which has offered regular teaching programs, meditation workshops and retreats.<sup>294</sup> Today, Jikishoan's centres run various activities in different areas of Melbourne, rural Ballarat and Canberra. It was reported that after ten years of operation in Australia, Jikishoen has 139 members and 50 friends with over 500 names on its mailing-list.<sup>295</sup>

Buddhist centres are also important in providing community and cultural support for newly arrived migrant Buddhists. Studying the well-being of the members of the Cambodian Buddhist community in Victoria during the process of adaptation and development, Sheva Vasi found that Buddhist temples serve both as preserves of Cambodian Buddhist culture and values and as the centres which deal with settlement-related challenges, such as the welfare needs of their communities and the services required to integrate Cambodian migrants into Australian society. Vasi argues that in order to achieve successful integration of these migrants, Buddhist temples need to be recognized and utilized as platforms for the delivery of sustainable and culturally competent services and programs.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> Davis, "Soto Zen in Australia," 36.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>296</sup> Shiva Vasi, "Adaptation and Continuity in Cambodian Buddhist Temples: Implications for Service Delivery and Community Development," in *Buddhism in Australia*, 95-104, 102-103.

It has been noted that in the process of localisation of Buddhism in Australia, there are some problems with transmission of Buddhist values and practices to younger Australian-born Buddhists. Tuong Quang Luu writes extensively about those problems in connection with the Vietnamese community. He documents the history of the Vietnamese community in Australia and New Zealand, commencing with students in the 1950s, to the period of “Buddha worship in a garage” and “house-temples” and the arrivals of the first Buddhist monks in the early 1980s and the founding of the Vietnamese Buddhist Federation of Australia in 1987.<sup>297</sup> Luu discusses issues of generational gaps and recounts the failed attempts by the Vietnamese Buddhist community to bridge that gap by inviting young Buddhist monks and nuns from Vietnam who lacked knowledge of western values to work with younger Vietnamese Buddhists in Australia. After four decades of resettlement, today the Vietnamese Buddhist congregation has grown, both in terms of migrants and Australian-born members. There are approximately 50 monasteries and house-temples in Australia and New Zealand,<sup>298</sup> which, as Luu points out, certainly demonstrate that there is a need to train young people who are capable of “finding ways to engage with the young, bicultural, technologically literate and English-speaking Vietnamese Australians.”<sup>299</sup>

Studying Buddhist and Muslim youth participation in ‘post-secular’ times, Anita Harris and Kim Lam observe that young Buddhist and Muslim practitioners of today “frequently entwined their individual, everyday religious and participatory practices, and perceived their experiences of religion as already having wider communal, even global civic and political significance, suggesting that their religious selves are produced in orientation towards the common good.”<sup>300</sup> They also note that young people, including young Buddhist practitioners in Australia, have become increasingly less formal in their religious participation but have emphasized the practicality and applicability of religious teachings to everyday life rather than

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<sup>297</sup> Tuong Quang Luu, “Changes and Challenges to Vietnamese Buddhism in Australia,” in *Buddhism in Australia*, 134-139, 135-136.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>300</sup> Anita Harris and Kim Lam, “Youth participation in ‘post-secular’ times: Young Buddhist and Muslim practitioners as religious citizens,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 70, Issue 2 (2019): 628.

accepting religions as “an abstract set of beliefs passed down either from texts or from parents or religious institutions.”<sup>301</sup>

## 2.4 Conversion to Buddhism in Australia

When it comes to conversion to Buddhism in Australia, the extant literature on the subject points to various sociological and religious factors, such as the development of science, the foregrounding of rationality, and existential crises of meaning. Examining this issue from a sociological perspective, Andrew Singleton, for example, argues that the phenomenon of conversion of Westerners to Buddhism is not so much due to the popularity of Eastern religions (including Buddhism) *per se*. Rather, it is a consequence of the triumph of science and reason in the West which challenged the traditional Christian worldview, the rise of religious individualism, and the emergence of the spiritual marketplace.<sup>302</sup> Croucher also claims that “the person of Buddha was not the chief reason for this turning to the East”. He argues that the turn was due to the “perceived rationalism and consistency with science” in Buddhism which was, for some groups like the spiritualists and Theosophists, “a foil in the battle against fundamentalist Christianity”<sup>303</sup> and “the redemption from blind Christianity to rational Buddhism.”<sup>304</sup>

Scholars also point out that an increasing number of Christian Australians turn to Buddhism as an alternative path of practising spirituality due to their negative experiences of institutionalized, authoritarian Christianity, some inadequately explained dogmas, and a lack of necessary tools for spiritual practice. Some of these shortcomings were already noticed by Alfred Deakin who, comparing the two traditions, wrote: “What I detest is not religion but priestcraft and dogma and intolerance.” In contrast, he wrote of Buddhism that “It was an all-

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<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 636.

<sup>302</sup> Singleton, *Religion, Culture and Society*, 224.

<sup>303</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 7.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

pervading pity, an infinite tenderness, and boundless compassion [sic], which winged the words of Gautama and made him a sovereign of souls.”<sup>305</sup>

In Sherwood’s view, Buddhist scholars, monks and lamas are perceived as more “inspirational, logical, authentic... highly sympathetic and radiating” by Western converts.<sup>306</sup> An additional attraction is the encouragement by Buddhist leaders of “not accepting something on the authority of another person but examining it for oneself”<sup>307</sup> and the contrast between the Buddhist teaching of compassion and “the sense of harshness, judgment and condemnation... experienced in other belief systems [e.g., mainstream Christian traditions].”<sup>308</sup> According to Sherwood, however, the main reason for conversion to Buddhism is a “breakdown of meaning in their [the converts’] lives” and the inability of traditional Christian churches “to offer plausible explanations for the social dissolution and personal dissolution confronting them.”<sup>309</sup> Unlike the Christian churches, which lacked “inspiration and comfort” and provided “few answers to life questions,”<sup>310</sup> those who experienced encounters with Buddhism and had experienced Buddhist spirituality and practices perceived Buddhist teachings as a “profound meaning system” which could provide “answers to their search for meaning in their lives.”<sup>311</sup> Consequently, people left their Christian churches.

A similar conclusion is reached by Heather Weedon who argues that in facing the extraordinarily rapid changes brought by postmodernity, many young Catholics in Australia are “not finding the answers they seek within the Catholic community,” so they are “looking elsewhere for spiritual nourishment and a place in which to feel at home.”<sup>312</sup> Many of these seekers find that nourishment and place in Buddhism which “meets their needs for health

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<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>306</sup> Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*, 33.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> Heather Weedon, “Reinventing the Kerygmatic Mission of the Catholic Church in Australia,” MA Thesis (Melbourne: Melbourne College of Divinity, 2005), 126.

and peace, their need to experience compassion, and provides a sense of connectedness to other human beings and to the natural world.”<sup>313</sup> Buddhism is also increasingly attractive to Westerners because of its philosophies and meditational practices.<sup>314</sup> Seekers are motivated by two fundamental teachings: (1) the Four Noble Truths: *Dukkha*: suffering; *Samudaya*: the origin of dukkha; *Nirodha*: the recession of dukkha; and *Magga*: the way leading to the recession of dukkha; and (2) the Noble Eightfold Path: Right View or Understanding, Right Thoughts or Intentions, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These teachings are considered as “the way” offering a promise of happiness in this life rather than in afterlife.

Buddhism also offers a sense of freedom in examining different issues of life. The concept of non-self (*anatta*) is considered as a powerfully liberating and transforming element, especially when people deal with “issues of guilt, anxiety and judgment that traditionally have been directed at the Christian self.”<sup>315</sup> Furthermore, the notion and practice of compassion challenges the growing selfishness which creates moral, social and environmental issues. Contrasted with the Christian idea that humans are given the right to rule over the natural world, Buddhism stresses the interrelatedness of all things,<sup>316</sup> which is particularly important to Australians who are environmentally conscientious, as it “provides an alternative worldview to the Western perspective of exploiting human and natural resources resulting in the fragmentation of community, disappearing forests, extinction of species, and poisoned environments.”<sup>317</sup>

In addition, Buddhism equips its followers with the needed tools and skills to engage in the processes of personal and social transformation. The Buddha’s teaching on the cause of suffering and its elimination appeals to Westerners, as they perceive in Buddhism “concrete tools for managing one’s stresses and for alleviating suffering.”<sup>318</sup> Some other Buddhist

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<sup>313</sup> Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*, 30.

<sup>314</sup> Kaye Healey, ed., *Religions in Australia: Religious Beliefs and Trends in Australia* (Sydney: Spinney Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>315</sup> Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*, 32.

<sup>316</sup> Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia*, 15-16.

<sup>317</sup> Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*, 36.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

practices that have been widely identified by Western converts as a source of inspiration and motivation to transform one's life and the lives of others are the Dharma teaching, meditation and retreats. On this point, Sherwood explains:

As we follow the *dharma* teaching and open to the path of mindfulness, compassion and insight there arises "a clear forest pool" within us... [and we] come to know an inner peace, and it is from that place that [we] can make the most effective contribution to peace and health in our outer peacemaking and socially transforming activities.<sup>319</sup>

Although there is a growing number of Australians who identify themselves as converts to Buddhism, opinions vary whether they are true converts. In her doctoral research exploring conversion to Zen, Shiva Vasi demonstrates that whether one can be considered a convert or not depends to a large extent on the understanding of what constitutes a conversion.<sup>320</sup> She argues that the changes involved in becoming a Zen practitioner in Australia meet the criteria of conversion such as belief in the significance and efficiency of *Zazen* (a meditative discipline), belief in the Buddha nature as the essence of the self and reality, and adopting an attitude of surrender and acceptance.<sup>321</sup> But Vasi also holds that this is not necessarily the case if one looks at conversion from the side of Buddhism itself. In the same line of thinking with Malony and Southard, Vasi points out that "traditionally, the highest level of conversion to Buddhism is to become a monk or a nun, take the vow of celibacy and dedicate oneself to gaining merits and attaining enlightenment by practising in a monastic setting."<sup>322</sup> Additionally, "[t]he Zen emphasizes experiential knowledge and it rejects belief change as a means to enlightenment."<sup>323</sup> Glenys Eddy's work provides a significant insight into the process of conversion to Buddhism in Australia. She argues that through socialization and participation in Buddhist study and practice (attending courses, retreats, regular meditation), practitioners experience personal self-transformation. However, individuals begin to identify themselves as Buddhists only once they make a commitment through taking the three

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<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>320</sup> Shiva Vasi, "Conversion to Zen Buddhism," PhD Thesis, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Political and Social Inquiry (Clayton: Monash University, 2004).

<sup>321</sup> Vasi, "Conversion to Zen Buddhism," 84.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

Refuges of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, together with the five lay vows, and they hold certain beliefs and perform chanting or have active membership in a specific organization.<sup>324</sup>

In contrast to the studies that have been undertaken in relation to conversion to Buddhism in Australia, my research deals specifically with people of Christian background and their conversion to Buddhism. It explores the reasons behind their decision to convert, the process itself, what it involved, and the nature of the prospects and challenges converts faced during the process of conversion. But before I address these questions, we should first engage the question of nature of conversion itself.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has covered four main themes namely, historical development of Buddhism in Australia, characteristics of Australian Buddhism, adaptation and localisation of Buddhism in Australian context, and the reasons why Australians converted to Buddhism.

Similar to the historical development of Buddhism in the West as presented above, Buddhism in Australia also encountered many obstacles and hardships such as the “White Policy” and the social discrimination in its process of establishment, adaptation and localisation. Despite all the hardships, Buddhism gradually took its root in Australian soil and developed its diversity of traditions and defined its characteristics such as democratic principles, close connection with indigenous spirituality, active involvement of women, and social engagement.

The growth of Buddhism in Australia is due mainly to both the arrivals of Buddhist migrants from Asian countries together with their Australia-born generation and the conversion of Australians to Buddhism. The former group is normally called ethnic Buddhism and the latter is called Western Buddhism or New Buddhism. Today, the distinctions between the Western and ethnic, monistic and laity, scholar and practitioner, male and female, etc. continue to exist both in status and in practices. However, thanks to the engagement through networking

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<sup>324</sup> Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*, 207.

and collaboration between different Buddhist associations and groups, those binaries are gradually fading away.

The chapter has also examined the conversion of Christian people to Buddhism in Australia as addressed in scholarly literature. So far, general observations have been made by scholars to explain this phenomenon: the triumph of science and reason in the West; the rise of individual religion; the emergence of the spiritual marketplace; the compatibility of Buddhism with science and its teaching of compassion; the lack of inspiration and comfort in Christian churches.



## Chapter Three

### Understandings of Religious Conversion

Due to the complexity of the topic that this study attempts to explore which involves two religious traditions namely, Buddhism and Christianity, the selection of literatures for reviewing is quite large. Firstly, it seeks to offer a basic understanding of concepts of conversion. Secondly, it provides an overview of the theoretical approaches to religious conversion, an explanation and application of Rambo's *holistic model* and *stage model*, different types of conversion, conversion motifs, and concentric conceptualisation model (see section 4.3, page 125). Finally, the chapter examines the ways conversion is understood in both Christianity and Buddhism, the two traditions which are the focus of the present work.

#### 3.1 Concepts of Conversion

The term “conversion” has been widely used in domains of religious study, theology, psychology, law, mathematics, logic and the sciences. In these areas, the basic meaning of the term is *change, transformation* and *transposition*.<sup>325</sup> But what about its signification(s) in the context of religion, in particular, Christianity?

As David Kling rightly reminds us, conversion is both a word and a concept.<sup>326</sup> Etymologically, conversion derives from the Latin word *conversus*, which is the past participle of *convertere*, literally meaning “to turn around” or “to return.”<sup>327</sup> Studies of the early uses of the term indicate that “the *spatial* connotation of revolving, reversing and changing direction was basic.”<sup>328</sup> James E. Smith holds that “the turning is an ‘about face’ in the sense that the reality or state from which we turn is in some opposition to the reality of the state from which we

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<sup>325</sup> James E. Smith, “The Concept of Conversion,” in *Conversion: Perspective on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba House, 1978), 51-61, 52.

<sup>326</sup> David W. Kling, “Conversion to Christianity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 598-631, 598.

<sup>327</sup> Smith, “The Concept of Conversion”, 51.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

turn.”<sup>329</sup> Smith further suggests that the understanding of the term exists in two domains of ordinary use. First, conversion is used in everyday situations to convey relations between persons, their beliefs and attitudes. This involves a change in thinking, holding a new set of beliefs or a new worldview. Second, the term conversion is used in popular religious discourse to refer to what happens within the confines of the religious life. In this situation, the term tends to create a sense of a revivalistic or evangelical understanding which may have some association with a personal experience, commonly known among Christians as “being changed/called/saved.” Conversion understood in this sense, in Smith’s view, “does not mean primarily a change of doctrine or theology, but rather a change of heart, a change in nature, a change in the self, sufficiently deep and lasting to bring about a change of conduct and bearing in the world.”<sup>330</sup>

According to Frederick H. Russell, the term itself is a metaphor borrowed from the arts and crafts to express a transformation of some material into a different object. In the process of changing or turning, however, conversion is never complete. Transformation is only half of a process. Russell calls the other half “aversion” or “disenchantment,”<sup>331</sup> claiming that “in conversion there is always something left behind,” and that the past – rather than being wholly discarded – actually facilitates the process of conversion.<sup>332</sup>

In the religious context, especially in Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, conversion normally means “turning to God.”<sup>333</sup> In other words, it involves a change from the absence of a faith system to a faith commitment, from religious affiliation with one faith system to another, or from one orientation to another within a single faith system. It can also mean a change of one’s personal orientation toward life, such as turning from expressions of superstition to an awareness of the providence of a deity, or turning from a self-oriented attitude to an other-oriented way of life, or turning from self-indulgence to self-denial in this life in order to gain a holy life hereafter. In short, conversion involves both turning away from

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<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>331</sup> Frederick H. Russell, “Augustine: Conversion by the Book,” in *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 13-30, 13.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>333</sup> Smith, “The Concept of Conversion,” 51.

old *and* turning to new either religious groups, ways of life, systems of belief, modes of relating to a deity or the nature of reality.<sup>334</sup>

This religious change or conversion again can be described in different terms, depending on the religious tradition. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian believe that “there is no universal definition that... captures all aspects of religious conversion.”<sup>335</sup> Each tradition emphasizes a specific meaning using their own terminology. What is understood as *conversion* or *metanoia* or *repentance* by Christians and Jews is probably called *submission* by Muslims or *Going for Refuge* by Buddhists.

In terms of defining religious conversion, the most basic and straightforward definition is “change” or “transformation.”<sup>336</sup> According to Marc Baer, conversion indicates an integrated movement of change, both internal mind-set and external actions, leading to a transformation of self-identity and way of life:

Conversion is a decision or experience followed by a gradually unfolding, dynamic process through which an individual embarks on religious transformation. This can entail an intensification of belief and practice of one’s own religion, moving from one level of observation to another, or exchanging the beliefs and practices in which one was raised for those of another religious tradition. In both cases, a person becomes someone else because his or her internal mind-set and/or external actions are transformed. In the case of intensification where one did not give other than cursory thought or attention to the theology of one’s faith or engage in keeping wholeheartedly to its requirements, one devotes one’s mind and body fully to understanding and embracing the religion. Whereas some scholars still posit an artificial distinction between “exterior” and “interior” conversion, I argue that conversion has an internal component entailing belief and an external component involving behaviour, leading to the creation of a new self-identity and new way of life.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 2-3.

<sup>335</sup> Rambo and Farhadian, “Introduction,” 10.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>337</sup> Quoted from Rambo and Farhadian, “Introduction,” 11.

In dealing with concepts of conversion, it is possible to make a distinction between the normative and the descriptive approaches to definitions of conversion.<sup>338</sup> The latter focuses on theological convictions which are expected or required for a conversion to be valid, while the former (the descriptive approach to conversion) refers to the nature of the process itself and at what actually happens during that process, with some scholars claiming that the word “converting” rather than “conversion” better captures the character of the phenomenon.<sup>339</sup>

Although often associated with changing religious affiliation, for some scholars such change is not a necessary part of defining conversion. For Max Heirich (1977), Roger Straus (1979), and David A. Snow and Richard Machalek (1984), conversion is a dramatic transformation not only in behaviour and attitude but a fundamental shift in one’s root identity and ground of being.<sup>340</sup> This understanding distinguishes conversion from the notion of changing one’s religious affiliation or denomination. Conversion understood in this sense may or may not involve a denominational change or a change of religious affiliation.

According to some scholars, conversion also needs to be distinguished from proselytization.<sup>341</sup> Ervind Sharma, for example, claims it is important to examine whether a religion to which someone converted is proselytizing or non-proselytizing, arguing that a proselyte may not be a convert because he or she may have changed from one religion to another with some external changes of life, manner and customs but has not experienced an inner change of life. Therefore, he/she may have not been truly converted.<sup>342</sup>

### **3.2 An Overview of Theoretical Approaches to Religious Conversion Studies**

Religious conversion is a complex subject which has been extensively studied by scholars from different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology and theology. Each

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<sup>338</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 6.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>340</sup> Max Heirich, “Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion,” *American Sociological Review* 83 (1977): 653-680, 672; Roger Straus, “Religious Conversion as a Personal and Collective Accomplishment,” *Sociological Analysis* 40 (1979): 158-165, 162; David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, “The Sociology of Conversion,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 167-190, 169.

<sup>341</sup> Ervind Sharma, “Hinduism and Conversion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 429-443, 429.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

discipline approaches the subject from a different perspective. However, there are also overlapping areas between disciplines. For example, mystical experiences in religious conversion have been extensively studied from both psychological and theological perspectives. This section presents an overview of psychological, sociological, anthropological and theological approaches in relation to religious conversion.

### **3.2.1 Psychological Approach to Religious Conversion**

Scholars of psychological theories of conversion have studied the phenomenon of religious conversions from a wide range of perspectives in relation to self and personality, examining different psychological factors that are behind conversions.<sup>343</sup> Broadly speaking, there are four ways in which psychologists approach and explain religious conversion: as a regressive pathology; as a progressive phenomenon; as human development; and conversion as an intellectual/cognitive phenomenon.

#### *Regressive pathology*

The basic claim that conversion is a regressive pathology derives from Sigmund Freud. He treats religion as an illusion or a mere human projection based on biological and psychological necessities.<sup>344</sup> Starting from this premise, he further asserts that “Man created God in his [image]”<sup>345</sup> and that “the god of each of them (individuals) is formed in the likeness of his father, that his personal relation to God depends on his relation to his father.”<sup>346</sup> Within this context, Freud views religious conversion as an expression of the “Oedipus complex,” “a feeling of indignation against his father.”<sup>347</sup> The outcome of the struggle with the authority of the father finds its religious expression as “a complete submission to the will of God the

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<sup>343</sup> Sara Savage, “A Psychology of Conversion – From All Angles,” *Previous Convictions: Conversion in the Present Day*, ed. M. Percy (London: SPCK, 2000), 1-18, 2.

<sup>344</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989 [1927]).

<sup>345</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989 [1960]), 33.

<sup>346</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989 [1913]), 182.

<sup>347</sup> Sigmund Freud, “A Religious Experience,” in *Collected Papers*, vol. 5, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957 [1928]), 243-246, 245-246.

Father.”<sup>348</sup> Thus, for Freud and other psychologists who subscribe to psychoanalytic theory,<sup>349</sup> conversion is rooted in the convert’s childhood wish to do away with the father and it plays a role of infantile compensation for and resolution to one’s own sense of helplessness in the face of the father’s superiority. In essence, according to the Freudian position, conversion is a regressive defence against repressed hostility toward authority, “a method of solving the conflict arising from the hatred of the father” or of any authority figure.<sup>350</sup> This approach also contends that sudden converts tend to be more emotional, fearful and less independent and creative.<sup>351</sup>

According to Rambo, the regressive pathological approach views religious conversion as “a coping device with the goal of guilt resolution, hostility management, and the identification of the person with the father figure.”<sup>352</sup> Therefore, this approach can offer some insights in terms of identifying the “why” of conversion, the possible reasons behind an individual’s decision to convert, as well as their experience of conversion.

#### *Progressive phenomenon*

The progressive approach analyses conversion experiences based on the understanding of the changing condition of the self in relation to the sacred or the divine. Describing religion in terms of a personal experience with the divine, this perspective suggests that personal religious experience is rooted in mystical states of consciousness,<sup>353</sup> and that religious conversion normally takes place after a period of crisis or despair, bringing the self into union “with the Absolute” when “we become aware of our oneness.”<sup>354</sup> Essentially, for psychologists of this trend, religious conversion is seen in a positive light as a unification of

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<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> Refer to Leon Salzman, “The Psychology of Religious and Ideological Conversion,” *Psychiatry* 16 (1953): 177-187.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.* 187.

<sup>351</sup> John P. Kildahl, “The Personalities of Sudden Religious Converts,” *Pastoral Psychology* 16 (1965): 37-44, 40-44.

<sup>352</sup> Lewis R. Rambo, “Bibliography: Current Research on Religious Conversion,” *Religious Studies Review* 8.2 (1982): 146-159, 155.

<sup>353</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982 [1902]), 31.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

the divided self. The progressive approach emphasizes the regenerative and positive effect of religious conversion arising from the convert's experience of the so-called presence and activity of the divine and/or surrender of personal will. Some studies of religious conversion have shown that through the conversion experience, the pre-conversion feelings of sinfulness, anxiety, confusion, depression, incompleteness and so on, were resolved and transformed into a sense of religious awakening and growth. For instance, in his *Psychology of Religion* (1911), Edwin D. Starbuck noted:

After conversion they [the converted] almost invariably set out with new and high resolves; their attitude towards life had been transformed; in the presence of the new life old habits had apparently passed away, new interests and enthusiasm had been awakened; motives and purposes had been purified, higher ideals aroused; frequently the personality seemed entirely changed.<sup>355</sup>

Some early studies of religious conversion employing the progressive approach, such as Starbuck's *Psychology of Religion* as well as William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*,<sup>356</sup> categorize religious conversions into two types: *volitional* and *self-surrendered*. In the volitional type, known as "the healthy-minded way,"<sup>357</sup> converts are conscious of making regenerative changes, including beliefs, moral values and worldview. This type of conversion is normally gradual. In the self-surrendered type of conversion, known as "the morbid-minded way,"<sup>358</sup> converts have a mystical experience during which they surrender their personal will to the intervention of the divine. In comparison to the volitional type, self-surrendered conversion tends to be more of an event than a process.<sup>359</sup>

Some contemporary scholars have expanded the view of the regenerative and positive effect of religious conversions by employing the idea of religion as a coping mechanism. Their studies have shown that religious conversion is a way of coping with stress and life crises, "a

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<sup>355</sup> Edwin D. Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness*, 3rd ed. (New York: Walter Scott, 1911 [1899]), 355.

<sup>356</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-209.

radical change in the self in response to a great deal of perceived stress through which the self became identified with the spiritual force.”<sup>360</sup> Conversion has also been described as “a healthy problem-solving activity,”<sup>361</sup> as well as an effort to recreate life through which converts experience a radical change of self.<sup>362</sup> It is also a process of identification and unification of the self with the sacred, a religious group, and the whole of humanity.<sup>363</sup>

Scholars have thus identified six basic elements of spiritual conversion: the experience of crisis; a divided sense of self; a motivation for radical change; a unified sense of self; an incorporation of the self with the sacred; and a life transformation.<sup>364</sup> Through their empirical studies, these scholars have discovered that conversion experiences improved converts’ sense of self and self-esteem, as well as their ability to make connections with both the self and the sacred.

In short, the progressive approach examines religious conversion by studying the conditions of the self in relation to the divine. The religious or spiritual conversion experience is viewed as a psychologically regenerative and positive process during which the divided self – suffering from crisis, anxiety, incompleteness and the like – is transformed into a new unified self.

### *Human development*

The human development approach describes religious conversion as a process of change in the subject’s formation of personal identity and issues pertaining to the meaning and purpose of life.<sup>365</sup> While conversion can occur at any age, some scholars propose adolescence as the period when conversions normally occur, given that it is a critical formative stage of one’s

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<sup>360</sup> Brian J. Zinnbauer and Kenneth I. Pargament, “Spiritual Conversion: A Study of Religious Change Among College Students,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57.1 (1998): 161-180, 173.

<sup>361</sup> Charles W. Stewart, “The Religious Experience of Two Adolescent Girls,” *Pastoral Psychology* 17 (1966): 49-55, 55.

<sup>362</sup> Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 248-250.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 250-254.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>365</sup> Bailey V. Gillespie, *The Dynamics of Religious Conversion: Identity and Transformation* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1991), 61.



personality.<sup>366</sup> However, other scholars propose that adulthood is a time of conversion, especially with middle-age, where adults often experience mid-life crises, which often lead to personal re-evaluations and re-orientations.

Some other scholars have also explored the relationship between human development and religious conversions in terms of the subject's inherent longing for self-transcendence which is a positive expansion of personal boundaries. Walter E. Conn regards religious conversion as "a special, extraordinary transformation of religious consciousness" in which the human drive for self-transcendence is the key motivation.<sup>367</sup> For Conn, religious conversion goes beyond human development in the sense that it enables "the completion of the personal development toward self-transcending autonomy."<sup>368</sup> He believes that "adolescent religious developments are just the threshold to the world of genuinely adult religious possibilities."<sup>369</sup>

As is indicated by this very short review, the human development approach analyses religious conversion by examining the correlation between the stages of human development and changes in individuals' religious orientations.

#### *Intellectual/cognitive phenomenon*

Some scholars such as Seymour Epstein, John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, and Fabrice Clement emphasize intellectual and cognitive elements as key motivations for religious conversions. They describe conversions as a way for individuals to achieve both intellectual and cognitive satisfaction. They situate religious conversion in the motivational structures for human transformation which include the need for experiencing pleasure and avoiding pain, the needs for a conceptual system, increasing self-esteem, and establishing and maintaining relationships.<sup>370</sup> From this perspective, converts are regarded as "truth seekers" who actively

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<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>367</sup> Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 197.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>370</sup> Seymour Epstein, "The Implications of Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory for Research in Social Psychology and Personality," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 15 (1985): 283-310.

search for the ultimate truth and the meaning of life.<sup>371</sup> Intellectual and cognitive conversion occurs when seekers have attained cognitive satisfaction and have found answers to existential questions.

We may now summarize these four psychological perspectives seeking to understand the phenomenon of conversion. The regressive perspective construes conversion in basically negative terms, while the progressive perspective interprets conversion favourably. The human development perspective sheds light with regards to the stages of life in which conversions occur (the “when” of conversion), while the intellectual/cognitive method seeks to explore the “why” of conversion.

### **3.2.2 Sociological Approaches to Religious Conversion**

In sociological approaches, there are, generally speaking, two perspectives that scholars apply in order to understand religious conversions. The “active” perspective treats converts as active agents who consciously make their choices in searching for the meaning and purpose of life and who consciously accomplish the process of conversion. The focus of this group of theories is human interactions and behaviours, as well as circumstances which facilitate the process of conversion. Active theories try to answer the question of how conversions happen, and they emphasize social networks, intensive interaction and affective bonds as major factors for religious conversions.<sup>372</sup> “Passive” theories of conversion, on the other hand, focus on the reasons, the conditioning and circumstances that cause conversion to happen. For these scholars, conversion is a result of both external factors – such as social and structural circumstances – and internal factors, including personality traits and cognitive orientation. They emphasize psychological dysfunction and disorder and social pressure (e.g., stress, tension, deprivation, social networks and affective bonds) as causes of conversion. Scholars have also developed other theories within the framework of the passive perspective to

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<sup>371</sup> John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20.4 (1981): 373-385; Fabrice Clement, “The Pleasure of Believing: Toward a Naturalistic Explanation of Religious Conversions,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 5.1 (2003): 69-89.

<sup>372</sup> John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 862-875, 868; David A. Snow *et al.*, “Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment,” *American Sociological Review* 45 (1980): 787-801.

account for religious conversions. Social network theory, for example, considers friendships and kinship networks as important factors that facilitate religious conversions.<sup>373</sup> Structural explanations of personal change, on the other hand, emphasize the role of structural factors – such as age, sex, occupation and social class – as the social determinants of conversion.<sup>374</sup>

Scholars in sociology of religions also foreground the impact of social and institutional factors involved in conversions. An important idea in this group of theories is the concept of deprivation, which involves frustration, tension, disadvantage, alienation and strain as pre-conditions leading individuals to seek religious resolution in order to compensate for the negative feeling.<sup>375</sup> Deprived persons seek religious conversion as “a way to transcend and transvalue relative deprivation.” By becoming converts, they “transform deprivation into virtues” and provide a “supernatural compensation for it [deprivation].”<sup>376</sup>

Other scholars pay more attention to interpersonal interactions in order to account for conversions.<sup>377</sup> This *interpersonal interaction* approach explores how religious seekers engage in personal transformation and actions in a specific religious group through immersion into the world of the group.<sup>378</sup> Another theory developed from a sociological perspective is *social influence theory* which focuses on *intensive interaction* and *affective bonds*<sup>379</sup> or *social attachment*<sup>380</sup> as key factors facilitating the process of conversion. The *social attachment* perspective views conversion as a process of becoming a member of a religious group whereby candidates strengthen their attachment to the group and accept its norms and

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<sup>373</sup> John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” 871-873.

<sup>374</sup> Marc Galanter and Peter Buckley, “Evangelical Religion and Meditation: Psychotherapeutic Effects,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 166.10 (1978): 685-691; David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe, “The Tnevnoc Cult,” *Sociological Analysis* 40.4 (1979): 361-366.

<sup>375</sup> Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), 249.

<sup>376</sup> William S. Bainbridge, “The Sociology of Conversion,” in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 178-191, 180.

<sup>377</sup> Roger Straus, “Religious Conversion as a Personal and Collective Accomplishment,” *Sociological Analysis* 40 (1979): 158-165.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>379</sup> Lofland and Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver,” 871-874.

<sup>380</sup> Bainbridge, “The Sociology of Conversion.”

values.<sup>381</sup>

Other scholars investigate social networks, affective and intensive interaction, and role learning,<sup>382</sup> claiming that they are significant factors in the process of conversion. Social networks – such as those created by intermarriage – play a key role in recruiting new members to a religious group,<sup>383</sup> as do affective and intensive interactions, which influence subjects’ understanding and acceptance of religious beliefs and values,<sup>384</sup> while role learning enables converts to learn the appropriate roles and norms of the group leading to “cognitive and behavioural transformations.”<sup>385</sup>

The *macrosocial relations approach* offers a different perspective to understanding religious conversions. This perspective examines macrosocial contexts – intersocietal and intergroup relations – which influence the acceptance or rejection of a proposed religion: “Acceptance means that the introduced religion becomes part of the social identity of large numbers of people in the social unit. A rejection of the introduced religion means that it continues to be regarded primarily as ‘foreign.’”<sup>386</sup> An example is the acceptance of Christianity in Korea in place of Japanese-imposed Shinto during the Japanese invasion in the early twentieth century.

In summary, sociological theories of conversion focus mainly on social contacts, interpersonal interactions, and social networks to account for religious conversions. They understand conversions as a compensatory response to various kinds of social deprivation. According to these theories, converts can be either active or passive agents in seeking and carrying out religious changes in the process of their conversions.

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<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>382</sup> David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, “The Sociology of Conversion,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 167-190.

<sup>383</sup> Bainbridge, “The Sociology of Conversion.”

<sup>384</sup> Snow and Machalek, “The Sociology of Conversion.”

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-184.

<sup>386</sup> Robert L. Montgomery, “The Spread of Religions and Macrosocial Relations,” *Sociological Analysis* 52.1 (1991): 37-53, 38.

### 3.2.3 Anthropological Approaches to Religious Conversion

Anthropological approaches study cultural factors that inform the religious transformation of individuals and groups. Anthropologists pay attention to the change of worldview and the interactions and dialogues between cultural systems. Anthropological theories tend to emphasize three elements as causes in the process of religious change: rationality or intellectual challenge; the process of acculturation; and the movement of cultural revitalization.

The *rationality theory* analyses the functionality of indigenous people's cosmologies in the process of religious change. This theory contends that, for example, indigenous people convert to world religions such as Christianity and Islam not only due the activities of missionaries but also because of the needs to develop their pre-existing traditional cosmology in response to the challenges posed by the encounters between native and missionary worldviews.<sup>387</sup> According to Clifford Geertz (who draws on Max Weber's work), traditional religions involve concepts with "rigidly stereotype" social practices and a "clustered arsenal of myth and magic," while world religions such as Christianity or Islam are "more abstract, more logically coherent and more generally phrased."<sup>388</sup> Therefore, religious conversion is often understood as a change of religious tradition when converts move away from a restricted cosmological worldview based on irrational elements to a more expanded and rational cosmological worldview.

*Acculturation* is another idea that anthropologists employ to account for conversion, and its is the main explanation for how cultural adaptation links with conversion experiences. For these theories, the focus is on specific contexts, such as the conversions of individuals or groups of people from a primitive or traditional culture and ethnicity to Christianity. Problems that interest these anthropologists are varied, including: the process of separation from the

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<sup>387</sup> Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Africa* 41.2 (1971): 85-108, 103; "On the Rationality of Conversion" (Pt. 1), *Africa* 45.3 (1975): 219-235, 221; cf. "On the Rationality of Conversion" (Pt. 1), *Africa* 45.4 (1975): 373-399.

<sup>388</sup> Clifford Geertz, "'Internal Conversion' in Contemporary Bali," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 170-189, 171-172.

old religious context and incorporation into the new;<sup>389</sup> how various cultural factors facilitate the conversion of a certain group;<sup>390</sup> how an ethnic non-Christian group adapts itself into a new Christian context in a Western country;<sup>391</sup> how different cultural and historical contexts affect the experiences of individuals or a group's religious change in the conversion process;<sup>392</sup> and how embodied cultures affect the adoption of the new belief system in people's conversions.<sup>393</sup>

The majority of anthropologists appear to agree that there is a close link between acculturation and religious conversion. Alan R. Tippett, for example, proposes a four-stage model of acculturation which can also be used to examine religious conversions "from old context (pagan) to new context (Christian). The stages are:... the period of awareness... the period of decision making... the period of incorporation... the period of maturity."<sup>394</sup> In line with this acculturation model, some scholars contend that the process of cultural assimilation regarding the change of religious affiliation varies according to specific contexts where cultural factors play important roles in fostering and elucidating experiences of religious conversion.<sup>395</sup>

Finally, the *theory of revitalization movements* focuses on the process of cultural renewal that people undergo in their experiences of conversion within specific cultural environments. *Revitalization movements* are understood as "deliberate, conscious, organized efforts by members of a society to create a more satisfying culture."<sup>396</sup> Conversion is thus a process of

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<sup>389</sup> Alan R. Tippett, "The Cultural Anthropology of Conversion," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 192-208, 193.

<sup>390</sup> Charles H. Kraft, "Cultural Concomitants of Higi Conversion: Early Period," *Missiology* 4 (1976): 431-442.

<sup>391</sup> Kwai H. Ng, "Seeking the Christian Tutelage: Agency and Culture in Chinese Immigrants' Conversion to Christianity," *Sociology of Religion* 63.2 (2002): 195-214.

<sup>392</sup> Diane Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction," in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, eds. Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 1-12.

<sup>393</sup> Rebecca S. Norris, "Converting to What? Embodied Culture and the Adoption of New Beliefs," in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, 171-181.

<sup>394</sup> Tippett, "The Cultural Anthropology of Conversion," 195-205.

<sup>395</sup> Ng, "Seeking the Christian Tutelage," 212; Norris, "Converting to What?," 171.

<sup>396</sup> Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 264-281, 264.

the revitalization of the old, unsatisfactory way of life. The old cultural system with its core myths, symbols and rituals is broken down and modified by a new religious system which functions to maintain and enhance life. According to this theory, the revitalization process consists of five stages: a steady state; a period of individual stress; a period of cultural distortion; a period of revitalization; and a new steady state.<sup>397</sup> In terms of religious conversion, this five-stage model examines the contexts which facilitate the transitional stages of religious change.

In summary, since there is a close link between culture and faith, a change of faith always requires from the converts some level of cultural adaptation and/or assimilation to the new tradition. Anthropological approaches provide tools for us in the present work to study the transition from Christianity to Buddhism, which is a transition from a theistic tradition to a mainly non-theistic system. Of the three anthropological theories presented above, only acculturation theory is applicable for this study, given that it assists us with identifying cultural factors that facilitate conversion and it also illuminates our understanding of how converts have adapted to the new culture and its practices.

### 3.3 An Overview of the *Holistic Model of Conversion*

It is clear from the above review of scholarly theories that conversion is indeed a very complex phenomenon crossing many boundaries of human experience (and thus scholarly disciplines). While all the theories provide useful insights about conversion, one may question to what extent any one model may be exclusively employed in our investigation of the “why” and “how” and “consequences” of Buddhist conversion in Australia. One way in which aspects of the various theorizations may be put to effective use is by incorporating the *holistic model* and the *stage model* proposed by Rambo in his book *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993).<sup>398</sup> The *holistic model* comprises cultural, social, personal and religious systems which correspond to the four disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology and religious studies.<sup>399</sup> To differing extents, each component plays a part in the phases of the *stage model*. The stage model is sequentially presented as context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction,

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<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>398</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 7-11.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*

commitment and consequences (to be discussed shortly). Obviously, Rambo views conversion as a process of change over time rather than as a self-enclosed event, and he suggests that each stage of conversion must be examined in the light of the aforementioned four components of the holistic model. So, before I elaborate on Rambo's stages of conversion, let us articulate how Rambo's components of the holistic model relate to the present study.

### ***Culture***

Culture, which may be defined as "a manifestation of human creativity and a powerful force in the shaping and renewal of individuals, groups, and societies,"<sup>400</sup> plays an important role in studying and understanding conversion. Myths, rituals, symbols, language and values are embedded in culture. By examining phenomena such as rites of passage, ritual, myths and symbols, anthropologists provide some insights into the cultural impact of conversion and the way culture impedes or facilitates religious change. The cultural context in which this study takes place is Australia, which was once a predominantly Anglo-Celtic, Western and Christian society. In the post-WW2 era, its cultural and religious landscape has markedly changed. Contemporary Australia is an increasingly multicultural and multi-religious/spiritual society. However, despite this change, Western and Christian values still dominate sociocultural and political structures. Meanwhile, Buddhism in Australia is known as both a philosophy and religion of the East. Officially, it is a minority religion, but one which has been able to attract a growing number of converts from Christianity. In this study, the role played by both "Western/Christian" and "Eastern/Buddhist" cultural factors in the process of conversion are examined.

### ***Society***

In examining and studying conversion, sociologists take into consideration the social and institutional aspects of traditions, the interaction between individuals and their environments, the relationships between individuals, and the social conditions at the time of conversion. As discussed above, sociological theorists of conversion develop their theories based on two main approaches, the passive and the active. Both these approaches are deployed in this study to examine why and how conversions to Buddhism occur in Australia.

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<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



The passive approach helps identify and explore the causes of conversion; the active approach assists in understanding how conversion takes place.

### ***Person***

In psychological studies of conversion, individual's thoughts, feelings and actions are the foci of exploration. These investigations consider conversion as the "transformation of the self, consciousness, and experience, in both subjective and objective aspects."<sup>401</sup> Conversion is examined from different perspectives: psychoanalysts focus on internal emotional dynamics; behaviourists observe a person's behaviour; humanistic and transpersonal psychologists examine processes of self-realization; and social and cognitive psychologists study the impact of interpersonal and intellectual influences on individuals and groups. The present study explores personal changes and/or the transformation of individuals as a result of their conversion from Christianity to Buddhism. Bearing in mind that conversion is personal, the interview questions (discussed below) have been designed to examine personal conversion stories with the aim of disclosing and considering a number of the individual's reasons, processes, prospects and challenges of conversion.

### ***Religion***

Religious studies scholars of conversion focus on the religious expectations, experiences and worldviews of converts. According to this approach, "the purpose of conversion is to bring people into relationship with the divine and provide them with a new sense of meaning and purpose."<sup>402</sup> Therefore, "conversion is essentially theological and spiritual."<sup>403</sup> This entails that the meanings, significance and goals of conversion are also religious and spiritual. Rambo warns that any approach that denies the spiritual dimension and neglects to integrate religious dimensions into the analysis of conversion – including religious ideology, symbols, rituals and institutions – falls short in appreciating the convert's experience, which may result in an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon. In examining conversions from Christianity to Buddhism, this study takes on board Rambo's warning. Christianity is a faith-

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<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*

based, theistic religion, while Buddhism is often understood and experienced as a non-theistic way of life or philosophy. Christian philosophies, theologies, religiosities and spiritualities typically differ markedly from Buddhist philosophies, theologies, religiosities and spiritualities. One of the aims of this study is to examine converts' understandings of these differences.

### ***History***

In addition to the four dimensions of culture, society, person and religion, Rambo also proposes that studies of conversion should incorporate a historical dimension in their analyses, given that "converts may have different motives at different times in a particular historical context" and that "the conversion process is different under different historical circumstances."<sup>404</sup> As the first two chapters showed, Buddhism in the West generally and Australia specifically has developed in the context of changing historical conditions and events, from international warfare to technological innovation.

### **3.4 An Overview of the *Stage Model of Conversion***

Rambo states: "a stage model is appropriate [for understanding conversion] in that conversion is a process of change over time."<sup>405</sup> This model therefore takes into account factors like the context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences of conversion.

### ***Context***

Context, according to Rambo, is more than a stage of conversion: it is "the total environment in which conversion transpires."<sup>406</sup> It affects the whole process of transformation and influences other stages of conversion. It includes cultural, social, personal and religious dimensions, and provides contextual factors that create opportunities or obstacles for conversion. Rambo identifies two types of context: the macro-context, which he names "The

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<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Big Picture,” and the micro-context or “Local Setting.”<sup>407</sup> While the macro-context is the totality of cultural, social, religious, political, economic and ecological environment, the micro-context refers to the immediate world of a person’s family, friends, ethnic group, religious community and neighbourhood. All these factors can either facilitate or obstruct conversion. By exploring and analysing Australian socio-cultural and multi-religious contexts, the study will be able to better understand the phenomenon of conversion from a macro-contextual perspective; however, for a more thorough understanding, the research also engages with questions regarding the convert’s family, friends, ethnic group and religious community. Kathleen Gerson and Ruth Horowitz, for example, note that while macro-social trends provide a starting-point for formulating a research problem, micro-social processes are required to be identified and examined in order to better interpret the lives of individuals.<sup>408</sup>

### ***Crisis***

Most scholars of conversion agree that in the process of conversion some form of crisis – be it cultural, political, psychological or religious – often/usually precedes conversion. However, it has also been recognized that “crisis” should be understood in variegated, nuanced ways, for the “precise nature of crisis will vary from person to person and from situation to situation.”<sup>409</sup> Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of the “why” of conversions, Rambo suggests that the nature of the various crises that might lead to conversion must be carefully examined and assessed.<sup>410</sup> Rambo also discusses two basic issues in the crisis stage of conversion, namely, the contextual issues, and the degree of activity or passivity of the convert. Regarding the contextual issue, Rambo argues that conversion to a culturally dominant religion is different from that which occurs when the religion is a minority (as is the case for Christian converts to Buddhism in Australia). Similarly, the degree of activity or

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<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>408</sup> Kathleen Gerson and Ruth Horowitz, “Observation and Interviewing: Options and Choices in Qualitative Research,” in *Qualitative Research in Action*, ed. Tim May (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 199-224, 201.

<sup>409</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 48.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

passivity of the potential convert in the process of conversion may depend on their knowledge of and familiarity with the religion.<sup>411</sup>

One of the objectives of the current project is to find out why Australian Christians have been converting to Buddhism. In the interviews with converts, I seek to retrieve their understanding and experiences of their former religious tradition, as well as the circumstances that led to their conversion. The key question here is to identify the “point of crisis” which worked as a trigger for the converts to leave their faith tradition and search for a new one. Leaving one’s faith tradition is presumably a painful experience because it may also involve abandoning emotional bonds with one’s faith community (and sometimes families and friends) and foregoing a set of values, beliefs or a familiar way of living. Exploring these experiences is a key part of this study.

### ***Quest***

A quest is an ongoing process in which people seek to “maximize meaning and purpose in life, to erase ignorance, and to resolve inconsistency.”<sup>412</sup> It normally intensifies in times of crisis, when people tend to actively search for resources to resolve (especially existential) problems and stabilize their lives. Studying this element as part of the process of conversion will provide a clearer picture of the nature of Christian-to-Buddhist conversion in Australia.

Rambo identifies and discusses three factors with regard to the quest stage of conversion: response style, structural availability and motivational structures.<sup>413</sup> Response style differentiates “the person who reacts actively from one who responds passively to conversion.”<sup>414</sup> In the process of conversion, converts can be active, receptive, apathetic or passive. Structural availability refers to “the freedom of a person or persons to move from previous emotional, intellectual, and religious institutions, commitments, and obligations into new options.”<sup>415</sup> Finally, motivational structures involve a wide range of elements. Seymour

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<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

Epstein suggests that four basic human needs – experiencing pleasure and avoiding pain; the possession of a conceptual system; enhancing self-esteem; establishing and maintaining relationships – play big roles in motivation.<sup>416</sup> Adding to these four basic motivations, Rambo proposes two other motivational factors: power and transcendence.

This study examines the quest stage by asking various questions related to the factors earmarked by Rambo, such as: how converts came into contact with Buddhism; why they took Buddhism as the new faith tradition of their choice; whether they are satisfied with their new religious path; and what is their ultimate religious goal, and whether they have achieved it.

### ***Encounter***

Encounter is understood as an engagement between the advocate (the one who seeks to convert potential converts) and the potential convert. This is a complex and dynamic process which involves the whole life-world of the two parties. Rambo argues that the nature of the advocate – with their personal, professional and religious backgrounds, and their understandings, motivations and strategies – affects the conversion process. On the part of potential converts, Rambo cites the work of Keshari N. Sahay, who provides five variations which normally take place in the process of the encounter: cultural oscillation (making a commitment to the new religious tradition while maintaining some cultural traditional practices); scrutinization (becoming more aware of the conflict between belief systems); combination (mixing elements of different belief systems); indigenization (incorporating the new adopted tradition into the local way of doing things); and retroversion (re-evaluating and re-adopting certain old practices that had been suppressed).<sup>417</sup>

Buddhism is known as a non-missionary religion, meaning that there is no official advocacy of conversion (in contrast to Christianity and Islam). However, it is recognized that the influence and expansion of Buddhism to Western countries has taken different forms of “advocacy” via various means: Buddhist talks and meditation classes delivered by Buddhist lamas and

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<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>417</sup> Keshari N. Sahay, “The Impact of Christianity on the Uraon of the Chainpur Belt in Chotanagpur: An Analysis of Its Cultural Processes,” *American Anthropologist* 70 (1968): 923-942; cited in Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 99-101.

teachers; media reports on Buddhism-related events; visits of high-profile Buddhist figures, such as the Dalai Lama; and the publication of books. In this regard, the idea of conversion-related encounter in Australia may also take a different form to the traditional one. Rather than being only a direct contact between the advocate and the potential convert (as Rambo suggests), the encounter happens between the potential convert and various direct and indirect means of contact with the world of Buddhism.

### ***Interaction***

Interaction is the stage of the conversion process whereby potential converts “learn more about the teachings, life-styles, and expectations of the group, and are provided with opportunities, both formal and informal, to become more fully incorporated into it.”<sup>418</sup> In this interaction stage, Rambo suggests that the study of the nature of encapsulation processes is important. These processes include four dimensions of interaction: relationships, rituals, rhetoric and roles. Kinship and friendship networks are fundamental to either acceptance or rejection of conversion and are primary avenues of proselytizing. Rituals plays an important role, both in religious life and in the conversion process. They foster “the necessary orientation, the readiness of mind and soul to have a conversion experience, and it consolidates conversion after the initial experience... [and it] enables the potential and recent convert to begin to understand and embody the new way of life that conversion requires.”<sup>419</sup> A third dimension of interaction that helps us understand the nature of conversion is rhetoric. Rambo argues that people’s language styles change in the conversion process, and that the language of potential converts typically begins to change as they interact with a new group.<sup>420</sup> The linguistic system of conceptualization and interpretation, with its metaphors and symbols, works as a vehicle for the transformation of consciousness. Finally, the role of the potential convert is that of a student who learns about beliefs and behaviours that are expected in the group. The convert’s role combines and appropriates all the elements that make a new way of life, set of beliefs, and network of relationships crucial to conversion.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 102.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

The interaction stage is obviously crucial to the process of conversion because its four key features is fundamental to the process: experiencing new/existing relationships, enacting religious/spiritual rituals; transforming their language; and performing their roles as new converts.<sup>422</sup> These four dimensions of interaction will thus be applied and studied here.

### ***Commitment***

Commitment is the most crucial stage in the conversion process. According to Rambo, commitment consists of five elements: decision-making, rituals, surrender, testimony and motivational reformulation. Decision-making is an integral part of commitment which can be both joyful and painful. The joy of leading a new life and of a new feeling of freedom can be an enriching experience. Decision-making can also be an experience of intense and painful confrontation with the self. It implies a turning-away from the past to a new future, from an old group and/or system of beliefs to a new group and/or system of beliefs. Rambo asserts that decision-making is not merely an internal process but also an experience of social interaction with friends and families.<sup>423</sup>

Rituals have been recognized by scholars as a powerful part of conversion. They are an explicit, experiential process whereby converts let go of the old and take on the new. Rituals also play a role in attracting converts. This process is called “bridge-burning events” which “provide the individual with powerful subjective experiences that confirm the ideology of the group and transform the convert’s self-image.”<sup>424</sup>

Making a commitment in the process of conversion also requires a great sense of “surrender.” According to a Christian understanding of conversion, surrenders involves a “turning point away from the old life and the beginning of a new life, produced not by one’s own controlling volition but by the power of God’s grace.”<sup>425</sup> Surrender involves several elements: a desire for surrender; a conflict between a need for self-control and a desire for surrender and

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<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

transformation; a “giving up” or “giving in”; a resolution of conflict that results in an experience of liberation; and a continual commitment.

Giving personal testimony of one’s conversion is known as a common way of publicly making a commitment to one’s new faith community, indicating the convert’s appropriateness for inclusion in the group. This narrative witness of a person’s conversion, according to Rambo, comprises two interacting processes: language transformation and biographical reconstruction.<sup>426</sup> The convert learns to give witness by listening to others’ testimonies, gradually beginning to perceive their own life within the community’s common perspective. By telling their own stories in the form of testimony, converts demonstrate their language transformation and biographical reconstruction. With this two-fold process, Rambo contends that the motivation for conversion – which can be multiple, complex and changing – is reinforced.<sup>427</sup>

In short, commitment is an integral and complex part of conversion, which can be either long-term or short-term, depending on “the degree of connection the person feels with the new group, as opposed to the degree of emotional connection he or she feels outside the group.”<sup>428</sup>

### ***Consequences***

The assessment of the consequences of conversion can be both descriptive and normative. Rambo, however, emphasizes that “evaluations, whether from theological orientations or from human sciences, are normative” and that “in the field of conversion studies, assessments are always made from a values orientation.”<sup>429</sup> Conversion can have sociocultural, historical, psychological and theological consequences. Converts may have undergone several significant experiences of transformation in the process of conversion. They establish a new, close relationship with “the transcendent” (the divine); they experience relief from guilt; they gain a sense of mission and a reason for living; they find new “family”

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<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-141.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.



or “community”; they identify/create a new self-image and a new worldview emerges; and the beginning of a long journey of transformation begins. This study includes an evaluation of conversion experiences by exploring both positive and negative experiences. In doing so, I have aimed to gain some insights into the theological implication of conversion as understood in both Christian and Buddhist teachings.

In short, conversion is a complex process that involves “a series of elements that are interactive and cumulative over time.”<sup>430</sup> The stage model proposed by Rambo is believed to deal with multidimensional aspects of conversion and is “process oriented.”<sup>431</sup> This model treats conversion as a process with sequential stages, which is suggested as a strategy for collecting and organizing complex data. In this study, the stage model has been applied to the data that were collected through interviews with converts to Buddhism (discussed in Chapter Four).

### 3.5 Types of Conversion

According to Rambo, there are five types of conversion: apostasy or defection; intensification; affiliation; institutional transition; and tradition transition. In his view, this typology, “portrays the nature of conversion in terms of *how far someone has to go socially and culturally in order to be considered a convert.*”<sup>432</sup> *Apostasy or defection* depicts a loss of faith or leaving a group, constituting an important form of change, both individually and collectively. The change in the type of apostasy, however, does not mean embracing a new faith system but rather the adoption of a non-religious system. *Intensification* revitalizes converts’ commitment to a faith, making it a central focus of their lives. There is no change of faith system or tradition. Rather, there is a re-orientation in terms of revitalizing and intensifying one’s own faith. The third type of conversion, *affiliation*, is the movement that converts make from no or minimal religious commitment to full commitment with an institution or community of faith. With *institutional transition*, an individual or a group moves from one community to another within a major faith tradition. This type of conversion occurs when, for example, a Christian changes their affiliation from one Christian denomination to another. Finally, the fifth type of

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<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

conversion, *tradition transition*, is the movement of an individual or a group from one religious tradition to another. According to Rambo, this was the most dominant type of conversion during the European colonial expansion, and it is prominent in cross-cultural and conflict contexts.<sup>433</sup> With this type of conversion, converts completely leave their original/previous faith to embrace a new faith with its belief system, values and practices, and obtain a new identity in a new religious community. This conversion therefore normally involves certain preparations according to the requirements of the new faith tradition and then an initiation rite to mark a complete transition. My thesis relates directly to this last type of conversion, given that it examines the conversions of Australians with Christian backgrounds to Buddhism.

Rambo's classification, however, is missing an important type of conversion called dual/double or multiple religious belonging. This type of conversion has become increasingly popular in the West, and it has recently caught the attention of scholars such as Catherine Cornille, Paul Knitter, Peter Phan, Claude Geffré and others.<sup>434</sup> While this is a relatively new concept in the West, dual or multiple religious belonging is not a new phenomenon or practice in the East. Belonging to more than one tradition has been a common practice for a long time in countries such as China, Japan, India, Sri Lanka and Nepal.<sup>435</sup> In China, people practice Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism as ways of life. Similarly, in Japan, people identify themselves both as Shintoists and Buddhists without perceiving any contradiction or conflict.<sup>436</sup> Historically, dual/multiple religious belonging was a common form of life for early Christians who followed both the new faith and maintained their Jewish tradition and practices. For them, their religious reality did not cause any theological or practical tension, as seems to be suggested by the following verse from the Book of Acts: "Day by day, they

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<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>434</sup> Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002); Cornille, "Introduction: The Dynamics of Multiple Belonging," in *Many Mansions?*, 1-6.; Paul F. Knitter, "A 'Hypostatic Union' of Two Practices But One Person," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 32 (2012): 19-26; Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Croydon: Oneworld Publications, 2013); Peter C. Phan, "Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church," *Theological Studies* 64.3 (2003): 495-519; Claude Geffré, "Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion," in *Many Mansions?*, 93-105.

<sup>435</sup> Cornille, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>436</sup> Jan Van Bragt, "Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People," in *Many Mansions?*, 7-19.

spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home” (Acts 2:46). And we recall that the Council of Jerusalem did not rule out Jewish practices. For various reasons, it was only towards the end of the first century that Christianity defined itself as a religious entity distinct and separate from Judaism.<sup>437</sup>

Due to monotheistic traditions’ claims of absolute and exclusive truth demanding single-minded commitment from their members, the phenomenon of dual/multiple religious belonging presents itself as a serious problem for monotheistic religions.<sup>438</sup> On this point, Cornille argues that “most religious traditions expect a total and unique commitment, if not from the followers at large, at least from their specialists or spiritual elite.”<sup>439</sup> She argues that many Chinese people, for example, may practice Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism simultaneously, but scholars or monks of each of these traditions are expected to show single-minded commitment to their own tradition. That, however, is not the case with monotheistic religions. Most of them demand total and single-minded commitment from all of their followers. Within this kind of context, dual/multiple religious belonging certainly encounters a number of problems.

Examining the components of “double” and “multiple” within the concept of religious belonging, Peter C. Phan characterizes double belonging as the fruit of a paradigmatic shift in the theology of religions and of enculturation, whereby a Christian, for example, adopts the beliefs and practices of another religion, such as Buddhism. By contrast, multiple belonging is a contemporary, postmodern form of syncretism, whereby a person appropriates elements from various religions as if they were goods in a supermarket.<sup>440</sup> For Geffré, multiple belonging refers to a typically Western situation, while dual belonging is an outcome of the encounter of Christianity with non-Western cultures and religious traditions.<sup>441</sup>

The present research focuses only on dual/double belonging which, according to Gideon Goosen, describes a situation “when a person has a first major religion and draws on a second

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<sup>437</sup> Phan, “Multiple Religious Belonging,” 504-505.

<sup>438</sup> Cornille, “Introduction,” 1-2.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>440</sup> Phan, “Multiple Religious Belonging,” 497.

<sup>441</sup> Geffré, “Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion,” 93.

to a greater or lesser degree according to the three criteria of doctrine, practices and actions.”<sup>442</sup> In Goosen’s opinion, we are only enculturated once,<sup>443</sup> with the result that one’s original religion remains dominant while the other expresses itself in a minor key.<sup>444</sup> Rose Drew holds the same view, but instead of discussing dual belonging in terms of dominant and minor religions, she discusses the dynamic between the two in terms of primary religious adherence onto which another is later grafted.<sup>445</sup> Knitter, on the other hand, argues that each tradition remains distinctly identifiable for dual believers, and that there is no primacy: “I am constantly translating Christian into Buddhist and Buddhist into Christian, but in what feels like a natural flow back and forth, like a conversation.”<sup>446</sup> He also seeks to appropriate Christ’s double belonging for Christian-Buddhists. Jesus, according to Knitter, “was a double believer, not religiously, in two different traditions, but ontologically, in two different kinds of being... so too a double believer can be understood as one person acting both Buddhistically and Christianly.”<sup>447</sup> Dual believers live two very different spiritual operational principles which “come together in a single *hypostasis* or person but without being confused or changed or divided or separated, for the property of each [tradition] is preserved.”<sup>448</sup> Given that the present work seeks to investigate Christian-to-Buddhist conversion in Australia, the study will determine to what extent dual belonging is a dimension of this phenomenon.

In summary, Rambo offers five types of conversion: from no faith to one faith; from one faith to another; from one denomination to another; from light commitment to high commitment within one faith; or from one faith to multiple faiths. Among these five types, *tradition transition* applies to this research, given that it studies converts’ transition from one faith (Christianity) to another faith/spiritual tradition (Buddhism). To determine whether this kind of transition has occurred with the study’s respondents, the research attempts to ascertain

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<sup>442</sup> Gideon Goosen, *Hyphenated Christians: Towards a Better Understanding of Dual Religious Belonging* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 19.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>445</sup> Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011), 3.

<sup>446</sup> Knitter, “A ‘Hypostatic Union’ of Two Practices But One Person,” 20.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*

whether/to what extent a change of faith/tradition really occurred. Additionally, the research is interested in whether/to what extent double religious belonging applies to any respondents. In terms of this particular question, the investigation seeks to determine how converts have practically integrated and/or resolved differences and conflicts emerging from belonging to two somewhat competing traditions.

### 3.6 Conversion Motifs

While Rambo provides a typology to help understand different kinds of conversion, John Lofland and Norman Skonovd propose an approach called “conversion motifs” to explain experiences of each type of religious conversion. They specify six types of conversion motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive.<sup>449</sup>

The *intellectual* mode of conversion, also known as self-conversion, is a mode of conversion where candidates play an active role in searching and seeking for an alternative source of personal fulfilment. They may have little social interactions and involvement, with no or low social pressure but with a high level of emotion. Typically, their beliefs are acquired before they participate in any religious rituals and organizations. The experience of this conversion may be characterized as “illumination [revelation]”<sup>450</sup> Lofland and Skonovd observe that this conversion mode is increasing in the West due to the privatized nature of religions (religion is increasingly considered as a private practice) in Western societies. This may hold some truth for conversions of Christians to Buddhism in a Western society like Australia, as Buddhism also accommodates an individualist approach of practice in the West.

The *mystical* mode conversion is a prototypical and ideal type of conversion in the Christian world. The well-known story of Saint Paul the Apostle is an example. This conversion is generally sudden, traumatic and sometimes characterized by hallucinations, visions or voices. Many previous scholars of conversion, such as William James, Edwin Starbuck, Elmer Clark

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<sup>449</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” 375.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

and others tend to focus heavily on this type of conversion.<sup>451</sup> It is typically marked with little or no social pressure, an extremely high level of emotion, a short duration, and it is sometimes interwoven with ecstasy, awe, fear and/or love.

The *experimental* mode of conversion has been recognized as “a major avenue of conversion in the twentieth century because of greater religious freedom and a multiplicity of available religious experiences.”<sup>452</sup> In this motif of conversion, potential converts have the freedom to take the time to “try-it-out” by themselves or have a “show-me” mentality in approaching a respective religion. Experiential conversions are generally characterized by low social pressure, a low level of emotional arousal, and take a long period of time, often accompanied by the experience of curiosity.<sup>453</sup> This motif is not unique to any religious or idealized contexts. However, it is commonly found practised among New Age movements or quasi-scientific religious groups which encourage the potential convert “to take nothing on faith but to try the theology, ritual, and organization for themselves and discover if the system is true.”<sup>454</sup> The “try-it-out-yourself” approach is highly applicable regarding conversions to Buddhism in the West, including Australia. My interviews reveal that many respondents were motivated by and appreciative of this mode of freedom and autonomy. They did not feel any pressure from Buddhist practitioners or teachers with whom they associated in the process of acquiring and learning. Becoming Buddhists was a decision which came as a result of the seekers’ soul-searching, committed learning and practising.

The *affectional* motif of conversion was first identified by John Lofland and Rodney Stark in their essay “Becoming a World-Saver” (1965),<sup>455</sup> which was then widely adopted and

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<sup>451</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; Edwin D. Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness*, 3rd ed, New York: Walter Scott, 1911 [1899]; Elmer Clark, *The Psychology of Religious Awakening* (New York: Macmillan, 1929); cf. Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” 377.

<sup>452</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 15.

<sup>453</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” 378-379.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>455</sup> Lofland and Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver”; also refer to Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” 15.

developed by scholars of conversion in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>456</sup> This motif shows strong personal attachment and liking by the potential converts for the practising believers, while the cognitive element is de-emphasized. As the affection is primarily central for this type of conversion, social pressure can be present in the form of support, and beliefs are appropriated after a long period of association and participation. This motif appeared in my interviews, though it was not as strong as the experiential motif. Most of my respondents lived in country towns where they shared a high level of social and personal contacts. Some of them were co-workers. A few respondents were attracted to Buddhism after meeting or seeing Buddhist monks in person or on social media, especially the Dalai Lama.

The *revivalist* motif of conversion occurs in contexts where the emotional pressure of crowd conformity is used to induce behaviour and to promote beliefs. Powerfully emotional music and preaching are effective means used to arouse prospective converts' emotional experiences. This conversion motif has become less prominent in the twentieth century and today than it was in the nineteenth century.<sup>457</sup> However, William G. McLaughlin asserted in 1978 that there are "apparent revivalist 'waves' of recurrence in spite of the long-term decline of the conversion motif in Western societies."<sup>458</sup> With the emergence of the "new religions" in the early 1970s, this conversion motif was resurrected by the Unification Church and continues to be applied in other Pentecostal churches in the modern world.<sup>459</sup> There was no sign of a revivalist motif found in my interviews.

The *coercive* motif of conversion is the fifth one proposed by Lofland and Skonovd. This mode of conversion is believed to be relatively rare due to specific conditions required for such conversions to occur. Synonyms for this motif include "brainwashing," "programming," "mind control," "coercive persuasion," "thought reform" and "menticide." Conversions often occur

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<sup>456</sup> Heirich, "Change of Heart,"; Thomas Robbins *et al.*, "Theory and Research on Today's New Religions," *Sociological Analysis* 39 (1978

4): 39-122; David Snow and Cynthia Philips, "The Lofland-Stark Model: A Critical Reassessment," *Social Problems* 27 (1980), 430-447; Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith," *American Journal of Sociology* 86.6 (1980): 1376-1395.

<sup>457</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 15.

<sup>458</sup> Cited in Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 381.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*

under intense pressure: converts are unable to resist, surrendering to the group's ideology. The process may involve physical torture and psychological terror in order for the group to gain control over the person's life. This conversion motif was not found in my interviews.

In summary, the conversion motifs model is an important contribution to the study of religious conversion. It helps identify "the different experiences, themes, and goals of various types of conversion."<sup>460</sup> It provides a platform for researchers to build their investigative frameworks. However, Lofland and Skonovd also admit that this model is "quite narrow in the sense that it adduces types but does not go on to delineate steps, phases or process within each type."<sup>461</sup> In a same line of thinking, Rambo contends that no model is normative and that there is a range of types of conversion.

### **3.7 Christian Understandings of Conversion**

The Christian understanding of conversion is based mainly on two sources, scriptures/the Bible and theological speculations which are reflections of the lived experiences of faith in light of the Bible. This section explores how the scriptures present conversion and how theologians speak about religious conversion.

#### **3.7.1 Biblical Understandings of Conversion**

There are three main words in the Bible which refer to the concept of conversion: the Hebrew word *shubh* in the Old Testament (OT), and the Greek words *epistrephein* and *metanoein* in the New Testament (NT). While *shubh* means to turn from one thing or direction to another thing or direction or to turn back to God in the context of covenant, *epistrephein* means to turn or to turn around with movements or changes of place, and *metanoein* means to repent or to change one's mind. Basically, the key meaning of these words is turning and change. Both the OT and NT, according to George E. Morris and Ronald D. Witherup, signify conversion as a turning which involves a turning from sin, evil and godlessness to God and God's grace.<sup>462</sup> Witherup explains:

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<sup>460</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 16.

<sup>461</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 383.

<sup>462</sup> George E. Morris, *The Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1981); Ronald D. Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994).



As in the OT, the root idea is clearly a turning. There is always movement in conversion.... Conversion always involves a turning, whether a turning from something or someone to something or someone... The general NT sense of conversion... involves turning away from sin, evil and godlessness and turning toward God, Jesus and a righteous life.<sup>463</sup>

There are two phases in the biblical understanding of conversion. Firstly, the turning movement in the biblical understanding of conversion is a response to God's invitation; God takes the initiative in inviting sinners to abandon their sinful ways of life and to accept God's grace by changing their life to live in harmony with God, with oneself and with community. According to Morris, biblical conversion involves a response to God's grace, a fundamental reorientation of one's life both in personal and communal perspectives, and a life-long process of commitment.<sup>464</sup> This understanding places God's initiative as the primary action and sinners' response as the secondary action.

Secondly, biblical conversion signifies a threefold change which involves an alteration of past behaviour, a rejection of past convictions, and a transformation in the understanding of and relationships with the world and God.<sup>465</sup> These aspects of conversion indicate a radical change which leads to "life transformation" as a result of a response to "a call to return, promising a restoration of the original intimate relationship between God and humanity in creation."<sup>466</sup> About this transformation, Gaiser writes: "Studies show that this structure of transformation permeates the entire Old Testament. Nor is it left behind in the movement to the New Testament – the title of which is a Christian confession that the decisive transformation or conversion of the world has taken place."<sup>467</sup> This understanding of conversion emphasizes transformation as the aim or objective of conversion.

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<sup>463</sup> Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 21.

<sup>464</sup> Morris, *The Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion*, 37.

<sup>465</sup> Beverly. R. Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 10-12; Beverly. R. Gaventa, "Conversion in the Bible," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1992), 41-54, 41-43, 53-54.

<sup>466</sup> Frederick. J. Gaiser, "A Biblical Theology of Conversion," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 93-107, 107.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*

Let us now examine how the two books of the Bible, namely the Old Testament and the New Testament, present their views on conversion. According to Dom Marc-Francois Lacan, the OT as a whole can be viewed as a story of conversion which has close associations with God's grace.<sup>468</sup> God's chosen people kept moving away from God to live in the darkness of sin by worshiping idols, but God was faithful and merciful in inviting them to come back and live in light. Conversion became necessary when people either individually or collectively strayed, turned their back to God and lived unjustly. God always took the initiative by calling them back. He called Adam after he ate of the forbidden fruit: "Adam, where are you?" (Gen 3:9), and he also called the people of Israel "Turn again, then, to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and always put your trust in your God" (Hos 12:6). In the OT context, conversion is obviously understood as a response to God's grace and initiative.<sup>469</sup>

God's invitation to conversion in the First Testament most often involves two dimensions, namely a vertical relationship, where people turn away from God and his covenant to worship foreign gods or idols, and a horizontal relationship, where people live unjustly in the sight of God by abusing or exploiting others for their own benefit. Illustrative of the former case is the attitude of Israel as God's chosen people throughout its early history in the Exodus and during the times of Kings and the prophets. It is more or less a constant theme throughout the OT. The Book of Exodus 32:8 states that "It did not take them long to stray from the way which I prescribed for them." We find a similar claim in Deuteronomy 9:24 ("You have rebelled against Yahweh since the day he first knew you"), Isaiah 1:4 ("They have abandoned Yahweh, despised the Holy One of Israel"), Amos 4:6 ("And you have not returned to me, oracle of Yahweh"), and Jeremiah 2:11 ("Does a nation change its gods? – and these are not gods at all! Yet my people have exchanged their Glory for what has no power in it.")

The second OT dimension of conversion involves injustice that is inflicted on others, especially the poor, the widows and the orphans, and particularly by those who were given power to govern, or those who were in leadership. Abusing power, being unjust and exploiting others are considered acts against God. King David, who did not only take Uriah's wife but also

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<sup>468</sup> Dom Marc-François Lacan, "Conversion and Grace in the Old Testament," in *Conversion*, ed. Walter E. Conn, (New York: Alba House, 1978), 75-96.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

caused Uriah's death, is a clear example of this type of turning away from God. However, after God sent the Prophet Nathan to declare God's punishment, David acknowledged the committed injustice, repented and converted back to God (2 Sam).

The New Testament, especially the Synoptic Gospels, portray conversion as a response to Jesus Christ's invitation to repent or to change oneself and to accept the good news of the Kingdom of God (Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15; Lk 15:11-32). Repenting and accepting the kingdom of God, according to Dom Marc-François Lacan, "demands of sinful man a profound conversion" known as *metanoia*, which is about "an interior transformation which blossoms out in a change of conduct, in a new orientation of life, a spiritual or moral about face."<sup>470</sup> Conversion in the Second Testament is therefore an act of faith: to be converted means to believe in the good news proclaimed by Jesus, openness of heart to God's grace, and a humble attitude to acknowledge one's sinfulness. In other words, to have a complete conversion, one needs to "reshape one's thoughts, refashion one's conducts, completely transform one's life and make one his [Jesus's or God's] witness."<sup>471</sup>

Various gospels emphasize different aspects of conversion. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus turns the community of those who believe in him into, as Lacan states, "a missionary community whose witness arouses the conversion of men of all nations."<sup>472</sup> Matthew presents the fruit of conversion as the proclamation of Christian Justice, and "this justice is nothing other than a permanent conversion."<sup>473</sup> Conversion is therefore for Lacan "not an act to be done once and for all";<sup>474</sup> instead, it is an ongoing process which will manifest itself in one's relation with one's neighbour, which needs to emulate the merciful and forgiving relationship of God towards everyone (Mt 5:48). In this sense, the whole of Christian life can be considered a conversion which involves believing in Jesus Christ and witnessing to the values of the Kingdom of God by acts of compassion to others.

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<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, 97, 100.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

The Gospel of Mark, according to Richard Peace, portrays the conversions of the twelve apostles as a gradual and on-going process involving responses to Jesus' invitation via their faith, repentance and discipleship.<sup>475</sup> Peace also contrasts the gradual conversion of the Twelve in Mark with that of St Paul as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, the latter document depicting Paul's conversion as a sudden, dramatic and instant one. Analysing Paul's conversion narrative, Peace construes a pattern which he wishes to construe as a prototypical three-step model of Christian conversion, namely, insight, turning and transformation. Insight is illustrated by Paul's realization that persecuting Christians means persecuting Jesus and going against God; Paul's change from persecuting the Church to joining the Church, from opposing Jesus to following Jesus, is illustrative of turning; and finally, transformation can be seen in the radical change of Paul's life, who through baptism went from being a persecutor of the Church and a zealous Pharisee to being a member of the Church and a zealous apostle proclaiming the good news to the Gentiles.

The Gospel of Luke focuses more on the joy of conversion and on the universality of salvation. God's love manifests itself through sending Jesus into the world to call sinners to conversion (Lk 5:32). Conversion and renunciation are necessary conditions for salvation to be universal. The source of conversion and salvation in the Gospel of Luke, according to Lacan, is the mercy of the Father: "It is this mercy which kindles our conversion by filling us with divine joy, thus making us capable of every renunciation."<sup>476</sup> This mercy again demands converts to be merciful to their neighbours. Similarly, studying stories of conversion in the Gospel of Luke,<sup>477</sup> Fernando Mendez Moratalla proposes a Lukan paradigm of conversion as a result of God's mercy and a human's response: it is God's initiative revealed in Jesus' reaching out to sinners to invite them to come back to God; the repentant turns back to God and accepts God's

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<sup>475</sup> Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>476</sup> Lacan, "Conversion and Kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels," 113.

<sup>477</sup> The preaching of John the Baptist (Lk 3:1-17); the conversion of Levi (Lk 5:27-32); the conversion of a woman of the city (Lk 7:36-49); a parable of conversion of the lost son (Lk 15:11-32); the conversion of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10); the conversion of the criminal (Lk 23:39-43); and the non-conversion of a ruler (Lk 18:18-30).

forgiveness; converts are resolved to make proper use of material wealth and to join the table fellowship; and they become disciples of Jesus.<sup>478</sup>

Conversion in both the OT and NT emphasizes God's initiative in inviting people to maintain their faithful covenant with God by worshiping only one God and by living justly with their neighbours. The difference between the two Testaments is the motive of conversion. Charles Curran claims that conversion in the OT is motivated by fear of punishment that would be inflicted if conversion did not take place, while conversion in the NT is motivated by the good news of God's love made present for God's people.<sup>479</sup>

While presenting the call to conversion as God's grace, the OT emphasizes threats of punishment for the sins people committed against God but who refused to come back to God. This applies at the nation and individual level. For example, for the nation's sin, the wrath of God was prophesied through the prophet: "On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon.... I will turn your feast into mourning.... They will wander from sea to sea, from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it" (Amos 8:9-12). And again: "I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm'" (Zeph 1:12).

The same threat of punishment was also prophesied to individual sinners. After King David committed sin by killing Uriah to take his wife Bathsheba, the word of God delivered by prophet Nathan states: "Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour..." (2 Sam 12:11). After receiving God's message, David repented. Similarly, to King Solomon who turned his heart from the Lord by worshipping foreign gods, the Lord stated: "Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant.... Then the Lord raised up an adversary against Solomon..." (1 Kings 11:11-14).

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<sup>478</sup> Fernando Mendez-Moratalla, *The Paradigm of Conversion in Luke* (New York: T. and T. Clark, 2004), 216-222.

<sup>479</sup> Charles E. Curran, "Conversion: The Central Moral Message of Jesus," in *Conversion*, ed. Walter E. Conn, 225-245, 228.

In contrast to the First Testament, the Second emphasizes “the good news of God’s love made present for his people”<sup>480</sup> as conversion’s motive. God’s love is a gift that invites sinners to conversion which is described as a “joyful change of heart.”<sup>481</sup> The stories of conversion in the New Testament are therefore permeated with joy. For example, the Gospel of Luke highlights the story of the return of the Prodigal Son as a joyful celebration: “But we have to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and has been found” (Lk 15:32). Other stories, such as the lost sheep (Lk 15:3-7) and the lost coin (Lk 15:8-10), also highlight this spirit of joyful celebration.

In short, conversion in the biblical understanding is a divine grace that invites sinners to turn to God through faith to be transformed into the children of God. The First Testament portrays conversion as a “turning back to God” by living the covenant of worshipping only the God of Israel and by doing justice to others. In the New Testament, the transformation through conversion demands the converted to follow Jesus “in the way of humility by seeking only God’s glory, and in the way of love by being merciful to his/her neighbours.”<sup>482</sup>

### **3.7.2 Theological Perspectives of Conversion**

Theologically speaking, conversion is firstly understood in the aforementioned biblical sense as a turning from human sin to God’s grace. This means that God takes the initiative to invite a sinful human to come back to God, accept God’s unconditional love, and receive God’s merciful forgiveness. Like the biblical understanding of conversion, Christian theology also speaks primarily of conversion as God’s working grace that invites the sinful human to be connecting with God, accepting God’s grace, and transforming one’s relationships with oneself, others and God. Christian conversion is therefore a combination between God’s liberating and empowering grace and human effort to change one’s life – human willingness to participate in God’s transforming work to restore converts to God’s image.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>482</sup> Lacan, “Conversion and Kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels,” 118.

<sup>483</sup> Manfred Marquardt, “Christian Conversion: Connecting Our Lives with God,” in *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 99-111, 110.

Donald McKim defines conversion as “one’s turning or response to God’s call in Jesus Christ in faith and repentance.”<sup>484</sup> David W. Kling also places Jesus Christ at the centre of a conversion experience by claiming that conversion is “a turning, allegiance or commitment to Christ, in whom salvation is promised.”<sup>485</sup> These definitions of conversion reflect the New Testament concept of conversion, which suggests that conversion is a gift of God through which converts experience “new birth” and “new creation,” and are “born from above” or “born again.”

Paul Tillich also speaks about estrangement, grace and conversion, and explains that the experience of conversion involves cooperating with God’s grace to overcome estrangement – which is unbelief and self-centredness – and to establish good relationships with oneself, others and the divine.<sup>486</sup>

Similarly, Joseph Fuchs construes conversion as a turning away from the fundamental orientation to sin so as to commit oneself totally to the love of God.<sup>487</sup> This turning from sin towards the love of God, however, must be accomplished in a mode of self-realization, meaning that one is both aware of the tendencies to commit sins and willing to change and become a totally different person. Conversion in this sense is a constant disposition of oneself to the love of God. This so-called continual conversion, according to Fuchs, occurs in three different forms. The first form is radical neo-conversion, which is known as an intense commitment of oneself to the love of God. The second form involves the continuous verification of who one is and of one’s self-giving to God. The third form of continuous conversion is conversion from sin. In this way, conversion is a change in the whole person, which is made possible by the grace of conversion offered by Jesus Christ.<sup>488</sup>

Conversion as turning away from the sinful state to God’s grace and forgiveness, according to Karl Rahner, must be done in a fashion of total freedom: Conversion always “involves an act

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<sup>484</sup> Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, (1996), 62.

<sup>485</sup> Kling, “Conversion to Christianity,” 599.

<sup>486</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 44-59.

<sup>487</sup> Josef Fuchs, “Sin and Conversion,” in *Conversion*, ed. Walter E. Conn, 247-262, 256.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, 256-259.

of freedom as fundamental decision”<sup>489</sup> to respond to God’s call to leave the sinful life and receive God’s grace and forgiveness. The content of the call is a summon to receive God who makes it possible for the final liberation of sinful human beings. Therefore, conversion is experienced as the gift of God’s grace and as a radical and fundamental decision which transforms the entirety of life. It is a turning from one’s past life to embrace a new life where love for both God and neighbours is at the centre of one’s life. In addition, Rahner emphasizes the importance of pastoral aspects of conversion by suggesting that pastoral theology and practice should “cultivate more the art of spiritual initiation into this kind of personal experience of conversion,” and that more concern should go to the cultivation of personal and religious experience of the mystery.<sup>490</sup> This helps avoid the dangers of merely liturgical and sacramental legalism and conventionalism.

By examining the thirteen books of the *Confessions* of Augustine, Russell indicates that conversion in Augustine functioned on two formal levels, namely the supernatural and the human. Russell explains:

The supernatural concerned the individual’s affective or empathetic relationship to the Godhead, while the human concerned the words used to describe that relationship and the effects of that relationship on one’s life in the Church. The human aspect functioned within human nature and institutions and was validated by the supernatural dimension of the conversion experience.<sup>491</sup>

Russell also points out that the process of conversion as experienced by Augustine involves three themes: sin and its resulting misery; God’s initiation of the conversion process; and the perilous and incomplete nature of Augustine’s conversion.<sup>492</sup> Initially, Augustine experienced a sense of misery as a result of sin or a chain of bad habits which weighed him down and alienated him from God and even from himself. In this misery, God interrupted his despair by guiding him with God’s Words in the garden at Milan.<sup>493</sup> In his reflection, Augustine believed

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<sup>489</sup> Karl Rahner, “Conversion,” in *Conversion*, ed. Walter E. Conn, 203-211, 204.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, 207-208.

<sup>491</sup> Russell, “Augustine,” 14.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*



that God converted him to God and that God also converted him to himself.<sup>494</sup> However, his conversion was incomplete, “not an event fixed in time.”<sup>495</sup>

In terms of a theology of conversion, Augustine linked conversion with the ideas of creation and recreation, which leads to illumination as a work of the Triune God: “*conversio* replicates *creatio*” which is “now joined to *illuminatio*.”<sup>496</sup> Russell’s argument is that “Creation is only a beginning, a program rather than a complete process, for creatures remain alienated from God unless called by the Word to receive form,” and that “the miracle of conversion becomes possible because God formed humankind in his own image and likeness, such that within the human self there is the triad of being, knowing and willing that reflects, imperfectly and at a great distance, the Trinity.”<sup>497</sup> Conversion, therefore, according to Augustine, is a response of the soul to the Word which is found in the books of Scripture by turning to God through baptism known as the “second creation” in the Church as a necessary instrument of salvation.<sup>498</sup> In short, Augustine’s theology of creation, redemption and human history reflects a life-long journey of Christian conversion. Thus, Christian life is a journey of conversion.<sup>499</sup>

The second aspect of Christian conversion is the transformation that the converts experience in accepting God’s grace. Bernard Lonergan speaks of conversion as “a radical transformation on which follows, on all levels of living, an interlocked series of changes and developments.”<sup>500</sup> Lonergan argues that conversion has different dimensions: “A changed relation to God brings or follows changes that are personal, social, moral, and intellectual.”<sup>501</sup> Lonergan also classifies conversion into three types which he calls “dimensions of conversion”: intellectual, moral and religious.<sup>502</sup> While he understands intellectual conversion

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<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>500</sup> Lonergan, “Theology in Its New Context,” in *Conversion*, ed. W. E. Conn, 1-21, 13.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

as “a radical and, consequently, the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge,” he defines moral conversion involving changing “the criterion of one’s decisions and choices from satisfactions to values.”<sup>503</sup> Religious conversion is about being “grasped by ultimate concerns,” or about “other-worldly falling in love,” or about total and permanent self-surrendering “without conditions, qualifications, reservations.”<sup>504</sup> Lonergan believes that these three types of conversion are different yet interconnected, and they aim at bringing about self-transcendence.

Hans Küng understands conversion as *metanoia* which is “a decisive change of will, an awareness changed from the roots upwards, a new basic attitude, a different scale of values.”<sup>505</sup> Küng believes that God, by his Gospel and his forgiveness, makes conversion possible, and that with faith, a radical rethinking and re-turning on the part of the whole person, a completely new attitude is required of the converted. Therefore, the call to conversion is a call to joy. This always promises a better future for the convert. This is what Küng calls “God’s will,” which is “man’s well-being” at all levels.<sup>506</sup>

The third aspect of Christian conversion is to become a member of God’s family in the Church through baptism. Baptism is known as the primary Christian sacrament through which people are initiated into the Church. It is a formal religious rite or a symbolic action that “allows sacred reality to be present and immediate.”<sup>507</sup> It “speaks of repentance and forgiveness of sin” and calls for faith in Jesus Christ as well as personal and communal commitments in the community of faith.<sup>508</sup> The baptismal font symbolizes a tomb that signifies the passing from death into new life: the baptizand is immersed into the water as Jesus Christ was buried in the tomb, then is immersed from the water as Jesus Christ was raised from the tomb (Col

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<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-17.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>505</sup> Hans Küng, “Christian Conversion,” in *Conversion*, ed Walter E. Conn, 273-277, 274.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*, 274-275.

<sup>507</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 181.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189.

2:12; Romans 6:4). Through this symbolic action, converts experience a sense of passing-over and cleansing which brings about a “rebirth and transformation.”<sup>509</sup>

Donald L. Gelpi speaks of baptism as “an initial transition from unbelief to belief, from sin to the obedience of faith”<sup>510</sup> which certifies that the converts belong to God and publicly states that they have entered a covenant with God.<sup>511</sup> This change of life is called a “born again” experience which brings about God’s forgiveness, regeneration or rebirth, and justification of the soul or salvation.<sup>512</sup> Through baptism, converts are incorporated into Christ and the Christian community.<sup>513</sup>

Being incorporated into Christ and the Christian community, the converts are commissioned to witness the Kingdom of God in the world. In “Conversion and the Church,” Nikos A. Nissiotis states: “Conversion does not mean withdrawing from the world, but rather engaging converted people and the whole Church in a more dynamic and creative relationship with it. Conversion is not meant to be individual, but rather ecclesial in the sense that it is a cosmic event realized through persons who are members of a world-wide community.”<sup>514</sup>

Bernard Haring also views conversion as a close connection with the Kingdom of God which is the ecclesial community or the Church. For Haring, conversion is “a grateful and joyous acceptance of the kingdom of God as God wishes to establish it between the day of Pentecost and the Parousia.”<sup>515</sup> This interim time, from Pentecost till the Parousia, is always under the sign of conversion. Conversion is a necessity for the Kingdom. It requires therefore a

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<sup>509</sup> Thomas M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 255-257.

