# THE CONVERSION OF SOUTH AFRICANS TO BUDDHISM

## by

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"I declare that <u>The Conversion of South Africans to Buddhism</u> is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references"

# The conversion of South Africans to Buddhism

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## Summary

This thesis is an examination of why South Africans have converted to Buddhism, how this conversion has come about and what the meaning of the conversion has been in their lives.

Chapter one is a literature review which revealed very little literature available on conversion to Buddhism and less on the conversion of South Africans to Buddhism.

L.R. Rambo's Theory of Conversion is used in this thesis to see if these conversions to Buddhism can be understood within this theory. In Chapter two Rambo's theory, which is a holistic model for conversion, is analyzed in detail. He proposes seven stages within his model: crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences.

Context is Rambo's first stage and in Chapter three the socio-historic and religious background of these converts is examined. In order to understand how and why these conversions have come about there needs to be an understanding of the background from which these converts come.

Taking Refuge (or the Gohonzon Ceremony) was used for the purpose of this thesis to be the turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhists. In Chapter four the meaning and importance of Taking Refuge is discussed.

The empirical aspect of this thesis was to interview twenty South Africans who had converted to Buddhism. Chapter five is a detailed analysis of these interviews and Appendix two gives the questionnaire used.

The aim of this analysis was firstly, to investigate whether these conversions to Buddhism can be understood in the context of Rambo's theory, secondly, to see whether Taking Refuge is the correct choice of the turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist.

In the conclusion it was found that Rambo's theory did not fully account for the conversion of the interviewees to Buddhism, and that Taking Refuge was not necessarily a good focal point in the conversion process.

In the light of this a Developmental theory of becoming a Buddhist was proposed which has the following steps: Context, exposure, interest invoked, practical application, commitment and consequences.

From the analysis of the people interviewed their conversion to Buddhism was a developmental process rather than a conversion as such. Hence their conversion fitted more closely with a Developmental theory than with Rambo's theory of conversion. This ties in with the discovery amongst the interviewees that none of them experienced one focal point at which they became Buddhist. For most of the interviewees becoming a Buddhist was a developmental process, with many of them having some sort of proto-Buddhist tendency within them before ever hearing about Buddhism.

## Key terms:

Conversion; Buddhism; L.R. Rambo; Taking Refuge; Developmental Theory; South Africans; Interviews; Non- Buddhist to Buddhist; Conversion process; Proto-Buddhist tendency.

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# CHAPTER ONE

# PREFACE.

The aim of this thesis is to attempt to examine the reasons why westerners have converted to Buddhism, how this conversion has come about and what the meaning of the conversion has been in their lives. In order to find the answers, various areas need to be examined.

The first area is concerned with why westerners have converted to Buddhism, which involves looking at the socio-historic background as well as the religious background of these converts. In order to determine what factors might have aided or "pushed" westerners towards the conversion process the following areas need to be investigated: secularization, loss of religious faith and disappointment in traditional religions. Closely tied to this would be any concepts within Buddhism which may be acting as "pull" factors, attracting the converts to Buddhism.

The second area is how this conversion has come about. L.R. Rambo proposes a holistic model for conversion and an attempt will be made to

understand these conversions to Buddhism within this theory. Taking refuge in Buddhism will be considered the turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist and this thesis will determine whether this is an appropriate point.

The third area investigates what the meaning of this conversion is for these converts and examines in what way it has changed them or affected their lives.

The empirical aspect of this will be to interview people who have converted to Buddhism and the analysis of these interviews will hopefully aid in the examination of the above three areas. Thus providing insight into why they have converted to Buddhism, how this came about, and what being a Buddhist entails.

Chapter two is a literature review of the material available as regards the conversion of westerners to Buddhism. Chapter three examines firstly, the nature of conversion and secondly, a detailed study of L.R.Rambo's conversion theory. Chapter four looks at the background from which these converts to Buddhism come, both the socio-historic background and their religious backgrounds. Chapter five is on becoming a Buddhist, which as previously mentioned will be the point at which a person formally

takes the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. Chapter six is an in depth analysis of the interviews conducted for this thesis. Chapter seven is the conclusion where it will be discussed whether L.R. Rambo's theory can be applied to these conversions to Buddhism and whether Taking refuge is the point of turning from non-Buddhist to Buddhist.

My interest in this field of study began with a fascination of conversion and the reasons why people convert to other religions. This led to a general interest and study of all religions with a particular attraction to Buddhism, ultimately evolving into an interest in conversion to Buddhism and finally to the conversion of South Africans to Buddhism. Upon investigation I found a dearth of information on this topic and hence when it came to choosing a topic for my thesis this became it.

# CHAPTER TWO

# LITERATURE REVIEW

In exploring the available literature on conversion of westerners to Buddhism it became obvious that there is not much available on this topic and certainly very little on the conversion of South Africans to Buddhism. This was one of the main reasons this topic was chosen for this thesis in the hope of providing some meaningful information in this area.

The most comprehensive work which looks at the conversion of westerners to Buddhism, although only concerned with conversion to Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a version of Buddhism first propounded by Nichiren in the thirteenth century, is <u>A Time to Chant</u> by Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere published in 1994. This work depends primarily on interviews and a questionnaire survey of a random sample of SGI followers in the United Kingdom. 1000 members were randomly taken from the 3609 SGI members in the UK at that time and a postal questionnaire was sent to them. In response, 619 usable questionnaires were received (Wilson 1998: 41).

The study first set out a profile of the movement, with a brief history of SGI in general and more specifically in Britain, it also sought to trace the source of attraction and patterns of growth of SGI. From their questionnaires and interviews they sought to discover "what circumstances occasioned their first acquaintance with Nichiren Buddhism; the features of the faith or of the movement which specifically appealed; and whether that same initial attraction was responsible for summoning sustained commitment when the 'interested stranger' became the 'dedicated member'" (Wilson 1994:49).

The authors found that although conversion to Nichiren Buddhism had some things in common with accounts of conversion to specific Christian persuasions, SGI conversions were also different in certain respects. The "difference lies in the belief that Nichiren's Buddhism is a practical religion, that chanting works, and can be immediately put to good effect" (Wilson 1994: 77). The authors have chosen to regard "first chanting" as equivalent to an affirmation of religious allegiance (Wilson 1994: 45).

In the epilogue the authors say that the decades in which SGI grew is a period where there is a shift from the producer society of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century to a society dominated by consumerism. "The new order required the legitimization of

consumption, an ethic which promoted hedonism, self-indulgence, and the unending pursuit of pleasure" (Wilson 1994: 219). The authors maintain that the development of *laissez-faire* economics inevitably led to a *laissez-faire* morality. "As moral regulations of one sort and another fell into desuetude, so a positive philosophy enhancing freedom of choice evolved" (Wilson 1994:218).

In this climate of economic and social 'permissiveness' the attraction to SGI is its "relinquishment of moral codes and its espousal of general abstract ethical principals which leave adherents free to discover their own form of 'taking responsibility'" (Wilson 1994: 220).

"By invoking the 'Lotus Sutra', the SGI adherent believes that he can control karma, can come to be in charge, take responsibility for his own life and circumstances, and realize his buddhahood – and all this through the meritorious act of chanting"(Wilson 1994: 222).

"Personal autonomy, the cultivation of a sense of personal responsibility, and dependence on one's own efforts all fit into the enterprise culture flourishing in what appears perhaps to be a post-socialist world" (Wilson 1994: 231).

The authors believe the attraction to SGI is because its ethics find resonance with currents in contemporary British society and an ancient faith in modern form converges with the aspirations of people in contemporary society.

The next work on conversion is by Sangharakshita, who is the founder of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), <u>The Meaning of Conversion.</u> This book consists of four talks give by Sangharashita in 1966 which were based on four traditional Buddhist teachings. The topics are – Going for Refuge; Entering the stream, The Arising of the Bodhicitta and The Turning About in the Deepest Seat of Consciousness.

Sangharakshita's emphasis was against a purely intellectual understanding of Buddhism and he emphasized the need to commit wholeheartedly to Buddhism and to allow it to change a person's whole way of life. For him, being a Buddhist is a full-time occupation, not a hobby or an intellectual pastime, but has to be taken seriously (Sangharakshita 1994: 8). This is a work which makes a clear statement of the meaning of conversion in Buddhism based on purely traditional Buddhist Principles.

<u>Meetings with Remarkable Women</u> by Lenore Friedman published in 1987 is biographical and consists of discussions with seventeen Buddhist teachers in America. It does not really focus on conversion as such but in their telling of their life stories they do speak of their encounters with and conversion to Buddhism. For example, Maurine Stuart said "I have the feeling I was a Buddhist in a former life" and she described how as a little girl she always needed time to just go and sit and be quiet (Friedman 2000: 76).

Years later at the age of twenty three she noticed a book called *An Introduction to Oriental Thought* which she started to read. "I can still remember it, the feeling of identification. Aha! That's it! I wrote in the margins: 'That's it!'" (Friedman 2000:77).

When she was forty four years old she was walking down a road and saw a sign "Zen Study Society". "She thought; that's what I am looking for, walked in and that was the beginning" (Friedman 2000: 77).

Besides these little other literature is available on conversion to Buddhism, especially the conversion of South Africans to Buddhism.

# CHAPTER THREE

# CONVERSION

## SECTION ONE
## THE NATURE OF CONVERSION

Conversion is a subject that has interested scholars from a variety of different disciplines, for example, anthropology, sociology, psychology and religious studies. Hence there is much literature on conversion and "several typologies of conversion have emerged, along with different models of the process through which they occur" (Paloutzian 1999: 1052). For example, James (1902) distinguished between sudden versus gradual conversions. Early theories of conversion were based upon the initial ideas of somethings being wrong with a person who would seek to change their religion. What Stark (1965) called "psychopathological" explanation of religious participation. These theories assumed a high degree of passivity on the part of the person being converted.

Later theories questioned this idea that converts were being forced to do something beyound their control. Strauss (1979) argued that the person doing the converting is best seen as an active agent and that this

volitional choice should be respected for what it is – a meaningful act. "He describes the (active) process through which participants go as including elements such as "seeking," "creative transformation," "creative bumbling," and "creative exploitation" (Paloutzian 1999: 1062).

Thouless (1971) categorized conversion by the domain of primary change: intellectual, social and moral.

Loftland and Stark introduced a model which served as a bridge between the old and the new theories. It not only looked at what might "push"a person to conversion but also what might be attractive for the convert in the new religion and assumes that the convert plays an active role in their conversion.

Loftland and Skonovd (19 81) went beyound the initial conversion model and propsed a descriptive system for the study of relgious conversion. They identified 6 motifs, intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive. "Each motif is characterized by the degree of social pressure involved, temporal duration, level of affective arousal, affective content and the sequence of belief-participation" (Kose 2000: 102).

L.R.Rambo published a book in 1993 <u>Understanding Religious Conversion</u> in which he presents a "systemic" stage model of conversion as opposed to a sequential stage model. Rambo emphasizes that the sequence is highly individual and is likely to involve a recursive aspect. A given conversion experience may include some but not all of the phases, and the intensity and duration of the phases may vary. Rambo's approach is interdisciplinay, and he blends ideas and research from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and relgious studies. He offers a rich, complicated model more in line with how human beings function. For this reason Rambo's theory will be used in this thesis to see whether the conversion of westerners to Buddhism fits this thoery.

L.R. Rambo gives the following meaning of conversion that will be used in the pages to come: "It will mean simple change from the absence of a faith system to a faith commitment; from religious affiliation with one faith system to another, or from one orientation to another within a single faith system" (Rambo 1993: 2).

Beverly Roberts Gaventa speaks of three types of conversion:

1. An alternation, which is a conversion that develops naturally out of previously, established life patterns, for example, when a Methodist marries a Presbyterian and joins the Presbyterian Church (Gaventa

in Maloney 1992: 42). Here there is no huge disruption of understanding, merely a reorientation within a single faith.

2. A pendulum-like conversion where there is a rejection of the past and a choosing of a new religious system, for example, a Protestant converts to Buddhism.

3. Transformation, in which the previous faith of the individual is not rejected, but reinterpreted, in the new experience. For example Martin Luther 'whose reading of scripture caused him to radically reinterpret his past' (Gaventa in Maloney 1992: 43).

Any of these attempts to define or classify conversion are incomplete, however, because of the complexity of the concept as well as the fact that in different traditions, conversion, the conversion process and the religious validation of conversion tends to vary. Conversion is more of a process than an isolated event, although conversion as an event cannot be excluded, for example, Saul on the road to Damascus. Conversion does not occur in isolation, but within a matrix of people, institutions, community and society, which all influence the conversion process in one way or another. It is important to note that universally the percentage of converts is generally low. Old systems of religion, family, and society hold people and rarely facilitate conversion. Therefore as Rambo says, voluntary conversion is a "complex confluence of the 'right' potential

convert coming into contact, under proper circumstances at the proper time, with the 'right' advocate and religious option" (Rambo 1993: 87).

Conversion must consist of push and pull factors. The factors that push people away would come from the cultural, personal, social and religious systems, which surround the person and constitute the background from which they come. Within these areas could be found the reasons for the individual's quest for change.

1. The cultural forces possibly affecting conversion would consist largely of the milieu of the early twenty first century out of which the converts come; exploration of this area is covered in the next chapter.

2. The personality of the person is obviously an individualistic concept influenced by the milieu, but would have its own distinct reasons for conversion. It would be important to look at the changes in an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions. Within some people there is a hunger for a meaningful life, and to them their conversion is a hope and a solution to their problems, a transformation.

3. The social conditions surrounding the person at the time of conversion can constitute both pull and push factors. These social conditions include important relationships, both at work and at

home, institutions surrounding the person, religious and social, and the interaction between people and the groups in which they are involved. Within this social matrix may be found some factors that are pushing them towards conversion and others that are holding them back.

4. With regard to religion, the following needs to be taken into account, "the religious ideology that shapes the conversion process, the religious images that influence the consciousness of the convert, and the religious institutions that are often the matrix in which conversion takes place" (Rambo 1993: 11).

The previous religious environment of the person could constitute a push factor if it does not satisfactorily answer the questions the convert is asking. This environment needs to be studied in order to see whether there are any connections, or similarities in ideology and imagery between the old and new religions. For example, are there any connections between the iconography and imagery of Roman Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism that might aid in the conversion process?

The pull factors would be concerned with the religious tradition to which the conversion is taking place. What in that tradition is attractive

to the person? Is it supplying the answers to their questions? Is it bringing about a change in their lives? Is it pulling them towards a conversion process? In a later chapter the pulling forces, if any, in Buddhism will be examined.

Another factor that needs to be kept in mind is history. Conversion occurs over time and the motivation of earlier converts may differ to those of later converts. Conversion also differs in different places and at different times.

No matter in what form, or religious tradition conversion takes place it is not a static concept within the individual, but is affected by cultural, social, personal and religious systems that surround the person. Therefore any attempts at a conversion theory needs to take these factors into consideration. L.R. Rambo proposes a holistic model for conversion taking into consideration these factors. This model will be used, although it is based mainly on a Christian standpoint, to see whether the conversion of westerners to Buddhism can be understood within this theory.

Rambo's theory is not only holistic, but also heuristic which maintains that conversion takes place in stages, "a stage model is appropriate in that conversion is a process of change over time, generally exhibiting a

sequence of processes, although there is sometimes a spiraling effect – a going back and forth between stages" (Rambo 1993: 16). Rambo's model is therefore a "systemic" stage model in contrast to a sequential stage model. "He eschews a strict step-by-step model because, he says, the process of conversion is one in which multiple factors all interact simultaneously and cumulatively over time" (Paloutzion 1996: 225).

# SECTION TWO

# L.R. RAMBO'S THEORY OF CONVERSION.

Rambo proposes seven stages within his model: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences. Although

Rambo set out seven stages he emphasizes that the "sequence is likely to involve a recursive aspect. A given conversion experience may include some, but not all of the phases described, and individual phases may vary in intensity and duration" (Kahn and Greene 2004: 237).

1. **Context** is more than just a first stage that is passed through but is rather "the total environment in which conversion transpires" (Rambo 1993: 20). Context has a continuous influence throughout the conversion process and through all the stages. Contextual factors affect avenues of communication, religious options available to people, their resources, mobility and opportunities, which all have a direct impact on who converts and why the conversion takes place.

The conversion process is influenced by both the external (macro) context and the internal (micro) context. The macro context is the total

environment surrounding the person and includes political systems, religious organizations, economic systems, industrialization, technology, which all have an enormous influence on the person and may contribute to pushing them towards conversion, or holding them back from conversion. The micro context is the immediate environment of the person, which includes family, friends, local neighbourhood and religious community. These factors help to create the identity of the person and shape the person's emotions, actions and thoughts. Once again these may be either push, or pull factors that are involved in the conversion process. It is important not to isolate the macro and micro contexts because they interact and influence each other. The importance of these factors is that in order to understand the psyche of the convert, background knowledge of the context in which they live will help to understand the push and pull factors they have experienced in their conversion process.

2. **Crisis:** most scholars of conversion agree that a crisis or disorientation precedes conversion (Rambo in Maloney 1992: 165). This crisis could be political, religious, psychological, or a life crisis such as death or sickness, some event that causes some confusion, or discord in the individual's life. Rambo brings up an important point in his discussion on crisis and that is

whether the convert is active, or passive in their conversion process. This idea will be examined in some of the other stages of Rambo's theory.

There are two basic types of crisis, "crisis that calls into question one's fundamental orientation to life, and crises that is and of themselves rather mild but are the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back" (Rambo 1993: 46). Death and illness would be examples of the first type of crisis, but the second type could be an insignificant event such as hearing children sing, or being in nature. This second type may only in retrospect be seen as the point of change. Once again the context of crisis is important as this can give some indication of the reasons for conversion. For example, most scholars agree that few conversions will take place from a well-organized religion which has the support of economic, political and cultural powers of the area. For example, few converts will be found from Islam to Christianity in an Islamic country. Different people view crisis differently. Psychoanalysts view it negatively as some form of breakdown and the conversion as an adaptive mechanism to attempt to resolve the psychological conflict. Humanistic/Transpersonal psychologists, however, view conversion positively and feel that there are people who are receptive to growth, development and new options (Rambo in Maloney 1992: 165). They therefore view conversion as a 'fulfillment motivation' rather than a 'deficiency motivation'.

