
Chapter 5: The Practice of Self-Transformation at Vajrayana Institute

1 Introduction

This chapter examines the techniques through which change is produced, experienced and—by their personal application of the technique—attributed meaning by practitioners at VI. Whereas Chapter 4 explored the learning and apprehension processes as they occur in the context of Vajrayana practice at VI, this chapter explores the continuation and extension of learning through personal application, and is therefore a continuation of Chapter 4. It is also the equivalent of Chapter 3 in terms of its examination of the nature of the shared reality that is constituted through personal practice and its aims and effects, as a means to understanding differences that may occur between formal experimental learning and personal application. The focus of this chapter is the nature of the results obtained from the personal application of practices taught at VI, how the practices fit with the framework and the soteriological goal of the tradition, and the uses to which these same practices are put by the practitioners themselves.

An exploration of practitioners' patterns of practice reveals both how regularly they practice and what they select from the range of practices taught at VI. Further, practitioners' views of the significance of terms, teachings, and practices, and their meanings, gives an understanding of how they put the framework together to create and maintain meaning for themselves. In the Gelugpa Tibetan context, all processes of self-transformation are easily seen as processes of mental purification, where the mind gradually comes to see reality from the view of enlightenment. The topic of personal practice, in terms of what is done and why, is significant because it indicates both the value that these practices have for the practitioners in terms of reaching strictly religious and more secular goals—although the two are related—and how meaning is derived and maintained at the individual level. Examining the techniques, processes and goals of self-transformation, will shed light on the above concerns.

Ideally, and somewhat artificially, this stage of socialization, representing the time between initial learning and experimentation as a student, and the time, if it comes, when the decision is made to commit to a Buddhist way of life, is where much of the testing and evaluating takes place. Tantric practice is included here despite the fact that one is expected to take refuge and become a Buddhist before engaging in tantric activity. In a linear chronological approach to socialization, discussion of *Tantra* would logically follow Chapter 6, after the discussion of the commitment. Because tantric activity at VI is of a highly practical nature in terms of its transformative techniques and effects, it is discussed in this chapter.

2 Personal Practice

From interview material and conversations with practitioners it is clear that many students *attempt* to establish a daily practice. Some are dedicated to their daily practice and set time aside for it. Others try to keep up regular practice, but find it difficult. It is significant that some practitioners do not meditate much at all. It seems that whatever the reason for this is, for example, lack of time, it is equally true that they believe that meditation is not the only way to purify the mind, because doing good deeds, thinking positively toward others and other like actions creates the merit needed, or creates the right karmic imprints to have obscurations removed, or to have realizations. In this sense, these practitioners rely as much on the purification of *karma* and the accumulation of merit as they do on the direct development of their meditative ability and the wisdom it brings.

Many of the practitioners whom I interviewed made it clear that their descriptions of their daily practice routine were descriptions of what they did under ideal conditions. They stressed that sometimes 'life got in the way' of their meditation practice, and they ended by not meditating as much as they would have liked. Another thing to note is that some admitted freely that there were many times when their practice commitments were either done in a rush, or with a distracted mind. What I observed about the desire for and the attempt at regularity is that it served to remind individuals about their intention toward self-transformation.

2.1 Patterns and Styles of Personal Practice

Ideally, practitioners spend up to an hour a day in their practice, whether this be quiet reflection, meditation practice, tantric commitments, or reciting the refuge prayer and vows. The following examples show a range of orientations to practice. The first two are tantric initiates, and the third is a sutric practitioner who has recently taken refuge.

NJ: I've taken Kalachakra Tantra initiation. Traditionally the practice is done three times during the day and three times during the night, and that's a lifetime commitment. I do mantras, not because of my commitments, but because they are beneficial tools we have been given. At the moment I'm doing a Sakyamuni Buddha visualization to develop my concentration. I do half-an-hour at minimum. I read the King of Prayers every night.

CR: I now have a set practice that takes me about an hour a day, but it's not a sitting down and meditating on the breath practice. My daily practice takes me about an hour. So it's like Medicine Buddha and White Tara and Green Tara, Kalachakra initiation, Cittamani Tara which is a higher yoga Tantra of Green Tara.

AN: I start usually with the breathing to focus, and usually it's a breathing out all the mess, the impurities and the obstructions and stuff and breathing in

calm,³⁸⁸ just as a centring thing, and yeah, I usually do the exchanging self for others or a compassion one.

From the accounts of personal practice given in interviews, it seems that the preferred meditation styles are concentration and visualization. A small number of practitioners perform analysis, but this is significantly less popular. Many sutric and tantric practitioners favour concentration in the form of deity visualization. Many respondents stated that they practised concentration in order to make their deity visualizations clearer and sharper. Beyond the goal of improving the quality of their meditation, the intention is to create the karmic conditions necessary to accumulate the merit to attain realizations.

2.2 Orientation to Practice

According to the Tibetan Buddhist worldview of the FPMT, actions and mental states are categorized as wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral or undetermined. The latter are seldom referred to in discourse at the centre, and for practitioners' purposes of progress on the path to enlightenment, all actions are seen as wholesome or unwholesome, virtuous or non-virtuous, and accordingly create positive or negative karma.³⁸⁹ The process of mental purification is meant to reverse the effect of previous negative action, and replace tendencies in that direction with positive ones. All virtuous action, for instance, performing *pujas*, reciting the refuge prayer, study, meditation practice, and virtuous action in daily life, is thought to result in the accumulation of merit, the first of two collections, merit and wisdom, amassed by the practitioner when they enter this path. This is the first of five paths that constitute the path to enlightenment: *accumulation*, *preparation*, *seeing*, *meditation*, and *no more learning*.³⁹⁰ CR's comments here, "Really for me the whole reason I'm doing those practices is to give my mind some sort of imprints that are going to help me in various situations in my life, and help me to be a better person", and elsewhere, illustrate both the emphasis placed on the purpose of mental purification for success on the path to enlightenment, and on the importance of the Bodhisattva motivation for the aspiring practitioner.

³⁸⁸ This is a reference to the *nine round breathing* meditation outlined in Appendix 9. AN's account of his experience with his daily refuge commitment is discussed in this chapter, Section 1.2.

³⁸⁹ Writings by Buddhist academics and by authors from within the tradition typically discuss two categories of action: virtuous and non-virtuous. See Powers, J. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, Snow Lion Publications, 1995, p80. However, in the *Discovering Buddhism* module *Introduction to Tantra*, the teacher referred to a third category, that of neutral actions where neither positive nor negative karma is created, because the mind is totally passive during these actions. These include sneezing and fainting.

³⁹⁰ See Powers, *op.cit.*, pp80-85, for a discussion of the five Buddhist paths, and especially p80 for his discussion of the *Path of Accumulation*. Also see Hopkins, J. *The Tantric Distinction*, Wisdom Publications, revised edition, 1994, p39.

This emphasis on purification *per se* within this form of Buddhism appears to have produced two interesting effects. First, the concentration and purification practices, especially the deity visualizations, tend to dominate practice in teachings and meditation classes at the Centre, and analytical meditation, while taught, is under-represented in individual preferences. This is despite that Tsong-kha-pa's *Lam Rim* teaches that practice in *stabilizing* and *analytical* meditation—concentration and insight—must be balanced in order to attain enlightenment.³⁹¹ It appears that, for some students, the path is more easily approached in terms of the purifying action of active imagination of a deity, wherein the role of concentration for focussing the mind is easily understood. It may be thought that the analytical meditations on *emptiness* can be postponed until enough mental purification has taken place for realizations of *emptiness* to occur more easily. NJ expressed the view that “You have to work your way to particular levels of realization” in order to have a realization of *emptiness*. Some time after the interview, I asked her if there was anything she could add to the previous discussion about her impressions of the analytical meditation we had explored in *Grounds and Paths*, the course we had both attended in the previous November.³⁹² She responded, “Well, you have to have a good degree of concentration to do those meditations. I am building up my concentration”.³⁹³

Second, when students and practitioners do not find adequate time to meditate, their desire for practice may be satisfied by the performance of meritorious works, with the view that the same merit will be accumulated by virtuous action. This can be seen to act as a psychological safety net for assuaging the guilt that arises from failing to meditate. In cases where lay vows are broken or commitments are not kept, adherents are told that they can ‘purify their vows’ by using the *Four Opponent Powers*. Practitioners feel that it is important to keep their commitments, which may consist of prayers, mantra recitations and deity visualizations, ideally treated as forms of meditation. By their own admissions, however, these are often done in a rush, and from their perspective it is better to keep their commitments with a distracted mind than not at all. The reasoning employed here has appeal for practitioners who attempt to maintain a commitment to the path while accommodating the demands of a busy life. Several practitioners described how they create opportunities in spare moments throughout the day for practice. CR expressed these sentiments in her description of her attempts to keep her regular tantric commitments:

CR: But it's really good not to not do the commitments. I've spoken to people. Everyone has said, this is from Geshe Logoan Rinpoche, to everybody, if you've made the commitment it's very important to keep it, it's not something to

³⁹¹ Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Snow Lion Publications, volume 3, 2002, p14.

³⁹² Hopkins, J. *Meditation on Emptiness*, Wisdom Publications, rev. ed., 1996, p44-6.

³⁹³ The original interview took place on 15 January, 2004. NJ offered these additional comments on 11 February, when I asked her whether there was more she could add to her account of her experience with analytical meditation.

lightly not do. And I know that sometimes when I haven't done them, it's because I've chosen to watch television or read, or do something else instead first, and I've left it until 11 o'clock at night when I'm exhausted, and then I've fallen asleep doing them. Because I worried about you know I've got a busy life. And Lama Zopa said the same thing. You can say the Sadhanas, if you know them off by heart. You can say them walking along to the bus stop. You can say them on the train. I do my practice on the train coming up here because it's over an hour, the train trip, and so I just sit there. I get my mala out, and do it. It's not as ideal as sitting in my Gompa, obviously. I'm not concentrating as well, but that's the way I can do it. At least, the good thing about having commitments is I'm doing something. If I didn't have those commitments I'd do nothing. There'd be days I'd do nothing, and sometimes, there have been times when I feel the commitments, which I freely made myself were like a burden. I've had that sort of like, 'Oh no. I've got to get through this. I haven't done my practice yet.

Similar sentiments are expressed by another practitioner. In describing his approach to and experience with performing his daily refuge commitments, BM relates candidly how considerations of motivation and discipline overshadow the meditative aspect of the practice.

AN: That's what I really welcomed about the refuge undertaking is that you bow to the Buddha, you do the prostrations and do the refuge prayer three times in the morning and at night, and I thought, 'Oh that's great because I'll meditate', but what I end up doing is just doing that and thinking, 'Oh well. That's enough. I don't have to sit and meditate', so in a way it's been very good because I've done it every single day, and it takes a minute or so. I've got a little altar at home, which is good in terms of focussing for the day, so that's been really useful because I start and end the day with that, but in a way it's substituted whatever practice I would have done, so I don't end up sitting very much.

GE: OK, so that obviously sets you for the day, as you said, so how do you feel when you're doing it, what kind of state are you in?