<sup>510</sup> Donald L. Gelpi, *The Conversion Experience: A Reflective Process for RCIA Participants and Others* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 101.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>512</sup> Peter Toon, *Born Again: A Biblical and Theological Study of Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 85.

<sup>513</sup> Ted A. Campbell, “Conversion and Baptism in Wesleyan Spirituality,” in *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition*, eds. Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 160-174, 161.

<sup>514</sup> Nikos A. Nissiotis, “Conversion and the Church,” *The Ecumenical Review* 19 (1967): 261-270, 268.

<sup>515</sup> Bernard Haring, “The Characteristics of Conversion,” in *Conversion*, ed. Walter E. Conn, 213-223, 216.

transformation of the heart, a happy turning to a new conviction, a life hidden in Christ, and a willing entering into the intentions of God towards the world and the earthly community.

According to Haring, conversion has both individual and ecclesiastical aspects. Accepting the Kingdom of God by each individual also means accepting the Church as a community of salvation in which one is delivered and with which one must act for the salvation of others.<sup>516</sup> The new life in each individual convert must grow in line with the growth of the Kingdom. To have a lasting, true and profound conversion, Haring believes, convert needs to be aware of their sin and the misery of being cut off from God. On this “great returning home” to God, as Haring calls it, or “the joyful returning to the Father” as Charles Curran expresses it, the readiness to do penance is a necessity.<sup>517</sup>

In an emancipatory theological key, Gustavo Gutierrez explores conversion in terms of the theology and spirituality of liberation, another dimension of the realization of the Kingdom of God. Inspired and guided by the Gospels, the theology and spirituality of liberation focus on the two-fold dimension of conversion: “a definite way of living before the Lord” and “in solidarity with all men.”<sup>518</sup> Gutierrez argues that our conversion to the Lord implies our conversion to our neighbours.<sup>519</sup> Conversion, therefore, means a radical transformation of oneself which entails “thinking, feeling and living as Christ-present in exploited and alienated man” and “committing oneself to the process of liberation of the poor and the oppressed.”<sup>520</sup> This process of conversion is permanent and affected by the socio-economic, political, cultural and human environment in which it occurs. Therefore, Gutierrez argues, no authentic conversion would happen if these structures are not changed. Like other authors, Gutierrez also views conversion as God’s gift or grace which is the source of Christian joy. This joy can be possible only when thoroughgoing liberation is obtained, which involves communion with God and with all others.<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>518</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, “A Spirituality of Liberation,” in *Conversion*, ed. Walter E. Conn, 307-313, 308.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 309-312.

## Summary

Conversion as understood in Christian biblical and theological terms is a radical transformation that brings personal, social, moral and intellectual changes. It is not an event but an ongoing process, involving God's grace given to sinful humans as a gift, a human willingness to accept the kingdom of God as the common goal for one's life, acceptance of the Church community as a means of salvation, and a turning away from sin so as to commit one's life to the love of God and neighbours. On the personal level, conversion is an experience of *metanoia*, a decisive and total change of will, of attitude and of values. This self-transcendence does not stop there but continues to lead one to a commitment to working for the liberation of all.

### 3.8 Buddhist Understandings of Conversion

Sangharakshita (the Englishman-turned-British monk who founded the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) realizes that, unlike systematic Christian studies of conversion, there has been so far no systematic study of conversion in Buddhism, and that the meaning of conversion in Buddhism is ironically "a simple matter, hardly worth studying."<sup>522</sup> In terms of the concept of conversion, like many scholars of conversion, Sangharakshita refers to the term as "turning around" which "involves a double movement: a movement away from something and also a movement towards something."<sup>523</sup> However, in the Buddhist framework of thinking, he specifies the religious meaning of conversion as "a turning from a lower to a higher way of life, from a worldly to a spiritual life."<sup>524</sup> For Sangharakshita, the experience of conversion is of primary importance "because it marks the beginning of our spiritual life."<sup>525</sup>

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<sup>522</sup> Sangharakshita, *The Meaning of Conversion in Buddhism* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1994), 15.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

In this section, I will look at three topics connected with Buddhist conversion: the conversion of the Buddha and his first converts; conversion as understood in different Buddhist schools; and different stages of Buddhist conversion.

### 3.8.1 The Story of the Buddha's Conversion

The story of Gautama's conversion effectively begins when he was twenty-nine and when, according to the Buddhist tradition, he had a set of experiences called the "Four Sights": encountering an old aged person, a sick person, a dead body, and an encounter with a *sadhu* or a holy man who had given up worldly life to pursue a transcendent goal.<sup>526</sup> Shocked by these sights, which account for his spiritual crisis, Gautama realized that all ordinary human life is *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness). He renounced all his family ties and retired to the forest to seek a way to free himself from the circles of suffering.<sup>527</sup> This spiritual crisis marks the beginning of his conversion process. After leaving his family and worldly life, Gautama entered the next phase of his conversion journey: seeking a way to free himself from this experience of *dukkha*. First, he sought spiritual instructions and practices from well-known meditation master Arada Kalama, whose teaching contained the statement that without an eternal immaterial soul one could not see any way of salvation, and that the soul, when freed from its material limitation, would attain true deliverance.<sup>528</sup> Joining with other students to learn from this master, Gautama was initially satisfied with the teaching. The focus of the practice was to reach the nirvana which Gautama succeeded in doing.<sup>529</sup> However, he was not satisfied with this achievement and went on to become a disciple of Udraka Ramaputra, one of the most prominent yogis in the Ganges Valley.<sup>530</sup> Udraka taught Gautama to go beyond "the state of nothingness" to "the sphere of Neither-Perfection-nor-Non-

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<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>527</sup> There are different English translations of the word *Dukkha*. According to Blomfield, "unsatisfactoriness" is the most acceptable translation; Vishvapani Blomfield, *Gautama Buddha* (London: Quercus, 2011), 31.

<sup>528</sup> Pokala L. Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism* (New Delhi: Apex Publication Services, 1993), 5.

<sup>529</sup> Blomfield, *Gautama Buddha*, 63.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*

Perfection.”<sup>531</sup> Again, Gautama quickly mastered this method but felt disappointed with the limits he attained.

Unsatisfied with what he had learned from these masters, Gautama and five other companions started to practise self-modification, strictly with a belief that when all attachments to the senses were destroyed, Gautama would be free from suffering. He was determined to practise the most severe ascetic penances to the point that his physical strength was drained and he passed out, lying on the ground unconscious. After regaining his strength from food offered by Sujata, the daughter of a herdsman,<sup>532</sup> Gautama was convinced that self-mortification was not the right path. He remembered his childhood experience when he entered spontaneously into a state of deep tranquillity experiencing a great sense of joy, happiness and peace. He asked himself: “Might this in fact be the path to Awakening?”<sup>533</sup> This became a turning point for Gautama’s journey to the awakening: “a middle way between lazily indulging himself and attempting to storm Enlightenment through sheer willpower.”<sup>534</sup>

With this realization, Gautama entered the forest path where he confronted “Fear and Dread” which helped him to practise mindfulness and awareness. Discovering how consciousness works, Gautama identified a series of four successively deeper stages of concentration or absorption through meditation: sensitive enjoyment; inner clarity and mental unification; mindfulness and awareness; and perfect equanimity. After six years of searching and practising different religious methods, and by applying the techniques he had discovered, it is said that Siddhartha Gautama became awakened or enlightened at the age of thirty-five-years old under the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya.<sup>535</sup> He was transformed and totally free. He is reported to have remarked:

In the course of knowing and seeing this, my mind was freed from the taint of sense desire, my mind was freed from the taint of being, my mind was freed from the taint of ignorance. And when it was freed, there was knowledge that it was freed: I

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<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>532</sup> Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism*, 6.

<sup>533</sup> Blomfield, *Gautama Buddha*, 71.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-81.

understood, birth is destroyed. The spiritual life has been lived. Done is what should be done. There is nothing further required to this end.<sup>536</sup>

After attaining the great experience of Enlightenment, and motivated by a compassion for beings, the Buddha began teaching Buddhism and summoned his disciples. The first of the disciples were his five former companions who received the ordination and formed the first nucleus of the sangha.<sup>537</sup> Included among his many converts were both monks and lay people, kings and robbers, nobles and farmers, wealthy and homeless, educated and illiterate, his family members and relatives and many people from different castes, who took the Triple Refuges in the Blessed One, the Dharma and the Sangha. Soon after forming the sangha, the Buddha sent his disciples to preach the Truth. Thus, a Buddhist missionary movement began.<sup>538</sup>

The main teaching of the Dharma involves a realization of the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path, which brings about a radical change in self-perception and worldview. The Four Noble Truths lie at the heart of Buddhist teaching, and we may note here that, with regards to the Noble Eightfold Path, the first two elements refer to wisdom, the next three elements concern morality, and the last three elements indicate concentration or meditation.<sup>539</sup> These are the basic Buddhist teachings that form a Path that offers Buddhist practitioners total liberation from the karma circle (the circle of rebirth determined by karma).

In short, the story of Buddha's conversion indicates that the key focus of conversion in Buddhism is to realize the unsatisfactoriness of life and the subsequent commitment to bring about the total liberation from circles of suffering by attaining enlightenment. After becoming enlightened, the Buddha started preaching the Path, forming community of practitioners and sending disciples to preach the doctrines. Thus, Buddhism became a missionary religion which has sought to proselytize potential converts. However, throughout its history, Buddhism has

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<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>537</sup> Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism*, 8.

<sup>538</sup> Blomfield, *Gautama Buddha*, 121-123.

<sup>539</sup> Balangoda A. Maitreya *et al.*, *Introducing Buddhism* (Taipei: Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1993).



developed into different schools with different teachings and practices, and each school has a different approach to conversion.

### 3.8.2 Conversion in Different Buddhist Schools

This section will briefly retrace the different understandings of conversion in the three major schools of Buddhism, namely, *Theravada* or *Hinayana* (the *Lesser Vehicle*), *Mahayana* (the *Greater Vehicle*) and *Tibetan/Tantric Buddhism*.

In the *Theravada* or *Hinayana* tradition, the path to enlightenment or liberation is personal. Liberation can only be obtained by one's commitment to the practice of the path. Salvation, according to this tradition, is not "from above" but "from below" and "from within."<sup>540</sup> One can take advice or learn the techniques from others, but no one can enlighten another. The journey to enlightenment has to start from oneself and from within. Conversion in this tradition is therefore understood as "a process of self-discipline."<sup>541</sup> In this process of conversion, one become gradually transformed by bringing all senses under control and by extinguishing all desires, passions, longings and self-centeredness, until one no longer experiences the dualism of realities and self-consciousness. In this complete non-attachment stage of being, one experiences nirvana. Once nirvana is obtained, one never loses it. For those who do not find it in this life, they will be reborn on earth in another life and will gain opportunities to try again. The only possibility to reach nirvana and become Buddha is by one's own effort, but few have recognizably succeeded so far: "in our era [aeon] we have had four Buddhas (the last being Sakyamuni) to show us the way, and the fifth is still to come."<sup>542</sup>

Differing from the Theravada school, which is an atheistic tradition, is the Mahayana school (the Greater Vehicle), which appears to be a theistic tradition. While the Theravada tradition does not view Buddha as a deity, Mahayana deifies Buddha and worships him, plus many lesser gods. As a result of this difference in their fundamental beliefs, Theravada holds that everyone has to work for his or her salvation and that the merits of one person cannot be transferred to another person, whereas Mahayana emphasizes that people can receive merits

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<sup>540</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion in Hinduism and Buddhism," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 9-21, 16.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*

from the Buddha as well as many other Buddhisattvas (lesser Buddhas) who choose to remain on earth to help others rather than to enter Nirvana themselves.<sup>543</sup> Conversion in the Mahayana tradition is to the person of the Buddha who is viewed as the Divine, the Ultimate and the One Supreme Reality.<sup>544</sup> Mahayana teaches that by worshiping the Buddha and practising profound meditation, one can gain merits from the Buddha's boundless merits' store and obtain salvation. According to the Mahayana tradition, there are different stages of conversion that one is required to go undergo to be enlightened and reach Buddhahood (Buddha nature).<sup>545</sup>

Within the Mahayana tradition itself, there are different schools such as the Pure Land School, Zen Buddhism and Tibetan/Tantric Buddhism. The Pure Land school was formed in the fourth century CE by a king named Amida who joined Buddhism and vowed to establish a Buddha-kingdom on earth called the Pure Land.<sup>546</sup> Unlike nirvana, this kingdom of the Pure Land is a paradise of material happiness which is promised to everyone who follows certain Buddhist practices: praying the formula, "Namu Amida Butsu," which means "Adoration to the Buddha Amida"; striving to be worthy of their salvation; collecting merits by their good deeds; and offering their merits for the salvation of others.<sup>547</sup> Unlike the Theravadins who believe that nirvana can only be achieved after many lives of discipline, practitioners of Mahayana hold that anyone can reach paradise after death by having faith in the Buddha, praying and collecting/offering merits.

The Zen school is not easy to classify, due to its internal differences in religious beliefs and practices. However, it does seem to fit loosely into the Mahayana tradition – "it [Zen] is the apotheosis of Buddhism."<sup>548</sup> Enlightenment, according to the teachings of this school, can be obtained by a direct route, without requiring the assistance of gods, scriptures, rituals or vows. This tradition emphasizes the importance of methods such as meditation, art, poetry

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<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*

etc to break through the normal human capacity of thinking that keeps people “locked into the illusion of reality and the cycle of rebirth... to [the] direct inner experience of the oneness of all things.”<sup>549</sup> Different methods are used to create bridges to reach enlightenment. The two common methods are known as *mondo* and *koan*. The *mondo* constitutes rapid questioning-answering between the master and disciple to speed up the thinking process, so that it suddenly transcends human rationality. The *koan* method uses a word or a phrase that confuses the intellect of a person and so frees him or her from their own control. Conversion, according to the Zen school, is to set out on a path to reach enlightenment through different forms of practices such as meditation, art, poetry and making love.<sup>550</sup> Enlightenment is obtained when “the pendulum of opposites comes to rest – where light and darkness, good and evil, being and nonbeing are equally valued and become one.”<sup>551</sup>

Tibetan Buddhism, known as Tantric Buddhism or the Vehicle of the Thunderbolt, emerged from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. This school emphasizes different forms of practice to achieve supernatural power: meditation, hypnosis, ritual sexual union, and the breaking of rules or taboos, such as meat-eating, drinking alcohol, and killing animals.<sup>552</sup> Conversion, according to Tantric Buddhism, is “both a *broad road* and a *narrow path*.”<sup>553</sup> The *narrow path* is understood in terms of monastic life in monasteries where few people join the path to study and practice esoteric techniques to become *bodhisattvas*. This narrow path is beyond the capacity of ordinary people. The vast number of ordinary people follow the *broad path*. For them, the path to conversion and enlightenment involves the veneration of monks and nuns, and worshipping Buddhism’s many gods, goddesses, spirits and saints.<sup>554</sup>

In short, different Buddhist schools teach different beliefs and values, and emphasize different methods of practice by which to obtain enlightenment. The major difference is that some schools are atheistic (Theravada and Zen), while others are theistic (Tibetan, Mahayana,

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<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*

Pure Land). These differences in belief entail differences in the understanding of conversion. Schools of atheistic Buddhism hold that salvation or enlightenment is personal and direct. They teach that one has to work for one's own enlightenment and that one can teach other people wisdom, methods and techniques as means to obtain salvation or enlightenment – but one cannot transfer merits or save others. As a result, conversion according to the teachings of these schools is a long, strict path of practice, and few have achieved it. In contrast, schools of theistic Buddhism hold that the Buddha is the Divine, the Ultimate and the One Supreme Reality who possesses an inexhaustible store of merits. By worshipping Him and through meditation and good deeds, one can win the Buddha's merits and thereby attain enlightenment. After one has become enlightened, one is, in turn, called to remain on earth to help others reach enlightenment. Conversion, according to these schools, is a process of becoming buddhas by worshipping the Buddha, practising the path, and doing good deeds. In this sense, everyone is capable of becoming a buddha.

### 3.8.3 Different Stages of Buddhist Conversion

Christopher Lamb views Buddhist conversion “as a process leading to Enlightenment” (this phrase is part of a chapter title in a 1999 book co-edited by Lamb and M. Darroll Bryant).<sup>555</sup> This process includes an “experience that marks a threshold between one stage of life and another,” involving “an irreversible decision” that is to be made in order to cross the threshold into a new life.<sup>556</sup>

According to Sangharakshita, there are four major stages of conversion in Buddhism, namely, *Going for Refuge*, *Entering the Stream*, *the Arising of the Bodhicitta*, and *Turning About*. These are the four fundamental steps that lead a Buddhist to total Enlightenment. This idealistic understanding of conversion treats conversion not as an event but as a life-long or even many-lives process. Conversion is therefore more than an initiation to become a Buddhist, and the process will not be completed until one becomes Enlightened. I now turn to a description of the four stages of Buddhist conversion, mainly drawing from Sangharakshita's book, *The Meaning of Conversion in Buddhism* (1994).

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<sup>555</sup> Lamb, “Conversion as a Process Leading to Enlightenment.”

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

## ***Going for Refuge***

Going for refuge is the first, most basic aspect of conversion. In addition, it informs and includes all other aspects and levels of conversion. It is the initiation ceremony used by all Buddhists, both monks and laypeople, across all traditions.<sup>557</sup> This stage of conversion includes Going for Refuge to the Buddha (the Enlightened teacher), to the Dharma (the Buddha's teaching of the way leading to Enlightenment), and to the Sangha (the community of those practising the path that leads to total liberation). These Three Refuges are commonly known as the Three Jewels, which are considered a foundational source of liberation from suffering. By reciting these Refuges, one "enters the Middle Way and embarks on the stages of sanctification."<sup>558</sup> According to Sangharakshita, the Three Refuges/Jewels, should be prioritized by converts. He argues that when one goes for refuge to the Buddha, one may still admire other spiritual teachers or leaders, but one should treat Buddha as the highest master – "the living embodiment of the highest conceivable spiritual ideal" which sums up all others' spiritual values and attainments.<sup>559</sup> Therefore, to become a Buddhist, one must orient one's wholehearted devotion to the Buddha, the highest religious ideal. While Buddha is prioritized, Going for Refuge to the Buddha is not wholly exclusivistic given that the process "does not preclude intelligent receptivity to teachers from other traditions."<sup>560</sup>

Similarly, Going for Refuge to the Dharma, the second Buddhist Jewel, demands from the convert adherence to the teachings of the Buddha and the spiritual Law, Truth or Ultimate Reality as the way, above all other teachings, leading to Enlightenment. This means that one needs to not only acquire a clear understanding of the fundamental Buddhist teachings (namely, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Precepts), but also practise the Dharma through observance of Buddhist ethics, meditation, and the cultivation of transcendental Wisdom. Once again, what is at work here is a prioritization rather than a clear-cut exclusivism. According to Sangharakshita, in Going for Refuge to the Dharma, one needs "not exclude appreciation of other spiritual teachings" because "As we begin to make

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<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>559</sup> Sangharakshita, *The Meaning of Conversion in Buddhism*, 20.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

sense of Buddhism we begin to find that all other religions also make sense.”<sup>561</sup> Here Sangharakshita upholds the Christian *fulfilment model* by insisting that “what is imperfect in them [other religious traditions] finds its fulfilment, its cultivation, in the Buddha’s teaching.”<sup>562</sup>

The third Jewel, Going for Refuge to the Sangha, should be understood in the context of the Three Jewels as a whole. On this point, Sangharakshita explains: “When there is communication among those who go for Refuge to the Buddha and the Dharma, then there is Going for Refuge to the Sangha.”<sup>563</sup> According to Paul G. Hiebert, this part is central to conversion in Buddhism. It is the highest level of Buddhist conversion. It is referred to as “leaving home” and entering a monastic life in the communities of monks and nuns who have committed themselves to religious meditation and monastic austerities.<sup>564</sup> The Sangha can be understood in three senses, according to the levels of spiritual hierarchy. The first hierarchy includes the Enlightened persons (such as the Buddha, Arhats, Bodhisattvas, other great Enlightened beings) and partly-Enlightened persons who have achieved a level far above that of ordinary life and consciousness. The second hierarchy includes ordained Buddhists who are known as monks and nuns. The third is the whole Buddhist community which, at different levels, has gone for Refuge to the Three Jewels. To be a Buddhist is to go for Refuge to the Sangha in all these three senses. Sangharakshita believes that the essential characteristic of Going for Refuge to the Sangha is a matter of communication which is known as a shared exploration of the spiritual world between people who are in a common spiritual relationship.<sup>565</sup>

With this short summation of the Three Refuges/Jewels, we can note that Buddhist conversion is not merely a matter of changing religious affiliation, or of exchanging one set of ideas or beliefs for another, but rather a profound change of life, “from an ordinary mundane

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<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>564</sup> Hiebert, “Conversion in Hinduism and Buddhism,” 19.

<sup>565</sup> Sangharakshita, *The Meaning of Conversion in Buddhism*, 25-27.

way of life to a spiritual, even a transcendental, way of life.”<sup>566</sup> This change of life, as indicated by Sangharakshita, involves three distinct steps of turning around: firstly, a change from limited ideals to an absolute, transcendental ideal; secondly, a change from daily ordinary life to a path based on unchanging spiritual principles and truths; and thirdly, a change from meaningless worldly contact to meaningful communication. It is these changes that constitute the first stage of Buddhist conversion – a “turning around” to Buddhism.

### ***Entering the Stream***

The second aspect of Buddhist conversion is another further and deeper step from Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. It is called Entering the Stream.<sup>567</sup> It is a critical point of Buddhist conversion where practitioners “begin to sit loose to mundane existence... to shift the focus of” their interest in order to leave the Wheel of Life (circle of birth and rebirth) and enter the Spiral Path (progressive sequence of stages) that leads to Enlightenment.<sup>568</sup> This is a breakthrough movement “away from the endless round of conditioned existence towards the infinite Spiral of the transcendental.”<sup>569</sup> The Bali Canon specifies ten fetters (chains or bonds including belief in a self, doubt about the Buddha’s awakensness, attachment, craving, ill-will, lust for material existence, lust for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance) that bind us to the Wheel of Life. In order to get to the Stream Entrance, one has to break the first three fetters: one’s self-image; one’s doubt or hesitation; and one’s dependence upon moral rules and religious practices as ends-in-themselves.

On the first fetter (one’s self-image), Sangharakshita explains that “you cannot enter the Stream until you have detached yourself from name and form, from personal existence, from all the things that you think of as being ‘you’ – in short, until you have realized that you are not ultimately real.”<sup>570</sup> This means that there is no “fixed/unchanging self” but rather selfhood is subject to change. This is the meaning of the Buddhist doctrine *anatman*: “no-self.” The second fetter that needs to be broken is doubt or hesitation. It involves the

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<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

epistemic refusal to commit oneself unreservedly to the spiritual life. The third fetter concerns “conventional attachment to morality and religion.”<sup>571</sup> This means that one clings to moral rules and religious practices and finds satisfaction in observing them. In short, real Buddhist conversion demands one to break from these three fetters in order to experience “a permanent transition from the conditioned to the Unconditioned mode of awareness and being.”<sup>572</sup>

### ***The Arising of the Bodhicitta***

The third aspect of Buddhist conversion is the Arising of the Bodhicitta, or the arising of the will to Enlightenment. In Buddhism, there are two types of Enlightenment: individual Enlightenment and the unsurpassed, perfect Enlightenment. Of these two types, the latter is higher and complete. This form of Enlightenment is obtained and then communicated for the benefit of all sentient beings, whereas individual Enlightenment is gained without being communicated because it is overshadowed by a sense of selfhood. Both forms of conversion are encouraged in Buddhism, though perfect Enlightenment is obviously the most encouraged and desirable. Also, there are two ways to obtain Enlightenment in Buddhism, namely, through teacher-disciple Enlightenment and private Enlightenment. The former involves the disciple receiving illumination (teachings/wisdom) and method of practising Buddhist spirituality from a teacher or master and with one’s own effort to gain Enlightenment. The latter form of Enlightenment is gained by an individual who discovers the path and method by oneself without the benefit of a teacher’s instructions. It is said that private Enlightenment is more difficult and rarer.

Regarding the arising of the Bodhicitta, an Indian master of the Mahayana, Vasubandhu, introduces four practices: the process of withdrawal from the world; the process of involvement in the world; the recollection of the Buddhas; and the contemplation of the virtue of an Enlightened One.<sup>573</sup> Sangharakshita explains that the first two practices or trends “are generally considered to be contradictory, since in ordinary experience they cannot both

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<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-62.



be pursued simultaneously.”<sup>574</sup> The withdrawing trend is a renunciation in the extreme sense: “a withdrawal from worldly activities, worldly thoughts, and secular association... and distractions of mundane life into the peace of the perfection of the Unconditioned, the unchanging rest of nirvana.”<sup>575</sup> This trend represents the wisdom aspect of Buddhist spiritual life which is practised in the Theravada tradition. The involving trend shows concern for living beings or a willingness to be involved in assisting other beings to obtain liberation from suffering. This trend represents the compassion aspect of the Buddhist spiritual path. However, according to Sangharakshita, true conversion occurs when the two trends of being involved in and being detached from the world are transcended. There is a breakthrough or an explosion between the tension of this duality. They are no longer two things – wisdom and compassion – existing side-by-side, but one thing: a new spiritual consciousness. This is known as “a conversion from spiritual individualism to a life of complete selflessness”; and when this occurs, “one has the experience of being simultaneously withdrawn and involved, simultaneously out of the world and in the world.”<sup>576</sup>

The last two practices, the recollection of the Buddhas and the contemplation of the virtue of the Buddha, offer encouragement to practitioners of the path. Through recollecting the Buddhas, who became enlightened in spite of their weaknesses and limitations could become enlightened, converts can become convinced that they too can be enlightened by their own efforts. Moreover, on their spiritual path, converts can dwell on the life of an Enlightened One and gradually become assimilated to them.

### ***Turning About***

The fourth and final stage of Buddhist conversion is “turning about” in the deepest and most radical sense of the phrase. It is at this point that the “eight senses of awareness” become the “five Wisdoms”: the eight senses include the five ordinary senses plus another three senses (the sense of mind known as the discriminating awareness functioning through mind; the dualistic mode of discriminative awareness which functions to discriminate subject and object – subject as self and object as world or universe; and the deepest seat of consciousness known

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<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

as pure awareness without discriminating subject and object), while the five wisdoms include the All-performing Wisdom or all-performing awareness which is capable of doing anything, the Distinguishing Wisdom which appreciates the infinite variety of existence, the Wisdom of Equality which sees everything as equal with complete objectivity, the Mirror-like Wisdom which reflects everything impartially and without distortion, and the Absolute Wisdom which perceives the reality fully.<sup>577</sup> When these Wisdoms are obtained, total conversion or transformation has been accomplished.

### **Summary**

Conversion to or within Buddhism is a complex and difficult task. There are no shortcuts to conversion. It is a matter of being committed to following the path through spiritual practices. Going for Refuge, Entering the Stream, raising the will to Enlightenment, and the Turning About of the mind are all important and essential factors for conversion to be realized and completed. Sangharakshita concludes his book on conversion with the following words: “our conversion is complete only when the aim of the Buddhist path is fulfilled, when our practice of Buddhism has taken us through these levels of conversion right to the turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness, to Enlightenment itself.”<sup>578</sup> As is often the case with Christian conversions, Buddhist Turning About can take place in an instant.<sup>579</sup> Nevertheless, sudden conversion often occurs in the context of a long process which demands much discipline, training and meditation.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to describe some aspects of religious conversion as presented in both Christianity and Buddhism. We commenced by noting how the term “conversion” has various

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<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-76.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>579</sup> This teaching is especially taught in Zen Buddhism; as D.T. Suzuki puts it: “While most of the other schools [of Buddhism] distinguish so many steps of spiritual development and insist on one’s going through all the grades successively in order to reach the consummation of the Buddhist discipline, Zen ignores all these, and boldly declares that when one sees into the inmost nature of one’s own being, one instantly becomes a Buddha, and that there is no necessity of climbing up each rung of perfection through eternal cycles of transmigration”; Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1949), 363.

layers of meaning and is used in different domains, from daily life to science, economics, and religious practice.

Within religious practice, the term “conversion” suggests different changes such as change of identity, of ways of life, of faith, or of heart.

The four theoretical approaches of conversion highlight the complexity of conversion study which can be examined from different perspectives, either psychological or sociological or anthropological or theological. Each approach focuses mainly on one or certain related aspect(s) of religious conversion.

The two models proposed by Rambo namely, the holistic model of religious conversion and stages model of conversion are applicable for the current study. While the former one provides a wide range of possibility to explore various aspects of religious conversion, the latter offers a procedural process of studying conversion. Additionally, types of conversion and conversion motifs assist the researcher to identify areas of study.

With Christian conversion, reference was made to relevant biblical scripture and theological reflection, where they emphasize conversion in terms of God’s grace, inviting sinners to return to God by accepting God’s love and forgiveness, and living in gracious relationships with God, others and oneself. Christian conversion is both individual and communal, sudden and a life-long process of commitment. Ultimately, Christian life is seen as a journey of constant conversion.

With Buddhist conversion, we examined various understandings of conversion from different Buddhist traditions, and concluded by delineating the four stages of Buddhist conversion. The Buddhist understanding of conversion is more individualistic than the Christian perspective. Conversion is seen as a commitment to the Three Refuges/Jewels. The beginning of this commitment is marked by the rite of initiation, where the candidates takes refuge in the Three Jewels. Like the Christian understanding of conversion, Buddhist conversion is ultimately a life-long journey that requires commitment in order for practitioners to attain enlightenment.

Fundamentally, religious conversion as understood in both traditions is a process which involves turn-around, changes and transformation. The key difference between the two

traditions is that while Christian understanding of conversion emphasizes God's initiative to call sinners, collectively or individually, to turn away from sinful ways of life and to turn back to God to live in harmony with oneself, others and God, the Buddhist approach views conversion as a journey where one realizes that life is unsatisfactory and makes their commitment to take refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, often with their own practices to attain individual enlightenment. Though both traditions account for sudden conversions, they emphasize conversion as a committed, life-long process.

## Chapter Four

### Methodological Framework

This chapter presents the research methodology and procedure of the study. First, in the research design, it specifies briefly the rationale and the method that is applied for the study. Then, it presents the selection and recruitment of participants. Following this is the formulation of questions. It proceeds with data collection and data analysis. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations.

#### 4.1 Research Design

This study is not an attempt to test, approve, or disapprove any theory of conversion, nor does it desire to explore new ways of interpreting religious conversion. Rather, it is a practical investigation of a specific phenomenon which I have encountered in my ministry as a Catholic missionary, namely, the conversion of people with Christian backgrounds to Buddhism in Australia. In other words, the motivation for this study arises from my pastoral engagements in parish settings, youth ministry, and my involvement in interreligious dialogue in Australia, all of which challenge my theological position on faith, practices and religious goal(s).

Encountering Buddhists through interreligious dialogue and, studying and practising Buddhist spirituality, I see myself being enriched spiritually and pastorally. In my theological training and my pastoral work, I have experienced a negative attitude toward Buddhism from the Catholic theological and pastoral point of view, but the fact I encounter in everyday life is that the number of western Christians interested in practising Buddhist spirituality or even becoming Buddhists is steadily growing, particularly in Australia.<sup>580</sup> It is these personal experiences that shape the rationale for the present study.

In order to (a) identify and explore reasons driving the conversion of Australian Christians to Buddhism; (b) understand what happened during these conversion processes; and (c)

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<sup>580</sup> In 2008, when I conducted research for my Master's degree in theology (my MA thesis was entitled "Interreligious Dialogue: Reading the Teachings of the Vatican and the Statements of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference [FABC] in the Context of Australia"), I found that Buddhism in Australia was growing rapidly.

determine the consequences of conversion, this research used qualitative research methods. To examine the previously discussed six stages of conversion (Chapter Three) in a descriptive and exploratory manner, the researcher employed an empirical, ethnographic method. This included in-depth interviews with Australians of Christian background who were engaging in Buddhist spirituality and practices and who considered themselves as Buddhists.

## 4.2 Participants

Levels of commitment that converts make to their new tradition can be very different. Coleman conceptualizes these varying levels of commitment as “a series of concentric ‘circles of involvement’, with those with casual interest situated on the outer edge, and dedicated practitioners sitting in the inner circle.”<sup>581</sup> The widest circle is also the most numerous and represents those who have been in one way or another influenced by Buddhist thought or practice. The next, slightly smaller circle represents those who have gone beyond reading Buddhist materials or attending talks or lectures and have begun some Buddhist practice such as meditation. The second smallest circle represents people who have become actively involved in a Buddhist group. Finally, the smallest circle represents the practitioners and teachers who dedicate their lives to the Buddhist path and are involved in teaching the Buddhist Dharma.<sup>582</sup> In addition to these four groups, this research has also included the “dual/multiple religious belonging” group – given that it has become increasingly popular in the West.

The selection of participants was limited to western Christians of Catholic or Protestant origin in Australia who have engaged in Buddhist spirituality/practices and have become Buddhists. Participants were limited to those who identified themselves as belonging to one of the aforementioned five groups of commitment.

To recruit participants, an invitation letter and a flyer were published and sent to selected Buddhist centres and practising Buddhists in Australia, asking for voluntary participation in this project. The advertisement included the aims and objects of the study. It also explained

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<sup>581</sup> Coleman, “Who is a Buddhist?,” 36.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*

that the study involved confidential in-depth interviews. Permissions to conduct research were obtained from the leaders of the Buddhist centres and temples.

From four hundred and eighty-two invitation letters sent, thirty-seven positive replies were received. Among the thirty-seven potential participants, twelve wanted to be interviewed via Skype or telephone, which was not practical. Another potential participant withdrew due to the death of his father, which took place two days prior to the scheduled interview. The final number of participants was twenty-four. At the time, they resided in three Australian states: Victoria (thirteen participants), New South Wales (six participants) and Queensland (five participants). Every participant signed the approved letter of consent before the interview took place.

#### **4.3 Formulation of Questions**

In formulating the questions, I employed Coleman's model of conceptualization plus the double religious belonging. Questions were formulated to target five groups:

- Group 1: those who have been in one way or another influenced by Buddhist thought or practice;
- Group 2: those who have gone beyond reading Buddhist materials or attending talks or lectures and have begun some Buddhist practice such as meditation;
- Group 3: those who are actively involved in a Buddhist group;
- Group 4: practitioners and teachers who dedicate their lives to the Buddhist path and are involved in teaching the Buddhist Dharma;
- Group 5: those who consider themselves as "dual religious belonging," which means simultaneously practising Christian faith and Buddhist spirituality.

#### **Questions**

The interviewees were asked to describe the following experiences associated with conversion:

- (1) their first contact with Buddhism;
- (2) the process and/or the critical point of conversion;

(3) their understanding of the Buddha and Buddhist teachings in terms of beliefs, doctrines, worldviews, values, communal and social involvements, and enlightenment or liberation;

(4) their practices of Buddhist spiritualities.

Regarding the first set of questions related to the “why” of conversion, interviewees were asked to give some reflective understanding of the teachings of their former religious background. Following scholars’ observations as reviewed in Chapter Two that a part of the causes for conversion of Christians to Buddhism was that Christianity failed to provide answers to its faithful’s spiritual needs, the following questions were designed to explore further the observations.

(1) God, Jesus, scriptures/bible, salvation and eternal life;

(2) The teachings of the Church on doctrines, social justice and values;

(3) Faith practices including praying, worshipping and being involved in charitable and social work.

The second set of questions focused mainly on identifying the “how” or the process of conversion following the six stages of conversion as presented above. This was a difficult task which required the interviewees to recount both their understanding of the Buddhist concepts and teaching and their experiences of Buddhist practices. Therefore, a prepared sheet of questions was given to each interviewee before the actual interview took place (refer to question module below).

The third set of questions was designed to evaluate the conversion experiences of each convert. This set involved the following process:

(1) The interviewees were asked to give some evaluative accounts of their new religious experiences in a new faith community such as experiences of transformation, faith practices, and satisfaction.

(2) Participants were also asked to give accounts of any difficulties and negative consequences of their conversions and their plans for future activities.



#### 4.4 Data Collection

The nature of this research is more exploratory than confirmatory, which means that there was less structure in formulating questions.<sup>583</sup> Data was collected using the *focused interviews* method which has an “open-ended character” providing both “qualitative depth by allowing interviewees to talk about the subject in terms of their own frames of reference” and “a greater understanding of the subject’s point of view.”<sup>584</sup> Both descriptive and structural questions were used in interviews. These enabled the researcher to explore the informant’s life and experiences in greater depth.<sup>585</sup>

The chronological method of interviewing was partly applied in this research in order to explore what happened at each stage of conversion and the converts’ experiences.<sup>586</sup> Chronologically-ordered questions provided structure for recounting and remembering events and experiences. The life-history format (telling experiences of conversion in a chronological order) was used to help create a comprehensible structure within which participants could discuss their conversion experiences over time.<sup>587</sup>

Being aware that no single approach can thoroughly examine and exhaustively define conversion as such, and that conversion can only be approached through accounts of experiences, I used the narrative approach as the most suitable method for the present study. Narratives, according to David Yamane, “are a primary linguistic vehicle through which people grasp the meaning of lived experiences by configuring and reconfiguring past experiences in ongoing stories which have certain plots or directions and which guide the interpretation of those experiences.”<sup>588</sup> My primary usage of the narrative approach for this study is to gather the stories of conversion by interviews through which experiences of conversion could be analysed and interpreted.

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<sup>583</sup> David Silverman, *Doing Quality Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 110.

<sup>584</sup> Tim May, *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), 93-94.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

<sup>587</sup> Gerson and Horowitz, “Observation and Interviewing,” 205-206.

<sup>588</sup> David Yamane, “Narrative and Religious Experience,” *Sociology of Religion* 61.2 (2000): 171-189, 189.

Arrangements for each interview were made via telephone calls and text messages. The interviews were organized in four blocks of time, corresponding to four locations: interviews with Melbourne respondents were scheduled for early May 2014; interviews with participants from country Victoria were scheduled for the last week of May 2014; interviews with those living in New South Wales were scheduled for June 2014; and interviews with those living in Queensland were scheduled for July 2014. The specific time and venue for each interview was allocated to be optimally convenient for each participant. Most interviews took place at the participants' private homes; some were held at their workplace, such as counselling centres or Buddhist centres; and one interview took place in my supervisor's office at Monash University's Clayton campus.

Each interview was scheduled for one hour. However, because of the nature of the in-depth interview, the length deviated; some sessions took less than one hour and others took longer than one hour, ranging from fifty minutes to one hundred and twenty-eight minutes, with a mean length of seventy-three minutes. The total time of interviews was one thousand seven hundred and fifty-three minutes. Every participant was interviewed once, except for "Guy" (all participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity), whose first interview was interrupted unfinished so another session was scheduled. All interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and saved on a disc. Interviews were transcribed by me. Each interview was fully transcribed, word-for-word, and then checked for accuracy. However, any of the interviewees' words and comments, which, when transcribed, did not add to the clarity of the transcript were deleted. Occasions when the conversations went off track was noted by me. In those cases, I summarised the interviews to the best of my ability. It normally took me several hours to transcribe one interview, and sometimes one or two whole days if the interview was long and unclear. By transcribing the interviews, I became gradually more and more familiar with the data. This process assisted me in identifying emerging themes and analysing the data.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

For data analysis, I used the heuristic phenomenological approach which attempted to describe the meaning of lived experiences of participants by exploring their narratives,

thought and feeling as related to a particular phenomenon.<sup>589</sup> Data analysis involved a process of various steps, basically following the three steps of coding schema introduced by Charmaz: initial coding by reading and re-reading the transcripts many times to gain familiarity with the stories; focused coding by identifying themes, ideas and concepts as they emerged in patterns of meaning; and axial coding by grouping the data according to categories of themes and sub-themes.<sup>590</sup>

As I read the transcripts, I took notes of the themes and patterns of meaning, and placed them in categories according to the questions under investigation, namely, the “why,” “how” and “consequences,” of conversion, with the third category being divided again into “prospects” and “challenges.” When the themes were categorized and grouped, I read them again to identify the frequency and intensity of the patterns of meaning. I then examined each theme closely in an analytical manner and took notes of any critical thought and ideas. It was not until the analytical process was accomplished that I started presenting my findings in writing. Note that several of the respondents whose English is not native, at times their expressions did not sound good or academic English. Despite this issue, the interpretation of the data was done in the most authentic and meaningful manner.

The presentation of findings has occurred in a sequential manner according to the pre-existing questions and identified themes. The findings for each question formed one chapter. As I set out this study with three questions for exploration, there are subsequently three chapters (Five, Six and Seven) that present the findings. The last chapter (Chapter Eight) presents the discussions and conclusion.

#### **4.6 Ethical Considerations**

I made every effort to observe the ethical standards prior to and during the process of data collection and analysis, and reporting the results of the study. Ethics approval was sought and granted by Monash University. A consent letter was presented to each participant prior to

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<sup>589</sup> Donald E. Polkinghorne, “Phenomenological research methods,” in *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience*, eds. Ronald S. Valle and Steen Halling (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), 41-60.

<sup>590</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing grounded theory* (New York: Sage Publications, 2014).

the interview to be signed. As noted above, the names used in this study are pseudonyms. No ages or professions of the participants are included in the data.

In presenting the findings by using the quotes from transcripts, I always attempted to be as accurate as possible. The quotes from the data are always indicated with quotation marks. My own words, added after the interview for clarity, are in square brackets. When a part of a quote is missing, a gap is indicated by an ellipsis.

## Chapter Five

### Causes for Conversion from Christianity to Buddhism in Australia

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews in relation to the reasons as to why the respondents, who come from Christian backgrounds, converted to Buddhism in Australia. The main question for exploration in this chapter is “Why did conversions of people with Christian backgrounds to Buddhism happen in Australia?” The interview findings indicate that the converts had experienced either some form of faith crisis or life crisis caused by three main factors: dissatisfaction with certain Christian doctrinal teachings; negative encounters with ecclesial institutions/structures; and a lack of resources for spiritual practice.

Regarding the first factor, several doctrinal teachings were identified as problematic: the teachings about God as the creator of the universe; Jesus as the son of God and the saviour of the world; the Bible as the Word of God; eternal life and salvation; and heaven and hell. The second factor for conversion derived from the converts’ negative experiences of the Church as a hierarchical institution and the “ungodly” attitudes of their fellow Christians in their daily lives. The third factor involved the converts’ feelings of a lack of resources required to help them advance on their life’s journey and religious practices. I now turn to a discussion and analysis of the factors based on the converts’ responses and reflections.

#### 5.1 Problematic Doctrinal Teachings

Maguire provides some general observations that Westerners converted to Buddhism because they had problems with certain Christian doctrines and beliefs about the creator God, original sin, Judgement Day, God’s Chosen People, papal infallibility, gender discrimination, judgemental attitudes, and so on.<sup>591</sup> The data validates this observation and provides more valuable details and explanations on those issues.

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<sup>591</sup> Maguire. *Essential Buddhism*. 194.

One of the common responses of the respondents to the question, “What stopped you from being a Christian?”<sup>592</sup> was that they could not find satisfaction in their understanding of the doctrinal teachings of Christianity. Most of them have had difficulties in understanding and therefore accepting the mainstream Christian teachings on God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, eternal life and salvation, and heaven and hell. Each of these issues is presented in this section.

### **5.1.1 God as Creator of the Universe**

The first two chapters of the book of Genesis in the Christian Bible tell stories of how God created the whole universe and human beings. Based on these scriptures, Christians are taught to believe that God is the creator of the world, as stated in the Roman Catholic Church’s creed: “I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.”<sup>593</sup> While this teaching has been commonly accepted by Christians as a symbolic explanation of the existence of God as the Creator of the universe, most of the respondents in this study found it unreasonable or illogical to accept it. Jan, for example, believed that “God is a concept that people made up to help them understand themselves and the world” and that this concept is important for certain people but not for all (Appendix 2: p. 65. For the rest of the thesis, this type of reference will appear as A: 65).

The first issue that led the converts to reject the teaching of the Christian churches on God was the personalization of God. Converts rejected or doubted the concept of a personal God. Several respondents found it difficult to accept the traditional Christian image of God, which is depicted as a person or a personal figure. Corrie, for example, rejected this personal concept of God who is purportedly all-loving and yet so remote from the world and the realities of life:

No, I don’t say that I had a particularly spiritual sense of God like I have now, not at all, no. I didn’t really get a sense of, I thought God was a person, a traditional man in

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<sup>592</sup> This question was not included in the Question Module as presented in Chapter Four. However, during the interviews, I felt a need of including it for two reasons. First, this question enabled the interviewees to specify reasons why they left Christianity before they became Buddhists. Second, I would like to see if the converts had completely left their Christian faith in their conversion journey.

<sup>593</sup> *The Roman Missal* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2010), 562.

the sky with beard etc., the all-knowing, all-loving person but it was so remote from reality that I didn't particularly find that important as a young person. (A: 83)

Similarly, Muni recalled her past understanding of the Catholic teaching about God who is depicted as an entity existing outside of this world: "God was very much the other person or entity that was untouchable and the inhabitants of this planet were very much the second class-citizens who have no real hope of redemption" (A: 95). In her crisis of faith, Muni started searching for alternative worldviews, including modern scientific perspectives, and she finally came to a realization that Buddhism could satisfy her spiritual enquiries: "None of that ever makes sense to me. You know, the science is on one hand and the idea of God in the Bible is on the other hand and so many interpretations of that. Now I read more for my own on quantum physics and things as well. I feel pretty good now of my understanding" (A: 96).

Some respondents also reflected that this personified image of God was portrayed as a fearful, angry and punishing God. Barn recalled: "My kind of upbringing was that God was a fairly angry and hurtful and spiteful God who would punish us for not being a Christian" (A: 16). This understanding of God brought him stress and fear during his younger years: "So, there was always stress for me that I had to be a Christian because if I die early I wouldn't like to end up in hell. And that was a fire-and-brimstone process. That, really when I got older, I started to reject" (A: 16). Similarly, Bernie and Kat also shared their same fearful experience of their understanding of God when they were younger. Bernie stated: "God became a fear figure" (A: 8). Kat remarked: "My view of God was that he was a man, male and that he was looking at everything I was doing and thinking. I feel worried and I would also pray that things should go alright to God. I also feel like I was a bad person... I feel quite stressed about it" (A: 76). However, this understanding of God changed when Bernie became an adult: "But now I wouldn't put things in that way. I wouldn't say to someone that I like to believe in God as creator because that's not how I experience things" (A: 8).

Besides those negative images of a personal God as presented above, Annie added that her past understanding of God was that of a provider of things: "I thought of God as someone being out there kind of looking out for me a little bit that I could ask for things, pray for things" (A: 1). This understanding of God was commonly expressed by other respondents. For them, this teaching did not make sense.

Finally, Blanch believed that God was a human concept and he therefore rejected the Christian teaching about God. For Blanch, the God-concept was used by people to serve their own wrong purposes: “The other question for me is he or she [God] has been used in such a justification for so many wrong things within the Church.” (A: 25)

In short, it is evident that the concept of a personal God as taught by mainstream Christian churches did not make sense to many respondents. They either replaced this traditional concept with their own modified images of God – for example, Emmi stated that “God is the goodness in everyone’s heart” (A: 42) – or they totally rejected it.

The second issue that was problematic for respondents was the apparent contradiction of the coexistent claims of God as an all-powerful creator and the reality of suffering in the world. There was a common thread of logical questioning about this contradiction among the converts. On the one hand, God was described as the almighty, all-knowing, all-loving and benevolent creator who in God’s goodness created everything. On the other hand, there exists untold suffering and evil in the world. This logical reasoning resulted in a rejection of the belief that God was a personal, all-powerful creator. Blanch, for example, stated: “I always have a problem with God, a personal God, because of so much suffering. The question of suffering seems to contradict the idea of God” (A: 25). Several other respondents, including Ross, Nany, Rina, June and Rom, spoke about the contradiction between God as the creator and the existence of human suffering. Russell explained why he did not accept the concept of God as the all-powerful creator:

It [God] was an all-knowing, all-seeing presence who could take and give at any time. That was my impression.... If that was a genuine case, you would have to ask why there is so much suffering and hurt within the world, if it is all-seeing, all-powerful.... For me, it just didn’t make sense. It’s something that was essentially a perfect being allowing that imperfection to happen. (A: 125)

For Nany, the reason she stopped believing in the teaching on God was why this personal creator God allowed suffering to happen to human beings: “I don’t really believe in God; I don’t believe that one person, or being, has power to create all this earth and then walks away and lets the people suffer. If there is a God, why does this God allow people to have pain, to live in poverty, to have diseases?” (A: 102) While identifying herself as a Buddhist-Christian, Rina also challenged the Christian teaching on God as the almighty creator who



nonetheless failed to prevent bad things happening in the world: “It’s a tricky one with God being benevolent because then when bad things happen, people say how can this benevolent God allow this to happen” (A: 58).

June and Rom emphatically refuted Christianity which, according to them, “had nothing to offer.” On the teaching about God, June commented that “From my perspective, there is no almighty creator; there is no God.” (A: 71) and “There is no beginning where there is a creation” (A: 69). The main reason why June did not believe in this teaching was that it failed to provide an adequate answer to the existence of human suffering:

... this Bible to me makes no sense at all. Why this all-loving God that is able to create and able to do things, why on earth would you have the world in such a state. If you were almighty and you could, why wouldn’t you sustain it? So, God doesn’t make sense at all to me.” (A: 69)

June specified that this issue of the coexistence between God the creator and the suffering of the world as the reason why she left Christianity: “It didn’t answer any question at all. So, I left Christianity probably from sixteen or seventeen. I didn’t see it has anything to offer” (A: 71-72).

Similarly, Rom highlighted the illogical presentation of God as the almighty creator and the co-existence of problems in the world. Therefore, the Christian teaching on God did not resonate with him:

It’s illogical; it doesn’t make sense; it doesn’t match with science; it doesn’t have any practical application... if that force [God] made the world, why so many problems. So obviously, there is a flaw: he couldn’t do it right or he got the design wrong or some other problem. It doesn’t fit together; it logically ... doesn’t work. (A: 112)

In comparing the teachings of Christianity and Buddhism on the origin of the world, Tan expressed the difficulty that he encountered in trying to understand the Christian teaching about the God who created all things:

The only thing I find hard to really come to term with is, because I am training as a Buddhist, that God created everything. In Buddhist training we know that what has been created comes from the emptiness (Buddhism teaches emptiness of existence,

emptiness of a permanent entity, emptiness of all concepts)<sup>594</sup>, comes from the universe of space itself. But in Christianity they say God is the creator of life. I find it a bit difficult to follow. (A: 156)

For Ron, there should not be a belief of God as the creator. He bluntly stated: “If you believe there is a creator God, something is wrong with you” (A: 106). For Ron, religions should emphasize moral principles rather than teaching about God: “All religions are just great. They have so many things to offer: you’ve got the Ten Commandments, can’t go wrong with the Ten Commandments; Buddhists have the Ten Precepts, almost identical. You know religion is good; it’s moralistically good” (A: 106).

Demy argued that the teaching on God as the creator and the creation of the human beings as both bodies and spirit could not be true: “when I examine by logic, I thought I could not prove that the Western Christian model of the creator god or of the spirit being created at the point of conception is true. I feel you cannot defend that by logic” (A: 30). Contrasting the Christian teaching on the creator-God and the creation of human beings with the Buddhist teaching on reincarnation, Demy pointed out that there was a lack of explanation in Christian teaching regarding the creation of the human spirit and soul:

I thought the Western Christian view in my mind or what I have been educated or fed or said, the point of conception of the soul or spirit just pops in suddenly there and there is no explanation why it’s there. Whereas the Buddhist view says that everything must have a cause, so it doesn’t just pop out of nowhere. So that’s where they have a belief in the reincarnation and everything depends on previous causes. (A: 30)

The third identified doctrinal issue found among the respondents contributing to their religious conversion was that there was a change in their understanding of God from their childhood to adulthood. Gal, for example, pointed out that: “I used to have an idea that God made everything. And I was very grateful. But today I don’t have a view, no view [of God]” (A: 50). Similarly, Tamie also recounted how she grew to reject the Triune idea of God: “Now I don’t believe in the concept of God as it is portrayed by the Catholic Church and the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I don’t support that.... I don’t believe that the earth was created by God” (A: 144).

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<sup>594</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, 26.

Don presented a classic case of believing when he was younger but that his understanding of God changed over time; he replaced the concept of an almighty God with the power or energy of nature:

At that time [in my childhood] I thought God was up there and almighty and invisible. That was what I could think of at that time. These days I've changed my ideas a lot. I just find that all what is said about God being all powerful, omnipotent, everywhere or powerful, in us and everything I believe in that description but I change the word God to nature. The power of the universe, the power of nature, I believe is what our religion, most religions started with.... I believe like there is a power or an essence or energy that will happen inside wanting to be good people, positive, happy. (A: 36)

Mary used the Buddhist concept of nothingness to explain her understanding of God. This took place at the early stage of her conversion to Buddhism. She recounted:

When I was twenty, my uncle, who is a priest, asked, "What is God for you?" .... "Look," I said, "God is everything. God is in me, in you, in nature, in the birds, in the sun, and in everything.... We are God, the immense energy of compassion that we don't even know. We are, this is God and we are all connected to this.... It's nothingness." Experience that nothingness, because when you come from that nothingness, that's what God is, nothingness. If we say God is permanent, it's nothingness. And it's beautiful when you come from that point.... By saying that God is nothingness, by experiencing this, I actually don't feel to be an atheist but I feel this amazing respect for God. (A: 91)

As a member of Pure Land Buddhism, where the concept of two Bodhisattvas and the Buddha are taught as saving figures, Suzuki found it easy to understand the teaching of the Triune God. However, for him, the Holy Trinity was not a personal God with three persons – as he used to believe –but "as an iconic way of expressing spiritual truth beyond the human words that we use" (A: 152).

As a Buddhist-Christian dual believer, Guy did not have any difficulty in accepting the teaching of the Holy Trinity. However, Guy's understanding of the Triune God was fundamentally different from the teaching of the Catholic Church (which emphasizes the inseparable unity of three Divine Persons). Guy viewed the Holy Trinity as three fundamental activities of the divine: "Now I see [God] in a broader perspective. I don't see the Father and

the Son and the Holy Spirit as just persons. I see three fundamental activities of the divine” (A: 46).

Basing their argument on the Buddhist principle of cause and effect, June and Rina suggested that if the word “God” in the Bible was replaced with the word “Karma,” the Bible would make sense to them; June articulated:

I believe that things are due to cause and effect which translate as Karma. This is a Buddhist perspective and you create your own world by your actions and your intentions.... I think in the Bible everywhere that it says “God” you put the word “karma,” the Bible makes sense.... If you take away “God,” this almighty individual that punishes and rewards, just put in “karma,” it does makes sense... otherwise this Bible to me makes no sense at all (A: 69).

Similarly, Rina was convinced that the Buddhist concept of karma could make more sense than the Christian Biblical concept of God: “in a Buddhist way of thinking, it’s because of Karma that these things [bad things and suffering] happen. And so that’s why bad things happen because people have caused that to happen” (A: 58). She eventually suggested that “if they exchange the word ‘God’ for ‘Karma’ then that will make sense. And so, it’s not what God will do for us but that what we do will have results” (A: 58).

As the above quotes indicate, the Buddhist converts reject or heavily reformulate doctrinal Christian teachings about God as a personal identity and the creator of the universe. Whether complete rejection or revision, these remarks indicate that the converts experienced doctrinal challenges or crises, leading the converts to search for a more acceptable system of beliefs.

### **5.1.2 Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of the World**

The Nicene Creed of the Roman Catholic Church reads:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men

and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man...”<sup>595</sup>

This Creed is publicly professed by the Roman Catholic Church and all its members at Sunday Eucharistic celebrations, as well as at certain public solemn liturgical events. Other Christian denominational Churches also profess this Creed or express in other ways the belief profess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Saviour of the world.

The interviews of this study disclosed three identified trends among the respondents regarding their views of the purported identity and mission of Jesus: (1) he was not divine but a historical person who radically changed human history; (2) he was a spiritual leader like the Buddha and other spiritual masters; and (3) while most respondents did not believe in the divinity and redemptive mission of Jesus, some other respondents did so.

First, there was a tendency among the respondents to reject the ideas that Jesus was God or the Son of God and the saviour of the world – as taught by mainstream Christian doctrine – but a historical person who, through his life and public teaching, introduced Christian values to the world and has made a great impact on many people. Several respondents, including Barn, Jan, Gal, Don, Tan, Corrie and Demy, shared the view that Jesus was an interesting figure who expressed good ideas and valuable teachings, performed miracles, and people claimed him to be the Messiah. People showed their appreciation for Jesus’ teaching and spiritual leadership, and expressed their willingness to embrace the values introduced by him. However, the converts did not generally accept the teaching that Jesus was divine and the world’s saviour – or they accepted these beliefs in often heavily modified ways (as explained below). Those who rejected or heavily doubted these doctrines tended to be those who had been more fully converted to Buddhism. They shared the Buddhist view that every individual was responsible for her/his own enlightenment or salvation. Therefore, believing in Jesus as a divine person or the Son of God and the saviour of the world did not essentially fit into their understanding of salvation.

Second, there was a strong tendency that respondents viewed Jesus as a saint or an enlightened person like the Buddha or one of the Bodhisattvas. In terms of placing Jesus on

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<sup>595</sup> *The Roman Missal*, 562.

an equal footing with the Buddha, Mary believed that “Jesus was another buddha... who had enquired about the inner sight of our being and then shared the message” (A: 91). Muni asserted, “I view him [Jesus] as a buddha, an enlightened being. What he was saying is the same sort of messages that the Buddha was teaching” (A: 96). As a Pure Land Buddhist, Suzuki saw Jesus as a “holy buddha... who was infused in Godhead.... He taught a way of ultimate peace and beauty and love and compassion” (A: 152). Associating Jesus with the Buddhist image of Bodhisattvas, Rina viewed Jesus as the Son of God in the following way:

Well, in a sense, with Buddhism there are Bodhisattvas. Yes, and I see Jesus as a Bodhisattva, and in that way, the Son of God. How do you see God? In Buddhism, they have a concept called emptiness, emptiness inheriting existence.... It means that we don't live independently; concretely we are so connected than we realise. So, in that sense, Jesus is the Son of God.” (A: 58)

However, other converts placed Jesus on a somewhat lower footing. June responded: “Jesus is a teacher like Buddha who isn't almighty; Buddha is enlightened and fearless but he (Buddha) is a teacher. He can't change your mind; he can only show you the way.... Jesus is another way that's showing the way” (A: 70). Other participants were more ambiguous on the question of Christ's status; Blanch stated: “Jesus Christ was an avatar, a saint, all that of things” (A: 25). And Barn remarked: “I am sure he motivated a lot of people. I think he spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert meditating and what he found there you can translate that into Buddhism. So, Christ is actually one of the bright sides of Christianity” (A: 16). Ron offers a similar view: “I think Jesus, yes, definitely... [who] preached love and respect and humility” (A: 06). Similarly, Demy expressed the following opinion: “I remain that there are figures who are in different histories or religions who are equally as important as Jesus Christ.” (A: 31)

In terms of the question of Christ's purported divinity or divine sonship, few converts maintained belief in his divine sonship – though in a modified way. Mary, for example, viewed Jesus as the son of God in the sense that he was a Buddha who acquired. Kate also accepted Christ's divine sonship when discussing her problem with Christian martyrdom:

I actually find... [that] the image of God giving his Son to the world to be treated in that way like I find something very unsettling about that idea there, because I think it

generates the idea that everyone has to be martyred. That idea of martyrdom in Christianity I find it disturbing. (A: 76)

Many converts either rejected or agnostically suspended the idea of Jesus as divine or divine son. Jan stated: "He's got a lot of good ideas and useful things. It would be a good example to live a life that way. But I don't buy the God bit" (A: 65). "I have a hard time in believing in a God... I can't see him [Jesus] as the Son of God," shares Blanch (A: 25). Zion had the same sort of doubt in this regard: "Oh, he's a good man and really a good person. If they say that he is God, well that's ok. But I can't, I find it hard to see that connection and I just don't get it" (A: 135). Similarly, Barn expressed uncertainty regarding Christ's divine status: "I don't know whether he was a god or the Son of God. It doesn't really matter" (A: 16). While Emmi was convinced that Jesus was a "religious master... who was an amazing, incredible person, who had a lot of wisdom," she explained that "I don't see him as the Son of God because I don't have a concept of God like that" (A: 42).

Some converts accepted Christ's divine sonship but with an important caveat – that we are all daughters and sons of the divine. Mary stated: "Of course Jesus is the Son of God. We all are." (A: 91). Emmi states the same thing regarded this expanded sense of divine sonship/daughtership: "I think we are sons and daughters of God in a way" (A: 42). Don expressed a similar position: "I believe in the man Jesus. He lived on the planet earth. But about the Son of God we are all sons of God" (A: 36). This belief is largely unorthodox for mainstream Christianity, which asserts that Jesus is "the only begotten Son of God" (though some Christians propound *theosis*, a process of deification of believers).

In terms of the doctrine of Christ's redemptive role, some converts appeared to have maintained it. Rina, for example, believed that Jesus died for human sins and became the saviour of the world:

As a Saviour, well look, I think I see him as he died for our sins like he paid the ultimate price; he demonstrated it to do that for our sake. It was pretty amazing and I hold Jesus in very high regard. In my Buddha statue, I have a crucifix around him because it's something that I have to keep two feet in both camps. (A: 58)

Guy was also convinced of Christ's redemptive role:

I believe that Jesus, more than any spiritual master, understood that for the universal salvation from God to finally have what he wants that all be saved that one person had to allow the fullness of God's redemptive effectivity to manifest him because spiritual God cannot experience pain. But incarnated in human being, God can now experience pain.... So, through Jesus, God experienced the ultimate suffering. (A: 46)

Similarly, Kat believed in the redemptive power of Christ: "I did see him [Jesus] as the Son of God and I did see him as atoning for our sins. I would have believed that. I come across people who say that Jesus as a Bodhisattva, another very good human being" (A: 76).

Like Christ's divine status, some converts also extended the notion of redemptive capacity to other humans; Don remarked:

Well, I can call you a saviour of the world. I am a saviour of the world because we are all equal inside; we are all the same essence; we are born of the earth. Saviour of the world means to me that he [Jesus] is not the king of the world or heavenly; that we have got the same possibility to do something beneficial for the planet. I think we can call him like a special man or lord Jesus or king Jesus. It doesn't matter. I think he was a special man that lived here and I believe in what he did, his words because I find that his word is very encouraging, positive, true and happy. (A: 36)

Other converts either rejected or were sceptical of Christ's redemptive role. Jan did not believe that Jesus Christ was the saviour of the world (A: 65). Ross surmised: "Jesus was a prophet. I thought that was really good. As a saviour, I didn't respond to him as a saviour all that well" (A: 125). Likewise, Emmi did not conceive of Jesus as the exclusive saviour of humanity: "goodness is the saviour of humankind... and Jesus embodied that but so did the Buddha.... There are some amazing people who just really embody that with all the strength and have an amazing ability to see things. And for me, Jesus definitely is that but he is not the only one" (A: 42). More strongly, June refuted the teaching that Jesus was the Saviour. For her there was no need of having a saviour. In her view, every individual was responsible for his or her own salvation. She responded: "No, not at all. Each individual is its own saviour by your developing your mind, developing your compassion, developing your wisdom. You are your own saviour" (A: 70) Ron explained the reason that he did not believe in this teaching of Jesus in Christianity:

I have to take this with a grain of salt. Right, is it true? It really does not matter. That's the mythology built around maybe Jesus Christ. But I don't think he hurt anyone. I



think he preached love and compassion. Right, and I think that the religion is all about love and compassion. And if we all live it by the Bible, it would be a great place. (A: 106)

In sum, most respondents did not share the Christian doctrines on Jesus Christ but regarded him as a saint, a sage or a philosopher. Many respondents associated Jesus Christ with the Buddha who had been enlightened and offered their teachings to the world as ways of liberation and salvation. Some respondents viewed Jesus Christ as divine son and saviour. However, their understanding of those titles did not exactly conform with conventional Christian teachings; they were coloured by Buddhist concepts such as Buddhahood (the condition of an awakened one) and Bodhisattva. Except for one respondent (Guy), who believed that Jesus Christ was divine and more superior than other religious figures, other respondents regarded Jesus Christ as either the same or “lower” than the Buddha.

### **5.1.3 The Bible as the Word of God**

The Bible is regarded by Christians as a sacred book revealing the word of God. In the Christian world, the Bible has the highest authority in terms of instruction and teaching. Christian rituals, practices and missionary activity are regulated by the teachings of the Bible. Passages from the Bible are read or proclaimed at every liturgical celebration. The respondents were asked if they believed the Bible as the revealing word of God, and whether and how it remained relevant in their lives. Their responses involved a mixture of views which could be classified into two major groups, namely, positive and negative.

Respondents identifying with the positive position stated that the Bible was a revelatory book handed down to humanity, and that they engaged with it by trying to deepen their understanding of the Bible and by living out its messages and values in their daily life. There were only two respondents who may be clearly identified with the positive category, both of whom were dual religious practitioners. Guy believed that the Bible was the source of divine revelation, but that it was subject to different interpretations: “Yes, the Bible is the Word of God but its interpretation has to be in a broader context with traditions, with the wisdom of the times, with the current developments in the world and understanding of science” (A: 46). For Guy, biblical stories could be both literal and metaphorical; their meaning depended on the context:

when the text clearly portrays what we understand from the revelation of Jesus as the God of the infinite love and infinite compassion, then we can take those texts quite literally almost. However, when a piece of text seems to portray an angry God or revengeful God or a God who throws people into hell, which seems to contradict the idea of the all compassionate God, a God who loves us... then we must interpret those texts in a way which is metaphorical. (A: 46)

Guy believed that this nuanced approach to the Bible kept him from having any difficulty in reading the Bible: "Because I take the text in that way I am not too troubled by it" (A: 46).

Rina likewise identified with the Bible in a positive way, though she emphasized how it generated shifting interpretations and misinterpretations:

Well, my interpretation changes. It's changed a little bit because sometimes I think that the things that I read in the Bible can be interpreted in many ways. Some interpretation is a bit broader, maybe.... It is open to a lot of misinterpretations. (A: 58)

While also questioning the authenticity of biblical translations, Ron also valued scripture: "Yes, I read the Bible.... It's a good book" (A: 106-107).

Most of the respondents gave answers that placed them in the negative group. None of the converts in this group regarded the Bible as the revelatory word of God, but there were differences regarding its value. For three of the respondents – Blanch, Corrie and Barn – the Bible was a source of great history, inspiring stories and moral guidance. They also classified the Bible as a sacred book like the Koran or Buddhist scripture. Corrie, for example, expressed appreciation for its stories and ethical value in the following way:

Because I've gone to my adult life and done comparative religion, I actually read the Bible and I see it as a great history of a range of peoples and thinking it's incredibly interpretive because you have a lot of people contributing to the stories but it contains sound moral guidance for good living, I think. That's the main thing and when you look at the main books, the Koran, the Bible etc., the core message was identical. It really is. (A: 84)

Barn, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of the Bible and its role in shaping the culture and values of Western societies and individuals. Reflecting on how deeply the Bible

had impacted his life and how it had shaped Western culture, Barn was convinced that his understanding and practices of Buddhism was significantly influenced by biblical values:

I think it [the Bible] got wonderful stories and I think they have been taken too literally at the moment. And I think the Ten Commandments are very valuable values to develop. I think my Buddhism is tainted by Christianity. I think I am carrying the ethos of Christianity in my Buddhism. I understand that I can't totally chuck out my culture.... I really appreciate our country and the values we have. We go off the track sometimes but I think we have very good ethical values in our country. I think they're worthwhile to fight for. (A: 17)

Alternatively, some respondents rejected the Bible due to its perceived incomprehensibility. Responses revealed that two of the respondents lost their interest in the Bible when they were young because they did not understand the texts and could not receive adequate assistance and guidance. Nany, for instance, stated that she lost interest in reading the Bible because she could not understand the stories; Nany asked her mother for assistance, but her mother failed to provide any assistance. (A: 102). Muni also lost interest while reading scripture (A: 92). For Ross, the Bible was not interesting enough to read: "When I was younger, I read a bit of it but I didn't stick at it. No, I haven't read it through. For me reading the Bible was a bit boring, really. I couldn't get into it." (A: 126). On the other hand, June explained that she was spiritual from a young age and therefore interested in scripture, but as she grew into her adulthood, she started to question its accuracy when she learned that the texts been translated and modified. She therefore began to have a negative attitude towards the Bible:

"Well, look. I was quite spiritual when I was young. I did try to read the Bible. I read bits of it, parts of it. I think it's a good historical source: someone begot someone, begot someone else. So historically it's interesting. But sometimes I have heard the Bible has been translated; it's been changed. How accurate is it in the translation and the interpretation of it since it really happened? (A: 70-71)

Similarly, Kat also rejected the Bible as she grew older. For her, however, the main driver for having stopped believing that it was the word of God, for losing her faith, and for rejecting its teachings was its political use:

I thought it [the Bible] was very special. I did believe the Bible as the Word of God back then. Today, no I don't believe. I don't have any interest in the Bible. I don't feel that I am very educated on how the Bible came to be and then the people that were as

instruments in writing the Bible in the political situation of the time.... I know that it has been used for political persuasion. That's what I would believe that it was crafted for particular reasons at a particular time. I don't believe it's the Word of God. (A: 76)

In contrast to June and Kat, Emmi and Jan expressed negative feelings toward the Bible when they were young but changed their attitude towards it when they grew older. Emmi stated: "I found it a bit harsh when I was young.... There were lots of things that didn't make sense.... Yes, I found some of the things a bit harsh and sort of lacking in compassion in a way when I was young" (A: 42). However, as she grew older, Emmi started to change her view towards the Bible by becoming more understanding and accepting of it: "But then I thought it's an old story where people lived differently and it may not be relevant till now.... And later on, I could look at it in more contexts that it probably wasn't meant that literally but it, you know, was more symbolic or something else" (A: 42). Jan also regarded the biblical stories, especially the creation texts, as symbolic stories and tried to understand them in their historical context (A: 65).

For some respondents – such as Suzuki, Rom and June – the reasons why they could not accept the Bible as the word of God was because of its numerous contradictions, wars and killings. Suzuki pointed out that there were many contradictions in the Bible, especially between love and hatred, and that it lacked congruency (A: 152). For Rom, the Bible could not be a sacred book because "there is so much killing. It's just a history of killing and slaughter... it doesn't make sense" (A: 112). In his view, "The Bible is irrelevant. It's a mixed bag.... There is no practical application and there are certain things that I can't believe" (A: 112). He added: "I read the Bible; I read the prayers and everything but there were not enough answers" (A: 112). Similarly, June emphasized the misuse of the Bible in Christian history as the reason why she stopped believing in it: "I think the Bible has been used over times. That [the Bible] was a warhorse [i.e., as a kind of 'vehicle' for war]. There were a lot of wars, a lot of killing done in the name of the Bible of Christians" (A: 71).

Ron expressed the same concern regarding the authenticity of biblical translations:

It would be very good to get the original texts of the Bible. And I am sure it would be vastly different. I think we have the King James Bible now. I bet nothing is like the original book.... It's modified to suit the power, to get people the power, you know. I

am not sure it's authentic or not but it still teaches us good things. Who knows what happened two thousand years ago? Who knows what happened at a hundred years ago, the truth, right? (A: 106-107)

He compared the Bible to Buddhist texts:

I like comparing stuffs and when I look at the Buddhist texts, it's still written on palm leaves. Right, it's so ancient and the wordings are identical. I think something is lost in translation [of the Bible]. I think my Buddhist teacher would say that. It's a bit degenerative because the language is not the same. You know, we accept what we have; we acknowledge that. (A: 107)

Like Ron, Don expressed scepticism towards biblical translations, explaining why he did not think the Bible was the word of God but rather of humans: "it [the Bible] is the work of human beings, of men. I think people did write the Bible because toward being refined and changed and edited, I think, the Bible is written by clever men." (A: 37)

While Demy appreciates the ethico-philosophical value of scripture, the problem lies in its demand to believe in it (rather than, say, logical argumentation):

It's a great piece of work. I think there are a lot of great wisdoms in the Bible, absolutely. However, there are things in the Christian world I don't like as well. So, as I said the problem I have is that it asks you to take everything on faith.... So, the problem is when it asks people to take the beliefs on faith then it leads down to the individuals. So, individuals can say I have faith and they still go out and do bad things because they feel they have faith. (A: 31)

She compares this position with Buddhism: "Whereas with Buddhism they want you to examine carefully all your actions, body, speech and mind. So, you just can't go out and do bad things" (A: 31).

Even though Zion had engaged in academic studies of the Bible with enthusiasm, and continues to appreciate it as literature, she tended to not believe in the Bible (though, as we note, she is somewhat ambivalent on this point when she states, "I don't know if I believe it"):

I did some Old Testament studies.... I like its stories and I like its literature and stuff like that. And I like writing essays on it. I don't mind doing that. And I like exploring things about it. And I enjoyed biblical studies but I don't know if I believe it. It's just

like traditional stories that have come down as far as I am concerned. And it can just as easily be Celtic stories from Ireland or to me it's symbolic, its value is in its symbolism. I think anyway. And I think it's important for people to know the stories. I think that's important but not to me. Just to know like it's good to know literature. It's good to know basic sort of English language, literary texts, you know, something like that. It's important to know things like that. And I think the Bible is like that to me. (A: 136)

In short, while some converts maintained belief in the Bible as the word of God, the rest of the respondents did not regard it as a revelatory work. Some respondents valued its historical dimension, ethical precepts, or as literature. A theme that emerged was the loss of interest in scripture, for varying reasons. While some respondents rejected the Bible in their teenage years because they could not understand it or did not receive proper instruction, many respondents lost interest as adults, mainly because they could not find answers for life problems or it did not make sense to them.

#### **5.1.4 Salvation and Eternal Life**

Another theme arising from the interviews that could be identified as a cause of the respondent's faith crises was the Christian teachings on salvation and eternal life. The Nicene Creed professes that "For us men and for our salvation he [Jesus] came down from heaven." In addition, the Western Christian doctrine of original sin teaches that all human beings have been tainted by sin because of the disobedience of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. The salvation of humankind is achieved through obedience to Jesus Christ and his self-sacrifice, while eternal life is gained by repenting, living according to God's commandments, and having faith in God. This teaching used to be the driving force for the evangelizing work of the Christian churches. It became so fundamental to doctrinal Christianity that many denominations believe that "outside the Church there is no salvation."

The respondents were asked how they responded to the Christian teachings on salvation and eternal life. The responses were quite uniform: none of the Buddhist converts supported this teaching of Christianity, though Tamie could perhaps be counted as a kind of exception:

People do seek divine assistance because people know that our life goes beyond material existence. I believe that people seek divinity in the world. So, the Catholic system will offer you God. I do believe that because of the cultural contexts that the

suffering of life that we do benefit from divine intervention.... So, I do believe that Jesus can help people and somehow shows them how to live. (A: 146)

The rest of the respondents understood salvation and eternal life in Buddhist terms.

### ***Salvation***

Strictly speaking, there is no Buddhist teaching on salvation as such. Instead, Buddhism speaks about enlightenment/awakening and liberation from suffering. The Four Noble Truths address the origin, causes and cessation of suffering, and the path leading to enlightenment. The respondents spoke about their understanding of the Christian concepts of salvation within this Buddhist framework. For example, Barn was convinced that he did not require salvation:

Salvation is a fascinating thing. From my Buddhist perspective, from Zen perspective and from my own meditation experience, I don't need salvation. Because I am always part of the universe, I've never been separated from it. I don't feel I need to be saved from dying.... When I look around me, I see everything non-separated from me. So, I am not separate and if I am not separated from anything, I don't need salvation from anything. (A: 17)

For Kat, the Christian view of salvation was too simplistic because it over-emphasized the importance of repentance and praying for forgiveness as conditions of salvation. She found that this teaching was not only unsettling but also disturbing:

Salvation and eternal life I find it unsettling as well.... I had a conversation with one man who was a very devoted Christian at that time. He told me that no matter what bad you do, if you really at the end of your life, pray to God and pray for forgiveness, you will go to heaven. I really find that unsettling, that sort of idea.... I find them disturbing that you can spend your whole life doing dreadful things and then pray at the end and you will have eternal salvation. I just don't believe it will work like that. (A: 76-77)

Tamie thought that the Christian teaching of salvation and redemption was beyond one's reach because it was dependant on God's will. When she compared Christian salvation with the Buddhist path to enlightenment, she surmised that the latter offers more opportunities for people to achieve it:

If you have a chance in this life time, you can improve one's self and seek enlightenment and help other people. So, it's like... you're given a lot more room to be an ordinary human being with strengths and weaknesses while within the Catholic concept, I think, it's like a dead-end road and someone else determines it. And it has very limited relationship that you build within your life. (A: 145-145)

Blanch rejected the notion of one's soul requiring salvation because he rejected the notion of a soul: "I think the underlined assumption is that... you have an intrinsic part of you that is surviving after your death.... In my experiences, I have no experience of that. So, salvation of that part of me is not relevant, in terms of eternal soul after my death" (A: 25). Rom was even more critical of the Christian teaching of salvation, describing it as "a ridiculous game" (A: 113). Speaking about the contradiction between the story of creation and the theology of salvation, he argued that "It's like you put someone in the water and they can only get out when you get them out. So why did you put them into the water in the first place? So, if this so-called deity made the world this bad and only he can get us out, it's a ridiculous game" (A: 112-113).

Rom pointed out problems arising from the belief that salvation is entirely faith-based:

Salvation is also murky. You can be never quite sure if you've got it or not. You're always worried.... You can't be sure. There's no radical step. It's just entirely depending on faith with no input. So, it's entirely in your head; it's entirely a belief. As you say, it has to be faith-based. If the faith is not there, then everything is vanished and you're left with what... So, there's a gap. (A: 113)

Some respondents believed that the Christian teaching about salvation aimed at controlling people. For Nany, there was no fact or proof of salvation. Rather it was an old teaching that taught people which behaviour leads to heaven and which to hell.

Questioning the validity of the theology of the original sin in relation to salvation, Zion wondered if salvation was required and even thinkable:

Salvation, I think, is that we learn to be kinder and not cruel and just we try to be kind to each other and generous and thoughtful and that sort of thing.... Again, about original sin, I just find it hard to get my mind around it because I just don't believe it. I don't. I can't see how it rings true to my experience. (A: 136)



Similarly, Tamie did not believe in original sin, and replaced the doctrine of salvation but replaced it with the Buddhist concept of Karma: “I don’t believe in Jesus and salvation. There is no original sin. I think that’s what keeps people down.... Well, people have karma and that’s where you can find your way out” (A: 146).

In summary, it is clear that the respondents did not accept the Christian teaching of salvation which they viewed as theologically contradictory and over-simplistic in its application. They no longer held this teaching as a truth that they wished to follow in their religious practices and spiritual paths. Rather, they felt more comfortable with the Buddhist teaching on enlightenment as a way of salvation.

### ***Eternal Life***

The last verse of the Nicene Creed reads: “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.” This sentence means that people who enter heaven become immortal. However, the responses of the Buddhist converts showed that this Christian teaching no longer holds true for them. One of the reasons for its rejection is that the converts considered the present moment as the reality of the eternity, which resembles the Buddhist notion of *samsara*, eternal change. For example, Barn believed that: “eternal life is here already. This is my eternity; one moment is ten thousand years. So, there is no other eternity rather than this right now” (A: 17). Similarly, Muni explained: “I think it would be the idea of being in the moment really. This is all what we have. This is the moment, not waiting for something. This is something you need to do or someone you need to be or you want to improve yourself and become enlightened. You have to be in the moment to the best of your ability” (A: 96-97).

Several respondents explained/interpreted the concept of eternal life by using other Buddhist ideas, such as reincarnation/rebirth or continuous consciousness/stream of mind, which are fundamentally different to Christian teaching in terms of continued identity. For Christianity, “eternal life” means that individuals do not lose their identity; in Buddhism, regardless of how eternal life is understood, individuals do not maintain their identity. Nany, for instance, believed that the next life would not take its place in one’s present bodily form but would take many different forms, in a circle of life that happened over and over again (A: 102).

June and Tamie both spoke about continuous consciousness when rejecting Christian eternal life. June remarked:

No, that's a Christian thing. No, no eternal life. There is a continuous consciousness, continuous stream of mind that is beginningless. There was no beginning. At the moment, this stream of consciousness is June here in front of you. This body will die one day. June will be gone forever but that stream of consciousness will go on to another sentient being, another sentient being, will never end. Beginningless and endness. (A: 70)

Mary, however, did not think that there was huge difference between Christianity and Buddhism in terms of eternal life. However, in her explanation of eternal life, she tended to lean toward the Buddhist concept of reincarnation in relation to the teaching of karma:

If you look at it, there is not much difference between this message [eternal life] and the message of reincarnation. It's still eternal, isn't it? One tells us that we go to a particular place like heaven or hell if you are bad.... The moment we die, we transform into something else. If this is something else, it's going to be reborn or stay forever in another dimension. I am not very sure. I believe, let's say, I believe in reincarnation.... Again, the concept of karma for me works very well and then reincarnation. (A: 92)

Sharing the same line of thinking, Don believed that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an example of reincarnation:

I would like to think that I can live forever and I do believe in reincarnation. So that's the cycle I believe can happen and will happen. It's not funny but there are one or two mentions in the Catholic Bible of the reincarnation but not many people can read it or see it or understand it. So that's what I find not accurate in some people's attitude toward reincarnation that it's not real, doesn't happen, and yet the Bible says so particularly when Jesus died and came back. It's a classic reincarnation, isn't it? (A: 36-37)

For Kat, the Buddhist concept of rebirth was a more sensible explanation of eternal life: "I don't believe that you have to believe in the reincarnation to be a Buddhist but I always lean towards thinking that we are reborn. It makes more sense to me for some reasons than just going somewhere. It doesn't really make a lot of sense. But I did used to believe in heaven and hell as an absolute stage, permanent stage" (A: 77).

In short, most respondents believed in eternal life, but their understanding was no longer in line with the mainstream Christian teaching. Rather, it was radically reconstructed according to Buddhist teachings about reincarnation and rebirth. For the converts, these teachings were more sensible, experiential and hopeful than Christian ideas about eternal life.

### 5.1.5 Heaven and Hell

The last four commonly understood *final things* that Christians believe in are *death, judgment, heaven and hell*. According to mainstream doctrinal Christianity, after people die, they will be judged by God, and depending on how they lived their lives – whether they followed God’s commandments or not – they will be rewarded with eternal, joyful life in heaven or eternally punished in hell. In the interviews, none of the respondents upheld this doctrine as a relevant teaching.

As with other Christian doctrines, converts compared it with similar or relevant Buddhist teachings in order to either transform or reject the notions of heaven and hell. In terms of the first group, Rina, for instance, confirmed these ideas but according to Buddhist understanding: “Yes, Buddhists also believe in heaven and hell. They speak of six realms of inner desires: hell realm, hungry ghost realm, animal realm, human realm, and two god realms which are similar to the heaven. So, they have in this world where they call samsara, suffering world,” but “In the Buddhist sense, they say that you are only in hell until your karma is extinguished. So, you suffer to the point where the karma is finished. It is not an eternal thing in that sense” (A: 59).

In a similar vein, Don also re-defined heaven and hell according to Buddhist understanding. In the process, he perceived both positive and negative elements to this doctrine. On the one hand, it might encourage Christian believers to be good to one another. On the other hand, this doctrine was based on fear, not on love, according to Don. Therefore, he preferred Buddhism to Christianity because Buddhism was more compassionate and appropriate:

I positively believe in heaven and hell and I think it exists since you believe it. But again, it’s a good metaphor for goodness and badness. If you’re a bad person in your life, you can be bad when you die in a bad place. I think it scares people to be good Christians. But on the other hand, it’s good that there is this option because we all want people to live and work together happily. So, if you’ve got someone saying: “You’re going to hell, if you

don't be good," it's good for the community, right? But that one also finds poor because the Bible is based on fear; it should be based on love. That is why I find Buddhism not only more compassionate but also more appropriate for the world. (A: 37)

Other converts considered these doctrines to be imaginary creations with positive dimensions (as Don argued). Blanch considered that they were created to provide consolation for people when they faced the death of loved ones. Blanch remarked: "It's a metaphysical thing. It's a lovely thought that I will meet up with my mum and dad again and all that sort of stuff" (A: 26). Likewise, For Nany, heaven is a "story that people made up that you feel better that the people who you love who died and you say, 'where do they go?' ah, they go to heaven" (A: 102). She continued: "I used to believe in that when I was little and I took comfort in it when someone or a relative died" (A: 102).

While Nany perceived a positive dimension to these teachings, she was nowadays dissatisfied with them:

You go to Church on a Sunday; you put money in a dish; you do your prayers; and when your time comes that you are parting, you are going to heaven or if you are bad you go to hell and you're stuck there forever.... You never come back; that's it; dead; gone; no more.... I don't believe there is no more; there is more than no more. (A: 102)

Other converts also considered these teachings as negative constructions. Some of the respondents recalled the negative impact the teaching had on them when they were young (Ross, A: 125; Tamie, A: 145) and criticized the Church for understanding humans either as good or bad, rather than as complex beings which are both good and bad. (Tamie, A: 145). Furthermore, Ross thought of these concepts as lures for people used by a number of religions:

That's [the idea of heaven] something that's really nice to want to believe in. You know, it's sort of getting nice carrots to get people to go along with it but for me the reality wasn't there. There are just too many religions... Each religion seems to have its own heaven and earth and hell. They have their own carrots and stick approach." (A: 125)

For some of the respondents, the Christian teaching of heaven and hell was also a powerful tool for gaining power and controlling people. Mary commented:

Heaven and hell, ... it is a bit of a punishment thing built up by the Catholic Church in Christianity. We pray and we worship a man on the cross that reminds us of the suffering. In Buddhism, you meditate in front of a man that is smiling. It's a very different message. So again, heaven and hell is something about control and power, in my opinion. If you don't do this, you will be punished. (A: 92)

Jan rejected heaven on the grounds of its idealism and economic logic: "Heaven was like a fairy story, too good to be true.... The idea of this is that you have to behave, to do the right things". (Jan, A: 65)

June and Tamie also accepted these notions as part of Buddhist belief, but, once again, they need to be understood differently in the Buddhist context:

Yes, the Buddhists have heaven and hell. They are states of mind and it's not somewhere you go as the Christians believe you go to hell for eternity or you go to heaven as a reward for being good.... It's not like that. These are within the circle of samsara, cyclical existence. And you go to heaven. You can go to heaven-like state but it's not for eternity. Once your good karma has run out... then you go back to lower realms. (June, A: 70)

### **5.1.6 Summary**

As is clear from the above responses, the majority of respondents had great difficulties accepting various major Christian doctrinal teachings, namely God as the creator of the universe, Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the saviour of the world, the Bible as the divine revelation of God, and the doctrines of salvation, eternal life, and heaven and hell. The questioning of the veracity of these teachings happened at different stages of the converts' lives: for a few, the questioning took place during their teenage years; for many, it happened when they reached adulthood.