Although crisis may precede conversion, there are conversions where there is no crisis at all. Perhaps crisis is too definitive a word because in Buddhism one finds the concept of *dukkha,* which is defined as suffering, but perhaps is better understood as dis-ease or angst. A person feels a dissatisfactoriness with life and a need to understand reality better. Is this the same as the crisis of Rambo's theory? No matter what the type of crisis, it will cause the person to actively seek to relieve their discomfort, discord or tension and this activity can be described more as quest.

3. **Quest** is the process in which people seek to maximize meaning and purpose in life (Rambo in Maloney 1992: 167). Quest is an ongoing activity, but seems to intensify under crisis conditions. During this period, people actively search for something that offers them growth and development, solves their problems, enriches their lives or fills the 'void'.

Five sets of factors may be helpful in exploring the quest stage:

1. Response style.

2. Structural availability.

3. Emotional availability.

4. Intellectual availability.

5. Motivational structures.

1. Response style is whether people are actively or passively involved in the conversion process. In some religious traditions the convert is passive and God, or other forces bring about the conversion, while at the other end it is believed that there is an innate desire in people to search for the truth. An example of the latter is the conversion of Ambedkar (1881 - 1956) to Buddhism. He was one of the Untouchables in India and was opposed to the caste system that he believed brought suffering to his people. He searched for a religion, which would increase the well-being of his people and he chose Buddhism, because of its Indian roots and the fact that it best suited his people. As a result on the 14th October 1956, two million Untouchables converted to Buddhism (Rambo 1993: 58). On the passive side there have been many court cases in the USA where anticultists have sued New Religious movements claiming that converts were coerced, imprisoned and fraudulently trapped in the new religion. People's response styles are better seen on a continuum where, at certain times, people are active and at other times passive.

2. Structural availability is "the freedom of a person, or persons to move from previous emotional, intellectual, and religious institutions, commitments and obligations into new options" (Rambo 1993: 60).

3. Emotional availability is the fact that emotional networks which surround a person, ties to family, friends, work, church, may prevent a person from pursuing interest in a new religion even if this is what they want. On the other hand emotions may be the push factor which aid in the conversion process for example to sever unwanted family ties, such as if a Jew converts to Christianity which may be seen as a repudiation of blood ties.

4. Intellectual availability is another factor, "the cognitive framework of a movement or option must be somewhat compatible with a person's previous orientation" (Rambo 1993: 61). It is very seldom that a person will convert to a religion that has a radically different framework to their own. People normally choose an option that has some connection or continuity to their previous orientation. This is interesting in terms of westerners' conversion to Buddhism, as on the surface this does not seem to be the case as we are really talking about a cross-cultural conversion. But as mentioned before, and which will be examined in a later chapter, perhaps there are underlying similarities which are not obvious at first glance. The religious context or background of the convert are important in the conversion process, generally a person from a mixed religious background would be more likely to change than those from a family with uniform religious involvement. It would be interesting to see from which traditions westerners who convert to Buddhism come?

5. Motivation is "multiple, complex, interactive and cumulative" (Rambo 1993: 65). There are many theories of motivation but Seymour Epstein offers one that is more in line with Rambo's theory as it integrates many possibilities. He postulates four basic motivations for people: the need to experience pleasure and avoid pain; the need for a conceptual system; the need to enhance self-esteem; and the need to establish and maintain relationships.

The emphasis of each motivation will depend on the individual, the circumstance and the time. Rambo adds two more motivational factors; power and transcendence. Power can vary from power to heal, power to be successful, to the power over one's life and the power over death. Transcendence, Walter Conn says, is an innate aspect of human nature where people strive to develop and grow this ties in with the humanistic/transpersonal psychologists' views that conversion is a positive experience. It is important to note that motivational factors will play a considerable role throughout the conversion process.

4. The fourth stage of Rambo's theory is **encounter**, which involves "the contact between the potential convert and the advocate and takes place in a particular setting" (Rambo in Maloney 1992: 169). Both the

advocate and the convert need to be examined as well as the interplay between them. The advocate is looking for potential converts and therefore employs certain tactics to attract and bring the convert into the religious community. The convert on the other hand tries to find something that will serve their best interests.

Religious growth numerically within a religious community occurs by expansion that is not due to any specific self-conscious effort by the members. It may just be that the birthrate increases, or simply an inclusion of new members. Mission on the other hand is an intentional effort by the religion to proselytize and attract new members. For the advocate in certain religions, conversion is central and therefore there is a need to look at the motivation of the advocate, their idea of conversion and the conversion process as well as methods used to attract potential converts. How do they make contact with potential converts?  How do they form a bond with the potential convert?  Do they use music, media, and television? There are also degrees of proselytizing, which are on a continuum from extensive, (for example, Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, Southern Baptist and Churches of Christ), to minimal as found in Judaism, or Hinduism.

Perhaps there is another dimension here because I do not believe that in every conversion there is only one advocate involved. The encounter may occur within a group situation such as at a temple or church and therefore the particular setting within which the encounter occurs is important and not necessarily the encounter with one person. In a particular setting it could be the atmosphere, the way people behave, what they are doing, the friendliness and acceptance by the group, which may attract the convert and bring them back again.

Relative to the conversion of westerners to Buddhism is the fact that the encounter may be an impersonal one that occurs through books, magazines articles. Many western Buddhists' first encounter with Buddhism was through reading material and not through any personal encounter with other Buddhists. It was only then that they actively went out in search of Buddhists to seek further information. This is an interesting aspect and opens up the mission theory and needs to be further examined.

5. **Interaction**; This is an important stage as this is when the potential convert becomes aware of the teachings of the group; the life style they lead and what would be expected of the convert. "If the people continue with the group after encounter, the interaction intensifies" (Rambo in Maloney 1992: 171). This is the period when the potential

convert chooses to maintain contact with the group, or not and if so they are well on the road to conversion. Once again the relationship between the advocate, who wants to keep up the interaction, and the potential convert, who wants to see if this is what they have been looking for, is very important.

This learning period varies from tradition to tradition. Some traditions, for example, Orthodox Judaism, do not actively seek converts and therefore it would be extremely difficult to find a Rabbi who would be willing to teach a person and help them through the conversion process. Other traditions, for example the Unification church, or the Church of Jesus Christ of the latter-day Saints, actively seek converts and so the conversion process is easier and widely available.

During this period a sphere of influence is created which is called encapsulation. Different religious groups create and maintain so called 'worlds'. Encapsulation of itself is not a sinister thing, for example, "every classroom is a form of encapsulation in that it creates an environment in which there can be concentration on the topic at hand, control of noise and competing ideas, and minimal interruption" (Rambo 1993: 104). The issue is not whether encapsulation occurs, but the degree of encapsulation. In some traditions the encapsulation is minimal and there is

not much control over the convert, while in other traditions, especially where the outside world is rejected, they exert a more controlling effect over the convert.

The degree of encapsulation depends on the status of the group in the macro context as well as the theology of the group. If the group is out of the mainstream religion then there is generally more control of the potential convert than if the group is more socially acceptable. Also if the theology of the group is such that the world is full of evil, then the group will tend to isolate itself from society.

Another way of understanding encapsulation is to appreciate the conversion motif being used by the group. Lofland and Skonovd propose the notion of conversion motifs by which they mean defining experiences that make each type of conversion distinctive. The six motifs are: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive (Rambo 1993: 105). In the first three, encapsulation is considerably less as the potential convert is active in seeking new possibilities. In these types of conversion the groups tend to be more open and encourage the converts in their spiritual pursuits. In the latter three encapsulation tends to be intense and "they often employ methods that either render people

vulnerable, or exploit existing vulnerabilities to win converts" (Rambo 1993: 105).

There are three types of encapsulation, physical, social and ideological. They are not distinct but overlap and interact with each other. Also there are degrees of encapsulation in other words a continuum from total to partial. *Physical encapsulation* is obviously removing people to a different environment, for example, temple or monastery. *Social encapsulation* is concerned with changing life-style in that the potential convert is expected to work and participates in activities, for example, at the temple, or church they would be expected to get involved in study groups etc. Some groups have a change in dress code, for example, Hare Krishna's, Sikhs, Orthodox Jews and the Salvation Army; in this way they stress the 'otherness' of their group from normal people. *Ideological encapsulation* "involves cultivation of a worldview and belief system that "inoculates' the adherent against alternative or competitive systems of belief" (Rambo 1993:106). The group's beliefs are the 'truth' and they are critical of all other beliefs or ideologies.

When a sphere of influence has been created by encapsulation, the four dimensions of interaction are deployed: relationships, rituals, rhetoric and roles. Relationships play an important role in conversion. People like to feel

as if they belong and therefore if they make friends in the group they feel accepted and are likely to remain in the group. Sometimes relationships may lead to the conversion process where a friend, or husband has converted and this inspires the other person to also convert.

Ritual plays a very important part in religious life and is important in the conversion process. Rambo says "ritual fosters the necessary orientation, the readiness of mind and soul to have a conversion experience, and it consolidates conversion after the initial experience" (Rambo 1993: 114). Rituals, such as praying, singing, meditating together help to unite the community and reaffirm the beliefs of the group and they bring about a sense of belonging. Rituals also enable the converting person to experience religion beyond the merely intellectual level.

Rhetoric includes the various linguistic interpretations of a person's action, feelings and goals. The potential convert begins to employ the specific rhetoric of the religious group and so begins to incorporate into their life the 'language of transformation' of that particular group (Lamb 1999: 30). This new religious terminology is a new interpretative system that helps to transform the worldview of the potential convert, for example Christians will use words such as 'sinner', 'heaven', 'hell'; Buddhists will use words

such as 'samsara', 'karma', 'dharma'; Muslims will use words such as 'shirk', 'sharia', 'jihad'.

The potential converts learn the expected roles within the group and how to conduct themselves in the tradition. "Group members explicitly or implicitly communicate to the converting person or group the expected changes that should take place were they to convert" (Lamb 1999; 31). They will learn guidelines for new behaviors and values, for example certain Christian groups prohibit smoking, drinking and dancing.

6. The culmination of the encapsulation phase is the **commitment phase.** Once a decision for commitment is made there is normally some public demonstration to seal the convert's choice. In some traditions these demonstrations are optional, while in others there are extensive rules and regulations pertaining to this demonstration. This period begins with decision-making and this final decision to convert can be a very intense and painful confrontation with the self. The decision to convert will involve an evaluation of the old life against the new life as a convert and what is very important here is the relationship that the potential convert has with the new group and the relationship and ties they have with people outside the group.

The ritual that accompanies the decision to commit in most instances follows a pattern of rejecting the old life and embracing the new life. In some traditions there may be a change in clothing, life style, diet, even a new name, all of which reinforce this idea of rejecting the old and beginning again. For example Hare Krishna converts will shave their heads and dress in orange robes. There is often joy, or relief after commitment, a newfound freedom and a strengthening of the relationships within the group. Commitment is a powerful psychological experience, which helps to confirm that the choices the person has made are correct.

7. The final stage of Rambo's theory is **consequences** and the "nature of the consequences is determined, in part, by the nature, intensity and duration of the conversion" (Rambo in Maloney 1992: 175). Any authentic conversion should be an ongoing process and not a once off happening. Obviously conversion is a complex process and the consequences of conversion equally so. For some people there are dramatic consequences of conversion and for others little changes in their lives. In some traditions conversion involves a total exclusion of family and friends, others a change in dress and food and others a complete change in life style. An important point is a notion Rambo developed of 'post conversion depression' where the initial euphoria of the whole conversion process begins to wear off and the result can be depression or the person leaving

the new tradition to which they have converted. How long conversion lasts is determined by the support and infrastructure of the tradition to which the person converts as well as the continual belief of the person in the new religion.

## RAMBO'S THEORY

| Context | Macro and Micro | |
|---|---|---|
| Crisis | | |
| Quest | Response style<br>Structural availability<br>Emotional availability<br>Intellectual availability<br>Motivational structures | |
| Encounter | | |
| Interaction | Encapsulation; physical, social and ideological | Dimensions employed; Relationships, rituals, rhetoric and roles |
| Commitment | | |
| Consequences | | |

# CHAPTER FOUR

# THE BACKGROUND FROM WHICH THE **CONVERTS**

# **TO BUDDHISM COME.**

## SECTION ONE.

## THE SOCIO-HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF WESTERNERS.

People are products of our history, education, religion and the social milieu in which they live. Rambo's first stage in his theory of conversion is context. In order to have a clearer understanding of westerner's conversion to Buddhism, the era in which they live, the prevailing ideologies and forces at work in society need to be examined. As most South Africans who have converted to Buddhism come from white, educated, middle-class backgrounds the milieu from which they come is a western milieu.

If we look at history it can roughly be divided into traditional or premodern society, then from about the 1750's modernity develops and at the beginning of the Twenty-first century we are in a postmodern society. Premodern society generally consisted of community and small social

settings where the individual was an integral part of the community and was rarely thrown back upon themselves. As Berger says "there were few, if any, uncertainties about the basic cognitive or moral framework of life, hardly any crisis of meaning, practically no crises of identity" (Berger 1977:61). Traditional society was also very aware of the interconnectedness of people and nature and the integral part each played in daily life.

With the arrival in the 1700's of technology this all changed. Technological innovations permeated and transformed economic, political and social aspects of society. This modernization even brought about a revolution on the level of human consciousness, fundamentally "uprooting beliefs, values and even the emotional texture of life" (Berger 1977: 70). Modern thinking is about a change in people's attitude towards the world. It is about self-assertion and people considering themselves no longer part of nature, which is merely matter, they are above nature and can know and control nature and ultimately change it. This leads to a lack of community and interrelatedness. Rex Ambler says the project of modernity can be defined as follows: "the historic attempt to gain freedom and autonomy for man by gaining control over nature and society, first by understanding them analytically, then by manipulating them technologically and organizationally" (Ambler R. in Flanagan 1996).

Technological developments and industrialization brought about a complete change in how and where people live and work. Mega cities developed; there was increased means of transport, mass media, huge developments occurred in science and technology. Western science, technology and medicine improved people's living standards and made their lives easier, which developed confidence in people's ability to control and improve their environment.

The twentieth century with its scientific development resulted in the philosophy of the 'death of God', which has its roots in the French Revolution. With the development of the scientific explanation of all phenomena in terms of regular natural law, the miracles of the Bible could no longer command unquestionable belief. The Virgin Birth, raising the dead, the resurrection of Jesus, healings, manna from heaven, changing water into wine, etc. "all appeared increasingly improbable to the modern mind, bearing as they did too many similarities to other mythical or legendary concoctions of the archaic imagination" (Tarnas 1991: 304). Darwinian Theory discredited the Genesis creation story; "Man could hardly have been made in the image of God if he was also the biological descendant of subhuman primates. The thrust of evolution was not one of spiritual transfiguration, but of biological survival" (Tarnas 1991: 304). This

culminated in Fredrick Nietzsche's epochal pronouncement of the "death of God" and the rise of the theology of the "death of God". The end result was secularization that resulted in a shift from "God to man, from dependence to independence, from otherworldliness to this world, from the transcendent to the empirical, from myth and belief to reason and fact, from universals to particulars, from a supernaturally determined static cosmos to a naturally determined evolving cosmos, and a fallen humanity to an advancing one" (Tarnas 1991: 319). All this contributed to the changing face of society, modernity evolved and this influenced the psyche and ideology of people in the twentieth century.

The western idea of progress is generally advancing from premodern society to postmodern society. Berger says "this myth of progress has crucially shaped western thought since the Enlightenment" (Berger 1977: 70). Even if this is the thinking of late Twentieth century people, some dilemmas have been imposed on advanced industrial society by the developments of modernity and have contributed to the way people feel, act and react in society.

Berger [1] says there are five dilemmas: abstraction, futurity, individuation, liberation and secularization.

The first one is abstraction which is rooted in the "capitalist market, the bureaucratized state, the technologized economy, the large city with its heterogeneous agglomeration of people and the media of mass communications" (Berger 1977: 72). In social terms this has resulted in the weakening of the bonds in the community in which people found meaning. On a conscious level abstractions have caused patterns of thought and emotionality that are hostile with respect to some areas of human experience. People who live in an abstract world feel alienated and alone. As people have gained control over their environment they have increasingly become alienated and notions such as the 'essential loneliness of Modern Man' have developed (Horton 1973: 288).

This alienation was influenced by the dualism set up by Descartes. He set up a dualism between *re cogitaris* (which has its essence in thought or consciousness) and *res extensa* (which has its essence in physical extensions) (Nishitani 1982: 80). By his statement *'cogito, ergo sum'* (I think therefore I am) the ego became a self-centered assertion of its own realness. As a result of the mechanistic view of the world brought about

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[1] This information is from Berger's earlier work which I will be using although in later publications he has recanted some of this work. This will be dealt with later in the chapter.

by science and technology and the consequent ability of human beings to control nature, the self-centered ego of human beings have power and authority over the natural world, which becomes a cold life-less world. "Each individual ego became like a lonely but well-fortified island floating on a sea of dead matter" (Nishitani 1982: 11).

The second dilemma is futurity, where the past and present loose their significance and emphasis is placed on the future. What has occurred in the modern world is a transformation of time, which Berger says occurs on three levels. Firstly, in everyday life where clocks and watches are dominant, secondly, on a biographical level where a person's life is mapped out as a career, school, university, work, buy a home, marry, etc. Thirdly, in society governments and companies map out projects for the future in terms of plans, a five-year plan or seven-year plan. On all levels people now experience time very differently from how it was experienced in premodern society. Clocks and the calenders dominate our lives which have resulted "in endless striving, restlessness, and a mounting incapacity for repose" (Berger 1977: 74).