AN: I'm getting more strict with myself because a lot of the time I'm finding ... because especially in the morning I'll just be doing it and thinking about other stuff, I'll find I've done two, but not mindfully at all, so I'll make myself do it again and say it properly to make sure the motivation's there and it's not just ... because I remember that I did that with all the Christian prayers. Just recited them, so it's good. It is a way of making myself, especially on certain mornings when you realize that your head is just running everywhere else but there, so in a way it's a bit of a centering, and a testing of how centred I am that morning, because sometimes I am focussed automatically without effort.

GE: You've obviously reached a point where you're making yourself do it properly, so do you feel better for it? Are you feeling any particular benefits?

AN: I like the continuity and commitment, because there'll be times when I've jumped into bed, and forgotten, and each time I've made myself get up and do it. So yeah, that fact that it gives a bit of structure to the day, so at night I find it's helpful because it makes me, when I'm saying 'to act for the liberation of all sentient beings', I'm actually at the same time trying to dedicate all the merits of that day, of how I tried to act for the benefit of others. It kind of does make me do a stocktake, whereas in the morning it's setting the motivation for the day 'cause I'm really cloudy in the morning and I would probably go through to ten or eleven without even thinking, whereas this does make me think about how I'm going to act during the day, because unless I did that, I would just act without being really mindful or thinking.

GE: Your commitment to this particular practice, you're basically renewing your refuge twice a day, why are you doing it?

AN: There are reason on both sides of that. One is that I said I would in a special ceremony, and that has to do with my guru devotion, so I guess that's more the schoolchild in me, because no one actually asks, but I would always think if they did, these are people I wouldn't want to lie to, I would want to be able to say 'yes' because I said I would. In terms of willpower I usually let myself off the hook, so I'm enjoying the benefits of not letting myself off, so there are disciplinary benefits, and all the mental benefits which I hadn't really thought about much. I hadn't really thought about whether it makes me calmer or the mental space. I don't think I've ever gone 'I'll feel better after I do this' or 'I'll feel calmer'. They're definitely the products of it. So it would be more the motivation and the discipline and the content. Yeah, I guess it could be peace of mind, because I realize I don't have peace of mind until I do it. I don't entertain the possibility of not doing it.

In AN's view, the commitment will keep him motivated because he has given his word to keep it. In this sense the motivation itself becomes the focus of practice as opposed to the meditation. This is similar to other responses about personal practice, and given that Westerners are attempting to develop a practice in the midst of leading busy lives, AN's response is understandable. However, by contrast, NC's approach to and experience of the refuge commitment is based in its performance as a meditation, and not as an obligation. As described in his transcript excerpt in Section 2.1 below, his practice produces a sense of *spaciousness*, of opening up, which gives him 'a deepening sense of refuge'. The two accounts demonstrate how practitioners may value different aspects of a practice because of their experience with it. The former approach has more to do with keeping the commitment, while the impetus for the latter is more to do with the effects of practice itself. These two different approaches to devotional ritual also highlight two different orientations to practice generally.

This difference has two possible causes. The first involves how one understands the purpose of practice. The fact that both practitioners believe that meditation is good for them is expressed in various ways throughout their interview transcripts.

However, while the former allows his relationship to his practice to become fused with the feeling of simply needing to keep his commitments, the latter's motivation is a result of his experiential engagement with the practice itself. NC had done some study and practice and had developed a rudimentary Buddhist frame of reference for the interpretation of meditative experience before his involvement in VI's courses. The second involves one's understanding of the role of the teacher as the voice of religious authority. If this may be taken to indicate response to authority generally, the ten years' difference in age between NC and AN (NC is the elder) may be a contributing factor to the difference between a comparatively externalized voice of authority (AN) and an internalized one. While age and stage of life may be one of many reasons for this difference of response to authority, they possibly lie outside the scope of this thesis, and therefore, only those factors supported by the data at hand will be explored. However, the effect of religious authority on socialization and its stages needs to be considered because of its emphasis as a causative factor in both conversion studies and studies of new religious movements.

According to the view of the FPMT, a practitioner needs to have a teacher or guru in order to practise successfully. Several writers allude to Tsong-kha-pa's statement that one must purify, accrue merit, and pray to one's guru as a Buddha in order to reach enlightenment.³⁹⁴ The Discovering Buddhism module *The Spiritual Teacher* is devoted to outlining the nature of the teacher-student relationship required for successful Buddhist practice, including the qualities that a student should look for in a spiritual teacher.³⁹⁵ This lineage and its view of the path provides many role models of authority to guide motivation and attainment: buddhas, bodhisattvas, lineage founders and leaders, lamas and their disciples, and teachers at FPMT Centres. While buddhas and bodhisattvas can be seen as models of the enlightened being, local lamas, geshe, Sangha members and lay teachers can all be seen as authority figures in a more immediate sense. Although there is an underlying, and at times overt, tone of *you must do what your guru tells you to do*, I have observed from students' responses in teachings, in conversation, and in interview, that individual responses to the role of the teacher vary. Some acknowledge the position of teacher and simply pay respect to the person who occupies the position, while others exhibit more of a tendency to cast *their* teacher or guru in the role of parent or therapist.

Heelas's notion of *detraditionalization* as it applies to Western sentiment, involves a shift of authority from without to within; its *voice* is displaced from established

³⁹⁴ See Ribush in the Editor's Introduction, Thubten Yeshe. *Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification*, Wisdom Publications, 2004, pp1-4. See also Thubten Zopa. *The Wish-Fulfilling Golden Sun of the Mahayana Thought Training*, original publication details unknown, republished for Kachoe Zung Juk Ling Nunnery, 2000, p 10; McDonald, K. *How to Meditate: A Practical Guide*, Wisdom Publications, 1984, p150.

³⁹⁵ See Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden. *Path to Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism*, Tushita Publications, 1993, Chapter 5. The recommended text for the Discovering Buddhism module is Berzin, A. *Relating to a Spiritual Teacher: Building a Healthy Relationship*, Snow Lion Publications, 2000.

sources to the *self*, with a corresponding decline of belief in the pre-given or natural order of things.³⁹⁶ It is suggested that Heelas's thought, that as sociocultural beings our voices of authority have been acquired in terms of established values and practices³⁹⁷ extends to the way in which established authority *per se* has been internalized as a value. The nature of individual response to religious authority may be affected by age, level of psychological maturity, and response to prior religious conditioning. However, respondents have indicated that they accept a teacher's authority if the teacher appears to embody the religious ideals of the FPMT, and practitioners accept the lineage leaders and teachers as representatives of religious authority. If the decision is made to take refuge and later, Tantric initiation, the decision to accept the guru's authority is formalized. From my own observations, the lama or geshe as a symbol of religious authority, and as a representation of the enlightened mind, becomes a strong influence, from philosophical and ethical perspectives, in the deliberations and actions of students. This influence extends to the adherent's involvement with Tantra practice.

2.3 Orientation To Tantra

According to scholars and practitioners alike, Tantric Buddhism is held to be a method for attaining enlightenment within the Mahayana view. According to Ray, Tantra has its own way of articulating Mahayana philosophy in the context of Tantric meditation.³⁹⁸ Wayman believes that the terminology in the Buddhist Tantras makes sense if one sees them as reflecting Buddhist tenets from the *Abhidharma* or from the Mahayana presentation in the *Madhyamika* and *Yogacara* schools.³⁹⁹ In the introductory section of the *Lam Rim*, Tsong-kha-pa outlines his division of the Mahayana into two: the *prajnaparamita* method—the part that is not tantric—and the *mantra* method, which is strictly Tantric.⁴⁰⁰ Teachers and practitioners hold to the view that Tantra is another path to enlightenment within the Mahayana orientation.⁴⁰¹ Ideally, all Mahayana Buddhists practise the bodhisattva motivation, the greater scope according to the *Lam Rim*, which is to attain enlightenment for the sake of relieving the suffering of all sentient beings.⁴⁰² According to Kelsang Gyatso,

³⁹⁶ Heelas, P. "Introduction: On Differentiation and Dedifferentiation", in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, pp1-18, Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

³⁹⁷ *ibid.*

³⁹⁸ Ray, R. *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*, Shambala, 2001, pp91-2. Ray's discussion includes the relationship of the teachings of the second turning to Tantra. See also Wayman, 1980, p359 for a discussion of the parallel history of Buddhist Tantra and Buddhist Mahayana.

³⁹⁹ Wayman, A. *The Buddhist Tantras: Light on Indo-Tibetan Esotericism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, pp3-4.

⁴⁰⁰ Also see Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p4.

⁴⁰¹ See Hopkins, in Tenzin Gyatso, Tsong-ka-pa, and Hopkins, J. *Deity Yoga In Action and Performance Tantra*, Jeffrey Hopkins ed./trans., Snow Lion Publications, 1987, p207. Hopkins expresses the view that "Tantra is the six perfections plus deity yoga".

⁴⁰² See Chapter 4, Section 2.1 for discussion of this perspective and how it allows for *lesser* motivations of the small scope: the desire for better samsaric conditions and the medium scope of the desire for liberation from *Samsara*.

the *Lam Rim* instructions enable one to engage in a meditation practice with any one of the three levels of motivation, but the three are progressive: each one lays foundations for the next.⁴⁰³ However, Tantric practice proceeds from the *assumption* that the practitioner operates from the bodhisattva motivation: the intention to attain full Buddhahood in order to help to end the suffering of all sentient beings.⁴⁰⁴

From the import of teachings and in conversations, it is clear that one must be ethically prepared for tantric practice. Received wisdom holds Tantra to be the quick way to enlightenment, but one must have the Mahayana motivation and be committed to the *bodhisattva* path. It is also emphasized that one must not 'get carried away with Tantra', and that sutric study and practice continue to serve as a foundation for progress on the path when one becomes a tantric practitioner. It is important to note that Tantra without proper ethical training and without the correct motivation is considered dangerous. One teacher said, "You are stirring up energies that you can't control".⁴⁰⁵ Tulku Thondup explains the expected ethical orientation in terms of simultaneous practice of the three vehicles: living physically according to the moral codes embodied in the *pratimoksa* disciplines, mentally maintaining *bodhisattva* aspirations and practices, and beyond that taking the tantric view of everything as the path of pure nature.⁴⁰⁶

Within the FPMT, in order to take tantric initiation and practise Tantra practitioners are expected to have taken refuge, signalling their commitment to the Mahayana Buddhist path. As the teacher of *Introduction to Tantra* said, "Taking an initiation implies that one is taking vows, and is therefore a Buddhist".⁴⁰⁷ The refuge commitment is sealed by the new adherent's taking as many of the five *pratimoksa* vows as they feel able to keep, but it was explained during a teaching that, ideally, Buddhists are expected to undertake to refrain from killing as a minimum. This refuge commitment means that some ethical discipline is put into place before Tantric practice is undertaken. Within the Mahayana vehicle, tantric practice is founded on the three principles of the path: renunciation, *bodhicitta*, and wisdom-realizing *emptiness*. In teachings from *Introduction to Tantra* and in the commentary to the Medicine Buddha initiation in May 2005,⁴⁰⁸ both teachers highlighted the need to develop *bodhicitta*. In the former, the teacher stated that the first gate to Tantra is 'absolutely flawless *bodhicitta* motivation'.⁴⁰⁹ Similarly, the *Vajra* master of the Medicine Buddha initiation stated that one must "have a good crop of *bodhicitta*". In

⁴⁰³ Kelsang Gyatso. *The Meditation Handbook*, New Age Books, 2002, pp6-7.