### **5.2 Causes of Conversions Due to Church Structures and Practices**

The second factor as identified by scholars and revealed by the interviews with the respondents that contributed to their conversion to Buddhism was their negative experiences

of the Church's hierarchical structure<sup>596</sup> and the "unchristian behaviour" of fellow believers as revealed by the findings of this study. To begin with, most respondents reported that they did not approve of the hierarchical structure of the Christian churches because it allowed its leaders and priests to misuse their authority and power. Tamie spoke of her ongoing personal struggles after experiencing abuse by priests. Buddhism has been her way out of those struggles:

I have struggles. This is very personal. Priests molested me. But this is a reality of people growing up in Catholic countries. People do not accept the wide-spread damage and harms that the Catholic Church has done. People still look at popes and archbishops as [divinely] assigned power. (A: 146)

Some respondents also felt uneasy with the way the teachings were delivered by Christian pastors or priests. Muni, for example, disliked their authoritarian manner and lack of personal involvement:

I am not really good with authorities in the sense that the idea of questioning is that if you are standing there and tell me what to think, it's not going to work.... Yes, involve me in the process and make me think about it and then I will be committed to it, if that I agree with. But the idea that someone stands and tells you what to think, it doesn't go well with me. (A: 96)

Nany encountered the same problem, pointing out that Buddhists offered a more collegial and egalitarian way: "The way they [Buddhists] interact with each other, the love that I feel and the empowerment that I feel, it's home for me.... It's teaching me so much about me and about people around me and the world" (A: 104). In the following remark, Nany's implicit criticism of overbearing ecclesial Christianity is obvious: "It's not a dictatorship... it is what it is but don't you believe everything that I am telling you; don't just take it as the truth yourself; go and find the truth yourself" (A: 103).

For Muni, Christianity and Catholicism were not the same. She could identify with the message of Christianity but not with Catholicism, the latter representing the Church's preoccupation with authority and power: "There is a difference for me in Catholicism and Christianity. Catholicism is all about the Church, the establishment, the authority and

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<sup>596</sup> Maguire. *Essential Buddhism*. 194; Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*, 30.

exclusion and power. I find that every time” (A: 100). Muni could also relate closely the messages of Christianity and Buddhism, but only when the Christian message was considered independently from the Church:

For me, there wasn't a Catholic teaching but really the idea of Christianity that I connected with. And what my Catholic priest talked about has really scaled right back the idea that Christ had the same experiences that the Buddha had and came to the same conclusion and gave himself in the same way. This is the idea of love. (A: 100)

Speaking on the same topic of power and authority in the churches, Corrie was very critical of the Catholic teaching that humans need priests in order to get to God. She was convinced that she did not need them, and that only her mind and effort can lead her to God. For this reason, Corrie left Christianity and embraced Buddhism:

The very core part of it [Buddhism] was that it stripped away the trappings of the Church that I didn't need a priest to get God. All I need is my own mind and my own discipline and if something went wrong, it was my responsibility; I didn't blame somebody else. So, it was a reality of standing in my own shoes and being part of my own destiny. That was absolutely a core driver in the initial part because I saw that place of hierarchy, allows people to divert their responsibility... That absolutely was my first core driver. (A: 85)

Criticism was also made towards the Christian churches for corrupting Christianity with their materialism:

I think Christianity has created wonderful values for us in the world. I think they are very good values. However, I think sometimes they have been corrupted by materialism of the West and come together in a way that if you are a good Christian you might grow in money and I didn't see that is what Christianity is about. So, that sense of material, I didn't like. (Barn, A: 23)

For others, such as Ross, Suzuki and Demy, Christianity has been corrupted by the wars fought in its name. Ross remarked: “too often it's [Christianity] used by leaders and sectarian people to rally forces against others. We are fighting in the name of God, all that sort of thing” (A: 126).

Other converts found that the institutionalization of the Church led to its ossification, characterized by layers of static practices and regulations which took away its inspiration and

attraction. Zion explained: “I just feel such layers of habitual things that I think the Church’s got so institutional and so dug a hole for itself. And so, I think that for me where I get the new inspiration would be from Buddhism really.” (A: 141)

In short, most of the respondents believed that the Christian churches were too hierarchically structured, which led to clerical abuse of power, authoritarianism, rigid regulations, meaningless ritualization, corruption and materialism. The converts’ negative experiences with the institutional side of the Church contributed to their crisis and loss of faith.

### **5.3 Experiences of Faith Communities**

In addition to the aforementioned loss of interest in Christianity due to its problematic institutional dimension, the respondents also held negative attitudes towards their former Christian communities. Many of the respondents reported that their former Christian communities did not reflect the teachings and values of the Gospels. The converts’ common experience was that their fellow Christians treated each other contrary to the demands of the Christ’s teachings. The faith communities were described as being “double-faced” (two-faced) (Tamie, A: 145) and characterized by “pretence” (Don, A: 37) and “hypocrisy” (Corrie, A: 83). The respondents talked about members of congregations outwardly caring for the poor but being actually unkind and ungodly behind closed doors. Tamie stated:

I think when I have grown up in a Catholic context, it’s the two-faced nature, Christian people were very kind like we gave money to the poor, we will help the poor but they are actually in real life not very kind people: they are hard to their children; they fight with their siblings, their families; they get involved in life’s conflicts, money, power like anybody else. But the face they portray to the world is that they are kind people but they don’t know how to resolve conflicts to help people, to look inside themselves and help. (A: 145)

Some of the respondents accused their former co-religionists of favouritism, privileging members of their own community: “So, the Protestants from Australia had an enormous influence in Melbourne. If you weren’t in the right church and with the right people, you didn’t get a job” (Corrie, A: 85). Converts also referred to the abuses that took place in churches.

In short, the list of grievances the respondents had with members of their former Christian communities is very long. As with other objections they had in relation to Christianity, the



“ungodly” behaviour of their fellow Christians also contributed to the crisis of faith that precipitated their conversion to Buddhism.

These three factors – the challenging and confusing character of Christian doctrinal teachings, the problematic institutional side of the churches, and the stark discrepancy between gospel values and the behaviour of church members – were fundamental driving forces behind the respondents’ journey of conversions to Buddhism.

#### **5.4 In Search of Meaning**

Scholars of religious conversion are convinced that one of the main causes for religious conversion is that the converts experienced some form of crisis of religious identity and meaning of life or faith in their original religious tradition, hence they started searching for a new meaning of life.<sup>597</sup> The interviews showed that the majority of respondents turned to Buddhism in search of spiritual fulfilment they could not find in Christian teachings, practices, institutions and congregations. For some of the respondents, the journey towards Buddhism began by meeting other Buddhists. Jan, for example, found something different in the Buddhists he met, which led him to read Buddhist literature and attend a discussion group. What he learnt about Buddhist teachings made more sense to him than the Christian ones, and he started actively pursuing and learning about Buddhist spirituality:

There were some impressive people I have met that were Buddhists and I thought there was something in this. And then I read a bit and began to go to this discussion group and learned it more and the more I learned the more it made sense, just about how the world works or how the world seems to work. Some of the teachings make a lot of sense, a lot of common sense. And you sit and you think about it and yeah, it makes a lot of sense. (A: 66)

Emmi was attracted by the open approach of Buddhism towards its own teachings and the instruction not to take them on faith but to experience them practically: “It was very open.... I was told: ‘don’t believe in anything until it becomes an experience, like listen to it, listen to stories, digest them. But if it doesn’t make sense, it’s not a doctrine as such. It just has to be true. You have to experience it. And not intellectually but also do practice’” (A: 42-43). Like

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<sup>597</sup> Amanda Lienau-Purnell, *Converts to Buddhism*, 78; Bailey V. Gillespie, *The Dynamics of Religious Conversion* (1991); John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” (1981); Patricia Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*, 30.

Emmi, Nany was also impressed by the lack of dogmatism and the encouragement to do her own research:

What I really like the most is that no matter who was giving the teachings... there was always a common theme: 'Don't believe what I am telling you; don't take it as the Gospel; go, research, look into it, do homework and check up on things, find out for yourself; and if you like what I am telling you and you agree with it, then come. If you don't, then don't come. That's fine.' (A: 103)

And like Jan's experience, Buddhist teachings resonated with what Nany naturally believed: "When I started to find out and listened to the teachings of all sorts of people, I would hear these teachings and I think: 'That's how I think. This is how I think that. Oh, maybe I am not so weird after all. This is what I really believe'" (A: 103). This casual, unforced approach helped Nany connect with her inner self, which then led to more learning about Buddhism through reading and discussion: "It encourages you to look inside yourself; it encourages you to listen to more teachings and read more things... and communicate with other people to get a better perspective on things, to get that confirmation." (A: 103)

Comparing the two systems of belief, Demy came to the conclusion that Buddhism was far more analytical, complex and sophisticated:

Well, the level of complexity, sophistication and the degree to which this Buddhist psychology has examined the Western mind, feeling [and] thought became quickly apparent to me [that] it was far more superior, far more complex [than the Christian teachings]. (A: 32)

For Demy, the attraction of Buddhism's rational side and the intellectual nourishment she derives from it was decisive:

It was not that I wanted to believe it but the power of the logic and the sophistication of the arguments got me thinking of studying this a bit further. And I am still happy not to believe it, to be honest. But the more I read and delve into my Buddhist studies, the more impressed I am with the level of sophistication and a logical analysis and thoughts and details that have gone into it. And I feel that it leaves the Western Christian model and Western psychologies far behind. (A: 32)

The same was the case with Rina, who was deeply impressed with Buddhism's logical approach regarding the purpose of life, self-development and rebirth:

It's the whole philosophy. It's so logical. To me, we live this life, what's the point of it, the whole notion that there is rebirth. The fact that we live this life, we prepare in this life. In Buddhism, it's not so much this life that's important; it's the next life. So, you are preparing all the time to try to be virtuous and preparing the mind... which will go onto another life. So, I can prepare this mind for whoever got my mind for the next life. And the idea of rebirth is on and on and continuing along this path to become an enlightened being ultimately. To me, that makes a lot more meaning than just there is this life and then nothing. That seems to me that it doesn't make sense. Ultimately with Buddhism you're inspired to enlightenment not just for yourself but for the benefit of all beings. It's because only when you are enlightened like Jesus, you can really help people to come out of samsara. (A: 59-60)

One of the decisive aspects of Buddhism for Ross was its emphasis on personal responsibility:

There are no excuses in Buddhism. It's all cause and effect; it's yourself. And that's what I like about it. The cause and effect: good things and bad things you created them yourself. You can't go running off begging forgiveness or things like that. It's up to you to solve the problems. And if it's bad in this life, then you try to make it better in the next life. That's why I like Buddhism. It's not handing it off to someone else to solve it for you. You are the one. End of story. (A: 126-127)

From the recollections of the respondents it is clear that their decision to take on Buddhism as their path to spiritual fulfilment was not a rash one: it involved a gradual process which involved comparisons with Christian teachings but also the different approaches to accepting those teachings – ecclesial Christianity requiring dogmatic acceptance from followers, Buddhism encouraging active, independent enquiry. Converts also compared religious practices, and the following section examines their answers with respect to that dimension.

## **5.5 Tools for Religious Practice**

One of the very important aspects of religious practice is the methods or techniques that are used to improve spiritual life and achieve spiritual goals.<sup>598</sup> According to the findings of this study, the majority of respondents found that mainstream Christianity emphasize mainly ritualistic customs and prayers, with less accent on Christian meditation, while Buddhist traditions focus on different methods of meditation, as well as rituals and prayer for some Buddhist schools. There was also a difference in the quality of guidance provided for using

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<sup>598</sup> Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*, 36.

these methods. For Bernie, Christian methods “didn’t seem to give much guidance on deeper questions... didn’t seem to be sophisticated enough [while] Buddhism has many ways to explain things, many different traditions and many stories and many different layers to it like philosophies of Buddhism” (A: 14). In a similar vein, Muni explained that Buddhism provided more practical guidance: “I honestly think Christianity and Buddhism have the same essence, the same thing but in practice I am definitely a Buddhist. It feels like it’s the same thing but how to get there I can’t find anything in Christianity for me” (A: 100). She preferred Buddhism to Christianity because it provided her not only with more sensible teachings but also with more effective tools for spiritual practice:

It’s definitely Buddhism, the teachings and the tools. I have to come to that realisation that I need to progress with many tools to get me there. And then I found Buddhism and now I found the challenge that I have. I know I have the tools to use to get there. But I think essentially it’s the same thing just depending on interpretations. But for me the Buddhist path is definitely much more effective. (A: 99-100)

Gal and Suzuki found that Christian praying lacked spiritual depth. Gal, for example, was not satisfied with Christian praying, as it seemed to involve merely requests for things: “I mean we were told to pray but there was no discussion about what prayer could be but just asking for stuff. There was always an ego involved in that.” (A: 52). As for Suzuki, the main reason that he decided to become a Buddhist was that Christian prayers could not settle his personal struggles, especially his strong sexual desire. The Buddhist path and practising meditation helped him control and overcome sexual cravings (A: 152-153).

It is worth noting that all of the respondents claimed that Buddhist meditation was a more effective method of spiritual practice, with the ineffectiveness of Christian prayer identified as one of the reasons for the faith crisis that generated the search for a more fulfilling tradition.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

As is clear from the above-cited responses, various factors contributed to the respondents’ crisis of faith, which then led them away from Christianity onto a journey of exploring Buddhism as an alternative spiritual path and accepting it as their preferred way. Both Christian doctrinal teachings and methods of religious practice were found to be lacking in

many aspects. The teachings were deemed by the converts as logically challenging, contradictory and controlling, while religious practice was generally seen as mechanical and ineffective. In addition, the converts also held negative opinions about the organizational structure of the Church and the behaviour of its clerics and laity, which were characterized as insincere and duplicitous. All of these elements contributed to the participants' crisis of faith and served as triggers to search for an alternative tradition that would help them achieve their spiritual goals. That search led them to Buddhism and its teachings and practices. All of the respondents found that Buddhist teachings were more logical, more in accord with science, and generally more in tune with life-based experiences. The respondents also felt that it was more compassionate, egalitarian, open and non-dogmatic. Its practices were also seen as more conducive to spiritual fulfilment. Accepting and converting to Buddhism as their preferred spiritual path was the next step, and this process is examined in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Becoming Buddhists in Australia**

The previous chapter identified several reasons that led respondents towards conversion. The main issue, however, was the converts' discontent with Christian teachings and practices. The converts experienced very deep religious dissatisfaction that set them on a journey to search for alternative sources of spiritual nourishment and life fulfilment. The search ended with Buddhism, which became not just their religion of choice but also their lifestyle. A key characteristic of this process was that – unlike some commonly known stories of conversion, such as the one about St. Paul's conversion, in which the convert undergoes some sudden and extremely unusual experience – the stories of conversion to Buddhism show a different pattern. Rather than being a sudden event that leads to an immediate change of faith, conversions to Buddhism typically happen in stages. This chapter explores the different stages of the conversion process and the circumstances in which they occurred. The first part of the chapter presents how the converts had their first contacts with Buddhism. The chapter then focuses on the converts' training, initiation and decision to commit to Buddhism.

#### **6.1 Initial Encounters with Buddhism**

The first contacts between the respondents of this study and Buddhism happened via different means, which can be classified into four groups. The first group, which encompasses the majority of the respondents, encountered Buddhism initially through their formal education or through reading Buddhist literature and via various types of mass media. The second group encountered the Buddhist way of life while travelling through Buddhist countries such as India, Sri Lanka Burma, Nepal, China and Tibet. The third group was introduced to Buddhism by their friends or co-workers in Australia. Regardless of the way in which they became aware of Buddhism, the initial contacts played a vital part in the process of conversion by generating further interest in Buddhist spirituality and practice.

##### **6.1.1 The First Group: School, Buddhist Literature and Mass Media**

Two of the respondents experienced their initial contact with Buddhism through their formal education. That first encounter opened for them a new horizon about non-Christian religious traditions and pushed them towards further exploration of Buddhist philosophy and spirituality. Rom, for example, had his first encounter with Buddhism and Hinduism through music concerts at school when he was about ten years of age. These initial contacts raised his awareness of other religious traditions, prompting him to inquire more about the teachings and practices of those religions. The next step was to read extensively about Indian philosophies and religions and to start practising yoga. When he was approximately fourteen years old, Rom stopped considering himself as a Christian and began to identify as a Buddhist in the national census. He later learned Hindi and Sanskrit and completed a PhD in Sanskrit.

Annie also encountered Buddhism for the first time while in high school, where she had the opportunity to study Indian art which also introduced her to Buddhist philosophy:

I actually studied Indian art for the last two years at high school. I studied art and could choose different areas. So, I actually had contact with, I guess, pictures of architectures and sculptures which included Buddhist and Hindu, which really, I think, were very eye opening... made me realize there would be different ways of looking at things and other religions out there. Part of that probably would have been the first time I was exposed to, in a superficial way, the teachings of religions. (A: 3)

Suzuki was another respondent who had his first contact with Buddhism through formal education. In 1986, he was studying Chinese traditional medicine. The course was offered by a Tibetan monk who also talked to Suzuki about Buddhism. At the time, Suzuki was impressed by the philosophy and teachings of Buddhism, but it was only in 2005, when he met a Chinese Buddhist lady, that he decided to become a Buddhist. He later went to China to study Buddhism and has recently become a Buddhist monk of the Pure Land Buddhism.

Like Rom during his stage of reading, some respondents became familiar with Buddhism through self-education. Gal became interested in Buddhism in her early twenties by reading a book on it:

When I was in my teens, probably reading, finding my way through... I started reading and reading. I bought my first big, fat book about Buddhism when I was about twenty-two or twenty-three, which is called *Buddhism* by Chris Humphrey. He is an interesting

man. But it was a book that was sort of actually putting stuff into my interest in Buddhism. (A: 51)

Self-education was also part of Nany's process of connecting with Buddhism. To begin with, the initial impetus were certain personal experiences during her teenage years that she later identified as Buddhist phenomena: after experiencing several peoples' deaths, she felt that they would somehow come back to this life; these "different experiences" invited her to explore other religious traditions. Nany's first concrete contact with Buddhism occurred when she was in her early thirties when she was given a book entitled *Buddhism for the Beginners*. It took Nany six years to finish reading it, and during those years she felt that Buddhism was much more in tune with her experiences and beliefs, explaining why she felt she was different from her friends and family: "This [Buddhism] explains why I think the way that I do, my own difference to my family and majority of my friends" (A: 103).

Some of the respondents indicated that, apart from books about Buddhism, there were other channels of introduction to Buddhism, including the mass media. For Demy, initial contact happened via television. In 1997, she watched the Dalai Lama receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. She was already aware of Buddhism, but the telecast prompted her to start searching for more information on Buddhist spirituality and philosophy, which then led her to reading books (A: 32). In a similar way, Tan was inspired to investigate by listening to a radio program about Buddhist philosophy. At that time, he was undergoing a deep spiritual crisis. The subject of the radio program was a Buddhist institute and how Buddhist philosophy can help people better understand themselves, which prompted him to visit the institute:

I was already fifty-eight [years old]. I had a lot of problems. I had been in business for many years. And I was wondering why I had this problem with my religion. I couldn't follow a religion. I was lost. I listened to a program on the radio and it talked about Buddhist philosophy, how it can help people understand themselves. It was a discussion of a Buddhist institute in the Sunshine Coast. As I lived in the Sunshine Coast, I went up there and I sort of fell in love with the information I was hearing and I stayed there. That's how I became a Buddhist. (A: 156-157)

### **6.1.2 The Second Group: Travelling Through Buddhist Countries**

A significant number of respondents had initial contacts with Buddhism while they were travelling through Buddhist countries such as India, Burma, Nepal, Sri Lanka, China and Tibet,



where they became impressed by the Buddhist way of life. While we noted above that Annie was first introduced to Buddhism via art class, she then gained further contact when she travelled to India, where she encountered Buddhists and experienced Buddhist spirituality. She then decided to stay on in India and enrolled in a one-and-a-half-year course in a Buddhist monastery. Ross also encountered Buddhism due to travel: he toured Tibet in the early 1970s, where he encountered Buddhists, experienced Buddhist philosophy, and was so impressed by Buddhist spirituality that he decided to learn more about Buddhism. Emmi reported that she had her first contact with Buddhism when she was twenty years old and while travelling through India. While there, she learned that Buddhism “didn’t try to convince other people to be Buddhists” (A: 42) – which appealed to her. She also liked the idea that “they [Buddhists] didn’t claim to be the only one [true religion].” (A: 42) This non-dogmatic attitude impressed her, setting her on a journey to learn more about Buddhism by reading Buddhist books. Later, she even met the Dalai Lama, after which she decided to become a Buddhist.

Jan’s first contact with Buddhism was in 1981 when he travelled to Burma. His local tour guide was a Buddhist and Jan became interested in why his new Burmese acquaintance expressed himself with his attitude towards life and other people. Jan later travelled to Nepal and that experience also left a good impression about the way Buddhist people lived their lives. Then he travelled to Europe, an experience which was not as impressive as those in Burma and Nepal: this difference sparked Jan’s interest to learn more about Buddhism. Upon his return to Australia, he initially joined a Buddhist group in Bairnsdale and later a Buddhist group in Wodonga, where he is still an active member. June went on a tourist tour through China, Nepal and Tibet in 1986. While in Tibet, she felt at home with Buddhist values and practices such as non-attachment and care for life. Since then, she made many trips to Nepal and Tibet, and felt more at home there than in Australia: “Sometimes when I get back, I feel very sick. I don’t taste anything” (A: 71). Kat recalled her first encounter with Buddhists when she was twenty-one and while travelling in India. She voluntarily taught English to Tibetan Buddhists in the north of India. At first, she was not really interested in Buddhism. However, after staying there for some time, she was impressed by the way people practised their faith which for her was meaningful. She then started learning Buddhist spirituality.

### **6.1.3 The Third Group: Meeting Buddhists in Australia**

Several respondents reported that they became initially aware of Buddhism through their encounters with Buddhists in Australia. Each encounter was very unique and had an impact on their decision to convert to Buddhism. Rina, for example, met a young doctor who was also training to become a Buddhist monk. They both worked in an emergency department and she was so impressed by his ability to remain calm in that highly stressful environment that she started learning about Buddhism:

When I was about twenty-four... I was working at an emergency department in Melbourne. There was one registrar working there. He was studying to become a Buddhist monk.... I was very impressed with how calm he was in an emergency. And I thought there must be something in this. So, I enquired from him about Buddhism. And then he gave me some texts to read and some addresses of people to contact.... I was in touch with him over the years. And he has been very helpful. (A: 59)

Mary had her first contact with Buddhism in 2000 through a friend who became a Buddhist convert. He brought her to a Buddhist ritual praying session, and while reciting the mantra, she was able to connect spiritually with her deceased grandmother. The turning point, however, occurred in Sri Lanka, where she met up with a native Buddhist who was her personal guide. Through conversations, he encouraged her to face her problems in an analytic way:

It is this enquiring, analysing process where you look, and when he said, 'look at your relationship with your anger, not the anger itself, look at your relationship, look at the event, look at the emotion.' That analysing and enquiring fitted perfectly with my scientific background. I said, 'I like this.' And at that time, I knew nothing about Buddhism. (A: 92)

Muni and Ron came across Buddhism through mere accident. Muni saw some Buddhist monks doing the sand mandala, which got her interested, while Ron saw three Tibetan Buddhist monks in a car and had a brief conversation with them. He was very young at the time but the images of those monks always stayed in his mind. Much later, he attended the lectures of the Dalai Lama, which truly fascinated him:

About sixteen years ago, the Dalai Lama came to Melbourne. I thought, "He's a special man, I should go and meet him." So, I hopped in my car and I drove to Melbourne. I

was just fascinated and I was thinking this is not God, this is your mind. You know, his Holiness kept saying: "It's your mind. Transform your mind. Don't transform the world"... and I was going: "how good is that? I need to chase that up." (A: 108)

Zion was drawn to Buddhism out of her curiosity:

Yes, it was extraordinary. I was driving to the city to go to work at the library at St. Francis'. And I used to drive down to a little lane way and saw a Buddhist centre... "I will call in there one day," I just heard that calling.... And so, I started going to the Buddhist group. And so that was when I started. (A: 137)

In short, the respondents had their first contact with Buddhism via different channels and sometimes as combinations of them: through formal studies, self-education, travelling, or interactions with Buddhists. These first encounters occurred at different stages of their lives: for some, it happened in their teenage years, for others in late adulthood. One noteworthy point is that their first contact with Buddhism left a very positive impression on the respondents, which generated further interest and a desire to learn more about it. None of the converts were introduced to Buddhism by force or for advantage (such as material gain or privileges). All respondents came to Buddhism by their own choice. None of them converted immediately, and each one of them went through a process of enquiring, learning and practising before deciding to convert. The following section presents the process by which they became Buddhists.

## **6.2 Becoming Buddhists**

Every religion requires a formal act of initiation into a religious tradition often involving prior training and preparation. Christianity, for example, has a program of preparation called the catechumenate which trains candidates for their initiation. Buddhist initiation also demands a period of preparation involving some basic training and instruction. As discussed in Chapter Two, becoming initiated into Buddhism requires candidates to acquire an adequate knowledge of Buddhist teaching and practices.<sup>599</sup> This includes learning about Buddhist philosophy and teachings, studying Buddhist concepts and precepts, attending retreats, and practicing meditation. The amount of time required for this preparation varies from person

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<sup>599</sup> Vasi, "Conversion to Zen Buddhism," 84-85; Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*, 207.

to person. Candidates have their own master who instructs them about Buddhist teachings and who also assesses whether candidates are ready for formal initiation. All of the respondents in this study underwent certain programs before they were initiated into Buddhism. What follows is a presentation of the training they underwent before the official initiation – Going for Refuge and committing to the Three Jewels (the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha).

### **6.2.1 Initial Training**

After their initial contacts with Buddhism, the respondents went through a period of learning Buddhist philosophy and values, and practising Buddhist spirituality. Tamie, for example, learned to meditate, practised yoga, read books, and attended some groups and classes, before finally learning about Sakya (Tibetan Buddhism):

I ended up learning to meditate and, like, going to some teachings... and doing yoga... reading books.... So, then I attended the teachings, reading and go[ing] to groups. I did that for a while and then fifteen years ago, I then, through people here, went to the teaching of Sakya, Tibetan Buddhism. I attended that and I had initiation, Taking Refuge.... Since then, I have gone to India to seek his holiness Saka Trizin and received Varaj Yogini initiation. So, I am a committed Varaj Zuhini practitioner. (A: 146-147)

Some of the older respondents who encountered Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s travelled overseas to take courses, attend retreats and practise meditation. Gal, for example, visited India three times for training and practices. It was only in 1980 that she was introduced to a Zen teacher in Australia and was formally initiated. She later became qualified to work as a Buddhist teacher and taught many classes at university level for more than ten years.

Annie is another convert who had her initial intensive training in India and Nepal, where she spent eighteen months learning, participating in retreats and practising meditation. She later went back to India to pursue further studies, followed by more education in Australia:

Yes, I went back to India for another year of courses that were being put on over there. I think they went through three or four months of teachings and initiations and then we went back to Dharamsala where we lived. We went back to Australia and we lived in an institute which is a Buddhist community near here and lived there for about six years. They had regular meditations and teachings but we were also working. (A: 4)

Tan also went through various stages of training in Buddhism overseas in order to become a qualified Buddhist monk and teacher: “Yes, formal training. Every day I go to the teaching, four days a week from 9.30am to 3.30pm” (A: 157). He later went to Nepal for further training:

I was in monastery in Nepal. I went to teaching there but I got very sick.... I worked there and did all the master’s water offering and cleaning and all sorts of thing.... I used to do what is called Lam Rim. It’s a teaching of the outline of the whole Buddhist program but in short version and simple applications.... I was there about eight weeks, a short term. (A: 157)

Suzuki also received his formal training in Pure Land Buddhism overseas. He studied under a master in China for several years before he became a Buddhist monk. His training consisted of memorizing scripture verses, sutras and prayers in a local Chinese dialect, and practising rituals and meditation.

As noted in Chapter Two, in the 1980s, opportunities for studying and development changed: Buddhism became part of the Australian religious landscape, so people who were interested in it could learn about it in Australia, either from visiting monks and nuns or from Australian Buddhists who returned from overseas training. Most respondents in this study had their Buddhist training within a local setting and by attending meetings of local groups who were hosting Buddhist programs. Bernie recounted:

A few years in a row from 1995 and 2002 a lot of Sakya people came to offer programs. I went to every one of them. I went to the teaching. I went to the initiations. I had practice. We then started forming our Buddhist centre toward the end of 1990s. Then we started a practice group ourselves, like there were a few other people connected to it. Then we practised more regularly. (A: 10)

Yes, I did a whole course of studies of the Lamrim.... I went there two or three weeks. They had this whole studies program. I studied lots of texts. We had a studies program, the three levels of spiritual perception of texts. I took part in putting on a diploma program, like the monk came up and every month the whole day of teaching of different aspects of Buddhist beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism. So, I did a lot of formal reading and writing, engaging with it a lot. (A: 11)

Many respondents in this study are associated with Tibetan Buddhism, which had organized groups in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. These groups facilitated the respondents’ on-going training and meditation practice. They also attended talks given by

Buddhist teachers and monks, participated in group discussions, and organized short and long term retreats both in Australia and overseas.

Respondents who did not belong to the Tibetan groups undertook their training through other local Buddhist communities. Among the respondents, Emmi was a special case. She reported that she and her family members as well as other families took residence at an Australian Buddhist monastery. She became a full-time trainee in this context. She participated in year-long intensive courses, weekend classes and retreats, where she practised rituals such as one hundred thousand prostrations and one hundred thousand offerings, which took her four years to complete. Emmi subsequently became involved in supporting programs such as long term retreats, intensive courses and weekend classes.

Eighteen out of twenty-four respondents went through training and also made the final step by Taking Refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. In Taking Refuge, they also took vows and committed themselves to the precepts of Buddhism as the path they would strictly follow in their lives.

Six respondents did not take refuge. This included Rom, Zion, Don, Demy, Guy and Mary. Except for Mary – who follows Tibetan Buddhism – these individuals do not belong to any particular Buddhist school. They are very open to learning from any tradition, and are highly committed to deepening their knowledge and perfecting their meditation practice, each in their own way. Mary, for example, regularly attends different activities at a local Buddhist centre, and at the time of the interview, she was planning to Go for Refuge in the near future. Rom is involved in teaching Buddhism at the tertiary level, studying early Buddhist texts and practising Zen meditation. Demy is also engaged in Buddhist academic studies, attending groups and practising daily meditation. Zion attends Buddhist talks and has converted one of the rooms in her house into a formal meditation room. Don takes classes at his local Buddhist centre, but also tries to learn on his own from CDs and books he has collected. Considering himself a Buddhist-Christian, Guy never intended to Go for Refuge but continues to learn and actively applies Buddhist teachings in his life. He goes to Buddhist temples with his children and participates in their rituals and activities once every fortnight.

### **6.2.2 Making Commitments**

In principle, Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels distinguishes Buddhists from non-Buddhists.<sup>600</sup> The initiation ritual with which they Take the Refuge marks the completion of their conversion. However, according to the ideal model of conversion to Buddhism, as proposed by Sangharakshita, Taking Refuge or Buddhist initiation is actually just the starting point of becoming a Buddhist anchored in the Three Jewels; only the achievement of enlightenment means that the conversion is complete.<sup>601</sup> The Three Jewels are the three spiritual principles: the Buddha is the principle of awakening; the Dharma represents both the truth that awakening embodies and the way to it; and the Arya-Sangha represents the community of the Buddha's awakened followers,<sup>602</sup> the community of ordained monks or nuns or all Buddhist practitioners.<sup>603</sup> When talking about the Sangha in the interviews, the respondents often referred to all Buddhist practitioners. A simple and common understanding of Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels is that the Buddhists take shelter in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha to protect themselves from problems and suffering.<sup>604</sup>

The study showed that several respondents expressed their feeling of being “at home with it [Buddhism]” (Emmi, A: 45) or even their becoming one with it: “I am it [Buddhism] and it is me.” (Nany, A: 105) As already mentioned, eighteen out of twenty-four respondents (75%) underwent Buddhist training and practices and formally took refuge in the Three Jewels. By Taking Refuge and vows,<sup>605</sup> they officially became Buddhists and committed themselves to following the path in order to achieve enlightenment. Following is an analysis of how much change that has occurred and what commitments they have made in their conversion by

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<sup>600</sup> Coleman conceptualises the levels of involvement as “a series of concentric ‘circles of involvement’, from those with casual interest on the outer edge to an inner core of dedicated practitioners.”; Coleman, “Who is a Buddhist?,” 36.

<sup>601</sup> Sangharakshita, *The Meaning of Conversion in Buddhism*, 13-16.

<sup>602</sup> Tejananda, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1999), 10.

<sup>603</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, 116, is the currently popular definition of the term; refer to *A View of Buddhism* website, “The Sangha,” [http://www.viewonbuddhism.org/sangha\\_monks\\_nuns.html](http://www.viewonbuddhism.org/sangha_monks_nuns.html) (accessed 27 July 2017).

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-119.

<sup>605</sup> The general practice involved in Taking Refuge is that one is implicitly taking a mandatory vow, which is not wanting to harm other sentient beings. The one going for initiation also chooses all or a combination of vows from the Five Precepts; refer to *A View of Buddhism* website, “Going for Refuge,” <http://www.viewonbuddhism.org/refuge.html> (accessed 27 July 2017).

analysing the respondents' understanding of basic Buddhist concepts and how they have lived out those teachings.

#### **6.2.2.1 Taking Refuge in the Buddha**

Making a commitment by Taking Refuge in the Buddha<sup>606</sup> is the first act of conversion. This requires the converts to have confidence/faith in the Buddha by following his teachings and practising his way of life. The study revealed that the respondents, while acknowledging the existence of the historical Buddha who became enlightened and began to teach the Buddhist path, emphasized the importance of the symbolic Buddha – known as Buddhahood or Buddha nature. Therefore, their commitment to the Buddha in Taking Refuge expanded beyond a personal relationship with the Buddha.

Discussions with the respondents in the present study showed that the converts understood that making a commitment to the Buddha involved not so much having a devotional relationship with the historical Buddha but rather realizing the Buddhahood that one has inherited. All respondents, most of whom followed the Mahayana tradition (including Tibetan Buddhism), believed that the historical Buddha existed, but, as discussed in the previous chapter, they do not all share the understanding of the divine nature of the Buddha.<sup>607</sup> Most respondents admitted that they did not have relationships with the historical Buddha; rather,

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<sup>606</sup> Buddha is generally understood by Buddhists as an “enlightened being” or an “awakened one” However, the term is commonly used to refer to the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who became enlightened or awakened – totally free from rebirth and suffering – and who left behind his teachings for those who wish to be enlightened like him. The enlightened Buddha is called Shakyamuni Buddha, the fourth known Buddha after Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, and Kashyapa in this eon; refer to *A View of Buddhism* website, “The Bhudda,” <http://www.viewonbuddhism.org/refuge.html> (accessed 27 July 2017).

<sup>607</sup> Some schools of Mahayana, however, present the Buddha as a transcendental being “whose life is a drama enacted for the edification of living beings... he decides that the time is right for his final birth and enters his mother’s womb fully conscious”; Blomfield, *Gautama Buddha*, 306; alternatively, Buddha was introduced as an immortal whose nature was divine omnipotence; Whalen Lai, “The Three Jewels in China,” in *Buddhist Spirituality*, 1995 ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass), 275-342, 278-281.



they were more inclined to the teaching of the “Buddha nature”<sup>608</sup> which comes from the Mahayana tradition. Guy, for example, talked about the Buddha nature which, he believed, was imbedded in human hearts and which is to be fully developed to the state of enlightenment: “Buddha is found in all of us” (A: 47). Similarly, Emmi explained:

And you take refuge [in] the Buddha who got enlightened and you sort of strive to do the same.... Buddha has the same Buddha nature as everyone else. In that way, there is no higher or lower. He just realized that and we’re all sort of as Buddhists, trying to emulate that and trying to reach the same goal. (A: 43)

All respondents believed that they inherited within themselves the Buddha nature which could be realized and fully developed through practising Buddhist teachings.

Several respondents stressed that the historical Buddha was important only because he had become an inspiration or a model for others to follow in their spiritual practice. Demy remarked: “He is an important figure that is meant to give inspiration to the people who study Buddhism” (A: 33). Suzuki stated: “I can see that he’s (the Buddha) a pursuit of that ultimate life.... I found it similar in myself that I was looking at something that resonated in my soul and I could only equate with him.... I also resonated with his style of teaching” (A: 153). Apart from expressing admiration and appreciation for the historical Buddha, most respondents did not have a personal relationship with him; instead, as mentioned, they emphasized the importance of the Buddha nature. They believed that the Buddhahood which the Buddha himself acquired to be enlightened was a universal Buddha nature that every sentient being inherited. They described Buddhahood in various ways, such as “basic goodness” (Emmi, A: 43) or “positive mind” (Annie, A: 5). Since it was commonly believed that the Buddhahood was intrinsically inherited by everyone, one therefore needed to make a connection with one’s self in order to realize the Buddhahood (Barn, A: 18; Ross, A: 128).

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<sup>608</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama explains “Buddha nature” in the following way: “Every sentient being – even insects – have Buddha nature. The seed of Buddha means consciousness, the cognitive power – the seed of enlightenment. That’s from Buddha’s viewpoint. All these destructive things can be removed from the mind, so therefore there’s no reason to believe some sentient being cannot become Buddha. So, every sentient being has that seed.” Dalai Lama, *Public Broadcasting Service* website, “On Buddha Nature,” 9 March 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/blog/2010/Mar/9/dalai-lama-buddha-nature> (accessed 27 July 2017).

Taking Refuge in the Buddha also meant following the guidance of a Buddhist teacher or master. Several respondents (Bernie, Blanch, Kat, Jan, June, Rina and Tan) viewed the Buddha as a spiritual teacher and believed that their Buddhist teachers or any spiritual teachers were the embodiment of the Buddha. From this point of view, they believed that acquiring a Buddhist teacher was the same as following the Buddha, and that their relationships with Buddhist teachers was one way of relating to the Buddha. Tan stated: "My teacher is a Buddha, the enlightened being" (A: 158). Bernie remarked: "when I hear of Buddha, I think about... the teachers who were giving initiations and deep meditations or processes or practices" (A: 11). And Rina explained: "The form of Buddhism that I am following is Tibetan. So, the Lamas, we see them as Buddhas" (A: 60).

Taking Refuge in the Buddha also meant following the Buddha's way of life. For Gal, making a commitment to the Buddha was following his example. Therefore, she took the bodhisattva vow to embody his life and his teachings: "We have bodhisattva vows and ... I vow to embody it fully. So, in whatever way we can, if you like, our religion to the Buddha or our loyalty to the Buddha is by having and being like the Buddha as much as we can be, each of us. So, I am embodying the Buddha's way" (A: 54). Similarly, Mary expressed her conviction in following the Buddha's way of life: "The Buddha represents who we all could be. And by being that we will generate so much love, so much happiness around us. So, this is my image of the Buddha which represents what I can achieve, each one of us can achieve" (A: 92). The purpose of embodying the Buddha's way of life was to liberate oneself and all sentient beings from suffering. Therefore, making a commitment to the Buddha was to become a true Bodhisattva "that would be willing to do everything possible to help other people, not just people but animals and all sentient beings, everything" (Nany, A: 103) and "that you can aspire to the same person that Buddha was, you know, yourself at the same level. There is no reason that you can't be, you know, within us" (Ross, A: 128).

In summary, Taking Refuge in the Buddha was an important step in the process of conversion to Buddhism as understood by the respondents. They all confirmed their belief that as the historical Buddha had awakened to the Buddhahood, every sentient being could also reach their Buddhahood by following and practising the Buddhist teachings. This belief in the possibility of becoming awakened reinforced their confidence in following the Buddhist path. Furthermore, most respondents did not experience a devotional relationship with the

Buddha. They considered the Buddha as an enlightened person or as a spiritual teacher, and they treated their teachers as a way of connecting with the awakened Buddha. It was therefore not so much the person of the historical Buddha but the Buddha nature and Buddha's teachings were emphasized as key by all the respondents.

The following section analyses the commitment to the Dharma that the converts made in their journeys of becoming Buddhists in Australia.

#### 6.2.2.2 Taking Refuge in the Dharma

If you were to follow the Dharma purely out of love for me or because you respect me, I would not accept you as disciple. But if you follow the Dharma because you have yourself experienced its truth, because you understand and act accordingly - only under these conditions have you the right to call yourself a disciple of the Exalted One.<sup>609</sup>

The term dharma (with a small "d") has many connotations in ordinary usage such as a thing or a phenomenon, a mental object, a state or a condition, or one's duty as a member of a particular hereditary class.<sup>610</sup> In Buddhism, the term Dharma (with a capital "D") is used to refer to both the Buddha's experience of enlightenment and his teaching.<sup>611</sup> Respondents in this study used this term to refer to the whole body of the Buddhist teaching and practices.

Taking Refuge in the Dharma, according to the Buddha, means relying on his teaching of the truth/Four Noble Truths, more specifically, its meaning rather than the words, its definite meaning rather than the provisional one, and with one's intelligent mind rather than with one's ordinary mind.<sup>612</sup> One's personal understanding and experience of the teaching and one's commitment to practising the path is vitally important for embodying the Dharma.<sup>613</sup> In order to examine how respondents made their commitment to following the Dharma as

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<sup>609</sup> This well-known message was given to Ananda by the Buddha. Quoted in *Old Path, White Clouds* by Thich Nhat Hahn, <http://www.viewonbuddhism.org/dharma.html> (accessed 27 July 2017).

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-8. This is associated with the caste system in India.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>612</sup> "Four Reliances" given by the Buddha before his passing away; *A View of Buddhism* website, "The Dharma," <http://www.viewonbuddhism.org/dharma.html> (accessed 27 July 2017).

<sup>613</sup> Sangharakshita, *What is the Dharma?: The Essential Teachings of the Buddha* (Birmingham: Windhorse, 1998), 8-11.

part of their conversion process, this section explores how they perceived the Dharma as a whole, and it identifies the key teachings they consider most valuable.

First, in the process of becoming Buddhists in Australia, this research revealed that Taking Refuge in the Dharma was considered the central task by all respondents. Of the three Refuges, they regarded the Dharma as the most important. They all expressed not only their appreciation of the Buddhist teachings but also their serious engagement in learning and practising them. Several respondents were very expressive when speaking about the importance of the Dharma: “The Buddhist teachings are the only thing for me that make sense of this world... the only thing I can use to explain the way the world is” (A: 74-75), remarked June, while Emmi stated that the Dharma “makes so much more sense to me. I feel really at home with it. It’s also a challenge sometime, of course, but it’s something most important in my life” (A: 45). Similarly, Rom reflected that the Buddhist teaching was “more resonant... and the meditation tradition was the key ingredient because when you meditate you have an experience and you have a teaching and you have a step-by-step process to validate something” (A: 114). He assessed further that “Academically, it’s flawless. You can’t fault it. It knows a lot logicity there because you have an experience” (A: 114).

For certain respondents, the Dharma was not like commandments, but rather like a guiding light that was given to everyone to follow and was tested for its feasibility by individuals through their own experience of it. For example, Don expressed his view on the Dharma and how to approach it: “It’s like a guiding light.... So, whether the Buddha said it, I think, everyone must try to experience it and start to do practice. When they start to feel that it’s positive, it’s true, it’s good, then they can continue and believe in it” (A: 39). Some respondents associated their Taking Refuge or becoming Buddhists with their following the Dharma. Tan and Blanch, for example, believed that committing to the Dharma defined their Buddhist identity and practice. Most respondents shared this understanding when they talked about their experiences of how they became Buddhists and how Buddhist teaching and practice made an impact on their life.

Furthermore, by Taking Refuge in the Dharma, the converts shifted their focus from Christian doctrines to Buddhist teachings. All respondents accepted Buddhist teachings as their fundamental principles of life and embraced Buddhist values wholeheartedly. The data

revealed that most respondents preferred Buddhist teachings to the Christian teachings.<sup>614</sup> However, they did not take all the Buddhist teachings on board but emphasized only several key teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Paths, karma, non-self, emptiness, impermanence, interconnectedness and interdependence, rebirth and reincarnation, and nirvana.

#### *The Four Noble Truth and Eightfold Noble Paths*

All respondents considered the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Paths as the most basic and enlightening teachings that helped them understand the realities of life and the causes of suffering. To begin with, converts were drawn to these teachings for their straightforwardness and sensibleness (Rom, Ross, Corrie, Demy, Don). The teachings were also life-changing. For example, Demy explained:

From my understanding of the Four Noble Truths and my examination, I've come to see that the previous way I used to live my life which is [a] pretty standard secular way [and] is actually flawed; and from my analysis I've come to see that I never achieve the satisfaction that I think I will get. And as I am getting older... I've come to see the truth of this. So, this has had a very profound effect on my life... and how I live my life. (A: 33)

Converts also noted the applicability of these teachings in daily life; Mary reported:

I try to apply some of the teachings in my everyday life. I am not saying that I am succeeding all the times. I am just constantly reminding myself that that is the path that I want to follow. It's so strong in me. There is nothing else that I want to follow. This is the path for my life now. (A: 93)

For Barn and many of the respondents, the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Paths offered practitioners not only answers to the critical question of the nature of suffering and its causes but also solutions to overcome it. Tamie used these teachings as tools to examine and diagnose the causes of problems and suffering:

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<sup>614</sup> Except for Gerald who did not show his preference to what tradition he preferred, all other respondents indicated that Buddhism was their religion of choice.

To really start... it's always like a sick blame: "That person did it to me." Well, the Four Noble Truths will say: "It's okay, how did this suffering come? Is it [because of] the context like the economic situation? Is it [because] someone rushed too much?..." You're interested to know... where it actually started arising then, the cause of suffering, and really understand that. And then you can be more compassionate.... You understand the basic cause of suffering.... So that's my real motivation to not blame and judge me. (A: 147)

In a somewhat related topic to the question of suffering, some respondents reported that the teachings of the Noble Truths and Paths also helped them realize the ever-changing condition of life (philosophy of impermanence), thus becoming less attached to their ego and material things. This realization enabled them to have more freedom and to be more generous in helping and serving other people. Jan explained how these teachings influenced her detachment and caring:

Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path help me to have less attachment to things and eventually less attachment to yourself and understand that things are temporary and ever changing, not to hang up on what you want or having things the way you want. It allows you the freedom to help more, to be more generous or to be able to help others without worrying about yourself all the time. (A: 66)

### *Karma*

karma technically means "action"<sup>615</sup> which is believed to shape "the life that we lead right from the beginning."<sup>616</sup> This Buddhist doctrine teaches that the action (mind, speech and body)<sup>617</sup>, which can be either skilful or unskilful, will result in what a person will become in the future, in this life or in the afterlife. Karma has been therefore known in the West as the principle of *cause and effect*.<sup>618</sup> This means that if the cause is skilful, the result will be

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<sup>615</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 95.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid.

<sup>617</sup> Khantipalo Bhikkhu, *What is Buddhism: An Introduction to the Teaching of Lord Buddha* (Bangkok: Social Science Association Press of Thailand, 1965), 30.

<sup>618</sup> Maguire, *Essential Buddhism*, 95.

wholesome, and vice versa. It is also commonly believed that when people die, it is the overall nature of their karma that will determine the place and form of their rebirth.

The interviews showed that all respondents believed in the teaching of karma, and they reported that this teaching was very complex yet crucially important. In general, karma was understood in conjunction with the law of cause and effect: good actions produced good and positive karma; bad actions created bad and negative karma. Most respondents emphasized that this doctrine aimed at teaching people not only to avoid unskilful or unwholesome actions but also to encourage them to take skilful and wholesome actions.

In comparing the teaching of karma with Christian teachings on good and bad, sin and grace, praying and self-responsibility, respondents criticized the latter in that it either over-emphasized a sense of guilt (Tamie) or undermining self-responsibility (Rom). In this respect, Tamie saw a need to undo some of the Christian teachings that she had previously learned in order to become fully Buddhist. Rom, on the other hand, believed that the Buddhist teaching on karma immediately created positive changes in practitioners. Most respondents reported that the teaching of karma made a deep impact on the way they lived their life: they felt more connected with their own feelings and emotions, more responsible for their behaviours and actions, and more harmonious with other people and the environment.

In short, the Buddhist teaching on karma helped the converts establish wholesome connections with themselves, others and the environment. It enabled the converts to be more responsible for their behaviours and actions, and it offered them a sense of hope that they could improve themselves by constant trying.

### *Non-self and emptiness*

Buddhism teaches that “within human nature, there is no permanent self or soul.”<sup>619</sup> The Buddha affirmed that “persons have an empirical selfhood constituted by a body and a mind”<sup>620</sup> which result in the Five Aggregates (material form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness). Since all these Five Aggregates are subject to constant changes, there is no permanent self. Similarly, Buddhism teaches that things are “devoid of

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<sup>619</sup> Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 37.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*

an intrinsic identity”<sup>621</sup>, a concept that is translated as emptiness. Emptiness is a “quality shared by all phenomena: lack of inherent nature and inherent existence”<sup>622</sup> or “empty-of-own-being.”<sup>623</sup>

Most respondents indicated that non-self was “not nihilism” (e.g., Annie, A: 6) but rather “the permanent self doesn’t exist” (Blanch, A: 27). and that “We don’t have a permanent and inherited existing self but we are products of many, many inputs and we change every moment” (A: 34), Demy explained. Rina expressed it this way: “we are not independently solid or fixed. We are empty of concrete self. And what I’m left to understand is that in some ways we are not separate, we’re connected” (Rina, A: 61).

Some respondents reported that understanding the true meaning of non-self enabled them to positively value life at any moment, to let go of their ego, and to discount themselves for the benefits of others. For Jan, the non-self “make[s] the world even more wonderful. Because in seeing something beautiful I think I can appreciate it more because I know it’s beautiful momentarily and tomorrow it will be gone. A beautiful flower today, tomorrow will be rotten in the bin. Therefore, only this moment” (A: 67). Understanding the meaning of non-self also assisted practitioners “overcome an illusion and perception of ego” (Muni, A: 99) and to let “go of that nature self and a new nature can grow in us” (Suzuki, A: 154). The notion of non-self also allows converts to become aware of the importance of relationships (Tamie, A: 148) and the significance of giving or to “sacrifice yourself for the benefits of others” (Ron, A: 109).

Respondents also viewed the teaching of emptiness as an important one. Most of them explained that emptiness did not mean that things do not exist. They do exist but in a different way from how people perceive them existing. Annie explained it in the following way:

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<sup>621</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 77.

<sup>622</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (second ed) (New York: Cambridge university Press, 2013), 150.

<sup>623</sup> Huston Smith and Philip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 62.



Emptiness is: things are empty of what they call inherent existence. It's saying that things are empty of existing in a way that we perceive them as existing. They are not empty of existence.... The way we see things as existing is what causes our suffering. If we really understood how things really existed and we really existed, our whole perception of things would change. (A: 6)

June defined the word thus: "emptiness is empty of inherited existence. So, I exist due to causes and conditions.... Yes, I exist because I have food, I have water... everything working together. I exist because of causes and conditions and there is no beginning for those causes and conditions" (A: 74).

Respondents also understood the concept of emptiness in connection with the teachings of interdependence and impermanence. Ross describes the relation of these two terms:

Things are solid moment for moment and then it'll change in the next moment. Everything is impermanent and we cannot exist as we are without something around us. You cannot exist without the air that you breathe, without the food that you eat. You can't stand without the ground below you. You're dependent on so many things to be as you are.... That's what emptiness is, nothing is solid, nothing is permanent. (A: 129)

The understanding of emptiness helped the respondents redirect their life and set purposes in life: "It gives you room to be there for other people and empty of yourself to be truly giving to people, listening to people" (Blanch, A: 27). Muni stated: "When there is that understanding that this humbleness that I don't need anything, I am not really even a person, I am just part of this universal whole, well then why I am here? Because I think I can help people come to that realization and that's the only thing I want" (A: 99). Ross remarked how these concepts modified his materialism:

You might just get your mind right for the next life. So, it [the teaching of emptiness] just makes you think a little bit more as you go along about the impermanence of everything, be it your life, you could be dead tomorrow, just be happy with your life today. I guess that's what it gets us to... it certainly makes me less materialistic. (A: 129)

An understanding of emptiness and related notions became beneficial for converts because it helped them realize that they had the freedom and the potential capacity for development. Annie recounted: "So, then it has great potential because it means I can change. I can develop because I can create the causes or something more positive because I am not permanent.... So... it has a lot of potential" (A: 6). Emmi expanded on the advantages of emptiness: "That's an incredible freedom.... Emptiness lets go of that rigidity of having to be right... but there isn't ultimate right... it might be right now; tomorrow it might not be.... And that gives rise to a lot more flexibility and compassion" (A: 44). Emmi adds: "It helps to deal with one's emotion a lot because we hear something and we are affected, we have reactions to things and there is always another voice saying 'look, this is emotion and you're seeing it because of your previous experiences'... it gives some sort of peace... you know it comes and it goes" (A: 44).

The teaching of emptiness helped the converts live in the present moment. Mary remarked:

And that emptiness of inconsistency is the best teaching you can get because then you really enjoy so much your mind. So, when you are happy, enjoy it and don't think what you are going to cook for dinner. When you are angry, realize it and realize that you don't need to perpetuate that. It will go. That moment that you are so offended by someone who said something, if you look at the emptiness of that word, it will go even within two seconds. And those two seconds will change all the dynamics, will change your life sometimes. (A: 93)

### *Rebirth and reincarnation*

Buddhism teaches rebirth and reincarnation, which are both similar and distinct from each other. Rebirth and reincarnation mean that there is a continuation of life from this present life to the next. However, these two terms are applied in two distinct scenarios: reincarnation is reserved for practitioners who are already enlightened, whereby one can control one's destiny; with rebirth, one cannot control one's destiny. Regarding rebirth, most Buddhist schools affirm that samsaric rebirth can be in any of the six categories/realms (god, demi-god, human, animal, hungry ghost and hell being), depending on what karma is involved.<sup>624</sup>

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<sup>624</sup> Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 42-45.

In explaining the meaning of rebirth and reincarnation, most respondents believed that when death occurs, consciousness goes on to the next life and that person's destiny in the next life is determined by the fruition of the karma created in the life that just expired. The converts regarded rebirth and reincarnation as key and sensible teachings of Buddhism, and preferred these teachings to the Christian teaching on eternal life. Emmi, Rina and Ross believed that, on an intellectual basis, these teachings made more sense than Christian teachings on eternal life (heaven and hell). For example, Emmi explained:

For me it [rebirth] makes a lot more sense... otherwise we're just coming out of nothing and then turning even by going to heaven or hell. How come we came out of nothing and lived for a short life and then be in the eternity either here or there? It just didn't make sense... reincarnation I don't know if it's true or not but it makes lots of sense. (A: 44)

There were, however, differences in terms of the level of credibility the participants assigned to these teachings and the language they used when talking about them. The first group, which included Demy, June, Muni, Nany, Rom and Tamie, firmly believed in the teaching of rebirth and reincarnation. They demonstrated a clear transition from Christian terminology such as "soul" to Buddhist terms such as "mind" and "consciousness" when explaining rebirth and reincarnation. Some of them even claimed to have had access to their previous life.

The second group, which included Corrie and Don, strongly believed in the teaching but still used Christian language and concepts to explain their understanding. Instead of talking about "mind," "consciousness," and "energy," they often used the Christian term "soul." For instance, Corrie stated: "I've always theoretically understood that because the soul maintains and is part of the universe then it can be re-absorbed into a new body" (A: 86). Similarly, Don believed that "the soul is eternal; the soul is coming back; it is a part of you and it lives forever and it can come back another time" (A: 39).

The third group, which was constituted by Guy, Rina, Suzuki and Tan, tried to reconcile the Buddhist teaching on rebirth and reincarnation with the Christian teaching of the resurrection of dead. Guy claimed that the Buddhist teaching of reincarnation was consistent with Catholic theology: "The idea is if all of us have the spark of God in all of us and the primary purpose of our life is to be awakened to this spark of God, [we] choose, not to deliver at the level of the

ego but at the level of divine essence that is within all of us" (A: 47). Suzuki referred to the Gospel of Saint John, where Jesus said, "You must be born again," to explain the concept of reincarnation (A: 154). Similarly, Tan explained that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an example of reincarnation (A: 159).

### *Nirvana*

Narasu explains that nirvana is neither "the state in which the individual soul is completely absorbed in the universal soul" nor "the annihilation of all activities... in which love, life and everything become extinct." It is rather "the destruction of the three fires of lust, hatred and ignorance and the perfection of all human excellence".<sup>625</sup> Nirvana is characterised as the "Unconditioned and Uncompounded"<sup>626</sup> by death and rebirth.

Respondents associated nirvana with the state of mind that was able to perceive the true reality of life and the world, and which was free from all kinds of attachments and suffering. The converts understood nirvana in a number of interrelated ways where the unifying theme was a certain state of mind: the "ultimate reality... the ground of being... the ultimate stage of peace, at oneness with everything or with God" (Guy, A: 48); "the state of mind that's totally free from mistakes of seeing things" (Annie, A: 6); "a state of mind where you do understand properly how the world exists and how you exist, the emptiness" (Jan, A: 67); "a state of mind: it is pure peace and bliss because there is no anger, no mental afflictions... a pure awareness, pure compassion, pure love, pure equanimity (June, A: 74). "a state of mind, of course..., not a place. It's a pure realm. In other words, your mind is free from the body... And there is no more suffering or birth or sickness or death. They're all finished. That's Nirvana" (Ron, A: 109).

Other respondents noted how they considered enlightenment higher than nirvana. For instance, Tamie noted how nirvana could mean that "everything is fine and happiness but... that can break, then the suffering again. So, it is not a permanent place or state" (A: 150), so nirvana is actually as a transitional phase to prepare for enlightenment, "which is another level beyond Nirvana" (Tamie, A: 150).

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<sup>625</sup> Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism*, 202-203.

<sup>626</sup> Bhikkhu, *What is Buddhism*, 107.

While some respondents (Rina, Guy and Zion) considered nirvana in Christian terminology, calling it and comparing it to “heaven,” others stated that the two were different from each other. They explained that nirvana was an outcome of learning, training and practising the Dharma, while heaven was given as a reward for being a believer: “I don’t see nirvana as heaven as some people do. Nirvana is that peaceful, empty place. It’s not about reward at all...” (Corrie, 87). Rom remarked: “nirvana is not heaven... Nirvana is a very misunderstood concept in most of the western world... They equate nirvana with heaven, as a blissful, pleasant state...” (A: 117). June also attempted to clarify its meaning: “Everyone should reach Nirvana. It’s not a place; it’s not heaven... when you superimpose Christian views on Buddhists, you’ll get really confused because... someone thinks Nirvana is like heaven, a place” (A: 74). For Muni, “nirvana is a stage of happiness wherever it is in this life or somewhere else. Nirvana is that ultimate stage. I don’t see that as a heaven realm as such” (A: 99).

For some respondents, nirvana and samsara were closely related and were both present here and now: “In my Buddhist faith, nirvana and samsara are the same thing” (A: 12), stated Bernie. Gal remarked: “We say in Mahayana that Nirvana is right here, before your eyes. This very place is the Pure Land. This very body is the Buddha. It’s right here now” (Gal, A: 57). Likewise, Barn stated the following about nirvana:

You know it’s here, now. So, as samsara, I mean nirvana and samsara coexist. Or you can say that samsara or suffering is the precursor of nirvana. How would you know nirvana if you didn’t have suffering? I would say that I would never take Buddhism up if I didn’t have big suffering. (A: 21)

For respondents who did not follow Theravada Buddhism, such as Annie, Emmi, Jan, June, Kat, Nany and Ross, the ultimate goal in practising Buddhist spirituality was not about reaching nirvana. Nirvana was a step towards becoming enlightened so that they would be able to come back to this life and help sentient beings to be free from suffering. Emmi explained:

For me, nirvana is not that interesting.... I think in a Tibetan Tantric tradition nirvana is sort of a side effect but it’s not the goal because... in the Tibetan tradition everyone

is liberated; you are not interested in going to nirvana until everyone else has reached there. It's more that communal care for everyone else rather than just myself. (A: 44)

Bernie expressed similar sentiments:

You wouldn't be practising Buddhism in order to reach nirvana. That's not the goal.... Mahayana Buddhism or Vajrayana Buddhism that I am into, their teachers make a commitment to come back and back to help people. They don't practise in order to reach nirvana.... Their commitment is to come back to better themselves in order to help more people to come back and back and back to take others with them until there is no other person left behind. You know, to be a help, that's the commitment.... The concept of escaping into nirvana isn't on the mind. So that's not on my agenda. (A: 12)

In short, all respondents held that the Dharma was an important Jewel on their path to become Buddhists. They believed that Taking Refuge in the Dharma enabled them to make commitments to learning Buddhist knowledge and skills and to abiding by the teaching through their practices. They also firmly believed that the Dharma was the tool that equipped them with the necessary wisdom and skills in order to advance in their spiritual lives.

#### **6.2.2.3 Taking Refuge in the Sangha**

Scholars tend to view a Buddhist sangha as a "monastic community."<sup>627</sup> However, for most Buddhist practitioners, a Buddhist sangha is a "community of all Buddhist practitioners."<sup>628</sup> Most respondents understood the Sangha as a community of all Buddhists, a lineage of Buddhism, or as their local Buddhist community. When reflecting on the roles that the Sangha Jewel played in their process of becoming Buddhists, most respondents highlighted two elements, namely the mutual enrichment of a community of the same-minded practitioners and a shared support of spiritual friendships. They believed that the Sangha was an indispensable factor which enabled them to develop their Buddhist learning and practice by providing them with a community of practitioners who shared the same interests and

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<sup>627</sup> Emma Tomalin *et al*, "Cyber Sisters: Buddhist Women's Online Activism and Practices," 13.

<sup>628</sup> Sangharakshita, *The Meaning of Conversion in Buddhism*, 25-27.

necessary spiritual friendship. Most respondents expressed their positive experiences of belonging to a Sangha.

Most respondents who associated with Buddhist groups found that the Sangha was a place for them to advance their Buddhist knowledge, skills and spiritual practices. Corrie, for example, noted that it was productive for her to connect with a Buddhist group to share the same beliefs and practices: “Living in the country, it’s nice to become connected with a group here because it gives me a shared experience. I live in a small country town where there aren’t many Buddhists but it’s nice to actually find people with the like mind...” (A: 89) Demy also found Sangha important, attending a Buddhist study group every Sunday for input and sharing (A: 32-33). Don visited a Buddhist Centre three or four times a week so that he could listen to Dharma talks and to practise meditation. Several other respondents, including Bernie, Emmi, Rina, Corrie, Jan, June, Mary, Nany and Ross, were involved in regular fortnightly gatherings for studies, talks, discussions and meditation.

Spiritual friendship was the second key feature of local Buddhist groups that the converts found truly inspiring. Bernie, Gal and Kat, for example, described friendships that developed at their local Buddhist groups as very important. Gal remarked:

In concrete terms, wonderful friendships, [I have] so many friendships with people involved in our community [which are] very deep, strong, valuable, wonderful. It has been just a great treasure.... That’s what I always feel and that’s what I am so grateful to the community and all of my teachers for; I have had wonderful experiences being with wonderful people, inspiring people. (A: 56-57)

Kat reported that her connections with Buddhist groups was life-changing: “My life has become very Buddhist... the connection with my particular Buddhist groups, it’s very profound.... It’s just very kind. I found that with Tibetan people. I found that with my group as well. So, it changed my life for sure” (A: 81). Bernie also praised the experience of Buddhist belonging: “It [Buddhism] brought me into a community that I feel really at home with, like my other Buddhist friends and my practice group.... So that’s a really a good part of being in a Buddhist group” (A: 14).

While acknowledging the important roles of the Buddhist Sangha in their journey of becoming Buddhists, the respondents also revealed that the type of Buddhist Sangha to which they belonged differed from traditional Buddhist communities. Most of them belonged to a local Buddhist group and participated in the group's activities on a voluntary basis. There were no prescribed obligations. None of them belonged to the "mendicant" type of community or monastic community. Most of the respondents were "householder" Buddhists, with only two individuals, Suzuki and Tan, being celibate Buddhist monks. All respondents, including Suzuki and Tan, lived in their private homes; their gathering-place is either a Buddhist centre or a private home, a part of which is refurbished and furnished to suit as a Dharma (teaching) room, a meditation hall, or a retreat centre. Twenty respondents (83.3%) belonged to a Buddhist group and enjoyed the benefits it provided. Four respondents, however, namely Blanch, Guy, Rom and Zion (16.7%), opted to not belong to any Buddhist group. Except for Guy, a self-claimed dual believer who decided not to affiliate with any Buddhist group, the other three persons did not feel comfortable with Buddhist rituals.

In short, the Sangha played an important role for most of the respondents' in their journey of conversion to Buddhism. It provided them with a necessary context and spiritual friendships, both of which enabled them to advance their religious study and spiritual practices. Making a home with the Sangha Jewel through initiation was, therefore, a vital commitment for the majority of the respondents in the process of conversion.

### **6.2.3 Practising Buddhist Meditation**

Meditation is known not only as one of the attractions that draw Westerners to Buddhism because of its therapeutic techniques<sup>629</sup> but also as an important element that helps practitioners alleviating suffering,<sup>630</sup> or gaining personal self-transformation.<sup>631</sup> All respondents were very committed to Buddhist meditation and practised it regularly, though the frequency varied from one individual to another. Most respondents meditated daily and often more than once a day. Three were practising it three-to-five times per week, with only

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<sup>629</sup> Healey, ed., *Religions in Australia: Religious Beliefs and Trends in Australia*, 12.

<sup>630</sup> Sherwood, *The Buddha is in the Street*, 32.

<sup>631</sup> Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*, 207.



four participants engaging in it casually. The purpose of practising meditation also varied from individual to individual and were quite many, ranging from the psychological and therapeutic to the spiritual.

For a number of respondents, one of the primary benefits of mediation was a way of training their minds. Demy offered a long list of aims of practising meditation in this regard: to gain greater proficiency at a single point of concentration; to familiarize herself with her mind; to understand how her mind operates; to train in conscious intention; to improve the quality of her mind; to understand the states of her mind, especially in relation to delusion; and to become enlightened in order to help others to improve their lives (A: 32). Likewise, for Rina, meditation involved learning about the working of the mind and focusing on the right things: "Meditation is about familiarity: familiarize yourself with the working of the mind and to be focused on virtues" (A: 62). Dual believer Guy also spoke about the mental benefits of meditation, but in a Christian mode, referring to it as a mental practice to train the mind, to let go of ego in order to be awakened to the love of God: "You are awakened to love, and so God is awakened in you.... Meditation or taming of the monkey mind so that as you practise this mental discipline, the noise of the ego subsides in the background and the more you can hear the voice of God within you" (A: 49).

In a related vein, several respondents indicated that their aim (or one of their aims) of practising meditation was to achieve mindfulness. For example, Jan indicated that the purpose of meditation is "mindfulness, being aware of what your mind is doing and being able to recognize when you are doing something stupid and fix it" (A: 66). Mary also emphasized the necessity of meditation in gaining mindfulness as part of practicing the Dharma: "There is no mindfulness without meditation. And there is no practice of the Dharma without meditation. It's necessary" (A: 94).

Some respondents reported that their aim of practising meditation was to gain calmness. Meditation aimed at "self-discipline and slowing down the body and mind to achieve calmness" (Don, A: 40), to calm down in order to concentrate on one's self (Nany, A: 103), and to still the mind and track the emotions and thoughts as they arise and negate themselves (Ross, A: 130). Ron connected mindfulness with calmness when he referred to having "clarity of mind, mindfulness, and tension easing" (Ron, A: 108).

For some, meditation was a way to heal themselves and/or others. For example, Muni reported that meditation was a way to generate energy for personal healing, but also to help others (A: 100), while other participants, such as Guy, Emmi and Bernie, used Buddhist meditation as part of their psycho-therapy counselling. For Annie, meditation helped her “to be more positive in interacting with other people” (A: 7).

Akin to Demy’s reference to conscious intention, Corrie spoke about conscious living:

Instead of life dragging you along, you actually are dragging life along; and it gives you that point of breathing between thinking and saying or doing. So, it puts another dimension into your daily living which I think is central. Otherwise, life is unconscious and automatic. I really am committed to conscious living. And Buddhism to me is conscious living. (A: 88)

Of course, another role of meditation was its spiritual benefits, such as connecting with the Buddha or his teachings through the living lineage (a particular school of Buddhist traditions), the realization of emptiness, and becoming awakened/enlightened. A few respondents believed that through meditation they could connect with the Buddha, the teachings, and/or with the source of energy via the living lineage to which they belonged. For instance, June noted that in meditation “you are connected through the living lineage to the Buddha” (A: 75). Suzuki connected the psychological and spiritual dimensions of meditation; it aimed “to purify the mind, to have a concentration of the mind, to connect with the consciousness of the Buddha and to replace the impure karma with pure karma” (A: 153). Bernie also linked meditation with spirituality, as it worked to “develop the consciousness, to develop the potentials... [which] keep the connections open to the other sacred... [and] to keep alive that connection” (A: 13). For Kat, “meditation was to bring that energy of that yogini into your life to merge with the yogini energy.... It’s a way to connect with your masters” (A: 80).

Tamie identified the relation between meditation and Buddhist doctrines, stating that this practice “will help me in my daily life, to keep my commitment to the path and to the teachings” (A: 150). Similarly, for Ron and Tan, meditation was a practice helping with the realization of emptiness. In the words of Tan: “meditation is sitting in one’s self, sitting in the emptiness of one’s self, sitting in the energy of letting go” (A: 160). Some respondents emphasized the process of becoming awakened as their aim of practising meditation. Barn,

for example, noted that “practising meditation was to be awakened. It was a representation of being awakened, or a deepening of the awakening process, or cultivation of deepening the awareness and of living this awareness in daily life” (A: 21).

For Gal, however, meditation did not aim at achieving anything:

There was no purpose. There is nothing to be gained. I have to teach that to people that all through our lives everything we do, we’ve got some goals, we’ve got something we have to do, we’ve got to gain. It’s always like that. In practising meditation, it’s really stepping out of that mind frame and becoming open to the whole. (A: 55)

Nevertheless, as Gal emphasized, practicing meditation, may bring about the presence of being awakened: “It’s not about going to a dream; it’s not about going to a bliss; it’s not about going to some sort of other stage of mind. It’s about being completely present and awake and alert” (Gal, A: 55).

Summing up, meditation was considered by respondents as an important practice, but the aims they hoped to achieve with it differed. For some, the main purpose was mental, for some it was therapeutic, and for others its main dimension was spiritual growth, with only a handful practising it in order to achieve the ultimate goal in Buddhism, namely, to become awakened.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

The study demonstrated that all of the respondents were attracted to Buddhism due to personal interest. Their first contacts with Buddhism left them with a very positive impression, generating a curiosity to further investigate this tradition. For many, Buddhism was more in line with what they “intuitively” believed, even before they encountered Buddhist teachings. The study also revealed that most respondents acquired solid intellectual training in Buddhism and underwent certain required spiritual practices for a substantial period before they made their commitment to this path. Many respondents undertook training overseas, and returned as Buddhist trainers and mentors. Only a small number of respondents underwent training at local Buddhist communities.

Regarding the commitments that the converts made in Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, they tended to focus primarily on the Dharma (the Buddhist teachings). They did not regard the Buddha as a divine person but as a human who became enlightened and left behind his teachings for others to follow and become awakened like him. The Buddha was, therefore, viewed not as a saviour but as an inspired teacher or guide. Consequently, some respondents felt more connected with the Buddha than with Jesus Christ. For most respondents, the Dharma was the most important element because, together with practising meditation and compassion, it was seen as a tool for obtaining the wisdom needed to become awakened. Respondents also understood the importance of the Sangha in their conversion process, although not to the same extent as with the Dharma. In addition, all respondents were committed to practising meditation and compassion, and regarded these practices as indispensable tools for obtaining enlightenment.

In terms of conversion, the analysis showed that most respondents in this study had made serious commitments to both learning the Buddhist Dharma and practising Buddhist values and meditation. It was also clear that they preferred the Buddhist teachings and practices to the Christian doctrines and activities. This included even the dual-religious believers. Finally, although some respondents still tended to use Christian terms and concepts in expressing their understanding of Buddhism, most of them adopted Buddhist concepts, values and expressions.

## Chapter Seven

### Classifications, Prospects and Challenges of Conversion to Buddhism in Australia

In the previous two chapters, I analysed the causes of conversion to Buddhism in Australia (Chapter Five) and what was involved in the process of conversion (Chapter Six). This chapter examines the level (how far a respondent's conversion took place at the time of interview) to which the conversion of each respondent took place, and presents the positive and negative experiences of the participants as a result of their conversions.

#### 7.1 Conversion as Commitment

Making a commitment is the most crucial stage of religious conversion because it involves a "bridge-burning" event to decisively separate "the old" from "the new" and "provide the individual with powerful subjective experiences that confirm the ideology of the group and transform the convert's self-image."<sup>632</sup> A part of this research was to explore how far the conversion of the respondents took place in terms of their commitment to Buddhist learning and practice according to Coleman's "concentric circles of involvement" model (2012), as discussed in Chapter Three. Coleman proposes four groups, which may be classified in the following way:

- *friends of Buddhism* who have been in one way or another influenced by Buddhist thought or practice;
- *associates of Buddhism* who have gone beyond reading Buddhist materials or attending talks or lectures and have begun some Buddhist practice such as meditation;
- "fully converted Buddhists" who are actively involved in a Buddhist group;
- "professional Buddhists" including practitioners and teachers who dedicate their lives to the Buddhist path and are involved in teaching the Buddhist Dharma;

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<sup>632</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 128.

- in addition to these four groups, I propose another one, namely *dual believers*,<sup>633</sup> who consider themselves as belonging to and practicing both Christian and Buddhist traditions; dual-believers are those who choose to remain in Christianity as their original faith and adopt Buddhism as their additional spiritual path; this phenomenon of dual belonging, can be regarded as a type of religious conversion (Chapter Two).

The following is a discussion of the extent to which respondents self-assessed the extent of their progress in the process of their conversion thus far (i.e., at the time of the interview process). I will also offer my own evaluation, based on the respondents' professed commitment to Buddhism, as revealed in the interviews.

### 7.1.1 Friends of Buddhism

There were two individuals (among twenty-four respondents), namely Zion and Blanch, who identified themselves as belonging to the *friends of Buddhism* group. They had previously been seriously committed to Buddhist teachings and practices, but have questioned and subsequently left the groups with which they were affiliated. Zion acquainted herself with different Buddhist meditation groups for around eight years, but she left them because "I didn't like their liturgies but they don't call them liturgies. They've got the name for them... rituals, yes" (A: 143). Similarly, Blanch had been a Buddhist practitioner since the 1970s and had associated with different Buddhist groups; however, like Zion, Blanch decided to leave those groups because he was uncomfortable with their ritually oriented practices. At the time of the interview, he had been a daily practitioner of the meditation of mindfulness.

On the one hand, Zion and Blanch could be considered in the *friends of Buddhism* category. According to Coleman, this group is known as an outer group, whose constituents display a casual interest in a religious/spiritual tradition and are therefore the least committed.<sup>634</sup> But in the two respondent's cases, their commitment to learning and practising the Buddhist Dharma was serious. Blanch, for example, later admitted in his interview that "conventionally,

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<sup>633</sup> Religious dual belonging has been recently studied by scholars of religious studies, including Cornille, ed. *Many Mansions?*; Phan, "Multiple Religious Belonging,"; Knitter, *Without Thought Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*; Knitter, "A 'Hypostatic Union' of Two Practices but One Person"; Goosen, *Hyphenated Christians*.

<sup>634</sup> Coleman, "Who is a Buddhist?," 36.

yes, I am a Buddhist but I would like to think of myself as more following of the Dharma” (A: 27) and that he would like to pursue a Master’s degree in Buddhism. Similarly, Zion’s commitment to learning and practising Buddhist spirituality was serious. Besides adapting Buddhist ethical teachings and lifestyle into her daily life, such as observing a vegetarian diet as a way to show her respect for life, promoting ecological awareness and peace, etc., she was greatly committed to practising Buddhist meditation. She revealed that because she was not able to associate with any Buddhist group for meditation, she converted one of the main rooms of her home into a meditation room where she could practise daily meditation. She treated her meditation room as a sacred space which was, therefore, only used for this spiritual purpose.

In short, the interviews revealed that because they were not able to affiliate themselves with any Buddhist groups or they were not initiated into Buddhism, Blanch and Zion identified themselves as *friends of Buddhism*. However, in practice, they were committed Buddhist practitioners and would be identified as *associates of Buddhism* – the second category in this analysis.

### **7.1.2 Associates of Buddhism**

The next group which is a step closer to the core group of Coleman’s concentric circle of religious conversion is the *associates of Buddhism*. Two respondents, Demy and Mary, identified themselves as such. Though they associated with Buddhist groups and had gone further in their Buddhist training and practice, they were not initiated. In terms of conversion, they both showed strong commitment to learning and practising Buddhism, and expressed their desire to take further Buddhist training and to prepare themselves for Buddhist initiation. Demy professed that Buddhism had become her “number one interest in life, number one top priority” (A: 32). She devoted much of her time and energy to learning and practicing Buddhist spirituality every day. At the time of the interview, she was planning to undertake postgraduate studies in Buddhism. Similarly, Mary expressed her desire to study the Dharma more deeply as well as to commit herself to following the Buddhist path: “I am just constantly reminding myself that that is the path that I want to follow. It’s so strong in me. There is nothing else that I want to follow. This is the path for my life now” (A: 93).

Again, these two respondents found themselves as *associates of Buddhism* because they had not yet been initiated into Buddhism. However, from the point of their commitment to learning and practising Buddhist spirituality, they were advanced practitioners. They were both committed members of Buddhist groups who had regular gathering for Buddhist talks, meditation, and retreats. In a sense, they were as committed to following the Buddhist path as *fully converted Buddhists* (to which we now turn).

### **7.1.3 Fully Converted Buddhists**

One respondent, Muni, considered herself belonging somewhere between *associates of Buddhism* and *fully converted Buddhists*. This means that she committed herself to learning and practising Buddhism and that she associated with a Buddhist group. However, in terms of conversion, Muni believed that she was a fully converted Buddhist: “I honestly think Christianity and Buddhism have the same essence, the same thing but in practice I am definitely a Buddhist. It feels like it’s the same thing but how to get there I can’t find anything in Christianity for me” (A: 100). Moreover, Muni was formally initiated into Buddhism and took the vow of Bodhisattva in 2007. With this vow, she made her commitment to speedily become an enlightened person, not seeking to enter Nirvana but rather remaining in this world to assist others with achieving enlightenment. In practice, Muni was a *fully converted Buddhist*.

Emmi, Jan, June, Nany, and Ross considered themselves as belonging to the group of *fully converted Buddhists*. They had been officially associated with Buddhist groups and actively involved in learning and practicing Buddhist spirituality and values. In terms of conversion, all these respondents showed serious commitment to following the Buddhist path by being initiated to become full Buddhists. Through the ritual of initiation, they received their Buddhist names which were given by their teachers; they also took Buddhist precepts (There are five Precepts for lay Buddhists and many for monks and nuns (227 to 253 for males and 290 to 354 for females), depending on schools or traditions. Five basic precepts: (1) abstaining from killing living beings; (2) abstaining from taking things not given; (3) abstaining from



sexual misconduct; (4) abstaining from false speech; and (5) abstaining from alcohol and all intoxicants.)<sup>635</sup>

#### **7.1.4 Professional Buddhists**

Annie and Bernie considered themselves as belonging somewhere between *fully converted Buddhists* and *professional Buddhists* groups. They were committed to practising Buddhism and took some casual roles in teaching Buddhism to others. Annie was a member of a Buddhist institute and participated in a local Tibetan Buddhist group. She had been practising meditation for about thirty-five years. At the time of the interview, she practised meditation daily, normally twice a day. Each session lasted from thirty to forty-five minutes. She helped set up a Buddhist services centre for the dying where she had been working as a counsellor for sixteen years. Bernie was an active member of a Buddhist group. She worked as a professional Buddhist therapist at a Buddhist centre. She took the vow of the Bodhisattva and maintained her Buddhist practices faithfully.

Eight respondents construed themselves as belonging to the *professional Buddhists* group: Barn, Corrie, Kat, Rom, Ron, Tamie, Suzuki and Tan. Of these eight *professional Buddhists*, two of them were celibate monks: Tan (following the Tibetan tradition) and Suzuki (following Pure Land Buddhism); both of them were qualified Buddhist teachers and spiritual leaders. The other six respondents were involved in teaching, conducting meditations, and hosting retreats. In terms of conversion, these individuals were *fully converted Buddhists* and had been professionally engaged in teaching Buddhism and practising Buddhist spirituality as their way of life.

#### **7.1.5 Dual Belongers**

Don, Gal, Guy and Rina identified themselves as *dual believers*. In the process of their conversion, they did not leave their original Christian tradition but adopted Buddhism as their additional or main religious path. As a consequence, their religious identity was changed and they became something new, i.e., dual believers. However, the respondents' religious identity and commitment differed from one another. For example, Don saw himself as a

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<sup>635</sup> Bhikkhu, *What is Buddhism*, 77-87.

Catholic-Buddhist, with a preferred affiliation to Buddhism: “I am happy with both Catholicism and Buddhism... I follow Buddhist principles more than Catholic principles” (A: 41). He indicated that he kept a minimal connection with Catholicism, such as attending relatives’ and friends’ marriages, baptisms and funerals for the sake of keeping familial unity and showing respect to them. His approach to religions may be understood in terms of the “New Age”<sup>636</sup> or “spiritual supermarket.”<sup>637</sup> “So, not everything in Buddhism is for me, I know that, likewise Catholicism. I think I pick and choose what is good to me” (A: 41).

Gal considered herself belonging somewhere between the categories of *professional Buddhists* and *dual believers*. She noted that her life had been always rooted in Christian values yet she had developed her knowledge and skills in Buddhism to the point that she had been involved in teaching Buddhist philosophy and meditation at university. In this way, Gal considered herself a *dual believer* who simultaneously lived and practised the two traditions. However, being more rooted in Buddhism, Gal identified herself as Christian-Buddhist. Rina also described herself as a Christian-Buddhist. This means that she remained in her Christian faith but took the Buddhist path as her primary religion. The reason that she chose Buddhism as her core religion was that “The Buddhist path... just makes so much sense to me and it helps me more [than Christianity does]” (A: 61). She also believed that “I see Jesus as a Bodhisattva, like on the par with the Buddha. So, they are like two practitioners” (A: 62).

It was a different story with Guy, who considered himself a Buddhist-Christian. By describing himself as a Buddhist-Christian, he meant that he opted to remain with Christianity as his primary religion and affiliated with Buddhism as his secondary religious path. He consciously decided not to be associated with any Buddhist group for fear that he would not fulfil the obligations required of him. In practice, Guy was devoting a quarter of his time to learning and practising Buddhism.

### 7.1.6 Summary

The study shows that many respondents self-identified as *professional Buddhists*, making up 41.7% of the respondents, followed by the *fully converted Buddhists* with 25.3%, then the

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<sup>636</sup> Cornille, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>637</sup> Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 10.

*dual believers* with 16.7%, and finally the other two groups, i.e., *friends of Buddhism* and *associates of Buddhism*, with 8.3% each. The study also shows that eighteen respondents (75% of the participants) were initiated Buddhists, and that six (25%) were not initiated. Taking initiation means that one was officially recognized as a Buddhist and that one decided to seriously commit oneself to following the Buddha by practising the Dharma in a Sangha.

Despite the varied levels of conversion among the respondents, in terms of their self-assessments, apart from Guy and Don – who used the “religious supermarket” approach to Buddhism – the other converts were seriously committed to learning and practising Buddhism. It is important to note that, in terms of commitment, it would be wrong to assume that the initiated ones were more committed and devoted to Buddhism than those who were not initiated. The findings revealed that some of those who were not initiated, namely Demy, Rom and Blanch, were serious practitioners of Buddhism. They committed themselves to developing their understanding of Buddhism academically, to practising meditation seriously, and to being deeply involved in different Buddhist activities. This finding suggests that the *concentric model* as proposed by Coleman functions only as a useful marker or guideline by which the converts identify the stages of their conversion to Buddhism, but that it does not necessarily reflect their true commitment to Buddhism or level of conversion.

Similar cases were also found with religious dual believers who took Buddhism as an additional religious path to their Christian faith. In terms of conversion, like those who had a single religious affiliation, the dual believers’ self-assessments of religious affiliation also varied between individuals. While Guy called himself a Buddhist-Christian and did not belong to any Buddhist community, Gal and Rina identified themselves as Christian-Buddhists and affiliated themselves to Buddhist groups. The difference was that, in the former case, the Christian identity was the priority, with an additional Buddhist affiliation, while in the latter cases, the prior identity had shifted to Buddhism, while keeping Christianity as a secondary affiliation. This was not only a matter of claiming a religious identity but it is indicative of the convert’s level of commitment to one or the other tradition.

As previously mentioned, Don and Guy reflected the mentality of the “religious supermarket,” whereby practitioners select what suits their liking. Guy, while being faithful to his Christian faith and adopting the Buddhist teachings and practices as an addition to his spiritual life, was

not affiliated to a Buddhist community. He remained Christian in terms of religious affiliation and took on Buddhist spirituality and practices. In contrast to Guy, Don claimed himself as belonging to two traditions and selected certain teachings and practices from them that suited or “made sense” to him. He confessed that his main purpose of practising the Christian faith was to merely maintain his familial and social relationships, and that his Buddhist practices and affiliation would offer him both spiritual and intellectual nourishment.

## **7.2 Positive and Negative Experiences**

One important aspect of religious conversion is the experiences that the converts had in their journeys of spiritual changes and growth. Like any other religious conversion, conversion to Buddhism is an “act of the soul” that involves both giving up the old and taking on the new. Conversion to Buddhism, in particular, is a process of gradual becoming which may not require the converts to exclusively denounce their original faith – as is the case with conversion to monotheistic religions. Moreover, the Buddhist converts may add their new faith tradition to their existing one, which is known as religious dual belonging. Whatever form conversion to Buddhism may take, however, it consists of both enrichment and difficulties, growth and challenges. The following sub-sections discuss the positive and negative effects of becoming Buddhists.

### **7.2.1 Satisfaction**

All respondents, regardless of their level of conversion, highlighted their positive experiences of conversion to Buddhism. Annie, For example, stated: “I think it [Buddhism] has given me a way of moving my life in a positive direction. It has helped me to somehow be connected with positive things in my life, with things that give me satisfaction so that I feel worthwhile” (A: 7). This positive attitude was commonly reflected in different areas of the respondents’ religious conversion experiences. The changes that they experienced were liberating and enriching in the sense that the respondents felt free and responsible for their learning and practices. Unlike “conversions for convenience,” where people become converts for various reasons of advantage, or “forced conversions,” where converts feel pressured or are coerced by other people or circumstances, all respondents in this study turned to Buddhism as a result of their voluntary search for spiritual nourishment. They took the initiative in seeking and

developing their spiritual learning and practising in Buddhism. The outcomes of their conversion were therefore positive and enriching.

The research indicates that there was a clear sense of satisfaction among the respondents as a result of their conversion to Buddhism. There was no significant difference between individuals belonging to the five groups. Fourteen respondents (58%) were “absolutely” or “very” satisfied with following the Buddhist path. This includes respondents from all five groups: Blanch from *friends of Buddhism*; Demy from *associates of Buddhism*; Emmi, June, Muni and Nany from *fully converted Buddhists*; Annie, Barn, Corrie, Kat, Rom, Tamie and Tan from *professional Buddhists*; and Guy from *dual believers*. It is interesting to note that people could be very satisfied regardless of how far they had advanced on their journey of conversion. This indicates that the respondents did not perceive conversion to Buddhism as an achievement but rather as a journey of becoming, and that satisfaction or fulfilment was not determined by how far practitioners have thus far advanced in their spiritual life.