The third dilemma is the process of individuation, which has occurred, in modern life. In advanced industrialized society structural differentiation has occurred where institutions which were previously under the domain

of the church, for example, education, health, are now run as special institutions answerable to the state and not the church. Social differentiation has also occurred where the economic activity becomes divorced from the home and new social roles are created as well as an increase in social mobility which resulted in people becoming divided and separated from each other. This ties in with Durkheim's concept of 'anomie' which describes "a state of social breakdown due to a weakening of the forces that ties people to each other, their collective conscience or group mind" (Carroll 1998: 87).  There is a paradox, however, because as these communities change into mega structures of modern society and abstraction occurs, the individual becomes more isolated and in desperate need of belonging which is obviously difficult in abstract institutions. Therefore a compromise needs to be found between individual autonomy and communal solidarity (Berger 1977: 76).

The fourth dilemma is liberation. In the advanced industrial society of the late twentieth century there has been liberation in huge areas of people's lives.  With faith in religion jeopardized by science and technology "fate is challenged, the social order ceases to be taken for, granted, and both the individual and collective life come to be more and more uncertain" (Berger 1977: 77).

Radical liberalism promotes the free individual, it maintains that the happiest individuals are those that are free, with no restraints or restrictions, and the death of God helped to promote this idea. It has given people more freedom and less need for belief in a God, or outside force. Carroll says the result is that "the modern individual is free to choose his beliefs – his gods – shopping around in the cultural supermarket from ideas that take his fancy" (Carroll 1998: 6).

In modern society there are multitudes of options and choices, people are no longer bound by tradition or fate, they have new horizons and opportunities that are endless. Although liberation on the one hand is wonderful because it has allowed people to extend themselves in new directions and experience life as never before, on the other hand the extent of the choices has made people anxious. If a person has too many options it can cause angst as how does one know whether this option is the correct one, Berger sees two contradictory notions of liberation, the ideal of liberation *as* choice and the ideal as liberation *from* choice (Berger 1977: 78).

The fifth dilemma is that of secularization. Secularization does not mean that all religious practices and beliefs have disappeared, but is does mean that there has been a weakening of the plausibility of religious

perceptions amongst a large number of people. No matter how educated and sophisticated people are, they need ways of explaining and coping with human experience of suffering and evil. Secularization has caused doubts in people's minds of the traditional religious explanations of evil and suffering. The dilemma is that even though science and technology have caused serious doubts in people's minds of traditional religious explanations, there are in people deeply grounded human aspirations. Most important amongst these are the "aspiration to exist in a meaningful and ultimately hopeful cosmos" (Berger 1977: 79).

One response to secularization is nihilism, with no belief to anchor the self and the future and no determining order, has lead to a sense of pessimism. The second response is consumerism; the idea that all that is left is the pursuit of pleasure and comfort. In actual fact the two tie in together because the vacuum left by nihilism is filled by consumerism. Consumerism is inherently melancholic; it "takes the form of feeling empty, cold, flat – in need of filling up with warm, rich, vital things" (Carroll 1998: 119).

Consumerism can be added as a sixth dilemma in the late twentieth century. Lury says consumer culture has emerged out of material culture in the second half of the twentieth century, it is different from material

culture in "the manner in which people convert things to ends of their own" (Lury 1996: 3). It is a process of stylization where things are not just material objects but are given meaning in a cultural context; possessions are seen as aspects of the self. Possessions suggest who and what people are, whether these are material possessions, or possessions of knowledge, they determine a person's status in society. For example, an Elvis collection helps establish a social identity and expresses certain aspects of a person's identity.

In advanced industrial society there is a strong tendency towards commodification. People's interactions with each other are largely governed in terms of the values, which commodities bestow on individuals. A large part of this interaction takes the form of production and exchange commodities. Therefore the way we interact with other people is in terms of commodities; we exchange, or produce commodities that we then consume.

Consumption is the way people define themselves and they never seem to be satisfied, always needing more and more things to consume. Indeed, modern life can be characterized as follows; people live "working chiefly to consume, consuming to achieve status, accumulating things that have no meaning, wasting on a gigantic scale" (Josephson 1962: 29).

People are fed messages from popular culture" you, too, can be happy if you only buy this car or that hair tonic; you will be thrilled, you will have adventure, romance, popularity – you will no longer be lonely and left out if you follow this formulae" (Josephson 1962: 198). In this way advertising is able to attach images of romance, exotica, fulfillment and the good life to mundane consumer products such as soap, washing powder, alcoholic drinks and cars. And hence material objects become carriers of social interaction and status.

At the end of the twentieth century many westerners feel lost and isolated. To ease this malaise they overemphasize their individuality, their 'freedom' and philosophy of 'me'. To help them along this path is consumerism, which beguiles them into believing that their worth is judged by their consuming ability and the vacuum, or 'lost world' can be recaptured. This consuming can take the form of many things the most obvious is material, the car we drive, clothes we wear, our accommodation, our occupation, all define who and what we are. For a brief moment our new BMW eases our malaise as we feel we possess something of ultimate importance.

Lee suggests that in recent years there has been a transition in commodities from material to experiential commodities. By this he means

that there has been a transition from the importance of durable and material commodities, such as washing machines, cars, TV's, video's, etc., to increased importance of non-durable commodities. In particular, experiential commodities which are either used up during the act of consumption or alternately, based upon the consumption of a given period of time, such as leisure activities or holidays (Lee in Lury 1996: 62). In other words commodities which are based on time rather than substance, for example, motivational courses, Buddhist courses, cookery courses, pottery classes, etc. We attempt to become more interesting by buying a ready-made individuality, through, "sending for", "enrolling in", or "reading up on" something, or "going places" (Josephson 1962: 185). In this way people are buying and hence owning something which helps to define them, to enhance their individuality, to express their freedom, in the hope that it will fill the gap and make them feel whole again. It will be interesting to see whether the interviewees in this study have experienced these feelings of isolation and whether they have influenced their decision to convert to Buddhism.

As the twentieth century progressed, cracks began to appear in people's perceptions of themselves and how they relate to the world. The first area is human self-assertion over nature and the second area is in the philosophical sphere which ironically has its roots in modernity. It is in these

cracks that some understanding of how westerners can accommodate eastern ways of thinking and thus convert to Buddhism can be seen. Especially in the Buddhist philosophy of the interconnectedness of the universe and the importance of cause and effect in terms of making karma.

Humankind's self-assertion over nature has proved damaging to nature and human beings themselves. World War One and World War Two showed the destructive power of technology to nature and humans. With the Pollution era and the discovery of the ecological limits of the earth, people have begun to reassess the human role in the world. People can no longer see themselves as distant and above nature, but realize the interconnectedness of humans and nature and the roles each have to play in sustaining life on this planet.

The second area where cracks have appeared is in the philosophical sphere and involves the area of human subjectivity. In modern thinking there are two streams of thought or two approaches to human existence. The first emerged during the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment which "stressed rationalism, empirical science and a skeptical secularism" (Tarnas 1996: 366). The other approach has its roots in the Renaissance and classical Greco-Roman culture and stresses the human experience

suppressed by the Enlightenment. This way of thinking has always been present in society and in the late twentieth century it became an important force. This is where the openness of western thinking and its receptiveness to eastern ideas can be found.

Although the two ways of thinking do have commonalities they view the world in different ways. The Romantic vision sees the world as a unitary organism and sees the human drama of life. The Enlightenment/Scientific vision sees the world as atoms that obey laws and human life as interplay of forces. The Romantics are not so concerned with the intellect of people and their power to exploit the laws of nature, but with people's emotions, spirituality, artistic ability and imagination. Both approaches are seeking to find the mystery and truth in nature, but the enlightened mind seeks a truth that is testable and concrete, while the Romantics are looking for a truth this is inwardly transfiguring and sublime.

They also have different attitudes towards the human mind, on the one hand there is scientific study of the mind and the focus is on perception, cognition and behavioral studies. The other is more concerned with human consciousness, emotion, imagination and the darker side of human nature, death, evil and irrational behavior.

During the twentieth century scholars have tried to bridge the gap between these two schools of thought with new developments in science, psychology and philosophy. There has been a change of focus on the inner workings of the psyche and concern with unconscious structures of the mind. An examination of these developments may help us to understand what, in westerners' way of thinking, would enable them to be open to Buddhist ideas and concepts.

An example is the work of Sigmund Freud who challenged the world view that had developed in the nineteenth century with its concepts of civilization and progress. His work on the unconscious uncovered a darker and less stable side to humanity. Just as people thought they were fully conscious, rational beings the wild, uncontrollable unconscious was exposed and people's so-called rational behaviour "turned out on analyses to be conflicted, double-edged, multi-faceted actions whose full significance is mostly hidden from us" (Ambler in Flanagan 1996: 147).

Jung, a student of Freud, expanded on this and introduced the collective unconscious common to all human beings and structured according to powerful archetypal principles. Although human experience is conditioned by such factors as biographical, cultural and historical, at deeper levels there appear to be "certain universal patterns or modes of

experience, archetypal forms that constantly arranged the elements of human experience into typical configurations and gave to collective human psychology a dynamic continuity" (Tarnas 1996: 385). Therefore Freud and Jung expanded the dimensions of human experience.

Another example of the widening cracks in the self-assertion of modern people was Wittgenstein's work in the area of linguistic analysis. Wittgenstein showed that speech "conforms to many different rules and 'games' and practical requirements, locking the individual into many different social networks, so that language cannot be construed, even initially, as a representation of the individual human consciousnesses" (Ambler in Flanagan 1996; 147).

And so a new era of society began to develop, a new way of thinking and looking at human beings and at the world that has become known as Postmodernism. Postmodernism is about deconstructing and demystifying the western mind. It rejects the so-called 'truths' and 'values' of modernity and any universal observations or general truths. Postmodernism realizes the limitations of humans and their self-assertion is undermined. Tarnas says; "whereas the modern mind's conviction of superiority derived from its awareness of possessing in an absolute sense more knowledge than its predecessors, the postmodern mind's sense of

superiority derives from its special awareness of how little knowledge can be claimed by any mind, itself included" (Tarnas 1996: 401).

Postmodernism criticizes modernity and its colonialism, imperialism, slavery and genocide, oppression of women, people of colour, homosexuals, and its abuse of the earth. Although postmodernism seems to lead to nihilism and despair there is a positive side which is an attempt to return to the traditional or premodern ways of experiencing life, in Freud's terms "the return of the repressed" (Ambler in Flanagan 1996: 147). In practical terms this is impossible because of the changes modernity has brought about. It is possible in subtle ways to rediscover our part in nature, our connectedness with each other and the fact that we are communal beings that need each other and the earth to survive.

It is out of this atmosphere that westerners who have converted to Buddhism have come; the question being asked is why this conversion has occurred. Have these people lost faith in other religious traditions and in science and turned to the East looking for answers, or is Buddhism a commodity that they have bought or are they just searching to fill the gap that modern life has created in them? Has postmodernism made people more receptive and open to other ways of living in and understanding the universe?

# SECTION TWO.

# RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND.

Although Peter Berger's work has been used in this chapter, in the 1990's he recanted some of his work especially regarding his secularization theory. Secularization theory, which essentially developed in the 1950's and 60's, (but the idea can probably be traced to the enlightenment), assumed that with modernization there would necessarily be a decline of religion in society and in the minds of the individual. But Berger, who contributed to the development of the Secularization theory, now says the "world today is as furiously religious as it ever was – and secularization theory essentially mistaken" (Berger 1999: 2).

In analyzing the state of religion in the world today it seems as if conservative or orthodox movements are on the rise and "religious movements with beliefs and practices dripping with reactionary supernaturalism have widely succeeded" (Berger 1999: 4). Religions that have tried to blend in with modernity seem to have failed; Berger says experiments with secularized religion have generally failed.

Buddhism may be considered a secularized religion and it seems to be increasing in popularity. Ninian Smart defined what a religion is in terms of a six dimensional organism, "typically containing doctrines, myths, ethical teachings, rituals, and social institutions, and animated by religious experiences of various kinds" (Smart1971: 31). Buddhism lays emphasis on the individual and the use of meditation or chanting to "concentrate the mind on the transcendant, invisible world, or to withdraw his senses from their usual immersion in the flow of empirical experience" (Smart 1971: 17). In the light of this, of Smart's six dimensions only two apply to Buddhism, the ritual and the experiential dimensions. The other dimensions are inconsequential to being a Buddhist. Therefore, perhaps Buddhism is not a religion at all but an experience of life and as such could be considered secular.

Examples of the rise of conservative religions are the Islamic revolution for example in Iran. As Iran modernized, the religion moved in a conservative direction. In America, in general people are more religious as well as more churchly than Europeans and the "so-called religious right has gained tremendously in power and influence" (Lynon in Flanagan 1996: 16).

The conservative thrust in the Roman Catholic Church under John Paul 11 has lead to an increased number of converts especially in non-western

countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a revival of the Orthodox Church in Russia. Even cultic movements have not lost their potency, for example, Aum Shinrikyo in Japan.

The only exception appears to be Europe which stands out quite differently to the rest of the world and seems to buck the trend and the 'old' secularization theory seems to apply. But Grace Davie says that maybe the Europeans are not "less religious" but rather "differently religious". She speaks of 'believing without belonging' and says "as the institutional disciplines decline, belief not only persists, but becomes increasingly personal, detached and heterogeneous and particularly among young people" (Davie 2002: 8). This point is strongly reinforced by data from the European Values Study of 1999/2000. Davie speaks of Europeans as being vicariously religious which is inapplicable to other parts of the world. In other words Europeans are "content to let both churches and church-goers enact a memory on their behalf" (Davie 2002: 19). So if people are dissatisfied with their church they do not, on the whole, leave and look for a new church, they just remain passive members and simply reactivate their commitment when needed, especially in times of birth or death.

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twentieth-first century what then is the atmosphere out of which these Buddhist converts come? Virtually all commentators agree that "traditional, institutionalized religions, the religions of Church and Chapel, is in decline" (Heelas in Sutcliffe 2000: 237). But this secularization does not mean the total decline of religion, but a change of face of religion, new expressions of religiosity which are not obviously 'religious' in the conventional sense. Bruce calls it 'pick-and-mix" and says "it may not yet be the most common, but it represents in religious culture the dominant ethos of the late capitalism: the world of options, lifestyles and preferences" (Bruce 1996:233). This ties in with what Aldridge calls 'the new voluntarism' because people now have choices, "they can reject their old allegiances outright, connect to a new identity, or return assertively to the faith of their parents. Religious affiliation is typically chosen rather than ascribed for all time at birth - as is evident in the converts to Buddhism (Aldridge 2000: 91).

The examination of religions at the end of the twentieth century would be incomplete without taking into consideration the New Age religions. New Age religions became popular in the 1980's but may have had their roots in the esoteric culture of the late nineteenth century as well as the human potential movements that developed in the twentieth century. They were

probably also influenced by the new religions of the 1970's such as the Unification church, Scientology and Transcendental Meditation.

A characteristic of New Age is its eclecticism which can involve anything from astrology, alchemy, mediation, Feng Sui, shamanism to Zen Buddhism. Bruce says because of this eclecticism it means that there are "few clear divisions and boundaries, few organizations, but rather a milieu in which people acquire, absorb and learn a variety of beliefs and practices that they combine into their own pockets of culture" (Bruce 1996:200).

With New Age religions there are varying degrees of involvement. For some people it is just reading a book for others it maybe a complete change in their worldview and a similar experience to conversion in traditional religions. What the significance of new Age religions are, is their subtle influence in the general cultic climate, which although it may not be momentous, can be significant (Bruce in Sutcliffe 2000:227). Bruce gives five themes of the new religious milieu of the late twentieth early twenty-first century which comes out of New Age, but was influenced by many other factors extending back to the Romantics. The significance of these themes for this dissertation is that they can help explain the receptiveness of the western converts to Buddhism.

1. Self-divine: This idea is foreign to traditional Christianity, which professes a separation of God and his people, who are basically bad. The idea that God is within and that people are good is a new idea in the West which has roots in the human potential movement.

2. Holistic: This is borrowed from Hinduism and Buddhism and is the idea that everything has one single essence and is therefore interconnected. This idea has lead to the development of environmentalism, holistic approaches to physical and psychological 'healing', to increased popularity of vegetarianism and many others.

3. No authority higher than the individual self: This is the idea that if something works for you it is the truth, personal utility is the final test (Bruce in Sutcliffe 2000:227).

4. Eclecticism: "The new age milieu offers an enormous cafeteria of cultural products from which consumers can select" (Bruce in Sutcliffe 2000:227). People seem to move from one practice, religion, belief or ideology to another and another, but this sampling is not due to dissatisfaction, but rather the feeling that they have acquired the benefits from that particular practice or religion. This really is a form of relativism and as Bruce says "many people simply sample a range of ideologies and therapies without noticing

incompatible assumptions and truth claims – fundamental unity behind apparent diversity" (Bruce in Sutcliffe 2000:228).

5. Focus of attention on manifest purpose – people want immediate results, they want something tangible and real. Therefore insights and practices are marketed as ways to feel better, to get a better job or improve your marriage.

Closely tied to what Bruce is looking at, that is, a changing cultic milieu where marginal ideas shift into mainstream ways of thinking is work by Colin Campbell (Campbell in Wilson 1994: 35). He looked at language to provide clues to the direction in which the prevailing system of beliefs and values are evolving. He found two particular important developments:

1. A cluster of terms, such as 'green', 'ecology' and 'conservation'. This is related to the rise of environmentalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, movements such as Greenpeace and nature conservation which have become a part of society and have their roots in the conservation and environmental movements of the 1970's.

2. The terms 'consciousness' and its synonyms, 'awareness', 'consciousness-raising' related to decline in personal God and increased belief in some sort of spirit or life-force.

It is out of this social and religious atmosphere that some people have chosen to convert to Buddhism and the aim of this thesis is to discover what the factors are that pushed people in this direction. Is it feelings of loneliness and alienation caused by capitalism and consumerism, or dissatisfaction with churches, or just the 'supposedly' innate desire in humans for spirituality?