⁴⁰⁴ Tsong-kha-pa. *Preparing for Tantra: The Mountain of Blessings*, the Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1995.

⁴⁰⁵ This was explained in the Discovering Buddhism module *Introduction to Tantra*.

⁴⁰⁶ Tulku Thondup. "Foreword", in Ray, *op.cit.*, ppviii-ix.

⁴⁰⁷ The nature of this commitment was outlined during the retreat for this module on Sunday 7 March 2004 at Vajrayana Institute in Newtown NSW.

⁴⁰⁸ This was held at the Buddhist Library, Church St, Camperdown NSW. The *Vajra* master was Geshe Dawa, a former resident Geshe at Vajrayana Institute.

⁴⁰⁹ From *Introduction to Tantra*, 27 January 2004.

the commentary after the initiation he elaborated on the three qualities necessary in a tantric practitioner. Renunciation must be a definite conviction; when one thinks about the suffering nature of *Samsara*, one develops renunciation and seeks the path to liberation.⁴¹⁰ It is hard to develop renunciation if the suffering nature of *Samsara* is not seen and accepted. In difficult and onerous situations, one wishes to get out of them, and one can see the same needs and desires in others. This transforms slowly into *Bodhicitta*, which is developed with the method of lovingkindness and compassion. On my asking one Tantric initiate, "What is your personal belief system?", she responded:

CR: Well, I suppose I just believe. It's believing that the purpose of life is to develop your qualities, to help all beings; that there is a reason for being here which I used to be not sure of, and that reason is to be of service of help to others. And that the way to do that is to ... you do have to develop your own quality, because I can't help others the way I am, not properly. I can try but I don't really know how, and quite often I get it wrong. I get angry, I have all those things happen, so, but also I don't think that everybody has to be a Buddhist, to reach, um, to reach a state of, you know, of enlightenment. I'm sure you do need to be towards the end, but I'm not sure ... but I think, to develop qualities anyway, and to be of benefit in the world, and to be a good and loving person. There are many paths to that.

GE: And so your purpose in being a Buddhist is for those things you just stated. It sounds to me like you're working towards enlightenment, but these other qualities ...

CR: That's the only reason for reaching enlightenment ... is to be like a Buddha and to come back and to teach, and to help.

Another factor important for understanding practitioners' orientations to tantra is the way in which it is routinely spoken about and regarded. In conversation, while it may be discussed as something extra to *sutra* practice, it is not promoted as something to be held in awe. Those students who show an interest in *tantra* want to know how it relates to Buddhism more broadly, and do not set out to find easy access to its secrets or display morbid curiosity.⁴¹¹ Amongst the participants at Vajrayana Institute the tantric practitioners are not obvious. Respondents would reveal their tantric involvement in interview rather than in ordinary conversation.

⁴¹⁰ See the transcript excerpt in Section 3.3 for NC's description of his attempt to reconcile the two different approaches to desire expressed by the idea of renunciation and by Tantra. *Wisdom-realizing-Emptiness* and its import are discussed in Section 2.2 and Section 4.

⁴¹¹ Urban, H. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, University of California Press, 2003. In this book, Urban suggests that the appropriation of Tantra by modern Western culture is largely as a form of spiritual hedonism. However, his book reflects an emphasis on the appropriation of Hindu Tantra by the West. Guenther believes that the word Tantrism has become almost synonymous with Hindu Tantra, and more is known about it than Buddhist Tantra. See Guenther, H. *The Tantric View of Life*, Shambala Publications, 1972, p2.

This approach is demonstrated in the orientation to *tantra* displayed by two committed practitioners before and after they were initiated. NJ and MM had very strong experiences in meditation, coincidentally both in Theravadin Buddhist settings, that are reminiscent of Tantric experience, although in different ways.⁴¹² In both cases these experiences were at odds with the meditative settings in which they occurred, and prompted the two seekers to find satisfactory explanations for their experience. After finding FPMT Centres, the Root Institute in India and Vajrayana Institute respectively, and beginning to investigate the Gelugpa Tibetan system, both became involved with Vajrayana Institute and took on volunteer administration duties. They also settled into a routine of sutric study and practice in order to broaden their understanding of Buddhism.⁴¹³ Given this and the fact that they do not consider their levels of practice special or advanced, it can be accepted that practitioners work within the doctrinal and ethical frameworks of Mahayana Buddhism.

For practical purposes two differences appear to exist between *sutra* and *tantra* practice. The first is the tantric emphasis on working with desire. While *sutra* uses the energy of lovingkindness and compassion, *tantra* uses the energy of desire and craving or attachment. *Tantra* is not in itself virtuous, nor essentially pure, but it becomes pure with the right motivation, which means utilizing the desire for enlightenment in order to attain it. More specifically, for higher tantric practice, it refers to transforming the energy of the desire for the partner into other emotional qualities such as the desire for enlightenment and compassion. In this way, a selfish desire based on craving is transformed into a selfless desire.⁴¹⁴ The second difference has to do with the nature of the deity visualization employed for ritual purposes. In the commentary to the *Medicine Buddha* initiation conferred on 30 April 2006, Geshe Dawa explained that in *sutra* practice the practitioner remains an ordinary being, but in *tantra* the practitioner arises as the deity, and the place or setting becomes the pure realm. The outcome is bringing on the path, and enlightenment is involved in the moment of sitting. Similarly it was explained in *Introduction to Tantra* that *sutra* is the causal vehicle. It creates the causes for enlightenment, and *tantra* is the resultant vehicle, wherewith the result is taken into the path.

3 Aims, Techniques and Outcomes of Sutra Practice

This Section examines those practical activities that belong to the category of sutric practice as distinct from tantric practice. In terms of the nature of the experience derived from the practice, material from interview shows that practitioners relate mainly to concentration-type experiences, the transformative function of which is in the interpretation attributed to such experience. Certainly in interview I did not hear

⁴¹² See Appendix 12.

⁴¹³ Transcript excerpts describing these experiences are found in Appendix 12.

⁴¹⁴ This was outlined in the Discovering Buddhism module *Introduction to Tantra*, January-February 2004.

of any experiences equivalent to the reports of the Vipassana practitioners concerning the increase in depth or clarity of awareness typical of analytical practice. Section 2.3 relates and discusses the nature of personal change and growth that is derived from non-meditative practice: from study and application of the principles in personal reflections.

3.1 *Samatha*/Single-Pointed Concentration

According to Gelugpa doctrine the primary aim of cultivating *Samatha* is the attainment of liberation and full awakening or buddhahood so as to be of service to others. Gen Lamrimpa and Geshe Tashi Tsering both outline three levels of motivation: a fortunate rebirth; to attain liberation or Nirvana; and to attain full awakening.⁴¹⁵ These correspond to the three scopes of the *Lam Rim*. The two writers also draw attention to subsidiary effects and benefits of *Samatha* practice: the development of psychic powers and other forms of heightened awareness,⁴¹⁶ and control of mind and body.⁴¹⁷ Anecdotes about feats performed by highly-developed lamas are part of the shared reality of the FPMT, to the point whereat some practitioners' perceptions of their extraordinary abilities have been instrumental in those practitioners' decisions to become Buddhist. However, while the cultivation of psychic abilities is accepted and spoken about freely at Vajrayana Institute, such cultivation is not seen as the goal of practice. All doctrine about *samatha* cultivation that is taught at the Centre is either directed toward training the mind in the practice of calm-abiding, or toward providing students with a conceptual understanding of the stages of progress in development. The relevant aspects of doctrine include the absorptions: the levels and states of meditative stabilization; the faults; and their antidotes.

In their personal practices, practitioners employ *samatha* for the same purposes and uses it is put to in teachings: to settle the mind initially, and to develop the ability to keep a focussed mind on the object of attention. This is to ensure greater success with other meditation techniques such as visualization or purification practices, or analytical meditation, as explained in Chapter 4.⁴¹⁸ Here, concentrating on the breath is used to focus the mind so that one's visualizations, usually deity visualizations, will be clearer and more sustained. The image of the deity or meditation object must be clear and relatively stable for effective use in purification exercises. CR commented while we were discussing her approach to deity visualization:

⁴¹⁵ Gen Lamrimpa. *Samatha Meditation: Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on Cultivating Meditative Quiescence*, B. Alan Wallace trans., Snow Lion Publications, 1992, p20; Tashi Tsering. *The Theory and Practice of Mahamudra*, Chenrezig Institute Publications, 2002, p37.

⁴¹⁶ Gen Lamrimpa, 1992, *op.cit.*, p16.

⁴¹⁷ Tashi Tsering, *op.cit.*, p37.

⁴¹⁸ See Chapter 4, Section 3.3: *Meditation Practice at Vajrayana Institute*.

CR: The higher tantra practitioners—people who have been doing it for a long time—yeah, they can do incredible things with energy channels in their body, that are going to help them to be able to have an ultimate realization of *emptiness*, to control their rebirths. Believe me, I can't control anything. I'm at the stage of trying to get my visualizations to be clearer. So, when I said before that I didn't meditate on the breath, that would be a good thing for me to do because it would help me to be able to keep my ... my single-pointed concentration that I'm practising usually involves the visualization of a deity and saying your *mantra*, so I might do a *sadhana* and the visualization of a deity. While I'm visualizing the deity I'm saying the mantra, and at the same time I'll be visualizing something like sending out light to all sentient beings. The rays of light might have the particular deity on it so it goes to the crown of all sentient beings' head, and white nectar or something comes down into them, purifying them of all negativity, bringing them every happiness, so you know, the visualizations, it's always related to the world, it's not somebody sitting on a cloud being happy. The deity's always emanating out, and it might be bringing people in.

GE: It's Mahayana motivation!

CR: Yes, it's always about that. I really do like saying the mantras. Some people prefer just doing the breathing, but meditating on the breath is nothing. The only purpose of meditating on the breath is to be able to stabilize your mind so that you can meditate on something like a deity or something. But ultimately what you're trying to have this single-pointed concentration for is the understanding of reality, which is *emptiness*. This is the whole purpose of it, so you can single-pointedly concentrate on your understanding of that. and then have a direct realization of reality.

GE: You need to be able to hold your mind on it.

CR: Yes. So my understanding is that a lot of this, all of this visualization ends up ... that's the ultimate goal.

GE: So you are not interested in bliss states just for themselves?

CR: Um no, it's a bit pointless. It's completely pointless.

The same practitioner experienced the effects of concentration practice while doing a *sadhana*. Although the experience she describes was generated during a Tantra practice, the experience itself is germane to the discussion. I had asked her whether any of her experiences in meditation had been striking in some way.

CR: I think what I was referring to earlier.

GE: The retreat?

CR: Yes, because that was during the sessions where it comes to the point, like you've done this whole Sadhana which includes various bits and pieces, then your visualizing, which is meditating. You're visualizing the deity and saying the *mantra*. We might be saying that, we might be doing that for half an hour or longer. The sessions were quite long when we'd be going through that section, and just that really intense feeling of actually becoming one with the deity, of actually being the deity, and being able to send out rays of love to other beings, to all other beings, to the entire universe.