Nine respondents (37.5%) were moderately satisfied with their new spiritual life. Again, this group consists of people across the board: Zion from *friends of Buddhism*; Mary from *associates of Buddhism*; Jan and Ross from *fully converted Buddhists*; Bernie and Suzuki from *professional Buddhists*; and Don, Rina and Gal from *dual believers*. The general feeling of this moderate satisfaction group was one of gratitude and thankfulness toward Buddhism for enriching their life. However, some individuals were not “at ease” with where they were at, but wanted to advance further on their religious path. Mary, for example, expressed her wish to deepen her Buddhist knowledge and skills to prepare herself for taking initiation in Tibetan Buddhism; Ross indicated that he was happy but felt challenged by the complexity of Buddhism; and Zion was generally content with her current religious state, but she felt a desire to continue her quest.

Ron was not satisfied with his progress, despite being a *professional Buddhist* who was advanced in his Buddhist knowledge and skills, and had made a considerable contribution to Buddhism in Australia, such as building a Buddhist centre on his large property, and establishing and running different Buddhist programs. He explained his dissatisfaction in terms of his need for more clarity regarding the teaching.

### 7.2.2 Positive Changes

The study shows that the respondents experienced some positive changes as a result of their conversion to Buddhism. Some common experiences that they mentioned were changes in the following aspects of their lives: their faith or beliefs; their attitudes towards life and ways of life; their personalities or temperaments; their perceptions of self and reality; the healing of trauma; and their relationships with their selves and others.

Regarding changes in their faith or beliefs, almost all respondents switched their faith completely to Buddhism or considered Buddhism as their primary religion while keeping Christianity as secondary one as in the cases of dual belonging. In terms of their conversions being life-changing, Kat, Nany and Ron, for example, experienced a radical change of life and saw Buddhism as an integral part of their life. Nany professed: "It's changed my life.... It's home for me. It resonates with me. It is me. I am it and it is me" (A: 105). Ron remarked: "I take vows myself every day. A vow is really good... but you don't take the vow, you can live the vow without taking the vow" (A: 108). And Kat explained the impact of her conversion on her life in the following way:

My life has become very Buddhist. It has almost become like a hundred percent of my life, the connection with my particular Buddhist groups and then having this access to the wonderful teachers in India like being able to go and visit them when I go to India and go and sit with them and talk to them. It's very profound, the connection is very profound. Plus, I was marrying a Tibetan man and have become quite involved in the Tibetan community and people as well. So, it has really become my life, like for a long time now... So, it changed my life for sure. (A: 81)

Several other respondents also reported that their life was so much enriched and more meaningful (Barn, Demy, Emmi, June, Muni) and that they became happier or more contented (Barn, Demy, Muni, Rom).

Most respondents revealed that in becoming Buddhists they encountered a change in their understanding of self and reality. This is understandable, given that, in sharp contrast to mainstream Christianity's permanent and everlasting soul, Buddhism teaches non-self and impermanence. Many respondents believed that there was an ego-self existing for everyone;

however, it was not a permanent entity but was always subject to change under the law of impermanence. The respondents reported that this Buddhist teaching helped them “to focus on the understanding of the ego in my life” (Guy, A: 49). By ego, they talked about materialistic and ideological realities of the self, such as the “I,” money, possession, power, worldview, beliefs, and so on, which Christianity tended to define in terms of a permanent ego or self, while Buddhism construed them in terms of non-self and impermanence. All respondents emphasized the Buddhist teaching that everything was subject to change, including the self. They claimed that this change in their understanding of subjectivity helped them to shift their focus in life. Most of them noticed that they became less attached to material things, fame or power, and became more compassionate to other people and life. They also indicated that they spent more time and energy on developing Buddhist knowledge, wisdom, compassion, skills, and the practices of meditation and loving kindness. An extreme case was Ron who, while working full-time to support his family, spent four to six hours of practising meditation every day.

Several respondents reported a change in their temperament, from often being angry, jealous, and harsh individuals to being more patient, tolerant, gentle and mindful as a result of their conversion. Nany, for example, experienced changes in her personality: “I am a lot more today a calmer person. My view of the world has slightly been altered. I have been always a giving and loyal person, very kind person. But I always was quick tempered. I would say without thinking.... I am different now” (A: 104-105). Barn also noticed the way in which Buddhism has affected him: “I am very much at peace with myself.” (A: 22) Other respondents, such as June, Muni, Ross and Suzuki also experienced similar changes in personality. Emmi also explained how Buddhism allowed her to overcome the obstructive feeling of guilt: “There is always obstacles in life but then we have the ability to learn from mistakes and be honest from mistakes and be kind... to oneself and others, like I don’t feel so much guilt...” (A: 45).

A few respondents, such as Emmi, Corrie and Tamie, experienced a healing of their past trauma and damages due to therapeutic treatment through Buddhist teachings and practices. They reported that Buddhism helped them overcome “great trauma” (Corrie, A: 89) caused by “abusive upbringing” (Corrie, A: 89) and physical/psychological damages caused by the legacy of their former religious traditions. Tamie revealed the following: “Yes, in my life I used

to be very difficult.... And the Catholic Church doesn't realize, doesn't want to take responsibility for the damage that they do, the priests and their institution and nuns" (Tamie, A: 151). Corrie explained how Buddhism "allowed me to move beyond a period of great trauma. I had a quite abusive upbringing and I was able to step beyond that and leave it behind... So intellectually and emotionally it helped enormously" (A: 89).

Some respondents noted that becoming Buddhist practitioners changed the way they interacted with other people. Mary, Muni, and Barn believed that practising meditation improved their relationships with others and also how it has affected other people. Mary, for example, reported: "This [relationship] has changed, for instance, the relationship with my husband. I meditate and, in its karma, he becomes more compassionate with everybody; he's more gentle" (A: 94). Barn also noticed: "I have a really lovely relationship [with his later wife]" (A: 21).

In summary, most converts experienced some changes in themselves and/or their lives. There was a clear change of heart with most of the converts, shifting the focus of their life from being self-centred to being other-centred. When dealing with the issue of enlightenment, most of them placed the focus on helping other sentient beings to be free from suffering, which, for some, manifested as profound changes in their relationships with others, both in their families and in their business. Their lives also became more meaningful; they felt free and more responsible in living out their religious commitment. It was also clear that many of the converts experienced a profound change in temperament. Buddhist teachings and practices helped them to be more gentle, patient and compassionate. By Going for Refuge, they felt a sense of being enriched both intellectually and spiritually, and of belonging to not only a religious tradition but also a community of supportive friends.

### **7.3 Ultimate Religious Goals**

The heart of the Buddha's teaching lies in the Four Noble Truths which teach about suffering (*dukkha*) and the way to end it (*marga*).<sup>638</sup> This means that the ultimate goal of practising Buddhism is to end suffering or to become enlightened.<sup>639</sup> Concerning this ultimate goal,

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<sup>638</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha As Brothers* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1999), 124.

<sup>639</sup> Sangharakshita, *The Meaning of Conversion in Buddhism*, 76.



there was a mixture of opinions among the respondents. As discussed below, the study identified three different groups in this respect. The first group included those who aimed at becoming enlightened and strived to achieve it in this life. The second group consisted of those who also set this goal but did not believe they could achieve it in this life. The third group comprised those who did not have this ultimate goal, instead enjoying their practices of Buddhist spirituality here and now. These differences seem to derive from the different emphases on the teachings of various Buddhist schools or thoughts. For example, while the Theravada tradition, known as the Small Vehicle, emphasizes that liberation can only be obtained by individuals who leave the worldly life to join the monastic lifestyle, the Mahayana tradition, known as the Great Vehicle, focuses more on the universal liberation of all who follow and practise the Buddhist path. Likewise, while the Tantric traditions are more ritually based, and liberation is understood as more universal, the Zen tradition focuses more on meditation and liberation, and is normally understood as private and individualistic.

### **7.3.1 Enlightenment as a Possibility**

The study found eight respondents (33.3%) who set their ultimate goal to be enlightened or to become a Buddha in this life and strove to achieve it. Acknowledging that this would be a very difficult and distant goal to reach, these converts still believed that the possibility was there. Annie stated: "I think again it's a possibility, it's a very distant thing for me. So, I'll be happy just to move in a positive way in that direction. And if it comes, I'll be very pleased" (A: 6). Like Annie, Kat had doubts but was still hopeful: "I would like to achieve enlightenment but I doubt. I don't think I can achieve it in this life time. Maybe I will but I wouldn't be so bold" (A: 82). Muni and Ron appeared more confident: "To end suffering for all beings.... I'd be happy to constantly be living to achieve that goal. That is a goal that I can achieve, why not? I set a goal that is really, really hard and I keep doing it forever" (Muni, A: 101); "It can happen tomorrow. It's just a matter of getting rid of stuff and the right message" (Ron, A: 111). Some other converts (Emmi, Jan, June, Nany and Mary) were even more ambitious in this regard, clearly setting enlightenment as an achievable goal, and demonstrated by investing a large amount of their day to learning and practising Buddhism. Their focus on learning and practising Buddhism was to attain enlightenment in order to end their own suffering and to help all sentient beings to end their suffering.

This optimistic view was partly shared by the two dual-belongers, Rina and Guy. Unlike the other converts, they used a mixture of terms and concepts of both Christian and Buddhist origin to explain how to achieve their ultimate goal. For example, Guy talked about obtaining salvation of “my soul” by “conquering aspects of my ego that blocks the spark of God from awakening, or cooperating with the Holy Spirit to expedite that, to cause this from awakening to happen in the most sufficient manner” (A: 49). For him, awakening could be obtained according to three interwoven steps: first of all, realizing that “God is wisdom and love. When you seek wisdom, if God is within you, this wisdom is all awakened”; “the second way is sure with a practice of loving kindness”; and “through the help of a spiritual master.... A spiritual master is very important I believe. For me... spiritual master is simply a soul that has allowed God’s presence to penetrate it and consume it” (A: 49). In this regard, Guy referred to Jesus, who “more than any master, allowed the fullness of God’s redemptive activities to manifest in him” (A: 49). Therefore, Guy believed that “through my relationship with Jesus, I find that he helps me in my awakening” (A: 49). In a similar manner, Rina believed that nirvana or heaven was the same thing or stage which could be reached by a “direct realization” of suffering. For her, the way to achieve this direct realization “requires a lot of training, a lot of meditation and purification of your karma” (A: 61). She also acknowledged that both the Buddha and Jesus were awakened teachers who could help her to be awakened: “I see Jesus as a Bodhisattva like on the par with the Buddha” (A: 62). Besides taking on Buddhist training, meditation and purification of karma, Rina also realized that “we’re supposed to do, to live like Jesus” (A: 61) because “if we live as Jesus lived, we can become like him” (A: 60).

It is interesting to note that these two dual-belongers concentrated more on their personal enlightenment while the other converts – who likewise strove to become awakened to end their own suffering – were also concerned with helping others to attain enlightenment.

### **7.3.2 Enlightenment as an Improbability/Impossibility**

Annie, Demy, Don and Ross (16.6% of the participants) regarded enlightenment as their ultimate goal but believed that it would be impossible (or at least improbable) for them to achieve this goal in this life. They believed that it would require a lot more practice to reach nirvana and that it might even take many life times: “But it’s a long way, maybe many life times” (Demy, A: 35); “I’ve got a long way to go” (Annie, A: 7); “Well, this life time I don’t think

I will reach nirvana” (Don, A: 41); “for me, it’s quite a distant goal” (Ross, A: 131). None of the converts, however, were discouraged by their scepticism. On the contrary, they were determined to be more committed to Buddhist studies and practices just to progress as much as they could in this life time: “So in this life time I just progress as much as I can” (Demy, A: 35); “I think it’s just living my life peacefully, living all the precepts, all the guidelines and the dharma.... I just keep working and living and being as best as I can” (Don, A: 41). Ross even expressed a certain contentedness of considering enlightenment as an improbability/impossibility: “I am happy just to sort of cruise along as I am” (A: 131). Despite their doubt (or perhaps “complacency,” in Don’s case), they were nonetheless committed to advancing their spiritual life in Buddhism and hoped to end all sufferings for themselves and other sentient beings.

### **7.3.3 No Goals**

The rest of the respondents (50%) claimed that they did not have a religious ultimate goal. The reasons provided varied from individual to individual. For example, for Blanch and Gal, the ultimate goal was not as important as leading a good life and being helpful here and now. This was because their understanding of nirvana and enlightenment was not tied to the future but to the present. Gal explained: “We say in Mahayana that Nirvana is right here, before your eyes. This very place is the Pure Land. This very body is the Buddha. It’s right here now” (A: 57). Likewise, for Blanch, awakening is not the priority: “Oh no, it’s not important to me. I think a good life is enough for me. I don’t see the enlightenment; it’s great, but not important” (A: 27). This understanding foregrounded the idea that Buddhism was a way of life (rather than a stepping-stone to a spiritual goal).

Barn expressed doubt regarding whether he even had a supreme spiritual aim: “I don’t think I have that kind of ultimate goal. No, these are things that may or may not happen.” (A: 22). Corrie was of a similar mind: “There is a lovely saying in many of the texts that on a spiritual path you’re always at the beginning. So, to me it’s not about having a goal. Every day you sit down something new arises or something old you forget about slaps on your face again” (A: 89). Similarly, Tamie took a clear stand on her practical understanding of this Buddhist goal: “No, just keep going and do the best I can” (A: 151). Bernie believed that nirvana was not her ultimate goal because “In my Buddhist faith nirvana and samsara are the same thing” so that

“You wouldn’t be practising Buddhism in order to reach nirvana. That’s not the goal” (Bernie, A: 12). He further explained:

Mahayana Buddhism or Vajrayana Buddhism that I am into, their teachers make a commitment to come back and back to help people. They don’t practise in order to reach nirvana and they are released from life as human beings. Their commitment is to come back to better themselves in order to help more people to come back and back and back to take others with them until there is no more person left behind. You know, to be a help, that’s the commitment.... The concept of escaping into nirvana isn’t in mind. So that’s not in my agenda. (A: 12)

Finally, Ross expressed doubt not only about achieving awakening but even the fundamental Buddhist practices: “My belief is probably not but I am not saying that that cannot happen. I don’t know enough to answer that question. But to get enlightened and to do day to day activities I don’t think so because there are too many distractions” (A: 131). For him, in order to be able to become enlightened, one has to renounce oneself and take up the monastic life: “I think to become enlightened, you would have done your day to day activities previously and then in your next life you may move into more meditation or being a monk or something like that. You’d be moving closer to that goal” (A: 131).

#### **7.4 No Negative Experiences**

Beside the positives outcomes of conversions to Buddhism in Australia, this study also sought to determine whether converts did not experience any difficulties, and whether they experienced hurdles and the nature of these challenges. In this section, I briefly discuss those cases where converts (including dual believers) did not experience challenges (which may thus be construed as a kind of “positive” in a negative sense, i.e., the lack of a negative may be considered a positive). It will become evident that these cases were the exception, given that most of the converts experienced difficulties due to their conversion process.

The first case of those who did not encounter challenges was dual believers, Gal, Guy and Rina. The interviews showed that these individuals were tolerant in dealing with religious differences and obstacles. For instance, Gal explained her open attitude: “No, I don’t [have any obstacles].... If there is a tension, I just recognize it. But I don’t experience tensions

because I am very at ease among Christians, my friends. And I've grown up a Christian" (A: 56). For Gal, it was not only possible but also enriching to be both Christian and Buddhist at the same time: "being a Zen person makes me a better Catholic" (A: 56). While acknowledging the differences between the two religious traditions, Rina did not encounter tensions or difficulties in terms of the beliefs and practices stemming from either Buddhism or Christianity. For her, the differences were "minor things, not important," and "The most important things are, I see in my life, maintaining virtues, not harming others but helping others as much as possible. And you can do that in both [traditions]." (A: 63)

Likewise, Guy was not negatively affected by being a dual believer:

I don't feel it [tension] because I was not baptised as a Buddhist, because I don't have a particular loyalty to a particular Buddhist sector or a Buddhist group but more to the body of Buddhist philosophy that I feel is free for anyone to take. I can take it and draw from it as I wish. So, I don't see any contradiction there. It's only to those people who feel if you belong to the two communities then you've got to divide your time accordingly. And if you spend too much time in a Buddhist system or in a Buddhist community... how do you reconcile your involvement in a Catholic thing? (A: 48-49)

Ross and Tamie also did not encounter challenges when becoming Buddhist practitioners, and explained it in terms of their attitude of appreciation for Buddhist teachings. For example, Ross singled out the Buddhist teaching on "reincarnation" which, in his view, integrated all other Buddhist teachings:

No, as I said before, with everything I've come across so far, there is nothing that I've really said: "no, that's not right." It's just what integrates sort of Buddhism is reincarnation, and as I said before, intellectually I've got all that. But emotionally, through my whole body, I am almost there. Because that really makes everything work properly, the karma and everything. (A: 130)

Besides his appreciation of the doctrine of reincarnation as a way of diffusing any negative brought about by the conversion process, Ross also explained that he did not encounter difficulties with accepting Buddhist teaching (which is one of the categories of negative experiences discussed below): "the basic teachings of Buddhism are very good. On a straight out philosophical, intellectual basis, the teachings are excellent in any way" (A: 130). Similarly, Tamie expressed that she was not challenged in a negative way by the Buddhist teachings:

I think I am more [interested in], for example, the teaching about self and non-self. I've read many books. The westerners try to explain about this. No. It's really simple. It's about relationship with people. I think a lot of western people get themselves into the understanding of non-self but really lose the sense of self. Ultimately we are individuals. (A: 150)

In short, these five individuals (Gal, Guy, Rina, Ross and Tamie) claimed themselves as not having difficulties with (a) becoming dual believers or (b) the Buddhist teachings. In the first case, this was due to the participants' strong connection with their original religious tradition, and in the second case, their openness in learning and adopting new religious teachings and values, as well as their and their appreciation of Buddhist philosophy. Except for Guy, who was not fully committed to Buddhism in his religious identity and spiritual life, the four other respondents became fully Buddhists or Christian-Buddhists, having taken initiations and vows.

## **7.5 Difficulties of Becoming Buddhists in Australia**

We now proceed to the negative experiences that the respondents encountered on their journeys of conversion. They are categorized in terms of general challenges (familial conflict, friction between different Buddhist schools, etc.), obstacles associated with Buddhist teaching and practice, and social tensions arising from the respondents' conversions.

### **7.5.1 General Challenges**

A first identified tension related to a convert's familial relations (the interviews disclosed only one respondent who experienced this tension). Corrie's marriage broke down as a consequence of her conversion. She recounted her conversion's role in the breakdown: "It [my conversion] certainly was a contributing factor to the cessation of my first marriage because my partner at the time paid lip service to my philosophy and at the end of the day the divergence of thought meant that we no longer suited one another" (A: 89). This was obviously an extreme case of relational discord. Nevertheless, Corrie accepted the consequence on the basis of deep reflection and understanding:

So, and that was okay; it was not a sadness; it was an understanding. My choices like all choices in life have had some consequences and I've accepted all those consequences with an honest to knowing. So, there's obviously a process of grief and

letting go but it's a conscious choice to step on this pathway. Yes, so I can only say it has brought me some wonderful things. (A: 89)

Another challenge that some respondents encountered was that Buddhism had been filtered through Christian structures and concepts. Rom was concerned about Western Buddhism which, according to his view, "obscures things" (A: 122). He pointed out that there was a radical change in the nature of Buddhism from non-theistic to theistic religion: "But to my understanding, Buddhism is non-theistic religion.... If Christians are bringing Buddhism together, I am not sure if they are fully aware of the problems" (A: 122). In this regard, Jan was troubled with accepting the belief in Tibetan Buddhism that there were deities who reflected different aspects of the Buddha (A: 67). Rom also believed that there was a conceptual problem with the definition of a Buddhist in the West. It seemed Buddhist identity in the West was a "self-claimed" or "self-labelled" business: "Anyone who claims to be a Buddhist is a Buddhist. Okay, it's the simplest definition. Anyone who self-labels is going to be a Buddhist. Probably, that is the only way to define Buddhists.... So, it's a problematic area of definition" (A: 122). Rom's concern might be true with the Buddhist population as shown in the Australian national census: in principle, one is officially recognized as Buddhist through his/her initiation to Buddhism.

Emmi noticed some tension between different schools of Buddhism. She experienced some sense of competition or jealousy among different schools: "Sometimes when I see within Buddhism different schools getting jealous of each other, the usual human reaction: 'I am better than you.' Then I just get sad.... I sometimes wish we can rise beyond that" (A: 45).

### **7.5.2 Challenges with Buddhist Teachings**

The study shows that different individuals had different difficulties with understanding or accepting certain Buddhist teachings or practices. Muni struggled with the belief that every Buddhist teaching could be rationalised and was open to interpretations. This approach, in her view, could be misused to justify certain actions for convenience. For example, some people believed that it was fine for Buddhists to eat meat because "In fact you can use it as a practice to purify the karma of the animals that you are eating" (A: 100). She sought to resolve this tension in the following way:

everything I get taught I bring it back to the idea of intention. Everything whether something is good or bad or right or wrong is in the intention. You might even do something which looked like being terrible but it came honestly from the place of love then it has to be the right thing.... So, I struggle some times and I find some teachings that are convenient for some people at different times. (A: 100)

For Demy, the basic challenge regarding Buddhist teachings was that Buddhism as a whole was a very difficult process to understand and to practise effectively. She stated: "Absolutely, the whole thing is very hard.... It's been a very difficult process, that is, lots of struggles, lots of resistance, lots of suffering" and that it "takes a lot of effort." (A: 33) Tan reported that a "Buddhist is known in the West from the Australian point of view as an intellectual. I am not an intellectual. I am a Buddhist trainee. So, I have a lot of difficulties with that" (A: 161). He also found it "very hard to accept some of the teachings because it takes a lot of intelligence which I don't have like logic and reasoning... It's one of the most complicated studies you can ever imagine because the Tibetan structure is very advanced" (A: 160).

More specifically, some respondents had difficulties with understanding teachings such as creating karma and gaining merit (spiritual credits to be earned by good deeds, acts or thoughts), and the ghost and hell realms (ghost realm is above hell realm but under human realm). Blanch, for example, could not understand the link between karma and merits. He found it hard to comprehend a belief that by generating positive merits, one could reduce the consequences of negative karma: "You've seen in South East Asia of common householders gaining merits by giving things to the religious elites" (A: 28). Kat struggled to come to terms with the meaning of karma and how it was interpreted and applied: "I don't agree with some other things like as a child being sexually abused might be their karma... You know like an abusive karma. I don't see it as a child's karma. So that can be quite unsettling" (A: 82). June and Annie found the concepts of the ghost and hell realms as "illogical" and therefore "horribly hard to take" (June, A: 75). When confronted with these teachings, converts tended to "put them aside" (June, A: 75; Annie, A: 7). This attitude again reflected the "New Age" or discretionary approach to religions.

Non-self and emptiness were also recognized as difficult teachings for some converts like Rom, Blanch, Jan and Nany. Rom pointed out that, while western culture was "built on selves"



and “servicing self,” Buddhism emphasized non-self and emptiness (A: 122): this contradiction created a great challenge for western converts. In a similar line of thought, Blanch was concerned about the application of the teaching of non-self and guilt:

If there is no self... how do you punish a murderer? It's like sex. They never talk about these things.... I think that's a real challenge for Buddhism. I think the things about guilt, in a civil society or any society, how do you punish someone if they are no permanent self? I don't understand. It [Buddhism] never talks about this. (A: 28)

Rom raised questions about some teachings of Pure Land Buddhism. The most problematic teaching for him was the oversimplicity of salvation where “they say that no precept is needed. If you say the name of this Buddha ten times with faith, you will go to pure heaven after death and from there you will go to nirvana” (A: 121). For Rom, this teaching contradicts the teaching of karma where one must be responsible for one's actions. The other problematic teaching for Rom was the Buddha nature. Rom noticed that this teaching could obscure Buddhism and cause it to be a theistic religion: “This is also called, for you, a theistic [religion], because it was not there in early Buddhism. That's a problem we have. There is no teaching about the Buddha nature. Even the word Buddha nature comes in later by the time it gets to China” (A: 121). The infallibility of a guru was also noted as a problematic issue. Ron reported that “They say you're supposed to look at your teachers as gurus who can do no wrong. Even if he does, he does it for a reason. I have a problem with that” (A: 110). He linked this teaching with “blind faith” (A: 110).

### **7.5.3 Challenges with Buddhist Practices**

A number of Buddhist practices were also challenging to various converts. The most problematic was meditation. One difficulty was that, since most of them were lay practitioners who worked full-time and performed various familial duties and responsibilities, respondents found it difficult to devote a substantial time to practising regular meditation. They struggled to find enough time to practise meditation daily. Demy also noted the arduousness of meditation: “the meditation practice is very difficult. I struggle every day when I am doing it” (A: 35). While others did not experience problems with meditation, they encountered difficulties with ritualistic activities, especially Buddhist prayers or puja, incense and offering (Blanch, A: 26). Zion remarked: “with their sort of pujas and things I just couldn't

get into them. I've tried to ask them to explain and it was just uncomfortable for me. Yes, it wasn't comfortable" (A: 143). Jan, too, found it hard to practice devotion to deities in Tibetan Buddhism (A: 67). Jan was challenged by the notion of "devotion to a teacher who is treated as a Buddha by the students" (A: 67). He explained: "Doing prostration... was something that Western people are not accustomed of doing. Doing prostration to someone else is putting yourself below them" (A: 67-68).

#### **7.5.4 Social Tensions**

Some respondents encountered certain forms of religious intolerance (or nervously anticipated intolerance), which is not surprising, given that Australia remains significantly (nominally) Christian, especially in broadly Anglo-Celtic areas (various states, suburbs and country towns). Buddhism was still a foreign religion. It was even regarded as "the work of the devil" (Barn, A: 24). Tan reported that people in his neighbourhood regarded "a Buddhist as a non-believer. And being a non-believer, they worship idols" (A: 161).

Rina, who lived in a small town where most of the inhabitants were (at least nominally) Christians, was the only Buddhist-Catholic. She felt that she could not tell her Catholic friends about her becoming Buddhist:

most of the people must be horrified if they knew [that I was a Buddhist]. And I haven't told the priest... Because one day he said that he saw his Holiness the Dalai Lama on television; he said, "he is a lovely little man, isn't he?" It's almost as if there is no substance to him [the priest]. But if he only knew what he said. And I thought to myself then I should talk to him about that because His Holiness the Dalai Lama is probably a Buddha. (A: 63)

Some respondents also struggled with the fact that they did not have a local Buddhist community or Buddhist friends with which to share their spiritual needs. Rina, Blanch and Suzuki experienced this disadvantage. The causes for this were varied among individuals. Living in a remote town where there were no other Buddhists, Rina felt a sense of spiritual loneliness (A: 63). Being a monk of Pure Land Buddhism, Suzuki wished to affiliate with a Chinese Buddhist community in Australia but he was racially discriminated against by them because of his Western background. Identifying himself as a kind of "Protestant Buddhist,"

Blanch did not accept certain Buddhist pious practices which he called “idolatry or incense and priesthood” (A: 27), so he decided to withdraw from his local Buddhist community.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This chapter identified and discussed data related to the questions of (a) levels of the participants’ religious conversions and (b) the kinds of experiences they encountered as a result of their conversions. With the first question, we noted that, despite the fact that the levels of conversion varied among the converts according to their self-assessments, the study proposed that all of them were seriously committed to learning and practising Buddhism.

In terms of the second question, the findings firstly showed that, except for Zion (who was still searching for her religious path), the other twenty-three other respondents were content with their conversions and were satisfied with their religious life and spiritual practices as Buddhist practitioners or dual believers. They found a sense of fulfilment in following the Buddhist path. Most of them experienced positive changes in their worldviews and lives. There was also a clear change of heart in the sense that they shifted the focus of life from being self-centred to being other-centred. They also experienced profound changes in their relationships with others by becoming more gentle, compassionate and responsible. Their lives became more meaningful as they enjoyed the freedom of being responsible for their fate.

The converts also showed a great sense of “feeling at home” with the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Though most of the respondents did not have a personal relationship with the historical Buddha, they looked up to him as their source of inspiration and as their key spiritual guide. Contending that they inherited within themselves the Buddha nature, the converts became more confident in practising Buddhist teachings with the (more or less) expressed aim of achieving enlightenment. They believed that Taking Refuge in the Dharma enabled them to be committed to both learning Buddhist wisdom and skills, and to advance on the Buddhist path. They also indicated that Taking Refuge in the Sangha provided them with a necessary environment for spiritual practices, and friendships for encouragement in their journey of conversion. However, among the Three Jewels, the converts regarded the Dharma as the most important Refuge, given that they believed that it was the Dharma that helped them acquire the necessary wisdom and skills for attaining enlightenment. Apart from the

positive experiences, the study also briefly referred to converts who reported that they did not encounter negative experiences.

The chapter then outlined challenges and difficulties experienced by the respondents during their conversion process. First, there were some general challenges, such as familial difficulties. Next, there were obstacles associated with some Buddhist teachings, such as karma, the non-self, and devotional piety. It was interesting to note that when faced with those difficult teachings, most of the converts tended not to learn more about the teachings but to put them aside. The chapter also examined challenges associated with Buddhist practices, including rituals and devotional activities. Finally, the converts were also faced with some social issues. The first was the challenge of religious discrimination. Though Buddhism has become familiar to Australians over several decades, it is still considered as a foreign religion by many people, especially those who live in the countryside. The converts were sometimes confronted with hostility by the local people when they started introducing or implanting Buddhism in new locations, but it was also reported that this discriminating attitude was gradually fading away. Finally, a few respondents found that it was difficult for them to affiliate with a Buddhist group or community.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Interreligious engagement has become a daily reality in today's world. People of different religious traditions share the same neighbourhood and constantly encounter one another; they can easily and instantly gain access to religious information and materials via the Internet and many other media channels; and they have the freedom to choose the spiritual path they will follow. In such a globalized and multireligious context, voluntary religious conversion has become more common than at any other time in history. Such voluntary conversion is occurring in Australia as well. The present study focused on finding answers to three specific questions related to conversion to Buddhism in Australia: the reasons why conversions happened; the process of how conversions took place; and the levels and consequences of conversions.

This chapter summarizes the findings related to these questions, situates them within the literature reviewed in the theoretical chapters, and finally ends by presenting limits of this study and possible directions for further research.

The findings of this study validate, expand and in some instances, challenge the existing literature on the development of Buddhism in the Western countries, particularly in Australia.

First of all, regarding theories of religious conversion, the findings both corroborate and question certain points of some theories. Studies by William James (1989) and Bailey Gillespie (1991), analysing religious conversion from the psychological approach, propose that conversion normally takes place after a period of crisis, either of faith or of self-identity. The data of this research shows, however, that the majority of respondents were already disconnected with their original Christian tradition long before they had their first significant encounters with Buddhism. The main reasons for conversion cited by the respondents did to some extent confirm that conversion comes after a crisis in faith or self-identity. The majority of them was dissatisfied with various teachings and practices of their original Christian tradition, which neither provided them with appropriate answers to their existential questions nor did it fully satisfy their spiritual needs.

The respondents struggled to understand and accept some of the key doctrinal teachings such as a personal God who is the creator of the universe; Jesus as the (only) Son of God and the only saviour of the world; the Bible as the revealed word of God; original sin; and heaven and hell as eternal reward and punishment. This study confirmed the findings of the existing studies of Jack Maguire (2001) and Patricia Sherwood (2003) on those issues, but it also expanded on them by looking at the causes for the problematic nature of those teachings from the respondents' perspective. To the majority, those tenets appeared unreasonable and illogical, yet imposed on the faithful without any discussion with the expectation to be simply accepted on faith rather than reason. The study also revealed that Christian doctrines were not adequately explained to the faithful and when people asked for explanations, they were normally brushed off by being told to take the teachings on faith.

The findings also confirm that social and structural dysfunction, disadvantage, alienation and strain were the preconditions leading individuals to seek religious resolution, as argued by Lofland and Stark (1965), Snow *et al* (1980). Most respondents encountered negative experiences associated with the hierarchical structure of the Church, its legalism and clericalism, and lack of pastoral support. Confirming Sherwood's (2003) argument that the main reason people turn away from Christian tradition to Buddhism in Australia is that they experience a breakdown of meaning in their life along with a lack of inspiration and comfort from their original tradition, the respondents noted the Church's failure to satisfy their spiritual needs, and the lack of concrete tools – such as meditative and contemplative methods – for spiritual practices in Christianity. For them, Christian spirituality focused too much on rituals like the celebration of sacraments while neglecting the meditative and contemplative aspects of spiritual exercises. Christian prayer was perceived as “too worshipful and too wordy,”<sup>640</sup> dualistic and simplistic, and as a form of communicating with a God who remains “the other,” “the transcendent Other and the Super-person”<sup>641</sup> whom people just ask for things. The other key problem encountered by the Buddhist converts was the discrepancies between the professed Christian values and the “unchristian” behaviour of ecclesial communities.

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<sup>640</sup> Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, 135.

<sup>641</sup> *Ibid.*

All of these challenges and experiences created a strong sense of disappointment in the respondents. For the majority, the decision to embrace Buddhism as their spiritual path of choice, however, was not an easy one. In some cases, it came after considerable time of deliberation and serious discernment. The data shows that the respondents consciously and deliberately made their decision to become Buddhists as a result of their long running crisis, without having any positive (new love, birth...) or negative (illness, loss...) conversion trigger as suggested by Maguire (2001). This was normally a long process and the turning point of conversion occurred at different ages among respondents, with several in their early twenties and many in their adulthood. (Bailey Gillespie; Walter E. Conn)

Conversion to Buddhism in Australia is never an instantaneous or dramatic event. Rather, it is a very long step-by-step process which involves serious deliberation. Becoming a Buddhist is about making a commitment to follow the Buddha in learning the Dharma and practising meditation and compassion in the Sangha. This threefold commitment requires an extraordinary discipline from all Buddhist practitioners. There is a lot of knowledge and wisdom to be acquired, methods to be learned and mastered, virtues to be observed, meditation and compassion to practise. In this respect, the analysis of the data indicates that the Buddhist initiation rite only marks the completion of the process. In other words, the initiation rite itself does not exhaustively define the religious identity of Australian Buddhist converts as some scholars suggest. (Coleman, 2012; Glenys Eddy, 2012) Non-initiated persons also identify themselves as Buddhists, and they are just as committed as initiates or professional in living and practising Buddhist spirituality. Therefore, the concentric model of religious conversion introduced by Coleman (2012) was not accurately applicable to measure the level of conversion to Buddhism just by assessing the level of commitment that the converts made to the new tradition.

The data also shows that the respondents came into contact with Buddhism in various ways, via formal or voluntary study, mass media and/or travel, which corroborates the suggestion by Coleman and Fronsdal that the ease of travel and communication in the modern world facilitates conversions. Most senior converts, who had a long-term association with Buddhism, encountered and/or learned about Buddhism while travelling overseas in 1960s or 1970s; other young converts encountered and learned about Buddhism via mass media channels and formal and, more frequently, informal information about it that was accessible

in Australia itself. Learning that there was a different spiritual tradition to their Christian faith, they started their spiritual adventure out of personal interest. Their first encounters with Buddhism aroused their intellectual curiosity; they were attracted by its philosophy and desired to know more, to deepen their knowledge of Buddhism and to undertake Buddhist practices.

The study also identified various unique/innovative characteristics of conversion from Christianity to Buddhism in Australia (and other Western countries). To begin with, they are not a consequence of Buddhist missionary work. Rather, they result from the individual's own interest and effort. Not a single respondent in this study converted to Buddhism through meeting Buddhist missionaries. Most of them initially encountered Buddhist spirituality through education, reading books, watching television, listening to the radio or by meeting Buddhists while travelling in Buddhist countries.

A distinguishing factor of Australian/Western conversion from Christianity to Buddhism in Australia is that converts can enjoy double religious belonging. While remaining Christian, people can adopt the Buddhist path as an additional religious tradition, thereby identifying themselves as Buddhist-Christians or Christian-Buddhists. Theoretically, this double belonging might seem problematic due to Christianity being theistic and Buddhism being non-theistic tradition. However, in practice, double believers in this study did not experience this tension. Quite to the contrary, their faith and spiritual life had been tremendously enriched and strengthened by the teachings and practices of the two traditions. Their positive experiences confirm Paul Knitter's perspective regarding double/multiple religious belonging:

For some religious seekers, especially in our contemporary context in the West, double religious belonging is not just something that can enrich their spiritual lives. It is, rather, something that *saves* their spiritual lives. In order to carry on their spiritual journey, they have no choice but to explore multiple religious belonging.<sup>642</sup>

Another major part of the study was the identification and discussion of the positive and negative effects conversion to Buddhism has on convert in Australia. These effects were analysed according to a number of categories. First of all, there was a very high level of

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<sup>642</sup> *Ibid.*



satisfaction expressed by the respondents. Given that the conversion of Australians with Christian background to Buddhism is driven to a large extent by dissatisfaction with Christian doctrines, practices and institutions, these high levels of satisfaction are unsurprising. The study also noted how respondents focused on Buddhist teachings and practices more so than on any ultimate “results” like enlightenment. Hence, even those respondents who doubted whether they would reach the stage of awakening were not disappointed or discouraged by their uncertainty: for them – as for the other converts – the focus was on the teachings, practices, and seeking to help themselves and others.

The study also points to other positive aspects of their conversion. These include positive attitudinal changes regarding religion/spirituality and life; transformations of respondents’ personalities or temperaments; altered, improved, perceptions of self and reality; increased ability to recover from traumas; and having more enriching relationships with their selves, others and the world. The converts also claimed that they became less attached to ego, material possessions, money and power. Selfishness and self-centredness were gradually replaced by greater selflessness and other-centeredness. Learning and living Buddhist spirituality also helped them develop a strong sense of compassion and respect for all forms of life as a daily reality. Many of the respondents became strict vegans, not eating or using animal products. Several took the vow of Bodhisattva which means that they would help all sentient beings become free from suffering until they all achieve enlightenment. This vow is a driving force and a constant reminder for them to practise compassion. Personally, I was deeply touched by their way of living during my interviews. The simple life they led, the warm and friendly hospitality they offered, the simple food and drinks they served (only grains and vegetables, no meat or fish product or alcohol), and the serious meditation they practised, all showed a great sense of compassion which did not just impressed me but, to some extent, also converted me.

Despite all these positive effects and experiences, Buddhist converts in Australia also faced certain difficulties during and after the process of conversion. Most converts had difficulties with understanding some Buddhist teachings such as non-self, emptiness, karma, merits etc. Teachings from different Buddhist schools, especially between theistic and non-theistic, meditation based and ritual based, were also problematic to some of the converts. They were, however, very self-insightful in acknowledging that it was very difficult (impossible for some)

to totally undo all of their Christian heritage that they received and practised in order to move completely to Buddhism. They were very aware that their Buddhist thinking and practices were to some extent tainted and influenced by Christian beliefs and values. Some converts also noted that Buddhism in Australia was westernised and that it was losing its originality and authenticity.

Another common difficulty that all convert encountered was to find enough time for meditation. None of the converts belongs to a monastic community; all are householder Buddhists (including the two monks who live alone in rented houses and have to earn for their living). This lifestyle of a householder deters them from devoting from being disciplined to practise their daily meditation and devote substantial time to it. Because of this circumstantial limitation, most of the practitioners believe that they could not achieve their religious goal (enlightenment) in this lifetime. However, they willingly accept this reality and are wholeheartedly committed to advancing their spiritual life to the best of their ability and within the given circumstances.

According to this study, belonging to a sangha, where they can receive inspiration, keep discipline, experience friendship and support for their Buddhist efforts, is really important to Australian Buddhist converts. In this, the study confirmed the view that sangha is an important factor for a Buddhist in western countries. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999) The study, however, also demonstrated that sangha is important, but not necessary. Converts would not geographically relocate in in order to be able to associate with other Buddhist and few of them avoided them because of the negative experiences they had with the sangha they belonged to. The negative experiences often referred to are differences in teachings and practices to the ones followed by the sangha which sometimes lead to discrimination based on ethnic differences.

In addition to this limited discrimination coming from certain Buddhist circles, converts, especially the ones who live outside of major urban centres, also experience discrimination and hostility from the local population. Although often restricted to accusations of “being idol worshippers” and removal of Buddhist advertising materials from public spaces, nevertheless the experience is quite negative.

In short, conversion of western Christians to Buddhism in Australia as experienced and reported by the converts is both a painful and fulfilling experience. It is a long and rough journey and comes at some costs, which can range from termination of marriage, loss of one's community and family, difficulties in learning and adapting to a new system of life and faith, to feeling alone while on the spiritual journey. Despite all of these problems and obstacles, all converts, at least in this study, remain happy with the decision they made to convert to Buddhism claiming that as a result of that decision their life became more meaningful and fulfilling.

Finally, we may cite some of the parameters and limitations of this study. Firstly, the selection of participants was restricted to westerners with Christian backgrounds who were converted to Buddhism or on the way to becoming Buddhists. It excluded all those who were not westerners and came from other parts of the world (e.g., Africa, Asia, Pacific Islands). Secondly, the research only briefly touched on the question of the impact of the conversions on participants' personal and social relationships. Further research of these particular aspects is certainly needed in order to form a more comprehensive picture about the process of conversion in Australia. This study also did not involve converts to new forms of western Buddhism, which maintain basic Buddhist teachings and practices but involve also some new characteristics, such as a more democratic approach and a lay-based structure. An invitation was sent to Triratna Buddhist Community, which practices this type of Buddhism, but unfortunately, I did not receive any response from the organization. A study that considers these non-traditional types of Buddhism and the conversion process they require would also contribute to a more comprehensive knowledge of conversion to Buddhism in Australia.

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## Glossary of terms

**Anatman** (Sanskrit) or **Anatta** (Pali): the doctrine that there is in humans no permanent, underlying substance that can be called the soul.

**Bhikkhu** (Sanskrit): Literally means beggar. A male Buddhist monk or devotee.

**Bhikkhuni**(Sanskrit): A female Buddhist nun or devotee.

**Bardo** (Tibetan): a gap or intermediate state. Often used in reference to the *chöl bardo*, the intermediate state between death and rebirth. Other bardos include the dream bardo and the meditation bardo.

**Bodhichitta** (Sanskrit): Mind of awakening. Relative bodhichitta is the desire to practise the six enlightened qualities to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings; absolute bodhichitta is immediate insight into the emptiness of phenomena.

**Bodhisattva** (Sanskrit): In the Mahayana tradition, a bodhisattva dedicates his or her existence throughout all rebirths to the attainment of enlightenment in order to liberate other beings who are suffering in samsara.

**Buddha Nature**: refers to the basic goodness of all beings; the inherent potential within each person to attain complete buddhahood.

**Dharma** (Sanskrit): The teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha (the historical Buddha); one of the three Jewels in which one takes refuge.

**Epistrophe** (Greek): to turn or to turn around with movements or changes of place

**Ethnoscape**: The shifting landscape of people across culture and borders.

**Financescape**: The global movement of money, including currency, trade and commodity.

**Geluk** (Tibetan): 'Virtuous Way'. Or, one of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Geluk was the last of the great schools to be formed.

**Geshe** (Tibetan): 'Ge' means 'virtue' and 'she' means 'knowing.' Geshe thus means one who knows virtue, one who knows what should be practiced and what should be abandoned.

**Green Tara** (Tibetan): The emanation of Skillful Means or Active Compassion.

**Ideoscape**: The global flow of ideologies.

**Karma** (Sanskrit): Action. The universal law of cause and effect according to which one inevitably experiences the results of one's own positive and negative actions.

**Karuna** (Pali and Sanskrit): Compassion.

**Koan** (Japanese; Zen Buddhism): A record of an encounter between a teacher and student in which an experience of enlightenment is triggered.

**Lamrim** (Tibetan): A systematic presentation of the path to enlightenment as found in Tibetan Buddhism.

**Mahayana** (Sanskrit): The great vehicle. The teachings of the second turning of the wheel of Dharma in which emptiness and compassion for all beings are emphasized.

**Mantra** (Sanskrit): Sacred sounds representing various energies that symbolize and communicate the nature of the deity. Mantras, which are manifestations of the speech aspect of enlightenment, range from single syllables to lengthy combinations.

**Mediascape**: the electronic capabilities of production and dissemination of information through media.

**Metanoen** (Greek): to repent or to change one's mind.

**Nichiren** (Japanese): Name of a Buddhist priest who found a Japanese Buddhist sect which is today known as Nichiren Buddhism based on Lotus Sutra.

**Puja** (Sanskrit): Buddhist ceremonies that range from the very simple to the most elaborate.

**Rinpoche** (Tibetan): Honorific for teachers, literally, precious one.

**Sakya** (Tibetan): One of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, named after the region in southern Tibet where its founding teachers originated in 11th century.

**Samsara** (Sanskrit): Cyclic existence, in which ordinary beings are trapped in an endless cycle of rebirth in the six realms of existence, which contain endless suffering. The state of ordinary beings bound to suffering by attachment, aggression, and ignorance.

**Soka Gakkai** (Japanese): A Japanese Buddhist movement belongs to Nichiren Buddhism. Soke Gakkai promotes peace, culture and education.

**Shubh**(Hebrew): to turn from one thing or direction to another thing or direction or to turn back to God in the context of covenant

**Technoscapes**: The transmission of cultures through the flow of technology.

**Theravada** (Pali): an old and traditional form of Buddhism that adheres to Pali scriptures and the non-theistic ideal of self-purification to nirvana. This school emphasizes personal salvation through your own efforts.

**Theravada** (Pali): The tradition of Buddhism prevalent in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma based on the teachings of the Pali canon.

**Tulku** (Tibetan): a reincarnate custodian of a specific lineage of teachings in Tibetan Buddhism who is given empowerments and trained from a young age by students of his or her predecessor.

**Vajrayana** (Sanskrit): Diamond vehicle – The path to enlightenment as described In the Buddhist Tantra.

**Vipassnana** (Sanskrit): The indestructible path. The Vajrayana follows the bodhisattva path of the Mahayana and is characterized by an additional set of teachings based on the tantras, which emphasize deity practice using visualization, mantra, and mudra. Also sometimes called tantayana, or secret mantra.

**Zen**: (Japanese): Meditation – A contemplative form of buddhism that originated in 6th-century China and spread to Korea and Japan.

**Zendo**: The meditation hall of a Zen monastery.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Question Module**

The following questions indicated the type of questions that were used in the focused depth-interviews. These questions worked only as a guide. The interviews might involve more or less questions, depending on the evolving experiences or stories of conversions that the converts recounted.

#### ***Questions for All Groups***

Questions relating to previous faith affiliation/adherence:

1. Can you tell me what your previous faith tradition was?
2. Did you receive any religious education at school? How did you find it?
3. Do you believe in God?
4. (If yes) What or who is God in your experience?
5. (If no) Can you tell me the reasons why you do not believe in God?
6. Do you believe in Jesus Christ as the Saviour? Can you share your experience of Jesus?
7. (If no) Can you explain why?
8. Do you believe in eternal life and salvation?
9. (For both yes and no) Can you explain how you understand them?
10. Did you or do you read the Bible? What do you think of the Bible?
11. Did you attend Church services? How often did you do so? What was your experience of the Church service?
12. Did you belong to a parish or a church community?
13. (If yes) Can you tell me your experience of the community?
14. Did you take part in any church social activities? Which activities? What was your experience of them?

Questions relating to Buddhist affiliation:

15. When did you have your first contact with Buddhism?
16. Can you tell me what made you turn to Buddhism?
17. Have you received any Buddhist training or teaching?

18. How do you view the Buddha?
19. What do you think about the teachings of the Four Noble Truth and Noble Eightfold Path?
20. Do you believe in the Karma? Can you share your views on this teaching?
21. Do you believe in the Buddhist notion of the circle of life? Can you explain it?
22. What is your view on the teaching of “non-self” and nothingness?
23. What do you think about the teaching of nirvana?
24. Which of the following five groups (a list of the five groups was provided) do you identify with?

***Questions for Group 1***

25. In what way have the Buddhist thought and practices influenced you?
26. Do you consider becoming a more dedicated practitioner of Buddhism?
27. Do you go to Buddhist temples or centres for worship or meditation? Do you attend Buddhist talks or lectures?
28. Between living the Christian faith and following the Buddhist path which one do you prefer? Why?

***Questions for Groups 2, 3 and 4***

29. How long have you been practising meditation? How often do you do meditation?  
What kind of meditation do you practice? What is the purpose of your meditation?
30. (Only for group 2) Besides meditation, what other Buddhist activities are you involved in? Are you thinking of joining a Buddhist group? Why?

***Questions for Groups 3, 4 and 5***

31. When did you start active involvement in your Buddhist group? Can you tell me what was involved in the process of joining the group? What kind of activities have you been involved in so far?
32. What Buddhist tradition do you belong to? Can you tell me about this tradition?
33. Have you experienced a moment of conversion? Can you share what happened in that moment?

***Questions for Group 4***

34. When did you officially become a Buddhist practitioner or teacher? What makes you a qualified Buddhist teacher?
35. What is it that stops you being a Christian and makes you a Buddhist?
36. Do you believe in all Buddhist teachings?

***Questions for Group 5***

37. How is it possible to be a “dual religious believer”?
38. Can you talk about the benefits and the challenges of dual belonging?
39. Is there a tension in this dual belonging? How do you hold the tension?
40. To whom would you recommend this dual religious belonging?

## **Appendix 2**

### **Interview Annie**

Annie has had a Christian upbringing. She was baptised and confirmed in the Anglican Church. Her parents didn't go to church but they encouraged her to participate in the Sunday schools at different denominations namely, Presbyterian and the Church of England. She was a member of her local church's choir. She had a good, pleasant experience of Sunday schools and religious education programs.

#### **View of God**

I thought of God as someone being out there that kind of looking out for me a little bit that I could ask for things, pray for things. I guess the moral values that came with it that I felt I needed to live by these values. It was part of education, I guess. We were taught those values. (6:41)

#### **Did you develop any kind of relationship with God?**

Probably at times I thought I did but they would have been not ongoing. I guess it's depending on one's life. Nothing very deep. It was very relaxed kind of Christianity. It was part of that culture. I mean it's the same as growing up in Vietnam. Some people in that Buddhist tradition go along with rituals and so on but how much they have touched their hearts and really affected them would vary between different times in their lives. It's like when I went through difficult times I became much more religious. (07:40)

I think I saw God as a person in those days. I don't think I really thought, you know, what I mean is that I was just accepting what I was told and how God was presented. I don't think I ever questioned that. (08:02)

#### **How do you respond to the Christian teaching of God today?**

I think I just take the bits I like out of it and I respond to God as a loving being, all-knowing, positive force. It's not a person. I guess from a Buddhist background I see it more as a force and also as a combination of all those beings who developed their minds to a point and they're actually able to do things, to be of benefit to others. I see it as something that everybody can aspire to and some people and some beings have moved further along that path. I can think of Christian God in that way. So, for me I can accept Christian God in that way. So, it's not like you Christians are wrong. It's just a different way of looking, it's just a different way of interpreting something that it's hard to define. (09:23)

I think for me because part of what I am trying to do in my life is to be more loving and caring and have the most positive impact I can with people around me. For me, it's important that I understand God in that way, because that's what important to those people that's their views. Dalai Lama said, 'if you're Christian, maybe you don't convert to Buddhism, maybe it's better that you stay as a Christian and you practice to the best of your ability and you use whatever you can take from Buddhism. So, I try not to see them as something separate. The worse thing is to think this one's right and this one's wrong. For me, the best way is to try and look at how I can understand this positive... I believe that there is something there that is a positive force and I have my way of understanding it through Buddhism and that works for



me and enables me to live my life in the best possible way. But if someone as a Christian I think they can achieve exactly the same thing by following the Christian teachings. I may not see God in the same way; I may not interpret God in the same; and it does not matter... Well, I think when you work with people who are dying, when you are trying to be of benefit to other people, the least helpful thing is if you think I am right and I know my way of seeing things is right. That's going to be the least helpful way. (11:55)

**How do you respond to the teaching that Jesus is the Son of God and the Saviour of the world?**

I think Jesus' teaching is fantastic. I think if people live by Jesus' teaching, they would live a very good life. I mean to my mind the way we behave and how we live our lives is what would make us following Jesus' teaching and would be the way Jesus would save us. I can't see, to me, someone who lives really terrible life and doesn't embody any of those teachings of Jesus that the fact that they go 'I believe in Jesus' is going to be of any benefit to them. That would be how understand it. If you follow the teachings that Jesus gave, I mean, God is love and if Jesus is the Son of God, then Jesus is the embodiment of that love... If we embody his teachings then that's what we become more like him and we develop that love. So that's what I would see it. (13:35)

**How do you respond to the Christian teachings on eternal life, salvation and heaven and hell?**

That's a big question. Well, I believe as much as anyone can believe something that one doesn't see for oneself that the mind goes on. So, I think there is eternal. I think something goes on eternally. I don't believe that we finish up this life and end up permanently in hell or in heaven. I mean traditional Buddhist teachings say that there are these places which are hells. I struggle, I mean it's quite possible but like you I can't say I believe in but I think people are born, we see people around us who are born into hell in various ways. So, what kind of God would give people one life with whatever might happen and you felt you are in hell forever? I wouldn't like to have anything to do with a god like that. I think there is a different way of understanding. There is a different way of looking and trying to make sense of what happening but I have a different way of interpreting, I guess. (15:34)

My understanding is limited but from the most satisfactory explanation for me is that there is a body and consciousness and that the consciousness in its pure and simple form goes on to the next life and take another body. I don't see a soul as such but it's difficult... Coming from a Buddhist perspective, consciousness... without thought and emotion there is a level which is just consciousness and awareness. And then other things come on top of that, thought, emotion and so on. Through training I can change or I can control and try to be conscious enough to develop my ability to have positive thought, more positive ways of reacting to things. I don't know that if that is different to soul. I am not quite sure. (18:09)

**Did you or do you read the Bible?**

I did when I was young but not now. Occasionally I mean I read some quotes from the Bible. I mean some I really find very meaningful and I guess I don't read the Bible as such. We have memorial service once a year for the family members of the people that we looked after who have died and we have a Buddhist speaker and a Christian speaker and sometimes other faiths

but usually those two... and I find that quite inspiring but I don't read the Bible. But I probably have to read a long way... I don't have a great interest in it. I guess because I have embarked on a path that I don't really feel that that's going to be helpful to me and it just a question of time. (19:37)

**When did you move away from the Christianity?**

When I was about sixteen. I think I became very religious for the two years before that probably when I was in quite difficult home environment. And then when I left home, I started questioning things and I guess becoming more involved with different ways of thinking. Then to me it no longer seemed relevant to me.

**When you were a Christian, were you involved in any social justice activities?**

No, but after that I became much more involved. But that was when I was growing up, you know, at sixteen. I completely changed, I became more politically, socially aware. I became more sort of radically in my thinking.

**When was your first contact with Buddhism?**

I was travelling in India with my partner. I actually studied Indian art for the last two years at high school. I studied art and could choose different areas. So, I actually had contact with, I guess, pictures of architectures and sculptures which included Buddhist and Hindu which really, I think, were a very eye opening made me realize there would be different ways of looking at things and other religions out there. Part of that probably would have been the first time I was exposed to, in a superficial way, the teachings of religions. But then the first real contact was that I was travelling in India with my partner and we were planning to go to one place in Himalaya and we couldn't get there. So, we went to the town which is the home of Tibetan in exile, the Dalai Lama. And we were going to stay there for a week or so just to have a look around. There were teachings happening there with the Alama at what they called the Tibetan library. They run regular teachings. And at that stage I thought religions were the opium of the people. But we thought we would go along and it might be interesting. My husband actually had previous contact with Hinduism. He did yoga and stuffs like that. So, we started going to these teachings and first of all it didn't make any sense to us but we kept coming back and we ended up staying for eighteen months studying there. So, we went to teaching each day and lived there. And we did a meditation course in Nepal. There were a couple of Tibetan lamas who run a one month meditation course there. And then we went back and did a three month meditation retreat. (23:47)

**Did you become a Buddhist then?**

Yes. Within Tibetan Buddhism at least it's taking refuge, I guess, is a common across ceremony where you say I take refuge in Buddha, dharma and sangha. To me, rituals are kind of, they confirm something that it's already happened. (24:37)

**What made you to stay and join Buddhism?**

I don't know. It's just something, there was something there, I guess, that I connected with but I initially didn't understand a lot because of the texts they were going through, some of which were very complicated. But I don't know but part of the teacher there, I think, there

was something about him that also just attracted me and it was a nice place to stay. It would have been, you know, if the circumstances were very awful I would stay the same way. But it just seemed to make sense to me and to be something practical that's how I could live my life in a meaningful way. (25:55)

At the Tibetan library there was two hour teaching every day. Sometimes the teacher who was there would give extra teachings. The one month course in Nepal was intensive. It was all day teaching meditation. You didn't go out. And the three month retreat were the three month of enclosed retreat, not speaking, doing practical practices. (26:35)

### **Did you take any further training after that eighteen month of training?**

Yes, I went back to India for another year of courses that were being put on over there. I think they went through three or four months of teachings and initiations and then we went back to Damsala where we lived. We went back to Australia and we lived an institute which is a Buddhist community near here and lived there for about six years. They had regular meditations and teachings but we were also working. And I was studying nursing while I was living there. (28:04)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

I don't know that I was ever really a Christian. I was Christian in name and I went along with some teachings of Christianity. But I think to really practice a religion it has to impact on how you live your life every day. You have to be really engaged. You have really to feel it in your heart. There are probably times when maybe that was true and maybe that was never sustained. It was a cultural thing, you know, you are a Christian. And it was something to turn to in times of difficulty. But I don't know that I really thought. I just took it for granted. I don't think I've ever really sincerely engaged with it, not in the way that it was something that really impact on my daily life that impact on my awareness and how I did things... I think I didn't feel it deep enough. I wasn't committed to it at a deep enough level maybe. I don't know. It's kind of like people that they think they're Christian but when they come to faith, they are dead. It doesn't help them because really the outward trappings are there, the actual real heart embracing evidence and living one's life hasn't been there. So, it's not really sustaining. And if it doesn't become something that's really sustaining then it's kind of artificial. (30:59)

Why I became a Buddhist? It makes sense to me. And if I probably had that kind of Christian faith, you know may be, I have friends who are Christians and for them it's a very sustaining thing and not they think outside the square and narrative tradition of teachings and they make it real for themselves in the lives. And maybe I could have done that but for me I feel much more connection with Buddhism than with Christianity and the message that it gives me to live my life and gives my life meaning. For me, they just resonate for me I guess... It gives you the tools to actually transform yourself into a person you like to be. It's all very well to think I'd like to be a kind person and I'd like not to get angry with other people and I'd like to be helpful. But I think you need a way to actually make that happen. And I think Buddhism gives that kind of way. Obviously Christianity must in some way as well because you meet some people who have really developed that quality to a high degree but it was never clear to me maybe my connection was superficial and I wasn't looking for it then either. It wasn't what I was looking for at that time. (33:06)

### **Do you have any kind of relationship with the Buddha?**

My understanding of the Buddha is probably broader than just one. It's beings who have developed their minds to that stage or towards that stage. And so, I might visualize a Buddha but I don't just see that as the historical Buddha, but I see that as embodying all of that positive mind. (33:58)

### **How do you respond to the teaching of Four Noble Truths?**

I guess by understanding I or other people or experience suffering of different kinds and that my perception of things creates my suffering. If I experience something, how I interpret it and how I respond to it is more what causes me suffering than it's actually happening. If I can train my mind in the teachings then I can change how I react to things and I can in that way reduce the suffering that I experience and use suffering into something to make something more positive come about and that dealing with other people, I can see their suffering and I can see that I am not the only one but there are many. So, the important thing for me is to develop myself so that in some way I can help to reduce that suffering in whatever way. I mean ideally to have the wisdom of the Buddha or someone who's really developed their mind so that I actually really help them in a deeper level or at least on a superficial level I can do what I can. (36:11)

### **How do you find the teaching of the Eightfold Noble Path?**

I guess, for me, it's more like the vows that I take would probably relate more, not killing, not stealing, sexual misconduct, harsh words, slanders. That to me would relate to the Ten Commandments.

### **Karma**

I think it's true. I apply it as much as I can, respond, speak and behave in positive way. I try that not as probably as successfully if something bad happen to things that as result of my karma and I am working it through. I believe that everything that I do creates what I am going to experience in the future, even it is just on that level of what kind of person I am, what kind of mind I have, if you don't take it any further as to happen in future life or whatever... I think at least it's obvious that my present behaviour, my present way of speech, my present way of thinking about things impact on my experience. I am creating patterns within my mind to be a certain kind of person. I believe that a person who actualizes all those positive qualities is necessarily a happy person. (40:51)

### **Non-self and emptiness**

I certainly wouldn't try to explain it. I think it's deep and I wouldn't claim to understand it perfectly. But I in a sense that we see things as existing in a solid way from our own side like I see myself as N and N is something very solid and unchanging but really N is just changing and made of parts. Where is N? Is the body the N? Where is it? So, to try and feel that I am N and what happens to me, they can't do that to me or I have to have that and that is from its own side and it's so desirable and it's so beautiful. I mean on that level it's helpful. I had this nightmare last night where I left the key in a car and the car was stolen. And I woke up and I thought 'it's a dream. Thank God.' And I thought that's how I should be thinking about everything. It's almost like a dream and I am putting these interpretations on it and I can put

different interpretations on it and I experience it in different ways... It's not saying that there isn't a self. It's saying that the self doesn't exist the way that we perceive the self. It's not saying there is nothing. It's not nihilism. It's not saying there is nothing. It's saying that we perceive there is something very solid and if we look, it doesn't exist how we perceive it. So, they address this strongly. It's not nihilism. It's not saying nothing exists. It's saying that the way we perceive it is not the way it actually exists and we cause ourselves unending problems because we think that things exist the way they seem to exist. And that's as far as I can explain it... Emptiness is things are empty of what they call inherited existence. It's saying that things are empty of existing in a way that we perceive them as existing. They are not empty of existence. They exist but they don't exist how we see them as existing. The way we see things as existing is what causes our suffering, if we really understood how things really existed and we really existed, our whole perception of things would change. Everything is changing. Everything is interconnected. Everything is made up by parts. The way we act to the world isn't like that. It's not like there is no real solid N. There is something changing constantly. It's nothing permanent about it, made up by parts and we you look into those parts, where is this solid N that I think it's so important that I have to protect as it got insulted. It's got loosen that... I am not saying it's not non existence. It does exist in a way that I perceive it to exist. So, then it has great potential because it means I can change. I can develop because I can create the causes or something more positive because I am not permanent. The cranky, selfish N is impermanent. So, to me it has a lot of potential. (45:50)

### **How does this teaching help you to live your life?**

Like I said, like waking up and thinking it was just a dream, and thinking there was something else that I've got to deal with today at work that it was a kind of my mind, difficult thing. I thought, you know, I just remember this thing I made into something really big and huge things and difficult. It's just like a dream. It's all that I am projecting all these stuffs and I make it seem really solid and a really big problem. It's just all changing. It's just all coming together. (46:36)

### **How about the teaching on reincarnation?**

As you said faith can be a difficult thing. But to me it [reincarnation] makes sense. Do you say if I believe a hundred per cent, no but I think it's almost likely... We just look around and take all the evidences that we've got and on the balance of the evidence. I am willing that it's likely and I am willing to go. That's okay with me. (48:10)

### **What do you think about the teaching of nirvana?**

I think if one can go beyond the theory and if one can realize the actual true nature of realities so that one isn't reacting to the kind of reality one projects then, I think again it's a possibility, it's a very distanced thing for me. So, I'll be happy just to move in positive way to that direction. And if it comes, I'll be very pleased... In a tradition that I am part of, it's actually the Buddhahood that you are not satisfied with, Thien. The idea is, I mean realizing nirvana is from suffering for yourself. It's a state of mind. It's all developing your mind. Nirvana is the state of mind that's totally free from mistakes of seeing things... Through developing your understanding of emptiness basically, you know, what you are saying of selflessness. Within Buddhism you are actually aiming toward that stage to be able to help all beings. So, it's sort of taking a further step, I guess. (50:15)

**Of the five groups which one you can identify yourself belonging to?**

She is sixty years old, belonging to groups three and four. She is a member of a Buddhist institute and participates in a local Tibetan Buddhist group. She has been practicing meditation for about thirty-five years. She practices meditation daily, normally twice a day and sometimes once a day. Each session lasts for half an hour or forty-five minutes. She takes breathing and visualization meditation. Meditation, for her, is to be more positive in interacting with other people. She helped set up Buddhist services for the dying. She has been working in this service for sixteen years.

**How has Buddhism and its teachings enriched or changed your life?**

I think it has given me a way of moving my life in a positive direction. It has helped me to somehow be connected with positive things in my life, with things that give me satisfaction that I feel worthwhile. (58:55)

**Do you feel any difficulty in following this path?**

I do. It's just difficulty in my mind. I think the more I am consistent in my practice and I get connected with it, then it's easy. But when I drift off and become less connected with it, then life is more difficult. (59:25)

**Are there any particular teachings or practices that you don't accept?**

Some I put aside, I mean, things like hell realms. It doesn't bother me. I guess I interpret things in a way that makes sense to me. Sometimes I come across people who are teaching things to me don't seem logical. It just let those things go. (1:00:20)

**How satisfied are you following this path?**

At the moment, I am very satisfied that you've caught me in a good time. I went to a very inspiring course just recently... it was a five day live in retreat and it was very inspiring. (1:01:30)

**Do you have any near future plan for your religious path?**

Just to try to be consistent. I think consistence is important.

**Do you have an ultimate religious goal?**

Just to be a Buddha. But in the meantime, just to keep developing my mind. If I could do that, I'd be happy. (1:02:01)

**Why to be a Buddha?**

So that I would be able to help; So that I would be happy; so that I wouldn't be suffering myself but mainly so that I am able to help everybody I come in contact with.

**What would you do to achieve this ultimate goal?**

I've got a long way to go. It takes a lot more than that. This is the love that doesn't discriminate. It's loving to everybody no matter who they are and what they do... and having a wisdom to understand what would be helpful. (1:03:12)

## **Interview Bernie**

### **Background**

Bernie comes from a Roman Catholic family. She was baptised in the Roman Catholic Church. She went to a Catholic kindergarten and later attended public school where she received religious education through her schooling years. She doesn't have a deep experience of what she learned from religious education programs.

### **Experience of the Church community**

It was not a good experience. People were very small minded in our village and they had very set ideas. And I saw that as a child already. They had very set ideas about right and wrong. They were very judgmental about the people who were a little bit different. It was a very strict set of rules to live by. And if you diverged a bit, people would point a finger like that. And I didn't feel quite safe... I never felt quite safe. That was the feeling. Strange, wasn't it? This I remember in great details like going to Church and listening to the teachings. Some of them are good; some of them make sense. Some of them are really 'ah, yea', you now. And coming out of the Church and seeing how people really behaved was very different to what the preacher had just said. And I remember feeling that discrepancy from my very young age: feeling well they are saying this, this is how you should live as a Christian, this is how they think a Christian but people are behaving like that. And they all say they're Christians. I actually felt that like I could see that discrepancy and that gap from quite a young age. Interesting, isn't it? (09:41)

### **How do you respond to the teaching on God as the Creator?**

God became a fear figure. But now I wouldn't put things in that way. I wouldn't say to someone that I like to believe in God as creator because that's not how I experience things. (12:56)

### **How about Jesus Christ?**

It was a kind of mixed bag because I like some of the stories and I like some of the things they said about him and what he did. And then I didn't like, I call it the glory bit like in the church there is picture of his crucifixion, all the blood, the nails, the things he was supposed to go through at that time. It never made much sense to me; it didn't make much sense to me like even he was lying on the cross, what he would say, and how people responded. I couldn't understand that and I couldn't understand why people would hurt themselves in order to go through what he might have gone through. It's just, even when I was a young person, it was foreign. (13:56)

### **How do you respond to the teaching of Jesus as the Son of God and the saviour of the world?**

I could never see the messiah as a physical person. Like even back then I remember that it never made sense to me, like the way things were reported: this was God who had a Son and the Son came to the earth and this happened. I could never really feel that to be true or makes sense to me. (14:48)

### **Did you or do you read the Bible?**

Very little of it, I did when I had to, like part of studies. I only read when I had to.

### **How do you treat the Bible?**

When I got a bit older, I got really angry about it because when I became a teenager and that was in sixties and seventies with revolutions and feminism they would pick up things from the Bible that was against women. It was more like that. Like I had brothers and how come they didn't have to do this. Yes, it was all about that. My head was a bit, you know, through that filter, the Bible wasn't very good to me. It's full of punishments... I didn't quite understand. (16:01)

### **How do you think about the teaching on heaven and hell in Christianity?**

As a child you think about, you know, you get a bit excited about the idea of heaven and you get a bit terrified about the idea of hell. But again, it's strange, isn't it? I have that same sense that this is something people talk about but not really... You know, I have that same sense that it's not how life works or how death works, like I have another sense in me that well, this is how they talk about it and that this is how it really works... It's not how it really is for me anyway. Maybe as a child with a fear thing I might have fear in hell but I never really thought that I would end up in hell because I did this or that. (17:32)

### **How do you respond to the teaching on salvation and eternal life?**

Look, it was very funny. It was meant to go to confessions, like we went to confessions. You know it's like screening what can I tell the priests and then, you know, they say that I say ten Hail Marys and ten this and then you're absolved. Even as a young person I thought it was so simplistic. (18:19)

Regarding the eternal life, I could possibly respond to the sense of continuity of something. So how is the eternal life? How can you say that it's different to the concept of heaven?... Well, I mean some of that concept makes sense to me now but not so much from the Christian eyes but more, you know, some continuity of beings or something happens. I don't believe that when we die, life starts in heaven and that's it. You know what I mean, like it's finished, everything is finished. I don't believe life is like that. I believe it's more open, you know, creative process what happens to whatever remains of us. And that people have influence over that. It's not predetermined, you know. (20:48)

### **Were you involved in any Church's activities?**

Not much. I tried to avoid it. They sent me off once to this because the GP thought I was a bit pale, I was too thin. The Catholic Church had these homes for children to go on some retreats. They should be fed well. There were doctors there. You had exercise. You were meant to get healthier there and get well. But they were the most abused. I still got nightmares about those six or seven weeks there like we weren't allowed to see our parents. Any letter we wrote home, somebody would read and looked if it was okay or not. The people were quite cruel and cold like they had no idea that I was totally homesick and heartbroken. And it was run by the Church. It was very bad. The food was horrible. It was full of rules. It was a terrible time. They shut it down afterward... It was such a dreadful experience. But in terms of being active with the Church, not so much, not so much outside the usual. I wasn't really. (22:37)



### **When did you have your first contact with Buddhism?**

I think it was already started when I left school. When I studied nursing, I started to read. I remember this biography on Buddha. It was in German. Somebody had written it and I read that. And that was a German novelist called NN and he wrote a book Siddhatha which is a bit Buddhist principles. And I read that. And then I went travelling in 1974 and went overland from Germany by cars with friends. We went to Eastern Europe, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Nepal. I saw Buddhist cultures then, like India, Sri Lanka and Nepal... So I was very much into that exploration on the cultures and things like that, visiting temples and monasteries. So, external things went on place. (24:44)

### **What encouraged you to embrace Buddhism?**

It's a hard question, isn't it? ... In 1987, maybe I was first getting in touch with it and I could really feel Buddhist/Hindu people in India that people have something by some quality in them that was absent in Western people. And I think it was a spiritual element because people how poor they were, like people could somehow embody or live, like life was different there. But something else matters more than the materialistic western culture. And I was sort of aware of that at that time. So, in 1987 I was on my way to Germany but just stopped over in India again and I went up to Lacdac. That's sort of Tibetan Buddhist. And [I] went to some monasteries there. And at one monastery they had a big festival on and His Holiness Dalai Lama was there. He came to this and gave speech. There were dances. I was absolutely fascinated. The monks were doing the chanting. So that left a deep impression on me. And then I think it was in 1995 His Holiness Dalai Lama came. Before that I met NN. She is our coordinator. She advertised a group and I went there. She has been a Buddhist since 1985. But anyway, she mentioned this teacher's name NN. And when she said that name, it was like something happening in me. Something triggered as if I should know, like some little registration, something I have experienced. I remember who they were or whatever. Then I started training as psycho-therapist and NN and her husband were the trainers. They were already into Buddhism. Then a Sakya monk came to Australia. I remember him coming for some talks and then next minutes there was a refuge ceremony. And I took refuge (probably in 1996). During the refuge, I had another little experience of connection. And then shortly after that I went to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's teaching in Sydney. Then there were a few years after that there were a lot Sakya teachers came... A few years in a row from 1995 and 2002 a lot of Sakya people came to offer programs. I went to every one of them. I went to the teachings. I went to the initiations. I had practices. We then started forming NN (Buddhist center) toward the end of 1990s. Then we started a practice group ourselves, like there were a few other people connected to it. Then we practiced more regularly. (29:00)

### **Did you take vows?**

I supposed so. There is always vow with initiation. There are different vows for clergies like monks and nuns to lay people. But I don't want to go the path of having vows and I don't keep them and feel bad about it... I did take Bodhisattva vows with the Holiness and things like that. I think that's inherently becoming a Mahayana Buddhist, like you do to help other people. I have already been in a helping profession. I think I would say yes. I did take those vows seriously and I still try to live by them. (31:07)

### **Have you done any formal training in Buddhism?**

Yes, I did a whole course of studies of the Lamrim with Gesher NN. I went there two or three weeks. They had this whole studies program. I studied lots of texts. We had a studies program, the three levels of spiritual perceptions of texts. I took part in putting on a diploma program, like the monk came up and every month the whole day of teachings of different aspects of Buddhist beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism. So, I did a lot of formal reading and writing, engaging with it a lot. (32:06)

### **What is your view of the Buddha?**

My view of the Buddha, I have two different views. I really have the view of the Buddha as a potential in each person, the Buddha nature. Then I have the view of the Buddha or different Buddhas as energies or potentials in different areas. And I really also have that feeling of the Buddha as spiritual teachers or lineage teachers that go back long, long way since the beginning of Buddhism that are still around, like the lineage of spiritual teachers that those energies or those teachers are like part of them, that consciousness they are around me. I have access to that. I have access to something that I am plucked into... They seem to guide my life that I may not be able to see or make sense of it but that I can feel the presence of it. It's a connection to something very solid, very old, a lineage. I feel that... So, when I hear of Buddha, I think about that or I think about the teachers who were giving initiations and deep meditations or processes or practices. And you feel your heart. That's what I think of Buddha. I don't think of him as a person as such... And you know also Buddha images, they will evoke that quality, they will evoke that potential of Buddha or that experience. That's sort of how I see it. (34:44)

### **How do you take the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path?**

I think they are very important. I get a little bit upset with some western translations of the Buddhist teachings. I think some are not quite correct. Some people want to, I don't know, they just take this a wrong way because when I've seen Buddhism in action in Tibet, for example, they are very much in every daily life. Being Buddhists doesn't mean you don't take care of earning money or take care of having a beautiful home. You still do that as a way of life. Not you don't take care of you daily life. But some people have strange ideas about that. I think they misunderstand the meaning of not being much realistic with not living in this world. Or they think non-attachment means you don't feel for people. People misunderstand. Sometimes there is feeling in the translation of the language. I grew up speaking German and I have a privilege, say for example, reading a text in German and reading it in English and see what a translation does to the meaning of things. I am thinking maybe something like that happened with Buddhist teachings and people and that's where something goes wrong... I think Buddhist teachers have developed to a certain language around teaching Buddhism in English. I think some of the language is a bit unfortunate, some of the language may not capture the meaning very accurately. And the western people take the translations and do something with them again. That's how I think about it... (37:25)

### **Do these teachings make an impact on your life?**

Oh yes, I think about those things. I think about what does it mean, life is suffering? What do they actually mean? I think about it a lot... But that comes from years of engaging in discussion and meaning and making my own sense. I think it takes a long time. (38:14)

### **How about the teaching of karma?**

I think it's a very complex topic. Again, I think people misuse the term karma, like... people have something very stressful happening to them, someone tells that that must be your karma. I don't think it is as simple as that. I think it's almost impossible to understand the complexity of karma. But I do believe there is a consequence and there is something that keeps going, maybe from life time to life time that has an impact on how we are now and what things might affect us or what thing might inflict us. But I think it's a mistake to make to simplify it and say that you've got this because you did this. I think it's too simplistic. (39:17)

### **How do you take the teachings on non-self and emptiness?**

I think if you live your everyday life trying to be a non-self, that wouldn't work. We need to be an ego; we need to be having a bit of ambition. That's all normal. I think, and this is at the level of spirituality. And I think the non-self belongs to a certain space of practice, maybe, like when we practice the spiritual practice. But we can't mix it up with living a life and working and having a family. I think it's good not to be selfish but that's different. And then emptiness again is a certain experience of meditation; it's a certain spaciousness or something that comes to the practice as to get a taste of something that's not limited to a physical body or this physical life. It's like something much more, I don't know, it's hard to describe. But I think it doesn't have much use in terms of helping someone with conflict or with the family or something like that. This is another thing that the westerners would do, oh it's all the emptiness anyway; I won't bother with this conflict. That doesn't make an effect, does it? So westerners would misuse some Buddhist concepts, I think. Non-attachment and so, I don't care, it's all empty anyway. Okay, this bill is empty. (41:43)

### **How about the teaching of nirvana?**

In my Buddhist faith nirvana and samsara are the same thing. You wouldn't be practicing Buddhism in order to reach nirvana. That's not the goal... Mahayana Buddhism or Vajrayana Buddhism that I am into, their teachers make a commitment to come back and back to help people. They don't practice in order to reach nirvana and they are released from life as human beings. Their commitment is to come back to better themselves in order to help more people to come back and back and back to take others with them until there is no more person left behind. You know, to be a help, that's the commitment... The concept of escaping into nirvana isn't in mind. So that's not in my agenda. (44:00)

### **Have you ever experienced a moment of enlightenment or transformation?**

Yes, I think so. I mean some people may have strong moments where everything flashes. I don't think I've ever had that. But I've had the feeling of presence... more that the feeling of usual every day, feeling about myself, like some expansive feeling, a very quiet feeling or feeling different energy in the body that is not visible, like energy currents that are not visible. (45:20)

### **Which group do you identified yourself with?**

Between number three and number four. People come to me as a Buddhist therapist. But I wouldn't say that it's all I am doing. I certainly belong to a dharma group and I'm active. (47:08)

### **How long have you practicing meditation?**

Well, I did some other forms of meditation before I became a Buddhist, like it was in the 1970s with movement and consciousness expanding. People were doing transcendental meditations, some breathing techniques. So, I was doing that before. I was doing that not regularly but I was doing a bit of yoga that has breathing meditation. So, I was learning about different meditation techniques right through 1970s until I came to Buddhism. And then I took on Buddhist practices... like you've got Buddhist practices with different stages of practice, like you learn from teachers. But most of them have a period of meditation. It depends on what practice you are doing what the meditation is about. But a lot of Vajrayana practices have got a meditation on emptiness, for example, or some have a meditation on breaths. In some retreat, you do a bit of karma abiding meditation which is settling your thoughts. There are different methods, not one method. (49:11)

### **Purposes of meditation**

In the Buddhist practices I do, it is to develop the consciousness, to develop the potentials. Yes, it's a part of the commitment to develop the consciousness toward one's own death. That's what it is about. So, something stable can be present at the time of death, but of course also to remind. Because it is easy to fall back as human beings to get a bit selfish, to get a bit lazy, to get a bit neglectful. So, I think practice of meditation can keep you on track or can keep that vision that something more about life than our everyday life routine or our physical wellbeing. There is something larger. I think it keeps the connections open to the other sacred. That's probably the main one big point of meditation. In meditation that I do is to keep alive that connection. (50:37)

### **Are there any other Buddhist activities that you are involved in?**

I would say every day, like to be conscious about my interactions with people or how speak or how I act or what I say. It's like my responsibility that I am not unkind to people, that I am not destructive. That is my Buddhist vows in away. So that's in every day process. (51:14)

### **Are you involved in any social justice activities?**

Yes, we are part of Tibetan network... Sometimes we do activism, we put on fund raisers, movie nights and it goes to Tibetans. Humanitarian and a bit political activism we do. We do fundraising to help Tibetan towns. When there was an earthquake, we raised funds to help people there. So yes, all of that happens... I try to be careful of the environment. If there is a speaker that's interesting about the environment, we'll go and support them. We buy the video. So it's something certainly in my thoughts and actions. But I don't belong to an environment group. But I am very concerned. (52:51)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

I don't think it's a moment. May be I was never being a Christian. I was by family of origin and by the fact that going to Church and all that But I always felt that little bit difference in me like when I thought, how I felt and how I saw other people relating to Christian. So I actually think like in my heart I'd probably never be a Christian. (53:38)

By the time I became a teenager and started like a young woman, developing my intellect, by that time I was not impressed by the Christianity in the Church. You learn about the histories and you get very disillusioned...It's very simplistic for a start. A lot of Christians that say Christians do not behave like they are meant to. It's definitely biased women and I don't like that once I became a young woman myself. It seems like people can get away with bad things in confessions. Then it's fine. They can brush it off. In Buddhism it's not like that. The consequences stay with you for a long time. You have to do a lot more work if you've done something destructive. You have to do a lot more work to make it right. (55:44)

### **What makes you a Buddhist?**

What makes me a Buddhist is first of all there is a strong connection I feel toward Buddhism. So that's probably my faith path and experience of that personally. Having seen that what the Buddhist says and some to the teachings and applying them to my life, that's true like actions and reactions and consequences. If I can do that then, that's likely to happen. If I want to change my unhappiness and if I do that then it will make a difference. I am just trying things out, I think, like putting things into practice and seeing that it works. That's true for the beliefs and faith in Buddhism. (57:20)

### **Didn't you find this in the Catholic Church?**

No, I didn't. It didn't seem to give much guidance on deeper questions. Yes, really like you have one line: God the Father. It didn't seem to be sophisticated enough.

Buddhism has many ways to explain things, many different traditions and many stories and many different layers to it like philosophies of Buddhism. So, Buddhism is a philosophy at the start, isn't it? And then there are some more people who have more experiences of it but more in the faith and spirituality. So, it just has many more options to fit into, doesn't it? (58:15)

### **How has Buddhism and its teaching changed or enriched your life?**

It brought me into a community that I feel really at home with, like my other Buddhist friends and my practice group. So that's a really big part of it. I've learn an enormous part, you know, like I feel very different. It's like if you are working for a Buddhist group and you're fundraising and you are doing things like building a website or cook for two hundred people at a retreat, it's a very different feeling doing that than doing something for yourself or for your own profit. The feeling you get from doing that, it gives you so much back, like the satisfaction... So that's a really a good part of being in a Buddhist group. (59:31)

### **Have you faced any challenges in Buddhism?**

Initially, again maybe the translations or not understanding. But initially have a little bit of issues with the book speaking about the women again. Then Lama NN came and what he said put things into perspective... He said, remember a lot of books that you are reading they were written for monks to turn them off about thinking of women. So they taught about women in a terrible way because they as deterrent for monks because monks are meant to be celibate, not because how it really is... So again, there are different levels of teachings and understandings. And Buddhism has this amazing rainbow. This teaching is for these people because that's what they need to progress with their lives. This teaching is for these people

because that's good for them and their lives. So initially and this is with a feminist anger I would pick up things that I have an issue with. (1:01:18)

**How satisfied are you now in following the Buddhist path?**

It feels being and living as a Buddhist it feels like I am being true to myself and my life. I am just connected into that because that's who I am.

**Do you have a short term plan for your Buddhist practice?**

No, not really. Well, we keep our practice group going. We keep doing different Buddhist activities. As I am growing older, it would be nice to have more time for retreats and practice, away from responsibility of earning money, looking after family. (1:03:44)

## **Interview Barn**

Barn comes from an Anglican family. Both of his parents were believers but not faith practitioners. AS was baptised and confirmed in Anglican Church. As a child he went to the Sunday school regularly. He later became a Sunday school teacher and was very active in Church activities. As he grew older he was thinking of becoming a priest which did not work out for him. Being a member of the church in his young age he enjoyed being with the people, being involved in different activities. He appreciated the good moral values and system taught by the Church. He did not get involved in social justice issues at all as he reflected that he was a selfish, individualistic young man.

He stopped his involvement in the Church and changed his spiritual practice into Buddhism when he was about sixteen years of age. He was convinced that he did not abandon his faith and his church but he was drifted away from it. It all faded away.