# CHAPTER FIVE

# BECOMING A BUDDHIST.

For the purpose of this thesis the point of turning from non-Buddhist to Buddhist will be considered as the formal taking of the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. This is a somewhat arbitrary choice as the point of turning could have been: the first time someone went on a Buddhist retreat, or read a book on Buddhism, or began meditating or the first time they called themselves a Buddhist. But for pragmatic reasons the formal taking of refuge will be considered the turning point as it is something people would remember as it would be significant to them.

What then is a Buddhist? For the purpose of this research understanding a Buddhist is someone who has taken the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts and who tries to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha who has shown the path to follow. A Buddhist would be someone who is cultivating loving kindness and compassion for all sentient beings, who is awake and developing an awareness of everything they think, do or say. A Buddhist would be trying to meditate and to read the Buddha's teachings and to try to break their habitual way of thinking, until they understand the transient, contingent (conditionally dependent) and devoidness of

intrinsic identity of everything. Ultimately a Buddhist would hope to reach Nirvana, whether in this life or a future one. From this definition of a Buddhist it can be seen that it would be too difficult to actualize this definition in the context of this research. How would one establish if someone is truly following the path of the Buddha? How would one determine if someone is developing compassion or awareness and to what degree? How do you monitor if someone is truly meditating everyday and how significant is that? As a result of this difficulty with the definition of a Buddhist, taking of Refuge and the Precepts will be used as a point of defining a Buddhist convert. This is not an unreasonable place to put this turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist as these two rituals have significant places in all schools of Buddhism, perhaps more significant in some than others.

What then marks the entry of a person into Buddhism? Venerable Hammalawa Saddhatissa says the required quality is *saddha*, which is 'confidence based on knowledge' (Saddhatissa 1991:59). Before a person can follow the Buddhist path they need to be sure or there must arise in them the confidence that there is a path to follow and a goal to be reached. Having this confidence, a person starts on the path and through their experience their original vision of the path and goal is confirmed, which strengthens their initial confidence and gives them inspiration to

develop further along the path. So a pattern is set and it is probably in recognition of this repeated pattern that the Buddhist custom of *saranagammana* or Taking Refuge was instituted and developed. All religions need some articles in which the followers have confidence and in Buddhism these are the Three Refuges.

For the purpose of this thesis a person becomes a Buddhist by going for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The following paragraphs will examine the function of the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts in Buddhism and during the interviews that follow I will hopefully see whether they truly are the point of conversion or whether there are other more significant points of conversion. At the beginning of meditation sessions in most schools of Buddhism the participants do go for refuge, is this enough to consider oneself a Buddhist or for some people is a more formal and public ceremony necessary?

*Buddham saranam gacchami*

*Dharmam  saranam gacchami*

*Samgham saranam gacchami*

To the Buddha for refuge I go

To the Dharma for refuge I go

To the Sangha for refuge I go

Going for refuge involves reciting these sentences three times in front of an ordained person and all Buddhists, monks and laity use the ceremony alike, regardless of the tradition. After recitation of the refuge a person may want to establish him or herself as *upasaka* (male) or *upasika* (female) follower by then vowing to observe the 5 precepts. This ceremony is also used for monastic ordination but more precepts are then taken. In Tantric Buddhism there is a fourth refuge, which is the Lama, or teacher.

The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha called the Three Jewels. This is because "it is said that it is difficult to encounter them in the cycle of rebirth and when they are encountered they are of great value" (Lopez 1995: 12). That is why, especially in Tibetan Buddhism, it is fortuitous to be born a human, as this is the realm in which you are likely to encounter the Three Jewels.

What then does refuge mean? From the Oxford dictionary refuge has two meanings: -

- Shelter from pursuit or danger or trouble

- Person, thing or course resorted to in difficulties.

Loori gives a useful meaning from Japanese; refuge comes from the term kie-ei:

Kie - means to unreservedly throw oneself into

Ei - means to rely upon.

Refuge, therefore in this sense means "unreservedly throwing oneself into and relying upon" the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (Loori 1996: 43).

The notion of refuge also suggests two fundamental points of the Buddhist worldview:

1. Sentient beings are in need of protection, of a place of refuge where they can escape from the suffering of samsara, the cycle of rebirth.

2. The Three Jewels can provide such protection, that "they themselves are free from the dangers and vicissitudes of samsara, and thus can offer refuge to others" (Lopez 1995:12).

The Three Jewels in Buddhism are often spoken of in medical terms where the Buddha is the doctor who diagnoses the illness, the Dharma is the medication prescribed and the Sangha are the nurses that help the patient get better. A close investigation of the Three Jewels is required in order to have some understanding what Buddhists are taking refuge in.

Who is the Buddha? The historical Buddha lived 563-483 B.C.E. His traditional birthplace is located [2]in Lumbini in what is now Nepal, and the death site at Kushinagar in what is now India. There are many traditional accounts of his birth, life, his enlightenment and his passing into Nirvana.

The passing of the Buddha into Nirvana created a sense of loss, not only for his disciples, but also for future followers. They would lament that their negative karma had caused them to be reborn someplace other than Northern India during the life time of the Buddha and not to have been part of his audience (Lopez 1995: 22). As a consequence, with the absence of the historical Buddha, a variety of substitutes were developed to take his place:

1. Buddhist icons- Such as stupas, painting and statues that are the image of Buddha's such as Sakyamuni and Amitabha or bodhisattvas, for example, Avalokitesvara or Maitreya. Sponsoring the production of icons was considered as an act of great merit. Part of some Buddhist practice is the use of images of the Buddha to reflect on his good qualities, which sometimes lead to seeing the Buddha "face to face" (Lopez 1995: 21).

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[2] Although these have been the long accepted dates they recently have been called into question with some suggestions that the Buddha may have lived a century later (Lopez 1995: 16).

2. Written texts of his teachings called sutras, there will be more detail of the sutra later.

3. Another substitute for the Buddha was "the transcendent principle, sometimes called the Buddha nature, which becomes the subject of a wide range of doctrinal speculations, devotion and practice" (Lopez 1995: 23). Especially in the Mahayana tradition there is the idea that the potential for Buddhahood resides in all beings and only needs to be developed.

4. The next substitute is the wisdom by which the Buddha becomes enlightened and hence the texts that contain this wisdom.

5. In the Mahayana tradition a very popular substitute for the Buddha is the bodhisattva, who is a being who postpones their own enlightenment in order to help liberate others. Not only was the bodhisattva someone to imitate, but they were also objects of devotion as they had vowed to liberate all beings from suffering. Some example of bodhisattvas are, Manjusri the bodhisattva of wisdom, Maitreya the bodhisattva who will become the next Buddha, and Avalokitesvara, " the most widely worshipped Buddha, who takes a female form as Guanyin in China and Kannon in Japan, and who in Tibet takes human form in the succession of Dalai Lamas" (Lopez 1995:25).

6. Another substitute for the Buddha is found in Vajrayana in rituals called sadhana, in which practitioners through visualization asks a bodhisattva to come into the practitioner's presence. One popular bodhisattva used in these rituals is the female bodhisattva of compassion, Tara.

What then does it mean to take refuge in the Buddha? There are two levels to understanding this "refuge in the Buddha". The first is the mundane or devotional level; this is Buddha as an example. Although the Buddha was a man, he can be seen to be set apart from normal sentient beings as he has special qualities. In the Khuddaka-patha commentary there is a summary of what the term Buddha means in the refuge formulae: "Buddha means he is that Exalted One who is self-become, who is without a teacher in things (dhammas) not heard before, who himself attained the highest wisdom of the truths and therein reached omniscience and mastery over the fruitions" (Bond in Carter 1982: 19). There are two special qualities about the Buddha; firstly, he attained the highest spiritual perfection, which is developing wisdom or insight into the ultimate Truth, "overcoming all the mental, physical, and emotional defilements and hindrances that obstruct the path to perfection for ordinary beings" (Bond in Carter 1982: 19). Secondly, he reached the goal

without a teacher; in other words is self-enlightened, and these two factors make his authority and significance as a refuge.

The second level is a more spiritual significance of the Buddha, because of his omniscience and his compassion for all sentient beings; he saw their suffering and offered a path to cessation of this suffering. In the Khuddaka-Patha, "Gotama, as the fully-enlightened Buddha, is the light of the world. He is enlightened and able to cause others to reach enlightenment" (Bond in Carter 1982: 23). Here the Buddha is more than an example and going for refuge to the Buddha is a 'power-filled act'. It begins a process of transforming one's life; it is an action of following the path, making the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha the pivotal focus of one's life, and a total surrender of the self. A shift occurs from the self to the Three Jewels. So, going for refuge starts a process, which will ultimately end dukkha, which is caused by our ignorance, or wrong perception of reality and by developing wisdom wrong perception will be replaced with true perceptions. Refuge is the beginning of the path that leads to the development of wisdom, or as Bond says, "refuge thus, serves as a skillful means (*upaya*) of orienting persons to the ultimate truth" (Bond in Carter 1982: 31). This leads on to the Dharma, which is the ultimate refuge that is inherent in existence but it took the Buddha to realize the dharma and to bring it to all sentient beings. It must be reiterated that the Buddha cannot

bring about one's salvation, which can only be done by one's devotion, commitment and hard work along the path shown by the Buddha.

What is the Dharma? The Buddhist canon consists of three collections; Sutra, Vinaya and Abhidharma. They comprise the original Buddhist canon, known as the Tripitaka or Three Baskets. The sutras are considered the actual words and teachings of the Buddha, the Vinaya are the monastic vows and disciplines left behind by the Buddha, and the Abhidharma are treatises left by the Buddha. Also included in the canon are various essential works, texts and commentaries by later Buddhist masters, as well as later Mahayana sutras and tantras.

There are also said to be two aspects to dharma, one is linguistic and one is experiential (Cabezon 1994: 190). Doctrine as language is the source of rational, conceptual reflection while doctrine as spiritual realization represents the experiential dimension. These two are causally related as the linguistic, rational aspect of the doctrine leads to the inner realization, which is the experiential aspect of the doctrine. Therefore by hearing the doctrine "its rational analysis leads to certainty, and that certainty is boiled on the fires of meditation, leading eventually to direct, nonconceptual insight" (Cabezon 1994:191).

The importance of texts in Buddhism derives in part from the fact that the tradition represents the Buddha as being eventually persuaded to teach others after his enlightenment, "this suggests that the dharma is something that can be passed on, something that is transmittable, transferable" (Lopez 1995: 31). Therefore there is the notion that the dharma should be translated and there is merit in sponsoring a translation.

What is important and what the Buddha stressed in his teachings is that a person must not put blind faith in the authority of the dharma, but that the validity of the teachings must be tested in the "light of their own reason, understanding, and experience" (Saddhatissa 1991:67). Therefore Buddhists read the dharma to understand the teachings of the Buddha and to get inspiration to follow the path taught by him. But the teachings are not only to be accepted and believed, but to be understood and practiced as well. The Buddha likened his teachings to a raft:

*'The doctrine I teach you monks, is like a raft to be used to cross over samsara, not as something to be held fast to. If a man comes by a great stretch of water and sees no way of crossing to the opposite shore which is safe and secure so he fashions a raft out of sticks, branches, leaves, and grasses and lashings and uses it to cross over to the opposite bank. Suppose now, O monks, he were to say "This raft has been of much use to*

*me so I will put it on my head and carry it with me as I proceed on my journey" – will he be doing the correct thing with this raft?' The monks agreed this action was not correct and the Buddha added the obvious answer: 'Even so, monks, the doctrine taught by me is for crossing over and not for holding fast to' (Majjhima Nikaya. I.134f ).*

I go for Refuge to the sangha. In Tibetan, there is a saying that "only the snow lions among us can go into solitude in the wilderness and achieve enlightenment alone" (Lama Surya Das 1997: 78). Most people need help and guidance along the path, which they get from the members of the sangha. What is the sangha? In the rules governing the ordination ceremony, sangha is said to be present when four fully ordained monks are in attendance, but this is a very limited meaning, sangha has come to have a much broader meaning.

The sangha can be understood in three principal ways, firstly, "it means the transcendental hierarchy of Enlightened and partly-Enlightened persons existing on a purely spiritual plane" (Sangharakshita 1994:25). These would include the Buddha's, Arahts, Bodhisattvas, or other Enlightened beings who have reached a level above the ordinary mundane life of samsara. The second understanding of the sangha is the bhikkhu-sangha- all those who have been ordained as Buddhists,

traditionally the monastic order of monks and nuns. Thirdly, there is the Mahasangha, where maha in Sanskrit means 'great', so this is the sangha understood as the whole of the Buddhist community, that is all those who, to whatever degree, have gone for refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma.

The sangha therefore does not only represent ordained monks and nuns, but also all people, past, present and in the future that follow the Buddha's teaching and find it to be a valid and satisfying way of life. The sangha, therefore, is a guide and not only provides a place where people can go for dharma teachings, but by example people can see how members are living the dharma. Lama Surya Das says, "the sangha represents the positive energy and support we all need. Sangha friends can help you get through the hard patches of your path, when you feel discouraged and depleted. Sangha can teach you a lot, and group sangha practice can wear down many of your rough edges" (Lama Surya Das 1997:80).

Going for refuge is therefore, much more than just receiving a badge or name that is going to assure the person a better moral life and understanding of reality. Going for refuge is just the beginning of the path, which is a long and arduous one, which can only be achieved through

the individual's hard work. The Three Jewels are a guide and inspiration for the person on the path, but offer no guarantee. Going for refuge is a living reality, a state of consciousness, and a continual awareness of living in accordance with the moral and ethical teachings of the Buddha. Going for refuge is not a once off event, a Buddhist goes for refuge all the time and is something they should be aware of everyday and in everything they do. Even people that are so called 'born Buddhists' go for refuge, where they reaffirm their commitment to the Three Jewels.

Going for refuge and being on the path to enlightenment in Buddhism is three-fold: it involves morality, meditation and wisdom. Morality, or sila, is the first is step and begins with the five precepts a person normally takes once they have gone for refuge. The precepts are a code of practical ethics that a person should try to follow in their lives. But once again because Buddhism is a practical religion the attitude towards precepts is different to what one finds in other religions. The precepts are not commandments as one finds in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, there is no concept of sin or punishment from some outside force if the precepts are transgressed. Buddhism is very aware of the social nature of people as well as their freewill and therefore the Buddhist will follow the precepts because by their own experience and reason find that taking a certain path will contribute to their own well-being as well as the well-being of all

sentient beings. Once again confidence is the important factor, from what a person has observed, studied and experienced, they know what right action is. A Buddhist does not behave in a certain way because it is in the scripture or they have been told to do so or because of blind faith, they will behave in such a way because of what they personally know of the world.

The five precepts are as follows:

1. I undertake the precept to abstain from the taking of life.

2. I undertake the precept to abstain from taking what is not given.

3. I undertake the precept to abstain from sexual misconduct.

4. I undertake the precept to abstain from false speech.

5. I undertake the precept to abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs.

The first precept concerns not only human life, but also all life and hence some Buddhists are vegetarians. Buddhism was the first religion to establish hospitals for people and animals (Saddhatissa 1991: 85). The second precept not only involves stealing but also renounces "greed and grasping, unfair competition that at any cost, leads one to acquire or accumulate riches by ruining others" (Saddhatissa 1991: 85). The third precept has an important social value as it helps to preserve the integrity

of the family as well as exercising some control over sexual appetites for the good of the individual and society, for example, in the spread of sexual diseases. The fourth precept is concerned with the necessity of care in speech, which once again is for the welfare of the individual and society. This not only involves lying but also speaking poorly of other people, gossiping, abusing or slandering others. It is about awareness of what one is saying and the fact that words can sometimes be more harmful than actions. What a person says should be worthwhile and meaningful and it is better not to say anything if it is just trivial conversation which could be harmful to others. The fifth precept recognizes that drinking and taking drugs weakens a person's moral and physical stamina and may lead to breaching of the other precepts.

Buddhism is aware of the relationship between the individual and society and by applying the precepts to a person's daily life their suffering and those around them can be lessened. The precepts do not represent the main teaching of the Buddha, but they offer a course of action for living in society which tries to cause the least amount of suffering for the individual and those around them.

The second area that is important when on the path to enlightenment is samadhi or meditation. In order to maintain a good standard of moral

conduct it is essential to practice meditation. An undisciplined mind is one that wanders and is difficult to control and it may follow harmful ideas or imaginations. By undertaking the practice of meditation the mind can become tranquil and develop better concentration. By choosing specific objects for meditation certain mental weaknesses can be overcome, for example, "by meditating on loving kindness we can assuage the traits of enmity, wrath and envy. By contemplating the inevitability and unpredictability of death we can dispel complacency and apathy" (Saddhatissa 1991: 89).

The final area is panna or wisdom. There are three kinds of wisdom: that acquired by learning, thinking and that acquired by meditation. If a person follows a good moral life and practices meditation then when the mind is well concentrated they will be able to understand the true nature of things. This wisdom is the understanding of reality in the light of anicca (transience), dukka (unsatisfactoriness) and anatta (insubstantiality).

The taking of the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts is a significant process, a way of life which leads to the development of wisdom and an understanding of the ultimate nature of reality.  Although refuge should be taken often and the Buddhist should be aware always of the Refuges and the Precepts, for this thesis the formal and public taking of refuge will

be   seen as the turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist. In the interviews that follow it will be seen if this is true or whether there are other turning points in the conversion process.

In Soka Gakkai Buddhism for the purpose of this thesis, the Gohonzon ceremony will be take as the equivalent of Taking Refuge as found in other schools of Buddhism. There are two essential elements to this form of Buddhism, the chanting of an invocation (daimoku) of the Lotus Sutra and the worship of a sacred mandala, the Gohonzon. "Any person who believes in this object of worship and chants *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* to it, can expiate all negative karma and attain Buddhahood" (Wilson 1994: 6).