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

CR: It was just, it just felt, um, you just kind of totally ... it's like when you, well for me, I really love drawing for instance, and when I get caught up in ... I went to life drawing classes for a while, and when I was caught up in that it was like nothing else existed. It was like, you know, the whole, the rest of the world just disappears, you're just caught up in the thing. It was like that, just being there, one with this experience and not, not aware of noises or of anything going on outside or discomfort or anything. Just, you know in this moment, like being in, completely in the present moment. I was thinking too at Kopan monastery we used to do a meditation on the breath, it was on the different channels and that one with Geshe Dawa that also involved visualizing various energy channels, going through the different *chakras*, so that was Cittamani Tara. So at Kopan again, that visualizing the energy channels by breathing in through one channel and then breathing out through the other, and then through the central channel, you can just ... become sort of one with the moment, and also get quite an expansive feeling of the mind. It's not like you are restricted within this skull, it's doing that medit. ... we did meditations on the mind where you are imagining the nature of the mind and the mind just goes out, you know, it's just a very expansive and open kind of feeling, and it's sort of about making that connection, too, like even though you're there, one with the moment, but it's like this incredible connectedness ...

Practitioner NC reported experiencing a mental opening up, a sense of spaciousness while doing his refuge commitments. While a discussion of the Refuge Ceremony, in its function as a rite of passage signalling one's willing identification as a Buddhist is in Chapter 6,⁴¹⁹ NC's account demonstrates how the daily performance of the refuge commitment can be seen as a transformative practice:

NC: And I think, since taking refuge, the thing that changed over the last couple of months is a real deepening of that sense of refuge. One of the things that really changed, like in the morning I'll do prostrations and a refuge prayer, I'll spend a few minutes without doing a formal prayer, just thinking about the Buddha, *dharma* and Sangha, and what opens up in my mind now when I do that is very different. There's a real spacious ... like when I'm focussing on the Buddha, *dharma*, Sangha, there's a real spacious lightness that opens up, so

⁴¹⁹ See Appendix 10: Refuge Teachings.

there's this actual sense that happens now of that in the refuge. So since taking refuge the thing that changed most is my faith that those things offer refuge has become internalized. So if you talk about conversion, that's probably happened since the refuge ceremony about two months ago. But it's probably really only in the last four weeks that that thing has changed.

GE: So that sense of spaciousness? You used that word before.

NC: Yeah, that sense of spaciousness and lightness and all the sort of qualities I'll get on a good day if I'm doing a meditation on *emptiness*. In my mind when I'm doing it, 'cause I'm thinking 'OK, Buddha, *dharma*, Sangha', in my mind that's what appears around them. My previous going for refuge prayer was fairly ... it was heartfelt and sincere, but it didn't have the same effect on my mind. When it happened, I wondered whether it was an impact of the formal ceremony, or was the impact of the continued practice. I don't know. I'm sure making the commitment makes it easier for my mind to settle down. It's funny, I'm quite practical and I'm much more likely to explain things in psychological terms than in religious terms, but because it was quite a significant difference, there was obviously something. My mind decided it was ready to view things differently or ... I can't quite put my finger on it.

Although the first example is a deity visualization and the second involves the performance of refuge commitments, there is a similarity in the descriptions given by the two respondents. CR refers to an expansive feeling of the mind while NC describes an internal spaciousness, which are descriptive of concentration-type experience. It is possible that practitioners are familiar with the mental sensation of slowing down when the amount of mental content and its momentary processing is restricted by the concentration on the breath or the visualization⁴²⁰ What is significant about these two reports is the way in which the two practitioners have attributed a transformative function or meaning to the experience. CR's was to do with the way the experience took her outside the sense of being *restricted within this skull*, and while her own evaluation does not appear to reach beyond this sense, it is conceivable that repetitions of this type of experience over a period of time might affect the way one habitually sees oneself. NC, on the other hand, connects the sense of spaciousness to his deepening sense of faith in refuge, which he connects in turn to the growing ease with which his mind settles down. These accounts suggest that concentration-type experience does have a transformative function in this meditative setting, because of the uses to which it is put.

⁴²⁰ See Gen Lamrimpa, 1992, *op.cit.*, p20. Gen Lamrimpa defines the attainment of *Samatha*,/ quiescence, in terms of access concentration to the first *dhyana* (*jhana* in Pali), the first meditative stabilization. He gives its prerequisite as the turning away from sensual desires. The experience of a fundamental sense of mental focus has been discussed in several places with respect to practice, for instance in Chapter 2 in the context of everyday practices, the practices modified by Vipassana practitioners for use in routine activity.

3.2 Analytical Meditation

Emptiness is the central doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism. While it is but one of the three principles of the Mahayana path to enlightenment, it is the core notion supporting the whole framework of meaning. According to Hopkins, 'Phenomena are empty of a mode of being called inherent, objective, or natural existence'. The 'concept refers to our ordinary sense of the way things exist.' He refers to the middle way, the refutation of both inherent existence and total non-existence, and states that 'It is possible to realize a sense of valid, nominal existence through gaining the understanding that *emptiness* is an elimination only of inherent existence.'⁴²¹ VI's teachings stress that the *emptiness* referred to is the lack of *inherent* existence of a phenomenon *from its own side*, and that all phenomena are subject to causes and conditions, and do not inherently or unchangingly exist. It is also stressed that *this does not mean that we do not actually exist*. We merely do not exist in the way that we seem to.⁴²² The view of the self between essentialism and nihilism is the correct view. *Emptiness*, ultimate truth, dependent origination and relative truth operate as a model for how the self is constructed.⁴²³

Hopkins' statement, that '*Emptiness* becomes the context within which a yogi purifies his perception'⁴²⁴ is useful for understanding the approach taken to *Emptiness*, meditation. One is given a conceptual description or definition of what is to be realized in meditation before one has the realization. The meditation outlined in Hopkins' *Meditations on Emptiness* and referred to in other texts, is used in teachings at Vajrayana Institute, although infrequently.⁴²⁵ During my time of participant observation at the Centre, this meditation was led twice: in *Mind and Mental Events* in 2003, and in the Discovering Buddhism module *Wisdom of Emptiness* in 2004. The purpose of the meditation is to create a shift in the meditator's perception of self. NC was one practitioner who found the analytical meditations interesting and useful. I asked him:

GE: When you're talking about doing the meditations on *emptiness*, which ones are they?

⁴²¹ Hopkins, G. *Meditation on Emptiness*, Wisdom Publications, 1996, p9; p11.

⁴²² Italics mine. Some teachers do stress this in the hope that students get the right understanding. This is not a nihilist position. See Gen Lamrimpa. *Realizing Emptiness: Madhyamaka Insight Meditation*, B. Alan Wallace translator, Snow Lion Publications, 2nd ed., 2002, pp99-100, for his discussion of the *Middle Way* as the avoidance of the extremes of substantialism and nihilism.

⁴²³ *ibid.*, p24. Gen Lamrimpa discusses the difference between definitive and provisional sutras according to the Prasangika system, where the former are the sutras whose chief and explicit topic is *emptiness*. *Emptiness* is the definitive meaning. The provisional sutras contain conventional truths and provide provisional meaning.

⁴²⁴ Hopkins, 1996, *op.cit.*

⁴²⁵ This meditation is outlined in Hopkins, 1996, *op.cit.*, pp44-46. Hopkins himself refers to the sevenfold reasoning of Chandrakirti. See also p10 for the reasoning and sets of reasonings used to reflect on the impossibility of inherent existence. The meditation is also referred to in Gen Lamrimpa, 2002, *op.cit.*, p99.

NC: I do the one where you go through trying to locate the self physically, and then mentally, and then there's another one that I read in a book where you're trying to look back at the meditator, look back at myself, look back and try to locate the meditator, and then just visualizing all of the body parts and all the mental faculties spreading out and then just reside in that *emptiness*. The thing is going through trying to locate it and then looking back at the self who is thinking, and that's when I get a sense of there isn't anything. So the other one, I do this when I'm running, saying, well, 'If there was an existent self, permanent, who was running, if it was a part of the body, then it would be always running, the whole thing about it can either be part of the body or separate from the body, it can't be both. So I do that when I'm running, look back at the aggregates moving.

GE: So, it's trying to give yourself a particular perspective.

NC: You're going through all those logical reasons about why, how, and where the self doesn't exist, and so just going through those logical steps of, 'Well I can't locate it. ... It's not there. ... It's not in my thoughts, and then, looking back at me who's thinking all those things ...

No other student or practitioner interviewed offered a description of this meditation, and therefore, there is no other experiential report to compare it with. It has been suggested elsewhere that students find the concept of *emptiness* difficult to grasp. The *Discovering Buddhism* students gave me the sense that they think that if they are to understand *emptiness* at all, it will likely be some time after they have acquired more knowledge and skill in meditation. They do not appear to entertain the idea that they could grasp it at this point in their exposure to the teachings. Ray's observation that most Westerners have trouble understanding the connection between *emptiness* teachings and the practical spiritual life is supported by my findings from interview data, that people relate to those concepts to do with one's ethical orientation to the world, Samsaric life, such as *bodhicitta*.⁴²⁶ The way in which students notionally accept and work with the concept of *emptiness* is outlined in Chapter 4 Section 5.1.3, where their employment of its statement of truth was used as a strategy for dealing with difficult relationships. In the section immediately below, this strategy is treated as a transformative technique in its own right. Further theoretical evaluation of this point follows.

3.3 Transformative Activity Outside the Meditation Setting

Many practitioners see that their Buddhist practice is more than just the formal practice period each day or in retreat, and that it also consists of practice outside of

⁴²⁶ Ray, *op.cit.*, p95. Here Ray explains how the teachings on *emptiness* make the bodhisattva path possible. The bodhisattva's understanding that all phenomena are inherently empty, makes their exposure to so much suffering in Samsara bearable.

the formal meditation context. The study of Buddhist texts and reading material, including quiet reflection on the teachings, may be considered a different orientation to practice within the membership. This results in the acquisition of Buddhist interpretive frameworks, which are then applied to the interpretation and understanding of life situations according to the Buddhist outlook. As outlined in Chapter 4 Sections 2.1 and 2.2, Vajrayana Institute stocks a wide range of relevant reading material, from primary doctrinal material such as several versions of the *Lam Rim* by lineage founders and members, to meditation manuals and prayer books. While it may seem that textual study as support for learning and practice does not deserve special attention because it is expected of serious students, it is singled out because it seems to reflect a preferred and deliberate orientation to practice by a handful of adherents. Two in particular told me in interview that they do not meditate, despite one of them being a Tantric initiate. Their grounding in the practice appears to be through textual study.⁴²⁷

In addition, reading is set as homework in the Western teachings such as *Discovering Buddhism*. Many practitioners report the derivation of benefit from such study. Regardless of the depth of reading and textual study, attempting to see a personal problem and its solution from a Buddhist perspective is part of the experimental process; it allows the student to try out the framework or meaning-system for themselves. From the view of a self-transformation technique, applying a Buddhist interpretation to a problem is an effective way of trying and testing Buddhist doctrine and its practical application. Many observe changes resulting from reading and personal reflection in the way that DE relates:

DE: I've just been getting more and more out of listening and thinking, and it's beginning to change my thoughts. When I have derogatory thoughts about somebody, now I notice and think 'You don't actually have to say that'. You treat somebody in a particular way and they respond.