### **Response to the understanding of God as Creator**

“My kind of upbringing was that God was a fairly angry and hurtful and spiteful God who would punish us for not being a Christian. So, there was always a set for me that I had to be a Christian because if I die early I wouldn’t like to end up in hell. And that was a fire-and-brimstone process. That really when I got older, I started to reject.” (06:36)

“I don’t believe in God. And it’s not a strong view. I think I don’t believe in a guy who dresses in a robe as it was presented to me. And so, I certainly understand Muslims’ idea of Allah, a kind of idea that they don’t try to define God. I like that. In many ways, Allah is a process of emptiness.” (09:07)

“I found it rather difficult to be in a church. I felt like a hypocrite. I found it hard to pray. I found it ridiculous to pray for the same thing. I find it difficult to pray for like can I win this football match. I see people crossing themselves and I think if there is a God he would be oh, oh, oh. So, I think in a way I started to see Christianity and all religions are culturally based.” (11:03)

### **Barn’s view of Jesus Christ as saviour**

I think he was a mindful radical who set it straight the right and the wrong of a lot of people. I really appreciate his view of throwing the money... I think he was an interesting fellow. I don’t know whether he was a god or the Son of God. It doesn’t really matter. I think he was an historical figure and I think he would be an interesting man to be around. I am sure he motivated a lot of people. I think he spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert meditating and what he found there you can translate that into Buddhism. So, Christ is actually one of the bright sides of Christianity (11:57)

I think there’d have been many saviours. I think what he offered was an understanding of suffering and a way out of suffering. What I don’t agree with now is that people can just find an easy answer. I think to find your way out is the only way to go. You have to work with that. No one can help us out of suffering... And I think when people find Christ as the way out; that’s a reasonable thing. And I wouldn’t discourage them not to think of God in Christ as being real. (12:47)

### **Do you read the Bible?**

I did a lot when I was a boy growing up but I don't know. I think it got wonderful stories and I think they have been taken too literally at the moment. And I think the Ten Commandments are very valuable values to develop. I think my Buddhism is tainted by Christianity. I think I am carrying the ethos of Christianity in my Buddhism. I understand that I can't totally chuck my culture up at all... I really appreciate our country and the values we have. We go off the tract sometimes but I think we have very good ethical values in our country. I think they're worthwhile to fight for. (13:54)

### **Eternal life and salvation**

Salvation is a fascinating thing. From my Buddhist perspective, from Zen perspective and from my own meditation experience I don't need salvation. Because I am always part of the universe, I've never been separated from it. I don't feel I need to be saved from dying... When I look around me I see everything non-separated from me. So, I am not separate and if I am not separated from anything, I don't need salvation from anything. I don't fear death... I mean we have fear of dying, in that sense, oh my God, but there is a sense that it's okay. (15:21)

### **How about eternal life?**

Well, there are a hundred billion people who have died and I remember asking a minister in my cynical days: 'Where do you go when you die, reverent? Can I book a house up there, a house or a flat?' So, eternal life is here already. This is my eternity; one moment is ten thousand years. So, there is no other eternity rather than this right now. I've always existed and we've always existed but not eternal issue, not Barry. Barry is conditioned. So, I don't need to hold on to Barry. So why do I need eternal life? I think it's a selfish aspect to hang on to me, one of a hundred billion. It's okay. (16:35)

### **Heaven and hell**

It is here... I have a view that it isn't anywhere but here. Anyway, hell and heaven are really the same thing. You know you need a certain amount of sadness and joy to go together. You know one is exactly the same. When we have a happy partnership and love from our family, there is normally an end on one day. So, there is sadness with the joy. And samsara which is the world of suffering and nirvana they're the same thing. It's how we see it. So, the real kind of saving of oneself is in the mind. (17:31)

### **Did you pray?**

You know I really didn't... I never thought of anything which was really worth praying about. However, when I got divorced from my first marriage, I've got married for thirty five years, then there was time when the suffering that I went through, it was very hard to tolerate ... And then there was one day when I was overwhelmed with grief which made the divorce,... I remember saying to myself, 'I can't do it anymore; I hand it over to you.' And I just handed it over to what I thought was a God at that point but that was pre-my-falling into strong Buddhist process. But I remember doing that and that seemed to kind of give me ability to take the weight of the suffering at that time. Then I discovered meditation and I had my first experience of being okay. I was quite depressed... One point when I walked out of the meditation hall and I felt it okay; I am okay; everything was okay. It was really felt. (20:55)



### **First contact with Buddhism**

I was in the South as a representative of a drug company. I left early and I went to the hotel with my friend... We were having drinks and I got up to go to the bar and I looked around me and I felt like we were not separate in any way. It was a kind of interesting experience that I just realised. I was working with this whole idea that everyone was suffering. It was only my own experience that woke me up to this: leaving, losing a family and children, having difficulty making contact with the children was very heavy. So that was my first understanding that everyone was suffering. (22:27)

And then with friends one night we were chatting and they said: 'you were talking like a Buddhist.' I said: 'Look, I don't really respect Buddhists because in Vietnam at the moment they are killing themselves there, self-immolating. They are burning themselves. It's awful. It was a bit like Japanese in the war.' The guy said " 'Whatever you say, go and read some books on Buddhism because you are talking like a Buddhist.' He was well read than I was. So, I did and I felt straight away that it was connected... I read a series, probably five or six books. (24:26)

### **Did you take formal training in Buddhism?**

I started meditating a lot at that point... in 1977, I think... There is a thing called Koan Curriculum and I started that back in early 1980s... I started to attend regular meditation sittings once a week. (27:52)

### **What is your view of the Buddha?**

I think the Buddha was an extraordinary gentleman who came out of a very difficult period in India. In a sense when he trod this life, he was really going against the Hindu traditions which were well established. I think that he was a strong will and a very intelligent man who was able to take a lot of people with him which was upsetting too many people of the princes and kings and emperors in that part of northern India at the time. Even his own country disappeared, overtaken at one point just before of his death. He was very sad about that but he managed to not be killed by any of these power hungry kind of lords. There were many people after him because he was probably a threat, maybe a little bit like Jesus was to the Romans. And so, he must manage that very well. I think he had the ability to manage that. He also didn't want to teach so there was no ego or little ego in this. So, he led quite a reasonable life. I was able to relate to the life he was living in a much more the way the modern precepts of industries... He left his family... (38:00)

I think what he found was his understanding of how the universe works. I don't think he was a god; I am just thinking he was a man. And if the Buddha didn't exist, Buddhism could still exist. (40:02)

### **Do you have a personal relationship with the Buddha?**

There is a sense sometimes you know of being 'eyebrow to eyebrow', a sense of being totally connected to him. But in a way the only Buddha we ever find is the Buddha inside us. So, the question should be reframed: 'Do I have a personal relationship with myself?' And I do. (41:43)

## **How do you apply the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path?**

I think unless you understand the Four Noble Truths, really understanding your own suffering, you probably won't be going to look for Buddhism, or you won't be going to look for solutions. So how do I apply? I have to suffer first. My first suffering was when I got divorced. Before that my life was so easy. My family and relatives were well off. I never needed money, never wanted for money. And I had a fairly strong ambitious kind of mind so I was going to get a lot of money... It was a shock to me that I was entering the suffering. I was unable to see it; I was incredibly selfish. Even in the Vietnam War I couldn't see the suffering of the Vietnamese. It was only when I realised my own suffering, very deeply I understood the suffering of everyone... So, joining the interfaith network is one way for me to work out the compassion for the world. (43:41)

## **The teaching of Karma**

I remember having a discussion with an Anglican priest, a short discussion about karma and it was as though a predestination that some Christians believe. I've always shattered at the process of trying to make karma too simple or too complex. I have a feeling that it's about this moment and what I am threading now. And if you look at rebirth, it's simply that every moment is a rebirth of this moment, a rebirth of intellect, a rebirth of compassion, a rebirth of awareness. You are getting closer to how it works. So, karma is a kind of universal law that it's not about 'gosh, you've got bad karma, man.' Karma is very complex and it's based around how you were brought up. A nine months in our mother's womb, and you want to go back past that you can but then it becomes difficult for Christians to understand what we talk about other lives. But then there're five years at home and you've got those five years and nine months when you've got a mother who's maybe a drunk or a prostitute or somebody who is violent in a home. What kind of karma is that creating? This is where our conditioning stands. Then we are lucky enough to be brought up in a good home. Do we have enough intellect to go to university? Where do you go to school? You came from a good home. So, did I. Many people in Pompeii who do not have a good home... So how do their karmas compared to ours? So, conditions that exist that conform to them. So, I can imagine people have been brought up in conditions so they don't have a mother and father, needing to steal. So, karma really is something that only we don't understand, it's very complex. Many thousands of things go to produce who we are or who we think we are. And so, we are convinced that the beginning of our lives that we are NN and NN but you're not; you are just the condition. And so, your mind thinks that you are that and you continue a story; you have a narrative. Many of the narratives where many of the processes that form your narrative are unknown to you. (48:06)

So, it's not about because you have been bad and you got sick or because you have been good and you are well. Karma isn't that simple. And really it's a thing that we can manage in terms of understanding. That's where meditation helps because in meditation we break away from the six senses, the five senses and the mind, and drop into a place where there is hardly any influence of the senses; the mind is slowed down. And so, what we are doing is developing an intuitive skill of knowing ourselves at another level, a level beyond the mind and the senses. That's very hard to understand from a Westerner. (50:28)

When you meditate you realise that you are not separated. So, if I hit you, I am hitting me; if you make you sad, I am making me sad. We are so connected. So why would I hit you while you are me. I am not separate from you. So how can I, I mean I don't let you come into house

and take things if you were a thief but I don't have to hurt you. You know there is a package of living as well but I don't see things separate to me. So why would I hurt you? (51:22)

### **How about reincarnation?**

We would talk about rebirth in Zen. NN asked a question: 'What happens when you die?' I said I don't know. You have to ask me after I die. But can I bring it back to just this moment and after this moment there is a new rebirth of each moment. So, if you die here. The next moment is the moment of opportunity, be more aware, more compassionate, more skilful. So, we don't have to go back into rebirth. However, the classical idea, Tibetan idea of rebirth is very interesting because it says that you go into a bardo after your life and for seven days and there are seven bardos making forty-nine days and after some point your kind of consciousness or energy is flying around and sees a couple making love and you decide I like that and you go to them. So, your karma has already been chosen because you're choosing your parents. So, you're deciding to go back into the life you want... I think it gives us a way of living more than I don't want to get to technical. I think it shows us how to live correctly. The whole idea of karma is about showing us that we must be living okay; we have ethical values. And something happens that we don't like, we do have to go to pieces over it; it's just karma that comes into fruition, might be bad or might be good. (53:39)

### **Teaching of non-self and emptiness**

Emptiness is very interesting to get a hand on it and you have to experience it. However, I give it a go, really an incomplete goal of trying to explain it, because it is very difficult. If you imagine that things exist in isolation, even this cup, someone has to dig up the clay which is in the ground, somebody has to dig it up and bring it in to a potter and the potter has to clay it and it has to go in a boat to get it here. So, this cup is empty. Nothing exists separately... When you talk about the cup we make words into things, the same as when we talk about the Buddha, we make it into concept. In that conceptual way of thinking, we separate ourselves. So, in the separation, kind of viewing everything can name, we separate; we need that; we need to do that in this world, in the phenomenal world. But in the spiritual lesson when we conceptualise about our spirituality, we make the Buddha into a thing that we want to be, we are already the Buddha; we're already a Buddha. So, we make everything a thing, even that's not the right statement. So, emptiness is something that exists for everything. So, when you step into emptiness, you are in the middle of the whole world. If you look around you everything is empty. You are empty; you are just in the universe. Even that is wrong. This is really an awful kind of process that tries to explain it to somebody that doesn't practice it. Practice is the understanding itself, to feel totally there, a kind of liberative from the old views, a fear and a kind of sadness in suffering that we have. So, everything is kind of manageable, all of the suffering in the world and the nirvana, all the same thing. It's the names we give things that kind of set problems for us. (57:05)

Non-self is really interesting because while we consider ourselves a self, this me myself and you yourself, dual. And if I can relate that in a spiritual world, when I actually know that there is no I, me, self or life span, I am really close what Buddhism is about because I am just walking away from this separation over time. And so, if I get rid of me, mine, I, self... The ego is important to live in our world, isn't it? I mean I need an ego to meditate. I need a strong ego to talk to people like this because I challenge them on everything. So, we need ego but ego in the intellect becomes the champion to against their awakening because we have certain ideas

and I've always found it hard to talk to people about Zen because as soon as I mention things that I don't want to hear they want to kind of put their views. And I think that's fine but in the end why do you believe that, why is that? Why don't you believe in souls? Why don't you believe in God? (59:30)

### **How about nirvana?**

You know it's here now. So, as samsara. I mean nirvana and samsara coexist. Or you can say that samsara or suffering is the pre-coexist of nirvana. How would you know nirvana if you didn't have suffering? I would say that I would never take Buddhism up if I didn't have big suffering. So, nirvana is a kind of quench but that's a kind of Theravada tradition. (1:00:10) I think it's an awakening process where we understand of our place in the universe. The mind is Buddha and then the mind is neither Buddha. You know when we start naming things we get lost again. When we start conceptualising about Buddhism, we get lost. We're lost in me and you, concept again. (1:00:43)

### **Buddhist practices**

Barry has been practicing meditation since 1976. Nowadays he practices meditation daily. He combines a sitting method called Shihantaza with mindfulness which concentrates on the awareness of breathing, watching the body and the emotion. Each session varies from 40 minutes to two hours. The purpose of practicing meditation for him was at first to be awoken. Now he realizes that the purpose of meditation is a representation of being awoken, or a deepening the awakening process, or cultivation of deepening the awareness and of living this awareness in daily life. Barry also teaches meditation at a Buddhist centre which was converted from his private property. Every evening he leads a Buddhist group with meditating and chanting the Sutras in both Sanskrit and Japanese.

In the process of becoming a Buddhist Barry was enrolled at university to do further studies in social sciences in order to be more effectively involved in human services. He has also been actively working with local interfaith networks. He has been offering healing services called 'Forest Hills Care' to patients with cancer or emotional issues on a private basis. This practice is, for him, a way of 'acting out compassion'. On this point, Barry warns that Zen Buddhism can easily become a good hobby because "people can be incredibly selfish by trying to solve all their problems in Zen, not realizing the person sitting next to them is maybe struggling with their problems as well." (1:07:58)

For Barry, practicing Buddhist spirituality is his full-time task. At the moment, he is leading five Buddhist groups of which two groups are Zen, two are mindfulness and one is reflective awareness. His aim is to train Buddhist leaders who in turns can organise and run future groups. He offers them Buddhist talks, different methods of meditation, chanting and retreats. Their every night meeting normally lasts for about one and a half hour which includes various activities namely sitting meditation, walking meditation, chanting, talks on various topics and sharing a 'cuppa'. Every day he offers private thirty-minute-meetings with group members either at the centre or via Skype.

### **How has Buddhism changed your life?**

I think it's really enriched my life tremendously... I am a very content man. I have a really lovely relationship. My wife is a Buddhist as well and we share this together... She used to be

a Catholic. So, we both are Buddhist. We took a long time. She used to write Christian-Buddhist, now Catholic-Buddhist. So, I have a contented life. How does that help me? In a sense I am very much at peace with myself. I came out of a divorce which was very difficult, very painful. So, I am content. I have very happy moments. So, I think it has a big influence on my life. (1:13:36)

### **Do you have any difficulties in following the Buddhist path?**

When I first started Zen in Australia, it was very rigid. We had to sit very still and people would come up to you and said: 'You are moving. Be quiet.' I found that very difficult. There was a difficulty when I went on a solo retreat 20 days at NN. I used their facilities to have a meditation hut. It was a 20 day retreat that I put myself on. I woke up on the third day terrified of dying. And I thought I would get up and meditate. The meditation was fine but there was a fear and I was convinced that I was going to die very soon. I was kind of moving with fear and loneliness, loneliness by itself and fear. So, I started to do a lot of walking. In the walking one day I walked pass a stupa. And as I looked up and read... 'The whole universe is walking with me'. So, there was a sense that I kind of feeling that I didn't have to be frightened any more. That's the idea of everything being in here and not being separated from anything. It was really reinforced. That was an experience that I had and interpreted it. Other people might interpret it differently. So, I realized that Zen and my sitting were not useful anymore and I kept dispensed with them. So, what I realised was that I couldn't rely on anything at all, including Zen, which was a great liberation. I kind of approached Zen differently after that... The fear did disappear and the loneliness did, too. There is a saying in Zen which I hope I could get it right for you. 'There is just one call to turn for you alone or for you to be alone and sacred in the whole universe.' (1:15:57)

### **How satisfied are you in following the Buddhist path today?**

I can't imagine not following it. I don't think I rarely think like that now. It just seems like a natural way to do. I am always amazed when people are drawn here, come and then disappear, because it's not to their liking. Because it was always exactly what I needed to do and I realized that for some people it's just not what they need. It's too hard, too difficult or it's just not what they want. For me, it's always being a really rewarding experience. And I had moments when I think why am I doing teaching? And I think what am I doing wearing this outfit. I have a robe and I put the robe away. So, there are moments like that. (1:16:57)

### **Planning for the future**

If I am a rich man, I am not a rich man, if I have a lot of money, I would like to build a monastery or a retreat centre bigger than this [his current retreat centre]. And there are many people that I would like to get them involved in this process, many Zen Buddhists that I would like to involve them as well. That is a dream but within that dream there is a kind of coalition with people and building a group and passing it onto people, passing this teaching on so that when I die and I will die, there will be something left not as a legacy of mind but as a legacy of Buddhism, of Zen Buddhism on this coast. (1:17:52)

### **Do you have an ultimate goal to achieve?**

I don't think I have that kind of ultimate goal. No, these are things that may or may not happen. In a way, I think this is falling apart, the whole thing. (1:18:05)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

I am not really sure that I actually stopped being a Christian. I don't think that is really an issue. I probably, I've got to be careful that I don't want to be too subjective about this. But I think in a way I think it's rather hypocritical and I've been trying to make sense of the abuses that happen in the Christian Church. I struggle to understand that but believe me it's still ... It's just part of people being people. Anyway, it has some impact on me. I remember being shocked when I heard about some of the roshe in America and what they got up to with their kind of hunting of women and money, taking money out of the sangha. There were some very well known roshe that got up to very bad things. I think the West was very blind. We open and we know these men from the East with so much dissolution about Christianity. These men from the East have got something to teach us. We've grown up. We know they're just human. What led me away? I think it was simply it didn't work anymore for me. I couldn't believe the stories, stories so stained and inappropriate: the story of virgin birth, the story of Christ ascending to heaven. You know Christianity never needed us to be real and the hypocrisy of the papal system and the hierarchy of the Anglican church and the money that the Anglican church has. It seems very materialistic. I supposed I should not make those judgments on people. (1:20:53)

I think I am much more sympathetic with Christian churches now. I don't see Christ the saviour in that sense. I see Christ as a man who is showing us the suffering in the world, you know hanging on the cross, suffered really and he was saying, 'hey, this is suffering; you are going to be at it, too.' I think he has a lot to teach us about the ending of the suffering. And I think he taught us about being decent to each other. Those things I carry; I don't tend to drop them. They are just in my soul if you wake up my personality. I use the term soul in term of personality. It's just like I felt out of it. It doesn't seem to be real. The stories have been interpreted by the modern Christians so literally. When I spoke to a man who had been divorced as if I talked to a Christian man in a new church a new fundamental church. There is a saying 'there is a demon, a demonic force.' That's why my marriage broke up. Then I thought both of you needed to take responsibility for why your marriage broke up instead of this kind of abstract you are talking about the demoniac influence in the area breaking your family up... I think also I like being responsible and I think Zen makes you very responsible for your actions. I can't blame God or Christ or Allah or anyone else for what I do... This encourages me to continue. You know I have friends who are priests and Christian ministers and they told me that I am going to heaven and I laughed. And they said it seriously. Someone asked me: 'You know the difference between I and you? You are going to die and I am going to die and I am going to heaven and you won't. And I thought 'okay, that's what you believe.' And so the personal rewards, a kind of gratification of ego that you are going to heaven, drive me a kind of so much crap. I should use another word. But I think any tradition, any culture that supports people in their times of trouble is worthwhile and I believe that for Christianity. I think Christianity has created wonderful values for us in the world. I think they are very good values. However, I think sometimes they have been corrupted by materialism of the West and sum together in a way that if you are a good Christian you might grow in money and I didn't see that what's Christianity is about. So that sense of material I didn't like. (1:24:15)

### **What encouraged you to embrace Buddhism?**

I didn't really embrace it; I just went toward it and fell into it, it seemed. I never thought I would be a Buddhist teacher. I never thought I would go this far. I never thought forty years ahead. It just seemed like I fell onto the path with good luck. I think it's the suffering of my divorce. I think I was luckiest person in life... So, good fortune kind of allowing me to feel the pain of life very early and I was lucky. I might have been a Buddhist and went through the same experiences and became a Christian. (1:25:26)

I think it's so much in common with Buddhism and Christianity actually. I didn't tell you that I think Christian Churches worry too much because I really think a lot of people are kind of so called Buddhists that really when the Christ comes I have this way better than Christ. I think just in case there is something up there I don't kind of personally go toward that. But I know people do. (1:26:05)

### **What are the prospects and difficulties that Buddhism has in the Australia?**

I think that prospects are huge but it will change in the next thousand years. It will continue in Australia because we have more Asians coming and I think it will be changed dramatically. Christianity has a part play in it. It will influence it, the same as when China picked up Taoism and Confucianism. When it came to Japan, it picked up Japanese way. When it went into Korea, it picked up Korean way. When it went into Tibet, it picked up the Shaming tradition... I think there will be a Western Buddhism. (1:26:67)

### **What challenges have you had in following the Buddhist path in Australia?**

When I first came up here, started to put my flyers up the walls, people would take them down, all of the radical Pentecostal people. They said this is the work of the devil. So, I had to go back and put them up again. And I had troubles getting flyers on the noticeboard. If we put the flyers up, the woman who was a Christian wouldn't let us put up... Those kinds of things were happening. That's fading. There were times when people meditated by walking around the hall and people would report them to the police. Some churches have been known to say prayers for the heathens up the road. So, we have to be culturally aware. The retreat I have here people are annoyed with it. We were not annoying; we are out at the park next door just doing some practices and people say: 'look at them. What are they doing?' And if you are aware as I have become, don't push it to people's face. (1:31:02)

## Interviewing Blanch

Blanch comes from a mixed Christian family of which the father was Catholic and the mother was Presbyterian. BE was baptised in the Presbyterian Church where he also received religious education and participated in Church services. He attended Sunday school regularly during the years of his primary and secondary schools. He then went to Anglican high school where he attended daily church service and religious education. He stopped attending both church service and religious education when he was sixteen years of age. In his twenties, he started practising meditation which, according to him, was part of the whole ethos of that time. He used meditation as a stress controlling therapy, which according to him, was very abiding and useful.

Recalling religious experiences, he had two profound moments when he was nine and eleven years old. He had a “transcendent experience” in which he felt that the world became transcendent and that he became united with everything.

About God he expressed that “I always have a problem with God, a personal God, because so much suffering. The question of suffering seems to contradict the idea of God... As an adult I think metaphysical questions like if there is a God or if there is a life after death, a kind of irrelevant to lead a good ethical life. The questions that cannot prove. They are not provable questions.” (08:36) “The other question for me is he or she (God) has been used in such a justification for so many wrong things within the Church.” (08:56)

On Jesus Christ, he comments: “Jesus Christ was an avatar, a saint, all that of things... I have a hard time in believing in a God... I can’t see him as the Son of God.” (10:54)

Blanch views the Bible as a historical document, a sacred book but not a revealed book. (11:57)

On the Christian beliefs in eternal life and salvation Blanch expresses that “I think the underlined assumption is that... you have an intrinsic part of you that is surviving after your death... In my experiences, I have no experience of that. So, salvation of that part of me is not relevant, in terms of eternal soul after my death.” (12:54)

Asked if Blanch ever prayed and his response is: “I pray but my prayers are more heartfelt expression of gratitude or compassion. I don’t think there is any one listening.” (13:20) When asked if he ever had an experience of being transcended in his prayer or meditation, he comments: “Certainly in meditation I find that Buddhist Sukamatar feeling is easy to fall back... quiet abiding, a sense of internal dialogue, participating and feeling a unity with your experiences or your body felt experiences.” (14:25)

BE was involved in liturgical singing in a choir from the age of nine till eleven. He had no involvement in any other social justice activities. He had positive experiences of his Christian community: “People knew each other. It was warm to be a member of a community, any community. Yes, good feelings.” (15:45)

Regarding the Church’s teachings, he says: “I don’t understand the concept of hell and punishment of the wicked...” Comparing the teachings of the two traditions, namely Christian and Buddhist, he remarks: I really respect the Church’s position on refugees. I think if someone stands up for social justice, it’s the Churches... I think Buddhist institutions should



stand up in a similar way for those of the social issues.” (16:42) He comments further: “I think Buddhism is about ethics, compassion and wisdom. I think they have a huge overlapping compassion.” (17:12)

Blanch does not take the Christian teaching on heaven as an important matter: “It’s a metaphysical thing. It’s lovely thought that I will meet up with my mom and dad again and all that sort of stuff. But it’s not important to leading a good life.” (17:31)

### **BE’s first contact with Buddhism**

Buddhism was first introduced to Blanch in 1970s through media. He first rejected the whole concept of Buddhist spirituality because of its strong emphasis on rituals, religious observance, individualistic approach of practicing, and its seemingly religion of elites. However, after having read extensive Buddhist literatures, BE started attending various Dharma classes and retreats, and practicing meditation. He used to be a member of a Buddhist Sangha but later left it because he does not connect with their therapeutic approach of meditation. Blanch is more interested in such practices that help him see the world more clearly. (23:21)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

“I think what we’ve talked about; I think it’s the personal God, the question of suffering and then the question metaphysic around life after death, about resurrection, virgin birth, these sorts of things. I think with religions of the book, you know, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, a lot of suffering comes from the use of that book.” (36:50)

### **What made you to turn to Buddhism?**

“I think meditation practice, mindfulness practice... That’s very much generally a way to the door of Buddhism. I think it’s part of the story of Buddhism; it’s a technology. It opens the general community experience to that world. For me, the more I research about Buddhism in terms of its ethics, its compassion and development of wisdom, it just makes more sense to me in my life.” (37:40) Blanch follows Theravadin Buddhist tradition.

### **BE’s view on Buddhist teachings**

About the Buddha: “I put him in classes as Socrates, philosophers, sages... He was really looking at the middle way between what he saw in his lifetime which was Jainism, that extreme... and Brahmanism.” (24:54) “He was trying to find a middle way... His insight into the human experience is right. I think formation of consciousness, the Dukkha, Atanata, Nitcha is right. The Four Noble Truths are right.” (25:35)

Blanch takes the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Paths as his spiritual guides and applies them in his daily life. Describing how he applies these teachings, he expresses: “I think that’s a process of insight. I think the big difference between what the Buddha is talking ethically, in terms of ethical terms, and the Christian approach, and I think the Christian approach is much more normative, you know *thou shalt* in the Old Testament. I think the Buddhist approach, the Bali approach, is much more virtue-based. I think it’s a process of looking at your own.” (26:29)

About the teaching of Karma: “I have a big problem with the Karma and rebirth... Karma in its original term, Hindu term, is very much based around reincarnation, another life, the turning of the wheel. That’s because the Hindus believe there is a soul called atman. But in Buddhism there isn’t one. So, what I have read most recently is that rebirth, not reincarnation, in Buddhism. Sorry, Karma in Buddhism is really about action, not about merit. That’s your actions reinforce samsara, your habits... And in those actions, you can change your rebirth, but not in the terms of reincarnation but in terms of rebirth from moment to moment as if each second was alive. So, it’s the rebirth within your own experience.” (28:59)

Non-self and emptiness: “I think the experience of meditation proves it.” (30:02) “It is a critical teaching because otherwise you believe that you can’t change... without that there is a me, a mine, an I. So, if you believe that there is a part of you that doesn’t change, then it is my pen. It is not that the self does not exist. I think the correct translation was that the permanent self doesn’t exist. It’s changing all the time. It’s always changing. I think it’s a misapprehension to think there is not self, because there is obviously there this N and there is M and we have histories and narratives of how we got here. But I think that’s much more a kind of working hypothesis; it’s kind of process and of course emptiness is a big one.” (31:30) “Emptiness is really the acceptance of no permanent self. It gives you rooms to be there for other people and empty of yourself to be truly giving to people, listening to people.” (32:07)

About Nirvana: “I think the original Pali Nirodandha means putting out off fire. It means extinguishing the fire. You know that quote of the Buddha: ‘Everything is on fire’, with greed, with hatred... I think I can accept that. The idea of heaven: no.” (33:15)

Are you looking forward to being enlightened? “Oh no, it’s not important to me. I think a good life is enough for me. I don’t see the enlightenment, it’s great, but not important.” (34:03)

BE sees himself as a Buddhist practitioner but a kind of Protestant Buddhist. (35:22) It’s “not much about idolatry or incense and priesthood.” (35:46) “I guess, conventionally, yes I am a Buddhist but I would like to think of myself as more following of the Dharma.” (36:08) He would like to take formal training like enrolling in a Master degree in Buddhism, to have longer sessions of meditation, to have a teaching master, and to have a congregation, a community.

### **Buddhist practices**

Blanch has practiced Buddhist meditation since 1970s. These days he still practices meditation daily. Each session normally lasts for 30 to 45 minutes. He follows the method of breath concentration, and the purpose for doing this is to get a real experience of continual change, of Anata, Enitcha and Dukka. He is very content of what he has been practicing.

### **How satisfied are you in following this path?**

Pretty happy.

### **The Challenges of following the Buddhist path**

I think not having a community. I think not having a teacher. I think finding the time. It’s always a challenge for anybody but my wife doesn’t really have any sympathy with this. But I think community and teacher would be the key things. (49:56)

### **Do you have any plan for the near future?**

I mentioned that when I got accepted into that Nantien Institute... I was always optimistic that I could do some program locally but I find that Buddhism is always retreating out of academia... I would love to do a month long retreat at Blue Mountains inside a meditation centre... and I would like to have a community. (44:17)

**Are there any Buddhist teachings that you find it hard to take?**

I think we've touched on the idea of karma, being Hindu idea of merits. Reincarnation makes more sense to me. I think the idea of you've seen in South East Asia of common house holders gaining merits by giving things to the religious elites.

**How have Buddhism and its teaching challenged or enriched your life?**

It is easy to know things like life is constantly changed or there is no permanent self that you've changed day to day... As a westerner, I've always felt that there was a place for a permethrin man, the idea that humans struggle in their life to improve everything. And there is a kind of fatalism in ... In the East, there is always a kind of reincarnated life, another life. In the West, there is only one life. You face that tragic kind of dimension of your life. There is a feeling in me that I feel kind of uncomfortable with that kind of acceptance. I feel that I should stand up against my fate. There is something in me that I feel uncomfortable with that kind of blind acceptance of sort of not being able to challenge my fate. I find that hard. I guess the other one is also the question of guilt. I am sort of researching around Buddhism and guilt. If there is no self and everything is a kind of, how do you punish a murderer? It's like sex. They never talk about these things... I think that's a real challenge for Buddhism. I think the things about guilt, in a civil society or any society, how do you punish someone if they are no permanent self. I don't understand. It never talks about this. And of course, most recently in Burma what's happening with the Rohingya and also in Sri Lanka with the Tamils and the Sinhalese, that's not a very specific, gentle Buddhist thing. (49:08)

**Have you got any religious experience that changed the direction of your life?**

I think when I was watching my mother for nine years before she died and I think watching the aging and dying process of my mother gave me a real insight into the three messengers: sickness, old age and death. (51:05)

**How do you perceive Buddhism in Australia?**

I guess demographics say you get more people from Burma or Thailand or Vietnam. I think the Buddhism that they bring is fairly cultural. I think old Australians rather than new Australians in number I don't think there are many people. I think we are living in an atheist society and materialist society. I think Buddhism has always reinvented itself as Christianity has in its cultural context... Buddhism is very much seeing a religion around death, the last part of your life. With the development of Buddhism in Australia I think mindfulness would be very interesting in the materialist, atheist society in which we live. People become more stressed and anxious. That would be a way leading people to a more wider experience of spirituality. (54:25)

**What contribution could Buddhism make to Australians?**

Potentially it could really help us to become a more caring and sharing society generally, turning away from materialism, turning towards spiritual values of fairness and sharing and ecological balance.

**Profession**

Being in IT for thirty years currently is an infrastructure project manager dealing mostly with initiative around desktop computing virtualisation.

## **Interview Demy**

### **Demy's religious background**

Demy comes from a family with both parents converting to Christianity from Chinese religions. Their first Christian affiliation was with the Church of Christ but later on they joined the Presbyterian Church. They were devoted Christians for the rest of their lives. Demy was baptised and during her young age she attended religious education both at Sunday program in Presbyterian Church and at primary school. When she started going to high school, her parents gave her freedom to make her own choice of religious practice, then she stopped attending religious education at both school and church. Recalling the experience of what she learned from religious education programs, she does not remember much, except for some of biblical verses that she learned by heart.

### **Demy's views on Christian teachings and beliefs**

**About God**, Demy remarks: "When I was a child, I think I probably believe in it, because that was what I was fed, was what I was given and my mind was not developed enough to think any broader. But when became a teenager, in my late teens, I became very interested in philosophy, religions and that's been a life-long interest. I've been reading broadly and widely, widely enough, and so I noticed that there are other cultures and other religions that don't have a Christian concept of God. Then it entered my mind, probably in my early twenties that I was curious to know that there are Buddhists and there is African religion that Aborigines have their view and so Jewish. So that was probably the first time when it struck me that there may be different views around and I only had been brought up on one view which is a Christian view and might be a view very narrow. So, after many years of reading and thinking about this I am currently much more relying with Buddhist thoughts than I am with Christian thoughts. So, I don't believe in the Christian God... I don't believe it necessarily a god in a way that Christian religion states it so, and heaven and hell and all of that...Personally, no I don't subscribe to that as a truth at this point in time." (06:15)

The reasons that she does not believe in the Christian teaching of God is because "my studies dwelling into the Buddhist thoughts that make me thinking about it... They don't believe in a creator God... Any religion I looked into I feel does not have hundred percent either explanation for the beginning of time or the creator of the world. So really there two ways you either believe in the creator god or you don't. And so, from my reading from my Buddhist studies they say that they do not believe in the creator god, they call it beginningless time. But they say that this is beyond human understanding" (07:15) "They asked you to examine by logics very carefully; examine by logics, it's not on faith based things. So, when I looked at it with logics and keeping in mind the other things I have read... I thought the Western Christian view in my mind or what I have been educated or fed or said, the point of conception of the soul or spirit just pops in suddenly there and there is no explanation why it's there. Whereas Buddhist view says that everything must have a cause, so it doesn't just pop out of nowhere. So that's where they have a belief in the incarnation and everything depends on previous causes... So, when I examine by logics, I thought I could not prove that the Western Christian model of the creator god or of the spirit being created at the point of conception is true. I feel you cannot defend that by logics." (08:44)

“They don’t also have an answer but at least they say ‘we can’t answer it’. And their logics, I think, is superior to the Western Christian model where they ask you to take belief of faith and just take it as ‘there is God; you’re born; you die; there is heaven and hell’.” (09:43)

“I firmly believe that if I hadn’t had the good fortune of coming into contact with accessible Buddhist logics and teachings I quite probably could have gone my whole life without digging more deeply because the culture I was born into, virtually everyone just takes it as given. Very few people think about that, even the prominent scientists, once people have a fixed set of beliefs they tend to stick with their beliefs and disregard the other options.” (10:46)

**About Jesus,** Demy says: “It’s quite possible he may have been a real person who lived and had a big impact on people. But I think within any of these religion traditions or anything that is written down anywhere, there need to be a care in the interpretation of what it is. So, I think one cannot always take things literally... But I remain that there are figures who are in different histories or religions who are equally as important as Jesus Christ.” (14:17) “One of the problems with the Western Christian model is they ask you to take it on faith without doing theoretical analysis while Buddhism is a direct opposite, you do not take this on faith. You need to examine it critically, analyse and think about it. So, you know I feel the same way with Jesus Christ in the whole Christian model. He may have lived; he undoubtedly has an enormous influence on lots of people that it is written on the Bible. But I don’t necessarily believe that it is one hundred percent correct that all miracles etc. that he did happened in exactly the way that it is written down. I mean one has to be very... careful in the interpretation lots of stories and things have been written down. You can’t prove that this is the word of God or this is the word of Jesus.” (15:24) “The difference with Buddhism is that they do not ask you to take it on faith or on the word. You test it out for yourself.” (15:40) “Not anyone could have written the Bible but there is a problem there. I have a problem with saying ‘yes, Jesus Christ is this and this, the saviour of men or the rest of us’ because it has too many holes in the argument as far as I am concerned.” (16:08)

**On the Bible,** she comments: “It’s a great piece of work. I think there are a lot of great wisdoms in the Bible, absolutely. However, there are things in Christian world I don’t like as well. So, as I said the problem I have is that it asks you to everything on faith... And there are more problems than that as well. I don’t feel that there is enough emphasis. So, the problem is when it asks people to take the beliefs on faith then it leads down to the individuals. So, individuals can say I have faith and they still go out and do bad things because they feel they have faith it doesn’t matter. Whereas with Buddhism they want you to examine carefully all your actions, body, speech and mind. So, you just can’t go out and do bad things.” (18:18)

**On Church community,** she recalls: “As we know there are lots of wars that Christians have been involved in, not just Christians, where they feel their faith is right, so therefore they go to have a war with someone else. Also when I went to Church for many years, even at Sunday school,... there were lots of people at my parents’ church. And they all said they went to Church as Christians but after Church, you know, there were lots standing around gossiping and all of that sort of stuffs. So, I felt that there is a problem with just saying ‘go with faith’, big problem, huge problem... Faith in itself is a shaky concept when you examine it logically.” (19:27)

## **Becoming Buddhist**

Demy had her initial contact with Buddhism through social media by watching Dalai Lama receiving the Peace Noble Price in 1997. Knowing that Buddhism existed in the world she started her search for Buddhist spirituality and philosophy by reading books. She read Buddhist literatures extensively with a critical mind and by using logical and comparative method. The more she read the more she felt attracted to Buddhism because of its logical sophistication and its experiential approach: "Well, the level of complexity, sophistication and the degree to which this Buddhist psychology has examined the Western mind, feeling [and] thought became quickly apparent to me it was far more superior, far more complex. They analyse it to a much degree of details." (27:42)

"It was not that I wanted to believe it but the power of the logics and the sophistication of the arguments got me thinking of studying this a bit further. And I am still happy not to believe it, to be honest. But the more I read and dwell into my Buddhist studies, the more impressed I am with the level of sophistication and a logical analysis and thoughts and details that have gone into it. And I feel that it leaves the Western Christian model and Western psychologies far behind." (32:52)

Demy has been practicing secular meditation for about nine years and Buddhist meditation for about four years. At the moment, she meditates four or five times a week, using two main methods namely single point of concentration and breath and visualisation. Each meditation session lasts for one hour. The aims of practising this are to train her mind, to gain greater proficiency at a single point of concentration, to get some similarity with her mind to understand how it operates, to train conscious intention, to improve the quality of her mind, to understand the states of her mind especially in relation with delusion, and to become enlightened in order to help others to improve their lives. (01:09:56)

Besides practising meditation DE also goes to a Buddhist study group every Sunday. She reads Buddhist literatures one or two hours every day. She does not engage herself in just one Buddhist tradition in terms of reading but be open to different traditions. (01:10:01) Throughout the course of the day she practices mindfulness and reflection. She confesses that Buddhist practice has become her number one interest in life, number one top priority. (01:11:56) She expresses her deep commitment to learning and practicing this path and wishes to make some contribution to helping others learning Buddhism.

### **Reason of becoming a Buddhist**

By applying the wisdom of emptiness which connects with the teaching of dependant arising in Buddhism to the Christian model of the soul, Demy came to a realisation that the two are exclusive and that she could not explain the Christian model by using logics: "By logics I cannot defend Christian model. Now you don't believe in 'the soul popping in at the time of conception' and you can't believe in Creator God in which case all of that becomes question mark." (01:24:17) "The wisdom of emptiness, and as I said, the teaching of dependant arising causes arrogate. Putting a lot of thoughts into that is being a clean shaft, probably the main thing that made me decide that the Christian view has some serious flaw in it, some logical problems." (01:24:44) "But the Buddhist stuffs... they say that, they say, they name that logical problem. They say: 'There is a problem here, you are a believer in creator God or you don't'. But they say: 'you are a believer in the creator God, there is a problem'." (01:25:31)

### **Demy's further training in Buddhism**

Demy has been committing herself to learning more about Buddhism: “Yes, I have been going to a Buddhist study group for the last four years.” (33:10)

**View of the Buddha:** For her, the historical Buddha is not much as important as the Buddhist teachings: “From my studies of the Buddhist things that I have looked at the Buddha historical figure is not really so important whether you believe him or not... The most important thing is the teachings of the Dharma. And this is what you have to examine and analyse to yourself and test it.” (34:42) “I am open to the thinking that the Buddha is a historical figure who lived but I am not really bothered as whether I believe that or not because that’s not really that important as to did he actually do this or do that.” (35:10) “The difference with Buddhism is that it doesn’t really matter because it is not about him, the fact of him living as a historical person, it’s the teachings where the important truths are.” (35:43) “He is an important figure that is meant to give inspiration to the people who study Buddhism.” (36:18) She does not have a personal relationship with the Buddha. This is because she explains: “The Buddha himself said that... when he died, apparently he said to people around, ‘listen to the teachings’, you know, ‘do not mourn me when I go.’” (37:06)

### **Responses to the teachings**

Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path are the core teachings that Demy has been learning and engaging every day. The first truth ‘life is suffering’ for her is a real challenging teaching which “has a very profound impact on my life because if you come to an understanding of this, it has a profound effect on how you come to live your life...From my understanding of the Four Noble Truths and my examination, I’ve come to see that previous way I used to live my life which is pretty standard secular way is actually flawed; and from my analysis I’ve come to see that I never achieve the satisfaction that I think I will get and as I am getting older... I’ve come to see the truth of this. So, this has had a very profound effect on my life... and how I live my life.” (40:22) These teachings also have had an impact on how she spend her time over things: “I am still in the process of coming to... decisions how I choose to spend my time I have in this life time so my priorities have had a pretty dramatic change.” (40:45) “Buddhist paths laid out very clear path for certain behaviours and actions of body, speech and mind.” (41:05) “I’ve become an everything in the Buddhist, I mean, it’s all intertwined, the understanding, it’s very complex and takes a lot of efforts.” (41:28) “To understand ‘life is suffering’, it would be easy to feel despairing, you know, get depressed by that. But there are certain other things in the Buddhist doctrines that can help you not get depressed, if you have an understanding of them. So, if you understand them not by faith but by logics, there is a path that you can progress along.” (42:26) She explains further: the doctrine ‘Life is suffering’ is a difficult teaching for western mind to understand; it’s radical; it’s like an earthquake; it’s very shocking. (43:50)

Based on her understanding of the principle of *cause and effect* Demy views the teaching of Karma as a crucial principle of life. For her, Karma is not just understood in terms of actions but also in terms of thoughts, views and motivations. (45:10) “Karma has an enormous impact on how I am trying to live my life...The teaching of Karma is very profound for me to start to think of my actions in the past that I didn’t think about much but trying to take much more care with my actions, and not just my actions, but thoughts.” (46:00) She explains further that this teaching of Karma is wrapped up in the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and it links with the teaching of reincarnation.



Through her studying and reading Buddhist teachings and literatures as well as her own experiences of life, Demy is convinced that reincarnation and rebirth is true. However, reincarnation or rebirth is understood in the way that our subtle mind or consciousness is going to the next life.

On the teachings of non-self and emptiness, Demy comments: “We don’t have a permanent and inherited existing self but we are products of many, many inputs and we change every moment.” (52:34) “It’s a credibly profound because if you start viewing yourself as not a permanent entity but as something that’s aggregate (53:40) and composed of many inputs, many thoughts, many feelings and histories... and then you start seeing other people like that. I mean it takes away reason to get angry at someone because you realise that we are just products of certain causes and conditions. And of course, the Buddhist views say that because most of us don’t understand reality. We have diluted views; we see things in a wrong way. So, when we get angry at someone, we get angry at them as permanent persons and in that moment, we’re projecting onto them and thinking about them because they’re knowing things that they’ve done then we feel anger. If you understand the wisdom of emptiness you can’t view people in that same way because you understand that even if they in that moment make you anger, it’s only because there are certain causes and conditions that promote it in them, and with different causes and conditions they wouldn’t.” (54:39) These teachings are profound and complex and related to ignorance and delusion. Therefore, they can be understood through years of studying and meditation. In the West, these teachings are “foreign concepts to Western mind, Western culture with everything is provable, here and now, empirical.” (59:36) “It changes your whole perspective on everything.” (1:00:08)

“The teaching of Nirvana gives me some hope.” (1:00:19) “My interpretation and understanding of it at this point is that there are beings who have made to Nirvana and are being able to communicate that. This is why it is written in books.” (1:01:06) “At this point I think it is possible that there is Nirvana that exists. I mean I am not discounting it and I am not taking it on faith. So far, from my own practice and my own studies I’ve seen some progression and I have had direct experiences or realisation of this in line with the teachings.” (1:01:51)

Demy expresses that she has a sceptical mind though she is not sceptical enough to stop learning Buddhism and that her understanding of Buddhism is still limited. (01:21:16)

### **How Buddhist teachings changed your life?**

“Profound, I mean... they have a complete profound effect on my life. Enriched, yes, I feel very enriched by the Buddhist teachings and a profound effect. It’s completely changed my way of looking at what the reality is, my understanding of realities. And the teachings have revealed to me that my mind did not operate how I thought it did and that life is very different to how I thought it was.” (01:29:06) “Although I was not very materialistic beforehand, I always had leanings this way... The Buddhism has been like an earthquake in my life because it completely changed my view of how life is, how reality is, what worth putting your time into, what goals worth pursuing. So, for example, I am much less interested in materialistic goals or sort of security, if you like. And I am much more interested and motivated in studying hard to try to progress as much as I can along the path in the time that I have.” (01:29:48)

### **Difficulties and obstacles in following the path**

“Absolutely, the whole thing is very hard... It’s been a very difficult process, that is, lots of struggles, lots of resistance, lots of suffering. I am not saying it’s all that. The realisation is very painful; the first Noble Truth, it’s a very difficult realisation to come to; and it’s lot of pain to get to that. And the meditation practice is very difficult I struggle everyday when I am doing it... Yes, many obstacles, many difficulties... I found it sort of upsetting and disturbing at times to come to see the truth of myself. Having said that it’s extremely liberating; it’s not all negative...The insight that I feel I have had has been so profound and the teaching has been so profound. I feel that this whole new world has opened up to me which I have never had access before.” (01:31:46)

### **How satisfied?**

“I am blissfully happy following the path... yes, absolutely, very joyous to be on the path.” (01:32:36)

### **Ultimate Goal?**

“Nirvana, so I can help all sentient beings...But it’s a long way, maybe many lifetimes. So, in this lifetime just progress as much as I can.” (01:33:02)

## **Interview Don**

### **What was your view of God?**

At that time, I thought God was up there and almighty and invisible. That was what I could think of at that time. These days I've changed my ideas a lot. I just find that all what is said about God being all powerful, omnipotent, everywhere or powerful, in us and everything I believe in that description but I change the word God to nature. The power of universe, the power of nature, I believe is what our religion, most religions started with... I believe like there is a power or an essence or energy that will happen inside wanting to be good people, positive, happy. (5:40)

### **Do you believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world?**

I believe some of that, like I believe that there was a man called Jesus that lived in the planet earth. He was a real man who lived this life. I don't know about the proof of miracles but I don't believe it and I don't disbelieve it because I think it's possible that the man came and performed miracles. It's because I've been involved in also spiritual counselling and helped healing people in the past also. So, it happened like almost exercised bad energy or evil spirit or that sort of thing. So, I believe that Jesus could have done that and could have been a very powerful human being. He was very sensitive to sickness and things like that. I believe in the healing of human touch, touching someone and healing them. It is very real and I believe in that. I believe in the man Jesus. He lived on the planet earth but about the Son of God we are all sons of God. (07:13)

### **How about the Saviour of the world?**

Well, I can call you a saviour of the world. I am a saviour of the world because we are all equal inside; we are all the same essence; we are born of the earth. Saviour of the world means to me that he (Jesus) is not the king of the world or heavenly that we have got the same possibility to do something beneficial for the planet. I think we can call him like a special man or lord Jesus or king Jesus. It doesn't matter. I think he was a special man that lived here and I believe in what he did, his words because I find that his word is very encouraging, positive, true and happy. (08:20)

### **How about the teaching of eternal life and salvation?**

I believe that we all do have like our souls or energy source or a power within. And that wouldn't drive us as human beings and that keeps us different to rocks and soil. Animals also have energy inside them. Eternal life, I think the only way I could accept that is, even I built a pyramid maybe in ten thousand-year time there will be only sands. So that's not eternal. (11:48)

### **How about salvation?**

Salvation, I can only give that to myself. So as far as praying I think that's very important, important tools and techniques because I believe that that can give the person who is really sincere a hope and faith in themselves and in their beliefs. It's comforting, it's like a hug and warm support, it's like compassion from God or from mother nature. It's supporting the person that way. It's something real and important... I would like to think that I can live

forever and I do believe in reincarnation. So that's the cycle I believe can happen and will happen. It's not funny but there are one or two mentions in the Catholic Bible of the reincarnation but not many people can read it or see it or understand it. So that's what I find not accurate in some people's attitude toward reincarnation that it's not real, doesn't happen, and yet the Bible says so particularly when Jesus died and came back. It's a classic reincarnation, isn't it? (14:07)

### **Did you or do you read the Bible?**

I haven't read it through. I have been going through studies on and off through my whole life and what I like very much about is I go through group sessions to study the Bible is the priest has much understanding of the Bible than I do. What I like hearing is that, let say Matthew chapter 15 for example, and they will explain what it really means to modern world and modern thoughts and what it meant back two thousand years ago... That's really inspiring because what is written in the Bible can be very supportive and inspiring and encourage people. So, to see the real strength and power of the word. (15:17)

### **Do you treat the Bible as the word of God?**

No, it is the work of human being, of men. I think people did write the Bible because toward being refined and changed and edited, I think, the Bible is written by clever men. (15:48)

### **How do you respond to the teaching of heaven and hell?**

I positively believe in heaven and hell and I think it exists since you believe it. But again, it's a good metaphor for goodness and badness. You if you a bad person in your life, you can be bad when you die in a bad place. I think it scares people to be good Christians. But on the other hand, it's good that there is this option because we all want people to live and work together happily. So, if you've got someone saying : 'You're going to hell, if you don't be good'. It's good for the community, right? But that one also finds poor because the Bible is based on fear; it should be based on love. That is why I find Buddhism not only more compassionate but also more appropriate for the world. (17:28)

### **Have you ever been involved in any Christian church?**

Several. I used to go regularly when I was a young boy. And I have been on and off for number of years. But basically, for Italian families and friends that I have had, they go to birth, marriage and death. And that's about it. This is more modern Italians here in Melbourne. It's all about being seen to give respect for the family. But you know if it wasn't for respect, no one would go. (18:13)

Apart from being a member of community groups that help others telling about their life and encourage to reading the Bible and to work with the Bible, I haven't done any volunteer work with the church. (18:57)

### **What is your experience of the church community?**

What I find many 'pretence' is the word is that all these Catholic people, families and friends who go to Church when they go back home they don't act very godly or very Catholic who follow the Bible. That has been really disappointing for me especially when I have been growing up like 'what a hell is it all about if you go to Church and you pray to God to give you

health and happiness and success, healthy family but why you do opposite when you go home?' You know that's been my experience. So, it's like me saying 'it's bullshit'. I don't know how to explain it. (20:50)

**Are there any particular teachings of the Church that you find it hard to accept?**

Things like the Ten Commandments are good. They are like precepts in Buddhism. It's good to know many religions share that. Fantastic. But I've never thought of that question. (21:52)

**When did you have your first contact with Buddhism?**

Unofficially I think it's about eight or ten years ago. What happened then was that I knew there was something more than just God in the Catholic and Catholicism. I would see some adults and some kids, for example, would see an insect on the ground and kill it or throw a rock at a bird or something like that and I disagree with that. I would always look down on the ground and would avoid ants, for example. They're little creatures but they have purposes in the world... That's how I started to believe in other animals and creatures as a young boy. There's always been more to what I've learnt or what I saw and what I believed in. So, in a way I was already doing the thinking of Buddhist, unknowing but knowing. And then later on, I started more seriously with meditation classes roughly five years ago, mainly coming here (Buddhist center). But one thing that I really want more is to, I think it doesn't happen here but it happens, have a friendship group of others who come here meeting and knowing each other, for example. I've been in Sunday afternoons for lunch here, one of those sessions but maybe during the week because I would like to know more people and just be friendly. I could have a cup of coffee or tea and just chat. I would like to do that more. (24:39)

**What encouraged you to embrace Buddhism?**

Mainly because when I look at the people and I say they look more normal than Catholics, to my standard it's more normal. One thing I like more is that they are not Caucasians. There are more Asians here (Buddhist Center) Sri Lankans, Indians... I like Asian people. The other thing is that I follow this ancient wisdom of the Japanese and Chinese people for the medicines and the herbs. So, I believe that they are not silly people; they have long beautiful cultures and very wise and long history and we still have much to learn from these cultures and Buddhism is part of that as being up two and a half thousand years. So, there must be something there that carries truth about life for me and people around the world. (26:16)

**Have you received any Buddhist training?**

Not personally. I've many audio CDs and I've got a small library of books which I haven't read all. I go one by one. Some are difficult to understand, specifically like the terminology. I am trying to place what these precepts mean to Catholic Caucasian upbringing. (27:04)

Most of my experience is coming to evening classes, meditation classes. This year was very good. I have been invited here the Chinese Buddhist group to the New Year celebration. I love the meanings of the culture. My dream is some day to marry an Asian girl. (27:55)

**How do you view the Buddha?**

I see Buddha, again, not like god. I believe that Buddhism is a philosophy of life. It's something that I can read and understand and follow and feel good. It's a way of life, a way of thought,

and a way of feeling. I would like to be treated as I would treat the others. This is a lot more respect in Buddhism than what I see in Catholicism. (28:38)

### **How do you take Buddha in your spiritual journey?**

Many years ago, I felt that I was like a little Buddha because of my good, big 'tummy'. But I was a journey to discover my life. What is the meaning of life? What am I doing here? Where am I going? Where will I end? What about my future?... People say guru but I think guru is a teacher. And that's how I see the Buddha. I think he's done a great job in describing what life is being about. (29:34)

### **What is your view of the Four Noble Truths?**

I do not remember what they are but I know of them... It's very straightforward and easy to be implemented in life. It's just like following ABCD. To me it's like following the Ten Commandments... It's like a guiding light. It's like I read that; that's recommended. It's important to try and live by the Four Noble Truths. If you feel comfortable and keep on doing it because it's working, it's that simple. So, whether the Buddha said, I think, everyone must try to experience it and start to do practice. When they start to feel that it's positive, it's true, it's good, then they can continue and believe in it. (30:55)

### **How do you take the teaching of the karma?**

Karma is dangerous. Karma can be dangerous. It can be. It's like karma is going to get you if you are not a good boy. But see, it's like heaven and hell in Catholicism. So, if you live a being a good person, that's positive and good karma. And it's a good feeling that you are a good man and I don't expect anything bad come back to me because what I am doing is I am giving out some positive energy, loving and compassion to everything and anything even trees and animals. And it's a good feeling that I feel even loving a tree or animal I'll get back love and compassion. (33:18)

### **What is your view on reincarnation?**

I take it easily; I believe in it. The Catholicism is like the soul is eternal; the soul is coming back; it is a part of you and it lives forever and it can come back another time. So that what means to me is that I have not finished my work on this planet earth and yet to come back again to continue and finish all my work that I have started. It's like I started a thousand years ago but something important that I've got to do, come back and finish. That's how I see reincarnation. (34:19)

### **Response to the teaching of non-self and emptiness**

One thing I find beneficially is that I was a science student so I come to realise chemistry and atom and physics and how interesting is that a lot of Buddhist beliefs physicists and chemists are coming to agree that what is being said is real or can be measured or seen. That's how I see self or non-self are items of psychological terminology. But they are parts of us; there is a self and non-self. So, it is like saying 'This is real D'. But a part of me, that is, you cannot touch but it is there. So that's how I measure non-self and self. About emptiness, look between these items is full of emptiness. That's how I explain my mine but everything is empty; the

whole universe is empty but it's all there. So, emptiness is part of everything and everything is part of emptiness. (35:46)

### **How important is this teaching of non-self and emptiness?**

To me, it's about separating the artificial mind and thoughts, man-made rules and regulations, from reality or nature in that respect. (36:19)

### **How do you take the teaching on nirvana?**

I think, again, it's a matter of faith in nirvana as far as it's like a goal to shoot for, to go for. And I believe it makes a person stronger in their own faith, their own strength and beliefs and the courage: 'Okay, I am going to go for it; I am going for nirvana as the best thing that I've got to go for.'... I think it's more a liberation of thoughts and feelings in the body. It's like a release of stress. Again, it's like praying; praying is very important. If I've got to pray for nirvana then I have to have actions. What I need to do, what I believe in to go to heaven or to go to nirvana. So, I've got to prove to myself and believe in myself that what I am doing is heading toward that... it's like heaven is a goal of all Christians. If you want to go to nirvana you know what you've to do. A guidebook, the rules to get into nirvana is the dharma or the Bible for the Catholics. What troubles me is that I think Buddhism and Catholicism are so similar in so many ways. I don't know why they don't make a big religion out of it, not a religion, a philosophy. (38:35)

### **How active are you with Buddhist activities?**

D has been actively involved in a Buddhist group for over three years. He is a member of the local Buddhist community. Every week he goes to a Buddhist Center three or four times to practice meditation. He likes doing meditation in bed because for him doing meditation lying down is more difficult than sitting up or standing. He uses breathing method with simple mantras. Doing meditation aims at self-discipline and slowing down the body and mind to achieve calmness. (42:00)

### **Have you ever had a religious experience of transformation?**

No, not so much like an instant conversion but I think it's becoming like a more solid and concrete feeling that I am doing the right thing that I am okay. It's building up stronger and stronger. (46:47)

### **How has Buddhism enriched or changed your life?**

I see people in the streets and in my life and think 'Hmm, they could so some Buddhist philosophy'. But that's like comparing myself to others. That can be positive and negative: it's negative if I think I am better than them but it's positive if I can say 'okay, I see that person and where they are at and that person has given me opportunities to learn from what they are doing. Seeing what happens to them so I don't do what they've done. (47:37)

One of the challenges I find at the moment, I think it's my biggest challenge, is that I'm still not at the stage of meditation where I can blank everything out... so I absolutely feel, see, sense nothing. And I feel as if I am part of the whole world, the whole universe and I am just floating, part of the ether as much as saying I split my body up into atoms; that what it is; I

am part of everything; everything is part of me. I am not at that stage yet and that's my goal. Whether I will reach it in this lifetime, I am not sure. (49:03)

**How satisfied are you with following the Buddhist path?**

I am happy with both Catholicism and Buddhism because I think I can see through "the bullshit" and what I've got to do is to see out of both religion and philosophy what I see is for me. So, not everything in Buddhism is for me, I know that, likewise Catholicism. I think I pick and choose what is good to me. (50:40) I don't believe in the Bible as because it is written by men not by God. So, it's like we have been lied to. And I believe the Bible is like politician that wants to control the population. The Bible to me is the power that wants to control the world to be all Catholics. They believe that their religion is number one religion and I don't believe that. You don't force a religion on a person to believe. They've got to find their own paths. (51:35)

**What makes you a Buddhist?**

That I follow Buddhist principles more than Catholic principles and I do live my daily life but not Catholicism like I said that I go to births, deaths, and marriages. I go to Church to show my respect to the families. And I think I've been understanding the situation. Inside I may not believe in what you are doing but I come here to respect you. (52:20)

**Do you have any goal for the near future?**

I see myself in the near future actually being downstairs and talking to public and giving speeches and talks. (53:12)

**Do you have an ultimate goal to achieve?**

Well, this life time I don't think I will reach nirvana. I think it's just living my life peacefully, living all the precepts, all the guidelines and the dharma. (53:50)

**Why don't you believe that you cannot get to nirvana in this life?**

I am not sure but I don't feel that I can. I may get close. I don't feel this life time is the right time. (54:06) I feel okay with this because I think not believing most the dharma says and it's like I want to believe a hundred per cent and I believe in myself and I will do whatever I can for myself and everyone else. In the end if that qualifies me to nirvana then it's okay. In the meantime, I just keep working and living and being as best as I can. (54:54)



## **Interview Emmi**

### **Emmi's religious background**

Emmi comes from a Catholic family background. Both of her parents were Catholic but they officially signed the document to become atheists because of taxation in the Church. As Emmi was given freedom to choose her own religious path, she remained a Catholic. Emmi went to a Catholic school and received the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Holy Communion, and Confirmation during her young age. Her experience of religious education was about fear, good and bad, punishment, and exclusivism. For her it was too rigid. She was employed to work at a Catholic pre-school as a teacher. She had a positive view of both the parish and school communities. However, she had a negative view of the parish priest who questioned the nun who employed her because of her parents' religious status: "I should be the one that needs rescuing rather than... I felt a bit like... I am deferent to my parents. I was hoping for more love... but you know there was only one person." (12:33)

### **Emmi's religious understanding**

Emmi does not believe in a personal God, but "God is the goodness in everyone's heart." (07:43) She believes that "goodness is the saviour of humankind" (09:01) "and Jesus embodied that but so did the Buddha and probably did Allah. There are some amazing people who just really embody that with all the strength and have an amazing ability to see things. And for me Jesus definitely is that but he is not the only one." (09:22) "Jesus is like a religious master. I don't see him as the Son of God because I don't have a concept of God like that. But I think we are sons and daughters of God in a way. We haven't got what he did. Some people are really authentic and he [Jesus] was an amazing, incredible person who had a lot of wisdom." (10:00)

Emmi read the Bible when she was young and her response to it was differently according to different stages of her ages: "I found it a bit harsh when I was young... There were lots of things that didn't make sense. But then I thought it's an old story where people lived differently and it may not be relevant till now. Yes, I found some of the things a bit harsh and sort of lacking of compassion in a way when I was young. And later on, I could look at it in more contexts that it probably wasn't meant that literally but it, you know, was more symbolic or something else." (10:49)

### **Becoming Buddhist**

When Emmi was twenty years old she had first contact with Buddhism through her travelling in India. When she was looking for spirituality, she heard that "Buddhism claimed that first they didn't try to convince other people to be Buddhists and I liked that. And then they didn't claim to be the only one. And I think that that was interesting." (13:17) This experience impressed her and set her on a journey of searching. She started reading Buddhist books. And her experience of meeting with the Dalai Lama became a decisive moment for her to become a Buddhist.

What encouraged Emmi to become Buddhist is the open and experiential approach of Buddhism: "It was very open... I was said 'don't believe in anything until it becomes an experience, like listen to it, listen to stories, digest them but if it doesn't make sense it's not

a doctrine as such. It just has to be true. You have to experience it. And not intellectually but also do practice.” (13:59)

Emmi became an active Buddhist practitioner twenty-two years ago. Emmi has received formal Buddhist training at a local Tibetan monastery in a local community in Australia where her own family lives with other Buddhist families. She has gone through intensive annual courses, weekend classes and retreats where practiced rituals such as a hundred thousand prostrations, a hundred thousand offerings. This accumulation of prostrations and offerings took her four years to complete. She has sequentially become involved in supporting programs such as over three year long term retreat, intensive courses, and weekend classes. After receiving adequate training from a Buddhist master and having practiced a number of rituals, Emmi was fully initiated into Tibetan Buddhism. Together with taking refuges to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, Emmi also took vows and precepts.

Emmi has been actively involved in a Buddhist group who worked hard towards establishing a school which would use Buddhist principles in teaching and learning but this has not been achieved as yet. So far, they have worked out the curriculum which follows the secular system with Buddhist essence. However this plan has to come to a stop because of different restrictions from the government.

### **Emmi’s response to the Buddhist teachings**

Emmi’s view of the Buddha is very dynamic: “The Buddha has different aspects. There is a historical Buddha that was a person on earth. And then there is also a Buddha symbolically on an outer level. And then the Buddha could be seen as different psychological stage and in our hearts... It’s hard to say what is the Buddha but it’s the basic goodness that we all have. For me all beings: animals, people, everyone has the same basic goodness.” (17:25) When asked about her personal relationship with the Buddha, her response was: “You take refuge to the Buddha and people do prostration; people have images and statues, and light incense. And you take refuge to the Buddha who got enlightened and you sort of strive to do the same...At the same time you know Buddhahood is not,... like Buddha has the same Buddha nature as everyone else. In that way, there is no higher or lower. He just realised that and we’re all sort of as Buddhists trying to emulate that and trying to reach the same goal...There is no gap. It’s not something that I cannot reach.” (18:47)

She has internalised the Buddhist teachings and put them into her daily life: “They [the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Paths] are big part of my life;” (19:11) “for me, in a tradition that I was taught that interconnectedness is really an important part as well that nothing is solid... it’s fluid and it’s all connected; so in itself it’s not solid or stack but it always depends on something else; it then give rise to lot of responsibilities of one’s actions will effect others;” (20:11) “you can see everything else how you effect others and make choices that way.” (20:17)

Describing how she applies the Buddhist teachings in her daily life, she explains: “We live in a community and everyone that lives on a community in a big block of land with waterfall and a temple that got part on top; and so, everyone that lives there was a Buddhist; and we always...those principles were part of our life and how we relate with each other; it’s like a big family.” (21:12) “It was really good and we could go to the teachings right there and the children could come home from school and we meet them in the afternoon.” (21:35)

“Karma for me is very different to the Christian idea of good and bad.” (21:57) “It’s more like an action, actions we do and that have with the experiences that we had previously, and we affect other people... for me, it’s more whole; it takes in account other circumstances.” (22:43) “I question a lot of what I do, how it affects, what I do for myself, how I affect others, how I affect the environment.” (23:09) “Karma is how you relate to the world and how the world relates to you; it’s the interconnectedness.” (24:07) She gives example of her divorce which on the one hand was a negative action but on the other hand a lot of family good bonds came out of that action. For her, it is too simple to say that “it’s bad karma or it’s good karma; it’s a lot more complex.” (24:29)

About reincarnation she explains: “For me it makes a lot more sense... otherwise we just coming out of nothing and then turning even going to heaven or hell. How come we came out of nothing and lived for a short while and be in the eternity either here or there. It just didn’t make sense... reincarnation I don’t know if it’s true or not but it makes lots of sense.” (25:23)

Referring to the teaching of nothingness and emptiness she explains: “That’s an incredible freedom. To complete on that that sort of means... the emptiness lets go of that rigidity of having to be right ... but there isn’t ultimate right... it might be right now tomorrow it might not be... and that gives rise to a lot more flexibility and compassion.” (26:44) She explains further the application of this teaching in her life: “It helps to deal with one’s emotion a lot because we hear something and we are affected, we have reactions to things and there is always another voice saying ‘look, this is emotion and you’re seeing it because of your previous experiences’... it gives some sort of peace... you know it comes and it goes.” (28:18)

Unlike the Theravadins who take nirvana as their goal, she said: “For me, nirvana is not that interesting... I think in a Tibetan Tantric tradition nirvana is sort of a side effect but it’s not the goal because... in Tibetan tradition everyone is liberated; you are not interested in going to nirvana until everyone else has reached there. It’s more that communal care for everyone else rather than just myself.” (29:25) “There is nothing wrong with wanting nirvana for yourself, of course, we do that but it sort of goes even further than that, say, I like that freedom or that realisation.” (29:40)

### **Emmi’s Buddhist practices**

Currently, emmi uses Buddhist spirituality mainly as a therapeutic means to manage her temper and to control and direct her actions: “My main practice now is catching myself and dealing with other people and my environment to not get caught up... to have Buddhist principles embodied, digest them rather than have them intellectually. When I get into upset or emotional or something and then bring that and remember.” (35:06) She also practices morning ritual: “In the morning I have a ritual; I light incense or candles; I’ve got a shrine at home; and think of other people... At night time I always have a prayer and contemplate how the day went... and I do some mantras.” (35:39) The purpose for all these practices for her is “to retrain oneself. Quite often we were taken away by so many things and we did not even aware what we’re doing and why. And it always interrupts that in a way...interrupt your habit and think that what am I doing, why, and stop and the bring oneself more into the centre space” (36:14)

AV helped establish a voluntary group who received training for grief counselling and listening skills that help the people who have terminal illness and are dying at home. The group is still in operation.

### **Moments of conversion and/or transformation**

“There were moments of bliss in a way of where things fall away, where time and space and you feel at home but I wouldn’t call it enlightenment; I am no near it and I don’t claim it at all but there were moments that entering a different heightened experiences when spiritual experiences certainly they appeared.” (46:13) “And I think there were many moments not one moment... It was not so much for me a religious moment. For me it was very much day to day experience when I really feel something and I know I am just taken away and I can’t stop that and that is almost the moment and it can be very ordinary, can be so simple but I actually recognise it; it’s a profound moment to be able to have stopped myself just going after it; and for me that is more achievement than when I am with the teacher.” (46:57)

### **How enriched or challenged in following Buddhist path?**

“It makes so much more sense to me. I feel really at home with it. It’s also a challenge sometime, of course, but it’s something most important in my life.” (48:23) “Much of my time spent as a volunteer for the Buddhist centre, for the retreat, for the school, and for me that was very enriching and that was kind of the most important in my life; and the rest is just a means of getting food and clothing and getting some money.” (48:50)

There is always obstacle in life but then we have the ability to learn from mistakes and be honest from mistakes and be raw and kind about it to oneself and others like I don’t feel so much guilt as I talk to some of my Christian friends who have this thing of guilt and I don’t have it as much I have remorse and I feel sad but I don’t have guilt. Just think this is human and we do make mistakes... and it’s how what we do with it later on and how we learn from it.” (49:54)

“Sometime when I see within Buddhism different schools get jealous of each other, the usual human I am better than you then I just get sad... I sometime wish we can rise beyond that, especially people who try hard to study and embody that.” (50:55)

### **How satisfied?**

“Yes, very much... It really helps in difficult situations and I am very glad even though I can’t claim I have done amazing practice but the little what I did was very helpful in my life.” (50:16)

### **Any goal to achieve?**

AV expressed her wish to be a volunteer to work with a Buddhist group somewhere she would feel at home. Her ultimate goal is to get enlightened and that’s for all beings. The way to achieve this goal for her is to practice and practice and to teach others to practice the Buddhist paths.

## **Interview Guy**

### **Guy's religious background**

Guy comes from a very traditional Catholic family. His mother was a Catholic and his father was a convert to the Catholicism from Taoism. Guy was baptised in the Roman Catholic Church where he received formal religious education. He was expected to become a priest but instead he became a religious person who dedicated his life for educational work. In his young age Guy was actively involved in the Charismatic renewal movement where he wished to take part in the evangelization of the Church, to bring people to Jesus and to God. (1:40) He was also involved in justice and peace movement. He had his in formal training in spirituality, theology and psychology. He completed a post-graduate degree in pastoral counselling which qualified him to work later as a lecturer and then as a professional counsellor.

Guy had difficulties with the conservative doctrinal teachings of the Church and did not find the meaning of celibacy in the Church which resulted in his leaving religious live. (3:44-4:18) H has been attracted to the Eastern spiritualities and has learned and practiced Chi Kong, Tai Chi and yoga which focus on the inner energy and healing. He was introduced to the idea of Theosis - an Eastern Orthodox theology which emphasizes the transformative process of attaining the likeness or union with God through purification of mind and body. This set him on a new journey of searching for a theological understanding of universal salvation and leading him to the exploring of other religions. (10:24)

### **Guy's religious understanding**

Guy does not see the Triune God as persons but as three fundamental activities of the divine: "I see [God] in a broader perspective. I don't see the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as just persons. I see three fundamental activities of the divine." (29:57)

"I believe that Jesus, more than any spiritual master, understood that for the universal salvation from God to finally have what he wants that all be salved that one person had to allow the fullness of God's redemptive effectivity to manifest him because spiritual God cannot experience pain. But incarnated in human being God can now experience pain." (31:32) "So though Jesus, God experienced the ultimate suffering." (32:37)

Guy believes that the Bible is the source of divine revelation and that it is subject to the interpretation: "Yes, the Bible is the word of God but its interpretation has to be in a broader context with traditions, with the wisdom of the times, with the current developments in the world and understanding of the science." (B, 02:23) Again, for him the interpretation of the Bible depends on the content of the text namely "when the text clearly portraits what we understand from the revelation of Jesus of the God of the infinite love and infinite compassion then we can take those texts quite literally almost. However when a piece of text seems to portrait an angry God or revengeful God or a God who throws people into hell which seems to be contradict the idea of the all compassion God, a God who loves us,... then we must interpret those texts in a way which is metaphorical." (B:04:18) "Because I take text in that way I am not too troubled by it." (B:05:07)

"In a month I bring my children three times to Church on Sunday and one Sunday I will bring them...[to] Chang Buddhist retreat centre." (B:07:54) "We actually do a pilgrimage where I

bring them around and I teach them about some of the teachings of the Buddha, the ending of the suffering, about awakening to your divine nature, your Buddha nature. And I recite sort of mantras with them.” (B:08:27)

“I often describe myself as a Buddhist Catholic.” (B:09:00)

Guy values the Sacraments but interprets them in the hermeneutical way. (B:09:41)

Guy is a member of a Roman Catholic parish. He gives free talks and lectures to different groups in different parishes. He also offers professional counselling services.

### **Becoming Buddhist**

“My interest in Buddhism has never been institutional sort of thing. I tend to...It’s purely my own search, my own reading.” (B:20:39) “My father comes from a Buddhist-Taoist-Confucian background... But the idea of Buddhism is very much ritualistic, statues...” (B:21:21) “When I began to explore more Buddhism was in seeing that there were so many people that seemed to be interested in Buddhism, especially in the West, in a more philosophical Buddhism rather than the meditation or mindfulness thing. The more I explore it the more I... I read a lot of Buddhist literatures.” (B:21:45) “I am quite impressed with Buddhism as a system of thinking which helps us to cultivate the spiritual life...The Eight Noble Paths, I think, it’s a wonderful strategy which can be applied to any religion.” (B:22:13)

Through reading Buddhist literatures and mystics Guy became aware of the idea of the inner divinity which, according to him, is equivalent to the concept of Buddha nature. (B:23:48)

“Buddha is found in all of us.” (B:29:27) “My view of the Buddha is that he is an extremely enlightened spiritual master who, like many individual souls, who have chosen to cooperate with grace and awakened to their inner divinity that they come to understand some of the great mysteries of the universe, the great spiritual truth. And they teach us from their particular experiences, their own particular life experiences.” (B:30:56)

Referring to his personal relationship with the Buddha, Guy explains: “It’s more one of admiration. My relationship with Jesus is more personal. When I pray, I say ‘thank you Jesus, praise you Jesus’. I may say thank you to the Buddha for the little insight here and there but I don’t feel particularly inclined to speak to him like I speak to Jesus.” (B:31:41)

“I see the truth [Four noble Truths] very significant, spiritual reality of why there is suffering in the universe, among human beings. I don’t see that’s the only thing... For me when I observe people, we are all suffering... And our suffering is because of our ego attachment” (B:32:57)

“The law of karma has been set in place in order that the justice and goodness of God will not be compromised.” (B:37:27)

“I believe that the best view of reincarnation, actually very consistent with the best found in the Catholic theology and it is precisely the principle of theosis. The idea is if all of us have the spark of God in all of us and the primary purpose of our life is be awakened to this spark of God to choose, not deliver at the level of the ego but deliver at the level of divine essence that is within all of us.” (B:39:23)

“In a sense, Nirvana is a stage where you are no longer attached to things, you are no longer living at the level of ego. You so completely have merged with the totality of this universal cosmic consciousness. So for me different words whether you call it ultimate reality or whether you call it the ground of our being. Nirvana for me would be seen as the ultimate stage of peace at oneness with everything or with God.” (B:50:02)

In terms of Buddhist practice, Guy follows a combination of traditions including Tibetan meditation with reciting mantras, Japanese lotus sutra and Christian meditation. GK also guides people with Buddhist principles and practices in his counselling services.

“I respect a lot what the Buddha teaches us; I am grounded in my own Catholic faith; and I find that Buddhism can inform and help me to understand... my Christian doctrines in a deeper and profound way, understand the purpose of life, understand the Sacraments... Actually Buddhism and Hinduism, the idea of the divinity of Jesus, I find Hinduism has a lot to help but even as in Buddhism you awaken more and more you reach this stage of enlightenment which helps you become one with the wisdom of the universe, helps you to inform and understand my own Christian faith in a far deeper way.” (B:58:29)

“What makes it easier is that while I am grounded and established in a Catholic faith and our religious system, my experience of Buddhism is one of the intellect and of philosophical understanding... I don’t go to Buddhist monasteries, I don’t go to be involved in Buddhist groups. I just admire them. Because maybe I have this skill to be able to learn without going to a Buddhist teacher. I don’t feel a particular need to be affiliated with any Buddhist group because I find some of them are actually quite limiting.” (B:59:56)

“Because my flavour of Christianity is greatly affected or influenced by the intellectual and philosophical dimension of Buddhism I find it no problem at all in saying that I am a Buddhist Christian. I bring up my children in the Catholic tradition and at the same time teach them about some of the Buddhist principles that I find particularly useful in helping them to rid themselves off the ego. So I have no problems with that. I can be a problem if you feel as though you have to have this dual loyalty. I think that if there is one God and there is one truth and different religions are different manifestations of that truth then we can learn from one another in coming to a deeper and more profound understanding of the ultimate reality. So I have no problems with that.” (B:01:00:59)

“Dual loyalty might be like ‘how do I divide my time?’, ‘do I go to this Buddhist gathering?’ You know in every religion you have the core, the codes, and the creed. If you belong to a religious system and you belong to that community and you emerge yourself in the activities of the community. So while I would insert myself mostly in Catholic activities, I don’t necessarily feel a need to insert myself in a Buddhist community. But if a person has that challenge then that will be a bit difficult. But for me that’s fine, not necessary.” (B:01:02:01)

### **Tension of being a dual religious believer**

“I don’t feel it [tension] because I was not baptised as a Buddhist, because I don’t have a particular loyalty to a particular Buddhist sector or a Buddhist group but more the body of Buddhist philosophy that I feel it free for anyone to take. I can take it and draw from it as I wish. So I don’t see any contradiction there. It’s only to those people who feel if you belong to the two communities then you got to divide your time accordingly. And if you spend too

much time in a Buddhist system or in a Buddhist community... how do you reconcile your involvement in a Catholic thing?" (B:01:02:55)

"In concrete term, it [Buddhism] helps me to focus on the understanding of the ego in my life. But this ego is not just in terms of materialistic concerns or we often think of the ego as 'I', you're letting impermanence defines your soul identity. So, I am my beautiful body; I am my money; I am my power. But these are some forms of ego. My ego could also be on a view: I am my views. So, if someone challenges my views, I feel threatened. So, when I am trying to put him down, trying to diminish him because I feel threatened that my view is challenged. That is also the ego because I am letting my view defines who I am. This ego can also be a theological model. Even our theological expands... But someone doesn't want that to expand. They commit what I call theological idolatry. They want a certain views of God and they don't want to change that. They define themselves by that. And that to me is idolatry because idolatry means the unnecessary restriction of a view of God or an image of God. So a person can also define the soul identity by a particular small view and refuse to change that. This is fundamentalists and traditionalists... And that unnecessarily limits you because God is far bigger and more expansive and all-inclusive. (B:01:06:15)

"Very satisfied, very satisfied. Jesus is still the main state of my thinking. But I think that of my experience of the divine or spirituality but it is embellished by the many of these views that expand my world of spirituality." (B:01:07:45)

"My ultimate goal is to continue doing what my soul has come into this life to achieve whether it is conquering aspects of my ego that blocks spark of God from awakening or cooperating with the Holy Spirit to expedite that to cause this from awakening to happen in the most sufficient manner." (B:01:09:14)

### **How to achieve**

"God is wisdom and love. When you seek wisdom, if God is within you, this wisdom is all awakened. The second way is sure a practice of loving kindness...God is love and you choose to practice the loving kindness in your life in a liberal and generous way..., you are awakened to love, and so God is awakened in you. Another way is through the practice of meditation. While I do meditation, I do not claim to be a great spiritual meditator...Meditation or taming of the monkey mind so that as you practice this mental discipline, the noise of the ego subsides in the background and more you can hear the voice of God within you. I am learning to meditate more and more. Another way is through the help of a spiritual master... Spiritual master is very important I believe. For me,... spiritual master is simply a soul that has allowed God's presence to penetrate it and consume it." (B:01:11:30) "For me Jesus, more than any master, allowed the fullness of God's redemptive activities to manifest him. Through him I experience of salvation, I experience of much faster and more sufficient of awakening because he takes away my sins. And Through my relationship with Jesus I find that he helps me in my awakening." (B:01:11:55)



## **Interview Gal**

### **Gal's background**

Gal was raised in an Anglican church. Her great...grandfather was the first Anglican bishop in Australia. Gal was a very devout Christian. She was baptised and confirmed. She attended the church school from where she received her religious education programs. She was not so much interested in the Bible and stories. Rather she was more interested in her relationship with God. She used to believe that God made everything but she was more interested in the nature.

### **What is your view of God today?**

I have no view of God. I used to have an idea that God made everything. And I was very grateful. But today I don't have a view, no view [of God]. (03:33)

### **Did you read the Bible?**

Yes, I did read the Bible. I always had to read the Bible. I got my own Bible.

### **How do you take the Bible?**

You know, it was just a bit like heavy. It didn't take too much to my life. I did a lot of church going. I went to Church all the times. I became a Christian, one of those ones that want to make everyone a Christian. I went to a special Bible camp. You know, I was very involved. And I want to get all my friends to become Christians. And they just kept going 'go away'. I was very committed Christian. That was the only way I knew and there was no other way. (04:41)

### **What activities were you involved in those days?**

Going to church, being confirmed, going to scripture classes, going to chapel everyday at school... fellowship at the church, dances, talks, social gatherings. You have to remember in 1950s in Australia, it was like there was one religion. There was no choice. There was one religion and there were different parts of it. Like there were Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians... It was like that. It was like different clubs and you know what club you are in. You knew there were differences but they didn't seem that big, except in the Catholic Church where you were told and we always felt that the Catholics had to do what the pope said. The pope was in the place of God and they always had to obey the pope. We felt that was a bit sad. You know we were kids. (05:57)

### **Were you involved in social justice activities?**

In those days the church was not involved in social justice. The communist party was. They were involved in things like human rights, Aboriginal justice. Not that I knew about that because we never learned that at school. We were very sheltered. There was mission work with the Aboriginal people... The mission work I am talking about was done in Aboriginals with unmarried mothers. So that was an outreach of the Church in those days. It was quite limited.

### **How do you respond to the belief that the Bible is the word of God?**

I think that there is a huge question mark over that. There are scholars who absolutely doubt that and say they were written and there were a whole lot of writers and they are not the word of God. I mean unless you say you and I are God... I don't have any belief in this idea... And some horrible stuffs in the Old Testament, very difficult. You know all I could have to say is that as a young girl, I read all passages about the way women were treated, the way people were enslaved, some of these were really awful. And then there was a whole thing of the angry, jealous God while I was drawn to the stories of love and compassion, not the stories of horrible cruelty. I was put off by that as a young person. (08:31)

### **How do you view Jesus?**

Jesus was an interesting man. He was one of many people claiming to be Messiah at that time. (08:45) About Jesus as the son of God, that's a wonderful thing to believe in; it's a wonderful system. I have no problems with it. It's great but it's not mine. He was an interesting man and he was radical. He really tuned things up side down which is great. And he died for that; he died for his beliefs. (09:22)

### **How do you respond to the teaching of heaven and hell as taught by Christianity?**

It seems like a very neat set up really: be good and you go to heaven, be bad and you go to hell. It's a way of keeping people good, I suppose. But I know people who had nightmares, kids too just having nightmares all the times about the idea of hell, the idea of burning. I mean terrible images that they've got about being cooked up in hell. Horrible! Awful! Today I don't have any idea about heaven and hell. Heaven and hell are on earth, in our hearts. When we have hatred, that's hell and when we are loving, that's heaven... So, I don't know enough about afterlife. I am not dead yet. So, I can't tell you about that. (10:41)

### **How do you respond to the teaching of eternal life and salvation?**

Eternal life is here and now... You experience it. Something that the experience you have. The whole notion of time is a very limited notion in the west or in our Judeo-Christian or whatever. We live by this tic, tic, tic. Time is not like that at all. Our very body takes us to the very beginning of the earth. I mean we've got the same stuffs in us as the very first explosion. We are part of that; we go back to that; we go forward. We are not bound by that. That's just too narrow. I found some of those teachings about heaven and hell and eternal life and all these, they are very beautiful ideas. But they are not for me. (11:55)

### **When did you have your first contact with Buddhism?**

When I was in my teens, probably reading, finding my way through... I started reading and reading. I bought my first big, fat book about Buddhism when I was about twenty-two or twenty three, which is called Buddhism by Christmas Humphrey. He is an interesting man. But it was a book that was sort of actually putting stuffs into my interest in Buddhism. It was peculiarly complicated sort of set of things that he was writing about. It was ten of this, eight of that and fifteen of this... I thought that was not what I was interested in. Then I spent time in India and we sort of very interested in Hinduism. I was lucky enough to spend a lot of time with friends who were living in a spiritual community over there and practicing meditation. And then coming back to Sydney, I started practicing yoga quite intensely. My yoga teacher... was a professor of religions at Sydney University. He was an incredible scholar in Hinduism and Buddhism and a great friend with a person who became my husband and my teacher. So,

I was meditating in his yoga class. He was teaching meditation but it wasn't a Buddhist meditation, it was Hindu Atha yoga. We did it every time and I practice it myself as much as I could. It was not until 1980 that he introduced us to the person who became our Zen teacher who was an American man who'd been a prisoner in war camp in Japan. He got whole stories. One thing that he said was if you were to take up this way, it's a discipline. You don't just do it when you feel happy and peaceful. You do it every day no matter what. Good, that's what I need to hear. That's what happened. So, then I started practicing. I was looking for a practice not a set of ideas... So, practice was that I was looking for. (16:38)

### **How long did you spend your time in India?**

We went three times and each time was two or three months. We moved around quite a lot and met many people. (16:55)

### **What encouraged you to embrace Buddhism?**

I've been practicing yoga and I've been meditating. I started meditating in India. I felt into it. I was just meditating and it was so natural for me. I was sort of thinking, NN and I went to hear different teachers talking. And when we encountered NN, who by that stage, was sixties. He was so quiet and didn't have any show business. He was just quiet old man. He said this thing about making it a discipline, you do it every day no matter what. That was what, that was the turn of the corner and I became. He said it was good to practice with other people. Then we were sitting in the morning and we were going once a week just to sit with other people who involved. I wasn't doing it out of Buddhism, I was doing it because I loved practicing meditation. I just felt it was home. I felt it completely right, completely natural, completely organic human practice. It was very sad at that moment, I think, when remembering back that the Christianity that I encountered didn't have a practice. I mean we were told to pray but there was no discussion about what prayer could be but just asking for stuffs, make so and so and do this and that. There was always an ego involved in that, request involved or need that, with meditation, that's all gone, completely gone. So, it was a very different place. (18:51)

### **How do you take the teaching of the Four Noble Truths?**

I am still grappling with the Four Noble Truths. They're misrepresented often. There is a misrepresentation. People think Buddhism is all about or Buddha said about everything is suffering. But it's not what the Buddha said, he didn't say everything is suffering. He said, 'there is suffering'. He also said, 'there is joy'. I mean there is so much misunderstanding Buddhism in Australia... The Buddha is about the waking up. Buddha means waking up... And what is that waking up? It's for you to do it, to wake up, to experience what he experienced which is what he taught. He taught from that experience of realization of complete interdependence throughout time and space of every single living and non-living thing. That's a big thing to teach. So that huge thing then becomes ramped into the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Paths. I am interested in how the Buddha said, 'Don't take what I said as facts, don't do this because I am saying it, try it, make it your life, see whether your life is going to be less suffering and going to be more joy in practicing the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path... I very much enjoy and I very much appreciate the Buddhist practice. It's really up to you. There is no God in the sky and there is nobody who is going to give you anything.