Therefore the turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist for members of SGI will be when a person has perfected the chanting of the daimoku and receives their own Gohonzon, "which is a mandala inscribed with many Chinese and two sanskrit characters, the names of Buddhas, and a summation of the law of enlightenment" (Wilson 1994: 6).

# CHAPTER SIX

# ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS

I conducted 20 interviews, 10 were male and 10 were female, they ranged in age from 23 years old to 77 years old. They have been practicing Buddhists for varying lengths of time from 2 years to 20 years, but as will be seen later these are only estimates as in most cases there was no one pivotal moment when they considered themselves to be Buddhists.

All interviewees are white, except one, they are all from middle class backgrounds and most have some form of post matric education, usually a university degree. They have varied careers from being students, retired people, people involved in businesses, photography, hairdressing to people who are ordained as teachers and nuns.

Appendix 2 Refers to the questions or areas that were investigated in the interviews and appendix four is a personal reminiscence of the experience of conducting the interviews and the experiences I had during the process.

The analysis of the interviews for this thesis needs to be conducted in the framework of L.R. Rambo's theory. Conversion is not a simple process and needs to be examined in a holistic way. Rambo's theory is not only holistic, but heuristic and the questions posed in the interviews are loosely based on the seven different stages of his theory as explained in chapter one. The analysis aims at investigating whether these stages apply in the conversion to Buddhism as they do in the Christian context.

## STAGE 1: CONTEXT.

The first questions pertain to the context of the conversion process. This is vitally important as conversion does not occur in a vacuum and there are many influences, both micro and macro that help direct the conversion process. It is also important to take into consideration that context is not confined to stage one, but as Rambo says, it is "the total environment in which conversion transpires" (Rambo 1993: 20). Of particular importance for this thesis is the religious background of the interviewees.

The interviewees come from varied religious backgrounds; Jewish (2), Roman Catholic (5), Muslim (1), Greek Orthodox (1), Dutch Reform (2), Methodist (3), Protestant (1), Anglican (2) and Non-religious backgrounds (3). With further analysis the religious backgrounds from which the

interviewees come is more complex than initially assumed and may be roughly divided into 5 categories.

1. non-religious (3)

2. nominally religious (5)

3. very religious (8)

4. extremely religious (3)

5. unclassifiable (1)

The first category could be called a non-religious background and three people would fit into this category. In these cases the parents of the interviewees are either atheists or completely disinterested in any religious or spiritual system at all. The three people were neither baptized, confirmed, had a bar mitzvah, attended Sunday school or church in anyway. Their possible only exposure to any form of religious thinking was at school and as one interviewee said, "I only had anything to do with Christianity because it was part of the curriculum at school". [3]

The second category would be a nominally religious background and five interviewees belong in this category. They may all have been baptized, confirmed, attended Sunday school even church services, but their

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[3] During the era when all the interviewees attended school the government of South Africa at the time implemented a Christian National Education policy of which religious education was a compulsory component.

parents were not involved at all, or minimally. As one interviewee said, "my father would drop us off at Sunday school and collect us later" another one refers to his parents as Christmas Christians only attending church at Christmas and maybe Easter.

The third category is very religious which included eight of the interviewees. These eight can be considered to come form very religious backgrounds in that they have all been baptized, confirmed, and attended Sunday school and church services. In addition the whole family went to church on Sundays and the parents were very involved in the church in some way.

The fourth category is extremely religious and involves three interviewees who, although came from religious backgrounds, in their teens became extremely religious more so than their parents. One entered a Benedictine monastery for a time and the other two seriously considered becoming a nun, or a monk.

The last category involves one interviewee who could be considered as having an 'other', or spiritual religious background. He described his mother as 'very ethereal' and she was involved in yoga, meditation,

motivational classes, and self-help books. He would go along with her to the centre and groups to participate in what ever they were involved in.

The next question asked, and in which factors can be detected which could be considered 'push' factors aiding in directing people towards conversion is:

## Was there a loss of faith in traditional religions?

This ties in with issues highlighted in Chapter three, where in post-modern society there is a doubting of the beliefs of traditional religions, with the development of science and technology people are questioning beliefs and the authority of the church. In an earlier chapter, secularization was considered to 'have been a weakening of the plausibility of religious perceptions' which can clearly be seen here. (Chapter 4: pg 44).

A strong feeling from a number of the interviewees was that they felt let down or disappointed by their traditional religions. A number of them felt that the church was incapable of answering their questions or gave them unsatisfactory answers which then caused them to move away from the church and look elsewhere for meaning. For example, one person's father

committed suicide and when he asked questions about where his father's soul went he said he was "let down by the answers the church gave me". The other concern was that whenever they asked questions they were chastised and told not to question, but simply to have faith and believe. This became extremely difficult for people who needed to know and understand why they were doing something and they needed an explanation behind a belief. Two of the people interviewed said that they grew up with a lot of fear as the God the church presented was a frightening God.

One interviewee growing up in apartheid South Africa became skeptical of religion as there was 'no integration of spiritual practice into social justice' and he became disappointed in his religion and other religions that seemed inert in the face of social injustice. Other people were concerned with the hypocrisy of Christians and their condemnation of other religions and spiritual beliefs. One person felt that Christians were plastic and artificial and from Monday to Saturday they were not nice people but on Sunday they were pious and she felt "totally disillusioned by this". One final concern was that the teachings of the church lacked depth and as such 'did nothing for them'.

One of the interviewees who came from a Jewish background said she had negative experiences regarding Judaism and she did not like the hypocrisy in the religion. She said when she did try to be a good little Jewish girl she was ridiculed and embarrassed.

The one interviewee who came from a Muslim background found a problem with believing in God and he lost faith in God. The one interviewee from the category of unclassifiable religion said that all the groups he had attended from yoga to motivational classes had been "good stuff" but not as pure and directed as Buddhism. He also said that he felt that "God was not returning his calls".

In the analysis of the context from which these converts came the results were surprising as of the twenty interviewees, only four came from non-religious or unclassifiable religious backgrounds. It was expected that the converts to Buddhism would have come from more secular backgrounds. In the light of this it is, therefore, not surprising that one of the push factors towards conversion was a loss of faith or disappointment in traditional religions. Perhaps the idea that secularization theory is dead may not necessarily be true, if secularization is a weakening of the plausibility of religious perceptions then that is exactly what has occurred with the converts to Buddhism. Secularization is one of Berger's dilemmas as

discussed earlier (chapter 3: 37). In general therefore the context from which the converts came was religious and they moved to a more secular belief system. Buddhism could be considered a secular religion and it presents itself as logical, reasonable and compatible with science, it is this-worldly and practical.

## STAGE TWO AND THREE: CRISIS AND QUEST.

Rambo says (and most scholars of conversion agree) a crisis or disorientation precedes conversion (Rambo 1992:165). What constitutes a crisis varies greatly from a life threatening crisis to feeling of angst or simply dissatisfaction with the conditions of your life. Crisis invariably leads to quest and hence these stages can be combined together. In conducting the interviews it was found that these two were ultimately connected in the minds of the interviewees. Rambo says quest is the process in which people seek to maximize meaning and purpose in life (Rambo in Maloney 1992: 167). Three sets of factors which help in exploring the quest stage are: response style, structural availability and motivational structures.

The following two questions were asked in the interviews relating to crisis and quest:

## Was there a crisis of some sort that initiated the conversion process?
## Was there any active searching for a spiritual or religious experience?

In terms of a crisis occurring that led to conversion, there were only three people who had some personal crisis in their lives; either illness, or death of a loved one. But interesting enough these incidents did not lead directly to conversion, but more to a disappointment in their traditional religion which then put them on the path that lead to their conversion. Some interviewees had not had a crisis as such, but rather some difficulties or problems, or feelings of unhappiness within their personal lives which led them in a change of direction and a search for answers to these problems. For others there was no personal crisis but rather a spiritual crisis which for different reasons led them to experience a loss of faith. Some people experienced no crisis as such, but were questioning their spirituality, still others said that they were simply spiritual seekers with no definitive moment at which point they began their quest.

In chapter three Rambo spoke of a continuum of crisis in that it can vary from something serious to something very mild. For most of the interviewees crisis was not a factor and so perhaps this stage does not apply to the conversion to Buddhism. It appears as if quest, as a process,

in these instances is more important than crisis in the conversion to Buddhism.

Most of the people interviewed were on a spiritual quest and were searching for something that would give them a meaning to life "rather than something you can refer to when you felt bad" as one interviewee said. A number of people said that they had always been spiritual seekers, but for different reasons. The search may have become more intense. For example, one person felt that as she got older and into her 40's the search became more urgent.  Therefore in terms of response style they were all actively involved in the conversion process.

Structural availability is "the freedom of a person or persons to move from previous emotional, intellectual, and religious institutions, commitments and obligations into new options" (Rambo 1993: 60). For some people it was emotionally difficult to leave their religion in which they were raised especially if they were religious or came from a religious family. Feelings of disappointing or letting down family members were expressed as well as feelings by some people of still having some connections with their previous religion.

A few people considered this an intellectual decision and these were the people who said that they had not actively been searching but had always been interested in philosophy and psychology.

As regards motivation each individual is different, but in terms of the theories of motivation discussed previously, Seymour Epstein's motivations seem simplistic in terms of conversion. More important in terms of Buddhism are Rambo's two additional motivational factors; power and transcendence. Both of these factors will appear again in further questions asked: power, especially power over one's life and death, feature in a number of interviewees understanding of Buddhism and their attraction to Buddhism. While transcendence, as defined by Walter Conn as, "an innate aspect of human nature where people strive to develop and grow" is evident as many interviewees said that they had developed and become better people since their conversion.

So this stage of Rambo's theory is problematic as crisis does not seem applicable to westerners converting to Buddhism. Quest on the other hand was significant to all interviewees. This ties in with Berger's dilemmas, as discussed in Chapter three, which have resulted in people feeling alienated and alone, with the need to search for something to fill the void within them and maybe to give them direction and structure in life. These

together with the loss of faith in traditional religions are the push factors that have pushed the converts to Buddhism. Another push factors could be an alienation from western culture, "it's often regarded as overly materialistic, very superficial, only concerned with money, fame, consumerism, and its seen as having lost touch with any deeper spiritual values" (Batchelor in Mackenzie 2001: 146). Some people are disappointed with western society and are looking for answers to questions such as; what is wrong with society? Why is there so much suffering and violence in society? Why is there such injustice in society? Why are there starving children? What am I doing here? Why is the car I drive so important? In the interviews many people were disappointed in society and disillusioned with the way they were living their lives.

## STAGE FOUR: ENCOUNTER.

This stage poses some problems in terms of how Rambo defines encounter which he says involves "the contact between the potential convert and the advocate and takes place in a particular setting" (Rambo in Maloney 1992: 169). The first problem is that Buddhism in general is not a proselytizing religion and especially in South Africa there is no major effort by temples, centers or Buddhist groups to advertise or even acknowledge their existence. Finding a Buddhist group or centre is generally by word of

mouth and most South Africans have little or no knowledge of Buddhism and where to find a temple or center. This situation was even more difficult during the apartheid era as access to Buddhist centers was limited. Ten years of democracy and the openness of the new government as regards religious practice have changed things somewhat. As a result the advocate may take many forms not necessarily in the form of a spiritual leader, preacher or priest, but as a friend, family member, books or the internet. Secondly, the particular setting of the encounter does not necessarily mean a temple or church, it could occur in your own sitting room.

## How did they first hear about Buddhism?

The people interviewed came to hear about Buddhism in many different ways and no particular way being more frequent than any other. Some heard of Buddhism through a friend who either was a Buddhist or was going to a Buddhist center or temple or who had gone on a Buddhist retreat. Other people were introduced to Buddhism by a family member who were either Buddhist, or who had an interest in Buddhism. One interviewee spoke about having discussions on Buddhism from an early age with his grandfather.

Yoga, Hinduism and meditation (non-Buddhist) are other paths which led people to Buddhism. People who had an interest in western philosophy began to take an interest in eastern philosophy then eastern religions and so to Buddhism. Another path to Buddhism was through traveling; some people had traveled to India or Taiwan and discovered Buddhism there which led to them investigating Buddhism once they came home.

For other people, books on Buddhism were their introduction to Buddhism, which is interesting considering the 'secular' as well as intellectual and philosophical nature of Buddhism? Some people used the internet or read a book on Buddhism and said it just made sense to them and was exactly what they were looking for. At least three of the interviewees said that they came to Buddhism from an intellectual perspective where they found the psychology and philosophy of Buddhism logical. In these cases the encounter was not people as such but information. Once again the secular nature of Buddhism needs to be considered as it has no dogma or god to believe in, it is rather about analysis of information and a practical ritual such as meditation which can be experienced personally.

## STAGE FIVE: INTERACTION.

This is the period when the potential convert learns more about the religion in terms of its teachings, lifestyle and expectations. As discussed in an earlier chapter during this period a sphere of influence is created which is called encapsulation and the degree of encapsulation varies. There are three types of encapsulation; physical, social and ideological. The following were asked to see if encapsulation occurs amongst the converts and the type of encapsulation experienced. Also to see if the four dimensions; relationships, rituals, rhetoric and roles, mentioned in an earlier chapter are present here and to what degree.

## To what tradition of Buddhism were they attracted and why? Do they still belong to that tradition now?

## What was the attraction to and in Buddhism and is the attraction still the same?

## What was involved with their interaction with Buddhism?

## Did it involve meditation courses, retreats, going to temple, speaking to people in their homes or reading books?

The people interviewed belong to six different schools of Buddhism:

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) – 2 members

Zen Buddhism – 2 members

Tibetan Buddhism – 5 members

Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) – 4 members

Pure Land Buddhism – 3 members

Theravada Buddhism – 4 members (more westernized than traditional).

# SGI

**Respondent 1:**

He first heard of this from of Buddhism from a friend's brother-in-law who gave him a book to read. He then joined the SGI in Johannesburg and began chanting, it made a huge difference in his life and he knew this was what was important to him. The attraction to this form of Buddhism is that it improved his life and he is committed to SGI and will remain in this form of Buddhism and he has never been interested in exploring or investigating any other from of Buddhism. He is very involved with SGI and attends meetings at the centre as well as smaller group meetings at people's homes. He chants at home and studies the sutras. He said that this form of Buddhism did not require that he shaved his head or wore robes; he felt just like everybody else and smokes and eats meat, he does not advertise that he is a Buddhist but if anybody asked he would be happy to talk about it.

**Respondent 2:**

She was introduced to SGI by her brother-in-law and she began chanting which she found beneficial. Once again the attraction to this form of Buddhism is that it improved her life, she says if she has any problems she chants and gets help with them. She is not interested in any other form of Buddhism. She is very committed to SGI and attends the larger and smaller group meetings and chants everyday.

The encapsulation here seems to involve a social type as meetings and the community of SGI seems to be important, but there seem to be two other types of encapsulation which are intellectual and practical. The intellectual encapsulation which brings about a new understanding of life through study of the scripture, and the practical side involves ritual in the form of chanting, prostrations or meditation which the interviewees feel works for them.

The four dimensions of interaction, as discussed previously, which are deployed when a sphere of influence has been created by encapsulation are; relationships, rituals, rhetoric and roles. All four interactions can be seen at play here; relationships, especially in terms of the smaller group meetings that they attend where they seem to have important functional roles, as well as in the larger group where at the

meeting I attended the one interviewee did a reading. The ritual aspect is the chanting which plays a very pivotal role in their lives and since Buddhism is a very practical religion which prescribes a course of action to take in trying to attain enlightenment this aspect is very clear here, they both chanted and it was beneficial to them. In terms of rhetoric which includes new religious terminology which is a new interpretative system that helps to transform the worldview of the potential convert (Chapter 3:32) this is particularly evident in the knowledge of the Lotus Sutra according to which they try to live their lives. Perhaps roles is the only area which is not clear as the interviewees have not changed their lives in any way in terms of what they eat, smoke, work or how they dress. The encapsulation therefore is not to a very large degree as there have not been any major changes of life style the most important aspect of this form of Buddhism involves a practical ritual, chanting, with an understanding behind the ritual and for them a proved beneficial effect from the action.

## Zen

**Respondent 3:**

This interviewee said she started meditating and then met her teacher who told her to meditate twice a day and do 108 prostrations per day. She didn't understand why she was doing it she just did it because her

teacher told her to and it was only later that she understood what meditation and prostrations are all about. Meditation just felt right for her and she needs the discipline that is in Zen Buddhism. Her teacher is very important to her and she will remain a Zen Buddhist and is going to relocate across the country to be near her teacher. Here once again is the practical side of Buddhism; this interviewee said she is a 'doing' person and sitting in meditation felt right to her. In this case the advocate, her teacher plays a pivotal and ongoing role. Her intellectual understanding of her practical ritual came after when she began to read study and take teachings.

**Respondent 4:**

The other Zen Buddhist did initially go to a Tibetan temple, which he did enjoy, but was always drawn to the meditative side of Buddhism and felt in Tibetan Buddhism there were things he did not understand and hence did not feel attracted to this form of Buddhism. He likes the meditation and simplicity of Zen, he says he is anti- feel good and gets the impression from Zen that this path is difficult and a challenge. His attraction to Buddhism is that it is the one religion which faces issues head-on, such as suffering, loss, the fact that things change, other religions he says skirts around these issues. He also likes the awareness of life, or sanctity of all life that is found in Buddhism, he says this is the most developed and evolved

way of looking at life. He is seriously considering becoming a Buddhist monk.

In this school of Buddhism there appears to be a larger degree of encapsulation involving greater changes in life; moving to a different province or becoming a monk. Relationships are important as well as ritual in the form of meditation and prostrations also an intellectual understanding of the rituals. Rhetoric in terms of the respondents using new religious terminology is evident and roles in terms of wanting to become a monk and relocating to be near one's teacher.