4 Tantric Activity at Vajrayana Institute

4.1 The Nature of Tantric Initiation and Commitment

In Section 1.2.1 it was explained that one is expected to take refuge before one takes Tantric initiation, ensuring that both an ethical orientation and a *bodhicitta* motivation are in place before engagement in Tantric activity.⁴²⁸ The Sanskrit term *Abhiseka*

⁴²⁷ Samuel, G. *Civilized Shamans*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993; Samuel, G. *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*, Ashgate, 2005. Samuel identifies two orientations within Western Tibetan Buddhism, the textual and the yogic, in contrast to the Shamanic and the Clerical he identifies in Tibetan societies.

⁴²⁸ See Tenzin Gyatso, in Tenzin Gyatso, Tsong-ka-pa, and Hopkins, J. *Deity Yoga In Action and Performance Tantra*, Snow Lion Publications, 1987, pp15-16. Here the Dalai Lama outlines the vows for each of the four classes of Tantra. Those engaged in Action and Performance Tantra take the Bodhisattva vows: eighteen root vows and maintenance of the aspirational mind of enlightenment, while those engaged in Yoga and Highest Yoga take Tantric Vows.

means empowerment or conferral of power. Tantric initiation empowers one to do the tantric practices of a specific deity. For instance, taking a *Vajrasattva* initiation empowers one to do the practices of *Vajrasattva* at the appropriate level. It is understood within the tradition that an initiation may be taken as an empowerment that comes with commitments, or as a blessing. In the latter case, one accumulates merit by attending the initiation and listening to the commentary given by the Vajra master, but does not become empowered to do the tantric practice. The practitioner decides which of the two options they choose by either reciting or not reciting the vows at a certain point in the initiation. I have heard it said that practitioners have been initiated accidentally by inadvertently repeating the vows along with other initiands. This can result in practitioners' being initiated into tantric practices that they feel they are not duly prepared for, or being given commitments that they know they cannot keep. Comments from some practitioners indicate the way in which safety guards may be built into the system. RI told me that you have to have very good visualization, 'otherwise it's just like a blessing'. This was meant in the sense that if you do not have success with visualization during the initiation, then you have not been initiated. Further to this was the question whether one is really initiated by going through the motions, by not feeling connected to the proceedings. RI also volunteered that what you hear and understand during the ritual determines the effect that the practice has on you and on what you should do, especially in the way you interpret the commitment instructions given.

When one takes initiation, instruction about practice comes in the form of imposed commitments. At interview, those respondents who indicated that they were tantric initiates also explained that they took their commitments seriously, even though they often found them hard to keep. Occasionally, they would indicate the mental strategies they put in place in order to keep themselves motivated. For instance CR explained,

CR: At least, the good thing about having commitments is I'm doing something. If I didn't have those commitments I'd do nothing, there'd be days I'd do nothing... But it's really good not to not do the commitments. I've spoken to people, everyone has said, this is from Geshe, from Logoan Rinpoche, to everybody, if you've made the commitment, it's very important to keep it, it's not something to lightly not do.⁴²⁹

One of the significant aspects of tantric practice spoken about, in *Introduction to Tantra* and in conversation, is that the initiand is not told before the initiation is taken what the commitment will be. To my knowledge the commitment is determined by the *Vajra* master, and anecdotal evidence suggests that it may be unexpectedly light, as, 'Try to say the deity's mantra as many times as you can during the week', or very heavy, by comparison. A commitment may be as finite as, 'Do one thousand

⁴²⁹ Also see CR's transcript excerpt in Section 1.2, this chapter.

mantras', or seemingly infinite, 'Do (a specified number) every day for the rest of your life'. This can be seen as a psychological safetyguard in two ways. First, it has the effect of warning off the idly curious. Second, the fact that practitioners are given commitments and are expected to keep them maintains an approach of seriousness toward tantra, and helps committed practitioners to maintain their motivation to practice.⁴³⁰ However, if they fail to keep their commitments they can purify, using the *Four Opponent Powers*, or renew their vows by taking another initiation.

The Discovering Buddhism module *Introduction to Tantra*⁴³¹ is designed to impart an awareness of the basics of tantric practice and to convey the seriousness with which it is to be undertaken. The four classes of tantra, Action, Performance, Yoga and Highest Yoga, were described very briefly to outline how each class builds on the skills and knowledge acquired through practice of the preceding. Action tantras involve the use of *mudras*/hand gestures and recitation of mantras. One is helped in the practice of this lowest class of *tantra* by being connected with external things. The teacher compared the energy used with the energy we use when smiling and laughing. In action tantra when we meditate on the deity, we do not arise as the deity.

Compared with the focus on external things in action *tantra*, performance *tantra* concentrates more on mental activity, and begins to use the energy of desire.⁴³² Comments by the teacher indicated this class of *tantra* to be concerned with visualizing the consort deity with desire, and arising as the deity, even if that is of the opposite sex. The third class, *yoga tantra*, uses visualization of the purification of body, speech, and mind. The meditation practice concerns visualization of the self as the deity informing all our acts. In this way it is a purifying, de-coarsifying practice. *Highest yoga tantra* was described as the system of highest possible development, wherein each deity has a subtle specialty. This class makes use of the system of *chakras*, the winds and the three wind channels (central and two side-channels).⁴³³

For reasons of secrecy the teacher did not elaborate on the practical aspects of *highest yoga tantra* beyond this point. She gave additional theoretical information about the interlinking of generation and completion stages with the grounds and paths, and

⁴³⁰ See Tsong-kha-pa. *Tantric Ethics: An Explanation of the Precepts for Buddhist Vajrayana Practice*, Gareth Sparham trans., Wisdom Publication, 2005, pp115-31. Chapter 5 of this book, *How to Keep a Tantric Ordination*, is a commentary on the consideration of thinking about the benefits of protecting, and the penalties of not protecting the vows.

⁴³¹ The module that I attended was taught in February 2004.

⁴³² Hopkins, in Tenzin Gyatso, Tsong-ka-pa, and Hopkins, J. *Deity Yoga In Action and Performance Tantra*, Jeffrey Hopkins ed./trans., Snow Lion Publications, 1987, p210. Hopkins refers to techniques revolving around and using the bliss arising from the desire for male-female union, which can be seen as an extension of the 'smiling' and 'looking with desire' metaphor used to describe action and performance tantra respectively.

⁴³³ See Appendix 9, *Meditations Taught in Mind and Its Potential*. The Nine Round Breathing meditation is outlined here.

about the correspondence of stages in the death process in the meditation with the Buddha bodies that the fully enlightened being assumes at entry to Buddhahood.⁴³⁴ Enough information was given to form an intellectual grasp of significant aspects of practical developments throughout the sequence of the four tantra classes, instance the progressive intimacy between practitioner and deity, but without being able to derive appreciation of the experiential states involved.

4.2 The Maintenance of Secrecy

From this it can be seen that Vajrayana Institute's teachings maintain and propagate an attitude of seriousness and respect toward *tantra*. In the manner of its self-representation, it attempts neither to conceal deliberately nor to reveal anything more than practitioners need to know in order to understand the relationship between the sutric and tantric paths. Thus the subject does not attract idle curiosity from newer participants. Initiations, when they occur, are advertised in the newsletter and by email. During the time of my involvement with the Centre, a handful of initiations involving *Medicine Buddha*, *Chenrezig*, *Tara*, and *Vajrasattva* were held. I believe that these were all action tantras. From time to time the *Vajrayogini* self-initiation, a highest *yoga tantra*, is advertised in the newsletter, but I have neither seen nor heard any other reference to this deity at the Centre. Because only action tantra initiations are visible, one has to think that higher tantric activity is successfully kept private between the guru and student, and, I suspect, between a small group of older, more experienced students. Accordingly, Tantric practitioners do not discuss their tantric involvement. In interview some were willing to reveal which initiations they had taken, but very little else. They successfully keep much of what they do secret. When I asked them about their daily practice and meditative experience, they tell me as much as they feel that I need to know, and they relate this within the context of their commitment to Buddhism generally. As BP commented, "When I first started coming I didn't realize that you're not meant to blah on about what initiations you've taken. You're meant to just go along ... I mean it is meant to be a private thing, but because it's for your project, I'll discuss it."

Another aspect of the secrecy surrounding Buddhist Tantra is perpetuated by its own *experiential* emphasis. As indicated by the descriptions of the four classes of tantra above, it is by nature an experiential practice, and understanding of its meaning is derived from its performance.⁴³⁵ This suggests that there is no intentionally concealed secret. This idea is supported by other characteristics of the practice. Ray notes that one must receive initiation before being given permission, texts, and practice instructions.⁴³⁶ However, as Wayman notes, *sadhanas* contain the bare description of the deity; their texts do not contain enough practical detail for informed practice. In this way the texts have the secrecy of obscurity, and the guru is

⁴³⁴ See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.* His table on p33 contains this kind of information.

⁴³⁵ Guenther, 1972, *op.cit.*, pix; Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p62.

⁴³⁶ Ray, *op.cit.*, p113.

meant to supply the missing detail.⁴³⁷ Wayman's point supports my own experience with initiations held at VI. The *sadhanas* outline what to say and visualize, but nothing else. The fact that some of these practices are available as booklets on sale in the bookshop⁴³⁸ indicates that they have no secret that can be disclosed in a text.

Whenever the buddhas, buddha families, *bodhisattvas* and deities were discussed at the Centre I noted a lack of systematization or categorization of these beings and their qualities. The Buddha families and their sets of correspondences were sometimes briefly referred to in teachings, but not studied in any systematic way. In interview I was puzzled at first when respondents were not forthcoming with this kind of information about the deities' symbolic associations. After they had told me what practices they did, I would ask them about the meanings of the deities, and they knew that *Chenrezig* is compassion, *Tara* is compassionate action, and *Vajrasattva* is mental purification.⁴³⁹ According to Wayman, although Westerners want to know the meaning of the deities and their mantras, the deities do not have meanings in the Western sense of intellectual understanding. Such meanings arise through the regular practice and service of the deity.⁴⁴⁰ This is exemplified by some of the instruction given during a Medicine Buddha Practice day, the schedule for which is given in Appendix 15: *Schedule for the Medicine Buddha Practice Day, 28 May 2005*.⁴⁴¹ The convenor stated at one point that the medicine Buddha is the archetypal healing energy in all of us. Sometimes in the visualizations she gave some direction such as to *try to feel the presence of the Medicine Buddhas*, and mentioned that throughout the literature their names and colours are not always consistent.

The lack of public visibility of initiations of higher status than action tantra is congruent with informal discourse among practitioners themselves. One never hears discussion of the nature of visualizations, or experiences that practitioners may have of the three higher classes of *tantra*. Two connected issues, the existence of such secrecy and the public nature of those initiations that are visible, may reveal the intent of the Vajra master with respect to the capacities of practitioners. Ray comments that lamas will sometimes give public initiations, even to those with no preparation, thinking of them as ceremonial blessings, sowing positive karmic seeds which will ripen in the future.⁴⁴² He contrasts these with the private initiations

⁴³⁷ See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, especially pp41, 55 and 60. In this vein, he also says that the sexual symbolism itself is not the secret.