People can guide you and suggest things and may be saying that you are going the wrong path here. There are guides but it's all your responsibility. (21:28)

### **How do you apply these teachings in your daily life?**

I think the key to it is, one of my teachers is a Vietnamese,... he is the most wonderful teacher. He teaches Buddhism in the most simple, beautiful way. It's not full of stuffs. It's very direct and clear. He talks about suffering in a way that I think it is very helpful for non-Buddhists to understand that, suffering, you have to recognise suffering. It may make you feel anxious, for example, or stress and it's going through your life and you're not. You don't have to actually acknowledge that, you don't have the mindfulness to say my body is feeling stress, I am feeling agitated, I am feeling anxious and yes, this is happening. So, it's quite a moment of accepting and acknowledging and then breathing into it and being calm and being compassionate about yourself around the feeling so you are not trying to stop the feeling, going away from the feeling. You are not trying to take pills for the feeling or alcohol for the feeling. You are actually experiencing it fully. Then it changes the experience of moods. It's not a permanent place to be. So, there is a lot of very caring and loving... The Buddha's teaching of awakening and the fruit of that loving compassion, that's what comes for yourself and for all beings and you are not separate from all beings. If you see somebody suffering, it's painful and you want to make some change, you want to reach out and give them whatever they need at that time if you can. So, the move from suffering, like there is suffering, yes. There is a way out of suffering. The way out of suffering is the Eightfold Paths. That's how Thich Nhat Hanh talks about moving through the suffering. He is acknowledging, experiencing compassion, resting in that and being patient with that... So, it's very simple and beautiful and doable by everybody. These days mindfulness is being used as a tool at universities in fact in medical department. It's part of assessable degree course mindfulness. It has been in that department for ten years. Many people have decided that this is a useful, helpful bit of Buddhism, let pull it out and apply here... Learning how to bring the full attention to the situations is a practice from Buddhism that is being used now to teach doctors because they found that they can increase patients' wellbeing if the doctors are really listening and really focusing. There is a better outcome for the patients. This is very important. (27:15)

### **How about the teaching of karma?**

The word karma is Sanskrit for actions. That's what it means. Which action are you going to take?... Right action, and right here means wholesome, not right and wrong, wholesome, noble as noble as human being can be and experiencing a noble, upright thought. Then from the thought arises actions whether it's a speech action or a physical action. And that speech action, whatever it is, it's a karma. I totally reject what people talk about good karma, bad karma... It's undeniable that there are causes and effects. It's undeniable. If I was to get up and jump out of the window, I would break a back. That would be a foolish thing to do. So, our speech actions and our thought actions and our physical actions can be obviously mindless, stupid, mean, angry and create difficulties for others or they can be loving, compassionate, caring and eliminate suffering for others. So, negative actions, positive actions, skilful actions and unskilful actions, skilful thoughts and unskilful thoughts... you are the agent of it. You say it, you do it and you are responsible. (30:11)

We have a purification vow. At the beginning of our Sutra we have a Sutra chanting. The very first of it is that all the evil karma, all the evil actions ever created by me on account on my

beginning of greed, hatred and ignorance, I now confess fully and openly. So, all say that together at the beginning of our sitting time every week. So, there's a confession if you like together of everything we've done that's unskillful through our greed, hatred and ignorance. (31:29)

### **The teachings of non-self and emptiness**

It's not understandable. It doesn't live in the world of cognition. It does when people talk about it and write about it. There are million books about it. But it's an experience... I don't teach people at the beginning when they come. There is no point. We chant the heart Sutra which talks about forms of emptiness all the way through it. So, as a group of people we're chanting that... Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness is form and it goes on. It's a marvellous heart Sutra. It's the heart of Mahayana school really. And then later on, students become, if they take up a discipline of practice, they practice and they come along and sit with the group once a week... For me, when I was practicing at the beginning, I practiced with counting my breaths for two years. The thing is that it is necessary to understand the mind. The mind is so creative and productive and full of thought and ideas and dreams and plans. It's so busy. To practice just being completely present with the breaths and counting on the breaths so there was nothing in the world but the count is extremely difficult for people. (34:23)

### **How do you relate to the Buddha?**

He was a person who lived a very comfortable life but felt there was more to be learned. He had questions. He turned his back on his indulged life and went off to the forest for six years looking for answers. He studied with yoga teachers and didn't feel that he had the answers. So, he left his friends and went off himself. So, he was a very determined person who broke through and found answers to the questions. What was his question? Why suffering? Why old age, sickness and death? His family and his parents were trying to stop him from seeing any sickness, any old age and any death. But he caught sight of something and they started him, I mean, questions. So, his own experiences had him a determined, focused person. I admire that. He had a breakthrough and he was able to teach. A lot of time when I teach, I talk about the Buddha and I say he was not a selfish man. He didn't stay sitting happy, bliss, joy. He got up and went back to the town. He talked to people and said, 'I've seen this'. So that's very important aspect. I admire that a lot. I think it's wonderful. A lot of people again have an idea that when they see Buddhists bowing to a Buddha statue, they bow to some sort of god or some sort of guru... It is much less complicated than that. We have bodhisattva vows and the last one is the Buddhist way is incomparable, is unachievable, is beyond reach but I vow to embody it fully. So, in whatever way we can, if you like, our religion to the Buddha or our loyalty to the Buddha is by having and being like the Buddha as much as we can be, each of us. So, I am embodying the Buddha way. So, it's completely crossed your life. It is not just a segment on Sunday or a segment on Wednesday. It's just the whole day, the whole night, every day. (42:46)

### **Have you taken vows in Buddhism?**

Yes, I've taken vows... at the precept ceremony and you take sixteen precepts. You make a special garment and you wear that when you practice meditation. I've done that twice... You have to really meditate and reflect on each of the vows and find a way to make the vow your own and then you have to articulate your own understanding in front of the community...

First I took in 1996 and then in 1998, I think. And then I took it again at another ceremony in 2000 or so... Every month we have a precept ceremony in our community and we chant the precepts together and we focus on one of the precepts and we all share in a circle about how we're living our lives and how we're practicing and when found the precept difficult. So we do that. (45:03)

**Did you take formal training in Buddhism?**

There was no formal training in Australia... I taught many classes at Sydney University. But there is no, you can go online now and do a course in America. But I am not doing that.

**How did you prepare yourself to become a Buddhist teacher?**

I just practiced. I practiced my meditation, I've been doing a lot of community work with a group. There is no sort of short way to be a teacher. You just do the best as you can and someone might say that I would like you to take up some teachings... It's about your teacher recognizing that you both have the same hearts the same understanding. That's how that works. (46:26)

**How long have you been teaching Buddhism?**

Ten years formally and before that as well... You may know or may not know that there are two basic schools in Zen Buddhism. They're Soto School and Rinzai School. Our tradition is the Soto tradition with some Rinzai elements. So, we do a lot koan work which is quite Rinzai practice and koan is an exchange or piece of scripture that we meditate with or sit with and the teacher will ask questions about that and you may or may not be able to resolve it and then you keep working with it. So, my teacher, for example, sat with his first koan for eighteen years. It's a long time. (47:31)

**How long have you been practicing meditation?**

Well, as I said I started learning, discovering meditation when my first trip in India. That would have been in 1967 or 1968. So, I started practicing and then getting more interested as I went through 1970s and then meeting my Zen teacher... in 1980s. (49:24)

**What are the purposes of practicing meditation for you?**

No purpose. There is nothing to be gained. I have to teach that to people that all through our lives everything we do, we've got some goals, we've got something we have to do, we've got to gain. It's always like that. In practicing meditation, it's really stepping out of that mind frame and becoming open to the whole... It's not about going to a dream; it's not about going to a bliss; it's not about going to some sort of other stage of mind. It's about being completely present and awake and alert. (51:01)

I think the word enlightenment is a mistake. I never use it. If I am going to talk about anything to do with that, I talk about realization and what is it to be realized and it is not realized through here, realize through the entire experience of letting go this mind. There is a lovely saying from a teacher ... who said, 'Body and mind fall away, fall completely away. There is no body, there is no mind. It's just the sound, the bird, whatever. The "you" is gone. (51:57)

**Have you ever had that experience?**

I think maybe I had. Many of my Zen friends have had that experience. It is not unusual... It has been experienced... I don't want to say that it is achievable because it makes a striving thing and a grasping thing. It is realizable but in a natural way. It just unfolds. You cannot make it happen. It maybe will happen. Somebody once said, 'Doing a lot of meditation makes you accident prone and the accident maybe waking up.' (53:14)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

I am a Christian. I am sure I am a Christian. What would be stopping me from being a Christian? You know ideas would stop me. But I don't just put faith. You might have got a sense that I am not devoted to belief structures. I don't really adhere to believe in structures. Well, the message of Jesus is love one another as you love yourself. It's the same messages coming from the Buddha. It's not different. How could it be different? He was a great teacher. Love one another; do unto others. All the most simply profoundly difficult, if you like, messages coming from Jesus... There are many, many Buddhist Christians. There are teachers of Buddhism who are also priests the Catholic Church... There is a group of Catholics meditators who meet in our Zen dojo and a friend of mine NN was a Catholic monk for many years and now he is being given an invitation to become a teacher by NN. So, he is a Roman Catholic Zen teacher in Sydney. (55:28)

I don't subscribe to the belief structure. I don't scribe to Jesus who died on the cross and save us all from our sins; we will go up there. There is a whole lot of stuffs that I let go off. I don't need to have that in my life. It's not necessary. For me, it's not necessary. I go to my friend's funeral and I hear it again and again; and I go to my friend's nuptial Masses and I hear it. It's a wonderful and great set of beliefs but I am not part of it. But I do recognise that Jesus' heart was wide open and he welcomed anybody. (58:34)

### **Is it possible to be both Christian and Buddhist at the same time?**

Undoubtedly, as I said there are people right now who are teaching their parishioners Zen. They say, 'it makes better Catholics'. They say, 'being a Zen person makes me a better Catholic'. (58:55)

### **Do you experience any tension when you are practicing both traditions at the same time?**

No, I don't. I just let go off. If there is a tension, I just recognize it. But I don't experience tensions because I am very at ease among Christians, my friends. And I've grown up a Christian. I've also seen a lot of Christianity where sorts of only that and its actions aren't Christians. So, I think that's interesting too. (59:40)

### **How have Buddhism and its teachings enriched or changed your life?**

In concrete terms, wonderful friendships, so many friendships with people involved in our community and very deep, strong valuable, wonderful friendships. It has been just a great treasure. In Buddhism, we say there are three treasures. The three treasures are: the Buddha, the historical figure and what he taught, the Dharma, again, the sort of teachings and how they work and the sangha, the community. Thich Nhat Hanh says, 'In the west now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the most important of the tree treasures is the sangha, the community, because people are so lonely and so split apart. To find way to create communities is very important. That's what I always feel and that's what I am so grateful for the community and all of my

teachers. I have had wonderful experiences being with wonderful people, inspiring people... It's not to say that there is not difficulty. There is a huge difficulty but, you know, that's inevitable. There should be difficulties. Life does not always go smoothly. (1:01:35)

### **Could you help me to understand the teaching of nirvana?**

We say in Mahayana that Nirvana is right here, before your eyes. This very place is the Pure Land. This very body is the Buddha. It's right here now. That's what you wake up to. When you wake up if you want to use the word, or realize, that's what you wake up to. Nirvana is right here now... It's not some other place, not some other thing. (1:02:51)

### **How about the teaching of reincarnation?**

I don't know anything about that. I don't partake that idea... I don't know. How could I know? I don't know. I don't have a fixed idea that when I die I will come back as a rabbit. No, I don't know. It's irrelevant. The Buddha said so himself. He said, 'People who come and always ask about a future life or whatever', he said, 'I am not here for that. I am here to teach about this life, this only life.' And he said, 'people who come and always ask about an afterlife or reincarnation, it's like somebody comes to me with a poisoned arrow on their leg and what they want to know is who made the arrow and what sort of poison on the arrow. They have lots of questions about the arrow and all they need to do is take the arrow out. All we need to do is dress the wound. Always questions and always fantasies about future things, it's nothing to do with our lives. (1:04:09)

### **So, is this teaching not a Buddhist teaching?**

Well, there's a lot of debate about that. There is a lot of debate about how much Hinduism, how much Brahmanism seeds into all the texts that are gathered because they were written a long time after the Buddha died. So, like the book of the Bible, you know, there is a lot of questioning around. How poor is the interfaith between Buddhism and Hinduism at that time in India?... I've spoken to a Theravadin priest who was just committed to the idea of reincarnation, Tibetan teachers who were really committed to that, and I respect that. Again, that's their belief system... Still for me I don't know. (1:05:14)



## **Interview Rina**

### **Rina's religious background (62 years old)**

Rina was born into a devout Catholic family. Her both parents were practicing Catholic faith. She was baptised and confirmed in the Catholic Church where she received religious education in her early years of age. She attended a teenage group for faith education and catechism one evening per week which she really enjoyed doing.

### **Responding to the teaching of God**

"That is a very tricky one because the Buddhists believe that there is no God. I went to a retreat recently and a monk said, 'if they exchange the word God for Karma then that will make sense'. And so, it's not that God will do for us but that what we do will have results. And Jesus said that it's what you sow and so you reap. So, it's very much with Buddhist thing that you have to make that effort to live in virtues. And then the results will be pleasant results. If you live in non virtues then the results will be unpleasant. And that to me in this age people with so much disharmony, that could be a very strong point that people believe in the law of Karma. Then they would know that they cannot get away with it. At the moment, people think they can get away with this behaviour but in actual fact they don't get away with it whether they believe in Karma or not... So, it's a tricky one with God being benevolent because then when bad things happen, people say how can this benevolent God allow this to happen. But in a Buddhist way of thinking, it's because of Karma that these things happen. And so that's why bad things happen because people have caused that to happen." (04:49)

### **Do you believe Jesus as the Son of God or the Saviour of the world?**

"Well, in a sense, with Buddhism there are Bodhisattvas. Yes, and I see Jesus as a Bodhisattva. And in that way, the Son of God, how do you see God? In Buddhism, they have a concept called emptiness, emptiness inheriting existence...It means that we don't live independently; concretely we are so connected than we realise. So, in that sense Jesus is the Son of God. In that we are not separate as we see ourselves." (05:59)

"As a Saviour, well look, I think I see him as he died for our sins like he paid the ultimate price; he demonstrated it to do that for our sake. It was pretty amazing and I hold Jesus in very high regard. In my Buddha statue, I have a crucifix around him because it's something that I have to keep two feet in both camps because I can't... Different times I left Christianity but I've come back to that because there is no Buddhist centre here. I have to travel across to Bendigo and Wodonga. I go to here because it's a weekly reminder. I've been to Mass this morning. It's a weekly reminder of that, of the virtues, being virtuous. There're a lot good things about that. But I feel that being a Buddhist would take me deeper, deeper in... And I just really find it a greater impact on. And even things like preparation for death, and things like that, too. And it's about in every moment you are conscious of what you are doing. It seems to be more part of my life." (07:42)

### **Do you read the Bible? And how do you view the Bible?**

"Yes, I do. Well, my interpretation changes. It's changed a little bit because sometimes I think that the things that I read in the Bible can be interpreted in many ways. Some interpretation is a bit broader, maybe." (08:10) "It is open to a lot of misinterpretations." (08:22)

### **Do you still attend Church's service?**

"Yes, whenever I am here, nearly every week. It's wonderful. It is a lovely group of people and I've been going for quite some time, years. And I play flute in a Mass." (08:51) She is still considering herself as a member of her local Catholic Church community.

### **Heaven and hell**

"Yes, Buddhists also believe in heaven and hell. They speak of six realms of inner desires: hell realm, hungry ghost realm, animal realm, human realm, and two god realms which are similar to the heaven. So, they have in this world where they call Samsara, suffering world." (11:08)

"In the Buddhist sense, they say that you are only in hell until your karma is extinguished. So, you suffer to the point where the karma is finished. It is not an eternal thing in that sense." (11:40)

She finds it hard to accept the concept of God and the virgin birth.

### **When did you have your first contact with Buddhism?**

"When I was about twenty-four. It's a long time ago. I was working at an emergency department in Melbourne. There was one registrar working there. He was studying to become a Buddhist monk... I was very impressed with how calm he was in an emergency. And I thought there must be something in this. So, I enquired from him about Buddhism. And then he gave me some texts to read and some addresses of people to contact... I was in touch with him over the years. And he has been very helpful." (13:51)

### **What encouraged you to turn to Buddhism?**

"When I was nineteen, I had a child and I was unmarried. And the father didn't want to have the child but I didn't want to have an abortion. So, I had the child. And I had to make a decision whether to keep the child or not, because in that time there were not single parents. And then the priest came to visit, he was just on his weekly visit... In that time, there were no social workers. So, I said to him, 'Look, could you come back and help me to discuss what I should do.' And he didn't come back and that had a huge impact on me with Christianity... I thought he was non-compassionate. He didn't come back or didn't arrange somebody to come to help me. And that was what I saw at that age and I thought it really had a huge impact on my feeling about Christianity. So that was a kind of deciding thing for me. And about three years later I went down to Melbourne and worked in the emergency department and then I met this fellow who studied to be a Buddhist monk." (16:02)

"It's the whole philosophy. It's so logical. To me, we live this life, what's the point of it, the whole notion that there is rebirth. The fact that we live this life, we prepare in this life. In Buddhism, it's not so much this life as important; it's the next life. So, you are preparing all the time to try to be virtuous and preparing the mind...which will go onto another life. So, I can prepare this mind for whoever got my mind for the next life. And the idea of rebirth is on and on and continuing along this path to become an enlightened being ultimately. To me, that makes a lot more meanings than just there is this life and then nothing. That seems to me that it doesn't make sense. Ultimately with Buddhism if you're expired to enlightenment not

just for yourself but for the benefit of all beings. It's because only when you are enlightened like Jesus, you can help really help people to come out of samsara." (18:07)

### **Have you taken any Buddhist training?**

"Yes, I've gone to a lot of teaching since 1980s. There is a course called 'discovering Buddhism'... I've got a vast extensive library because I've lived a long way. I do a lot of reading and practices." (19:08)

### **How do you view the Buddha?**

"Well, as a person who realised the suffering nature of this world and who found a way out of it. And likewise, it's how I view Jesus. So, there is not just one Buddha, there are more than that. That's the difference of Christianity. They say that there is one God and Jesus is the only Son. But they don't say that if we live as Jesus lived, we can become like him. And that is the difference I think because it's how we live this life that's important, what we do for others." (20:03)

### **Do you have a personal relationship with the Buddha?**

"We have teachers. We can have more than one teacher but we can have a personal one and that's why you have a personal relationship. But then we see our teachers as Buddhas in a sense. The form of Buddhism that I am following is Tibetan. So, the Lamas we see them as Buddhas." (20:50)

### **How do you take and apply the teachings of Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path?**

"The Four Noble Truth is that there is suffering, there is a cause, there is a result, and there is a path. So, this is the suffering world and the way out of it is to follow the path. And that's what I do. It's through my watching my thoughts, words, and deeds. So, it's the same as Christianity. So, keeping my thoughts as virtuous as possible and my words and my deeds, so restraining and refraining from non-harm." (21:49)

### **How does the teaching of Karma affect your life?**

"If you believe in Karma, you'd live your life differently because you know that you can't get away from anything. If you harm someone, if you steal, if you lie, you know that you may get away in this life but you ultimately cannot get away. The Karma has the definite result and not only that but it increases. So, if you kill an insect and you don't purify that then that will grow over the time and then it will come back with some illness or some whatever that is appropriate for that particular thing. It makes me live more harmoniously. Yes, it is an important part." (23:06)

### **Do you believe in reincarnation and rebirth?**

"It'd taken me a long time, took me years and years to really come around to believe in that but to me intellectually it seems the most logical thing that I am presented with. And it makes sense, in a sense that why we are here on this earth. We are here just for ninety years, to work hard and to do what we do, house and children, and then we leave. That's it. To me, I think I actually believe that the way we are taught in Christianity is misinformed, I believe that. And I've read books about this, about Jesus, having lived in India and like that. And I

believe a part of the Bible is missing, this part that if we live like Jesus that we supposed to do, to live like Jesus. It's not just about praying. Praying is important but we've also got to live it, we've got to restrain ourselves from selfishness. And that's what Jesus had done when he died and he said: 'forgive them for they know not what they do'. He realised these people and I just wonder what he meant was people don't realise the Karma. It was like Karma that they don't understand what they are doing. It's going to cause the future pain. That's just the way I see that. So that maybe a different interpretation that makes sense to me." (25:30)

### **Teaching of non-self, emptiness and nothingness**

"We are not fixed and unchangeable. With emptiness, everything comes from, everything is a manifestation of, what people say God in Christianity. But in Buddhism emptiness is within everything but it's a very difficult thing, it's so hard to get my head around it... But it means we are not independently solid or fixed. We are empty of concrete self. And what I'm left to understand it is that in some ways we are not separate, we're connected." (26:40)

"It's part of meditation. It's something that can be intellectually understood. It has to be understood through meditation. So, it's a part of a single point of concentration to meditate on emptiness, on emptiness of inheritance existence. And so ultimately there is a stage called Nirvana, when someone can have, instead of having intellectual conceptual understanding of emptiness which isn't true, it isn't a real thing. My conception of emptiness is only from what I understand but after years of single point of concentration and it takes a lot and I am now no near there. Then they don't become a Buddha, they become an Arhat. From then they are out of the circle of samsara. They can see the future path lie ahead. So, they have a direct realisation of emptiness... It is a very profound teaching of Buddhism. It's a very difficult concept to fully understand." (28:25) "It's the way you look at things that you see that things aren't the ways they appear." (28:39) "In a way, if I look at life that way, it probably affects a little bit too my life and death because you realise that a death is a physical go." (30:01)

### **Nirvana**

"It could be like heaven because there is no suffering. Once you understand what suffering is, you have a direct realisation. And I had one teaching from a Geshe who said he had twenty minutes of this experience where he could see the things weren't they ways they appear. And his life had changed from then on. But it's not something that people would have experience of. That requires a lot of training, a lot of meditation and purification of your karma." (31:19)

### **Do you consider yourself belonging to two traditions at the same time?**

"Yes, I guess so but see Buddhism demands a lot more of me than Christianity in my view." (31:42)

### **Which of the two traditions do you like more with?**

"The Buddhist path... because it just makes so much sense to me and it helps me more. When I apply the teachings, there is some teaching called Lojong teaching which is a way you imagine your enemy being a best friend... And so, Jesus did this too. The person who criticises you is the person that's going to teach you patience... They have very specific teachings that are very in depth. And at one point I thought this is just too complicated, I just need something simple like Zen, something simple but Zen is not simple. You know, it becomes that way..."

Especially with Tibetan everything is clearly defined and there's step for everything. But it does make it easy to follow because there are practices that you can do and I do that in my life." (33:15)

**How long have you been practicing meditation? And what method do you use?**

"About thirty years, I think. Sometimes I do it daily but sometimes might happen then you don't. You might be busy. So, I try every day." (33:44) "There is an analytical meditation... to have a sound mind, to have met the teachings... When you're meditating, you bring it deeper into your being then you will single pointedly concentrate on that." (34:49) "Meditation is about familiarity, familiarise yourself with the working of the mind and to be focused on virtues." (35:07)

**Are there any other Buddhist activities that you are undertaking?**

"I guess it's a whole life thing; it's a whole life. You do offerings. There are purifications that you that you can do. There are practices that you do, just as in Catholic faith. I am not sure if they have confessions where you go to see a priest to absolve your sins. They have something similar called the Four Opponent Powers. So, if I were to kill an animal or something then I would have regret for that, I would take refuge in the Buddha. So that's the base of it. And then I would have an activity which I do... I can do that practice as a remedy. And then I have a confession to restrain from doing that again... I actually do a practice in the morning and another practice at night to purify... things." (37:54)

She belongs to Mahayana Buddhism which is called a Galloper tradition. After thirteen years of practicing Buddhist path she took refuges and vows in 1998.

**Do you believe in all Buddhist teachings?**

"Yes, Buddha taught different things for different people." (40:43)

**How is it possible to be a dual religious believer?**

"For a long time, I didn't go to Church and I found it hard to abandon the whole notion of Jesus. I feel that Jesus is amazing, what he did. And I found it hard to abandon that. Then I thought maybe I don't need to, I felt a strong pull toward Buddhism. And so, I just kept going and then I realised that I actually don't have to stop. There is no reason why I have to stop practicing Christianity." (41:46)

**Did you have to give up your beliefs in Christianity when you took refuges in Buddhism?**

"No, because I guess I see Jesus as a Bodhisattva like on the par with the Buddha. So, they are like two practitioners." (42:14)

**The advantages of being a dual-belonger**

"I think the advantage is that when I go to a Buddhist teaching, I think this is like that of Catholic teaching. Then I think, yes, this fits into that. So constantly I can see similarity, like the Catholics have the confession the Buddhists have Four Repentance Powers to do yourself to purify what they don't call it sins, they call it the negative karma. So, I've been able to accept there are lot of things that as a younger person I rebelled against in Christianity but

that now I can accept because of Buddhism, because looking at it that way I now can understand the Catholic, the Christian things better.” (43:45)

### **The Challenges**

“When I met at a Buddhist place, they sometimes talked about Jesus in very lovely terms. They don’t oppose Jesus. His Holiness Dalai Lama actually said, ‘do not change your religion, stay with Jesus if that suits you, because it might cause conflict. But I have found it hasn’t. It mean it has. I have many conflicts or just something I have to work through, but when I was over there I felt I’ve got a Church. I don’t have a problem saying that. But here at the Catholic Church I Don’t. Only a few people know that I am a Buddhist. Not many people know that I am actually a Buddhist. It’s just an internal thing. A few people know like very close friends. But most of the people must be horrified if they knew. And I haven’t told the priest. I think maybe I should tell. I wouldn’t have a problem if I took him aside and talked to him about that. Maybe one day I will. Because one day he said that he saw his Holiness the Dalai Lama on television, he said, ‘he is a lovely little man, isn’t he?’ It’s almost as if there is no substance to him. But if he only knew what he said. And I thought to myself then I should talk to him about that because his Holiness the Dalai Lama is probably a Buddha.” (45:36)

### **Did you see any conflicts within yourself in terms of faith?**

“No, I don’t. There might be minor things, not important. The most important things are, I see in my life, maintaining virtues, not harming others but helping others as much as possible. And you can do that in both.” (46:04)

### **In terms of practicing, do you have any difficulties?**

“Well, I don’t do much in Christian sense, except going to Church and occasionally read the Bible. I stopped going to Communion and then I friend forced me to go. I have gone to confession once after many years I did go to confession. I haven’t been back to confession... Now I go to total Communion.” (47:20)

“Yes, I think it is very interesting to look at that because often people feel they just have to have one. But I’ve always tried all my life to have... because a lot of suffering in this world being because of religious beliefs, you know, wars because of religious beliefs. So, the more we understand another faith, and if you only follow it at a superficial or if you only read about it at a superficial level, it’s not the same as when you’re actually practising. So, there are two big religions, I guess, that I have fairly in depth understanding of it. I don’t understand much about Muslim, I would like to. But I think if there was more openness between religions to understand each other then there is a lot less suffering.” (48:48)

### **What have Christian faith and Buddhist path challenged or enriched you?**

“In the Christian faith, I guess, there are opportunities to go there every week. I contribute to the group and it’s a nice group of people. It’s life a social thing too and it’s also a reflective time for me to be there. And it means that I am contributing in a spiritual sense to this community whereas if I didn’t do that, because I live in this community, and there is nobody else here that thinks that I do with Buddhism, I would be very alone here in a spiritual sense. In a way, I am a bit alone here because I think so differently. So that gives me a connection with the local people. And I don’t talk about my Buddhist things to many people because they

don't understand it. They have a bit of fear, I think. They just don't understand what's it about. They haven't dwelled into it. The more you dwell into it the more you realise that they are not that different. They are different. With the Buddhist...." (50:25)

**Are you satisfied with what you are practicing now?**

"Yes, I think I've come to a point now that I am happy staying with the two traditions. It's a kind of discovery. Every time I go to the teaching in a Buddhist tradition and every time I go to the Catholic I am learning more about both. I am learning about the similarities." (51:03)

## **Interview with Jan**

### **Jan's family religious background**

Jan's father was not interested in religions but his mother was a member of Presbyterian Church in which J was baptized. During his early years, he was sent to a Methodist Church near his home in Melbourne to attend the Sunday school and to learn catechism. Later on, when a church of Presbyterian was built in the area, he went there regularly for the Sunday school and church services. During the years of his teenage he helped run the Sunday school at his Presbyterian church. Recalling the memories of the Sunday school programs and church services, J has little memories of them, except some songs he learned when he was with the Methodist church.

### **Jan's understanding of God, Jesus, Bible, salvation and Church's teachings**

The Sunday school and church services did not make an impact on Jan's understanding of God. He was not sure if he had an understanding of God. He believes that the Church's functions were not relevant to young people. There were not discussions of the current social issues. It seemed the Church got stuck in the past.

When asked how is Jan's view of God today, Jan response was "God is a concept that people made up to help them understand themselves and the world." (4:50) He believes that this concept is important for certain people but not for all.

As of Jesus Christ, he said: "I think he's got a lot of good ideas, at least as reported. He's got a lot of good ideas and useful things. It would be a good example to live a life that way. But I don't buy the God bit." Jan does not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God or the saviour of the world. (6:00)

Responding to the question "Do you read the Bible?", Jan said: "When I was young, I read a bit of the Bible, especially the Old Testament." He treats the Bible, especially the Creation, as stories and does not take them literally, but tries to understand them in contexts. (6:38)

About eternal life, heaven and hell, he said that "he was puzzled by them. They are stories taught to make you to behave. Heaven was like a fairy story, too good to be true. It did not motivate him to be good to receive this reward. The idea of this is that you have to behave, to do the right things". (8:20)

Regarding the teachings of the Church Jan finds it difficult to take the creation stories and the teachings of heaven and hell.

### **First contact with Buddhism**

Jan's first contact with Buddhism was in 1981 when he travelled to Burma. Through having some encounters with a local tour guide who was a Buddhist, Jan became interested in what his Burmese friend did. He later travelled to Nepal and had good impression with Buddhist people and the way they lived their lives there. Then he travelled to the Europe and experienced that it was not as nice as it was in Asia. That sparked his interest in Buddhism. When returned to Australia, Jan joined a Buddhist group in Bairnsdale and later he joined a Buddhist group in Wodonga with which he has been an active member till today.



### **Jan's present religious practice**

Jan is an active member of a Buddhist group since 1990. He has been practicing Buddhist meditation for about 25 years. At the time of interview Jan meditates every day, one in the morning and one in the evening. He follows a mixed practice of mindfulness with some ritual of purification and prostration. The purpose of meditation for him is "mindfulness, being aware of what your mind is doing and being able to recognize when you are doing something stupid and fix it." (28:30) The practicing of meditation, for Jan continues throughout the day "when you are out engaging with people, you are aware of what your mind is doing... This is the benefit of doing meditation, to be able to control your mind for the rest of the time." (29:37)

Besides practicing regular meditation Jan also attend regular talks and discussion which take place every fortnight. He has undergone a few long-term retreats both domestic and overseas and several short-term retreats. He has been involved in some social justice Buddhist activities in the local community where he lives. After almost twenty years of practicing and studying Buddhist spirituality and values with serious consideration, Jan took the three Buddhist vows and five precepts in 2009 all of which took place in a ritual context. He was given a Buddhist name.

### **Why embrace Buddhism?**

Through reading Buddhist literatures and having discussions with a Buddhist group, Jan began to see Buddhism make sense to him and started to embrace Buddhist spirituality. "There were some impressive people I have met that were Buddhists and I thought there was something in this. And then I read a bit and began to go to this discussion group and learned it more and the more I learned the more it made sense, just about how the world works or how the world seems to work. Some of the teachings make a lot of sense, a lot of common sense. And you sit and you think about it and yah, it makes a lot of sense." (14:30)

### **View of and relation with the Buddha**

Regarding the relationship with the Buddha, Jan said: "In the tradition it is more a teacher that teaches the Buddhist teachings and you have relationship with the teacher. Through that the Buddha is presented to you and gradually when you are ready you understand the teacher as a Buddha. Because that's how you get the teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha, the dharma come through a teacher in that sense... and the Buddha is still around" (16:30)

Regarding the teaching of the Buddha, Jan said: "a lot of it is very impressive, absolutely astounding intellectual undertaking and results and just the understanding it involves in the psychology and nature and physical world."

### **Understanding and application of Buddhist teachings**

**"Four noble truths and eightfold noble path** help me to have less attachment to things and eventually less attachment to yourself and understand that things are temporary and ever changing, not to hang up on what you want or having things the way you want. It allows you the freedom to help more, to be more generous or to be able to help others without worrying about yourself all the times." (18:55)

“Understanding **Karma** helps me to understand things... Things aren’t always going well and you think ah, the world is exactly what we see according to what we have done in the past. All we have, the world we experience, is a result of our previous actions. So, when things are going well, fantastic, I have done some good things, good things have happened in the past. When things aren’t going so well, this is a result of something stupid I have done in the past. I’ve got to be careful not to do stupid things again. Collectively and individually... what we’ve done in the past results how we experience life.” (20:20)

“The teachings of **non-self** and **emptiness** help us to see the true reality of our existence and of the world: “We don’t see ourselves as we really are... Not understanding and mistaken understanding of how we exist results in us having a fault concept of ourselves and that fault concept we exaggerate and make really important. Although I am here but I am not here in a permanent sort of really important way I like to think I am.” (22:00) These teachings help “make the world even more wonderful. Because in seeing something beautiful I think I can appreciate it more because I know it’s beautiful momentarily and tomorrow it will be gone. A beautiful flower today, tomorrow will be rotten in the bin. Therefore, only this moment.” (23:32)

**Nirvana** is “a state of mind where you do understand properly how the world exists and how you exist, the emptiness. Understand that so allow you to behave properly, most beneficially for everything... It’s not so much a reward... When your mind understands how everything really exists and you understand how things appear as they do, but understand it appears that way momentarily, you can see how things are working properly. So, you can act most effectively. And apparently, it’s a really blissful state.” (25:45)

### **Moments of change or religious transformation**

J has had a few moments of “wake up” or “ah ha”, those moments of understanding of Karma. This has helped him understand what is going on and apply it into what he does.

### **Why stopped being a Christian?**

“I think, I have just gradually dripped away from it.” The main factor that he could recall was that during the Vietnam war the Church was not reacting to what was happening in Vietnam and failed to help him understand. From this negative experience, he felt that he was drifted away from the Church and he stopped going to Church. (41:10)

### **What makes you a Buddhist?**

“Trying to accept the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha... prostrations in the morning and take refuges three times in the evening, and take vows.” (42:02)

### **Do you believe all the Buddhist teachings?**

“There are some I don’t understand and some I don’t accept fully because I can’t understand or see the relevance. But I’ve got to the stage where I think that’s a problem with my understanding not so much a problem with the teachings.” (42:32) Some teachings that he still struggles with are the teaching of emptiness, the devotion to a teacher who is treated as a Buddha by the students, and the belief in Tibetan deities who reflect different aspects of the Buddha. Doing prostration was hard at the beginning. It is something that Western people

are not accustomed of doing. Doing prostration to someone else is putting yourself below them. (45:41)

### **How Buddhism changed and enriched your life?**

Buddhism has made a positive change in how Jan views and lives his life, as he said: "Buddhism has made me not attached to money, not attached to positions, being prepared to see what you can do for other people. That's more important than doing something for yourself. I do all those things easier." Buddhism also taught him to accept the temporary world by letting go of things.

### **How satisfied?**

"I am very thankful that the dharma exists and that I have been able to receive as much as I have and get a chance to practice because I find it very beneficial." (48:08) Jan expressed his gratitude to the existence of the Dharma and all what he has received from Buddhism. He sounded content with following the Buddhist path and wished to go deeper into the practicing the Buddhist teachings. In his short-term plan, he is going to attend one month retreat.

### **Ultimate goal**

Yes, to achieve enlightenment and to be able to benefit everyone and to end suffering. (48:57)

## **Interview June**

### **June's religious background**

June comes from a Christian family. Both of her parents were Presbyterian and they later joined Uniting Church. She was christened and participated in Church services. In terms of faith education, because of attending state public schools at both primary and secondary levels, she did not receive any religious education, except the Sunday school at church which lasted from her age of five to eleven. In her teenage she attended only Sunday church services.

### **Responding to the teaching about God**

"I believe in Jesus Christ and the teachings of Christians but I don't believe there is an all-powerful God, a creator. I believe that things are due to cause and effect which translate as Karma. This is a Buddhist perspective and you create your own world by your actions and your intentions.... There is no beginning where there is a creation. Sometimes people say, 'what is the purpose of life?' There is no purpose because it's karmic. So, there is no creator that puts you here to learn this particular thing. That's my view. But I think in the Bible everywhere that it says "God" you put the word "karma", the Bible makes sense... If you take away "God", this almighty individual that punishes and rewards, just put in "karma" it does makes sense... otherwise this Bible to me makes no sense at all. Why this all-loving God that is able to create and able to do things, why on earth would you have the world in such state. If you were almighty and you could, why wouldn't you sustain it? So, God doesn't make sense at all to me." (06:17)

"The Ten Commandments is the teaching on karma; it's not a complete teaching on karma because it's just 'God says you've got to do this'. And if you do this,... you are a good person, good things are going to happen, you will have a good rebirth. But it's very childish, it's God. It's like there was a child here and just say 'don't go near that fire' and I didn't tell them why. Whereas I think with Buddhism, it's like telling to that child 'don't go near that fire because if you touch it, you'll get burn. It gives you the next steps. Whereas Christianity with Ten Commandments are teachings on Karma and morals and ethics, I think it's very good but incomplete." (08:14)

"I am talking from the point of view a Tibetan Buddhist, not from a point of view of Theravadin. We say that Jesus was a Bodhisattva. Now Bodhisattvas are beings of great compassion that have developed their minds so that they have what's called 'Cidies'. Jesus could walk on water... all those sorts of things. That all happens when you get rid of negative afflictions, anger, attachment, pride, and jealousy. When you go over all those negative afflictions, you start to develop the quality of loving kindness and compassion to all people and you start to work on your mind because who we are is all mind and body. From my point of view and Buddhist point of view the body is just an instrument of the mind, nothing special. It's the way we see things, the way we feel things, the way we relate to things. So, we say Jesus was a great Bodhisattva, very special being, great compassion, great wisdom. Jesus taught only for four years. It would be very interesting if he lived longer. Buddha taught for forty years. Once again, he was teaching on the context of the people around him whereas Buddha was teaching in the context too of a people in India who already had an understanding of karma, you know the Hindus and Jains." (10:47)

### **Response to the teaching about Jesus as the Savior of the world**

"No, not at all. Each individual is its own savior by your developing your mind, developing your compassion, developing your wisdom. You are your own savior. From Buddhist perspective, every being with the mind which includes the apes, has the potential to become a Buddha, an enlightened being... Jesus is a teacher like Buddha who isn't almighty; Buddha is enlightened and fearless but he is a teacher. He can't change your mind; he can only show you the way: this is what I did; this is what you've got to do. If you do this, this, this, you too will become like me enlightened. Jesus is another way that's showing the way." (12:35)

### **Response to the teaching about Jesus as the Son of God**

"There is no God. So, I don't know what that means. I can't answer. I don't know much about Christianity. (12:48)

### **Response to the teaching about eternal life and salvation**

No, that's a Christian thing. No, no eternal life. There is a continuous consciousness, continuous stream of mind that is beginningless. There was no beginning. At the moment, this stream of consciousness is Julie here in front of you. This body will die one day. Julie will be gone forever but that stream of consciousness will go on to another sentient being, another sentient being, will never end. Beginningless and endness." (13:48)

### **How about salvation?**

"Salvation from what? ... No, Buddha is teaching the way that we can become perfect, all-knowing being like Buddha, completely compassionate, completely wise, able to help every sentient being. No, not salvation." (14:47)

### **Heaven and hell**

"In the Buddhist system, there are heavens and hells. These heavens and hells and realms are state of mind. They aren't places where you go to. They are state of mind that you can in your rebirth end up in hell realm which sounds absolutely horrific. However, since beginningless time we have been through these realms over and over again and until we become enlightened or until we reach Nirvana...you are out of samsara. Then you keep practicing many more levels. Then you keep refining your mind until you become enlightened being." (57:53)

"Yes, the Buddhists have heaven and hell. They are state of mind and it's not somewhere you go as the Christians believe you go to hell for eternity or you go to heaven as a reward for being good... It's not like that. These are within the circle of samsara, cyclical existence. And you go to heaven. You can go to heave-like state but it's not for eternity. Once your good karma has run out... then you go back to lower realms. (58:51)

### **Did you or do you read the Bible?**

"Well look. I was quite spiritual when I was young. I did try to read the Bible. I read bits of it, parts of it. I think it's a good historical source: someone begot someone, begot someone else. So historically it's interesting. But sometimes I have heard the Bible has been translated; it's been changed. How accurate is it in the translation and the interpretation of it since it really

happened? I've heard that in the Bible there used to be karma and in the Jewish tradition, in the Kabala - the mystical Jewish tradition and Christian tradition – there is karma and reincarnation. I think the Bible has been used over times. That was a warhorse. There was not lot of wars, a lot of killing done in the name of the Bible of Christians... dreadful things done in the name of Christianity, crusades, burning people, if you don't convert you are being burn and killed. I think Jesus Christ would be doing that. That's not Christianity. That's being done in the name of Christ. I look at our prime minister at the moment who says he is a Christian and sometimes gets on his high horse and nothing against him. He's probably a nice man, gets up on his high horse and says God and thanks God. If Jesus Christ stands beside him, Jesus Christ should be horrified. What we are doing to refugees and things like that. That is not Christian... I think if you are a Christian, you've got to visualized Jesus beside you and think what Jesus would do now." (18:07)

### **What do you think of the Christian community to which you used to belong?**

"It was a community of old people. There were no young people. I found it very dry and boring. There was a person the front that sort of lectured you and people sang a few songs, normally with some wobbling ladies in front of you. I didn't find it, it didn't do anything for me at all." (19:00)

### **Did you attend any social activities in Church?**

"There was a youth group when I was young. They were actually quite good. It didn't do any Churchy things. But it was just a social group of young teenagers... There were no social justice activities. This is once again a small rural community. It was only just a Friday night... giving teenagers something to do... It was actually good but not much in a way. We start with a prayer and end with a prayer." (20:12)

### **When did you have your first contact with Buddhism?**

In 1986 she visited China, Nepal and Tibet. While in Tibet as a stranger she felt that she was home. (21:47) Whenever she visited Nepal and Tibet after that she always had the same feeling. Now she feels herself as a stranger in Australia: "Sometimes when I get back, I feel very sick. I don't taste anything." (22:20)

### **What encouraged you to turn to Buddhism?**

"Travelling through Buddhist countries and seeing how different it was, not obsessed like the West, just a different energy, not this striving for more money and drinking alcohol, yes different gentler people. I can't explain it, just really different to the West." (23:17)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

"No God. In Buddhism, there is no God. From my perspective, there is no almighty creator; there is no God. It's our mind and our continual of mind that we are developing." (01:14:14)  
"What stopped me from being a Christian? Ah, it had nothing to offer; it had nothing to offer; for me, it had nothing to offer. There was someone up there on a pulpit preaching. There was no dialogue between it. It did answer any questions of why there is suffering in the world, why is this happening. Ah, God's will. Okay, this is all-compassionate God that can do anything. Why is he letting the world goes like this? It didn't answer any question at all. So, I

left Christianity probably from sixteen or seventeen. I didn't see it has anything to offer." (01:15:20)

### **What makes you a Buddhist?**

"Because I believe that the teachings of Buddha are refuge. It is a way to develop your mind to progress along the path, progress along the way to be an amazing being that can help other beings to become enlightened." (01:15:58)

### **Buddhist training**

"To be called a Buddhist, you take a small ceremony what is called 'Taking refuge'. I have actually taken refuge. I am here talking to the Tibetan Galloper. So, it's not until you formally take refuge, you can't call yourself a Buddhist. You can go to the Buddhist teachings and you can do all sorts of things but you can't say 'I am a Buddhist'. So, when you take refuge, it means that you really believe and you practice the Buddhist teachings." (24:10) She took Buddhist five vows (non-killing, non-stealing, non-lying, no sexual misconduct and no intoxicated drug or alcohol) and refuge into Tibetan Buddhism in 2006. At the moment, she attends weekend teachings and practices. She has done one month retreat at a monastery in Nepal and three-month meditation retreat in New Zealand. She has done a several ten-day retreats in Australia. She has also attended most of the talks given by Dalai Lama in Australia. She has had her own Buddhist master. She is a member of a local Buddhist group which has every fortnight gathering for meditation and teachings. This group has been in operation for about thirteen years. At the present, she practices two-hour meditation every day. She has been working as co-ordinator at her local Buddhist centre for the past three years.

### **View of the Buddha**

"Buddha is a teacher. There are lots of Buddhas on this world but they look like ordinary people. They basically act like ordinary people... there are people on this earth right now that are Buddhas. Buddhas are people with enlightened mind that see reality as it is" (31:45)

"I think Christians misunderstand and put on Buddha a sort of God aspect, creator. So, Buddha is a teacher; Buddha gives you practices. And it's not 'you must do it'. This is what I discovered; this is what I found out. If you do this, this happens; if you do that, that happens. And Buddha said, 'don't just do it because I said it; you've got to test it; you've got to find out for yourself. If it doesn't work for you, don't do it. And the thing I really like about Buddhism when you go to teachings and weekends, you're really encouraged to ask questions... In Tibetan Buddhist system, you go there and they actually debate. They have a topic and they have debate, one monk against the other. And that is really a good way of getting it clear when you have to argue a point and the other persons take sides. You have to think about it; you don't just 'this is the way it is and you believe it.' No, you have to work it out yourself, you have to figure it out yourself... You have to meditate on it, think about it until you actualise it... you know something you sort of have to think 'there is no way I can find it out with my mind as it is now, so I put it on hold. That probably the way it is and one day I'll know myself'." (34:09)

### **Buddhist teachings**

#### **Four Noble Truths**

“The Four Noble Truths, fantastic. If you out into the world, I hope I am not too negative, there is so much suffering in the world. Even individuals that appear to be happy, they are suffering. Every relationship ends in death or parting... Buddhism is the only religion that explains why there is suffering. No other religion does it. The Buddha was fearless in his presentation, he said, ‘This is the truth; this is the way it is. Find out for yourself.’ Whereas there is no other religion gives explanation why there is suffering. You know, it’s God’s way, God’s will, God’s will or bad luck. If you’re a scientist, it’s good luck or bad luck. If you’re Christian, it’s God’s will. If you’re a Buddhist, it’s karma, it’s what you have done. Every action causes reaction and so you create your own future.” (35:53)

“If you are suffering, if you are having a crappy time, you actually instead of blaming I hit this to me and the government has done this to me and this is happened to me, you can think, ‘in the past I must have transgressed and not done things right and this is actually quite good; it’s getting this real negative karma and I won’t have to experience it again. And my reaction to it, the way I react to it and the way I act now will create for me a better life in the future, for this next continual of mind to keep on practicing the Buddhist path and become a Bodhisattva like Jesus, a Bodhisattva, and apart from Bodhisattva, above that, a Buddha.” (36:58)

### **Karma**

“Karma is a really complex and people throw around karma, karma. With our mind, we have a very limited understanding of it, only enlightened being. The Four Noble Truths are, noble is a translation for Aria, Aria being – Noble Being. And that is someone who has seen reality, who has sort of had enlightened episodes and seen reality. They are the Four Noble Truths because you have to have certain level of development in your mind which we are all capable of to actually really see karma, the way it is. But in saying that you can see cause and effect around you. I mean nothing happens without a cause... Everything you do has a reaction. I mean that’s on a very basic superficial level. Everything you do as a reaction, yes, causes and conditions.” (38:24)

### **Eightfold Noble Path**

“I haven’t actually studied much about the Eightfold Noble Path. It is a Buddhist teaching. I think it is quite significant in the Theravadin system and it does come up in Mahayana system but I haven’t studied it in depth.” (39:05)

### **Reincarnation and rebirth**

In reincarnation, you can control your destiny but in rebirth you can’t control it. Reincarnation happens with Lamas who have developed their mind and compassion to the point that they can choose where to reincarnate in the next life. Rebirth happens with ordinary practitioners who cannot choose where to be reborn.

### **Wisdom of emptiness or non-self**

“Emptiness, fantastic. Now that is really hard to comprehend especially from Christian point of view because it doesn’t make any sense until unless you have an understanding and a belief in karma otherwise people are going to mistake it for nothingness. And it’s not nothingness.” (45:15)



“You hear it over and over again. And when you first hear it, you think, ‘why are you talking about this?’ You know, it really makes sense that it goes together with karma because emptiness is a very bad translation; that’s a dreadful translation. They should have kept the original word which is ‘shunyata’... and it’s often talked among the Western people how it’s ashamed to be called ‘empty’ because people confuse ‘empty’ with ‘nothing’. It’s not ‘nothing’... Emptiness is empty of inherited existence. So I exist due to causes and conditions... Yes, you exist because I have food, I have water...everything working together. I exist because of causes and conditions and there is no beginning for those causes and conditions. I need a mother and father to exist. They had parents, they had parents...going back endless time. So we think of people as solid, no changing, just existing of their own rights. But we don’t. We exist due to the kindness of other people, the food we ate tonight...” (47:57)

“We are so interrelated but we think we are just ‘me’. But we rely on other people and the air and the earth. We don’t exist independently, we rely on everything. So that is intellectual understanding of Karma. So, it’s not empty as nothing...So there is one thing understanding it intellectually. Then you have to sit on a cushion and actualise the feeling, actualise the understanding, get the realisation of emptiness. And that’s a big one.” (49:32)

## **Nirvana**

“Nirvana is peace. Nirvana is when all the mental afflictions have gone. Mental afflictions are those states of mind which causes us to be disturbed like when you are angry you mind is disturbed. It’s not a nice place to be. When you are angry, when you are jealous, when you’ve got pride, your mind is disturbed. So, mental afflictions are anything that disturbs your mind. You are not open and loving when you are angry... So, Nirvana is as you progress and practice and you have to have daily practice to train your mind. Buddhism is psychology. Or Buddhism is changing your mind. Your mind is very plastic. The West has just realised the plasticity of the mind while Buddhists have been doing that for two thousand five hundred years. So, Nirvana is peace when those negativities have no trace of them in your mind. So, anger doesn’t arise in your mind, jealousy doesn’t arise in your mind, pride doesn’t arise in your mind. All those disturbing emotions do not arise in the mind. What you have in your mind is great compassion which is not wanting people to suffer, and great love which is wanting people to be happy. You don’t distinguish, you don’t have great love and compassion for this person because it’s my husband or my son, but that person over there don’t worry about that. It’s great love and compassion for all sentient beings. So, in saying that there is no difference between the rats and the ceiling and my kind mother. I have great compassion and kindness and I don’t want harms to happen to either of them. That’s Nirvana; that’s great peace when you have no mental afflictions in your mind. So, what do I think about Nirvana? Fantastic! Everyone should reach Nirvana. It’s not a place; it’s not heaven... whereas I think in Christianity when you superimpose Christian views on Buddhists, you’ll get really confused because I think someone thinks Nirvana is like heaven, a place. Nirvana is a state of mind; it is pure peace and bliss because there is not anger, no mental afflictions... It’s not the liberation of the mind. That’s a natural state of mind. It’s a pure awareness, pure compassion, pure love, pure equanimity (56:16)

## **How have Buddhist teachings affected or changed your life?**

“How has it changed your life? Profoundly. The Buddhist teachings are the only thing for me that make sense of this world. That’s the only thing, the only thing I can use to explain the

way the world is. I have taken the Buddhist vows I live within those. So, I don't steal, I don't lie, I don't drink alcohol, and not killing is the hardest vow. It's really, really hard... Buddhist teachings affect everything that I do, practicing generosity and those things, my meditation practice every day, just the way you relate to people. It's fantastic!" (01:02:38)

"In practical terms, I am far more patient and tolerant and I don't put myself first all the times. I am not that important and other people are far more important, yes, completely changed my life completely, made a much happier person just because you always work on your mind and developing qualities. When you work for other people and when you are being kind, you are really being kind to yourself. Because it's just better than just thinking of me, me and me, what is there for me, what can I get, what can I do for me. When you are thinking of doing things for other people, you are actually a winner because you feel good." (01:19:52)

### **Practicing Buddhist meditation**

She has been practicing Buddhist meditation for eleven years. She follows Tibetan Gelugpa tradition. She had two one-hour practices of meditation, one in the morning and another at night. In meditation, you are connected through the living lineage to the Buddha.

### **Are there any Buddhist teachings that you find it hard to accept or to believe?**

"I found the hell realms horribly hard to take and I still do find those teachings of hell realms and the ghost realms and all that very difficult to take. But any of those teachings you just put aside." (01:16:27)

### **How satisfied are you following the Buddhist path?**

"I am really please that I am following the path. I would like to have a lot more time to practice. I am hoping that when I get older, I'll have more time practicing. Yes, there is nothing I would rather do. I find going to... I like socialising with friends and having a meal and talking... I would rather do something worthwhile developing my mind, mixing with mind-liked people that understand the reality, the nature of world. Yes, it's the most important thing for me. Yes, absolutely the most important thing." (01:20:53)

### **Do you have an ultimate goal in following the path?**

"To become a Buddha, that is the goal. How to achieve that? That's all Buddhist teachings are all about. There is a path to the enlightenment." (01:21:13)

## **Interview Kat**

### **Kat's religious background**

Kat comes from an Anglican family. Her father for some reason became anti-church when Kat was thirteen years of age. Her family was not very "religious", as she said, but was casually practising. When she was a teen, her father became very interested in religion and he participated in the Church of Christ for one year. During that year, Kat regularly attended Church services and other activities in the Church of Christ. However, Kat was baptised and raised up with some level of involvement in her local Anglican faith community. She received religious education, bible study at Sunday school and was actively involved in the parish youth group. Later on, she switched her commitment to the Baptist church community.

### **View of God**

"My view of God was that he was a man, male and that he was looking at everything I was doing and thinking. I feel worried and I would also pray that things should go alright to God. I also feel like I was a bad person. That was a mixture of things because I was not sort of a good person like any bad thought or difficult thought. I would think God can hear this or see this. I feel quite stressed about it." (3:47)

### **Did you read the Bible?**

"Yes, I did... I thought it was very special. I did believe the Bible as the word of God back then. Today, no I don't believe. I don't have any interest in the Bible. I don't feel that I am very educated on how the Bible came to be and then the people that were as instruments in writing the Bible in the political situation of the time... I know that it has been used for political persuasion. That's what I would believe that it was crafted for particular reasons at a particular time. I don't believe it's the word of God." (05:16)

### **View of Jesus**

"It's like I have views but they were not well formulated; they weren't very well thought through... I did see him as the Son of God and I did see him as atoning for our sins. I would have believed that. I come across people who say that Jesus as a Bodhisattva, another very good human being. I actually find it, I go as far as say it's impulsive, the image of God giving his Son to the world to be treated in that way like I find something very unsettling about that idea there, because I think it generates the idea that everyone has to be martyred. That idea of martyrdom in Christianity I find it disturbing." (07:02)

### **View of Salvation and eternal life**

"Salvation and eternal life I find it unsettling as well. There is a lot in Christianity that I actually find disturbing and unsettling. I had a conversation with one man who was a very devoted Christian at that time. He told me that no matter what bad you do, if you really at the end of your life pray to God and pray for forgiveness, you will go to heaven. And I really find that unsettling that sort of idea. And I think a lot in Christianity that's very unthought through, like it's very unintelligent. And I am sure there are a lot of Christian people who actually really somehow think it through and digest it and have something that sensible and intelligent. But there're a lot of Christian things that I've heard and I think they just don't make sense to me

and my framework. I find them disturbing that you can spend your whole life doing dreadful things and then pray at the end and you will have eternal salvation. I just don't believe it will work like that. I don't believe that you have to believe in the reincarnation to be a Buddhist but I always lean towards thinking that we are reborn. It makes more sense to me for some reasons than just going somewhere. It doesn't really make a lot of sense. But I did used to believe in heaven and hell as an absolute stage, permanent stage." (08:48)

### **Could you talk a bit on the teachings of heaven and hell?**

"In Buddhism, there is a lot about heaven and hell and the hell realms as well in Tibetan Buddhism... I don't know lot about it but I know I read a lot about his particular realms and hungry ghost realms, they are lower realms and they have all these versions of it like hell realms is ice-cold... And there are god realms. I don't know enough about it. I don't really understand it. I don't know if it is an explanation for psychological stage that some people say or it's an actual thing that they believe as an actual thing (10:51)

### **Did you get involved in any church activities?**

"Yes, I was quite heavily involved just in a youth group, I think, every Friday night when I was about fourteen and fifteen. I went to Sunday school or something intermediately growing up. I don't remember a lot... I liked them to a certain extent. I liked the sense of community and having somewhere to go. It was when I was fourteen and fifteen. I liked them but I couldn't find, I didn't really find a real connection, you know, the real connection with people. The pastor used to talk sometimes and I couldn't agree with some of the things he said. When I started to think a little bit more and I grew up a little bit more, I just couldn't get a real connection with people." (12:13)

### **What was your experience of the community?**

"It was neutral. There was nothing that stands out as bad or nothing that stands out as wonderful. It wasn't really a great punch of people where you go, they were really lovely punch, we had a lot of fun together, we had meaningful conversations. It was more like this was the right way and this was the wrong way. So, you should be doing this and you shouldn't be doing that." (12:46)

### **When did you have your first contact with Buddhism?**

"That was when I was twenty-one and I went over to India for travel and ended up doing one month of volunteer work with Tibetans up the north of India. I was with my boyfriend at the time and we were looking at doing volunteer work around India. We just didn't want to travel, we just wanted to do volunteer work. After a few months of being in India we came to Sala. I don't even know that if I knew there were lots of Tibetans there. I don't think I knew about Tibet. I don't know what made us go there. But I like mountains. Maybe that was that simple. And when we were there, we went and approached a Tibetan Dalai Lama's representative in Australia to do volunteer work and then we went and taught English to the students for a month. So that was my first. And I think that was meaningful like even though I didn't become interested in Buddhism then and I didn't think to ask a lot of questions to find out very much. I think it was just meaningful." (14:04)

### **What encouraged you to embrace Buddhism?**

"Then I went to a bout twenty-eight or twenty-seven and I got enrolled in Tibetan counselling psychiatry training. I really did it because I knew some of the trainers and I liked them... I wasn't interested in Buddhism. I was a bit defined or something but I enrolled in that course and part of that course was going to Tibetan Buddhist teachings. So that was how I became... I think I was quite defined for a while. So, I went to teachings but I don't think I was connected. I think when his hominess NN came to Australia and, it must have been first or second year of my training, I went to the initiation in Sydney. And I had some interesting dreams. I think something just went in. After that I went away for ten days to a Buddhist retreat up north. I think that was when it really settled into me in a way that I was really interested in Buddhism and there was something here. But I was always very aware that I liked Tibetan people and I thought they were good people from going back to being twenty-one and being around them. Even when I was twenty-one, I was sitting in... a cafe on the roof, there was just this sense of peace, like the real moment of peace and I hadn't really experience that before. That happened in Sala and it was very strong, just that moment when everything just felt blissful and peaceful." (16:34)

**Did you have any preparation for initiation?**

"No, you don't have to. You're meant to have taken refuge before you go to initiation. Some initiation you need to have prior initiations. You can't go to an initiation. You need to have prior ones before that... I did take refuge very early on in the training... I've taken Bodhisattva vows where you say you'll come back, you keep coming back in your reincarnate to help others." (18:40)

**Have you taken any formal training in Buddhism?**

"I don't think there is anything formal that I would say a formal training but I have been to retreats and teachings, lot of Dharma talks and lot of Dharma practice, Buddhist practice... like doing meditation, initiations." (19:21)

**How do you view the Buddha?**

"I view the Buddha as a man become enlightened. He was a prince and went out to search for the meaning of life and he found the way to become enlightened." (19:44)

**Do you have a personal connection with the Buddha?**

"No, not really. I have a personal connection to the Dalai Lama, to his holiness Sakya Trizin and the masters that I have met and seen. But I don't feel like having a connection to the Buddha." (20:08)

**How do you take and apply the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path?**

"I remember one of the reasons that I actually love Buddhism is because coming across very early on just that the understanding that life is suffering or life is uncomfortable or dissatisfying, because that sits with something I experience but I really thought that it was my own experience and I found that profoundly comforting to realize that there was that experience being in the world. I never come across anywhere else. We don't have in our western culture. It's like we should be happy, we should be satisfied with materials. I don't

hugely get into the four Noble Truths... and the Eightfold Path. But I don't quite think in those terms. I am not quite sure. I am still really integrating into Tibetan Buddhism. I've been very fascinated by Tibetan Buddhism at different points. I am probably a bit less fascinated at the moment... So, I can't quite answer that question." (21:52)

**Have these teachings made an impact on your life?**

"Yes, they have profoundly at different times like I have a lot of really struggles. It is in the times when I had struggles and then I just think, I mean it's sort of understanding that things change that things are interdependent, depending on causes and conditions. It's not going to stay the same. And I think also really essentially no matter what's going on around me and how I am going to behave, what I am going to do, what is happening to me, I've still got that choice of how to respond and what to do, not saying that I always get it right. But I do come back to that more because of Buddhism... There's always your self-responsibility. So no matter what everyone else is doing. I think that's very profound for me no matter what everyone is doing I am responsible for myself and my own actions and the consequences of those." (23:08)

**This seems to have some connection with the karma. Do you experience the karma in your life?**

"I think it's a very nebulous karma. I don't know how you really know. But it's been interesting for me because I have married my husband who I met him through his mother and his mother really wanted him to live in Australia. So partly it's an arranged marriage. When he came to Australia working for community services for ten year, his single mother with kids, with two children, I was really struggling with work. I didn't want to do it anymore. I hated it. I was getting really exhausted. I got sick of it. I just didn't want to hear about all the awful things. As soon as he came to Australia, about a month later I lost my job. That was because I got restrained from my job. But I almost felt that was karmic because I needed to lose that job. I needed to for my own health and sanity and to find my own path and to find my own work. But if that wouldn't happen before he came to Australia or I wasn't married to him, I would have been in serious trouble in terms of financially doing things. So, I almost felt that's karmic like that he came right at that time and for the first time I really lose my job. It's like all the doors were shut... I feel that's a karma." (24:49)

**How do you take the teachings of non-self and emptiness?**

"I don't really think there is no self. I never really understood about no self. Emptiness I understand as interdependence, just like everything is empty of its own, doesn't exist in its own right. It all depends on other things... Emptiness, I think it is really useful. It's not anyone or anything that creates everything. It's like everything comes together before it becomes something. I like that in human relationship as well. It's not just one person is bad and everyone else is good which I think came through from my Christian background about someone can be evil or someone can be really bad and another person can be very good." (27:28)

**Have these teachings made an impact on your life?**

"Yes, it does change the way I think about my life because I don't think there is an easy way out. I think if I believe like there was a heaven, permanent heaven, I'd probably feel like okay

we're just living this one life and then I'll go somewhere else. Because I don't believe it, so it's more of a really slow, long life, many life times. I think it's changed the way I view things... It doesn't feel like there is one quick life and it's over. It doesn't feel like that, you know. And I should make use what is around me because who knows in the next life maybe I won't have, if I don't make use of the opportunities and the people and the teachings, I may not have that access the next life." (29:37)

**How do you treat the teaching of nirvana?**

"Look, it's not too much into Tibetan Buddhism. I think it is more strongly into the Theravadin Buddhism. Yes, I heard them mention nirvana but it's always more with rebirth and reincarnation. I don't know it a lot. I don't know if nirvana is the god realm because in the god realm in Tibetan Buddhism you are there for very long time and at some point you come out of god realm and come back to rebirth. I am not sure if that's nirvana or nirvana is another place." (30:11)

**Which group are you identifying yourself with?**

"I think I would say group four."

**How long have you been practicing meditation?**

"About thirteen years. At the moment, it's not very much but we used to meet every Friday and we practiced together and we went on retreats and do things. But at the moment, we haven't met this year and I haven't started at home practice. I am going this weekend to a retreat. Yes, it's not enough. I need to find a way to incorporate it." (32:12)

**What method of meditation are you using?**

"Generally, I use Tantric practice which is a Tibetan Buddhist practice... It just involves visualization. It's more like ritualistic realization of the deities, it's a union with the deities, it's mantras, it's taking refuge, and it's dedication practice at the end. It's to bring that energy of that yogini into your life to merge with the yogini energy. That experience is being given to you in a way through the initiation... It's a way to connect with your masters." (33:38)

**Are there any other Buddhist activities that you are doing?**

"Yes, we've done a lot with raising funds to send to Tibet... when the earthquake happened there. So, when we do fund raising activities, we put money into that. We've done a lot of things in the past to send money to nuns and families in Tibet, to send medical supplies... We became a bit political for a while to organise campaigns about Tibet, human rights,... We became quite political and organising campaigns and things for the public to come along and demonstrations and articles in newspapers. So, we've done a lot. We became an active, busy group... I've been involved for thirteen years." (34:54)

**Have you ever experienced a moment of transformation?**

"Yes, I've experienced moments of, when I was in Tibet, we went to Tibet together as a group, I've definitely experienced the moments when something else was going on... I don't even know the words to explain it... but just moments of some altered consciousness, something profound happening to my mind definitely, particularly in retreats and through practice. Being

in environment, being in monasteries that are centuries and centuries old, they do have an effect on your mind.” (35:55)

### **When did you become a Buddhist practitioner?**

“When I took refuge, I think about twelve years ago. I became a Buddhist practitioner at that point and then I did start a practice around that time as well.” (36:12)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

“I actually stopped being a Christian anyway before I became a Buddhist. So, I walked away from Christianity when I was fifteen or sixteen years of age. It made no sense to me I didn’t like it; I didn’t like what people are saying. So, I rejected it... What I remember is the pastor I was asking him when I was fifteen or sixteen years of age. He was talking about it’s sinful to live together without getting married and I didn’t really agree with that. I was, in our culture today, I think it’s important to know somebody before you marry them. For other reasons I lost interest... He was about rules. It’s just about simple rules rather than about really deeply how do we sit as being Christians and being with people, really care for people. I couldn’t find in the Church that deeper layer of care, passion and kindness. It was just rules. And if you didn’t do it, then you were sinful. And if you did do it then God lived in you. It’s just something in me that just got voted against this... I couldn’t find what I needed there. That was for sure. I think if I found what I was looking I would stay. But I didn’t find it.” (38:29)

### **What makes you a Buddhist?**

“I really think it’s my Buddhist group; it’s the women around and the connection we have is so strong and so enduring. Because we are Tibetan Buddhist therapists, we really look at Buddhist teachings but not the way of following rules like in a way: how do you live with this? How do you live your life? How do you be an authentic human being plus being a Buddhist? And how is that really helped you be more real connected human being? How did Buddhism do it? How do you become less destructive and more constructive always? The corner stone and power I think that’s my interest in Buddhism: how do I become constructive and less destructive? And I think it’s got the answers, you know. And then it’s just because of so many experiences over twelve or thirteen years, of just going to retreat or doing something and then feeling my own sorrow or suffering. And then there is a sense of something much bigger than me; it’s more beautiful than it is normally in my life comes into place in some ways, some feelings very profound.” (39:56)

### **How has Buddhism changed or enriched your life?**

“My life has become very Buddhist... It has almost become like a hundred percent of my life, the connection with my particular Buddhist groups and then having this access to the wonderful teachers in India like being able to go and visit them when I go to India and go and sit with them and talk to them. It’s very profound, the connection is very profound. Plus I was marrying to a Tibetan man and has become quite involved in the Tibetan community and people as well. So it has really become my life, like for a long time now. It’s not just sort of me and I do a little stuff... Being a westerner and growing up in the west, in a Christian culture and seeing how harsh people are to each other, within this culture judgemental, awful stuffs that are going on with people. I have found something much kinder within Tibetan community and Tibetan mentality, the way of thinking about things. I can find it quite frustrating because



it's not very analytical and it's not well thought through sometimes. It's not in the mind but the heart. It's just very kind. I found that with Tibetan people. I found that with my group as well. So, it changed my life for sure." (42:10)

**How satisfied are you with you following the Buddhist path?**

"I am a hundred percent satisfied with what I found and what is there. I am very lucky." (42:34)

**Are there any Buddhist teachings that you find it hard to accept?**

"I do find it hard to sit with what they mean when they talk about karma. I can find karma very hard to sit with sometimes. I don't agree with some other things like as a child being sexually abused might be their karma. The same time I know that Tibetan Buddhism that comes from a certain culture, it's a different language, how it's interpreted into English and then how it talks about. You never know exactly what is being said or something is really meant by it... There are certain things that I see westerners running and I go, 'oh, my goodness, that's dreadful, that's a dreadful thought that I'd never be able to come at. That child is abused because of the karma, their own karma. You know like an abusive karma. I don't see it as a child's karma.' So that can be quite unsettling. I sometimes hear things about anger that unsettles me, the anger is bad... So again, it's the matter of language and interpretation and that." (44:00)

**Do you have a short term plan for your spiritual practice?**

"I just have a home practice. I think it is very important. I've been neglecting that." (45:15)

**Do you have an ultimate goal to achieve?**

"It would be an enlightenment. I would like to achieve enlightenment but I doubt I don't think I can achieve it in this life time. Maybe I will but I wouldn't be so bold. I don't think I will ever forget Buddhism. So, no worries about that... I do want to look back at the end of my life and feel like I've lived a good life and I did benefits to others. And I see that as Buddhism." (46:11)

**Academic background**

"An honours degree in applied social ecology, Buddhist psychiatrist and post graduate in clinical psychotherapy. Working with young women. TAFE teaching. Yoga teacher. Psychotherapist. Web designer."

## **Interview Corrie**

**Background:** Corrie was born into a family which has a mixed religious background. Her grandparents were with Salvation Army and her parents were strict Presbyterians. Corrie was baptised in Presbyterian Church where she later attended Sunday school and learn about the stories of Jesus Christ and basic Christian teachings. She appreciated the discipline in Church and enjoined church music. For her, the Church teachings gave her a sense of what is right and wrong. Her grandfather later took up Theosophy and yoga in his seventies with a focus in meditation as a way to manage his Parkinson disease. He taught Kay to do meditation when she was seven years of age. In her early years of adulthood, she did some undergraduate studies in religions and comparative theology of religions.

“As I went into my teenage years and attending church I observed a spiritual hypocrisy between the behaviours of people from Monday to Friday or Monday to Saturday and their expressions in church on Sunday and that made me question the validity of what people practiced and their integrity around the implementation of the Christian religion in Australia. Then I went to university and I did western philosophy at that time when I was seventeen.” (03:05)

### **Her experience of religious education**

“It was really about story telling. From a child point of view it was learning history, history of Jesus Christ delivered in a way that it was a story. The more central philosophy came from the pulpit and the sermons more so I felt. I love the music, church music is stunning. I appreciate the discipline that it brought, just simply sitting in silence for an hour a week and I quite like that. That resonated with me even as a young person. So that part of it I really quite like.” (04:35)

“It gave me a sense of right and wrong as a young person. That I guess it gave me a sense of hypocrisy because I understood about not harming other people, not putting people down, not using people, not lying. The basic tendance of Ten Commandments put into practice and when I saw them not being adhered to in daily life, then I guess, I sat with hypocrisy and not respect those people.” (05:20)

### **Sense of God**

“No, I don’t say that I had a particularly spiritual sense of God like I have now, not at all, no. I didn’t really get a sense of, I thought God was a person, a traditional man in the sky with beard etc., the all-knowing, all-loving person but it so remotes from reality that I didn’t particularly find that important as a young person.” (05:58)

### **About Jesus Christ**

“He was certainly a, I think, I saw him more as a sage, a very intelligent prophet and philosopher, certainly someone who was real and lived a life and I appreciate what he had to say.” (06:24)

### **Jesus as the Saviour**

“No, as a young person that didn’t resonate in a way that... I really appreciated the triangle. In my later years, I’d studied more particularly and done a lot of meditation because to me,

yes, I can see the Father, Son and Holy Ghost but I see it resonating in mind and body and spirit and the whole range of ways that cause the whole range of religions. I can relate to it now and certainly it was not meaningful as a child.” (07:14)

### **The Bible**

“No, not particularly when I was young. It wasn’t part of our family life. Because I’ve gone to my adult life and done comparative religion, I actually read the bible and I see it as a great history of a range of peoples and thinking it’s incredibly interpretive because you have a lot of people contributing to the stories but it contains sound moral guidance for good living, I think. That’s the main thing and when you look at the main books, the Koran, the Bible etc., the core message was identical. It’s really is. If you pull it down to the Four Noble Truths, the Ten Commandments, the realisation in the Koran, they are all the same. So, it’s about men respecting men and so on and so forth. The change is the social overlay which is really about political power and social control and maintaining communities.” (08:50)

### **Heaven and hell**

“It wasn’t something as a child that frightened me. It was just an uneasiness of delivery. Certainly as an adult I understand it, the special-ness of it: above and below, doesn’t exist obviously. And I’ve moved across to the eastern philosophies from Christian philosophy. So, I am much more attuned to Jung’s philosophy of the great unconscious, collective unconscious in that the being a higher world essence but no, the idea of heaven and hell I see as almost a childlike perception that was again used as a tool for social control. I understand the nature of finding a peaceful place and is it heaven? Well, it’s a sense of deep calm and spiritual rest and knowing. But it has to be attached to a daily life whereas there is a lot of Christianity has heaven as something and you have an awful life and you work toward it as a reward. And I don’t see heaven as a reward.” (10:33)

### **Other doctrines**

“I understand some of the Catholic teachings such as contraception, if I was a Catholic, I would have troubles with those. The Protestant teachings don’t have that level of social control. So, no, there wasn’t a huge angst in my understanding of the Protestant morals or values. I thought they were good guidance to good livings.” (11:37)

### **Involvement in Church’s activities**

“As a teenager, some but not a lot, we didn’t go every week, we’d go about once a month. There was some youth group but more so that was an activity for social situation in a rural town because there was nothing else on. I did try bible study through some of them all and evangelical groups a couple of times and found them faults. They seemed to me to be so literally interpreting the bible that was farcical. I understood that the bible was a story; it was not to be taken literally.” (12:38)

“In my twenties, I did western philosophy at NSW University but I went on to read a lot of Jungian philosophy and Jung worked with a man called Molong and he translated all the eastern texts for Jung. So, through that passage I was made aware of the concept of collective unconscious, the concept of being able to work individually to reach a place of peace and calm, not having to go through a priest or another structure that it was an individual journey

and that my own behaviour was responsible for my spiritual outcomes... I guess I did a lot of thinking in my young years around philosophies and religions and so forth. In my twenties, I joined Vesak Tanunda yoga ashram group. I saw that as an adjunct to eastern philosophy, the philosophy of mind and body and spirit and that they all go together and they work harmoniously together. So, I've actually been a yoga teacher now since 1976, and a regular practitioner of yoga and meditation and so forth. As a Buddhist, I would probably call myself a contemplative that I've had a contemplative learning process rather than a structured book learning process. So, through my twenties and thirties I read most of the core, all the core scriptures: Lacies and the Buddha and all those the Zen books... and I did lot of self-studies. In mid 80s I went back to University and did comparative religions at Deacon. I did studies of African... but also Islam and Buddhism in great details, reading all the texts and coming to an understanding that I think man has innately inside him a sense of being part of a whole and wanting to make sense of the being part of a whole. So, this for all cultures, a sense of being larger than self, it explains how on earth do we survive here. It's a paradox between being a manicure part of the universe but being whole of our own universe. So, we're enormous here but in a wider scheme I think we are grains of sand. So, having structured that allows individuals to come to terms with that paradox and where they fit and what their behaviours in the fitting and how that impresses on daily living and the ego and so forth. So, I did that study through the eighties and I continue to read. I had a period in my life of three years where four days a week I would be meditating, like a retreat." (17:13)

### **First contact with Buddhism**

"I would say I 1975. The very core part of it was that it stripped away the trappings of the Church that I didn't need a priest to get God. All I need is my own mind and my own discipline and if something went wrong, it was my responsibility; it didn't blame somebody else. So, it was a reality of standing in my own shoes and being part of my own destiny. That was absolutely a core driver in the initial part because I saw the place of hierarchy, a constructor of a church allows people to divert their responsibility: 'Ah, it's not my fault; the priest told me to do it or the church told me to do it or somebody else wrote that doctrine; I am just pedalling along and I am following what I am told.' And I saw that as being intellectually lazy and dishonest. That absolutely was my first core driver." (19:50)

"[I was] moving away from hypocrisy of behaviour that I was observing in the Church. So, the Protestant from Australia had an enormous influence in Melbourne. If you weren't in the right church and with the right people, you didn't get a job. And I was aware that the church could influence in a negative way and ruin people's lives. So, I was very alert to the fact that power was being used inappropriately. And because that structure has been stripped off, power was changed in Buddhism. The power was set here with individuals. To remove that power which was used for good and for bad was very important to me at that stage." (21:06)

### **Training in Buddhism**

"I've done retreats but I haven't done formal, structured learning of the prayers etc. in a structure like that. I am now coming to that group where that structure is being used. It doesn't concern me at all. It's nice to have a practice and to share that with people but I am always being happy with my own practice at home." (22:02)

### **Buddha**

“A man of great wisdom, a human being, someone who lived an honest life and actually lived so understood what it was like to feed children and pay bills and be hungry and to have a courage to retreat, have the courage to sit in silence and not know what he was wanting, to wait for an answer to come to him who had the courage of this conviction to let go a whole structure of life so forth and explore his inner thought and guidance.” (23:05)

### **Personal relationship with Buddha**

“I probably say I would, yes. I would certainly say I see his daily living at all stages of his life something that I can relate to. Yes, I would say I would feel that I have a personal relationship with the Buddha.” (23:40)

### **Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path**

“To me, they are central. They are like commandments or they are very good guiding posts. I can remember when I first read them and I must have been fourteen or fifteen, they just resonated as right, simple, right, reflective of life, honest. They made sense.” (24:19)

“It’s about what comes out of your mouth has to be aligned with what your real thoughts are and the actions you make but also your intentions. So, it’s about integrity and your inner truths, being true to yourself but being true to mankind. And the things that make life right like not being greedy and having what you require but not massive amount. So, I just saw it as really simple guidance to good life.” (25:23)

### **Karma**

“It is interesting if and for a long time now I have understood that if we look at physics you can’t destroy electricity. Our soul to my mind is a combination of our body electricity which is our thoughts and our hearts and the circulation and so forth. So, when we die, physicality dies but the soul which is that electric part of ourselves remains. And to me that’s part of collective unconscious. I understand that that’s not stationary...It’s part of the unstatistic whole just as the earth is part of the universal energetic complete picture. So, I don’t have any issue with that soul being reincarnated into another suit of cloth. I understand that living as best as we can, the pathway leaves that soul in a very clear place and it’s not taking poor thinking and poor behaviours and poor responsibility through. So, the memory of that soul if it works hard to live a good life in the right way goes through it a good life and comes back as good life.” (27:34)

“I don’t agree with the Hindu karma which is if you are an untouchable you have to be an untouchable. To me, in Buddhism and what is exactly what I would have made these changes because we are responsible for ourselves, we have that opportunity to shift our physical life to something else. We can absolutely change our destiny and we can change the clarity of our souls with just our hard work.” (28:16)

### **Reincarnation**

“I’ve always theoretically understood that because the soul maintains and is part of the universe then it can be re-absorbed into a new body. That’s fine. In my period of retreats, I’ve had three profound three experiences where I have understood that I have lived life previously as two monks. So, I guess in that period of meditation where I was in meditation

for many hours a day sitting at a very still point going to a place of deep emptiness which allowed the mind to access what I call old soul. So, I feel that as if I had very deep experience of previous lives.” (29:43)

“Some of the mystics in some of the Christian religion understand that but it’s not part of the mainstream Christian religion at all.” (30:02)

### **Non-self and Emptiness**

“They are all wonderful part of life... It is that paradox of being part of this world but part of the universe, so being larger one’s sphere and time and atmosphere. If you understand that paradox, you can’t have ego... It’s about you can’t be part of this world genuinely, part of this planet and adding to it and being responsible for your point of contact, if you have ego attached. And the ego is about greed and acquiring things and those sorts of them wanting to have an influence to reflect on yourself rather than have an influence that reflects on the community.” (31:22)

“In my work with people I can’t work with another human being and have an intension of the outcome for myself I can only have an intension of outcome for the other person. So, I guess there’s being a foundation cornerstone for my work for pretty much the whole of my life. And similarly I have no attachment to that person’s outcome; I can’t have an attachment to outcomes. If I am seeing twenty or twenty-five people a week, I can’t absolve their soul stories on my shoulder. It’s not mine. My responsibility is to hold a safe place for them, to inform them and guide them but it is entirely of their choice to step on. But to get to that place of holding the same place and informing and guiding, I have to have that commitment of non-attachment.” (32:55)

### **Nirvana**

“I don’t see nirvana as heaven as some people do. Nirvana is that peaceful, empty place. It’s not about reward at all, no none of about reward. To me Buddhism is not about doing good things now and you’ll get a reward over here. If you do good things now, the rewards happen now. If you are disciplined and you meditate and you get to that quiet place and you are prepared to surrender and to be empty and to let go off attachment and greed and so on, the reward is here, not in twenty years of time when we die. And the reward is not heaven; it’s setting a place of pure love here and now.” (34:25)

### **Buddhist practice**

“I am certainly a selective part of the Buddhist group here. I have been teaching yoga meditation for thirty years [since I was twenty-six]; I run meditation classes.” (36:44)

“I do meditation for about forty minutes in the morning; when I wake up I do some yoga stretches and the sit which with have some ritual structure around it but also some quiet. At night time, at the end of my working day, I might just have twenty minutes or half an hour. At least twice a week I run a class. That would be a disciplined hour.” (37:16)

“In my courses, I teach a range of methods because not everybody relates to the same thing. So, some of us mantras, some of us gazing, some of us breath awareness etc. I personally like the connection with the human body and the ability to get in touch with the body, relax the

body, make the vibration slow down so the body in tune with the world around us. So initially it's always a breath-awareness, quietening. It may be a guided meditation as visualisation; it may be bringing one of the Noble Truths to mind and we actually contemplate on a particular structure and we might discuss it afterwards as to people's ideas around that." (38:27)

"The purpose of practicing meditation is to keep you grounded, keep me grounded. Instead of life dragging you along, you actually dragging life along; and it gives you that point of breathing between thinking and saying or doing. So, it puts another dimension in your daily living which I think is central. Otherwise life is unconscious and automatic. I really am committed to conscious living. And Buddhism to me is conscious living." (39:27)

"I've had three profound experiences that allow me to shift the focus of my life in time. The first one was giving Nitra which is the relaxation at the end of a yoga class. It's a structure where you simply mention the parts of the body. The participants on the floor go round their bodies and relax and have a little sleep. I was sitting as the teacher and as I mentioned a foot, then suddenly I realized that there was a foot sitting in front of me, and a leg, and a knee, and a body, and an arm, and a shoulder. So, there was a human being sitting in front of me, cross-legged, mirroring my body, quietly gazing at me and in white robes a man and just sitting in silence but giving me a sense of doing the right things, of approval, of inclusion, of wisdom, of knowledge. And communicating with that essence was a thought process there... And I guess that there was the beginning of long retreat time and very affirming of the pathway I'd chosen. So that was great." (42:25)

"The second one was when meditating on my own. I have a farm and when I was taking into the experience of being a monk in the process of dying. Son in a small cell on a bed with other monks standing around him and I had duality of being able to see the picture but also be in the body of the person at the same time. So it was a sense of experiencing, physically experiencing what it was to have your body stop working and to leave that body in a sense to a high realm and to be in that body and watch the grief of the people standing in the room with you and being unable to offset the grief but to know a complete surrender of letting go of human form. And that I guess confirmed to me that reincarnation is your essence... It allowed me that experience so that death is something that would never concern me; it's not frightening; it's just one of the life's experiences. I think I was gifted that experience for that level of knowledge that it was a willingness to surrender and become part of the whole, and a willingness to understand that it's a part of the journey. It was a very transforming experience." (44:32)

### **When did you become a Buddhist?**

"That's an interesting question. I've been teaching for as long as I've been practicing. I found myself in 1984 I think it was, it was one of the census, recording, it was when I wrote the word Buddhist on the census. But u suddenly realized that I genuinely identified myself as a Buddhist. It's interesting because I have been teaching and living that way for a long time but I also live in a western world and I do a job and I have a family. So, people always understood that I was a yoga person. I taught meditation. That was just who K was. But that was an official identification when I put it on a piece of paper." (46:04)

"I did yoga training at a Tanunda group which I appreciated as Hindu. Well, it's a yoga group. I don't have a formal recognition from a structured group to give me permission to teach. I've always seen it as one of my responsibilities." (46:40)

### **What makes you a Buddhist?**

"I live it. That's what makes me a Buddhist. I live that practice and thought. I evidence what I believe." (47:00)

### **Impacts of Buddhist teachings on your life**

"In my early life, it allowed me to move beyond a period of great trauma. I had a quite abusive upbringing and I was able to step beyond that and leave it behind. I've had some health issues and that quietness, that calmness and that inner healing, the meditation the health benefit of that, not going to a panic place etc. have allowed me to prepare myself from some quite serious health issues... So intellectually and emotionally it helped enormously." (48:32)

### **Have you got any difficulties with following the Buddhist Path?**

"It certainly was a contributing factor to the cessation of my first marriage because my partner at the time paid lips of it to my philosophy and at the end of the day the convergent of thought meant that we no longer suited. So, and that was okay; it was not a sadness; it was an understanding. My choices like all choices in life have had some consequences and I've accepted all those consequences with an honest to knowing. So, there's obviously a process of grief and letting go but it's a conscious choice to step on this pathway. Yes, so I can only say it has brought me some wonderful things." (49:47)

### **Are you satisfied with what you have been practicing?**

"Enormously happy, absolutely."

### **Do you have any particular goal to achieve?**

"Living in a country it's nice to become connected a group here because it gives me a shared experience. I live in a small country town where there aren't many Buddhists but it's nice to actually find people with the like mind... There is a lovely saying in many of the texts that on a spiritual path you're always at the beginning. So, to me it's not about having a goal. Every day you sit down something new arises or something old you forget about slaps on your face again." (51:21)



## Interview Mary

### Mary's religious background

Mary comes from a traditional Catholic family. She was baptised and received different Sacraments from the Church. In her years of teenage she participated in Church service as well as religious education at school regularly. For thirteen years, she studied religions and joined in a discussion group on this subject.