## TIBETAN BUDDHISM

The 5 Tibetan Buddhists answers the above questions as follows:

**Respondent 5:**

His attraction to Tibetan Buddhism was influenced by his mother and Geshe. M. Roach, who is an American who became a Tibetan monk. He says Geshe Roach is very important to him and has greatly influenced him. He did look at Zen Buddhism, but the philosophy and culture of Tibetan Buddhism is more attractive to him. He says 'the philosophy of Buddhism is more logical, analyzed and can be proven.' He also enjoys the chanting as it has power or blessing in it. He was very involved with the

temple and even lived there for six months and now goes to the temple for meditation and teachings two to three times a week. He will definitely remain a Buddhist and is moving into Tantric Buddhism.

**Respondent 6:**

The first time he sat in a Tibetan Buddhist shrine room he knew he was in the right place and said he felt a strong karmic connection. He has explored other schools of Buddhism but remains attracted to Tibetan Buddhism. His attraction to Buddhism is that it does not have a creator god and the concept of karma makes sense to him, he says you create your own reality and all responsibility is on you which he finds empowering. When he first discovered Buddhism he received formal meditation instruction and lived at the temple full time. He is very influenced by his teacher whom he feels is very important in his life.

**Respondent 7:**

She was initially attracted to the psychology and philosophy of the east which she says gave her explanations for things that she could not find in the church. She is a committed Tibetan Buddhist but goes on retreats and teachings to other centers. She likes the middle way of Buddhism and meditation and chanting are a very important part of her life.

**Respondent 8:**

She did go to different Buddhist centers, but Tibetan Buddhism made the most impact and she said she felt a connection with Tibetan Buddhism. In the future she would like to pursue her practice more vigorously and although she is a Tibetan Buddhist she is influenced by books and teachers from other schools. Her attraction to Buddhism is the logic it has which she says she did not find in Christianity. She says Buddhism has information available as to what you are doing, why you are doing it and what you are aiming for. Teachers are very important as examples and being in their presence has a subtle effect on you.

**Respondent 9:**

He believes that you need to practice something and see if it works, if you do not see any changes in life then there is no point in applying it. After he began practicing it made a big difference in his life and he is very committed to Tibetan Buddhism although he does go on retreats to other centers and temples. He says the lama or teacher in Tibetan Buddhism is very important and his attraction to Buddhism has a lot to do with his teachers who are also an example and role model. He likes the intellectual side of Buddhism and he feels the meditation supports the wisdom side of Buddhism.

In this form of Buddhism there seems to be a fair amount of encapsulation especially in terms of relationships with their teachers who play pivotal roles in peoples lives. The intellectual aspect of Buddhism is very important to all of them and they all use new religious terminology such as karma, awareness and being in the moment. Ritual in the form of meditation and chanting are an important part of their practice.

## FWBO

The four members who belong to the FWBO had the following to say:

**Respondent 10:**

His attraction to Buddhism was the meditation and he believes it is in the meditation that transformation takes place. His teacher is important to him and he now receives teachings as well as doing meditation. He has looked at all the different schools of Buddhism but FWBO suits him as he says it is Buddhism adapted for westerners living in the western world. Even so he does go to other centers and temples for retreats and teachings and will definitely remain a Buddhist.

**Respondent 11:**

She went on a Buddhist retreat and just fitted in, she says, 'the way the people lived and the precepts they followed was the way she was living anyway, she had been a Buddhist all along but just did not know it'. She

then began to read extensively and joined the FWBO where she attends weekly meetings. She likes the western approach of the FWBO and has looked at other forms of Buddhism but the FWBO is convenient for her. She didn't have an attraction as such to Buddhism but she kept bumping into people who were Buddhist and all of a sudden she was getting on with and enjoying being around people who were Buddhists. She felt maybe this was a message of some kind. Meditation is a very important part of her practice and she says if she doesn't meditate she notices the changes in herself straight way.

**Respondent 12:**

She went to find out about meditation and when she entered the temple 'she knew this was what she wanted and this was what she was looking for and got involved very quickly'. She is ordained in the FWBO order and teaches at a center and although she is committed to FWBO she will attend teachings and discussions at other centers. For her the process of becoming a Buddhist was slow as in the beginning she did not understand many things but through her study, meditation and reflection she came to understand what becoming a Buddhist meant.

**Respondent 13:**

He first went to other temples and centers but felt he could not relate to them, he likes the FWBO and 'finds it gentle and you have your own choices'. He attends the centre once a week and is studying to be ordained but he enjoys solitude practice and does solitude retreats. He uses new religious terminology and speaks of mindfulness, awareness and everything in his life is his meditation, when he drives, cooks, works and breathes.

Here varying degrees of encapsulation are seen. In terms of the four dimensions of interaction all are deployed here, relationships are important because of the weekly group meetings as is the importance of their teacher. Rituals in terms of mediation are a significant part of their practice and they all feel the beneficial effects of meditation. They do use new religious terminology and the intellectual side of Buddhism is very important to them. Probably the only area that is not so clear is roles played as not much has changed in terms of their life style besides perhaps becoming vegetarians and one respondent being ordained.

## PURE LAND.

The three members belonging to the Pure Land form of Buddhism responded as such:

**Respondent 14:**

She heard about the temple and went on retreat, when she heard the teachings 'they were what she had always wanted and what she knew'. She comes from an intellectual, academic background and Buddhism stood up to that and gave her the answers she needed. She says Buddhism gives responsibility to the individual, 'how I am today is a result of yesterday and tomorrow depends on how I react today'. For her Buddhism brings a tremendous amount of hope, and the concept of no-self gives her the freedom of the possibility of change and the notion that things can be better. Pure Land was the first type of Buddhism she stumbled across and she likes the order and simplicity of Chinese Buddhism.

**Respondent 15:**

She went on a retreat at the temple and the more she listened the more she knew this makes sense and said 'this is solid gold, this is the truth". For her the Buddhist concept of no-self is very important and when she heard this concept she felt a great relief. She did look at Tibetan Buddhism but it did not have the same feeling for her as Pure Land she says she must have been Chinese before. She is has been at the temple as an ordained nun for two years.

**Respondent 16:**

The first time he read about Buddhism he had an instant affinity to it. He likes the detail in Buddhist scriptures and says if there is anything you want to know about, you can find it in the scriptures. He is also impressed with the way the Buddha teaches as he says anybody can understand it. He also finds it very important in Buddhism that you are responsible for your own spiritual life. He will remain a Buddhist but not Pure Land, at the moment he is living as a volunteer at the temple; he finds it dull and boring and will move probably move to another school of Buddhism. He says to confine himself to 'one school of Buddhism is very restricting especially in the new South Africa where there is awareness of diversity'.

In these converts there seems to be a fair amount of encapsulation by virtue of the fact that they all live and work at the temple and therefore social and physical encapsulation will generally be greater then with other schools. At the temple they have to live according to, not only another religion, but also a different culture. Life at the temple is conducted according to Chinese culture, from the food that they eat to the use of Chinese language in all rituals and services; hence they all are learning Chinese. What is important to them all is an intellectual understanding of Buddhism and its concepts and they use new religious

terminology in their speech.  Roles are important considering they all live as part of a community and as such are expected to take on varies role.

## THERAVADA.

The four interviewees from this form of Buddhism responded as such:

**Respondent 17:**

He came to Buddhism intellectually through philosophy and enjoys the philosophy and psychology of Buddhism which helps people to understand who they are. He says it was a natural growth process that led him to Buddhism.  The wisdom and compassion sides of Buddhism are important and he felt at home in Buddhism. He has looked at other schools but feels Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism have too many cultural trappings and cultural ways of doing things which he does not feel comfortable with. He finds there is less cultural trappings in Theravada Buddhism and will remain in this tradition. When he first found out about Buddhism he went on many retreats which stimulated a tremendous amount of studying and discussions with people. He lives at a retreat center but no longer feels the need for retreats he does his own practice and meditates twice a day.

**Respondent 18:**

She found she was drawn to Buddhism and gravitated towards people who were Buddhist. She finds that intellectually Buddhism is a very rational religion. On the humanitarian side she likes the compassion found in Buddhism and describes it as a gentle religion. She lives and works at a retreat center and says she moved there to strengthen her practice and to get some clarity. She does not attend many of the retreats as she works and does not have time, but she does her own practice. She says it is hard to say whether she will remain a Buddhist.

**Respondent 19:**

She says as she began to read books on Buddhism and find out more about Buddhism it just made sense to her and so she joined a meditation group and began to go on retreats. She has a problem with picking a particular tradition of Buddhism and she does read about and go to other temples and centers. She says she rather takes what makes sense and what she needs from everything. She does attend a Theravada meditation group, but is also doing a course in Tibetan Buddhism. The concepts of karma and impermanence appeal and make sense to her. She will remain a Buddhist and wants to get more involved.

**Respondent 20:**

He found out about Buddhism from a friend who had been on a Buddhist retreat, he then decided on the spur of the moment to investigate a Buddhist web site and also to go on retreat. His introduction to Buddhism has been Theravada, but he does sometimes go to other Buddhist centers. His practice involves daily meditation, weekly meetings and occasionally going on retreat. His attraction to Buddhism is about personal experience and taking responsibility for your own actions and behavior. He finds meditation beneficial to him.

In these cases, encapsulation does not seem to be extensive even for those who live at the retreat center. An intellectual understanding of Buddhism seems to be important and there seems to be a more relaxed relationship with being Buddhist. There is no specific teacher that plays a pivotal role as in other schools of Buddhism. Roles they play are only in relationship to all running a retreat centre and the roles involved in that. They all use religious terminology and in terms of ritual they seem to have a more relaxed attitude to meditation and generally do their own practice.

Encapsulation, as seen from the interviews, is not very great in Buddhism it is only where interviewees have been ordained that the encapsulation is

greater. The secular nature of Buddhism plays a part here, Buddhism does not require that people make drastic changes in their life style, perhaps the only changes that most of the interviewees made was to become vegetarians in sympathy of all sentient beings. The area where encapsulation has occurred in all interviewees is in the practical ritual side of Buddhism. All interviewees chant, meditate or do prostrations daily and consider them a vital part of their practice and maintain that this is where changes have taken place and they feel the benefits of meditation or chanting.

In terms of the three types of encapsulation, physical could only apply to people living at temples or retreat centers, but they are there at their own volition and are free to go at any time, so this type of encapsulation is not really applicable to these Buddhist converts. Social encapsulation seems to be important in terms of group meetings and relationships, in some schools of Buddhism, with their teacher. But no drastic changes in life style have occurred with the interviewees perhaps a greater awareness of all sentient beings. Most of the converts do use new religious terminology in their speech; words such as karma, awareness, dharma, compassion are frequently used. In regard to ideological encapsulation, which Rambo says "involves cultivation of a worldview and belief system that 'inoculates' the adherent against alternate or competitive systems of

belief" (Rambo 1993: 106). This does not really apply to Buddhism as the nature of Buddhism is not to regard itself as superior to any other religions, but rather consider them to be a wrong view. At least three of the interviewees were impressed with how some people have been able to combine, for example, Christianity and Buddhism or Judaism and Buddhism. They also said that Buddhism had enhanced their understanding of their previous religions and made them more open to other faiths. Rather, therefore, than an ideological encapsulation, it is more an intellectual encapsulation which involves a new understanding of life, (many of the interviewees were attracted to the philosophy and psychology of Buddhism). The ritual aspect or practical side of Buddhism is very important as it gives practical instructions of what to do and all the interviewees said they tried it and it worked for them and therefore they continue to follow the practice.

## STAGE SIX: COMMITMENT.

The culmination of the encapsulation phase is the commitment phase. According to Rambo's theory this period begins with decision-making and this final decision to convert can be a very intense and painful confrontation with the self (Chapter 3: 34). Once a decision for commitment is made there is normally some public demonstration to seal the convert's choice. For pragmatic reasons it was decided in chapter

four that the taking of a public ceremony of refuge-taking would be considered the turning point from a non-Buddhist to Buddhist. This therefore would be the culmination of the commitment phase and the following questions were asked of the interviewees to see if this was so.

## Was their commitment to Buddhism a public or private demonstration?

## In other words at what moment did they decide they were a Buddhist and was it a difficult decision?

## When and under what circumstances did they take the Three Refuges and did they have to participate in any courses, retreats or studying to understand what this process entailed?

In **SGI**, as seen in chapter four, it is during the Gojukai ceremony that a person receives there own Gohonzon and this is seen as the point of turning from non-Buddhist to Buddhist. The two SGI members answered the questions as follows:

**Respondent 1:**

He joined SGI and he had to learn to chant for three to six months and after three years of chanting he received his Gohonzon in a public

ceremony. This was a very important moment for him but not necessarily the moment of transition from non-Buddhist to Buddhist, he considered himself a Buddhist before receiving the Gohonzon. For him chanting is what has made a difference in his life and being a Buddhist has made him a better person but in terms of his life style not much has changed.

**Respondent 2:**

She joined SGI and after 6 months of learning to chant she received her Gohonzon in a public ceremony. This was a very important and proud moment for her but it was also not a turning point, it was the chanting that she found beneficial.

Both SGI converts considered the Gojukai ceremony very important but not necessarily the point of moving from non-Buddhist to Buddhist. Neither of the interviewees considered this a difficult decision, for both of them it was something they looked forward to and were extremely proud of. They did seem to have some knowledge and understanding of the importance and function of the ritual.

## ZEN

**Respondent 3:**

She took refuge and the precepts at her home on a retreat, after she had been meditating and doing prostrations for some time. She said it was not 'a big deal' and she had not particularly wanted to do this but her teacher said she should. Afterwards she said it felt right and it gave a new dimension to her practice.

**Respondent 4:**

There was no one pivotal moment when he moved from non-Buddhist to Buddhist he just began meditating, studying and going on retreats. He is totally committed to Buddhism and is even seriously considering becoming a monk, but has not taken formal refuge. The main reason is his family whom he says are Christians and he "does not want to scare them off" as they already have problems with him being a Buddhist and he says they would have difficulty accepting such a formal ceremony.

In these cases the significance of taking refuge does not seem to be all that important. The first interviewee's Zen teacher is very significant in her life and although she had not done any reading on Buddhism and did not understand what her practice was about she just did it, she says she did things back to front: "first I did and then realized why". In her understanding the practice is the significant part and taking refuge was something she did along the way. The second interviewee also just began

to practice but he had also gone to teachings in other Buddhist schools. He seems to have a deep understanding of refuge but is concerned with his family's reaction to a formal ceremony. Even without a formal refuge ceremony he considers himself a Buddhist and lives a Buddhist way life. One aspect of Buddhism that he finds really appealing is the personal responsibility aspect.

## TIBETAN

**Respondent 5:**

The first time he took refuge was in India where the Buddha attained enlightenment and then later at the Lam Rim center in Johannesburg. Both times he had to take teachings and go on retreat before taking refuge. For him it was a difficult decision as he felt that he was taking on a major responsibility and it was a big move for him but he thinks taking refuge is good as it motivates a person, but it was not a pivotal moment of moving from non-Buddhist to Buddhist.

**Respondent 6:**

He considers taking refuge to be very important and the vows must not be broken. He has taken formal refuge four times and he says it is fine to take refuge from different teachers if you feel connected to them and will see them in a future life. The first time he took refuge was in London and he

did not really know what it was about but it made sense to him. Although taking refuge is important he says that you don't need to take refuge with a teacher you can take internal refuge on your own. There was no one moment when he considered himself to a be Buddhist, and initially did not want any label but now after investigating the path he is proud to say he is Buddhist.

**Respondent 7:**

There was no one moment when she moved from non-Buddhist to Buddhist it just happened. Taking refuge is very important to her and she does so everytime the spiritual director of Lam Rim is in South Africa. The attraction to Buddhism is the psychology and philosophy which gave her explanations for things in life.

**Respondent 8:**

She took refuge in India under the Bodhi tree, but she did not know much about it and felt it was a ceremonial thing but she did not pay much attention to it. She does feel that on some psychological level it did do something. Now she has a deeper concept of refuge and for her it is a reliance on the teachings of the Buddha.

**Respondent 9:**

He has taken refuge although he feels there is a ritual aspect to it, but he says in Tibetan Buddhism one needs to take refuge to move forward in your practice as one can't take empowerment transmission, etc, if you have not taken refuge. He feels taking refuge is a bit like a marriage ceremony which is not so important or necessary, but it is nice to have a public commitment. He says refuge is a foundation and since for him Buddhism is a world view you are taking refuge in that world view, which he says is not easy. There was no one pivotal moment when he 'became Buddhist' he says he began practicing and it made a difference. His teacher is very important to him.

All the interviewees from this school of Buddhism have taken refuge as there seems to be a greater emphasis on taking refuge especially in terms of moving on in your practice and into Tantric Buddhism. Teachers are very important and most converts did have teachings and went on retreats before taking refuge. Even so taking refuge is not seen as the moment of moving from non-Buddhist to Buddhist, it seems to be more, as one interviewee said, "an anchor that you can return to" and an affirmation of the practice and path that has been chosen.

# FWBO

In the FWBO, taking refuge means becoming a mitra, or order member and requires intense studying and retreats over a period of time.

**Respondent 10:**

He is a committed Buddhist and meditates, which is very important to him as he says this is where the transformation takes place, goes to meetings one a week and goes on retreats. But he does not want to do the mitra course or be an order member; he says he does take refuge before meditation anyway and does not want or need a certificate on his wall. There was no one pivotal moment when he was now a Buddhist it was just a gradual thing that just happened.

**Respondent 11:**

She has not taken formal refuge one concern being that if she does so in the FWBO it might restrict her to that tradition and she feels that in the future she may want to know about Zen or Tibetan Buddhism. She is also concerned about the vows and the seriousness of taking them. She says that becoming a Buddhist was not "I am going to convert kind of thing" but a natural progression in her life. She says she is practicing Buddhism anyway without the need of taking formal refuge.