⁴³⁸ One such booklet is Ngawang Losang Tempa Gyaltzan. *Medicine Buddha Sadhana*, trans. Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, FPTM Education Services, rev. ed., 2002.

⁴³⁹ Lama Thubten Yeshe. *Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification*, Wisdom Publications, 2004, p287. Vajrasattva is the male meditational deity symbolizing the inherent purity of all buddhas. His practice removes obstacles created by negative karma and breaking vows.

⁴⁴⁰ See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p54; pp20-1. Here Wayman refers to a correspondence between the five Dhyani Buddhas, the five *skandhas*/aggregates and five corporeal centres, and he discusses the references to such correspondences in the Guhyasamajatantra and Pindikramasadhana.

⁴⁴¹ This was held on 28 May 2005, following a Medicine Buddha initiation given by Geshe Dawa at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown on 30/04/2005.

⁴⁴² Ray, *op.cit.*, p114.

between teacher and student, wherein the commitments are held to be different.⁴⁴³ Added to that is the current fashion for serial initiation. Several of my respondents were ‘serial initiates’ as seen from the list of initiations that they had taken and had attempted to keep commitments for, for example, ‘Kalachakra and two Vajrasattvas’, ‘One Thousand-arm Chenrezig, Four-arm Chenrezig and Green Tara’. CR, quoted in Section 1.1, said that her daily practice, consisting of ‘Medicine Buddha’ and ‘White Tara’ and ‘Green Tara’, ‘Kalachakra’ initiation and ‘Cittamani Tara’, which is a higher *yoga tantra* of ‘Green Tara’, took her about an hour. From the religious perspective, multiple initiations may be seen to allow the practitioner to accumulate merit by attending blessings periodically. Pragmatically, it is conceivable that serial initiation allows Western practitioners the opportunity to renew vows on occasion, and to restate their commitment to the path.

4.3 Understanding the Nature of Deity and Deity Yoga

During *Introduction to Tantra* the teacher explained that the basis of *tantra* is to access the pure Buddha mind; that ‘the idea behind visualizing the deities is that you are getting in touch with what’s already there’.⁴⁴⁴ CR said:

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

It is held that visualization of deities stimulates the growth of corresponding potencies already latent in the practitioner’s own mind,⁴⁴⁵ which, according to Lama Yeshe, has the underlying nature of essential clarity and purity.⁴⁴⁶ Practitioners typically both relate to deity visualization and practise it as a concentration practice. Ideally, tantric practitioners are meant to have achieved some success with both concentration and analytical meditation before they enter tantric practice. According to Wayman, ‘Contemplation of the yoga of the deity is meant to bring about the complete characteristics of calming, and one is meant to have the voidness contemplation’.⁴⁴⁷ The Dalai Lama holds the view that Action and Performance Tantra are practical for many people because ‘although they involve meditation on *emptiness* and on a deity, they are yogas in which the mind’s realizing *emptiness* does not manifest as a deity. The meditator is mainly concerned with achieving clarity of

⁴⁴³ *ibid.*, pp198-99.

⁴⁴⁴ I attended *Introduction to Tantra* in February 2004.

⁴⁴⁵ Harvey, 2000, *op.cit.*, p141.

⁴⁴⁶ Lama Thubten Yeshe. *Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification*, Wisdom Publications, 2004.

⁴⁴⁷ See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, pp110-11 for these comments, and Ray, *op.cit.*, p177.

appearance of a divine body, mantra letters and so forth, and thus cannot *mainly* meditate on *emptiness*'.⁴⁴⁸

It is evident from conversations and interviews with practitioners that many have not attained this meditative stability, although they strive for it, and work to strengthen it, using deity visualizations as a concentration exercise. This is exemplified in CR's transcript excerpt in Section 2.1, in which she discusses her use of concentration in order to make her deity visualizations clearer. By keeping commitments and doing the *sadhana* of a deity, intention toward enlightenment is expressed and reinforced. In practical terms, these tantric practitioners have a fundamental understanding of the path and its grounding in the *bodhisattva* motivation. This excerpt illustrates the approach to practice and self-development held by those who practise deity yoga:

CR: One of the things I like is that when you've taken a highest yoga initiation you can then imagine yourself as the deity. You can arise as the deity, and so it's this whole idea of doing that because you're imagining what you will become in the future, and bringing that result into the present, and the purpose of that is to try and remind yourself in your day-to-day life of who you actually are, and who you actually can become, not puffing yourself up and being proud or whatever, and a lot of the time I don't remember it at all, to be honest. I think just by familiarizing my mind with it again and again, by doing this daily practice, then hopefully, I'll be more likely when I'm in a situation where I could yell at someone or get upset or angry or whatever, that I'll have a bit more to draw on, to pull me back from that, so I can deal with things more compassionately, more kindly, so it's kinder on them.

It is significant that CR articulates the connection between her habitual states of mind and the purpose behind her practice of deity yoga. She is honest about her tendency to express anger and her forgetfulness in employing techniques for managing it at the time. However, her expressed intention, that she remind herself of her true nature as distinct from its habitual outer manifestation, is representative of the way in which the deities are meant to be understood and practised. Harvey notes that unwholesome mental states, such as anger, are seen as distortions of the mind's underlying intrinsic purity. The deities symbolize the positive energies that the impurities may be transmuted into.⁴⁴⁹

One important consideration for understanding practitioners' existential reality involves the way that they view the dualistic notion of purity-impurity in relation to the nature of deity. The Dalai Lama maintains that in all four *tantras* the body is divine,⁴⁵⁰ suggesting that the appropriate view of the body is as a purified body. He

⁴⁴⁸ Tenzin Gyatso, 1987, *op.cit.*, p15.

⁴⁴⁹ Harvey, 2000, *op.cit.*, p141.

⁴⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p9.

states that in Action tantra ‘one is meant to cultivate self-generation, but some cannot’, and he believes that this is why most action tantras do not clearly present deity yoga. His statement that ‘one must be able to maintain the view of being a deity and having a divine body’, and ‘must remain free from conceptions of ordinariness and of inherent existence’,⁴⁵¹ even in action tantra, indicates the ideal consciousness of a practitioner. The Dalai Lama draws attention to the emphasis placed on physical cleanliness, the external activities of cleanliness in action tantras.⁴⁵² Without explanation as to why, at the beginning of the Medicine Buddha initiation, which I attended three times, initiands—regardless of whether they intended to take initiation as a blessing or as an empowerment—washed their mouths with saffron water before they entered the room. Ideally, one must be able to see oneself as a divine, and therefore, as a purified being. Practically speaking, one must believe in one’s ability to realize one’s own Buddha-nature and its inherent *emptiness*. While practitioners can see their Buddha-nature as an inner potential and as a model for their own development, as has already been demonstrated, realizing *emptiness*—conceptually or experientially—is difficult here. Perceiving the desire energy itself as pure may present difficulties for some Westerners.

There appear to be two interrelated problems concerning the correct way to view desire for *tantra* practice. The first is in seeing it as essentially pure, and the second is in engaging with it without becoming lost in its energy. Here there is a seeming contradiction between the ‘Hinayana view’ and the Tantric view. Tulku Thondup outlines the essential differences between the Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana views. Hinayana practitioners avoid encounter with the sources of negative mentalities and emotions. Mahayana practitioners apply the right antidotes to negative concepts and emotions and their sources. Vajrayana practitioners accept and transmute negative concepts, emotions and their sources into enlightened wisdom.⁴⁵³ Although this statement is biased toward the Mahayana view, it is clear that one must be able to identify clearly, accept the nature of and deal effectively with mental and emotional impulses in day-to-day existence before one can use them effectively for higher training. From this it is clear how prior *sutra* training establishes the right mental orientation to Tantric practice. However, I have witnessed discussion at the centre wherein it is clear that students have both ambiguous and ambivalent responses to the nature of desire and its treatment. Some of this vacillation is suggested by Buddhist doctrine itself. It may be confusing for some practitioners, especially if they are relatively new to Buddhism, to hear desire spoken about alongside the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion, sometimes also expressed as desire, aversion and ignorance.

Such people may find it difficult to discriminate repression from the suppression—to check and contain the impulse—needed as a precursory step for the kind of

⁴⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp11-12.

⁴⁵² *ibid.*, p17.

⁴⁵³ Tulku Thondup, in Ray, *op.cit.*, ppviii-ix.

transformation in which one expresses an instinctual energy, such as desire, with the appropriate motivation in a specific ritual context. It may be difficult to conceive of using the basic energy of desire without labelling it as unwholesome. In addition, as Guenther notes, in the Tantric view body and mind are seen as interdependent and interpenetrating. The whole person is given equal value, as opposed to the higher value placed on the mind in Western thought generally. In his view the extreme dualism of body and mind has led to the body's being treated with aversion.⁴⁵⁴ These concerns are echoed in the following conversation that I had with NC, who had expressed an interest in Tantra, about the way to view and deal with desire. He was recounting the answer to a question he had asked the resident Geshe about the nature of desire and attachment.

NC: What I understand now as true, complete renunciation is a very profound position, a profound understanding that everything in our existence is a form of suffering, and Geshe Samten said that when you have true renunciation, your desire for liberation ... it won't be intellectual, it will be an urge.

GE: It will just be an urge that will consume you?

NC: Yes. It's not something that you'll have to think about. It'll just be there. I'd been having trouble with the whole. It's a pretty enormous way to be thinking, to get to the point that you can accept that even, because I always go back to the point of, 'Oh. Look at the sunset, it's beautiful', and I know it's not going to last, but ten minutes is lovely and, you know, even that pleasure ... Say an enlightened being was there, they would take pleasure, because they're not in Samsara once they're enlightened. But, it's a hard concept to, um ...

GE: So, did he actually say things like it doesn't mean that you can't enjoy pleasurable things, but you just don't get attached to them?

NC: Not on that night particularly. He did say that it doesn't mean that you give everything up, because if you say that everything's suffering, you can understand where people go off on that tangent, this extreme of giving everything up, you can understand where they get that from. If they know that you're still able to do things without attachment, it's a tricky one to get. The example I use with myself, I used to be quite overweight and I used to eat a lot, and now when I look back at my relationship with food, it was greedy, attachment, it was not really satisfying. I'd eat but it wouldn't really satisfy me. I was eating for the wrong reasons, and it was a real grasping relationship with food, whereas now I love to cook, and I love food, and I prepare food for people, I get a real enjoyment out of it, but there isn't this greedy grasping thing. So I'd sort of used that as an example with myself, like a renouncing of food as a source of pleasure and satisfaction, by grasping at it but now that I've given it up, I now enjoy it more than I used to.

⁴⁵⁴ Guenther, *op.cit.*, pp6; 8-9.

GE: It seems to be something about the nature of that extreme grasping, that pushes the pleasure away. It's an odd one.