"I stopped going to Church when my grandmother died... So, there was a moment in my life when there was this cut with the Church. There was a cut with the Church as an institution. There wasn't a cut with the spirituality. This is it. We received religious teaching and probably the cut I had there because I could see some contradiction. Now I am older and a little bit wiser, I see that contradiction does not come from the religion itself but comes from individuals, the believers... I think each and every religion has a fundamental religious message behind it, especially Christianity they have a message of compassion. If then this is applied, it is a different matter. But it comes again into human beings and how they interpret this. So, the Catholic Church in general, in my opinion, has a lot of messages somewhere. (04:00)

"I believe the Catholic Church, for instance, started from a spiritual message and then it becomes almost power. I am talking about the Catholic Church because this is my experience... In Catholic Church, there is this power thing, there is this distortion of the main message. And distortion comes from the degree of human individuals' power... They spit the word 'spirituality'. Okay, everything that is about spirituality is about the Church... It's where we've lost the word 'spirituality'. It was at that point that 'bang' happened." (05:41)

"Spirituality is the ability to breath, the ability to have that moment where you try to give space to the other person to express itself, where you try to look at things in different ways. We've lost that spirituality, that ability. And the Church has begun an institution: wars, dogmas and you have to do this otherwise you'll go to hell, and this and that, especially the Catholic Church, if you think. I don't want to criticise it. It was my heritage when I entered the Church. I had an immense respect for that building means for some people. And I had an immense respect for something that is bigger than me. I don't want to call it God because I don't want to go to that story." (07:39)

"I read the Bible when I was little, the Bible for children. I've tried to read the Bible as an adult. Never succeeded, too complicated. Maybe if I have time in another life, I may read it too... In my opinion, the Bible is an interpretation because I always have a problem with one of the first sentences of the Genesis where it says: 'And God made man and he gave power to the man to be more than the nature, to dominate... For many years, I was so angry about this statement. I said: 'this is really so arrogant. And then I said: 'Hang on for a moment, still this is an interpretation of men.' It's an interpretation. Who is writing it, this word, has created an amazing implication. Maybe this Jesus Christ was an amazing person like the Buddha, in my opinion. His message was 'respect the nature, make sure I give you this gift, treat it with respect, with the sustainability and in everything. Maybe it's just an interpretation who's written the first sentence. So, I said: 'Let's not get stuck in that. Let's explore what might have been.'" (09:35) "This is where the Buddhism comes into the picture because you know one of the things of Buddha is 'just don't believe what I say, experience it for yourself.' So, this is a

process that we pass the meditation of the person in enquiry, of the mind that is enquiring. It's very much in tune with my scientific background." (10:56)

"I don't think the Bible is a message from God. It's interpretation of men of the words of Jesus Christ. Of course, it's important that his word is given to others like there are sacred texts in Buddhism, Hinduism, and everything. So, we all have sacred texts. Of course, it's important the message is carried on. If this is the word of God, I am not sure, I am confused, even know if God exists. That's my problem." (12:30)

### **Responding to the teaching of God as Creator**

"When I was twenty my uncle who is a priest asked, 'what is God for you?'... Look, I said 'God is everything. God is in me, in you, in nature, in the birds, in the sun, and in everything.'" (13:18) "We are God, the immense energy of compassion that we don't even know. We are, this is God and we are all connected to this. So, when we look at things through the eyes of God... well the potential to exchange with people is amazing. When we experience that, we can experience through prayer, through charity, through whatever you do but experience it with that background. It's nothingness. Experience that nothingness, because when you come from that nothingness, that's what God is nothingness. If we say God is permanent, it's nothingness. And it's beautiful when you come from that point... By saying that God is nothingness, by experiencing this, I actually don't feel to be an atheist but I feel this amazing respect for God... And as I said, 'whenever I enter a church or whatever spiritual building that means something, I have an amazing respect for that. I just don't want someone to impose me and say, 'this is it'. I want to experience it.'" (16:16)

### **Responding to the teaching of Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world**

"Of course, Jesus is the Son of God. We all are. We all are sons of the universe... I think Jesus was another Buddha and that's it. For me, Jesus was like a Buddha, was a person who had enquired about the inner sight of our being and then shared the message. I am not so sure that all the stories that we've had are completely correct. I don't know." (17:26)

On the understanding of Jesus' divine nature, she said, "we all have it, like the Dalai Lama... We all have that divine in us. The moment we are born, we have that divine in us. So, speaking from the scientific point of view...you know about the miracles that the Bible tells about God and everything, I said, I don't exclude that he has done something like the healing property, we have, when people go to Lourdes and bang, they are cured. I am a scientist and I studied a bit about the brain I think there is actually an amazing reaction and molecules that faith can ignite in your system. We actually can create an amazing healing at the physical level. So why not a person who has cultivated a trained, as in energy as a spiritual divine being, through different practices, why they cannot be a healer?" (19:47)

"Meditation is not to experience something but it can open up the physical ability that we have, because we are energy that the brain, the amazing machine, and if we ignite that amazing machine, thing amazing can happen. This is not because someone up giving something. I don't believe that. I believe that ... the world, the universe, the energy is part of who we are." (21:08)

### **Responding to the teaching of eternal life and salvation**

“If you look at it, there is not much difference between this message and the message of reincarnation. It’s still eternal, isn’t it? One tells us that we go to a particular place like heaven or hell if you are bad... The moment we die, we transform into something else. If this is something else, it’s going to be reborn or stay forever in another dimension. I am not very sure. I believe, let’s say, I believe in reincarnation. I am analysing again, I say, why certain people have certain paths. And no matter what they do, there is certain thing that doesn’t work for them. Again, the concept of Karma for me works very well and then reincarnation.” (24:33)

“Heaven and hell, I think it again, it is a bit of punishment thing built up by the Catholic Church in Christianity. We pray and we worship a man on the cross that reminds us of the suffering. In Buddhism, you meditate in front of a man that is smiling. It’s a very different message. So again, heaven and hell is something about control and power, in my opinion. If you don’t do this, you will be punished.” (27:47)

### **About the experience of Christian community**

“This is so typical that there is a contradiction between what is taught and what is practiced... They are judgemental. You are in or out; you are a Christian or you are an atheist. And we have the right story. This is what I don’t accept.” (31:49)

### **The first contact with Buddhism**

Mary had her first contact with Buddhism in the year 2000 through a friend who became a Buddhist convert. Her friend introduced Mary to a Buddhist ritual praying session that she could spiritually connected with her deceased grandmother through the mantra. However, the turning point for her to embrace Buddhism took place in Sri Lanka where she encountered a native Buddhist friend and also her assistant. Through her encounters with this Buddhist friend, she found out the beauty of Buddhism: “It is this enquiring, analysing process where you look and when he said ‘look at your relationship with your anger, not the anger itself, look at your relationship, look at the event, look at the emotion. That analysing and enquiring fit perfectly with my scientific background. I said, ‘I like this.’ And at that time, I knew nothing about Buddhism. I love this attitude. And then I love the fact that ‘you take responsibility for your actions’... that is the core thing.” (40:27)

### **Training in Buddhism**

Mary has had some informal training in Buddhism by reading Buddhist literatures, practicing Buddhist meditation, attending Dharma classes and joining a Buddhist discussion group. She expresses a desire of studying the Dharma more deeply.

### **The Buddha**

“The Buddha for me is someone has reached that connection, that enlightenment, that’s how they call it and has the ability to be the nothingness, to be God. The Buddha represents who we all could be. And by being that we will generate so much love, so much happiness around us. So, this is my image of the Buddha which represents what I can achieve, each one of us can achieve.” (43:52) “The first time I went, he was teaching, and I immediately felt this amazing connection with this man and I said, ‘Oh my God, could this man become my teacher one day?’.” (48:13) “My connection with the Buddha is deeply respect.” (48:55)

## **The teachings of Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path**

"I try to apply some of the teachings in my everyday life. I am not saying that I am succeeding all the times. I am just constantly reminding to myself that that is the path that I want to follow. It's so strong in me. There is nothing else that I want to follow. This is the path for my life now." (49:38)

### **The teaching of Karma**

"I don't understand completely the Karma topic and we are studying this... I do take responsibility for my actions and I know that I am trying every day to build good Karma. Sometimes I walk on a street and I say thank you to the previous person because I have an amazing, wonderful life. Not that I don't have problems like everybody but my path was quite smooth and I said to myself if Karma is really there the person before me has done so much. And so I have to return this for the next one, for the next life. So, like for me, for instance, just recently I took the decision of not studying more. I had an opportunity to do a Master, studying the effect the brain... I dropped it. And you know why? Because I said, 'I don't need another piece of paper but I can do a lot with my intellect by doing volunteer work, by giving my time to the community. I will do this and one day I will enter a monastery, maybe... But what I am saying is I have let go off the ego, satisfaction. I ask myself, 'Is it ego, this new Master? Or is it where it takes you?' So, I enquire all the times my actions. In everyday I do now in more depth because of the Karma." (52:25)

### **The teaching of non-self, emptiness**

"That's perfect. If I say to you, 'God is nothing,' the teaching of emptiness is so true. It's so true because it is actually what we attach, the identity that we attach, that makes something exists. When you explain this to people, sometimes they call you crazy. Of course, this is real, it's a couch I can see it. Yet in the context that we are now, it is a couch. In ten years' time, it will be in a rubbish bin, will be totally different... You look at reality in a different way. So, when there is something that hits you, upsets you, that concept of emptiness, even pain, it will go... Happiness, it comes and goes... When you attach to something, you lose the fact that that something is temporary. Whatever it is, it's temporary. And that emptiness of inconsistency is the best teaching you can get because then you really enjoy so much your mind. So when you are happy, enjoy it and don't think what you are going to cook for dinner. When you are angry, realise it and realise that you don't need to perpetrate that. It will go. That moment that you are so offended by someone who said something, if you look at the emptiness of that word, it will go even within two seconds. And those two seconds will change all the dynamics, will change your life sometimes. Then people say that you don't enjoy anything. No, you enjoy more because when you enjoy, you actually enjoy it... When you are making love, you are making love better. You live it better. You live that moment better. And you manage those moments that are difficult." (56:04)

### **The teaching of Nirvana**

"I am not quite sure about Nirvana... I am not quite sure Nirvana is the same with enlightenment. I think Nirvana is probably when you are connected with everything. You become one with everything. And it's like enlightenment because then you experience this moment of 'wow'." (57:08)

Mary has been an active member of a Mahayana Buddhist group: “I live as a Buddhist every day.” (01:02:40) She has been practicing meditation for 9 years. Every day she meditates about half an hour by sitting and concentrating. The purpose of doing meditation for her is to become more mindful in everyday life: “There is no mindfulness without meditation. And there is no practice of the Dharma without meditation. It’s necessary.” (01:01:44) Through practicing meditation she experienced a moment of transformation: “I feel gratitude. It never left me. Since that day that feeling of gratitude never left me. This person that in the last five or six or seven years has created so much damages to my family has brought me with this exercise.” (01:10:24) Besides attending the Dharma talks and practicing meditation, she also gives lectures to students on pathology, on meditation and mindfulness.

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

“I am not sure about the existence of God as they portrait it. I believe in God. I don’t believe in the explanation. I think I am a Christian as well. Because being a Christian is being compassionate and I think I am trying to be compassionate. So there is nothing that stops from being a Christian. What I want to be compassionate. But what is to be a Christian?... If being a Christian is to believe in God, that stops me from being a Christian. If being a Christian means to actually apply in your life the teachings of Jesus, I don’t want to stop that. Because that is beautiful, that is very similar to what the Lord Buddha said.” (01:14:21)

### **What makes you a Buddhist?**

“What makes me a Buddhist is the wish that I could really make the life of others better, the wish in my profound heart that I can make at least the life of some one better.” (01:15:07)

### **How Buddhism and its teachings change your life?**

“Of course, I become more mindful of what I say, what I do. And this has changed, for instance, the relationship with my husband. It is incredible. I meditate and in its karma, he becomes more compassionate with everybody; he’s more gentle. But he has never sit at meditation cushion. But me being different, me being probably emanating a different energy with my actions, with my words, my attitude have changed him again, have changed my work.” (01:16:03)

### **Are you happy with what you are practicing?**

“Yes, but I want to learn more... I want to follow this teaching continuously. I think one day I will take refuges because, as I said, my practicing is following the Dharma... I want to do some longer retreats as well. So, I want to study more Buddhism. Maybe one day I enter a monastery, I don’t know. It’s not the right moment now. However, this thought has entered my mind.” (01:18:12)

### **What is the ultimate goal for your religious practice?**

“The ultimate goal is to make every human being free of suffering. That’s the ultimate goal because you actually are happy when you do it. You are happy. You experience happiness that is completely different.” (01:18:44)

## **Interview Muni**

### **Muni's religious background**

Muni was born to Catholic parents who later got divorced and were excommunicated from a Catholic community. She was baptised in the Catholic Church. Muni went to Catholic schools where she received religious instructions that prepared her for other Sacraments.

Muni has completed a Bachelor degree of Arts in English and anthropology. She has been running her own business Engaging Communication which is a communication agency for five years. The goal of this business is to generate fund to buy a Buddhist centre for her Buddhist teacher.

### **Muni's view of God**

"God was very much the other person or entity that was untouchable and the inhabitants of this planet were very much the second class-citizens who have no real hope of redemption. You're given this lifetime and there is so much emphasis on doing the wrong things. It's bad to do the wrong things and then you have to apologize for that and then you have to do penance for it and then you probably do it again. It's so much emphasis on the negativity. It seems like a good way to control people. You keep telling people that they are bad and they need help and they can be dependent on you. And I guess a lot of priests whose behaviours are not something necessarily lived up to but we are told that it is. But it didn't seem that way. I think human beings always want to be happy and they don't want to be told that they are doing the wrong things all the times." (05:03)

"I remember after the birth of my second child I got the point where I really felt within that spiritual framework that I was raised up with, I had so many question and so many things that I wanted to work on but I had no tools to take me further. And I had this mad, crazy two weeks when every day these things happened to me. The next day I saw an interview of a great friend of mine who is a Buddhist. He had exactly the same questions that I had. And then the next day went down to the local shopping center and there were some Tibetan monks set up a sand mandala over a course of a week. I was drawn to it and I went down every day and I just sort of stand there. I didn't really know other than a little bit that I studied at school what Buddhism was. But I was drawn to it. And then I met these people a couple days later and he was about to start teaching and the teaching was on Sundays. I get the message and I can hear it. I go along and I met him and I had a strong connection. That is the ability to communicate without words. I felt it was a strong transmission that I never felt from any one. While he was teaching he had this spiritual connection. And one of the first thing he told me was the idea of questioning that you need to question in order to understand things and move them from intellectual understanding into your being." (07:12) "... I think what I lacked was nothing that I experienced from my Catholic upbringing. There is no power for the individuals to, you know that idea of the Buddha nature that we are borne with, all beings are borne with. Even that idea itself is very liberating. I think for me there is a disconnection between how people behaviour and what they say and how they look and their intention and motivation of being here." (08:24)

### **Did you have a personal relationship with God?**

“No, I looked but I didn’t connect with it. The Catholic priest that I was talking about, I think he was from a Passionist Order, but he was very much focused on more of the core of Christianity really that God is love and he is everywhere and he is in everyone. He was even persecuted within his own Catholic Church quite heavily because he didn’t believe in the protocol. He did what he needed to do for the rest of us... That was the only thing I get connected with.” (09:47)

### **Do you believe God as Creator?**

“None of that ever makes sense to me. You know, the science is on one hand and the idea of God in the Bible is on the other hand and so many interpretations of that. Now I read more for my own on quantum physics and things as well. I feel pretty good now of my understanding.” (10:20)

### **How about the belief that Jesus is the Son of God and the Saviour of the world?**

“I liked the idea, the stories and some interpretations of the stories. Then when I got older and read and looked at more historical perspectives and the sorts of things that, I think, more the person of Jesus he represented really me now is very much Buddhist principles. I view him as a Buddha, an enlightened being. What he was saying is the same sort of messages that the Buddha was teaching. The idea of God, I think, so much get lost in the interpretations but for me it’s the same sort of interpretation really as Buddhism. And I think with a lot of different spiritualities and studies... I see a lot of similarities heading in the same direction and the same ultimate goal with different ways of getting it.” (11:42)

### **Did you or do you read the Bible?**

“I read bits of it. The people that I read with at school their interpretations of it were quite literal and I didn’t seem like it. This is just reading in general. With studies of literatures, this is something written on the page but there are a lot sub-texts going on. And for me the Bible is exactly the same but no one seems to have that same view. When I was reading it, I was not particularly interested in it.” (12:25)

“I am not really good with authorities in the sense that the idea of questioning is that if you are standing there and tell me what to think, it’s not going to work... Yes, involved me in the process and make me think about it and then I will be committed to it, if that I agree with. But the idea that someone stands and tells you what to think, it doesn’t go well with me.” (13:05)

### **Response to the teaching of heaven and hell**

“It’s probably also similar with the idea of only one life time. It didn’t seem to make sense to me. You are either rewarded at the end of it or from a personal perspective I don’t think there is a hell. Hell is this life if you make it and the same as the heaven. Really, it’s while we are here in Samsara we make it heaven or hell depending on our motivations and actions.” (13:54)

### **Response to the belief on eternal life and salvation**

“No, I think it would be the idea of being in the moment really. This is all what we have. This is the moment, not waiting for something. This is something you need to do or someone you

need to be or you want to improve yourself healthy and become enlightened. You have to be at the moment to the best of your ability. Why waste time?" (15:45)

### **Involvement in Church**

"I was on a parish council when I was sixteen or seventeen. I did a lot of activities but there were sort of older people organizing them. The parish priest that we had is still being persecuted by his Church. That wrapped off some of us as well. Whenever we went the diocese needing those of things, they never listened to us. But he still gets five thousand people at Christmas mass and people around the world come to see him. So, he had the right idea." (16:41)

### **Mary's experience of her Catholic community**

"It was nice. My mom founded. She was excommunicated from her local church when her and my dad got divorced. That would have been in 1979. And a year later she heard of this place that started in Terry Hills for all the rejects. Everyone who was not welcome at any church was welcome there. The priest started with the Mass with 'who is near you, welcome'. He joked about the Catholics and the Protestants. He just made the people feel welcome. And that was really nice for everyone that was there they can see that. And he started this movement called the family groups movement. That was really an extended family for people in similar situation to you... the purpose of that really is that in this society we cut ourselves off and we are in isolation to everyone else surround us. And that was, I think, an attempt really to say that you are not and that we are together. Everyone goes through the same things as you... I think really a lot of memories say that all these people were welcome at one place that I did go to. So, it was a good feeling than anything else. But probably there was an inherent mistrust of the Catholic organization." (19:17)

### **When did you have your first contact with Buddhism?**

"It was rather than learning about that at school, it would have been seeing those monks doing the sand mandala and that was 2006 or 2007. And then I met my teacher two weeks after that." (20:16)

### **What made you to turn to Buddhism?**

"This is something I struggle with it as well and because I am still playing a catch up with the understanding a lot of protocol and theories and intellectual understanding. I just had this felt-like the universe was moving, physically moved me up and moved me toward these things. Then I meet NN and that feeling was strong inside. Whatever it is, he is going to tell me and I am going to listen. For me, who questions everything, that's really unlike me. But I think I've got to the stage where I knew I needed more to become a better person and I was very open. I realised how difficult it is for people to find teachers that they have connection with. I had no idea. It was just a feeling inside that I had and everything, every word he said to me just made so much sense." (21:42)

### **Have you had any formal training in Buddhism?**

"Yes, I have some practices at psychiatric school and I had transition in Bodhisattva... She has been attending Buddhist weekly classes for five years." (24:50)



### **How do you view the Buddha?**

"The connection I have is inside but inside everyone. So, inside everyone is Buddha. Yes, there were the teachings and they are the path. But again, the idea that there are different types of teachings is that because of different types of people which is really inclusive. For me it's very much a feeling of not up there, not looking down and teaching people. I am inside of you if you have that commitment and open yourself up. Everyone has that potential." (26:00)

"In terms of historical Buddha, I probably view him the same as Jesus Christ, an enlightened being and has the ability to give this teaching from such pure place but leave behind that legacy and energy for everyone to connect with. So, the stories seem to be familiar to me between the two of them." (26:40)

### **Response to the teaching of Noble Truth and Noble Path**

"I probably struggle with those more than anything. It is difficult to understand, maybe cultural differences in understanding the terms such as suffering as well as nirvana. And for me it's hard to get straight answers out of Tibetan monks... It took me a long time and I questioned a lot because it felt to me like very definite 'it is what it is'... I think they are kind of rule-like and structural ideas. I struggle with those most." (28:21)

### **Do you believe in the teaching of karma?**

"I do very much so. It feels like I can feel karma. I think my interpretation is a bit different. One a practical level, I find a lot of people particularly within Buddhist circles talking negative karma and bad karma. For me, for instance, a friend who started a business and it wasn't going very well and said, 'I have a lot of bad karma and I accumulated over a long time and I never clear it up in this life time.' And I said again, 'what a point of karma if you cannot change it?' It makes you powerless and gives you an excuse. Take responsibility; generate those right intentions; smash all negative karma you think you've got. I believe that it's this energy force that leads us all to ultimate happiness. It's not holding anyone back. It's there for you to share all the negativity you have inside you to lead you to this guilt path. I think bad karma is a perception of reality. And I refuse to believe that there is this negative force out there that holds everything back. It doesn't make sense. And these are people who have been studying Buddhism for a lot longer than me and they struggle with me sitting there and saying that you can change it." (32:38)

### **Response to the teaching of reincarnation**

"That is one of the easiest things to answer because it doesn't make sense to me that we only have this life time. Probably I've chosen to understand it more from my quantum physics which is that we are really just an extension of energy from universe. So, we are part of universal energy and we inherit these bodies in this life time to help. We have the ability to help all things around us and to improve and to help all beings to reach the stage of happiness. But that energy just can't die or disappear but it goes somewhere." (37:30)

"I actually have memories from the last life. I met my master and again I had the strongest connection I've never had. But I have this memory of him in China and I didn't really understand it but I was drawn to him and he couldn't speak English and I can't speak Mandarin. So, I spent a lot of time just being around him. I went to all his classes and just sat

there and just felt that I really know this person. And I did this intensive training with him for three months, just leave my acupoint open and energy just comes rushing through and at the end of three months he closes off acupoint and you've got more energy to heal yourself and people. I went through the closing and then became depressed. I never felt anything like this; I didn't want to get out of bed; I didn't want to move. I had a friend she had done the course with me. So, we were going through why and where was the feeling coming from. And then I was having this friend and I knew him and his current life was my last life. I died when he was eighteen in this life and his current life is my previous life. I have some memories like I can see him but I can't see me." (39:33)

### **Teaching of non-self and emptiness**

"Again, our reality is a perception. I think those teachings are a way of destroying that ego, that illusion and perception that we have built and even so in this society everything is focused on this idea of self that you exist and you are this person and that everything is meant for you in this life time. When you look at and meditation on the idea of emptiness, it's just only a way of reconnecting with that subconscious that energy is part of the energy that we are." (42:30) "... We are all the same part of energy in this purpose, greater purpose which is beyond us. The idea of emptiness is coming to that realisation and it can be kind of sad, I think, of having to let go. But when you let go of that your ability to other people is immeasurable... When there is that understanding that this humbleness that I don't need anything, I am not really even a person, I am just part this universal whole, well then why I am here? Because I think I can help people come to that realisation and that the only thing I want. So, when that's the only thing you want then you start to learn that the reaction in this body and the way we interact with each other is not really there. It's all rasping. You don't get hung up on it either." (44:41)

### **Do you believe in the teaching of nirvana?**

"I think, I probably got it wrong but for me at the moment nirvana is a stage of happiness wherever it is in this life or somewhere else. Nirvana is that ultimate stage. I don't see that as heaven realm as such. I think dying is where most people have opportunities to reach enlightenment, the process of dying. My understanding is that we have this clear, white light and through meditation, going through that process of dying, preparing yourself to receive that light. But if you don't do that practice, it can be scary to experience things that happen to you through death. I think that's where it helps some people to attain enlightenment in this life time. But for most of us the best chance is through death process." (46:06)

### **Have you ever experienced a moment of conversion or transformation?**

"I know I have moments of pure love for other people that I know. In every day, I am getting much better, much skilful at showing that love to a lot of more people. And I keep doing that." (47:01)

### **Christian faith and Buddhist path?**

"It's definitely Buddhism, the teachings and the tools. I hate to come to that realisation that I need to progress with many tools to get me there. And then I found Buddhism and now I found the challenge that I have. I know I have the tools to use to get there. But I think

essentially it's the same thing just depending on interpretations. But for me the Buddhist path is definitely much more effective." (49:24)

### **Buddhist practices**

After 6 months of training through attending classes and practicing meditation, Mary took refuge in Buddhism in 2007. She is a member of the Tibetan Sakya school which emphasizes on the possibility of becoming enlightened in this life time through the practice of non-abandonment, embracing everything and pushing the mind beyond conceptual structure. She has made a commitment to practice meditation daily for duration of half an hour to one hour. She uses Chi Wong meditation to generate energy for personal healing and Buddhist meditation to help others since she believes that the power of the mind, the subconscious energy, can heal other people. At the moment, Mary attends to Buddhist classes every week.

### **Do you still consider yourself Catholic or Christian?**

"Outwardly no, because I think people have this idea of what they think what is and is not. But I honestly think Christianity and Buddhism have the same essence, the same thing but in practice I am definitely a Buddhist. It feels like it's the same thing but how to get there I can't find anything in Christianity for me. But clearly understand that, I think, because we are all different and we connect different ways that there is the right path for other people to get there to the same place where I am going. It's just a different way for me." (55:54)

### **What stopped you from being a Catholic?**

"There is a difference for me in Catholicism and Christianity. Catholicism is all about the Church, the establishment, the authority and exclusion and power. I find that every time. (57:28) For me there wasn't a Catholic teaching but really the idea of Christianity that I connected with. And what my Catholic priest talked about is really scaled right back the idea that Christ had the same experiences that the Buddha had and came to the same conclusion and gave himself in the same way. This is the idea of love; that's the only thing that is important. So that makes sense but wrapped up in the Catholic thing. No, No." (58:04)

### **What makes you a Buddhist?**

"I feel like I am one of the worst Buddhists you have ever met. I don't look like one... I think that absolute commitment to enlightenment for Noble Truths." (58:57)

### **Do you believe in all the Buddhist teachings?**

"No. Again when other people explain them to me and it seems similar that you can rationalise anything, one teaching or the other. The idea of some Buddhists shouldn't eat meat and some it's fine to eat meat. In fact, you can use it as a practice to purify the karma of the animals that you are eating. So, it's the same tradition, different ways to come at it. So, everything is open to interpretations. And with everything I get taught I bring it back to the idea of intention. Everything whether something is good or bad or right or wrong is in the intention. You might even do something which looked like terrible but it came honestly from the place of love then it has to be the right thing. That's how karma, I think, works... So, I struggle some times and I find some teachings that are convenient for some people at different times for them." (1:00:29)

**How has Buddhism enriched or challenged your life?**

“It has completely changed my life, given my life absolute meanings. And that is happiness. I am happier. I don’t get angry as much anymore. And if I do I can have that mindful gap. You don’t know the anger. You feel it and it happens. But you can change it and see how insignificant that is. Especially with kids, I used to get very tired and angry all the times. I don’t have that anymore. And dealing with a lot of people has changed the way I do business, change the way I interact with other people. It strips back the idea that when you meet some people you should do this. These are the protocols that exist in the culture. If I connect with someone, I am going to touch them. I don’t even need to let them know that I have that connection. So, it has changed everything.” (1:02:54)

**How satisfied are you with following the Buddhist path?**

“Very satisfied. I just want to help other people but I am not sure exactly how. In the moment, I am just doing what I can generating a warm feeling for other people who are around me. And hopefully through my practice I will find a way to fulfil that.”

**Your ultimate goal?**

“To end suffering for all beings... I’d be happy to constantly be living to achieve that goal. That is a goal that I can achieve, why not? I set a goal that is really, really hard and I keep doing it forever.”

## **Interview Nany**

Nany's family belongs to Anglican Church. Both parents practice their faith in a casual manner e.g. only attending Church's services on special occasions. Nany was christened in Anglican Church but never attended any church activities: "Religions were never talked about. Not that it was a bad thing. Simply it was not discussed... religions were never a big thing." (2:28) However, the family was open if someone from the family gets married to a person from other Christian denomination.

### **Nany's view of God**

Since in her young age, Nany has never believed in God: "I don't really believe in God; I don't believe that one person, or being, has power to create all this earth and then walk away and let the people to suffer. If there is a God, why does this God allow people to have pain, to live in poverty, to have diseases?" (5:08) For her, "if somebody believes in that, they get comfort, that's fine." (5:44)

### **Nany's view of Jesus Christ**

She does not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God or the saviour of the world. Somehow, she has a confused view of Jesus with the image of God the creator. She strongly believes in the theory of the Big Bang.

### **Did you or do you read the Bible?**

Her immediate response was "No". But later she shared that she used to own a Bible for children. At her young age, she tried to read it but could not understand it. She asked for help from her mother but her mother failed to help her because she could not understand it either.

### **Heaven and hell**

She does not believe in heaven and hell as such but she believes in realms of life. She believes in realm of hell. But heaven for her is a "story that people made up that you feel better that the people who you love who died and you say, 'where do they go?' ah, they go to heaven." (9:10) "I used to believe in that when I was little and I took comfort in it when someone or a relative died." (9:36)

### **Eternal life and salvation**

She believes in eternal life but in a broader sense than what she learned from the Christian faith. The next life will not take its place in the present bodily form but will take many different forms. Eternal life, therefore, is a circle of life that happens over and over again. For her there is no fact or proof of salvation. It's an old teaching that teaches people to behave: "you go to Church on a Sunday; you put money in a dish; you do your prayers; and when your time comes that you are parting, you are going to heaven or if you are bad you go to hell and you're stuck there forever; ... you never come back; that's it; dead; gone; no more... I don't believe there is no more; there is more than no more." (11:41)

### **Involvement in Church's activities**

Nany has never been involved in any Church's activities.

## **The first contact with Buddhism**

She had a few experiences that she later identified as Buddhist experiences since her primary school and teen ages. She witnessed people's deaths and believed they would come back to this life again. These "different experiences" invited her to a new venture of exploration. But her real first contact with Buddhism happened when she was in her early thirties when she was given a Buddhist book, entitled 'Buddhism for the beginners', which took her six years to finish reading it. Through reading the book she felt it so much connected with her experiences and beliefs, "This explains why I think the way that I do, my own difference to my family and majority of my friends." (15:52)

## **What encouraged you to embrace Buddhism?**

She could naturally connect the Buddhist teachings easily with what she believed: "When I started to find out and listened to the teachings of all sorts of people, I would hear these teachings and I think: 'That's how I think. This is how I think that. Oh, maybe I am not so weird after all. This is what I really believe.'" (18:44) She is given the freedom to think, to test, to explore and even not to believe. Referring to the teaching authorities, she recounts: "What I really like the most is that no matter who was giving the teachings...There was always a common theme: 'Don't believe what I am telling you; don't take it as the Gospel; go, research, look into it, do homework and check up on things, find out for yourself; and if you like what I am telling you and you agree with it then come. If you don't, then don't come. That's fine.'" (19:25) The teachings connect with her beliefs and encourage her to test them out for herself and to search for more: "It encourages you to look inside yourself; it encourages you to listen to more teachings and read more things... and communicate with other people to get a better perspective on things, to get that confirmation." (19:52) "It's not a dictatorship... it is what it is but don't you believe everything that I am telling you; don't just take it as the truth yourself;... go and find the truth yourself." (20:06)

## **Have you taken any Buddhist training and courses?**

For two and a half years she has been attending Dharma class regularly which takes place every fortnight. She has become a member of a Buddhist group and has done a weekend retreat. She has taken three Buddhist vows in Mahayana-Tibetan tradition. For her, this step is a serious commitment to help herself and other people. She has been practicing Buddhist meditation for two years. She follows concentration method with breathing. Her purpose of practicing meditation is to calm herself down and to concentrate on her own inner self and mind. She is open to learn from other Buddhist traditions.

## **How do you view the Buddha?**

"An awoken mind, completely aware, not close-minded, ... a true Bodhisattva... He was a person that would be willing to do everything possible to help other people, not just people but animals and all sentient beings, everything". (29:02) "Buddha sees the good in all people but he never could really see that until he looked inside himself." (29:33) However, she has not personal relationship with the Buddha.

## **Rebirth or reincarnation**

From her real experiences that she had of the past life she believes firmly in rebirth and reincarnation. (36:41) She believes that her life here in his present body will come to an end but her consciousness will continue in different realms and one day may come back to human life again. She expressed that if she will come back to this life again is to get herself right before she can help other people. (37:11)

### **Response to Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Noble Path and Karma**

The Four Noble Truths, for her, are the simple teaching of the reality that helps her to be aware of the causes of suffering and how to avoid or reduce suffering. This has a connection with the understanding of Karma. Actions, words and thoughts can create positive and negative karma. Everyone creates his/her own karma.

### **Non-self and Emptiness**

For her the teachings of non-self and emptiness help her to know that things are changing and impermanent.

### **Nirvana**

It's a complete freedom from suffering. It's not a place but a feeling. For her there is no need to hurry to become enlightened but to focus to be herself and to help other people. Nirvana is important but for her to come back to this life to help other people and animals is more important. (42:35)

### **Moments of religious transformation or conversion**

The teaching on the process of dying gave her an experience of "Ah-ha" moment that has helped her to overcome the fear of death. (49:25) "The dharma has taught me not to be scared." (50:28)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

"Because I don't agree with it, ... with the Church. It doesn't fit comfortably in my heart, to have someone telling me, 'you must attend church every Sunday, if you don't go to church every Sunday, you will go to hell.'" (51:07) She shared that she attended a church service in a Catholic church but again it did not resonate with her: "I can't accept this. It's not what they did is wrong. It did not fit in her heart". (51:54) She compared this with the way that she experienced with Buddhist monks, nuns and lay teacher: "The way they interact with each other, the love that I feel and the empowerment that I feel, it's home for me... It's teaching me so much about me and about people around me and the world." (52:41)

### **Are there any Buddhist teachings that you find it difficult to accept?**

"No, not yet... But the whole idea of emptiness is difficult to grasp." (54:06)

### **How have Buddhism and its teachings have changed your life?**

"I am a lot more today a karma person. My view of the world has slightly been altered. I have been always a giving and loyal person, very kind person. But I always was quick tempered. I would say without thinking... I am different now" (55:29) She has become more patient, more tolerant, and more mindful, more passionate, gentler... and more karma: "It's changed my

life. I am comfortable with it... It's home for me. It resonates with me. It is me. I am it and it is me." (58:32) She feels completely happy with what she is practicing now. (58:37) She expresses that she wants to continue with this Buddhist path. She has no short-term plan but the ultimate goal of following the Buddhist path for her is "to be enlightened, to be a Buddha." (59:06) For the time being she practices what she is doing with Buddhist practices to help all sentient beings to be happy.



## **Interview Ron**

### **Background**

Ron was born into a Presbyterian family in Europe 1945. He was baptised in the Presbyterian Church and had some level of involvement in the life and activities of his local Christian community. All he remembers of his childhood is that he went to the Sunday school every week mainly for social gathering purposes rather than for religious education. He was also singing in a Church choir for a couple of years. At school, he did not participate in the religious education at all. His family moved to Australia for a new settlement when he was eleven years of age. The family then stopped all their involvement in Church. For some reasons his parents became anti-Catholic Church.

Ron was married to a pious Catholic. He was asked to have some religious education as a requirement of the preparation for marriage. He came for the instructions once and stopped because he could not take the teachings. When he was asked to come back to the instructions, he responded: "I am marrying this woman, not the religion and they accepted that." (09:48)

### **Responding the teaching on God as Creator**

"If you believe there is a creator God, something is wrong with you." (08:59) "All religions are just great. They have so many things to offer: you've got the Ten Commandments, can't go wrong with the Ten Commandments; Buddhists have the Ten Precepts, almost identical. You know religion is good; it's moralistically good. You know some of the stuffs are not that good. But most of my friends are Catholic and we can talk about that stuff; we can get on very good." (10:44)

### **About Jesus Christ**

"I think Jesus, yes, definitely. I think there are many great people on this planet... They all preach love and respect and humility. And yet when I look at that humility is gone. You know I get a bit surprised at the expensive clothing of the clergy and luxury apartments. If Jesus would have seen this, he would say 'come on guys, let be humble. Right, here I am supposedly borne in a stable and I am alright. You've got servants...'" (11:47) "I have the greatest respect for that because I think the new pope probably one of the best men on this planet, I would imagine you know. So, the leader is everything; really the leaders lead by examples. This is what I like about the Buddhist monks. They are just humble." (12:12)

### **About Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world**

"I have to take this with a grain of salt. Right, is it true? It really does not matter. That's the mythology built around maybe Jesus Christ. But I don't think he hurt anyone. I think he preached love and compassion. Right, and I think that the religion is all about: love and compassion. And if we all live it by the Bible, it would be a great place." (12:54)

### **Did you or do you read the Bible?**

"Yes, I read the Bible... It's a good book. It would be very good to get the original texts of the Bible. And I am sure it would be vastly different. I think we have King James Bible now. I bet nothing is like the original book... It's modified to suit the power, to get people the power,

you know. I am not sure it's authentic or not but it still teaches us good things. Who knows what happened two thousand years ago? Who knows what happened at a hundred years ago, the truth, right?" (13:56) "I like comparing stuffs and when I look at the Buddhist texts, it's still written on palm leaves, right, it's so ancient and the wordings are identical. I think something lost in translation. I think my Buddhist teacher would say that. It's a bit degenerative because the language is not the same. You know, we accept what we have; we acknowledge that... I like the transformation of the mind but not the world. I don't have to change the world. I like that." (14:40)

### **Ask if you pray?**

"I can't remember. I would imagine with great scepticism. Right, my parents never prayed before meals or anything like that. So, if I go to a Catholic family, yes I do pray." (15:03)

### **About the Christian teachings on eternal life and salvation**

"I guess I can't answer that question really when I was younger... If it works for other people, it's good on them... One of the questions I used to ask when I was quite young 'why there is so much suffering in the world?' And there was one priest that I knew through my in-laws and I said 'what's all this about, all this brutality happening with children... what's happening about that? How come there is no body doing nothing? He said: 'that's God's secret.' Then I was a real sceptic after that because he couldn't answer that or wouldn't.'" (17:54) "I said: 'why do the children suffer so much on this planet?' You know when you see footages about the war in Vietnam, always children suffering. You know any war always children suffer. And I said: 'why did God let this happen?'" (18:07)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

"Lack of truth. Christian is just a name. If someone asks me you are a Christian, RB? Yes, I am a Christian... It's a blind faith: you believe in God, you're going to Heaven. It lacks certain amount of: 'don't ask me any question. Just believe that God is waiting for you in Heaven... We've got Jews, we've got Muslims and we've got Christians and we've got same God but they can't even love each other. So, if there is any violence in us to prove your point, what is that? Christians did a good job. They murdered Muslims and they murdered us... It's not love.'" (01:31:99)

"If you believe the Buddha and believe that you were my mother at one stage, how would I murder you? How can I ever repay you? It doesn't mean you can do whatever you like to me. If your motivation is loving kindness and mine is, we're just perfect, aren't we? We're going to work with each other." (01:31:42) "Buddhists, we actually have the answer for world peace in the teachings of the Buddha. We can actually do that but the ignorance of others does not allow that to happen because there are too many prestige interests in other things. Buddhist is just a name, really. I go to the multifaith thing, it is a great thing. If I won't tell you about my religion and you don't tell me about yours, you can talk about it but you don't force it on me, we'll have the best time, because the room is filled with people with the similar interest: love and kindness. You can't put a name on that. What is that?" (01:34:01)

### **First contact with Buddhism**

“I was always interested in Buddhism.” (21:25) Many years ago he saw three Buddhist Tibetan monks in a car and had a conversation with them. Those three Buddhist monks always stayed in his mind. He describes his second encounter with Buddhists: “About sixteen years ago, the Dalai Lama came to Melbourne. I thought he’s a special man, I should go and meet him. So, I hopped in my car and I drove to Melbourne.” (24:40) He attended the three-day teaching given by Dalai Lama. “I was just fascinated and I was thinking this is not God, this is your mind. You know, his Holiness kept saying ‘it’s your mind. Transform your mind. Don’t transform the world... I was going how good is that? I need to chase that up.’” (26:46)

### **What makes you to turn to Buddhism?**

“Seeker of truth. You can’t be a Buddhist if you don’t believe in the Karma. You can’t be a Buddhist if you think all the emotions are not pain. You can’t believe everything that has inherited existence and you’ve got to believe in no-self, that’s number one. So, there are four things called four seals. If you think there are some emotions that are good, you are wrong. And that’s true. And if you think there is no impermanence, well mate, you are wrong. If you think everything is permanent, if you think there is an inherited self, it doesn’t work. And Nirvana is beyond concepts. No one could explain Nirvana to you... because it needs to be experienced.” (01:28:39) “Nirvana is right here, Hanh would tell you. This is Nirvana. Clear up your mind and you’ll find it. So, Nirvana and Samsara are just states of mind.” (01:29:16)

### **Asked if he has taken vows?**

“I take vows myself every day. A vow is really good... but you don’t take the vow, you can live the vow without taking the vow.” (34:25)

### **Becoming a Buddhist?**

“It’s your mind. So, you need to work with your mind and not put faith in God because God is a myth but my mind is not a myth.” (36:22)

“Being a practitioner, it’s the hardest thing I ever do... I never feel comfortable because it raises more questions than answers, I reckon, for me. But if you look at it logically, it’s really good, it’s really good. It makes a decent human being out of you. And nobody ever tells you that’s God’s secret. You ask the question, you get the answer which is logical and you can’t fault it. That’s the beauty about it, right, if you’ve doubts, you ask a great teacher. It’s very hard to put it over me, I think. And he’ll show you do this because of this. If you don’t believe it, you test it. I like that, right.” (44:39) “Meditation is the most amazing thing. If you want clarity, you meditate. And you can’t fault it. So, if you take the emotion out of it which is human error, I think, it is clinical, really a Buddhist teaching. There is no ‘I say this and you need to do this’. You question, you question everything. I can’t fault it.” (45:50)

RB used to meditate six hours every day. He broke it into three sessions: one in the early morning, one at noon and the other one in the evening. These days he practices four hours a day. He used a method called “Karma biding or shamata or shenei”. This meditation method, known as ‘single point meditation’, aims at realizing the emptiness and finding a subtle mind. This method of meditation normally requires some guidance of a teacher otherwise it can become stressful to the practitioners. What he has achieved from meditation is clarity of mind, mindfulness, and tension easing. This method is not unique to Buddhism and it is for

everyone to practice, despise their faith traditions. But for Buddhists, RB believes, there is another step which is called "Reincarnation". (51:57)

"A Buddhist believes that the mind is beginningless. If it's beginningless, it does not have an end." (52:52) "Impermanent is a big thing in Buddhism. As a Buddhist, you have to have faith in the Karma which I have 99.9 percent. It's cause and effect. If you do something positive, generally it's a positive result." (53:56) "You don't reincarnate but your mind. So, what Buddhists have taught, I think, is separating the mind from the body. So, when the body just withers and dies, the mind just travels on." (55:05) "Buddhists teach that we are all interrelated, because the beginningless of time. So why should I be awful to you when you have been my mother. So, Buddhists look at everyone being related. We don't upset anyone because we owe each other so much. If you are an ignorant animal then you are an ignorant. But as human beings we can get through that ignorance." (56:49)

About the idea of non-self, he comments: "Non-self is that you would discount yourself for the sake of others, no self-cherishing. So, if you don't self-cherish, there is no self. You sacrifice yourself for the benefits of others which Jesus did." (01:01:14) Explaining the relationship between self and Karma he says: "There are two levels of Buddhism: conventional and ultimate... There is conventional Buddhism and there is ultimate Buddhism. The ultimate view is the emptiness. If there is no self, there is no Karma... On the conventional level, there is Karma. You experience it all the times. But the next step is the ultimate. That's the Buddhist teachings." (01:02:27) "When you go to Vajrayana which is Tantra... Tantra means no self, selflessness, ultimate path, we all need to go there but we just crawling along at the moment learning Sutrijana, then we move up to Vajrayana." (01:03:01) "To go to the next level is skipping this level and there is no birth, no death, no rush for me." (01:03:20)

### **Relationship with the Buddha**

"The Buddha always said: 'Don't look at me, forget me. Look at what I teach.' So now if we go to Cambodia they look at Buddha as God. They pray to Buddha. That's a different type of Buddhism. Buddha gave those teachings because it suits those people's minds. So that's Theravada Buddhism... A Theravadin Buddhist would just make sure that if you are a monk that you attain enlightenment. I am just a working peasant; I don't even get your teachings. So, my job is to look after you. In Mahayana, I am looking after you and me. That's the difference. So, Buddha gave those three schools of Buddhism: Theravadin, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, so for different levels of minds." (01:05:25)

### **Understanding of Nirvana**

"Nirvana is a state of mind, of course. Everything is a state of mind, not a place. It's a pure realm. In other words, your mind is free from the body. How good is that? That would be pretty good. And there is no more suffering or birth or sickness or death. They're all finished. That's Nirvana." (01:07:23) "It's not the highest state. It's called with-remainder. Another word, there is still something stopping you from becoming omniscient because of not wishing freedom for others, just your own personal salvation. Salvation is a Christian thing." (01:07:57) "With Mahayana Buddhism it includes everybody. With Theravada, it's only your own salvation." (01:08:15)

### **Do you believe in all the Buddhist teachings?**

“In Buddhism, it depends on the quality of the teachers. They say you’re supposed to look at your teachers as gurus who can do no wrong. Even if he does, he does not for a reason. I have a problem with that. You know I don’t have a blind faith and it’s not encouraged to have a blind faith. But I have some problems with behaviours of some people who are supposed to be highly realised and they just do shit... I am still a normal human being, I still judge. That’s what I am trying to stop but it may take a long time.” (01:20:55)

### **Involvement in Buddhist activities**

Ron has been a practically active Buddhist over the years. He has attended a lot of Buddhist talks and retreats, hosted Lamas when they come to give teachings, organized various Buddhist gatherings.

Ron is running a Buddhist retreat centre that he built. He used to teach Buddhist spirituality and Tibetan meditation. At the present he only offers Buddhist meditation to higher level practitioners. He offers home visits to the elderly people, helps the dying, and cares for the lonely people. With the help of his family members, he provides places, namely accommodation, facilities and logging, for people to learn Buddhist teachings and practice Buddhist meditation.

“Buddhism suffers from too many older women... If you go to a retreat, and if there are fifty people, forty will be women...It’s a cultural thing where women are more connected. So, we’ve got quite a few people that come locally but there’re all seventy years old people.” (01:14:21) For him, this limits the development of Buddhism in Australia. Buddhism is still classified as an Eastern religion. Actually, Buddhism is not a religion. We call it religion but it’s not a religion. It’s a way of life and it’s the whole change of your mind. (01:17:10)

“The Buddha said: ‘I did discover emptiness; it’s always being there. I didn’t discover Karma; it’s always being there.’” (01:17:32)

### **Are you satisfied with your practice?**

“No, I am looking forward to some clarity. I am not trying to be attached to it, because that’s just another thing. There are so many things to do and if you get a little bit of insight which I have a few times. It’s very hard not to grasp on that and wish for that to happen again. It’s difficult. So, the teachings sometimes you feel it’s getting close, I stop my meditation because I don’t want to attach to that. I can see that it was going to happen so it was better to stop.” (01:21:52)

### **Asked if he does not want to get there?**

“I do want to get there but my mind is not steady enough yet. I think from the little bits of moments I’ve had, what they call grasps, I grasped that ‘there it is’. And that I have a stable mind so you see it, don’t grasp. The moment you grasp, it’s like grasping an eel. You grasp it, you hold it, and it will slip out. It’s a very slippery client. That’s something I have learned. When you’ve had some clarity, you manage to stop the groan mind. And there it is an awareness, you grasp, because it is the most incredible experience to actually reach your mind. It’s incredible. I’ve worked that out and your teacher would say ‘you learn, maybe not in this life time,’ because Shamata may carry on from life to life.” (01:22:57)

**Can you get enlightened in this life time?**

"I don't know because to do what I do you cannot have a family, you cannot have one hundred acres of land that you have to maintain and look after. It's very selfish, really. You know when you've got a wife and family, that's a priority; that's above everything. If they would have left their wife, left their family, that was not right. They do because they think 'if I am by myself.' So, a prayer says 'may I too remain until Samsara is empty.' Well, Samsara is never empty but the wish is to remain to become a Buddha and teach others. That's a good thing. If a Buddha can exist as we think he can exist, there is a Buddha among us all the times. But a Buddha can't take your Karma. You have to fix your Karma through purification practices." (01:24:38)

**Is Buddhism a right path for you? Are you satisfied?**

"At the moment, it is. I often look at myself and ask, 'what are you doing?' That's a good thing because it makes look good... You wouldn't keep doing it, I don't think, if it is a futile. So, if you put in the hours you'll get the results. That's the way I look at it." (01:25:26)

**Do you have any plans and goals to achieve?**

Ron has no plan for the near future. The ultimate goal is the enlightenment for all the sentient beings. It can happen tomorrow. It's just a matter of getting rid of stuffs and the right message. There are so many practices in Buddhism, so many and so many deities and I am a bit confused about that, like three hundred deities that people used to practice." (01:26:13)  
"I still go to the teachings because I still learn a bit about everything." (01:26:47)

## Interview Rom

Rom was born to his Anglican parents in a small town where religions were clearly divided according to denominations or religious groups. He was baptised in Anglican Church and in his childhood and teenager years he attended weekend church service and Sunday school regularly. He also received religious education at secular school. He was a pious practitioner who received ascribed sacraments and was involved in different church activities.

When he got to the age of thirteen, he started questioning his religious beliefs and as he did not receive adequate explanations and clarification, he stopped his involvement in as well as engagement with Christian faith: "This is the story. There are a lot of gaps. I had many questions which unfortunately couldn't be answered... And a lot of them were fear or linked to fear, not on top, but underneath there was a kind of negative view on that. It just told you what you shouldn't do. And everyone was dressed nicely and they spoke nicely and they drank tea but it was not very engaging." (08:04) He explains further that "My mother said: 'Too many questions; there are some question you shouldn't ask'. And when she said that, I thought 'Ok, if I can't ask questions then it's not true'. I had questions that had to be answered. And they kept sending me back to other stock answers with no experience. It can't be real." (08:40)

On the teaching about God as the creator of the world, he comments: "It's illogical; it doesn't make sense; it doesn't match with science; it doesn't have any practical application...the main question is if that force made the world, why so many problems. So obviously, there is a flaw: he couldn't do it right or he got the design wrong or some other problem. It doesn't fit together; it logically and mostly doesn't work." (09:26)

About Jesus as the Son of God and as the Saviour of the world he critiques: "Even worse. Now when I hear those words, ... I can hear people say those words and I have to overcome my aversion to hearing them because I was hearing them a lot of times. And sermons were very long... and no reality behind it, no experience...There was no depth I could see in that, no actual activity or practice... I don't like the music either. There was no emotional part of that and it didn't match the reality. So, I kept finding these gaps." (10:33) "The imagery is also negative... The problem is you can't appreciate the Western civilisation without appreciating Christianity's impact." (10:55)

About the Bible, he explains: "When I read it, hold it, and there is so much killing. It's just a history of killing and slaughter...it doesn't make sense." (11:58) "The Bible is irrelevant. It's a mixed bag." (13:10) "There is no practical application and there are certain things that I can't believe." (14:27) "I read the Bible; I read the prayers and everything but there were not enough answers." (15:44)

Regarding the teaching on heaven and hell, he says: "Heaven looks very boring. One of the most serious questions I had then was that ok, I've got this single life and I can get it wrong or right and this finite space decides infinity, unending life. That's not fair and it's unseasonable that a finite decision here can produce infinite result. That's unjust. (16:46)

On the teaching about the eternal life and salvation, he expresses: "It's like you put someone in the water and they can only get out when you get them out. So why did you put them into the water in the first place? So, if this so called deity made the world this bad and only he can

get us out, it's a ridiculous game. If the creator produced this situation, either he knew it would be like this and he did it anyway or he didn't know and then he was not the creator. So, this situation doesn't make sense. It doesn't hold the water. If I made the creation...Didn't he know the Lucifer would do this? If he didn't know that, then he is not omnipotent. Then already he fails as God. In the system, it's not so free and forcing. If God is God, then he should've known this should happen. Oh, then it says it's free will. Then he should've known what free will would be, what the choice would be. Doesn't hold water!" (19:27)

"Salvation is also murky. You can be never quite sure if you've got it or not. You're always worried... You can't be sure. There's no radical step. It's just entirely depending on faith with no input. So, it's entirely in your head; it's entirely a belief. As you say, it has to be faith-based. If the faith is not there, then everything is vanished and you're left with what. Looking at the reality and physics and other things, so there's a gap." (20:05)

About the teachings of body, soul and spirit, he comments: "Body, no problems. We've got bodies; that's fine; totally accept that. The other two unfortunately cannot be experienced. Ok, I've got soul. Where is that? I've got consciousness; I've got emotion; I've got these things but there is no soul or spirit that I can see. It's no identifiable object there. I look credibly carefully, you can't find them. I could not find any of those. I can find the body and I can find my mind. But mind is not soul, is it? The mind is not mentioned in Christian teachings." (21:58) "Soul is something so imprecisely taught... you don't know what a spirit is. And then you have the Holy Spirit and you have the Trinity. You think where do they get this from? And what is the difference? And all the stuff about the right hand of the Father and the left hand and wow, it's pretty heavy but it doesn't make sense; it doesn't have any cohesion. So that is part of the problem of the teachings. I've gone to the Confirmation and I had all that and I was asking all the questions but I could never be answered. And I still don't think it rationally holds together as a system unless you put in there faith and you accept it. That's why I can't do it." (23:04) "I am looking for experience but I could not find it. It's all intellectual, verbal and traditional. No, I tried." (23:35) "Just a kind of routine, external behaviours. Fine, ok. That's the best you can get. Fine, I would leave that aside and doesn't teach me to respond to what I need from there." (24:20)

Besides attending some of the community's gatherings such as the fetes or group discussion on faith or doctrines, Rom had very a minimal level of involvement in the community's activities or interaction with other members of the community. His experience of the faith community is quite negative: "The community was clearly divided according to the denominational groups."

### **First contact with Buddhism**

Rom had his first contact with Buddhism and Indian religions and culture through music concerts at school when he was about ten or so years of age. This awareness of the existence of other religious traditions urged him to inquire more about the teachings and practices of those religions. He started reading Indian philosophies and religions extensively and started practising yoga. He also learned Hindi and Sanskrit languages. He later obtained a Ph.D. in Sanskrit. He stopped considering himself as a Christian and began to identify himself as a Buddhist or Hindu when he was about fourteen years old. He went as far as specifying his religion as Buddhism or Hinduism in the national consensus.



The Buddhism that Rom became familiar with in those days was “a kind of filtered Western rationalist Buddhism... a kind of construct of Western, Protestant culture to produce a kind of anti-Christian rationalist Buddhism.” (30:59) Rom became interested in Buddhism because Buddhist teachings have “more resonant...and meditation tradition was the key ingredient because when you meditate you have an experience and you have a teaching and you have a step-by-step process to validate something.” (32:08) He had his first one-month Buddhist meditation retreat in 1989 which deepened and validated his understanding of Buddhist teachings.

#### **Four Noble Truths (39:39)**

“It’s foundational. And that’s one of the things the first time it’s read and six weeks I am teaching the Four Noble Truths in a classroom here. In Buddhist things, it’s a big moment because that will say that you have to have enough merits, enough conditions to be able to see that teaching. So, when that teaching comes in front of you people pay attention and see how much they make out of it. Academically, it’s flawless. You can’t fault it. It knows a lot of logic there because you have an experience. The problem is the translation of the word suffering. It’s not the correct phrase. And everyone gets that wrong which is fine, because it’s probably like other religions. The teaching has a single level in English. You get that meaning but as the more you go through it and more into it you’ll find it has another layer. It’s more subtle and complex.” (40:48)

“I generally tell people that we will not translate it. Instead, we will use the word that they use in Sanskrit or Pali and we will discuss it from all around and you will get an idea of what that means. Okay, if I say going to the supermarket is a suffering, having cancer is a suffering, having a family is the worse from suffering, it does not make sense. But if you start to see that once you have children, then you actually suffer for yourself, you suffer for them as well. You expand the world of suffering or the way you can feel pain. So not wanting to die is suffering; being born is therefore suffering... because the cause of death is birth. Fantastic! Because you cannot fault that, because you’re born, you have to die. There is no way to alter with that.” (41:50)

“Is giving birth a good thing? Is having family a good thing? Is life a good thing? That’s the question that comes up. Now, is the world a good place? What are we here for? And what are we going with it? All those usual questions that you and I have, and the answers in Christianity are set aside, and the Buddhist answers are ‘well, it’s not good to be born because this world is ... even a finger snap of existence is to be avoided. It exposes you to suffering. You cannot escape suffering if you have breaths, if you have a body, because the suffering comes through the body and the mind. So, the Four Noble Truths are, on the physical level, there is suffering in the body. And if you look at the structures, now there is a problem, there is a cause of problem, and how to fix the problem or the diagnosis of the cause. It’s extremely rational and most people misunderstand it because they do not understand what dukkha is, what suffering is. They think that if I get enough money, I’ll be out of dukkha. But rich people get sick. What’s fascinating is no one links the Four Noble Truths to the other teaching, which is so important, is dependent origination. It’s a difficult one. So, if you put those together and work it out how they fit together, that takes a bit of instruction or explaining: How does dependent origination produce suffering? How are they related and how is the analysis of the body, mind, our experience? How do they fit together? That’s where it gets interesting... So,

the Four Noble Truths: cause of suffering and suffering, that's totally true; the cause of suffering is attachment, the thirst; and to remove the cause will remove the effect; and there is a method to remove the cause and the effect. That's fine, the Four Noble Truths are fine. Dependent origination is a more subtle teaching. In a few sentences, it's basically that everything that exists, including our selves, is caused by other processes. I supposed if you call a human a sentient process, you start to understand. Individuals are not like stones that are made and sit there. There are processes and causes and conditions that produce everything around us. That machine is ten thousand causes have produced that. You bought it, someone made it, someone invented the chips. There is so much that comes together in that. You exist there because of you parents, your grandparents, your education, everything comes together to put you just there. So, everything is conditioned... So, our suffering is also there for condition and has causes. Everything we do affects this process. I just jump to another example. You know the weather system, a complex process with multiple interactions and effects. If you change something here, it'll change something here slightly. So, dependent origination is like that. It's an analysis where you can say: 'you've got this happening and this is the result.' As a Buddhist, what you can do is only this one point, and if you make changes here, the rest of the weather, the rest of the system starts to change. And then you should try that and see what happens. The fortunate thing is that there is one place to change things is your internal intention. That's the single most point, the only point you can change the whole process. So, what they say? You then have good intentions, not in the sense of I wish no one will be poor. You are kind to people and generous and you watch your own behaviours mentally, physically and verbally. That's it. That's the entire process. So, you put in good intentions and again, using the technical term intention, that's where you can change entire reality. So that's the Buddhist teaching. That's a machinery. And if I look at the service of Christianity, more faith and more faith and I just pour on more faith. Okay, but I will never know if it is going to work. If you change your intention, you'll see your mind change. That's all meditation is about, about loving kindness. Okay, Christians are generous and Buddhists are generous but they do it from a different starting point. They have the same intention. They want to help which is very good. It's good to be kind always. And all traditions have that. Christians are kind because they are going to have reward in heaven and most Buddhists are doing the same, to be honest. But if they understand it more subtly, the intention changes the conditioning in your mind. So, the next time you'll be kind. There is a move toward that and reduces the suffering." (47:11)

"Eightfold Noble Paths are the things you do to reduce your own suffering and to get out. And no one understands those eight factors either. They are moral behaviours but the main part is your mind, the mental path. A lot of Buddhists and also Christians are stuck probably in the physical, the very simple stuff which is fine. But there is a level beyond that way you can open doors to other things you didn't know existed. The mental world, the Buddhist meditation, there is nothing like that in the Christian tradition. I was meditating in Sri Lanka. There was a Christian monk studying at the same place, he suggests: 'I am here from a Catholic Church in Rom. We need to study this meditation.' So, then you read St John of the Cross or St. Teresa of Avilla. What's going on there? But it doesn't make sense. You've heard of Bernadette Robert? You know her book? Fantastic! She is a Christian. She has a Buddhist meditation experience and the rest of her life is trying to understand. It's fascinating." (48:26)

**Karma (48:30)**

“This is one of the big problems. Everyone wants to know about karma. Am I going to get a new car? Is it in my karma? Karma is another word that it’s hard to translate. I would link directly back to that dependence origination. You make it change at this point in your behaviour or your mental behaviour and see what happens. You can’t change anything else. If I am going to have cancer, if I am going to have disease, or if I am going to have something happen like this or lose my job or be on a plane crash, I can’t change that. I can only change my internal reactions. Contrast with the Christianity, okay, disaster happens, it’s God’s mercy. You have to go through it, ask for more faith and say some prayers. There is nothing you can do except wait. It’s going to give you more trouble just to test you, fine. The Buddhist example is that you’re responsible for your actions. So, you did this to yourself. All you can do now is to endure it and make a good intention, do good things, try to learn from it and that will help you in the future. There is nothing magical. Things are happening bad to you but no one put things on top of you from outside because they want to test you, which is not fair either. You are responsible for your activities. I do believe that our actions produce our results. That’s key to Buddhist studies.” (50:00)

“Karma is... If I do an action, there will be a result. I just think carefully about which action I choose because the result, it’s like a law of moral physic. If I am saying bad things or thinking bad things, again, doing bad actions or saying bad actions is the one I can control mostly. I don’t do those and I get a benefit. If something bad still happens to me, I still wait and it’s gone up its way... Anything that happens to me because of some conditions I set in place and I need to learn from that. The problematic conditions are very simple on three causes: greed, hatred, delusion. That’s enough. That explains every possible situation that I can respond to. If I am greedy, attached or averse to something, those are going to cause me problems. It’s more amenable to do something. I don’t know what you are doing with Christian sitting and praying. I don’t know if it is working. There is no sign. There is nothing come back to you. It might be true but might not be. There is no confirmation. Whereas if I produce Buddhist living and loving kindness and I spend a week doing loving kindness, my mind would change within a day completely. The world doesn’t change but my experience changes. So, I’ve already made a change in my mental continual process and I didn’t have to do anything by being good... So, it’s a completely different process. You can see the problem. This one is with no toolkit. With this one I have interesting toolkit. Not only that, it’s rational, or can be rational and it has a lot of subtleties around it. And the idea of everything in existence being conditioned by something opens so many doors that even quantum physics hasn’t caught up with it yet. So intellectually, it’s in advance of Western thinking.” (53:04)

### **Emptiness or Nothingness (53:30)**

“Remember what I said with dependence origination. That’s an early teaching which is the same as emptiness. If everything in this room has been put here or comes here in a process, someone has put everything here, so actually everything here is created by a set of conditions. When those conditions cease, it will cease to be. So, there is nothing that is not caused by other conditions... It’s the same teaching of non-self. You are sitting there on a chair now where you’ve a body and a mind working. But those are also set by other causes and conditions. When the causes and conditions cease, that end result ceases. That’s the emptiness and nothingness, the same as nothing exists by itself. There is no entity that is there by itself. It’s very complicated to understand. It’s inter-dependent... An interesting teaching is that anything that comes together will always later on goes apart. You can’t

dispute that. Nothing that comes together will stay together forever. It will eventually one day goes apart. So, everything is conditioned, including our existence and this consciousness we have. It comes together for certain reasons... Consciousness has conditions underneath it.” (55:50)

### **Reincarnation, rebirth (55:52)**

“Every cause has an effect. We accept that. So, consciousness is also the result of other conditions and it produces further conditions. So, the next birth is not the same consciousness. This is again from the theories. You have a body, you have intentions. Those are making actions now. Those have to have consequences. So that produces the next series of consciousness that will follow your life or my life. So just as these atoms in a cup that can never be destroyed in that sense, I have to be careful with that... Consciousness makes intentions have results so those results will produce a future consciousness and a future body and a future karma, if you like... Do you experience your consciousness as continuous? If you do meditation then things start to happen there because consciousness is not continuous for us. In a Buddhist sense, it’s momentary. The series of mind moments happen one after the other. Consciousness is not continuous in a Buddhist sense.” (57:28)

“The Buddhists do not have any continuity of any existence, including consciousness. That’s why they can’t have a soul. Consciousness is moment to moment.”

### **Nirvana (59:23)**

“That’s a fantastic question. I have troubles at every course. Buddhists have heavens and that’s not nirvana. So, nirvana is not heaven. There are many technical discussions on nirvana. The Buddhist analysis about our personalities is that we have five components: body and four other non-physical components, let say the mind or the soul if you like. The only way to enter nirvana is for those five to cease, including consciousness. There is no consciousness in nirvana. So, nirvana is a very misunderstood concept in most of the western world. They do exactly what you have just said. They equate nirvana with heaven, as a blissful, pleasant state. The bad news is that nirvana cannot be pleasant. Pleasure and pain can only exist together. If you take away pain, you take away pleasure. So, pleasure and pain, you need to set those aside. You only need to define analysis of human. When those cease, including consciousness, that’s when nirvana is possible... Heaven is temporary. Everything conditioned changes. Heaven, hell and human world are all subject to changes. Nirvana is a space or non-space or whatever it is that does not change and it’s outside that conditioned reality. It’s not conditioned. It’s a mysterious teaching.” (1:02:58)

### **View of the Buddha (1:03:07)**

“My personal view is that the Buddha existed and he put the teaching forward. The teaching has survived until now. That in itself is almost a miracle, because of the two and a half thousand years of teaching which is really subtle. I came from a pre-literature society. It comes through enormous filters. What we have now is of course a construct. You have to work out what’s really there and so forth. Some people in this temple pray to the Buddha every day: look after my grandson, and let me pass the exam or I want a lot of money. They do that. So, in that sense, it’s exactly as the same as, I think, the theistic religions are: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. They all have a theistic process. So, you have that link and you say

prayers. What does a Buddhist pray for? What are you praying for as a Buddhist if there is no one to help you? Does a prayer exist for a Buddhist? Probably not in that sense, because you are responsible for your own things. You can't ask any other influence to help you, because you did it... Human needs religions. Human creates religions to feel comfortable and to make sense of the world. So, the Buddhist population of the world has the same need for understanding, for safety, for absence of fear as any other persons. Every religion creates a system to make people feel safe and secure. So, Buddhism, it's a very subtle teaching. The idea of no-self is extremely difficult to grasp, and extremely straightforward. It's a constructive consciousness. People with families cannot deal with emptiness. They need rice, they need to have food. So, you don't teach them the emptiness of reality. No point." (1:06:16)

"Instead of making a prayer, you work on your intentions. So, I want to put in conditions that will make this happen for me. If I want to be healthy, I need do things that condition that. If I need to be mentally healthy, I need do things mentally. If I want to a happy life, these are the conditions that will produce that. I don't need to pray. People here are praying. There are five Buddhas up there. And every day people are giving out money. You guess what, the more money to give to the temple, the more merits they receive. If I want to give you ten thousand dollars and I am open hearted, fantastic. And its' gone. Maybe some merits maybe not. But if I want to give you ten thousand dollars, and I want everything back, I want my sins forgiven, I am doing a transaction. It's commerce. It's spiritual capitalism. Sorry, it does not work. I don't think it works. I think it's good if you are generous and you help people. But the only real benefit is going to be on your mind. If I am starving and a poor person gives me half their food, that's more important than someone gives me a million dollars because you can spare it. So, the intention is purer. We have practices that produce good intentions. Again, maybe I am over intellectualizing and most Buddhists don't like that... What did Jesus teach on the nature of consciousness? Nothing. The nature of cause and effect? How the world is constructed? Why Jehovah made an unjust world? Jehovah has to explain that. He hasn't yet."

### **Western Buddhists (1:18:15)**

"Some of the book we've had here. We have meditation. We have a unit on Buddhist-Christian dialogue. They lent me a book on Christian meditation and it put everything in a nutshell for me. It's a problem. They are using this Aramaic phrase. He said: 'you practice meditation and you don't know what will happen. Grace will decent or not decent.' Okay, that's a Christian view on meditation. Buddhist meditation is much more scientific. This is a toolkit. You do this and you build and this will happen. We know the steps. We have the instruction for how to produce the result. You want calmness which is the major product, you do this step and you'll get calmness. The Buddhist tradition is like that. Whereas in Christianity, you do this and God will decide. So that's the problem I have with Christian-Buddhist side. The west sees Buddhism like a smorgasbord. I'll take this part of Buddhism and this part, and I'll make this and this is Buddhism. That's a problem because there is something that is not part of this smorgasbord, for example, non-self, greed, hatred and diversion. Those are fundamental. We teach introduction course here. I am trying to get beyond those groups to say that this is what everyone should agree on, even that is impossible. Christianity has a core. You have a Bible. What is the core of Buddhist belief? I can't find it. Okay, five precepts. No, the Pure Land School doesn't follow precepts. So, we are out in the limbo there. It's so filtered and so diverse. You can't actually pin down on Buddhism. I don't know if you know

that history. Buddhism does not actually exist in in a sense that when Europe saw Asia, Japanese, Tibetan and Sri Lankan, they didn't know it the same religion. It's so different. Until 1844 one French got it and said: 'Maybe all these groups are one religion. So, let call it Buddhism.' And so, they created Buddhism. And Hinduism is the same... Because our western culture has dominated, and now people are using construct Buddhism. It was a culturally impeded practice. It came from Japan, from China, from Central Asia. India lost it. So, Sri Lankan Buddhist and Vietnamese Buddhist don't have that much in common, even the name of the Buddha, nothing in common. We now pull it together. So now we actually reinvented Buddhism in London or in Europe. That's what people are practicing, Shangharakshita is one, which is fine. But one big problem, I don't know if you know this history, when Buddhism hit China, it changed. It met this literate culture, and it changed. Now all those forms of Buddhism are meeting the modern West. So, it's changing. A lot of things are happening. What is happening now around you and me is that the modern world hits Buddhism and it's a disaster for Buddhism. You know we have mindfulness accounting. We have Buddhist dating services. We have all this capitalist western world is now looking at Buddhism to turn it into kind of happiness industries. Buddhism is not designed like that. I teach on ethic course. Human rights are there. What is Buddhist justification for human rights? Rights have come out of Europe and Christian background. Human have rights from birth. Buddhism does not accept that. It does not teach on that. So why are we expecting Buddhism to provide teachings for the Western world. No, you should look at what Buddhist teachings are. It's greed, hatred and delusion. Fundamentally, Buddhism doesn't think the world can be fixed. The last point I want to make on that is that the Buddhist teachings for lay people like you and me is to be good, not to do evil and to purify the mind. All the austere stuffs are only for the monastic, for the monks and the nuns. Emptiness and meditation is for the monks and nuns, not for lay people who have families who have to do shopping, who have to clean their cars. So now the monastic teaching is thrown around in the Internet as if for everybody, discussions on the emptiness from people who don't have any meditation practice who have no experiences. There is a lot of misapplication, misunderstanding of very subtle concepts which is fine as long as we know that you can't. If Buddhism fails in the West, because it doesn't make people happy, not because of faulted Buddhism. Down here is the garden centre... The Buddha is not sitting there beside the ardent ornament. Okay, Buddhism's gone into a culture but it comes in a grass level...The West, capitalism, Buddhist stuffs, it's a whole mixture there." (1:17:02)

"Who are the Western Buddhists? Who is a Buddhist in Australia? Buddhists around the world, the Western world, white, intellectually educated. You've got this kind of privileged group, a lot of Jewish people. So, they are interested in Buddhism. It's a kind of elites. If I go down to the football club, not many Buddhists are there. So, you have a group who are convert to intellectual Buddhism whereas you also have ethnic Buddhists from China, from Vietnam, from other places who are also here. Those Buddhisms don't match. I am working at a Vietnamese temple. It's fantastic. But only Vietnamese is spoken. There is ancestor worship, a lot of chanting is going on. It doesn't match if I go to a Buddhist meeting in Cleve in Sydney where they talk about sustainability, veganism, and dharmic work. There are multi-layers of Buddhism happening there. All of them are valid. But the question is 'Why did Christianity recede in the West?' We've had the whole history of the Enlightenment and Christianity coming forward. And then it seems to disobey with modernity. In Post-World War, we lost Christianity and it died. And Buddhism came in since the seventies as a kind of pseudo replacement or they think so. But there is a lot misunderstanding. Yoga and

Buddhism, meditation and all these mixed together, and even with drug element there, with the whole sixties and seventies movements. And now it comes to health and wellbeing. When I do a Buddhist meditation retreat, people say, 'I hope you are very relaxed now'. Buddhist meditation is not for lowering blood pressure. I think, it's not so much misused but it's indiscriminately used. I teach here and I tell people: 'you can do whatever you like with Buddhist beliefs but you should know where it came from, that you've got these three major traditions surviving and this is their nature. And we've got new ones developing. So you're free to do what you like but as long as you realize what you are doing. It might be worth understanding some of the original systems first before you throw them out or start to sell them. That's the problem we have now of people making money from Buddhist industries. But then that's not unusual, not new.' (1:20:37)

"What is interesting is that there is something subtle behind all the religions that we have to look for. And if we get past the businessmen. And I don't think that academic has it either. We teach here applied Buddhist studies. One of the formal scholars in the world is a Christian and he is reading this ancient text and he said: 'yes, I am thinking about this in church the other day.' I thought: 'My God, how can he read this text from BC500 and he is still a Christian.' I don't know how that's possible. And this is a technical language subject. So, fine. That exists as well. But he does not have access to the teachings and meditation." (1:21:42)

#### **How long have you practiced Buddhist meditation? (1:21:50)**

"Again, it's a problem with definition. There is a wonderful book called 'Mindfulness of Breath' from the seventies. So, when I read the book, I started meditating on my own. I thought, 'I can read the book, the instructions, so mindful of the breath, I can do.' But you can't get a picture when you're an Anglican boy and you're brought up in a country town. And you're sitting on a sheet and you try to meditate. You don't know what you're doing. Meditation cannot be taught from a book. You need some certain conditions, you need instructions and guidance. So, I did a couple of retreats before 1989. Meditation is very interesting. One month retreat I did in 1989, that's where I learn the beginning of the process. It's an extremely subtle skill... I do a number of techniques. There are two streams of Buddhist meditation: those to produce calmness and those to produce insight. I am very much on insight stream. And I am using calmness as well. How can they come together? Calmness meditation, you take the mind and you put on an object repeatedly. It's a thought, a prayer, whatever you want, the breath, a contact, that you put the mind in a limited area repeatedly. That produces calmness eventually. You repeat it patiently again and again. That produces only calmness. When you stop doing the practice, the calmness goes away. So, it's conditioned. When you do insight meditation, which is the other one, the mind doesn't choose an object. You follow the process of consciousness. You watch the mind as it experiences things. That's what we have to practice. You are aware of what is happening in the mind as it happens whether it a thought, a sound or a memory. Again, I am thankful for the Buddhist teaching. We only have six inputs to ourselves. Six things are coming: five senses and the mind. So, you just watch those and what happens: extremely refined. That teaching produces eventually enlightenment but it produces a much small thing called insight... The aim of Buddhist teaching is to eliminate suffering. Good karma is not eliminating suffering. Eliminating suffering is by having insight into the nature of reality. Greed, hatred, illusion are set aside and you see the nature of suffering, impermanence and not self (1:24:38) So calmness is to allow insight to develop. So, you calm down and you sit there with enormous

calmness. Already, that's enough for most people. Once people get a sense of calmness, already they want to become a guru. Because they think that they've got it. This is a preliminary. Calmness is there, very refine state. Western culture does not teach this. You cannot produce calmness in any of these traditions. This is one thing precious. Insight is when you do the next step. If you did ten day retreat and you know what calmness was, we can have an interesting chat. When calmness is there, the mind is becoming still, quiet and you experience something you never felt before: peace in the mind. It's not a religious event. It's a technical state. Then insight and wisdom come after that." (1:26:46)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian? (1:33:20)**

"Faith: There were unreasonable demands on my mind. I was asked to believe things with no evidence and no way to test them, no information whatsoever to validate it. So, I need a validation of the teaching. And the scriptures were problematic. They have been filtered through human hands. I am reading translations a thousand years later and they don't hold together, the contradiction between the new testament and the old testament. Okay, I am supposed to believe that those are the same traditions but it doesn't match, has been revised. The Jews don't accept that and the Islam doesn't accept that either. What is really going on there? How can I test it? It's just a history. Where're my practical hands on day to day change in my life and my mind? There is none. That's a short answer." (1:34:24)

### **What makes you a Buddhist?**

"It's exactly the same answer: experience. If you do a month meditation retreat and it altered the way you experienced the world, even the way you move your heart. Everything changes. Something happens there. If I do a Buddhist meditation and my mind experienced instantly a difference for hours or days or insight arises and it's a permanent change in the way I look at things or conditions... then you have an experience." (1:35:23)

### **Any teaching that is hard to take? (1:35:40)**

"There are teachings in the Buddhist universe that I have trouble with and I set them aside. One of my most problematic ones is the Pure Land where they say that no precept is needed. If you say the name of this Buddha ten times with faith, you will go to pure heaven after death and from there you will go to nirvana. There is no concept of conditioned reality or you're being responsible or making cause for that. The other one is the Buddha nature problem. This is also called for you as a theistic, because it was not there in early Buddhism. That's a problem we have. There is no teaching about the Buddha nature. Even the word Buddha nature comes in later by the time it gets to China. Because you remember the Buddha said: 'no self'. So, if there is no self, how can there be a nature. So, it's a contradiction. All it means is a potential... There was one wonderful Japanese debate, 'Do trees have a Buddha nature? Do plants have a Buddha nature?' The whole question how to relate the world around us is a problem as well... Also, there is one teaching in the tradition that there is a difference between the mind and matter. That seems to be axiomatic. The consciousness and matter are separate. So, there is no Buddha nature in this object or that. There can't be. It has no essence. So, where is the Buddha nature inside me? I can't find it. I can find consciousness. I can find all those parts. And I've looked a lot. When you spend weeks in meditation, you do know your interior furniture quite well. Saint Teresa called in 'interior castle'. I don't know everything but I know most of it inside me by nature. And I know only six inputs. So, Buddha nature, I can't find it



yet. I think that's later something coming into Buddhism from other cultures, like Chinese Buddhism needs certain things. They had to change the rules. Western Buddhism, a new construct, needs certain things as well. So, they can put in certain things, like they pursuit happiness. Happiness is not a Buddhist pursuit. Western American Buddhism later produces that." (1:39:50)

"Western Buddhism, it's problematic because it obscures things. Then people think that Buddhism is about lowering your blood pressure or they think that they can bring anything in and that's fine. Or let say we want to put together for your topic, Christianity and Buddhism can come together. Now there is a whole series of issues that brings up. Can they become mine? You can choose things and you can go with the flow and all that. But to my understanding, Buddhism is non-theistic religion. This temple has five Buddhas and people pray there. So, there are theistic layers. If Christians are bringing Buddhism together, I am not sure if they are fully aware of the problems. Maybe they are and that's fine. Actually, I must say one big difference between Buddhism and Christianity is. Buddhism you can think anything you want. Your mind is free for any theological disputes, no limits. Christianity is opposite. You have to define dogma. Buddhism does not have a dogma that I can find. That's a problem for you as well to define who are you talking to and what are they doing." (1:41:21)

The trouble with Shangharakshita is that its Buddhism is filtered through Christian concepts. So please be careful with reading Sangharakshita. You need to do wider reading... We all come with constructs and we need to be a little bit careful about it. So Shangharakshita informs you with Buddhist definitions. It needs to be a bit wider. Academically, how do you define a Buddhist? Anyone who claims Buddhist is a Buddhist. Okay, it's the simplest definition. Anyone who self-labels is going to be a Buddhist. Probably, that is the only way to define Buddhists. Let themselves define. So, you've got Christian Buddhists. Okay. So, it's a problematic area of definition. In Buddhist teaching, we can't actually find out who is a Buddhist. There is no test. There is no certificate... Why do you think Dalai Lama is so important? Because the West needs a pope. They need a Buddhist pope. He doesn't even lead all the Tibetan Buddhists. He is just one school. The reason is to decentralize. Christians can't understand that because they have a central structure. There is no Buddhist clergy structure from the old days. I should tell you also that I was ordained a Buddhist monk temporarily in Burma. I had my ID card and certificate for two months, temporarily. Thailand and Sri Lanka, they all have Buddhist registration system for monks. But that's modern, that's new. There is no way to control. There is no clergy. There is no senate. Each group does it own." (1:44:06)

"Our Western culture is built on selves. Psycho-therapy, for example, is built on servicing the self and they try to put Buddhism inside the psycho-therapy. You can't work like that. Buddhist analysis is different and maybe that's not a general analysis for public. If you have a meditation experience where you forget who you are, that's going to be disconcerting. Bernadette Roberts felt it like alienation. So, she tried to come to term with that, she was trying to keep Christianity at the background and come to terms with what God did or whatever. That's a problem. She's done it with a book. But she was exploring the Buddhist world. It can happen." (1:45:54)

**How Buddhism has changed or enriched your life? (1:46:08)**

"I don't think I could have a life without Buddhism. Christianity doesn't provide enough resources for life worthwhile interesting. There is not enough in Christianity to make life experienced, enriched or comprehensible. For me, and I don't mean this is a criticism, Christianity is not the model that can produce life. There are too many questions and answers and in a sense, it didn't fill the gap, meaning understanding of the nature of realities and nature of existence. What am I here for? Why am I doing this? How does the universe work? How does my mind work? So, there aren't enough resources in it. That's why I was looking at other cultures. However, this is a very simplistic view, western cultures are good at material things, not good at the interior stuffs. Look at these Asian cultures, material things are not so good but there is another whole technology of the mind there that you put together. So that's interesting. It fills up the gaps... I think putting things together is interesting. So, enrichment, I wouldn't understand the world as I do or behave as I do or beyond what I call the path from now on without Buddhism." (1:47:55)

### **How satisfied are you?**

"I am totally happy and I am trying to be a good Buddhist. I am trying to practice meditation, make good intentions, not do harms and purify the mind. That's my test. On the death bed, will I look back and think 'Oh, I should have been a Christian or not?' No, I am totally over all, because Christianity produces fear in people because of judgement whereas Buddhism produces competency. It puts authority back into individuals and responsibility, I think... If you know that you are responsible, you lose the fear. So, I am ready to die. That's my test. As a Buddhist, you can die because all you do is produce all sorts of loving kindness for yourself and for others. Christianity doesn't focus on that. The Christian teaching is I am bad because of the Fall. It also doesn't make sense. It is a very scary stuff. So, Christianity takes away fear and it fulfils authority. It gives you something to do." (1:49:39)

### **Do you have an ultimate goal to achieve?**

"Can enlightenment be achieved currently? What's an enlightened person like? Have I met one? I don't know. I think all I can do is to put in place conditions which help me to understand the world. And it does change every day. I don't know about your faith basis but it's a daily process and experience and realities. I meditate every day, often twice. And every day is different in terms of Buddhist experience of the world. The meditation is intensive and one part. Other part happens in normal life where you understand whether the teaching becomes subtler or you can analyse and understand everything around you from that Buddhist perspective and test it every single time. I give an example. The main Buddhist teaching from the first Four Noble Truth is that if you attach to something, you will suffer. So, if you reduce the attachment, you reduce the suffering. And that I can apply on a bus coming in here now. It works every single time. So, I've got that test on moment to moment base." (1:51:17)

### **Academic and professional background**

"It's a mixed background. I spent twenty years studying Sanskrit in NN and I was working in a library there. So, I am not a career academic. Religion or belief or whatever is my prime mover. I was a volunteer in NN. I came back here because of a position. I need a job. This one I have qualification for... Academically I am not doing that well because it's not my main process. And I could walk away from my job as well. I think meditation and studying the teachings is

my main goal actually. And by teaching I have to study as well because when you have to talk about it you have to know more.” (1:52:54)

### **Is there a Western Buddhism as such?**

“There is a floating mass, the entire corner of this room covered with books from the West. So, what is going on there? There are certainly teachings flooding through the traditions. All three traditions are producing teachings and people are reflecting on them. There are new books over here too. We can’t keep up. There’s a flood. What’s in there is still being sorted out. There is misunderstanding, miscomprehension, and misinformation. I think the intention is to understand it whether the West ends up understanding it or not. I don’t know. The teaching is not pure in the sense it comes through human activities and languages. The real test comes when you meditate, because all Buddhism to me evolves from the mind. You clear the mind, you fix the mind then certain things start to happen whether the teaching is practiced. Let’s say it’s like a technology. I would see Buddhism is like more a technology than a religion. And the technology is being put into practice with the meditation and then it produces the results and not like the results of blood pressure or smoking or whatever. It makes people more generous. They understand the nature of life and if they suffer less, that’s important.” (1:54:40)

### **Will Buddhism prosper in Australia?**

“There is a problem because we have the religious institution from ethnic groups. Those won’t last forever. We have Chinese, Vietnamese, Burmese, Thai systems. Those are going to last another generation or two. None of the Vietnamese children at the temples are interested. They want jobs; they have cars; they speak English; they want to be accountants; they have a different world. They are not going to support the monasteries forever. The monks and nuns are less. Westerners don’t support monks and nuns because they don’t have the tradition. And there are no institutions strong enough. So, it’s a bit unclear. Intellectually Buddhism will enter Western conceptualizing and thinking in a distorted or accurate form, it doesn’t matter. It’s now part an intellectual world culture. Hopefully we can refine it so we can understand what it means and we can use concepts like dependence origination. Remember the western only in the last fifty years understood system theories. From BC500 we had a definition of complex system into relating. It wasn’t understood in the West until fifty years ago. So, there are things still there that we need to understand. Whether it’s prosperous or not, I certainly hope not because prosperity brings institution which brings damage. The cutting edge is when people live in very simple ways. The institution is going to kill the religion. So, if you have interested individuals who are struggling, who want to reduce their suffering, that’s where the Buddhism can help. I think that’s part of the change now. The suffering in the West is unbelievable and it’s not physical. So, physical resources are not enough for people to be happy. That’s the real fundamental question that I put to your studies as well.” (1:56:51)

## **Interview Ross**

### **Background**

Ross was born and brought up in a Christian Presbyterian household, but not strict Christian. His family later joined the Church of England. Though inherited Christian values, they rarely attended Church services or activities. He went to Sunday school for two or three years during his primary school years but left it because he did not see the importance of it. The occasions that he went to Church were to attend weddings and funerals.

“My profession is a motor trade in retail and whole sale. I am dealing with people all day every day. I have a lot of customers and take hundreds of phone calls every day... And I find that challenging to think well. So, I am cooperating that wherever I can into my practice to sort of change my mental attitude. So, it’s better no matter what the situation I am facing with. So, in many ways I am thankful for what I am doing because it gives me a chance to actually practise the mindful aspect of Buddhism, being a good thought towards other people, because thoughts are as important as actions in many ways. So, in that way I am very lucky. That’s what I do.” (50:10).

### **View of God and response to the teaching about God**

“It was an all-knowing, all-seeing presence who could take and give at any time. That was my impression.... If that was a genuine case, you would have to ask why there is so much suffering and hurt within the world, if it is all-seeing, all-powerful. And there is always an easy way out of God’s will. You know, it’s not up to us to understand. It’s God’s will. For me, it just didn’t make sense. It’s something that was essentially a perfect being allows that imperfection to happen.” (03:46)

### **Response to the teachings about Jesus as the Son of God and Saviour of the world**

“Jesus was a prophet. I thought that was really good. As a saviour, I didn’t respond to him as a saviour all that well.” (04:06)

### **Response to the teachings about eternal life and salvation**

“That’s something that’s really nice to want to believe in. You know, it’s sort of getting nice carrots to get people to go along with it but for me the reality wasn’t there. There are just too many... each religion seems to have its own heaven and earth and hell. They have their own carrots and stick approach. So, for me, there are Christian things where you do what we say it’s going to be marvellous... At the same time, I see Jesus as a great prophet who expounds some very good views for you to live by. You know that basic theology was excellent but this whole heaven and hell are a bit too much.” (05:17)

About heaven and hell, “when I was young, it was about fear more than anything else. And as I got older I just didn’t pay much attention to it. But when I was young, it was quite fearful. It doesn’t make sense. It’s just a silly attitude for a merciful God who is all-powerful that means he created the good and he created the bad. When you start looking at these sorts of things, hang on, a couple of inconsistency here. That is my thought.” (06:17)

### **Did you or do you read the Bible?**

“When I was younger, I read a bit of it but I didn’t stick at it. No, I haven’t read it through. For me reading the Bible was a bit boring, really. I couldn’t get into it.” (06:48)

### **Experience of the Church community**

“The Church community, over all, is good but it’s difficult sometimes when you see so-called Christians doing some fairly unchristian acts and yet they still front up the church each week... Like I say, there are a lot of inconsistencies that I didn’t like. It can be an evil person in many ways and goes to Communion each week and confess all your sins and still finish up in heaven. All is well.” (07:40)

### **Involvement in Church’s activities**

“When I was younger again, in primary school, I was part of CEBS that was Church of England Boys Society which was similar to boy scouts. That was good. But I can’t remember them pushing God down my throat at that state or anything. I think it’d have a little service to start and finish and normal things. Other than that, I’d never gone to fun-raisers for churches.” (08:30)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

“To say that you’ve stopped being a Christian is very big. Even though I follow a Buddhist path, there is still a lot of Christian in my bones. And so, to say that I have stopped being a Christian, I think it’s not washed out of me completely, even though I don’t follow that path. And I find a lot in there distasteful of the Christian faith, and not so much Christian but the way it’s promoted by the leaders and by the churches that I don’t like so much. But I don’t think that I could say that I’ve stopped being a Christian but I am now a Buddhist... The Christian perse, that’s quite okay. What I don’t like is the way Christianity is used as a tool by so many people. I think probably you’ve got to get back to the basis of teachings of Christianity, probably be quite good. But too often it’s used by leaders and sectarian people to rally forces against others. We are fighting in the name of God, all that sort of things. I don’t like that. And once again, the other thing I don’t like the whole Christian thing is the supreme God who oversees the whole thing. God created this, God did this, God did that. I am not into that at all. But the basic Christian principles, once without being polluted by the human authorities, are quite good. But I don’t abide by this whole Supreme Being bit.” (41:24)

### **First contact with Buddhism**

In early nineteen seventies, he travelled to Tibet where he encountered with Buddhists and knew more about Buddhism.