**Respondent 12:**

Becoming a Buddhist for her was a very slow development and in the beginning she felt that it was difficult to understand what was meant by going for refuge. But through study, meditation and reflection after about a year she could say "I am a Buddhist". For her there are different levels of going for refuge, many tiny steps, and she says conversion to Buddhism happens in development as you go along. She had three years of study before she became a mitra and then wanted to be ordained. This involved much more intense study and retreats eventually resulting in a public ordination ceremony at which she was given a mantra and a new name. Once ordained she then began to teach and has a small regular group of students.

**Respondent 13:**

He found Buddhism through books and talking to people and only recently joined an organized Buddhist group. He is very much a loner and does his own solitude retreats and practice. There was no particular moment when he became a Buddhist. He is now busy studying to be a mitra and has intense study sessions with his teacher.

In FWBO, the path to becoming a mitra involves intense study and retreats. Only on person has completed this path and another is in the

process. Respondents 11, 12 and 13 are very busy at work and life and so perhaps are put off due to limited time in their lives. Even so they consider their practice as sufficient to call themselves Buddhists and do not see the necessity of taking formal Refuge.

## PURE LAND.

**Respondent 14:**

She has taken refuge and the five precepts and considers them vows that will be a guide in her life and she considers them serious vows that cannot be revoked. Although she did feel in her heart that she was a Buddhist long before she took refuge. Before she took refuge she meditated, did prostrations and went on retreat. She finds refuge in the sangha very important as she feels you need fellow Buddhists to keep you on track.

**Respondent 15:**

Becoming a Buddhist was a gradual thing and everything seemed to come together, she says it was the ripening of karmic seeds. She came to live at the temple with the intention of being ordained before which she had to study, meditate and go on retreats. She has taken refuge and the five precepts, but she says it was not 'a big deal' and the ceremony itself is just decoration. Going for Refuge and taking the five precepts really

happened before when she first heard about them and understood them, then that was when she really took them. More important for her was the shaving head ceremony which in Chinese means 'leaving home' and this was an important step as you give up your clothes and have your head shaved and she said it was a great relief.

**Respondent 16:**

He has taken refuge and when he was standing saying that he accepts the Buddha and his teachings and wants to be part of the community, it just felt right. He has done a lot of reading and studying in order to understand what this meant but even so he does not think it is necessary to take public refuge, it is just decoration. What is important is what is going on inside, what your intention is and what you do afterwards. He said that you do not have to go through a ceremony to be Buddhist, being a Buddhist is measured by your actions and he said he was a Buddhist long before he heard of Buddhism.

All three people in this school have taken refuge and the five precepts and consider them in a very serious light. They all have studied, meditated and gone on retreat before taking refuge. But once again this ritual is not seen as the moment of conversion. The first interviewee felt she was a Buddhists long before she took refuge, the second found the refuge

ceremony secondary to the shaving head ceremony and the third did not feel it necessary to take a public refuge.

## THEREVADA

**Respondent 17:**

He did take formal refuge at Ixopo from a Tibetan teacher but says it was not very important to him. For him there is no formal moment when he became a Buddhist it just happened as part of a natural growth process. He is interested in the philosophy and psychology of Buddhism.

**Respondent 18:**

Her conversion to Buddhism is not a clear cut process; it is complex and she is not purely Buddhist, even now she has remnants of Christianity. She considers herself a Buddhist and lives a Buddhist life and meditates when she can, but she has never taken formal refuge.

**Respondent 19:**

She has not taken formal refuge, but does take it by herself before she meditates. Until now she has not found it necessary but feels she is reaching the stage where she is starting to think about it. She needs time to consider and understand what taking the precepts means.

**Respondent 20:**

He has not taken formal refuge as he feels it is not necessary because what is important is not allegiance to a specific faith, but the relationship with the self in a spiritual way and the relationship with others. Here was no one pivotal moment when he considered himself a Buddhist he says "I can't even say now I am a Buddhist", but he meditates and likes the philosophy of Buddhism and if this constitutes being a Buddhist then he is. But he feels he has not converted as such, it is just something that happened.

Out of the four Theravada converts only one has taken formal refuge and for him it was not very significant. None of the converts felt that there was a pivotal moment when they became Buddhist they said it is just something that happened as part of a growth process.

In an overall assessment of the degree of encapsulation and the type of commitment requirements and ceremonies the following was found:

**SGI**- Not a great deal of encapsulation but both interviewees have gone through the Gojukai experience, which was significant but not a turning point.

**ZEN-** There appears to be a greater degree of encapsulation especially in terms of the practical ritual and meditation which take up a fair amount of time. Only respondent 3 have taken Refuge and it was not a particularly significant ritual for her. Respondent 4 has not taken refuge, mainly for family reasons, but still considers himself a Buddhist.

**Tibetan-**In this school of Buddhism there is a large degree of encapsulation one significant reason being the significant role the teacher plays in this form of Buddhism. There is a strong intellectual encapsulation as most of the interviewees are involved in intense study of Buddhism. They have all taken refuge and this maybe related to the fact that in this form of Buddhism it is often necessary to have taken Refuge to further your practice. But for all the interviewees it is not the moment of turning from non-Buddhist to Buddhist but is significant more as a reminder of the practice and path they have chosen.

**FWBO-** Respondents 12 and 13 have a large degree of encapsulation as the one is ordained and the other is studying to be a mitra. Respondents 10 and 11 have a small degree of encapsulation with very little change in their life-style besides meditating and attending weekly meetings. In this form of Buddhism, in order to go for Refuge a person must study for some years and this seems to put people off from becoming a mitra.

**PURE LAND-**This form of Buddhism in terms of the 3 respondents has the most encapsulation because all 3 members are living at the temple and have most significantly changed their life-styles. This form of Buddhism is very culture bound and these respondents have had to adopt another culture in many ways, such as learning Chinese. They have all taken refuge, but it was not a pivotal moment for any of them although it was important.

**THERAVADA-** This is a westernized form of Theravada and the least encapsulation occurred here. All 4 respondents have a very relaxed attitude to Buddhism and really do their own practice in that they take from Buddhism what they want and use it in their own way. Only one person has taken formal Refuge.

For the purposes of this thesis the turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist was taken as the ritual of going for refuge which was very important in classical Buddhism. In the analysis of the interviewees 13 of the 20 interviewees took refuge and 7 have not. The 7 interviewees who have not taken refuge come from the following traditions: 1 Zen; 3 FWBO and 3 Theravada. The 13 that have taken refuge come from the following schools of Buddhism: 2 SGI; 1 Zen; 5 Tibetan; 1 FWBO; 3 Pure Land and 1

Theravada. It does seem that the greater the degree of encapsulation the greater the possibility of the person having undergone a public ceremony of commitment to Buddhism.

| School of Buddhism | Taken Refuge | Not taken Refuge |
|---|---|---|
| SGI | 2 | |
| Zen | 1 | 1 |
| Tibetan | 5 | |
| FWBO | 1 | 3 |
| Pure Land | 3 | |
| Theravada | 1 | 3 |

Therefore, at first glance it appears as if going for refuge was a good point to use for the turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist as 65% of the interviewees had taken refuge. But with further analysis of what the interviewees said, a different picture seems to develop and going for refuge no longer seems quite so significant. Whether the interviewees had taken refuge, or not, there was no one pivotal moment which they considered a turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist. What is significant is the people with very little encapsulation and no public ceremony still consider themselves to be Buddhists. Therefore the assumption that taking refuge, which was very important in classical Buddhism, would be a significant tuning point in contemporary South

African Buddhism, is incorrect. The significance for these South Africans of taking refuge is that it is a foundation, a guide, a referral or a reminder of the path they are on.

## STAGE SEVEN: CONSEQUENCES.

This is the final stage of Rambo's theory and, for a conversion to be authentic, it should be an ongoing process but the consequences of conversion can be both positive and negative and these can affect the converts' commitment to their new religion. As a result, the following questions were asked of the interviewees to understand what types of consequences have occurred and to examine why they have remained committed to Buddhism.

**What have been the consequences of this decision?**

**How has it positively or negatively affected their lives and in what way?**

**Have there been any negative implications to their conversion process?**
**Do they see themselves remaining Buddhists in the future?**

**What is their present involvement with Buddhism? Are they active institutionally in that they belong to a temple or group and regularly, meditate or go on retreats? Are retreats and mediation beneficial, especially if they live very active busy lives, do they feel that they need time-out from everyday life?**

## SGI

**Respondent 1:**

Becoming a Buddhist has changed his life and he says he is a better person. Initially his family thought he was just going through a phase as he was so young, but they have come to accept his decision and he has had no negative consequences from converting. He chants twice a day but feels that chanting must be accompanied by actively living life as a Buddhist according to the Lotus Sutra, which he tries to do. He attends meetings at the centre as well as smaller group meetings and continually studies of the sutras.

**Respondent 2:**

When she first began chanting her family was not very accepting and thought that she was crazy. But over time they have accepted her chanting and some of her children even join in. She says she still does get some negativity from people, but Buddhism is beneficial to her personally

and if she has problems she chants and gets help with them. She is very committed to SGI and attends both larger and smaller meetings.

## ZEN

**Respondent 3:**

Buddhism has positively affected her life, but she does not like the word "better", but when things went wrong in her life, like in business or her divorce, she just keeps sitting in meditation and things improve. Her parents have a problem with her conversion to Buddhism, especially her father, who finds it very uncomfortable and hard to accept. Her daughter is not a Buddhist but accepts her mother's practice and has even participated in a retreat. She meditates regularly and does retreats and interviews with her teacher.

**Respondent 4:**

Buddhism has made him more aware of life and other people and his life has changed. He now sees deeper aspects to life and is more sensitive to people and the suffering all around, he is no longer so self-involved. His family is Christians and they find it difficult to accept his conversion to Buddhism, although his mother says he has matured and deals with things better, so she does see a positive side to Buddhism, but there is also a fear of Buddhism being wrong and evil. He used to meditate everyday but

now is studying and so meditates when he can and also goes on retreats when possible.

## TIBETAN

**Respondent 5:**

He says being a Buddhist has brought about a drastic change in his life and the way he understands the world. As a consequence of meditation he does not get angry anymore, and he has let go of a lot of things emotionally and physically. Becoming a Buddhist brought about a change in his intended career path, he has chosen to study refugees based on his compassion for sentient beings. His father has a problem with him becoming a Buddhist, especially the issue of him no longer believing in God. But they have resolved their differences by finding common ground especially in the mystical side of Islam (his father's religion). His friends are very accepting of him being Buddhist and find him inspiring in terms of finding their own spirituality. He meditates everyday, does yoga, goes to temple twice a week and goes on retreats when possible. He is also doing an internet course with a Tibetan lama. (It is an ACI course offered by an American, Michael Roach, who is a Lama).

**Respondent 6:**

Becoming a Buddhist has brought about a lot of change in his life; he used to get angry very quickly and had a lot of desire for negative things. His practice has changed him totally and he is experiencing more and more moments of clarity and bliss and seeing things clearer. His family is Catholic and some of them are not very happy with his conversion, but he had some psychological problem and meditation helped him tremendously and so his mother and sister are supportive of him. He has lost some of his old friends because of the changes in his life, but says he has made new friends and surrounds himself with people who have similar interests. His practice is very important to him and he daily does meditation, visualization and mandala offerings which take him about one to two hours. He is also doing an internet course with a Tibetan Lama which involves a lot of work.

**Respondent 7:**

She says all her friends admire her because she is positive and everyday she tries to help someone, even if it is to phone with a thought for the day. She has no problems with being a Buddhist; she does have one relative who will not visit her because she has a statue of the Buddha in her house. She does one and a half hours of meditation every day; she goes on retreats and goes to the temple regularly for meditation, chanting and lectures.

**Respondent 8:**

She has been a Buddhist for six years and does not know whether the changes in her are due to Buddhism, or the fact that she has just grown up. She has no problems from her family as regards being a Buddhist, but what bothers her mom is her involvement, for example, if she says she is going on retreat her mom will say you are young and should be doing something active. Most of her friends are nonchalant about her being a Buddhist and some may ask questions but to others it is not important. She is studying at the moment and does not have much time for practice, maybe twenty minutes after she has been studying, but in the future she wants to get much more involved in her practice and go on retreats and studying courses.

**Respondent 9:**

Because he came to Buddhism much later in life he can see the changes more clearly, although there are always changes taking place as you get older. He used to loose his temper very easily and now is a better driver as he made driving part of his practice, he is enjoying his photography a great deal and his work has improved. His plans for the future have changed as he wants to be able to make more time for his practice. His life-style has changed in that in the last six months he has not watched

any TV, or read any newspapers and he was always obsessed with news. His world view has changed as he is not driven so much anymore by anger and fear. His mother was a bit concerned in the beginning but she did go on a retreat with him as did his sister. Because he has had a change of lifestyle some of his friends have drifted away as he is less likely to go to a party or go out, but he has ended up associating with people who are also Buddhist. He meditates five or six times a week, goes on retreats and is studying through the internet with a Tibetan Lama.


## FWBO

**Respondent 10:**

He says he probably has changed enormously, but he has not changed his life style. He has had no real problems with being a Buddhist from other people, he does have one work colleague that he clashes with, but his family is very supportive. It is the one thing in his life that he has got passionate about and he does it for himself. He goes to the FWBO for meditation once a week; he meditates alone about three times a week and goes on retreat when ever possible. He also attends teachings at other schools of Buddhism if he feels that they are being given by a good teacher.

**Respondent 11:**

There have been beneficial changes in her since she became a Buddhist, she used to be short tempered and impatient and now manages to control this and has become a calmer person. She was a vegetarian before she knew about Buddhism, so she says she was living a Buddhist way of life before coming a Buddhist and as a result there has not been a huge amount of change in her lifestyle. Her eldest daughter likes the mystery of Buddhism and is accepting of her becoming a Buddhist. But is not herself interested in Buddhism. Her youngest daughter is a Christian and thinks what she is doing is wrong. She has lost some friends but has also made new ones. She tries to mediate everyday for 40 to 60 minutes, goes to the centre for teachings and meditation once a week and goes on retreats when possible.

**Respondent 12:**

Becoming a Buddhist made her aware of her habits, she stopped eating meat and she became more aware of animals, how she related to he husband and child changed and she became more creative in her response and not so angry. She says she changed bit by bit as she had deep conditioning, but as she learned where it came from she got to know herself better. Her parents could not really understand her conversion and her mother-in-law is very against it. He husband and son

are not Buddhist but are very supportive of her. One of the difficulties of being a Buddhist is that her interests are different to her husband, for example, he would want to go on holiday and she will want to go on retreat. She is ordained and teaches at a centre and says teaching has been good for her personality as she has become more confident and trusts herself more.

**Respondent 13:**

Being a Buddhist has changed him a lot and he has a different awareness of everything, he says he pauses rather than reacting straight away. The changes in his life have been a slow process and seem to infiltrate into his life without him really knowing. He says his mom is very accepting of his conversion, and although she runs her own church group she is not critical of him and they have a mutual understanding. His brother is very opposed to his conversion and he has lost some friends, but he says he has made new friends who have the same interests as him. He meditates at least five times a week; he does solitude retreats and is studying to be a mitra.

## PURE LAND

**Respondent 14:**

She says becoming a Buddhist has changed her enormously and she has become a gentler, softer and more caring person. She says she thinks

more clearly and Buddhism has helped her let go of tremendous amounts of anger. Her conversion to Buddhism was difficult for her children as they felt they had lost her. But she had been very unwell psychologically and now she is in a much better place and her children see this and it makes her conversion more acceptable. In the morning she does 108 full prostrations and 40 minutes of meditation, at night she goes to the mediation center where a sutra is read followed by chanting and meditation. During the day she tries to chant and will go and do prostrations if she is having difficulty coping or is "unraveling".


**Respondent 15:**

Becoming a Buddhist and an ordained nun has brought about complete change in her life. She never gets angry now as there is nothing that important to get angry about; there is no point in getting irritated or impatient as she says things will happen in their own time. She is totally positive and lives in the present moment. She does not have much family and her mother did not understand her conversion initially but she is coming to terms with it now. Most of her friends are open minded and had no problem with her conversion. She works very hard at the temple and gets up at 4am everyday to prepare for morning services at 6am, she does the morning offering at 10.45, and then at 7.45pm she attends

evening service. In between she does office work and is very involved with charity work and organizing retreats; she is also learning to speak Chinese.

**Respondent 16:**

His experience as a Buddhist is very positive and everything he has learned through Buddhism has confirmed everything he knew before on his own, but now he says it is put in context. He works as a volunteer at the temple and helps wherever he is needed. He does his own practice and meditates morning and night. He does not attend the dharma functions at the temple as he says it is all in Mandarin which he does not understand. He says he will remain a Buddhist but not a Pure Land Buddhist as this form of Buddhism does not appeal to him. He has not decided about the future yet, but he does not want to confine himself to one school of Buddhism. His father is fine with his conversion, but his brothers can't understand why he does not want money and cars as they do. For his friends his conversion was no surprise as he had always been philosophical.

# THERAVADA

**Respondent 17:**

He sees Buddhism as a way of life and therefore it has influenced him in that it has changed the way he looks at life. For him becoming a Buddhist

was a natural process and therefore did not bring about a huge change in him. His mother is a staunch Christian and had difficulty with his conversion and even sent ministers out to speak to him, but eventually they managed to come to some understanding. The rest of his family are not religious and he has never experienced any conflicts over his conversion.  He helps run a retreat centre but does not attend the retreats. He does his own practice and meditates every day sometimes twice a day.

**Respondent 18:**

She says there has been no drastic change in her life since she became a Buddhist; she says she was living a Buddhist life before she knew about Buddhism. Generally her family and friends are fine with her conversion, but she does have one friend who is a devout Christian and does not want to have anything to do with Buddhism. She lives and works at a retreat centre and is also studying psychology. Therefore does not have much time for her practice but meditates when she can. She wants to work with disabled people when she has finished her degree and is not sure that she will remain a Buddhist.