NC: Exactly, it pushes the pleasure away. You see that clearly. It's when we grasp at things, there's that addictive quality of wanting it ... it pushes the pleasure out. And then there's that other fear in your head, but if I give up the grasping will I lose it?. How can I give up the grasping? There's one thing that I always want to ask about, but I'm too embarrassed to ask about, is sex, you know, because it's got to be one of the biggest grasping things. But I think that renunciation is getting to the point where you can ... The idea in Tantra of using desire, I've never really understood in Tantra how that works. The one thing that has become clear to me is that if you can enjoy things without grasping at them, and you are really freeing up your attitude towards them, then there's enjoyment. But where's the desire? If you free up your grasping, isn't your desire dropping away? That's how I feel about it. When I think about it with all sorts of desires, I try to recognize it for what it is, and I suppose if you can use the desire and recognize what it is, and mentally say 'I want to bring this desire into the path and dedicate it toward the path', that's given me something to think about.

These comments reflect NC's understanding of desire and its renunciation, after considerable reflection on his prior approaches and behaviours related to desire and craving. His new understanding was a result of incorporating, after the recognition that the impulses were capable of modification, the Buddhist position into his own thought. Bodily and mental impulses, the sources of attachment and aversion, need to be seen simultaneously as pure and as things to be renounced. The ideal state of preparation for tantric practice—being accomplished in concentration and insight, and having a view of one's body and mind as pure and divine—is an aspirational attainment rather than a reality. It must be considered that the *bodhisattva* path, as a prerequisite to tantric practice, orients the mind toward attainment of the appropriate view of self within a framework of compassionate and ideally selfless motivation. This ensures the practitioner's self-discipline with respect to influence—of the internal field of bodily, emotional, and mental energy—on the reification and inflation of the ego.

As one would expect, with a practice that is meant to be secret, no one really spoke about tantric experiences. Two practitioners reported striking experiences that occurred to them in Theravadin Buddhist settings before they had made contact with Tibetan Buddhism. They are significant because the experiences themselves, though very different, lend themselves to a Tantric interpretation because of the imagery used to describe the experience, and the intensity of the experience conveyed by the two individuals. The individual context for both was one of extreme emotion. Both had been dealing with highly emotionally charged situations before the experience occurred during meditation practices of different natures. The transcript excerpts are presented in Appendix 12. As one can see, the symbolism used to describe the experience is tantric in nature. These examples are discussed in Chapter 6 Section 2.2

with respect to the effect of these experiences on the individuals' subsequent decisions about Buddhist exploration and commitment.

5 The Self and Its Transformations

5.1 The Transformative Techniques and Their Effects

For many, the Mahayana motivation to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings expresses the goal of practice. Often the more short-term goal is the improvement of one's mental and emotional life. Practitioners have often expressed the sentiment that by working on themselves they improve their relationships with others, and in this way they are working toward alleviating suffering. From this, more immediate personal goals can be seen to support the ultimate goal expressed by the Mahayana motivation. One experienced practitioner, CR, said of her commitment:

CR: It's believing that the purpose of life is to develop your qualities, to help all beings, that there is a reason for being here—which I used to be not sure of—and that reason is to be of service of help to others, and that the way to do that is to, you do have to develop your own quality because I can't help others the way I am, not properly. I can try but I don't really know how, and quite often I get it wrong.

According to the outlook of the FPMT, all practice done with a Mahayana motivation can be seen to be transformative in some way. Although McDonald's book divides the meditations into four sections, viz. meditations on the mind, analytical meditations, visualization meditations and devotional practices,⁴⁵⁵ she maintains that all meditation techniques are either single-pointed concentration or analytical meditation,⁴⁵⁶ supporting the widely accepted view of all Buddhist meditation as fundamentally either concentration or insight. Concentration and *analytical* meditation are prescribed as greater scope practices in the *Lam Rim*.⁴⁵⁷ However, the commonality between virtually all of the practices employed by Vajrayana students to effect transformation is the use of visualization, and this mainly through concentration practice. Although concentration is practised by using the breath or a deity image as the meditation object, most practitioners reported incorporating deity visualization into their personal practice. Regardless of which technique was used, the general effect is a calming influence on the mind, which improves the individual's focus and sense of mental well-being.

⁴⁵⁵ McDonald, *op.cit.*, p8.

⁴⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p19.

⁴⁵⁷ Tsong-kha-pa, *op.cit.*, 2002. The entire third volume of the three volumes of Tsong-kha-pa's *Lam Rim* is devoted to exposition of concentration and wisdom, the last two of the Six Perfections of the bodhisattva.

Those concentration-type experiences that were reported by practitioners, namely NC's experience of *spaciousness* contributing to a deeper sense of refuge, and CR's *expansive feeling of the mind* during a sadhana and while doing a channel-clearing, were notable for their transformative effects. Csikszentmihalyi and Bedford comment on the positive psychological changes, complex in nature, that result from these types of experience.⁴⁵⁸ In particular, CR's experiential account echoes Csikszentmihalyi's description of flow experience. The purely psychological benefit of concentration experience can be seen alongside another aspect of this experience. The sense of self depicted in these experiences seems to be one of enhanced interiority rather than sacrality; it does not have the overlay of sacrality that many new age or Western alternative practices assume. This interiority is not rarefied or essentialized. It is more a case of the mind's relaxing, loosening up, letting go of content, emptying, not of disengaging from its concerns. It is more an extension of one's sense of self, rather than a rarefication.

The devotional practices, which include the refuge prayer,⁴⁵⁹ seem to function principally to reaffirm one's outlook and to reinforce one's motivation for self-transformation. Much of the material presented in this chapter, and in Chapter 4, emphasizes the importance of correct motivation for this form of Buddhism, in such a way that it seems more highly regarded than meditative attainment. This is reflected at interview by the subtle conveyance of a sense of achievement in maintaining an attitude of altruistic motivation despite not having meditated as much as one might. The fact that many practitioners report personal change as an effect of their Buddhist involvement generally—study and reflection on specific situations—without describing any substantial meditative input, suggests that the majority of changes occur as a result of strategies employed in everyday awareness rather than as a consequence of an altered awareness generated in meditation.

Many of the changes reported by practitioners concern the use of mental strategies for managing their feelings, especially anger and defensiveness, and for managing their habitual mental states. They report feeling generally calmer and more content in themselves. For many practitioners the ability to deal with negative feelings was an important achievement for them, but in comparison to the changes achieved by the practice of bare attention to one's immediate experience in order to note the impulse to action before it manifests, the Vajrayana practitioners achieve similar results by the use of suggestion, by holding images of the desired result. Using images of the self, much change can be seen to occur by direct reflection on and modification to the self concept. Before these processes are discussed, the relevant

⁴⁵⁸ Csikszentmihalyi, M. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, HarperPerennial, 1991, p41; Bedford, S. "Crying Out of Recognition: Experiences with Meditative Practices in a New Religious Movement", in *ARC, The Journal of Religious Studies*, pp119-32, McGill, 24, 1996, p126. Here Csikszentmihalyi explains that flow experience has an integrating effect on the self because consciousness is unusually well-ordered during states of concentration.

⁴⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p144.

models of the self from the Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist and Western academic perspectives, are outlined. This is done in order to establish what is meant to be transformed through practice, how this transformation occurs, and how change and its mechanisms are to be treated theoretically in the context of *socialization* research.

5.2 Vajrayana Models of the Self

Understanding the self and its transformations from the Buddhist perspective in terms of three aspects: the imputed, relative, and absolute, is discussed in Chapter 3 with respect to its explanatory power for the kinds of self-transformation effected by Vipassana practice. These aspects are respectively: the solid and continuous sense of I equated with the Western *ego*, the relative self as depicted by the principle of dependent origination, and the self in the absolute sense, *anatta* in Theravadin thought and *sunyata/emptiness* in Mahayana thought. However, in contrast with the Theravadin view presented at BMIMC, the FPMT presents a more conceptually elaborate view of the self, and the terms 'absolute', 'relative' and 'imputed' are used frequently in courses such as *Discovering Buddhism* and *Buddhism and Western Psychology*. Conversation, class discussions and interview material demonstrate that students do not naturally think in terms of the threefold model of the self. As previously related, the notion of *emptiness* appears to be held as a conditional belief; it is held to be true on the condition that the individual will one day have a direct realization of it, and therefore validate it for themselves. The notion of a changeable mindstream able to be affected by thought and action appears to operate as a conception of the subject of transformation. In this way, the views of the ultimate and relative selves are accommodated conceptually. Generally, the concept of Buddha-nature appears to function as a commonsense view.

In the Gelugpa system there are two ways of perceiving and working with the absolute view: *emptiness* as the impersonal absolute, and the Buddha as a model of the enlightened being, one who has realized *emptiness*. Students' appreciations of the nature of *emptiness* as lacking inherent existence were explored in Chapter 4, and in Section 3.3 above with respect to the nature of deity. The buddha-nature is said to be of the nature of *emptiness*. The use of the term Buddha-nature may give the impression of something capable of reification, and it is possible that being unfamiliar with the notion of *emptiness* that deity images are meant to embody, might lead some students to think in terms of an essentialized, holy being, at least initially. The use of buddha, *bodhisattva*, deity images, and images of one's guru are meant to remind oneself of aspects of one's own buddha-nature being inherently empty. However, cognitively speaking, one must first be able to see Buddha-nature as a quality or set of qualities belonging to a Buddha, more specifically Sakyamuni Buddha, a fully enlightened being, in order to see the model of the enlightened being as representing oneself. This involves reification to the degree necessary to objectify the image, to see it as a discrete object.

Teachings often make the distinction between the ultimate and relative views. The former is seeing the self as inherently empty. The latter is seeing it in terms of *a dependent arising*,⁴⁶⁰ that is, as a set of interdependent causes and conditions. Watson notes that the Gelugpa distinguish between the essential self which is to be denied, and the transactional self: the sense of self as we experience it, which is produced by the interplay of the aggregates.⁴⁶¹ This relative or transactional self is frequently understood and expressed in terms of the aggregates and dependent origination in the literature. In *Discovering Buddhism* module 9, *Samsara and Nirvana*, the twelve-step formula of dependent origination was presented as describing the nature of cyclic existence, *samsara*, and explaining how the person may both remain in and be liberated from *samsara*. It is significant that teaching and instruction in both Centres, VI and BMIMC, rarely discuss the doctrine of the aggregates beyond a brief mention. The notion of the person employed in Vipassana practice is framed by the four *satipatthanas*, and other notions are dominant in FPMT discourse: the principle of dependent origination, and *mind and body* to signify the aggregates. This is significant because of the reference to the five aggregates in the Heart Sutra, used to explain the *emptiness* of phenomena. The doctrine of dependent origination is used in its more general sense, that phenomena are impermanent and subject to causes and conditions. Similarly, *nama-rupa*/mind and body appear to be used to signify the subjective field of mental and bodily phenomena that give rise to the sense of I.