### **What encouraged you to become a Buddhist?**

“One of the things that I did like Buddhism was, in general, the peace that goes with it and sort of non-violence... just on the surface it looked good and I thought that was fine. I kind of liked that and left at that with that pursuing it.” (10:20)

“Because... there are no excuses in Buddhism. It’s all cause and effect; it’s yourself. And that’s what I like about it. The cause and effect: good things and bad things you created them yourself. You can’t go running off begging forgiveness or things like that. It’s up to you to solve the problems. And if it’s bad in this life, then you try to make it better in the next life. That’s

why I like Buddhism. It's not handing it off to someone else to solve it for you. You are the one. End of story." (42:21)

### **Buddhist training**

Ross has been a member of a Buddhist group which follows the Mahayana Tibetan tradition. Reflecting on his past journey of practicing Buddhist spirituality, he recounts: "With Buddhism, over the last five years, my wife had been a Buddhist for quite a few years now, and I had that Buddhist influence in my life. And occasionally I went to Buddhist trainings and that sort of things. Like Buddhism from an intellectual point of view, across the borders, I can't find any inconsistencies. A couple of things I can't take on board for sure but the inconsistencies I can't find any. But Buddhism in general I started to follow it more about five years ago when I got quite ill, I got cancer. And I supposed what that did was it made me think I don't know how much longer I got to live. So, it accelerates quite a bit of what you think you may or may not want to do in life. So, it made me sort of thing, well I am interested in and so start to look into it more. So, it accelerated some of my thought processes. Since then I started taking Buddhist classes. I go to probably two classes every three months. There are classes twice a month and I don't always make it to all of them. So, it's two times every three months. I have been on retreats in various parts of the world and in Australia. So yes, I looked at it a bit more... and gradually without a lot of studying on my part I am absorbing more and more of the Buddhist ways of life." (12:29)

### **How have you found those Buddhist activities?**

"I really like them. I really do it sort of gives you a better appreciation of life, makes you think more and hopefully in many ways I think one of the things I really like about them is that it tends to, I believe, make you, it brings out the best in you. It starts making you, if you've got the chance of being a better person, it starts working on that part of you to try to make you improve yourself. Buddhism itself I find quite an intellectual thing; it's quite practical but more than anything else it's just about your mind and getting that right and hopefully then the rest will follow." (13:25)

### **Does Buddhist practice help with your sickness?**

"I think it helps. From a Buddhist point of view, it's much more understandable why you get sick, why good things happen and why bad things happen. So, it becomes much more understandable. The meditation that goes hand in hand with Buddhism of which I have been a bit slack with my meditation but that is also very good for your sense of wellbeing. The whole things sort of fit quite nicely into a practical lifestyle. It makes you aware of the way you yourself conduct yourself because you are your final. Everything you do, life will give you a positive result or a negative result, not due to anybody else but yourself. So, it sounds a very good limiter in the way you act." (14:33)

### **How do you view the Buddha?**

"Look, I am viewing from the point of view that he was a person who is very beneficial to humankind, no, a person who is very beneficial to all sentient beings, just not humans but to all beings. That's his main thrust. So, the Buddha that we talk of is very good."

### **Do you have any sense of relating to the Buddha?**

“From the point of view of what the Buddha was, is within us all. So, it gives you, you know that from the teaching that I take is you can aspire the same person that Buddha was, you know, yourself at the same level. There is no reason that you can’t be, you know, within us. In that way, I can see myself similar that nowhere near his level. The icon’s yet to sort of grow.” (15:55)

### **Buddhist teachings**

**Four Noble Truths:** “I just find it so logical, as simple as that. It’s a logical teaching. Like so much Buddhist teachings, it’s a logical teaching. That’s in many ways the Buddhism in a nutshell and just maps out a good way to live, to ease your suffering and to bring happiness to yourself and others. It’s all laid out there for you in those Four Noble Truths.” (16:46)

**Eightfold noble Path:** “The same deal. You know, you’ve got ‘life is suffering, you want to end the suffering, there is a path to end suffering’, so it just gives you a path... I don’t think about the Four Noble Truths all the times. What I am doing, I try to make things quite simple. So, in my life daily, as I’ve shared with you before, I try not to commit any negative actions, negative thoughts and that’s the best I can do, not trying to have anger over the rest of us. The main thing, I think, is not to blame the outside for all the problems, this person, that person, this situation, just to look inside and decide, well, it’s probably my attitude that is at fault here and improve your attitude, improve your mind.” (18:08)

**Karma:** “Karma is great. I think Karma is difficult because to believe in karma, this is from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition that has slightly thought about certain areas but Mahayana style, the karma for me, with the reincarnation, was a little bit difficult because I am still, I believe in the reincarnation intellectually but I haven’t believed in it yet emotionally. You know it easier to intellectualize things but then to believe things totally within yourself is another step. Basically, I am nearly there, but karma for me explains so much that happens in this world. Some people just say, ‘shit happens, something goes wrong’, whereas in the karmic way of thinking, well, it’s a ripening of the previous actions or thoughts. Whereas you wake up tomorrow morning you and you read you’ve just won two million dollars in the lotto, that’s ripening of good deeds you’ve done previously. Everything therefore has cause and effect and I love that simple intellectual thing of cause and effect, not some guy in sky decides what’s going to happen. It’s your own actions that cause this reaction of further down. And ultimately that makes you responsible; you’re responsible for good things that happen and you’re responsible for bad things that happen. If you get cancer, well then, you created that cancer to yourself from something previously you’ve done by causing sickness or diseases or distress to other people. And yet if you are exercising a great health, and as far as I am concerned, that’s because you have done beneficial things in the past. So, for me, Karma is something which is the bedrock of Buddhism. I just love it.” (20:27)

### **Do you believe in reincarnation and rebirth?**

“Yes, I do intellectually a hundred per cent, sort of emotionally in my body I am sort of ninety-seven or ninety eight percent. It’s easy to intellectualize, it’s easy to read cases where it happened or where they’ve chosen other Dalai Lamas and then other Lamas, and then people can recognize things from previous lives and friends and that sort of thing. But, I haven’t got deep into myself yet that’s it one hundred per cent genuine, intellectually yes, but deep within myself, I think, I’ve still got to meditate a little bit more. It’s just so many ways of looking at

it. If you have children, one husband, one wife and two or three kids and you've got brothers and sisters, sure you will share some individual traits which travel with the family, but you look at each one, you say 'how is he my brother, he's so different, how is that my sister, she's so different. So often they can be different to each other and yet they're brother and sister. And so, it's something which I love in Buddhist things that, okay, they've got their own minds which is come from previously. And to me that makes a lot of sense too. You can sort of start understanding why things are like that. So, it's such a good questioning and answering; it's not something where you're forced to believe in something. And there is really a disappointment if you do question. You know, that is something about Christianity; well, this is the way it is; that's what the book says, don't question it. And that's something which I don't like. And I am not so keen on that. That's what I like about the Buddhist viewpoint" (22:44)

### **Wisdom of emptiness and nothingness**

"I think one of the biggest problems there is and I am speaking here not from personal experiences but what I am being told is with the explanation of 'emptiness'. There is no good translation from the Tibetan into the English language to try to get it across. There isn't an equivalent English word to describe it because their mind has never been thought along the way that Tibetans have on this area... So 'emptiness' is the best they've got and it causes quite a bit of confusion... Emptiness is, once you have had a handle on it and I am still getting there, it's pretty obvious in that nothing is as it seems. Everything is dependent upon everything else. So even though this is a solid house, it's dependent upon everything around it to be as it is... Things are solid moment for a moment and then it'll change in the next moment. Everything is impermanent and we cannot exist as we are without something around us. You cannot exist without the air that you breathe, without the food that you eat. You can't stand without the ground below you. You're dependent on so many things to be as you are... That's what emptiness is, nothing is solid, nothing is permanent." (26:06)

### **How has this teaching affected your life?**

"You suddenly realise that nothing is permanent, no matter what you strive for is impermanent and the only thing that is going to keep going is your mind. That's the thing that is the most important than anything else. You can build this castle, you can have the most beautiful car, you can have all this kind of things, but in the end, none of those matters. It's all impermanent but your mind goes on. So, what you've got to try to do is you look at all these things and say these are all nice things, they're worth having but what you should be working on is the one thing that is going to move on and that's your mind. Try to get your mind right so in the next life, hopefully, you will get a better position to gain enlightenment. What I look at now is that I don't orient towards money and earning and job or that sort of things. And all that still is important but not as important. It just doesn't matter as much. I think that what it shows me that there is something which, in simple terms, it's not much point being the richest and end up in a cemetery. You might just get your mind right for the next life. So, it just makes you think a little bit more as you go along about the impermanence of everything, be it your life, you could be death tomorrow, just happy with your life today. I guess that's what it gets out to. It's in an area that I am a bit vague on but it certainly makes me less materialistic." (28:26)



“The teaching of non-self is part of it. The whole non-self thing, the ‘I’ – the nonexistence ‘I’, that’s really a difficult one as well. What is the ‘I’? But that is part of what I am saying as well. The ‘I’ is existing as I am here. There are two realities: the true reality and the conventional reality. The conventional reality is day to day, you know, you me and that sort of thing. The ultimate reality is acknowledging that you and I don’t really exist as we see each other. Things aren’t as they seem. The ultimate ‘I’ doesn’t really exist... So, on that area, I am in there but haven’t got a full handle on it. In my own head, I have got a good idea of it but I can’t explain it well which means I haven’t got a full understanding of it as yet, as simple as that. Since you can understand it clearly and succinctly as far as I am concerned, it means you understand it fully.” (30:21)

### **Nirvana**

“I have to get a correct definition of nirvana and enlightenment. Basically, they are the same thing. I don’t use nirvana very often even though it gets thrown around... Enlightenment is when you get to a stage where you don’t any more create negative karma. You create no more negative karma and you get out of what they call circling existence, you know, where you just keep coming back into this realm, hell realm or human realm or whatever and burn up your karma. So, you don’t create more karma at all. So, you are longer in samsara. You are out of that. That’s enlightenment. And then you can choose an enlightened person, a Buddha, and then chooses to come back, the Mahayana tradition sort of says, they normally choose to come back then to help sentient beings for them to become enlightened. That’s my reading on it.” (32:05)

### **Buddhist practices**

Ross has been an active member of Sengteng Ling Buddhist group in Victoria for around five years. He has been practiced Buddhist for that period of time. At the moment, he meditates once every two days. Though he is a Mahayana Buddhist he follows Zen-style meditation, sitting and watching breaths. He believes that following this method he stills his mind and watches the emotions and thoughts as they arise and negate them. Beside meditation, he regularly does the water balls which is a morning ritual which involves incense and prayers. This is one way to train his mind and to train himself to be benefit to all sentient beings.

### **Are there any Buddhist teachings or practices that you find it hard to accept?**

“No, as I said before, with everything I’ve come across so far, there is nothing that I’ve really said ‘no, that’s not right’. It’s just what integrates sort of Buddhism is reincarnation, and as I said before, intellectually I’ve got all that. But emotionally, through my whole body, I am almost there. Because that really makes everything work properly, the karma and everything. Even without that though the basic teachings of Buddhism are very good, on a straight out philosophical, intellectual basis, the teachings are excellent in any way. (43:26)

### **In practical terms, how have Buddhism and its teachings changed your life?**

“I certainly don’t look to others anywhere as I used to for my happiness. I am trying very hard to calm anger and not always project outputs to someone else that causes the problem, you know that problem comes from yourself, not from others. So, on the day to day level getting on with people, remaining calm, not being jealous or angry or wanting more or that sort of

things. It's been very good for me. It makes life on the day to day level. I find it a very practical religion. That's what I like about it." (44:41)

**How satisfied are you with following Buddhism?**

"I think, I am. Look, it's not something that I spend hours every week doing. I go to the teachings, I sort of read some books and then just try to apply it gently on my day to day life. I don't bash myself around the dead with it. If it doesn't work out on a particular day, it's okay, I'll try it tomorrow. I just find it a good way to try and live a better life and to get on with others better. It's a real challenge though, you know, when you've got chucks out there and foxes and everything. The foxes eat the chucks and you're meant to be compassionate with the foxes. There is a lot challenge that goes with it. But as long as you take it in good humour, like most things have good humour about it, and sort of things. That's how it goes." (45:55)

**Do you have an ultimate goal to achieve?**

"Look, the ultimate goal normally for any practicing Buddhist or any practicing Mahayana Buddhist is to become enlightened so you can help all people, all sentient beings. That's the ultimate goal... But for me I have to say I've resigned myself of this life isn't going to happen anywhere near it and I am happy just to sort of cruise along as I am. That's the ultimate goal but for me it's quite a distant goal." (46:52)

**How about the near future goal?**

"I am just laying the ground work now. I think if I was really serious about getting on with it in this life time, you know, really a hundred per cent serious, then I'll have robes on and will be away on retreats or study hard and that sort of things. And I am not doing any of those things. I go on occasional retreats, I still live my normal day to day life and cooperate Buddhism onto it but the ultimate goal, sooner or later, I'll get there." (47:38)

**Can you live your day to day life and become enlightened?**

"My belief is probably not but I am not saying that that cannot happen. I don't know enough to answer that question. But to get enlightened and to do day to day activities I don't think so because there are too many distractions. I think to become enlightened, you would have done your day to day activities previously and then in your next life you may move into more meditation or being a monk or something like that. You'd be moving closer to that goal. But my knowledge of Buddhism is really small so my answer there probably completely incorrect but that is my take on it." (48:43)

## Interview Zion

### Question 1: Could you share with me the experiences of your family's religious background?

"My father was a Catholic. He died now but he was a Catholic. None of my mother's family was a Catholic. So, for years and years I was the only Catholic in an extended family when I was in England because I was in Africa as well. So, I was often the only Catholic. When I was a little girl, like at a boarding school during the holidays, I'd be the only one and I still work to that. So, it would have been wonderful if someone accompanies me to that. I was always aware of the fact that I was the only Catholic but the rest of the family weren't. I knew when I was confirmed I didn't even know a Catholic that I'd have asked to be my confirmation sponsor. And I was in England by myself because my parents were in Africa. And I just assumed that one of the nuns should be my sponsor but they weren't or wouldn't be and I had to ask a local chemist because we heard that he was a Catholic. If he could be my sponsor when I was like twelve years old. It was very daunting. So, I was always aware of being Catholic. I'd like being Catholic and then when I was about 17 or so I sort of drew away from the Church. And then I had actually in test spirit when I was actually very religious and I loved going to the morning Masses during the week rather the weekend Masses. And I had a deep Catholic type of religious experiences but then I'd leave the Church then I came back to the Church when my children, I married a non-Catholic, when my children were born I assumed that they'd brought up, baptised as Catholics, and my husband didn't mind that. That was fine. He was Anglican but he'd sometimes come to Church with me or we just didn't go to one or another. You know it was like that. But again, I was with non-Catholics. I was always seen as a Catholic among non-Catholics and it didn't really worry me too much but I was aware that I wasn't supported sort of by being Catholic except my dad was a Catholic. And so, then when children had grown enough to, it was John who decided that we came to Melbourne to send them to a Catholic school. And so, I was surprised I was going to send them to a state school but he decided on a Catholic school. Then they went through the program of going to the first communion and things like that and it was then I thought oh, oh... if I am going to expect that they go to communion, it's about time that I have to decide where I stand. So, I came back into the Catholic Church at that stage. And I was lucky because I actually met the head Mistress, who was very, I really got on well with her. And I could ask her questions about Catholicism that I could ask a priest but I wouldn't ask a priest because I wouldn't feel comfortable. And so, you know it's good to meet her and I come back into the Church. Then I became very religious. And then we'd moved up to Sydney just when I was really back into the Christian, into a Catholic community, into the Church. I was on every committee that you would be on, with the school, you know, and things like that. And then we got moved up to Sydney and I was devastated but then I got involved in all Catholic Church. I was in committee, I set up libraries, I was really involved in the Church and I used to go to Mass every day because basically it was really lovely in Sydney. With children sometimes they go to Mass. When they were at school then I go to Mass. Then it was pretty a rough time because I certainly wasn't welcomed by priests up there in Sydney. I felt very much out of it then. But I got involved with all other mothers and people with the Catholic things. Then I started doing a course. There was one of those Aquinas academic courses we brought to the parish. And I thought I'd go.

Then I started doing biblical studies that I'd never done in my life. And then I started going to Hunters Hill to the Theological College at Hunters Hill. And I did one subject there. And we got to move back again to Melbourne. Then I started searching theology at YU. So, it was really odd. It was like the Church sort of pulling me away but academically in the later part and just socially to start with because I was lonely in Sydney. Already up there for 10 months but it seemed like eternity. And when I came back, I couldn't wait to enrol in theological studies. So that's how I got involved in library, well that I have been a librarian all my life, but just work in a theological library. That's what I have been doing for 20 years."

**Question 2: How was it to be the only Catholic in a family?**

"It was a weird feeling because I never felt supported. I had one uncle in who was in England and I had an uncle who wouldn't talk to me because I was a Catholic even when I was six years old. He would not talk to me, remember coming to the house but he wouldn't talk to me. He must have been like a very strange Methodist, something like that. So, it's sort of like tied evangelical type of thing but very weird and very narrow view point and he wouldn't talk to me because I was a Catholic and I can remember being there staying with my other uncle which is he brother. I thought why this uncle never talked to me."

**Question 3: Did you receive any religious education?**

"Yes, I did from the nuns and I loved them. They were my family; they became my family because mom and dad were in Africa and I had no brothers or sisters. I loved the nuns; I loved the boarding school. It was really nice."

**Question 4: How did you find the religious program that you had?**

"I liked it. I mean I was only nine. I grew rebelled against it. I mean my whole relationship with Catholicism was rebellious against it since I was as a child. But I loved it. I would never not to say that I am Catholic. It is; that's just how it is. But I rebel against it even now."

**Question 5: Is it about the content of the teaching that you rebel against?**

"Well, I had moments that I was really spiritual. I can have really deep times. So, I did experience a type of conversion experience when I came back into the Catholic Church. So, when my kids making the first communions and there was one time at some one's funeral, this woman who had been so good to me, D her name is. And it happened to be his father's funeral. It could have been at any time. I wouldn't know the father. I didn't know the father at all. I just went to support her when her father died. And I had an extraordinary religious conversion experience. It was like you hear of Saint Paul's light and I was just so different. And I was actually working in a public library down in Brighton and they knew I had a morning off to go to the funeral. When I got back I was so shocked by this experience. I had no idea what it was. I had never read Saint Augustine's confessions or conversion. I didn't know about thing like that at all. I just had this experience. The light was like a right poem or something because I didn't know how to cope, how to process it. But it was like this light was being filled with light, and just being ecstatic sort of about this religious experience. I hadn't no idea what it was. I was in the Church. I was kneeling down, probably after communion, but I was kneeling down at the funeral and this thing, this experience happened to me. And because when you go to a funeral, people often come out teary and. And I had to go to work, after it. I didn't know enough people to start right talking and things. I just sort of went back to work. When

I got back to work, I can remember people saying: Oh, just leave her alone. She's been to a funeral. So, I must have looked different or shocked or something because I heard somebody say that and I thought: Oh, that's funny, but it was from this experience. Yes, what it was; it was most enormous light. It's like I went somewhere else or something or it's just like a glowing enormously right light. And I just felt like, I supposed you just say like you were loved or something. But it was just ecstatic. So, it was just amazing. I was just knocked of my feet alive. I was kneeling down. But it was just only for a moment probably. It was just enormous sort of light. That's all I remember of it. So, it's just that sort of things but it just knocked you completely. I was completely knocked but I didn't understand it. I never read about conversion experiences and I had no knowledge at all of it. And sometimes later I must have said something to the priest or I had gone to Mass and then sort of ...I remember feeling very deprived if I didn't receive the communion wine, like it would really upset me that's part of the whole communion. One day I think for some reason we didn't have it or we may had a prayer service or something and Instead I was upset and then I must have said something to the priest and a day or so later he gave me a bit about I think from Augustine's confessions and about this light that he expressed. I thought, oh my God, that's it. That was sort of what I had experienced that light or something. And then I mean I'd gone through times even when I was at the boarding school I sometimes go down to Mass in the morning. The girls would tease me because they see me getting up early to go to that. We had to go three times a week but I used to like the quiet times. And I would have gone in and out of those times of liking that deep experience."

**Question 6: So, after reflecting on that experience, you realized that it was a conversion?**

"Well, I knew it was special. I knew it was too special. It wasn't certainly something I was going to talk about very readily to any. I knew it was big; I knew it was special; and I knew that it was sacred. I didn't know enough to realise that. And so, when the priest gave me just a little photocopy from Augustine's confessions, I think it was, and I thought, oh he understands. And then subsequently I went up to the white Friars monastery when it was a Carmelite place and I met a nun up there and she said NN, her name was, and she's a Loreto nun and she is doing direction. And I had not been to spiritual direction but I just sort of went along to this for a reward day retreat. And she said to me, out of the blue, she said to me something about 'and you know what I mean, don't you?' And it was about this sort of conversion experience or something. And I hadn't said anything to her and she said, 'you know what I mean, don't you?' And I said, 'yes', and then I told her what my experience has been. But I just wouldn't have said anything unless she had already said that. And I just realised that I knew it was something special or sacred."

**Question 7: What about the concept of God? Do you have any difficulty?**

"Yes, I believe in God. I have a struggle associating with Jesus, like I sort of having a close concept of Jesus. I just don't but I've got... I know in my bone that there is a being or something that sort of looks out to me or cares for me. And if anything is I am frightened of something and I am thinking of children and I want to protect it, I will pray to God. That's what first comes to my mind. Yes, my personal experience of God, it's quite close really. And yet I am not churchy as such. And I have had times in my life when I am very churchy and I have been very involved and I can go off, like if I am doing a reading, I sort of doing readings at Mass or readings at Easter or stuff like public readings. And I can tap into that faith that I

have and in some ways those readings are meaningful to a lot of people. But then I don't like performances as such. I know that I am tapping into the depth that can touch lots of people, all that sort of things."

**Question 8: How does the faith that you have just shared affect your life? Does it make any changes to your life?**

"I think I have struggles as much as anyone does have. I think it gives trust that things will eventually work out; it gives me trust that I don't believe necessarily, well I've always believed in reincarnation which I know not Catholic at all. To me, it's the only thing that makes sense. And so, I just know that I am here to sort of learn and it may take several lives and that's sort of things. I just think that it gives me confidence that it's ok if I stuff things up now I still have other chances. It's not the end of the road. I don't see this God as being sort of very moralistic and stuff like that. I see that as being the Church's moral. I believe in the God who works things out, that I will be ok, that you know I will somehow get back on track if I lost whatever, or that things will work out."

**Question 9: What is the difficulty that you have as you have shared in relating with Jesus?**

"I am not very Gospel related and stuff. I feel that you hear them. I think that ... an American priest who says something about the Good News that it's sure it's good but it's not news any more. I forget what his name is, a terrific preacher. And that's how I feel. It's sort of when you go to Mass you will hear the same bits from time to time again. And I like things that are new and more enlightening that would give you more of a slant on things. And that's where Buddhism came in because I am hearing things afresh and it's sort of new."

**Question 10: So, what is your view of Jesus?**

"Oh, he's a good man and really a good person. If they say that he is God, well that's ok. But I can't, I find it hard to see that connection and I just don't get it. The Holy Spirit, I can understand in the Holy Spirit. Because I understand its spiritual sort of thing. But God, you know, Jesus being the Son of God and all that. And when I studied the Trinity I'd studied to get a hand on it but I just don't get it."

**Question 11: What is your view of Jesus as the saviour?**

"I don't know if I believe in the original sin and stuff like that. I would be likely to live in the original blessing or evolutionary sort of experiences that we get as we should get better and better as we go on. And I can believe so as if you could get back to the Middle Ages and see people fighting and we're still doing the same thing now but we are trying a little bit harder, I think, not to sort of fight. And they went terribly cruel to each other. And so, I mean, I would have more a concept of us getting better from each life that we are trying to be a bit better. So, for instance, we don't take teeth out these days without anaesthetics. That's an improvement to me; that seems to be better."

**Question 12: So, are you thinking of salvation as an evolution?**

"Yes, I can't imagine that anybody could have done anything so awful that we lost our rights to go to heaven for God's sake. Well, men the men must have thought that up, you know. And then when I look at my grandson, and I've just had my recent grandson now, how could

anyone tell me that the baby is not anything that pure innocence. How can he be born for original sin on itself, for God's sake? I couldn't imagine it, you know, the totally vulnerable, totally innocent and stuff. I just can't get it."

**Question 13: From your understanding and experience how do you express the idea of salvation?**

"Salvation, I think, is that we learn to be kinder and not cruel and just we try to be kind to each other and generous and thoughtful and that sort of thing.... Again, about original sin, I just find it hard to, I mean, I've been taught it but I find it hard to get my mind around it because I just don't believe it, I don't. I can't see how it rings true to my experience of say baby or people or just I don't get it."

**Question 14: You used to be a committed person in the life of the Church. What kind of activities did you undertake?**

"They would be social. I mean I've been very much involved in reading at Mass. I was on the parish association of a little Catholic school. I was in, what do they say it?, pastoral council guiding that community. But my interest is always to build up community to get people involved and to organize things, like I organized the big mission in the Church and we had, for six weeks, we had six different preachers coming in, different people coming in. And we tried to get lots and lots of people involved. That's my interest to build up community and to sort of get people involved. There were lots of lonely people to try to involve then. And it's that what I see as Catholic. I think that's Catholic. That's important."

**Question 15: Is there an Ultimate goal of your involvement in Church's activities?**

"I supposed the ultimate goal is to get everyone talking to each other and to sort of to be sharing with each other and to talk. Well, it's through the building of the little parish library or something or people talking or having a cup of tea together. It's all the practical side of things. I don't think that's where the beauty of the Church and humanity comes out in people doing things together. To me the worse thing is to be able to go to Mass on a Sunday, a couple of moments I haven't spoken to somebody. To me that's absolutely sinful. And it is such a dreadful thing about the community to let that happen."

**Question 16: How about the Bible? Do you read the Bible?**

"Oh yes, I do. I did some Old Testament studies up there at the YU. I like its stories and I like its literature and stuff like that. And I like writing essays on it. I don't mind doing that. And I like exploring things about it. And I enjoyed biblical studies but I don't know if I believe it. It's just like traditional stories that have come down as far as I am concerned. And it can just easily be Celtic stories from Ireland or to me it's symbolic, its value is in its symbolism. I think anyway. And I think it's important for people to know the stories. I think that's important but not to me. Just to know like it's good to know literature. It's good to know basic sort of English language, literary texts, you know, something like that. It's important to know things like that. And I think the Bible is like that to me."

**Question 17: When was your first contact with Buddhism?**

"Yes, it was extraordinary. I was driving to the city to go to work at the library at St. Francis'. And I used to drive down to a little lane way and saw a Buddhist centre. This was in Little Lonsdale street. And I said to my husband, because my husband used to go into the city on those Mondays, I said to him, 'I will call in there one day', I just heard that calling. And so, one day I did before I actually started work. I walked up a little... And I knocked on the door and I thought, there would be like, I imagined there'd be like a reception desk and they had leaflets and you just picked up some leaflets. That would be it. So, I went in there and I was greeted by one woman who was sitting down and then a tall man who was NN. And anyway, I suddenly took fright because I suddenly thought I don't know why I am here and I said to him 'I don't know why I am here'. I was just so... It wasn't set up in a way I imagine it would be. He said, 'Well, we'd better sit down and have some chats.' So, I sat down with him. It's like there were like two seaters. And we were just talking and he said, 'it was the most ...someone who just comes in and said, 'I don't know why I am here.' We've got talking and I said, 'I would be interested in. I've been seeing the place and I thought I just come and see what's going on there. And he said, 'We've had lunch time meditation on Mondays, Wednesdays, and something.' And then he said, 'we're going to start the classes soon.' He was giving the classes and it was on the Monday night. And I said, 'I'd better sign up for classes.' Because Monday night was the only night I was in the city. And so, I started going to the Buddhist group. And so that was when I started."

**Question 18: What made you interested in Buddhism?**

"Why Buddhism? Why not Islam or something like that? Buddhism I like because I like the asceticism that I saw what I imagined the ascetic monks and nuns. I like the prayer; I like the ... again, it appealed to that deep part of me that would go to Mass week day morning or something that prayerfulness that quietness and prayerfulness and stuffs like that. I imagined that's what Buddhist would be like and I then found they have a strong ethical teaching which I found was interesting because they tell you how to not get into issues, to have tried to learn that little gap they took, that little gap before you make a decision which is just reactive to things. I thought, 'Oh, this I can understand". It's more like psychological but it's so how to do it and what the ideals the goals are. So, the goals I am quite comfortable with their goals. Ah, and then they tell you how to go about doing it and to reflect, I like the fact that they reflect on their everyday life and what they're doing. And it's just not biblical stories or something like that. That appeals to me."

**Question 19: Did you read Buddhist literature or Buddhist books before visiting the Buddhist centre?**

"No, no, I just had said to my husband several weeks before I must call in one day and see it. It was just a fresh thought, mind you. My whole life was started with the whole fresh thought because like, for instance, one day we were driving to the airport and it said, ah I saw a big sign 'Emirate Melbourne to Dublin one stop to Dublin', and I said to my husband gain, 'I can do that.' And that's what started me thinking of going to Ireland and taking my dad's ashes back to Ireland. So, I get those inspirations. It's not unusual for me. But and they can lead to quite big things. So, I think that's the way which I think God guides me like a book fell out at my foot. And that's how I became a librarian. I was shelving some books waiting to go overseas and a book fell out at my foot and it's about 'Training to Be a Librarian'. And I applied and I got a reply note, 'we were full up and we don't want you'. And then I got a telegram and they



said, 'there's been a cancellation, come over within three days', and it was in Sydney. So that's how I started off in librarianship. So, it's how my life works."

**Question 20: How long has it been now since you started learning Buddhism?**

"Oh, heaven! I supposed it must be about, not very good at gauging years, it would be about six, seven, eight years, things like that. I think now. And then I started going to Buddhist classes and I enjoyed it. And then I moved down from home when I had my own house. I kind of didn't have the same needs then to go to a Buddhist group for meditation and things because I had the spaces around me. I used to go to weekly classes to start with and I did several of those courses and with several of those people. Started with NN and then, they had a woman there NN as well. So, I did with them. I think I did a couple of courses with them. And that would have been like the first year. I probably did about three courses. And I sometimes go with them on Sunday days and things like that, if they had all day long thing. And then they started, I'd then be keen on courses, and then I thought of, well, you are continuing to be the beginner or else you become a Maitra which is like a friend of Buddhism and I wasn't ready to do that. I couldn't have committed to become a Maitra in Buddhism which is like a much deeper commitment for it. And then after that you can be a Maitra all your life or then you can go for ordination."

**Question 21: How do you identify yourself now with Buddhism?**

"Well, yes as a friend of Buddhism and also what you have just admired their practices and things. But I am not sure now whether I actually say that I am practising as a Buddhist. I couldn't, couldn't really say that now. I think it would have been an experience, good experience in my life and I continue to read about anything I see about Buddhism, I will read it with interest, you know, like it appeals to me greatly."

**Question 22: How do you view the Buddha?**

"Yah, I feel him probably with more closer than I would with Jesus Christ. I feel it easier to get to respect him or to know him because there is no sort of claims that he is god. He says he is a person and I see him as somebody who's worked really, really hard and he said he was enlightened or whatever that is. I don't quite understand what that means really but obviously, he's practiced and he's overcome a lot his ego things. And I admire that. I think that's terrific idol. I would love to do a lot more of that, to overcome a lot of the human like basic sort of jealousy and, you know, those reactions and stuffs like that. I think that's desirable to do that."

**Question 23: How do you view the teachings of Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path?**

I've come across that and I find that the whole sort of, it's a good concept but the idea of all those listened stuffs that they have. I can never remember them all; I can only remember like couple of them or something like that. Then so and I think, 'oh, this is the same sort of thing they get like institutionalised by the Church and by the bible and I am sure it's a helpful way of remembering things. But that's like formal instructive side that everybody has to go through and stuffs. It's like a skeleton that people would learn whereas I don't see that it's sort of really, that's not how I learn, not how I feel it's helpful to me. But I do, I have come across them and I've come across some when I went to one studying course which is interesting about the wheel of life and I found that's interesting, I found that's very interesting

actually because it explains the whole sort of things. I'll try to explain about the wheel of life. It's like the hungry ghosts, really interesting, and then different ones, the sort of the opposite sort of ones. And it seems to expand. A lot of the things that we go through like areas that, ways that we can get caught up like, say by addiction or something which would be like that. I think they might be the hungry ghosts that sort of never satisfy. All of that I see that's almost like biblical teaching. I would see that almost like the Old Testament or something. I love some of the characters in the Old Testament like Abraham that I can relate to them, you know, so sort of human. And I see the wheel of life as being a little bit of like that sort of thing. I've forgotten that all of the different ones which were there but some of them very scary and very, it's sort of makes you really think how seriously people can get caught up in things. And so, I've found that very interesting that, to me one of the news, that were news. And it's sort of symbolic thing. I think a lot of things are symbolic and I like to work with symbols. I work with symbols a lot."

**Question 24: Do those symbols make any effect in your life or how you live your life?**

"I think it's sort of clarified to me the sort of dangers that we live with and ways in which we can get sort of stuffed into habits or whatever it is and things like that. I see it as instructive, informative, symbolic but useful, definitely useful."

**Question 25: What is your view on karma?**

"Karma, I have experienced karma, I think, on many occasions. I find that if you do something nasty, something nasty happens to you. To me, that makes sense because, and it makes sense psychologically, because you cause bad things, which I can on occasions, I can, and then it sort of comes back at you. And yet, on the other hand, like if you're driving along and you let a car in or something or a car let you in, well then, it's up to you to let, you feel that you want to let another car in, sort of things. It's just like people are nice to you, you just feel like you want to be nice to them. But I struggle a lot with my anger and temper and things like that. And so, it's really important to me to sort of learn not to react like to the emotional, have emotional reactions and things. So, you know, I find that karma helps me to sort of realise that. It's common sense, absolutely. And also, when you believe in lots of lives, well then if you live badly in one life, it stands to me that you have to make it up maybe in the next, I think."

**Question 26: How about the concept of 'non-self' or 'emptiness'?**

"I find that that's how for me to grasp. At the same time, that is the closest point in which Buddhism and Christianity meet. I think so. Because I think, a while ago, I'd read a book by a woman called Bernadette Robert and she speaks about that nothingness from a Christian view point. And I think people who go very deeply into Christian meditation, have an understanding of that sort of nothingness and emptiness if you like and that sort of things, and I actually think that is the part of Buddhist teaching which where Christianity and Buddhism could most meet, most closely meet, I think. But I am not sure that I really could say that I understand it but I think that it is important that I see it like sort of like deeper reflections and thoughts, you know. Perhaps, at the later stage for me I've been, I've had times that I explore that sort of things but then life sort of comes crowding it and you don't sort of have time at the moment, I don't have time to sort of spend time doing that, just simply because of the involvement with NN and the baby, with stuffs like that. But I can see

that that would be a development where Buddhism and Christianity could very closely meet. I think it's that very deepest part of a human person and that it's sort of, I think it was, and I saw film that it was made by him and I saw it at a retreat house, and he speaks about different religions being like the fingers so Islam, Christianity and so on. But it's the very depth that that palms and the arms and the hands and that sort of things and at that point that all the religions could probably meet up closely. But it's only very deep, deep down. And that's sort of what I think about it."

**Question 27: How about the teaching of Nirvana? What is your view on that teaching?**

"Is that like enlightenment or stuff like that? Yes, I could see how that's like heaven or something. But when one has become advanced, sort of like an advanced human being. So, I could see that it says some of the teachers that I may have in my life that when they get to the stage where the world doesn't mean all that much to them. It's important but it doesn't, they don't live by the world's standards. They're bigger than that. I can see that their next stage, their next life could be sort of like, not necessarily coming back into this world as we know it. But I also believe in the reincarnation and I think that we just develop and like we reincarnate and we'll get to the next stage that we're like big advisory wise bodies eventually that we'll help smaller beings, younger beings to get through life. And then we're just pure things, just so advanced. It's probably much closer to God or to that spirit."

**Question 28: Of the following five groups, which one do you identify yourself most closely with?**

- *those who have been one way or another influenced by Buddhist thought or practice;*
- *those who have gone beyond reading Buddhist materials or attending talks or lectures and have begun some Buddhist practice such as meditation;*
- *those who are actively involved in a Buddhist group;*
- *practitioners and teachers who dedicate their lives to the Buddhist path and are involved in teaching the Buddhist Dharma;*
- *those who consider themselves as "dual religious belonging", which means practicing both Christian faith and Buddhist spirituality at the same time.*

"At the moment, I have to say the first group, just a very baby group. I have done courses and things like that. But at the moment, I couldn't say that I'd be part of those courses. And people can do courses and they just seem to be ready and they teach whatever it is, something in the secular world or outside. I am never like that. I am like the sort of person I who has my mind sort of extended by something at one stage. But I don't necessarily sort of keep it going or something. It's always like it, just become integrated and part of me but then I might need something else more later too, expanded or something like that. I would say that it's good."

**Question 29: Do you consider becoming a more dedicated Buddhist practitioner?**

"Ah, I could see that. Yes, I could see that. It's not my calling just at the moment because of other commitments like with work, with NN and the baby, like life gets in the way a little bit. But I could see that I could, I could do that."

**Question 30: What Buddhist practices are you doing at the moment?**

"At the moment, it's not even meditating at the moment. I would like to be. So really it would be it very much. It's much Buddhist practice, it's almost psychological practice as it is as

spiritual practice. And it's just sort of reflecting and working on my own, sort of reactions and things and gradually, slowly wearing myself down and become a person that I would want to be. It's not. I work on dreams. So, when I go to see NN, I work on dreams. I work on like reading about sort of psychological things. It's just ongoing investigative sort of things. I am still using my meditation room. It's still sort of there, special. But I am not going into it often at the moment. So, I've got all house set up for it. And I've got very little time outside of sort of work and things at the moment, it's just a busy dash in my life."

**Question 31: About your meditation room, do you still keep it as meditation room.**

"Yes, I still keep it as meditation room. I always call it meditation room, always. And if I go in there, I always sort of bow to the Buddha who I got there. And if I sit there, sit there quietly. It's always a quiet room. It's not the room I just go in and be talking to people. Cats come in there. But it's a special room. Yes, always."

**Question 32: Between living the Christian faith and following the Buddhist path, which one do you prefer and why?**

"Oh, at the moment, I prefer to the teaching of Buddhism because I feel that Catholicism is something I've been brought up with and I don't feel that it's new at the moment, like nothing about it and I am surprised greatly. I am encouraged by the new pope. I am really very happy that we have someone like that. But then even all the flurry books sort of come out about Francis and all this nothing there but really what he's doing is new and it's great that someone will do that in the Vatican. But I just feel such layers of habitual things that I think the Church's got so institutional and so dug a hole for itself. And so, I think that for me where I get the new inspiration would be from Buddhism really. But I would never not say that I am a Catholic. And I think I would be a Catholic until I die, you know. And that's my distress."

**Question 33: How often do you do meditation?**

"Oh, right sadly at the moment, not very often. But that's not to say that I don't have very quiet moments as well I would frequently through the day there will be something that would just stop me and I can very quickly go in deep. And I think that some of the things that what I like to try to do it to be mindful when I am doing things and I can pull myself up when I am not being mindful. And I would almost like to have a meditation that goes on 24/7, you know. I would like to have that sort of thing."

**Question 34: Besides having casual meditation, are there any other Buddhist activities that you are involved in?**

"No, except that I keep up with NN to discuss things. I see him around every six weeks or so. And we discuss anything that sort of comes up or issues or something. I would really miss that if I didn't see him."

**Question 35: Did you have any other moments of enlightenment or conversion beside that experience of conversion you had?**

"More practical and so there are moments I could find the way I could absolutely say that Buddhist teaching had altered the way I acted in a certain way subsequent to hearing or reading about the Buddhist teaching. And so, for instance, one thing that's dangerous for me

if I am waiting for a long time in a queue I'll get very, very impatient. And, for instance, we have discussed sort of ways of defusing those sorts of issues. One day I went into Medicare to claim some doctor's bills or something. The queue was enormous. I thought, 'oh, this is a danger zone to me.' I was aware of that and I thought from a Buddhist teaching I realized that this is a dangerous moment for me. And so, I went next door and I got some of those cheap one-dollar cards and I needed to send off a couple of cards or birthday cards. And so, while I was in a queue in the Medicare, I wrote cards. That occupied me and by the time I was caught up to the counter, I was as sweet as pie because I hadn't sat there fuming and being angry that I'd kept waiting for so long. And so, I really thought to me, I thought, 'well, that was one very clear case where in discussing things like in Buddhist groups and ways that they explain that you can do it to avoid that dangerous sort of reactions. I did something about it, I did it. And so, I did mention that when I went to Buddhist groups, I mentioned that following weeks that I was very pleased that something had worked, you know. It worked right away, something with it. That's what I like about Buddhism. It gives you practical. Just didn't tell you to do that. But it gives to some practical examples of ways you can use."

**Question 36: Are there any other Buddhist teachings or practices that you think have enriched or changed your life?**

"I think I felt encouraged by meeting a group of people, all ages, all backgrounds who were seriously looking at their lives, looking at how they live their lives. And I found that really encouraging that here were people that were from streets, if you like, who have been brought up in any particular way, like some of them were left Catholics, a lot of them were left Catholics. Some of them have been hurt very much by the Church, either the Catholic Church or Protestant Churches or Evangelical Churches. Some of them, you know, some of them work, you know, in really sort of difficult situations, like orderly hospitals, not high up in the world. Some of them were layers yet we could all meet together and in this one group. That was not an issue. It was not governed by class or, you know, experiences or anything. But they all intently looking at their lives, looking at the ways they lived their lives. And I found that really inspiring and transforming that we could all get together. The other thing I was slightly liked was that they were either vegetarians or they were struggling to be the vegetarians and I really liked that, and that they don't approve of killing. I am totally vegetarian... I was going that way [being vegetarian] beforehand. I think before I joined a Buddhist group but it can't get me extra impetus to be totally vegetarian. I am still totally vegetarian. I just wouldn't, I don't condole killing at all if I can avoid it if I, like I take insects outside and things like that. But really would try very hard not to kill animals, very much aware of cruelty in the world. I am very sensitive now to cruelty and violence, sensitive to that even more now. I supposed now through Buddhism. I like the fact that they are against abortion and that's a very tricky thing to me because I've got two daughters and I hope, my goodness, I'll never have to face that because I'll be in such a difficult position. But I like the fact that even in this world that Buddhists can talk about trying not to go along that line and while they're still on for women rights and things. That's one thing I admire about them and they can say 'no' because of killing. You know life is more important to them. So, I think they've got a lot to offer which in the churches we know the centre of God such a handle which comes down too heavily on it. They still got healing. And they churches don't talk about the respect. And I talk about the respect for life and abortion and they don't talk about respect for life and killing and eating meat and animals and things. You know, so that's why I feel more comfortable with Buddhism."

**Question 37: Do you have any difficulties or challenges in Buddhist faith and practices?**

“Yes, I didn’t like their liturgies but they don’t call them liturgies. They’ve got the name for them, I forget now but the ... rituals, yes, yes, there is a special name I forget now. Yes, pujas. And I have the most difficulties with those because I couldn’t, I didn’t feel comfortable in them. And I didn’t, I can see how they like them and I can see how it’s meaningful to them and to sort of sit around and the candles and things. And can see the incense, all of them, I like the incense, I like candles and things like that.”

**Question 38: What makes you uncomfortable?**

“I didn’t, I think because I know so much about Catholic liturgies. I understand the symbolism of Catholic liturgies and it’s a comfortable clove or nest that I can get into Catholic liturgies and yet with their sort of pujas and things I just couldn’t get into them. I’ve tried to ask them to explain and it was just uncomfortable for me. Yes, it wasn’t comfortable.”

**Question 39: How satisfied are you with your religious life?**

“Ah, I guess I am still searching. I am still really searching. I missed, sometimes I missed the things, I don’t go to Mass at the moment, very often. I just go like for the ordination or something. It really doesn’t. That’s not what I see, but that’s not really satisfactory. Ah, if I go back to a Catholic Church, like if I go back to my own parish either one of those two parishes, the two parishes where I used to be, it’s ok. It sort of feels alright but I think I am still searching.”

**Question 40: In searching for religious life, do you have any particular goals that you want to achieve?**

“No, not really. I think maybe part of it is the community. It’s looking, maybe part of it is looking for a community and yet at the same time I am not willing to sort of going out there and trying. I don’t want to try anything else yet. Ah, I am not at the end goal yet, just more understanding, just constantly searching to understand myself to consolidate what I think. I mean I am so old now to be still searching but I just, I still just sort of want to find an understanding of myself and to live at peace and in harmony with whatever it is. And I think maybe with animals. [laughing...] I have four cats and I learn so much from them. And I learn from children, I learn from babies. You know there is a gentleness out there. There is a depth and stuff which is inspiring and I think that’s where I learn from that sort of things. Yes.”

## **Interview Tamie**

### **Tamie's previous religious background**

Tamie comes from a traditional Catholic family. She was baptised into the Catholic Church from which she received religious education and instructions. With her family she regularly attended Sunday Church services and activities. She attended Catholic schools and Catholic university and was an active member of the Catholic Youth group. With her family members, Tamie was involved in some social justice activities organised by the local Church including fund raising for poor people in Africa. When she turned fifteen years old, her family stopped attending Church due to their negative experiences of the Church as an institution playing out the power. She believes that her family members remain Christian and are spiritual but they stopped their involvement in Church. They are still parts of the Christian community, still attending certain celebrations, but they have detached from the Church as authority and therefore they no longer support the Church.

Regarding her professional training and work, Tamie was first trained as a nurse. She later undertook further studies and became a psycho-therapist. At the time of interview she is still an active practising psychotherapist who specializes in helping women and children overcome their struggles in her related field.

### **Tamie's view on God**

"Now I don't believe in the concept of God as it is portrait by the Catholic Church and how the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I don't support that. I do believe that perhaps at the time Jesus was like a remarkable person and had leadership and really brought Christian values to the world. But then what the institution that has grown about it and that the location of authority. I don't believe that the earth was created by God." (08:13)

The teaching of Jesus as the Saviour, for her, "is highly problematic. They put God and Jesus like that as a saviour. That is outside of oneself and not inside of oneself. So that is a big reason that I would not support the Christian [teaching about Jesus], even though I believe Jesus really existed as a historical person but how all the stories that evolved around it I think it's not a kind of spirituality that I take." (09:12)

The Bible for her is "a moral tool...I did not like it the way it was used to kill people. I think they are moral stories that are good for children to learn. But the Catholic Church relies a lot on guilt and punishment which I experienced a lot in my life. That is part of growing as a Catholic. It's very a hash culture and it's very punitive; it's a very authoritarian." (10:30) The Bible, for her, is "a construction. People have constructed it to make sense of the world and creation and things... So, it's not the word of some divine. Jesus probably was quite a divine person but I think it's just how everything was constructed. It reflected the society of that time but not necessarily of an individual person's word." (11:23)

### **Response to the teaching of Jesus as the saviour of the world**

"I don't believe that like I think that's one of the major errors or difficulties in Catholic doctrine because if you look at how Jesus was nailed to the cross and tortured and so the Catholic Church celebrates human tortures and that's somehow that Jesus transcends that and then it's reborn. But through the tortures so I think that it's really a cruel way of looking at

humanity and the punishment and the guilt... So, I don't think Jesus is a saviour. I think the teachings need to be about how to be a better person, not about that somehow when you're dead you either go to hell or heaven, like this is what you do in this life time... because I think when I have grown up in a Catholic contexts, it's the two-face nature, Christian people were very kind like we gave money to the poor, we will help the poor but they are actually in real life not very kind people; they are hard to their children; they fight with their siblings, their families; they get involved in life's conflicts, money, power like anybody else. But the face they portrait to the world is that they are kind people but they don't know how to resolve in conflicts to help people, to look inside themselves and help... it's scary me to another life." (14:27)

### **Response to the teachings of heaven and hell**

"They are very strong concepts used in the Catholic Church when you grow up. And I think for children it's very powerful, to be good or to be bad. And again, I think it's too simplistic and it's all about power as if someone can decide that you belong [to] heaven or you belong [to] hell. So, I think I don't agree with it." (15:08)

"As a child that could be sort of very occupying in hell but I do think the Catholic Church fails to understand that human beings have got good and bad inside them, all of us. And it's about how we can integrate our aggressive nature, our competitive nature, and how can we be constructive and not destructive to ourselves and to all the people." (15:48)

"I now am very like it's just I cannot believe that the doctrine continues to hold so much power. Obviously, I have been very hurt by the doctrine. I do think the Catholic Church has [done] a lot of damage to a lot of people. Like I was reading today in the newspaper Sydney Morning Herald in Ireland, a Roman Catholic country, the bodies of 800 children have been found in a pit. These are children of unmarried mothers. This is in the old days because to be unmarried and be pregnant was a taboo and wrong and so often these girls were raped and then got pregnant and the families rejected them and this was because of the Catholic Church. So, the Catholic Church with all this sexual abuse stories that are today coming out in public, the Catholic Church does a lot of damage. So, I am very hurt. These stories are real and took place in Catholic countries. And it's taboo and if you live in a country with strong taboos, it all comes out in the West. You know it's repressed." (18:05)

### **Response to the teaching on eternal live and salvation**

"I think I much more prefer Buddhist concept of reincarnation that a part of you reincarnates. So, I wouldn't sort of, it's not eternal life, that my interest is in my consciousness. What happens to our consciousness when we die? So, I am intrigued by that. So, I would agree there is like the continuity of consciousness, not my entity, not me. I die and my consciousness is intact and I will live on forever, I don't believe that. But a part of my consciousness is passed on the world because that's where I think its reincarnation. I think again heaven and hell is like a punitive structure... and heaven and hell is like the dead ends. Where do you go? Either heaven or hell, that's it, dead ends. While in Buddhism, I think, you have a continuity. And if you have a chance in this new life time, you can improve oneself and seek enlightenment and help other people. So, it's like the salvation and the redemption you're given a lot more room to be an ordinary human being with strengths and weaknesses while within the Catholic



concept I think it's like a dead end road and someone else determines it and it has very limited relationship that you build within your life." (21:27)

"People do seek divine assistance because people know that our life goes beyond material existence. I believe that people seek divinity in the world. So, the Catholic system will offer you God. I do believe that because of the cultural contexts that the suffering of life that we do benefit from divine intervention like His Holiness [who] is our teacher. So, I do believe that Jesus can help people and somehow show them how to live... I don't think the difference with Catholic or Christian with Buddhism is that they will say 'you cannot do without me, you are nothing, you are born a sinner.' So, I think that is just a ridiculous premise. Of course, you need someone who knows it. I think if you view humanity as sinners or ordinary people, good and bad, you don't have that problem. So, I don't believe in Jesus and salvation. There is no original sin. I think that's what keeps people down. If you didn't have original sin, we have a lot of positive, constructive... Well people have karma and that's where you can find your way out." (24:27)

### **First contact with Buddhism**

She had her first contact with Buddhism in her 20s through reading books.

### **Reasons to turn to Buddhism**

"My dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church. I like the way the Dalai Lama talks, the way he talked about people. About Buddhism I like the way, the focus is on compassion. And now in my professional life I am really interested in Dalai Lama's book 'Beyond Religions'. I really like that because Dalai Lama doesn't really promote Buddhism as another religion. And it's a philosophy of consciousness. I like that, how to learn about your own mind... There is another world out there. When you grow up as Catholic, it can be a very narrow focus." (27:30)

"I have struggles. This is very personal. Priests molested me. But this is a reality of people growing up in Catholic countries. People do not accept the wide-spread damage and harms that the Catholic Church has done. People still look at popes and archbishops as [divinely] assigned power... So, I have my personal struggles, I have sought to move beyond that. I don't want to be an angry person but I need to understand the effects of these things in my life, because they do harms to young children. This is horrible... Where is the justice? I have grown up with a notion of Justice, help people who are less than we are. So, I did grow up with that. But the Church creates it, the Church creates the injustices... I do think that the Catholic framework keeps the list on things because they want to maintain power and control." (30:06)

### **Becoming Buddhist**

She takes Buddhism as a "spiritual resource and I ended up learning to meditate and like going to some teachings, learning to meditate and doing yoga... reading books. So, it's as a philosophy of life. I really like how Dalai Lama talked about it in terms of shared humanity, the suffering is there as a reality of human existence but how can we be constructive and be in relationships with others more from equal. We are the same rather than you are a sinner and I will save you. No, you have responsibilities in this life to help our world and people. (31:20)

“So, then I attended the teachings, reading and go to groups. I did that for a while and then fifteen years ago I then through people here went to the teaching of Sakyana, Tibetan Buddhist. I attended that and I had initiation [three year ago], taking refuge... Since then I have gone to India to seek his holiness Sakatzen, received Varaj Zuhini initiation. So, I am a committed Varaj Zuhini practitioner.” (32:24)

“I have made vows to be a Varaj Zuhini practitioner. So, I practice every day... There are sacred texts that I go through... and only those who have initiated can do it. It really is about how to learn to enter into this kind of blissfulness of human nature.” (35:46)

### **View on the Buddha**

“I think the Buddha is an amazing teacher, is an enlighten being, and really proceeds the hayad, a hard word to find out, how to understand the suffering and how our minds play a role in keeping the suffering going, and how we can get a way out.” (37:43)

“I am aware of the Buddha every day, like I think we are very grateful, I am very grateful. Humanity is very lucky that Buddha is part of humans. So, I do think he is an exceptional, precious being who really had that quality to really stop what is going on here, how can we be in the world without making the suffering going.” (38:36)

### **Response to Buddhist teachings**

Regarding the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path, she comments: “I think it’s very powerful because I do think it’s a very clever way to really construct things and to go back all the sufferings and how can we understand that and how can we remedy it and how can we be in relationship with. So, I think they’re a fundamental path.” (39:15)

### **How to apply these teachings in daily life?**

“If you know [I] have a strong reaction to something, it’s like ok, stop, where does it come from? How do I feel like this? To really start, because people are very particularly Western culture that comes from a Christian, it’s always like a sick blame: ‘That person did it to me’. Well, the Four Noble Truths will say: ‘It’s okay, how did this suffering come? Is it [because of] the context like the economic situation? Is it [because] someone rushed too much? Someone has been hurt?’ You’re interested to know... where it actually started arising then, the cause of suffering, and really understand that. And then you can be more compassionate... You understand the basic cause of suffering... So that’s my real motivation to not blame and just me, I don’t want to feel hurt, and everyone does get hurt. (41:13)

### **Responding to the Buddhist teaching on karma**

“I don’t understand karma very well but I do believe in the reincarnation of consciousness and I do somehow believe that let say I have come into the life of my parent’s. It hasn’t been just my parents that created me through biology and creation of God. Somehow a part of me, my consciousness has come into my family, and has placed that world for whatever the continuation is there. So, I don’t think, I don’t believe that we can control things like I think the Catholic Church would like to believe that they can control everything. I don’t think we can. So, I do think that that’s where karma has a lot more to enthrone because there are many

things that are beyond that control and it's part of the universe... and strings of consciousness." (43:27)

### **The effect of the teaching of karma on her life**

"It's totally different because if I am still having my Catholic Church then I am a sinner, I am always wrong... But with the karma, you know it's a lot more like okay, I've got this purpose in my life; it's okay I am here and this is incredibly difficult but you know I am not inheritably bad... What they have been teaching me is to really move beyond like N says: 'Your enemy is your greatest teacher.' If you can really not repeat the destructiveness and then find your ways to move beyond it then it's your greatest teacher. So, I think that's where the karma comes in because it's more like a teaching tool and the obstacles that one comes across are not always your faults or you are blamed for it. That's where I think it's a lot more, it's a moving framework rather than a stuck, solid thing." (44:49)

"For me, it is like a learning to undo the Western concept of guilt and original sinner. So, I think for me somehow, I have to [admit that] I am a Western person learning about Buddhism. I am not an Eastern person like you who has grown up in that. So, I do think it is very different... For me to have learned Buddhism has a lot more to do with unlearning about Catholicism because it goes on deep. And I do think I will not be an intellectual Buddhist. I want to be a real spiritual person direct in relationships. And that has come with great teachers, you know, really good and also personal development work that really challenges my understanding. And I think that's where Western people make a mistake because they want to be good Buddhists and they will say 'You can't be angry or you have to be kind.' But what does it mean on a real, every day basis. That's where my practices are integrated. If people would say 'Oh, I've had bad karma', I am not like 'Oh, yes you have'. But what do you mean. And lot of the times they don't mean karma in Buddhist understanding. They mean karma in a punitive Christian way. So, I think for Westerners it's a very different and it's easy to portrait oneself as a good Buddhist because it makes you feel better. But if you can't be in a real relationship because many good Buddhist Westerners avoid conflicts while conflicts are part of life and how can you be constructive in conflicts... That's where I like the teachings of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism." (48:26)

### **Reincarnation**

"There is like a rebirthing process... Some part of my consciousness will continue, strings of consciousness. That's how I understand it." (49:10)

"I do want to do my best in this life time. This is a precious human life. So, I do want to do my best but, you know, I am very aware of my limitations and that a part of me can continue on the path to seek enlightenment." (49:45)

### **Non-self and emptiness**

"One of my teachers here is a very good Buddhist psycho-therapist... contemplates that the non-self is because we are never just exist[ing] on our own; we are all in relationships with others. And that is the teaching of non-self... We are never just us; we rely on... When you were in mental health Western people will say 'There is something wrong with you; you have genetic defects; your hormones are out blackened; you are sick.' That's how western world will look at human suffering. Well, my view is that what's happening in your life, what's

happening in relationships. All people's problems are because of the relationships. So, it's very easy for me to understand self or non-self because we don't exist in isolation of everybody or any animal on earth. We are in relationships. So, I found it an easy concept. A lot of Buddhist writers struggle [with] non-self. And I have seen in my work as mental health worker people who go to India and meditate to empty their minds, empty and empty, and they have no grounding. They are lost because they're confused, bad of luck, no self, which just sort of being disconnected, meditate[ing] on their own and being isolated, and particularly western people do not understand it and they actually [become] unwell... because people still have selves but it's in relationship with others. So a lot of western people made a big mistake to go and be Buddhists and meditate and be on their own and they're confused because they do have a Christian background; it's still there, you know, being a sinner. They say: 'something is wrong with me because I cannot sit still for ten hours.' You know, it's very hard... Actually life is about in relationship with others..." (53:22)

### **Does emptiness go in line with that teaching of non-self?**

"Yes, because I think that's very powerful, that's where I like what I learned from post-modernism that the meanings we give to things. You have to actually really, you know, nothing is really real; it's the meanings we give to things and... People will say 'I am so depressed and unhappy and nobody else is.' It's lots of contexts, lots of understanding of how most of us suffering is shared and the if we really took out the fact that the Catholic Church is an institution that does harms to you, you know, if we can understand that it's an institution. It's like the Dalai Lama talking about the Chinese; it's not the Chinese people; it's the government, the institution, the dogma, the construct that, you know, many Chinese are okay. You can't say 'Chinese people are bad'. It's is the dogma. So, you can start separating and it's the same beyond religions, beyond the frameworks. If you say 'well, it's a shared experience, it's a normal experience and start taking the meanings like understand them all. And I also think you can feel one thing here and the feel something else in a different. So, you know you have different responses. So, it means those responses relate to contexts. That's where the emptiness comes in for me. It's really deconstructing at understanding and then having compassion... It's very easy to understand in a way but we all hang on to our belief system... We hang on to meanings; we assign meaning because it serves our purpose to feel the way we feel. I think some lines of Buddhism really sort of focus on emptiness but somehow miss out on the fact we still live in communities and we need each other. And everyone can go and be in retreat for thirty years and be in isolation, not everyone can do that. So, I do think it's a very delicate subject but I understand it by always questioning. That's what Dalai Lama [says]: 'If you don't agree with my teaching, you tell me why not. Maybe we are mistaken. That's a Tibetan Buddhism... It's ancient. People have been refining it. Does it work? No, it doesn't work this way. Is it true? That's tactic. And people fail to analyse and question because they rest on certain meanings. But I don't because I think when you are a very good practitioner, you can go to that blissful state. That's a very special case to be but [it] takes a long time.'" (57:44)

### **Nirvana**

"Nirvana teaching is another construct. We can arrive at a place where there is a lot of happiness and peacefulness but that again is a human construct. That's not real either

because the Buddha has gone beyond Nirvana; he's gone to enlightenment... which is another level beyond Nirvana." (58:44)

"Nirvana is presumed that everything is fine and happiness but ... that can break then the suffering again. So, it is not a permanent place or state. I think when someone has achieved the enlightenment..., it's about the ability to be in relation with all human conditions and not have attachment to those while in Nirvana you have attachment to happiness... Again, there is another level to go beyond Nirvana." (1:00:29)

"People misuse terms like nirvana because they think that there is such a happy, blissful state but then they are still in isolation." (1:00:53)

### **Practising Buddhist spirituality**

Tamie identifies herself as belonging to the forth group. She co-founded a Tibetan Buddhist group called Sakya Trizin Ling. She has been actively committed to various practices and activities known as 'Four Arms' including teaching, fundraising, political activities, and psychotherapy. Practically, she has been involved in practicing meditation, attending Buddhist talks and retreats, offering psychotherapy counselling, fundraising to help the poor, partaking in the international promotion of human rights and protection of environment.

### **How long have you been practicing meditation?**

"Probably more serious from 2007, I practice every day. I do short practice. The teaching that I am committed to, short teachings and mantra, I do them every day. But longer teaching, as group we meet every Friday and practice for a couple of hours every week. We don't work on Friday and we dedicated Friday to our practice. We change it a bit because the economic circumstances putting pressure on the people. But people still practice in their private time." (1:10:05)

### **What are the purposes of practicing meditation?**

"To make commitment to the teachings, you know, deeper understanding will help me in my daily life, to keep my commitment to the path and to the teachings." (1:10:20)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

"Just the destructive two-faced nature of the Catholic Church." (1:10:58)

### **What makes you a Buddhist?**

"I don't know. I am committed to my refuge, committed to doing my best to follow the Buddha's teachings." (1:11:18)

### **Do you believe in all Buddhist teachings?**

"No, I am learning about it. I think I am more for example the teaching about self and non-self. I've read many books the westerners try to explain about this. No. It's really simple. It's about relationship with people. I think a lot of western people get themselves into the understanding of non-self but really lose the sense of self. Ultimately, we are individuals." (1:11:57)

**How Buddhism and its teachings challenged or enriched your life?**

“Oh totally. I was really a young woman struggling with legacy of the Catholic Church and the damage done in my life. I was quite a harsh and authoritarian person, really easy getting in conflict with people. When there was a conflict it was difficult to hear the other person. Yes, it was really difficult. My friend said, ‘N, you are difficult. Go and think about this.’... So, I have friends now who say: ‘how do you what to make it so complicated? You have been selfish. Have you heard what has been happening to that person?’ Yes, in my life I used to be very difficult... And the Catholic Church doesn’t realized, doesn’t want to take responsibility for the damage that they do, the priests and their institution and nuns.” (1:13:58)

**How satisfied are you with following the Buddhist path?**

“Yes, very, very satisfied.”

**Do you have any short term plan?**

“I am going for a four-day retreat. Every year I do that... I am attending to my mantras every day.”

**Do you have an ultimate goal for your spiritual life?**

“No, just keep going and do the best I can... I am thinking when I can do a tree month retreat.”

## **Interview Suzuki**

### **Suzuki's family religious background**

Suzuki comes from an Anglican family who belonged to the working class. His parents were not "religious," as he described them, but they were believers. Suzuki was baptised in the Anglican Church where he later received his religious education. During his childhood and teenage, Suzuki attended church service every weekend. He was an altar server until he got to the age of sixteen. Today he does not recall much of the experience of the Sunday school but the religious instructions at the primary school, as he recounted, made a deep impact on his spiritual life.

### **Suzuki's understanding of God**

Coming from the Pure Land Buddhism where the concept of two Bodhisattvas and the Buddha are taught, Suzuki finds it easy to understand the teaching of the Triune God. However, for Suzuki, the Holy Trinity is "as an iconic way of expressing spiritual truth beyond the human words that we use." (11:31)

Jesus, in Suzuki's view, is a "holy Buddha... who was infused in Godhead, or in Godness... He taught a way of ultimate peace and beauty and love and compassion." (8:05)

The bible in Suzuki's view is not the Word of God because it lacks of "congruency". There are contradictions in the Bible, especially between love and hatred. Other than that all other doctrinal teachings of the Church sit comfortably with Suzuki.

### **Suzuki's experiences of Christian communities**

His experiences of Christian communities and teachings were a mixed feeling. He associated with three Christian communities namely, the Anglican Church community, the Anglican Franciscan community, and the Roman Catholic community. While the homilies in the Catholic Church that he attended were more earthy, the sermons in his Anglican church were more academic which became difficult for people (in this case, his mother) to understand. (17:13) Again, the two Anglican Franciscan communities that he associated with were different in approach: one was open and inclusive and the other was set back and exclusive. (20:31) The experience he had of the Roman Catholic community was very positive. He and his family felt very much welcomed and accepted. (22:17)

Suzuki was aware of his responsibility for social justice and was actively involved in different activities such as providing opportunities to the disabled. Suzuki also has had a great admiration of St. Francis of Assisi.

### **Suzuki's first contact with Buddhism**

In 1986, Suzuki had his first contact with Buddhism when he attended a course in traditional medicine offered by a Tibetan monk. He was impressed by the teachings of Buddhism. But it was not until nine years ago, in 2005, when he met a Chinese Buddhist lady then he decided to become a Buddhist.

The main reason that he decided to become a Buddhist is that in Christianity he could not find adequate answers to overcome his personal struggles, especially his strong sexual desire.

Praying, for him, did not help at all. He found that following the Buddhist path, especially practicing meditation, has helped him overcome his craving struggles.

There are some other reasons stopped him from being a Christian namely, (1) in history Christians have been involved in wars and killing; (2) institutionalised church; (3) when he questioned the doctrine in a healthy way, the response is: "That's the word of God. You must believe otherwise Satan is entering your heart." (01:21:29) "While in Buddhism when I question, the master or teacher will say: 'Good, good, test it out in your life. If it works and does no harm to you or to anyone else, then finish with it... So, I find that Buddhism is one way which allows me, individual, a free expression to experiment, make sure that it is sitting right with my life... I like that freedom of enquiry'." (01:22:15)

Suzuki has received formal training in the Pure Land Buddhism in China where he stayed for several years to practice the Buddhist spirituality as a monk. His training consists of memorising the scripture verses, sutras and prayers in a local Chinese, and of practicing rituals and meditation. (36:14) He underwent his Buddhist training under the guidance of his Chinese master who, according to him, is not so much intellectual but spiritual. Suzuki started his practice of meditation in his young age and has been practicing Buddhist meditation for nine years. He uses the visualization method with reciting mantras and concentration of breathing. The purpose of practicing these is to purify the mind, to have a concentration of the mind, to connect with the consciousness of the Buddha and to replace the impure karma with pure karma. (01:05) He also maintains the morning and evening rituals with chanting and prostration. He is involved in teaching Buddhist meditation.

Suzuki has experienced some moments of complete bliss during his meditation that he describes as "a sense of love, a pure bliss, a sense of total belonging. This is the idea of no-self." (01:29:46)

At the time of interview Suzuki hesitates to call himself a Buddhist monk. This is because, according to him and to the regulation of Pure Land Buddhism, if he stops wearing his Buddhist robe for over 24 hours, he is no longer a monk. Living alone in Australia and undertaking different types of work, maintaining the monkhood is not possible for Suzuki. He now regards himself as a teacher and master of Buddhism. (01:02)

As a monk being ordained in the mainland China he finds it very difficult to associate with any Pure Land Buddhist monastery or group here in Australia. This is unfortunate for him since he cannot continue his monastic life since he came back to Australia.

### **Suzuki's view on the Buddhist teachings**

Referring to his view and relationship with the Buddha, Suzuki says: "I can see that he's (the Buddha) a pursuit for that ultimate life... I found it similar in myself that I was looking at something that was resonated in my soul and I could only equate with him... I also resonated with his style of teaching. (37:04)

Referring to the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Noble Path and Five Buddhist Precepts, he said that "the Buddha gave these teachings not as commandments because there is not God in Buddhism ... He gave us as guidelines... for us to follow." (42:27) For Suzuki, there is no ultimate truth but there are many truths. (43:37)



Karma, in Suzuki's view, is a teaching that encourages him to change his thought and his thinking process to make his life happier now. (44:43) He links the idea of the Karma with the purification of the mind and the Holy Spirit, as he explains: "Once we begin to purify our mind then we allow this space that Christian call the Holy Spirit to work and then when the Holy Spirit can work in our lives then miracles happen... over flowing as Jesus said." (47:32) He then refers to the displacing impure karma and replacing pure karma and links this with the Christian praying to Jesus. (48:29) Impure karma can be dispelled by reciting the name of the Buddha ten times with clear mind and clear consciousness and will be replaced by pure karma. (58:24)

The teaching of reincarnation sits well with Suzuki's set of beliefs. He finds himself comfortable with people's recount of their memories of previous lives. Reflecting on this teaching he refers to the Gospel of Saint John where Jesus said: "You must be born again" as an explanation for the concept of reincarnation. (51:27)

The teaching of non-self teaches us to realise our true self by "letting go of that nature self and a new nature can grow in us". (54:20)

The Pure Land, for Suzuki, is of this life, here and now. But the Pure Land is not Nirvana: "Pure Land is an interim stage to break the circle of death and suffering and rebirth. We enter the Pure Land which is a state of consciousness. (54:45) It's not heaven which is impermanent; (55:20) Pure Land is permanent... Pure Land becomes like consciousness where we are able to polish a stone, so to speak, to the point where then we are able very easily moving into Nirvana. (55:33) So Pure Land is like a training ground for entering into Nirvana. (56:42) There is also a hell realm but this hell is temporary, not permanent.

Human beings are special because they have gifts and opportunities that other animals do not have to become awakened. (56:18)

He seems to agree comfortably with the Buddhist teachings that he has learned or encountered with.

### **The impact of Buddhism in Suzuki's life**

Buddhism has made a remarkable impact on Suzuki's life: "I feel more at peace in myself. I used to be a very angry person but it's gone... I feel comfortable with who I am sexually and all ways, a sense of ease and comfort... and a sense of purpose as well to teach something that I think all people could get something good from." (01:23:34) "Some of my friends say that there was a change in me and that they could see visible changes." (01:23:46)

Following the Buddhist path, he has experienced practical challenges such as eating offered food which is not vegetarian, financial support...

I think Christianity was a religion that urged me but not a spiritual path that pleased me. So, Buddhism is not as a religion but it's more as a life education, a way of living life. And it does please me. (01:27:00)

He wishes to establish a Pure Land Buddhist centre somewhere in Australia which is more an Australian way of expressing Pure Land faith. (01:28:28)

## **Interview Tan**

Tan was born to a couple of Jewish parents. His mother passed away and his father got married to an Anglican woman. As a consequence of this, he was raised up as a mixed religious person namely Jewish and Christian. Because of the family circumcisions he was neither baptised in the Christian faith nor initiated into the Jewish tradition. However, he was made familiarised with both religious traditions. At home, sometimes he read the Torah and some other times he read the Bible. When asked how he identifies himself religiously, his response was: "From birth, Jewish but by living, Christian." (02:26) He attended both Jewish and Christian religious education. He was sent to live in a Christian institution for many years. He stopped his involvement in religious practice when he was about thirteen years of age: "I was really mixed up at school because I was neither Jewish nor Christian. I didn't know what I was." (03:47)

### **Did you read the Bible?**

"My mom had a Bible at home and my dad had a Torah also, so a Jewish Bible and a Christian Bible. I read them but I wasn't good at school. I had a lot of psychological problems and I grew up without good schoolings." (04:22)

### **How do you respond to the Christian teaching on God as creator?**

"I used to say that God is energy. I mainly bring in Jesus Christ because the people here, couple of them are strong Catholics still. So rather trying to make it too complicated, I use the deities like you see on the wall here. I say imagine one of them here is Jesus Christ. Now use Jesus Christ as an emblem that you try to understand within your own being you need to do with yourself. So, I combine it so that people don't feel inhabited. Otherwise they have a lot of troubles." (05:54)

### **Do you believe Jesus as the Son of God or as the Saviour of the world?**

"Not really. I think Jesus Christ in my knowledge of my literature, I read a lot about, Jesus Christ between thirteen and twenty-six is not registered in any literature except in the high Catholic tradition and it is hidden as secret teaching... He went to India and he learned a lot from masters. Whether he was the Son of God or not, it doesn't matter. The point was he was an enlightened being." (06:51)

### **How do you respond to the Christian teachings on eternal life and salvation?**

"I think it's the same as when we meditate. If we meditate, we are doing salvation... If we taught meditation correctly, we have to learn to let go off all our inflections or our instable attitude about life. That is a form of salvation. You find your inner being, your awareness of oneself. And that can only be found after listening the teachings and your meditation practice. So, the two are uniform. If you believe that you read the Bible and you have salvation, they believe salvation after death. You follow Christ and you are taken to heaven. We can uniform that similar to Buddhist philosophy: at death, we leave the physical body behind and we move into immediate state, the bardo, and if we train ourselves in this life, we can understand bardo and then fulfilled our karmic reaction into rebirth whatever it may be whether you go to heaven or you stay in this world and become a sentient being." (08:19)

**Do you believe in heaven and hell?**

"In the conscious mind, we do have heaven and hell. If your mind thinks, for example, that beautiful sight out there, it's a beautiful scenery. So, if you think the mind is going to the negative energy of hell, that's where you go as far as your consciousness is concerned. It's not a physical place. It's a mental operation." (08:44)

"The consciousness can be the spirit of your being of the total energy of oneself. That consciousness, by purification in this world in this time in this moment of your physical being, will then re-enact the next life what's that spirit going to be." (10:50)

**Were you involved in any Church's social justice activities?**

"Yes, I used to go to Jewish clubs... that have the camps and that sort of thing. My father made me go to those. I didn't want to go. But he was very dogmatic. And I go to those but I found very uncomfortable. Then I went to the local Christian school and went to the boys clubs and scouts and that sort of things, the Anglican. So, I was in two streets: one foot on that street and the other on the other street. It was very complicated, ... a lot of problems." (11:52)

**Are there any Christian teachings that you find hard to accept?**

"The only thing I find hard to really come to term with is, because I am training as a Buddhist, that God created everything. In Buddhist training we know that what has been created comes from the emptiness of everything, comes from the universe of space itself. But in Christianity they say God is creator of life. I find it a bit difficult to follow. But I have to be careful because I have Christians coming to the teaching all the times. So, I tried not to get into the conversations... I've found that people coming here have come to terms of having a more open mind now. They're in tune with the philosophy of Buddhism. They don't have to believe in it but they can see that there is more to the Buddhist philosophy as what's written down on the paper." (13:04)

**What was your experience of the Faith communities?**

"I was growing up in a Jewish area. There were synagogues there. But I felt uncomfortable because my mother (step mother) was Anglican. I felt more comfortable with the Anglican and Christian way because as a European I was very much victimized by the local people in the school and that. So, I turned toward Christian, fitting better with the people. I found that quite difficult." (14:31)

**Did you have a positive experience with the Anglican community?**

"Not really. They were very vindictive... In the forties and fifties there were a lot of vindictive against Europeans. We weren't accepted like Vietnamese. It got a long time to be accepted. We had the same problem. We were victimized... We had a lot of problems with the local Australian people of Christian backgrounds." (15:12)

**When did you have your first contact with Buddhism?**

"I was already fifty-eight. I had a lot of problems. I had been in business for many years. And I was wondering why I had this problem with my religions. I couldn't follow a religion. I was

lost. I listened to a program on the radio and it talked about Buddhist philosophy, how it can help people understand themselves. It was a discussion of a Buddhist institute in the Sunshine Coast. As I lived in the Sunshine Coast, I went up there and I sort of felt in love with the information I was hearing and I stayed there. That's how I became a Buddhist." (16:17)

### **What made you turn to Buddhism?**

"It was knowledge because I had no schooling. I used to love listening to philosophy discussions. I wasn't allowed to go to university or lectures because I had no living or intermediate schooling. When I went up there I heard of this philosophy or Buddhist philosophy and I listened to the teachings and I took notes and I worked in a library. I started to get very interested in the philosophy of Buddhism and then I just wanted to get as much information cramped in this brain that I've never had this opportunity. I found a way that I could go back to school. And to me it was school. For the first time in my life I could go to school and learned as an adult... My teachers taught me but from those teachers I could take the teachings home and studied at home and write essays and write information. I listened to the teachings everyday and I just heard the teachings over and over again." (17:58)

### **Did you receive formal training in Buddhism?**

"Yes, formal training. Every day I go to the teachings, four days a week from 9.30am to 3.30pm... for five years. I didn't sit any exams. I never learn to sit exams. When I sit exams, I get frustrated and I couldn't see... But if I go home and write a thesis on it, I can do it." (19:43)

### **Did you take any further training?**

"Yes, I went to Japan for six weeks. I studied under a master there, Japanese, and I learned Zen. Then I used to go to a Zen practice up at Nousa and I practiced Zen teaching with my master. (20:15)

I was in monastery in Nepal. I went to teachings there but I got very sick... I worked there and did all the master's water offering and cleaning and all sorts of thing... I used to do what is called Lamrim. It's a teaching of the outline of the whole Buddhist program but in short version and simple applications... I was there about eight weeks, a short term." (23:31)

### **Did you have to finish certain training to become a monk?**

"Not really. When I was on a pilgrimage... that was in 2003, the fourth November, I was in a place called NN where the Buddha was teaching, I had a beautiful, energised something which is very special. Then I sat there and I said: 'I am going to become a monk.' Exactly to date the fourth November 2004 I became a monk." (25:12)

"I had an energy feeling that something special happening that I wanted to do and I wasn't sure what it was. I thought maybe I wanted to become a monk because I wanted to learn. I didn't become a monk because I wanted to become an ascetic monk that locks himself away. I want to be with the people and I want to learn. I found that I needed schooling but I thought if I become a monk I can learn because it is very expensive for learning... I couldn't afford it because I wasn't working. I thought the way I could learn was become a monk and maybe then I could find my inner being and able to share with other people." (26:30)

"It took me a long time to be accepted... because I didn't pass the exams. I only passed my essays. They wouldn't recognize that. They wouldn't accept my thesis or essays that was a way to learn... because in the west they lock you in boxes... They kept knocking me back. I said: 'One day if you won't ordain me, I am going to Vietnam, no actually Thailand. I went to Thailand. I went up there to a place called Changmai... And I went to school there. They were all children in there. The masker came out to me and said: 'What are you doing?' I said: 'I want to look at the children.' He said: 'You come and have a look.' He said: 'What are you going to do?' 'I want to teach children Buddhism.' He said: 'It's okay. We're going to ordain you. You come and teach here.' 'I can't. I've got to go back home... I've got to go to school...' (28:30)

### **Could you tell me a bit of the ritual for ordination?**

"You asked me the question: 'Did you go through teachings to be ordained?' Not really. The master's got to accept you... In the master's continuum, you've got to be a right person to be ordained. Whether the master is right or wrong I don't know. But once you've got accepted then you are given six months to change your ways whatever it is. For six months, you've got to practice the teachings now, the five refuge vows precisely. That's the main thing... that becomes your main structure. Once you have achieved that within five months, they'd say: 'We're going to ordain you.' (30:51)

### **When did you consider yourself as a Buddhist?**

"In 1998 when I was 58, I went to NN. The first I decided, I loved it so much. I waited six months before I took refuge... What refuge means, you prepare to take the five vows and you are going to practice Buddhism and you are given a Buddhist name." (33:32)

### **How do you view the Buddha?**

"My training is changed over the years. When I first viewed the Buddha, I couldn't prostrate to the Buddha... I don't know. I could prostrate when I was in Vietnam. I couldn't prostrate here. I felt wrong, I felt uncomfortable... In Vietnam and Thailand, I had no problems but here I had different attitude. It took me a long time to really adjust myself to prostration. Now because I have a bad back, I don't prostrate in physical form much. I prostrate much in a mental admiration... It took me a long time to understand the philosophy correctly even though a lot of teachings. It takes me a long time to really come to terms with what the Buddha represents. It doesn't represent an idol at all. It's a mind thing of enlightened being of your own self. So, you become a mind that has a total awareness, total energy, total perceptive of who you are, what you could be within your own being. Hence you become a Buddha within your self. So, it's a different way how I understand the Buddha. I don't call the Buddha Buddha. I call him Siddhartha Gautama. That's his name. I call him by that. People say what's Buddha. It's a Hindi word for enlightened teacher... And there are many buddhas. My teacher is a Buddha, the enlightened being. He is teaching me how to understand what I need to understand." (36:46)

### **Do you have any spiritual relationship with the historical Buddha?**

"No. He's there but I have a feeling I can't say that the Buddha is above all my other teachers. But I do feel within Buddhism, within the philosophy of Buddhism, within the knowledge of Buddhism, is not Buddhism. It's a knowledge of enlightenment. Buddha is only a word. It's

only a word given to a person that became enlightened. And we all have that wonderful energy that we work toward.” (37:49)

### **How do you take the teachings of Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path?**

“I remember going to the dentist one day when I first got into Buddhism as a beginner and the first book I got was ‘The Four Noble Truths’ I got in India. I put on my chest. I had lots of troubles with dentists, I had very bad teeth. And the lady was an Indian lady, a Hindu. She said: ‘You’re a Buddhist.’ I said: ‘I am just starting. I am reading the Four Noble Truths. She said: (...) And that time in the dentist I had no pain at all. No pain. She said: ‘I notice that you are a different person.’ I said: ‘because the book was on my chest.’” (39:45)

### **How do you explain this?**

“I allowed the energy in myself to activate a pure mind at that time. I am not pure outside; I still do bad things; I do other things that are controlled by outside. But at that time, I allowed a pure energy of my being to open up ... Your own energy heals if you allow it.” (40:27)

### **Do you believe in the teaching of karma?**

“Absolutely... I look at my life, I’ve had such, I travel a lot too. I travel excessively. When I was twenty-two, I went overseas for two years and I hit around the world...”

### **Do you believe in reincarnation?**

“I use the word ‘knowledge’. We need to learn what we need to know. ‘belief’ is habitual... The Christian word ‘belief’, you believe in God. But do you know the knowledge of God? Do you have the awareness of God by information? That’s when you can understand what is going on... So, knowledge is more important than belief. If you have the knowledge, you have the awareness.” (47:58)

### **How do you explain the teaching on reincarnation?**

“I use the example of our consciousness has always being and always be. We may not understand that because we live in a physical form with very limited information. But if our consciousness has come from somewhere, it’s got to go somewhere. So, after recognize what consciousness is when you physical form ceases to function at the moment of death, there is a spiritual behind it, isn’t it? Your spiritual consciousness goes somewhere. That in itself is reincarnation. I mean I use the word the... death of Christ. Christ rose up after the third day. What rose? A reincarnation manifestation of himself, manifest of Christ is reincarnation. Christianity talks about it but then talks, they don’t explain it. I try to explain that the manifestation of Christ is reincarnation. Whether you believe the reincarnation of animals or another sentient being is in material. It’s where your mind focuses on. There is reincarnation. I keep it simple.” (49:38)

### **What is your view on the teaching of non-self?**

“That’s the basis of Buddhism, the basis of every school of Buddhism. Some schools don’t talk about it but the basis of non-self is within the experience of your emptiness, your inner nature, your depth of the inner being, your consciousness. So, within your being you become an enlightened structure. That’s an easy way to explain it. If you work with meditation, the

answer to everything in philosophy of life itself is meditation. That's when you start experience the real non-self. You can't experience non-self out here, we call it a clock, a bell. It comes from letting go off the bell. When you hear that sound, that bell disappears into the emptiness. So, within your consciousness you become the bell sound. That is the non-self. You are still a person. I am still Tan. You're still who you are... But within your being of your consciousness you become that inner presence of your self... Son in consciousness there is no me as such, like no I, no self. But this is a person. You can't take away the person. I may not be the name of the person. The name comes from your teacher or your parents but the self itself is its own being – that is your non-self.” (52:14)

### **Buddhist practices**

Tan was involved in teaching Buddhism and meditation for over fifteen years. He converted his flat into a Buddhist centre where teaching and meditation took place. He prayed and meditated every day for about one and a half hours. The purpose of meditation is sitting in one's self, sitting in the emptiness of one's self, sitting in the energy of letting go.” (57:57)

### **What stopped you from being a Christian?**

“Buddhism. Well, I stopped following religions when I was in my young teens. I didn't follow. But I've always had some being continuing within my self. That's being a bit more than most people maybe. I've had some being there that allowed me to express the energy of what I feel.” (59:46)

### **How Buddhism enriched or changed your life?**

“It's only a sense of knowing about yourself, knowing that there is something more to the human conditioning just than me as a person. There have to be answers within yourself. And Buddhism has opened that door up. It allows you to look within and know that you are a higher person inside than you would have been before. It just turns it around. You are more in depth with your own energy.” (1:02:09)

### **Are there any Buddhist teachings or practices that you find it hard to accept?**

“It's very hard to accept some of the teachings because it takes a lot of intellectual intelligence which I don't have like logic and reasoning. The teaching of logic and reasoning is very difficult. It's one of the most complicated studies you can ever imagine because the Tibetan structure is very advanced. The ideology of their focusing on their path, it's all on logic and reasoning. They train children in very early age to learn that. I came to the teaching when I was already fifty-eight. I was quite old and then taking up all these teaching in late age is quite difficult.” (1:03:18)

### **How satisfied are you with following the Buddhist path?**

“When I was giving the teachings, I used to have very high expectation. I took me a long time to get over it. My biggest fault was expectation. I expected more from myself and I couldn't understand why I couldn't get more. So, I learned by losing expectation and I got more... I am trying to break away from the expectation of trying to be what I am not, to be what I am and accept others as what they are and what they are not. I am working on that and I find that I am improving... At the moment, I am very comfortable. Yes.” (01:05:13)

**Have you experienced any difficulties being a Buddhist in Australia?**

“Yes, very difficult,... mainly because of Christian ideology. The main structure is, they look at a Buddhist as a non-believer. And being a non-believer, they worship idols because they look at Buddhist coming from the East, Asia and Far East and to them from a point of view, it looks foreign. And Australians don’t like foreign things. They are very closed off. And it is changing on the intellectual side because intellectuals are starting to realize Buddhism is also intellectual and they are accepting that even doctors, philosophers and psychologists and psychiatrists... The Buddhist is known in the west from Australian point of view as an intellectual. I am not an intellectual. I am a Buddhist trainee. So, I have a lot of difficulties with that.” (1:07:18)

**Do you have a short term plan for your practice?**

“My thought is that I could set up a centre, a retreat centre for meditation and practice on the level of... just the people coming from the streets and having helped people that suffer with a lot of amount of psychiatric problems because I know Buddhism is a way to clear that. The west doesn’t see it that way... Psychiatric centres don’t realize that Buddhism is a way of solving people’s problems.” (1:08:10)

**How can Buddhism make its contribution to the lives of people in Australia?**

“It helps them to have an inner awareness for themselves. They can change their desires, the suffering they are going through of materialism. Materialism in our society is a bad problem. It’s causing more troubles.” (1:09:30)