The sense of self or I, our own sense of self, the object designated by I which feels solid and continuous, is imputed onto the relative view. Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden further divides this imputed I into two.⁴⁶² He states that the self, the sense of I, is of two types. The first is the I imputed onto its base, the five aggregates, and exists conventionally as a dependent arising. The second type of I arises from the superposition of inherent existence onto the first type. It is the second type that is inherently empty. Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden states that the first type exists relatively. To refute this 'I' is to take the nihilist position.⁴⁶³ Watson's generalized two-level model of the self,⁴⁶⁴ outlined in Chapter 3, Section 3.2, may be applied to the understanding of the data of these Vajrayana practitioners to equal effect. Two aspects of her model relate to the sense of self. The first, in her Level 1 and corresponding to James' self-as-subject, deals with self-image as process. It consists of a simple but coherent notion of self, open to the environment. This aspect appears to correspond to the I imputed onto the aggregates that Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden describes,⁴⁶⁵ the I that when refuted leads to nihilism. This I is ultimately

⁴⁶⁰ This term was used frequently in *Discovering Buddhism* teachings during my period of fieldwork, to denote the relative view of the self.

⁴⁶¹ Watson, 2000, *op.cit.*, p31; Watson, G. *The Resonance of Emptiness: A Buddhist Inspiration for a Contemporary Psychotherapy*, Curzon Press, 2002, pp96-7.

⁴⁶² Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, *op.cit.*, pp851-52.

⁴⁶³ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ Watson, 2002, *op.cit.*, p110.

⁴⁶⁵ Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, *op.cit.*, pp851-52.

meant to be seen as a dependent arising, but the Gelugpa view holds it to be real, nonetheless.

Aspects of the Vajrayana practices involve the field of immediate subjective experience. At least two already considered can be seen to involve this subjective field: the four-point analysis of the *emptiness* of self meditation, and the deity yoga of the three higher *tantras*. Discussion above has already alluded to how mental and bodily energy may be directed, depending on the kinds of concepts embodied in the images. One can only assume that in higher Tantric practice practitioners are meant to focus directly on their experience of particular feelings and mental states while they make the visualizations.

Watson's second level is the self-concept as representation, which is bolstered by language and culture, and becomes increasingly reified. It is considered autonomous, but is adhered to and affected by emotional components. It also includes James's pure egoic component of the objective self, which he considers to provide the core sense of continuity in the individual.⁴⁶⁶ Buddhist doctrine and contemporary Western thought both see this core sense of continuity as a construct of the mind.⁴⁶⁷ This is the I that is imputed onto the I arising from the interplay of the aggregates, as Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden stresses.

This distinction between the two imputed senses of *I* from the Gelugpa perspective, and the two sites of self-awareness as understood by Watson, clarifies misapprehensions about the different aims of Buddhism and psychotherapy that sometimes occur in the literature. Concern has been expressed about the misunderstood differences between the aims of Western psychotherapy and Buddhist meditation by Western practitioners, claiming that it might lead to perception that the notion of *emptiness* means non-existence. Comparing the two approaches, many scholars agree that Buddhism assumes a strong and healthy ego-structure to begin with, whereas much Western psychology aims to strengthen it. Although some have seen the two goals as incompatible, several researchers, including Epstein and Watson, maintain that this view is reversible when the terminology has been clarified. Engler observes that meditation requires a mature level of ego organization,⁴⁶⁸ something that Watson believes is necessary before this ego-organization, the sense-of-self, can be safely seen as a construct, adding that without a firm basis of mental health, it is possible to confuse pre- and trans-egoic

⁴⁶⁶ Again, see Watson, 2002, *op.cit.*, p110. On p94 Watson explains her labelling of James's two components of the self, subject and object, as 'I the knower' and 'me the known', as self and self-concept, and holds them to refer to the 'field of immediate subjectivity' and the 'self as seen as an object distinct from its environment' respectively.

⁴⁶⁷ See Watson, 2002, *op.cit.*, p94.

⁴⁶⁸ Engler, J. "Therapeutic Aims in Psychotherapy and Meditation: Developmental Stages in the Representation of Self", in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 16 [1], pp25-61, Transpersonal Institute, 1984, p26; Watson 2002, *op.cit.*, p93.

states in meditation.⁴⁶⁹ The aim of Buddhist insight is to deconstruct the self-representation, the autonomous and reified way in which we see and treat ourselves, and not to destroy it.⁴⁷⁰

5.3 The Sense-of-Self and Its Transformations

Berger and Luckmann, in their treatment of socialization, refer to aspects of the person or self, such as immediate body experience, which are never completely socialized in the sense that their experience is somehow outside of what can be socially constituted through the use of language.⁴⁷¹ As outlined in Chapter 1, Section 2.2, scholars of social constructionism and its related subdisciplines of socialization theory and symbolic interaction, focus on the formation of the self-concept or representation through socialization. These theories have difficulty in successfully accommodating the subjective field of experience and its role in personal change. It seems that the changes commonly reported by practitioners, such as more effective management of negative feelings, are effected in the subjective field in terms of internal recognition and checking of the impulse, but managed more broadly and in an continuing manner by the way in which people wish to see themselves objectively. In contrast with the purely analytical approach to meditation taken in Vipassana, primarily dealing with the self-as-subject, the practitioner at Vajrayana Institute is given role-models with which to work, in the form of Sakyamuni Buddha, and the families of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and tantric deities. In purification practice involving visualization they use the imagination to suggest a desired state of affairs, and here negative feeling is regarded as unwholesome. The deities used for practice embody symbolic representations of qualities belonging to enlightened, undefiled beings, who serve as role-models for the practitioner's desired state of mind. As explained in Chapter 4, by this stage the practitioner has acquired a structure of understandings about the path to enlightenment, and therefore is familiar with the ideas symbolized by the buddha and deity images. This demonstrates how changes implicating the self as both subject and object can occur.

During the *Buddhism and Western Psychology* course in 2003,⁴⁷² the teacher applied Horney's psychoanalytic perspective to the understanding of the relative and imputed selves, with the aim of clarifying the nature of self-attachment and self-

⁴⁶⁹ Watson, *op.cit.*, p121; p159.

⁴⁷⁰ Watson agrees with Epstein's view that the contradiction between ego and Buddhist self is *easily negated* once it is understood that the "target of Buddhist insight is not the ego in a Freudian sense, but the self-concept, the representational component of the ego". See Watson, 2002, *op.cit.*, p116. See also Imamura, R. "Buddhist and Western Psychotherapies: An Asian American Perspective", in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp228-237, University of California Press, 1998, p235.

⁴⁷¹ Berger, P, and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday & Company, 1966.

⁴⁷² These classes were given during July and August 2003.

cherishing.⁴⁷³ The relative and imputed selves correspond to Horney's real and idealized selves, respectively. The teacher explained that an aim of psychotherapy was to develop the relative or real self,⁴⁷⁴ and to lessen identification with and attachment to the idealized self: the image of our *ideal* self. Although Horney's clinical view differs marginally from the view asserted here, the teacher was making use of the concept of the idealized self to illustrate the way in which we develop an over-attachment to this sense of self, resulting in 'neurotic egocentricity' or 'neurotic pride'.⁴⁷⁵ The aim of Buddhist practice is to deconstruct the *imputed* self, that is, the sense of permanence created by the interplay of the aggregates comprising the relative self.

6 Conclusions

In the same way that the Vipassana practitioners were seen to undergo concurrent processes of strengthening the self-image and deconstructing the sense of self as a solid and permanent core, similar effects can be observed to occur for the Vajrayana practitioners, but as a result of the engagement with a different set of techniques. These are primarily in the use of suggestion through imagining a desired state-to-be, and prime among these is deity visualization to stimulate growth of desirable qualities that are considered to be latent in the practitioner's mind.⁴⁷⁶ The practitioners of this school have a strong inclination toward concentration and purification, in line with the emphasis on balancing meditation with virtuous action aimed at purification of the mindstream. Compared to the Vipassana practitioners, whose training is specifically in the analytical method of observing the arising and ceasing of the first three *satipatthanas*—sensations, feelings, and mental states—delineating the field of immediate subjectivity—it seems that, in general, Vajrayana practitioners may achieve outwardly similar modifications by concentrative visualization of deities as models of the perfected personality. Almost all of the meditative experience discussed in Sections 2 and 3 above, which deal with the aims, techniques, and outcomes of Sutra and Tantra practice, is related to concentration practice. Many of the transformative experiences that practitioners report may appear somewhat limited in scope and effect compared to those reported by the more experienced Vipassana practitioners, but as explained in Chapter 1 Section 3.2, the majority of Vajrayana practitioners who made themselves available for interview were known to me through interaction in introductory courses such as *Discovering Buddhism*, or through programs of *sutra* study. I had almost no knowledge of, and very limited social access to the more experienced tantric practitioners, and therefore, I must allow for the possibility that my data for the activity at VI is skewed in that it

⁴⁷³ Horney, K. *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, Norton, 1970. The teacher referred to this publication.

⁴⁷⁴ Horney, *op.cit.*, p17. Horney defined this real self as 'that central inner force' ... 'which is the deep source of growth'.

⁴⁷⁵ The teacher drew our attention to pride as one of the Six Root Delusions, the other five being desirous attachment, anger, ignorance, doubt and deluded view. These are described in Geshe Acharya Thubten Lodon, *op.cit.*, pp417-37.

⁴⁷⁶ Harvey, 2000, *op.cit.*, p141.

may largely represent the experiences and transformations of practitioners in the relatively early phases of exploration of and commitment to the Buddhist path.

This last point is important to bear in mind when one considers the purpose of practice within the FPMT: to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. While not all interview respondents from Vajrayana Institute explicitly stated their commitment to the cultivation of *bodhicitta* or to the *bodhisattva* motivation, this motivation is continually expressed in collective activity at the Centre—such as reciting the refuge prayer at the beginning of teachings as related in Chapter 4 Section 3.2—and personally by keeping commitments. For all adherents this involves reciting the refuge prayer daily⁴⁷⁷, and for Tantric practitioners, keeping the commitments given in initiation. In addition, practitioners privately engage with those practices and virtuous actions that they know will facilitate their eventual attainment of the goal of enlightenment. As stated, many aim for regularity in their practice, but the demands and time constraints of a contemporary Western lifestyle often interfere with establishing the degree of regularity that practitioners would like.

For the practitioner, transformation and progress on the path is reflexively monitored through changes to the *imputed* self or self-concept. From the Buddhist perspective, the practitioner aims to see the *imputed* and *relative* selves as inherently empty, but from a social-scientific perspective, visible change is equated with transformations of the self-concept, which can be seen to occur as result of the interplay of deconstructive and reconstructive processes. As discussed above in Section 4.1, many of the changes reported by practitioners concern the use of mental strategies for managing feelings, especially anger and defensiveness, and for managing habitual mental states more generally. These transformations take place within the personal field of immediate subjectivity, the *relative* self, and their objectification is felt as change to their sense-of-self, their self-concept. For the practitioners concerned, these are tangible results and therefore signify that progress is being made. In this way a practitioner's sense-of-self, including concerns for the quality of one's mental life and personal relationships, is his or her testing ground. Concomitant with practice of the path to enlightenment—informed by one's continuous learning and increasing comprehension of the Buddhist path—is the continual testing of the information contained in teachings and texts against one's own life experience. The way in which this learning, testing, and change affects one's decision to commit to the Vajrayana Buddhist path and to the FPMT is the subject of Chapter 6.

⁴⁷⁷ Taking refuge and vows are discussed in Section 1.3 above, *Orientation to Tantra*. Also see Appendix 8 for the *Refuge and Bodhicitta* prayer.