**Respondent 19:**

Becoming a Buddhist has brought about definite changes in her; she is much calmer and more accepting of things that occur. She says her life is

much better although she knows it is a difficult path that she has chosen. Her family is Christian and although they have got used to the idea of her being Buddhist they are not very happy with it. Most of her friends are fine with her conversion and some show an interest in Buddhism. She tries to meditate daily and she attends a meditation group once a week, she also goes on retreat when she can. In the future she would like to get more serious about her practice.

**Respondent 20:**

Meditation has had a good effect on him and he started doing Thai Chi and he says the combination has changed him. The biggest change has been at work in the way he thinks about work; he has become less ambitious and not 'so hungry' any more. He says Buddhism has introduced him to a part of himself that he had never explored before, which is a spiritual self. He has had no difficulties becoming a Buddhist and in general his friends have been very accepting of him being a Buddhist. He meditates daily and goes once a week to a centre for meditation and when he can he goes on retreats.

All interviewees agreed that becoming a Buddhist has had a positive effect on their lives, for some the changes have been dramatic and for others very small. Only one interviewee was not sure that she would

remain a Buddhist and a few felt that they would in the future perhaps move to another school of Buddhism. Any negative consequences of becoming a Buddhist were generally related to family members, but in most cases some mutual understanding was able to be reached. All participants are involved in meditation, study, retreats, weekly meetings to various degrees and a few expressed a will in the future to be more engaged in their practice.

In an overall analysis of the five categories of religious background there is no obvious pattern as to the type of Buddhism respondents converted to. For example the three members belonging to the non-religious category converted to SGI, Tibetan and Pure land, the three respondents in the extremely religious group converted to Tibetan, Zen and Theravada Buddhism. The eight of the nominally religious group converted as follows: 1- Tibetan; 1- Zen; 2-Pureland; 2 FWBO and 2 Theravada. In the very religious category the breakup is as follows: 2- Tibetan; 1FWBO; 1-SGI; 1 Theravada. The person in the unclassified group converted to FWBO. This absence of a pattern is probably due to fact that the different traditions of Buddhism, because of their different rituals and practices, provide people with choices to suit their needs and personalities. Buddhism is not just one belief system which must be accepted in its totality, the different

schools have their own unique systems which cater to the individuality of people of the twenty-first century.

| | SGI | Zen | Tibetan | FWBO | Pure Land | Theravada |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-religious | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | |
| Nominally | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Very religious | 1 | | 2 | 1 | | 1 |
| Extremely religious | | 1 | 1 | | | 1 |
| Unclassifiable | | | | 1 | | |

For the purpose of his thesis the point of turning from non-Buddhist to Buddhist was taking Refuge, or in the SGI school of Buddhism the Gojukai ceremony. As seen from the interviews there is no obvious pattern emerging, hence the use of the going for Refuge (or Gojukai ceremony) as the turning point is problematic. None of the respondents considered it a turning point and for most people it was significant but not a vital part of their conversion to Buddhism.

Rambo's theory as a tool in dealing with conversion to Buddhism is useful, but there are some areas that are problematic. These do not necessarily reflect flaws in Rambo's theory but rather indicate that the nature of Buddhism causes the problems to arise. In terms of Rambo's stages problems arise in the crisis, encounter and commitment stages. None of

the interviewees had a crisis as such which turned them from a non-Buddhist to a Buddhist rather a 'spiritual quest' was what they all undertook. As mentioned earlier, encounter also proved a bit of a problem as the advocate in a number of interviews was not a person but rather a book or the internet. The final area where there appears to be problem is the commitment stage here the issue again is not so much Rambo's theory, but the choice of taking refuge as the turning point of non-Buddhist to Buddhist.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# CONCLUSION

In conclusion there are three areas that need to be carefully examined and resolved. The first area is to determine whether Rambo's conversion theory applies to the conversion of South Africans to Buddhism, the second whether taking refuge was the turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist and thirdly what are the push and pull factors that have brought about this conversion.

Rambo's conversion theory with its seven stages is not a good fit for the conversion of these South Africans to Buddhism, mainly because many of the stages are problematic as well as the nature of Buddhism which differs greatly from the monotheistic religions that Rambo's theory was designed for.

# SECTION ONE

# RAMBO'S THEORY AND WHY IT DOES NOT FULLY ACCOUNT FOR THE CONVERSION OF SOUTH AFRICANS TO BUDDHISM

Rambo's first stage is context which is logical as it is necessary to understand the background from which the converts come, but in this case as seen earlier this was surprising. It was expected that the converts would come from secular backgrounds but only four of the twenty did, therefore one of the push factors towards conversion was a loss of faith or disappointment in traditional religions. This leads to an understanding that secularization theory is applicable here as the converts have moved from religious backgrounds to a more secular belief system which they have found in Buddhism.

The second stage of Rambo's theory is crisis which, as seen from the interviews, is not applicable to these converts while quest, stage three, was significant to all the interviewees. It seems that the converts had a loss of faith which pushed them into a quest to fill the gap and to find meaning and relevance in life. This leads onto Rambo's stage four

encounter which took many different forms as seen in the interviews. These encounters whether they were traveling, friends, family members, yoga, philosophy, books or the internet invoked an interest in Buddhism.

The fifth stage of Rambo's theory is interaction during which a sphere of influence is created which is called encapsulation. As seen from the interviews the encapsulation in Buddhism is not very great and very few of the interviewees have had to make any drastic changes in their life style. It is the secular nature of Buddhism which does not require a person to outwardly change who they are. It is in Buddhism's emphasis on rituals, meditation, chanting and prostrations that encapsulation has occurred. People of the late twentieth and early twenty first century are not prepared to just accept a belief system; they want intellectual understanding and practical rituals which work for them. All the interviewees do prostrations, chant, or meditate and it is in this practical side of Buddhism that they found changes occurring in themselves which then encouraged them to investigate further aspects of Buddhism.

The sixth stage is commitment and as seen previously taking refuge does not necessarily work as a good focal point in the conversion process. None of the interviewees had one focal point at which they became Buddhists; becoming Buddhist for most of them was a 'developmental process' with many of them having some sort of proto-Buddhist tendency

within them before they even heard about Buddhism. Therefore, although taking refuge was important in classical times and is significant in certain schools of Buddhism, for example FWBO, for these contemporary converts Taking refuge is not significant as a means of identifying themselves as Buddhists. These Buddhists identify themselves by 'self-ascription' and practical rituals such as meditation as well as an understanding of life in light of the Buddha's teachings.

The final stage is consequences and Rambo says that any authentic conversion should be an ongoing process and not a once off happening. All the interviewees said becoming a Buddhist has brought about positive changes in their lives, for some greater changes then for others. They are all actively involved in meditation, retreats, meetings and further study of Buddhism. They all are totally committed to Buddhism, except one person who was not sure she would remain a Buddhist. The others all want to get more involved in Buddhism in the future.

Although Rambo's theory does cater for some religions, it does not work for Buddhism it is not a fault of the theory, but rather the nature of Buddhism as a religion. In the next section a brief look at Buddhism will be undertaking to see where the problems lie and to see the pull factors contained in Buddhism for the South African converts.

# SECTION TWO

# A BRIEF LOOK AT THE ATTRACTION OF BUDDHISM FOR THESE SOUTH AFRICAN CONVERTS.

To begin, with Buddhism is concerned with the individual and this ties in with the individualistic age of the West and "it buys into the preoccupation with the individual and his or her well-being" (Claxton 1990: 26). In Buddhism individuals have the right and responsibility to find their own way to truth which begins with one's mind and coming to understand and know how the mind works and how one's reality is part of one's mind-set. Thubten Gelek says "Buddhism is concerned with the individual. It's part of Buddhism's openness. The person is the most important thing – the maturation of the individual to his or her highest potential" (Thubten Gelek in Mackenzie 2001: 57). Although the ultimate aim of Buddhism is to undermine the self and not to future enhance it, the initial attraction could be this emphasis on self.

Some people coming from traditional Christian backgrounds are encumbered with feelings of guilt. In Buddhism these feelings are removed because there is no 'god' figure that the individual can feel they have let down, or disappointed. As Buddhism has no dogma or

commandments that the individual must live by, it does not focus on feelings of guilt. In Buddhism people must accept responsibility for their own actions, it does offer guidelines by which to live but if one transgresses they will not be condemned to eternal damnation. In the interviews, seven respondents[4] all said that one of the attractions to Buddhism was that you are personally responsible for your own actions and that there is no one to blame for the direction of your life.

Buddhism presents itself as logical and a person is not asked to follow blindly, but is expected to question and find out for him or herself. This also suits people of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, who as a result of developments in science and technology, are not prepared to blindly accept things, they want explanations and facts in order to understand the meaning and working of things. As Robert Thurman says, "The glory of Buddhism is that it is a presentation of the meaning and purpose of life, supported by a lot of verification. It is a system that provides reasonable proof, demonstration, persuasive argumentation and a spiritual outcome. It does not ask you to believe in something" (Mackenzie 2001: 251). Five respondents[5] all said that what they liked about Buddhism was its logic, they could not just believe in

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[4] These are respondents: 4,5,6,9,14,15 and 20
[5] These are respondents: 5,8,9,16 and 17

something because someone said so, they needed logic and reason in order to understand something. They said that it was an intellectual decision to become a Buddhist.

Buddhism is pragmatic and deals with the suffering experienced in life but also offers a practical path to finding a solution. The emphasis is on the importance of the mind and the fact that a person's suffering is a consequence of their state of mind. Buddhism teachers that the obscurations, anger, greed, pride, hatred and jealousy are the problems and gives the methods needed to rid the mind of these. Because Buddhism is pragmatic it emphasizes practice and the benefits thereof, it advocates meditation and the effects of meditation can be experienced for oneself. So Buddhism professes not only to offer a full philosophical explanation of reality but also to offers a practical solution. For twelve respondents[6] this was one of the attractions to Buddhism. The meditation or chanting works for them and because they have experienced it for themselves they have confidence in the rituals and in Buddhism.

In the post modern world, the right to choose is very important and in the different traditions of Buddhism there are many choices available to people, from the rich iconography of Tibetan Buddhism to the austerity of

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[6] These are respondents: 1,2,3,5,8,9,11,14,15,17,19 and 20

Zen Buddhism, these different traditions provide numerous methods of practice for an individual's particular personality and circumstances.

The doctrine of karma for some westerners is a source of hope as there is no fate or pre-ordained direction for your life; you have control and can change life's direction. Closely connected with this is the Buddhist Principle of Conditionality "which replaces the idea of linear causality with the notion that events arise, never in dependence on any single cause, but rather as a consequence of an infinite conflux of interacting conditions" (Kulananda 1997: 218). The picture westerners have of themselves is as a 'self', an essential nature which is fixed and enduring which then limits the extent to which people can change and grow. But the Buddhist Principle of Conditionality maintains there is no abiding essence, "We become who we will become in dependence upon the conditions of the present and future. If we set about creating conditions which support change for the better then we will, inevitably, change for the better, and there is no limit to how much better we can become" (Kulananda 1997: 13). This is very different to western ways of thinking where you hear people say, 'I am who I am', 'I cannot change' and 'a leopard never changes its spots'. Buddhism gives some people hope that they can change and become better, different people. This concept was

very important to respondents 14 and 19 as they said it gave them hope that circumstances, and themselves, can change for the better.

Most people have a fear of death and in western society death is generally a taboo subject. Buddhism deals more thoroughly with death than a lot of other religions and helps people to understand death and it also deals with the transitoriness of things. Buddhism offers a practical guide of how to behave and what to do when dealing with death. For some westerners this fresh approach to death may be attractive especially if they have experienced the death of a loved one and felt the traditional churches have not been able to help them in their grief as was the case with respondents 4 and 6.

The above points may constitute some aspects of Buddhism which westerners find attractive and will constitute pull factors in the conversion process. In terms of Rambo's theory and where problems arise are the following aspects of Buddhism: no god figure or dogma, no feeling of reprisal if a person transgresses, being able to make one's own choices and therefore being responsible for one's progress through life.

# SECTION THREE

# THE DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY OF THE CONVERSION OF SOUTH AFRICANS TO BUDDHISM.

It therefore has been established that Rambo's theory does not account fully for the conversion of westerners to Buddhism and secondly that taking refuge is not necessarily a good focal point in the conversion process.

In analysis of the interviews what appears to be the problem is the use of the word conversion in Buddhism, 'development towards becoming a Buddhist' may be a better way of analyzing what has occurred with the interviewees. Since many of the interviewees said that they had been Buddhist before they even heard about Buddhism, or that when they heard the teaching of the Buddha it felt like they were coming home and that this was something that they always knew. Perhaps there was some type of proto-Buddhist tendency within the interviewees to begin with, which then was allowed to develop.

In the light of this a Developmental theory of becoming a Buddhist can be proposed which would constitute the following stages: context, exposure, interest invoked, practical application, commitment and consequences.

## Stage one: **<u>Context.</u>**

The context out of which the converts come is vitally important in understanding the developmental process. The context will give an indication of the thought processes of the individuals and the push factors in their lives which move them away from their current belief system. There has to be knowledge of the religious background of the individuals as well as their educational and social backgrounds in order to identify these push factors.

## Stage two: **<u>Exposure</u>**

Once a person has doubts about their current belief system or begins looking for a new understanding of life there needs to be some form of exposure to Buddhism. As seen from the interviews this took many different forms, from family members, books or the internet, yoga, Hinduism, meditation to philosophy. There does seem to need to be some type of openness in these interviewees which made them receptive to Buddhist philosophy.

Stage three:  **Interest invoked**

Once there was exposure to Buddhism interest is invoked which leads to an investigation into Buddhism. This resulted in people going in search of meditation groups, temples, retreats, teachings and so they began learning more about Buddhism.

Stage 4: **Practical application**

All the interviewees began immediately with the practical, ritual side of Buddhism, they began doing prostrations, chanting or meditating. And it was within these rituals that they felt positive changes come about which encouraged them to continue and to investigate further into the philosophy of Buddhism. This stage is very important because if there were no positive effects felt there may have been no further interest in Buddhism. This is where the nature of Buddhism is interesting as there is no god-figure to believe in, no saviour to follow, no one to pray to and no dogma or commandments to keep to, there are only guidelines and philosophy of how to live and to understand life. Therefore to keep the converts interested in Buddhism there had to be some tangible proof for them that this was the correct path to follow. As they felt the positive

effects of the rituals their interest in Buddhism continued to be invoked and strengthened.

Stage 5: **<u>Commitment</u>**

Becoming a Buddhist for these interviewees was a developmental process; there is no one pivotal moment they consider a turning point from non-Buddhist to Buddhist. If they have taken refuge it is part of the developmental process, but not an indication of their commitment. Their commitment to Buddhism is a private and personal process which most feel does not need a public demonstration or ritual. Buddhism does not require overt outward changes in order to be a Buddhist, only for the ordained who would wear robes and may shave their head, for the rest there is very little that changes outwardly in their life styles. Where the changes occur are within themselves and their understanding of life and the commitment they make is to themselves.

Stage 6: **<u>Consequences</u>**

All interviewees said that becoming a Buddhist has positively affected their lives and they had the following things to say: They are more aware, calmer and not so angry; have a better understanding and clarity of life; have noticed improvements in their work and feel they are better people,

less self-involved and more aware other people and their suffering. The development of changes was a slow process which developed over time and as respondent 13 says "The changes in life were a slow process and seemed to infiltrate into your life without you really knowing".

The development of becoming a Buddhist is a cyclical process as the positive effects encourage further study, meditation, retreats, chanting which leads to more positive effects and further investigation into Buddhism.

| Developmental theory | Rambo's theory |
|---|---|
| Context | Context |
| Exposure | Crisis |
| Interest invoked | Quest |
| Practical application | Encounter |
| Commitment | Interaction |
| Consequences | Commitment |
| | Consequences |

In the final analysis Rambo's theory does not work for the conversion of westerners to Buddhism and taking refuge is not a good choice of a focal point of moving from non-Buddhist to Buddhist. The conversion of the people interviewed follows a more developmental process and therefore a developmental theory has been proposed. Self-ascription is the only method by which a person can decide whether they are Buddhist or not, no one can declare someone a Buddhist by some ritual or presentation of

a certificate. As Kahn says there is a shared "common construal of religious conversion as an individual, intrapsychic phenomenon" (Kahn 2004: 234). The developmental theory proposed applies more appropriately to the people interviewed and explains some of the discrepancies noted when trying to use Rambo's theory.

Importantly it is the nature of Buddhism which makes the conversion more of a developmental process then a conversion as such. The developmental theory may be able to be applied to the conversion to such 'religions' as Taoism or Vedanta, but further research would need to be done.

In the final analysis secularization theory is not necessarily dead, if it is considered as not a total decline of religion, but a change of face of religion. With the help of science and technology there has been an erosion of traditional beliefs, but people are still searching for some meaning in life something to replace the traditional belief systems. Consumerism has filled that gap and given meaning to some people, but other people have begun to question whether possessions do give meaning to life and create happiness. As respondent 15 said, at one stage, she has 33 pairs of gold earrings and 6 cars and this did not bring her happiness. These interviewees have found in Buddhism something that

fills the gap, but does not necessarily contradict their post-modern ways of thinking. These contemporary Buddhists see flexibility in Buddhism and most practice an eclectic form of Buddhism. They may or may not take refuge in one tradition, but if they do they do not necessarily stick to that one tradition, they may go to Theravada weekly meetings, but they may also be doing an internet course in Tibetan Buddhism. Some interviewees will attend a weekly SGI meeting but will also go to a Theravada retreat center. They also all said that they would attend teachings at other temples and centers in other traditions. Another interesting fact is that some people were actively involved in teachings and meditation but then for some period of time they may be less active and then once again be very active. There is a type of coming and going according to what is occurring in their personal life, but all the time they still consider themselves Buddhists.

# APPENDIX A

## A SHORY SURVEY OF BUDDHISM IN SOUTH AFRICA.

In South Africa nearly all the Buddhist traditions are represented:

Tibetan (Kagyupa, Gelugpa, Sakya).

Theravada (Traditional, westernized vipassana)

Zen (Soto, Rinzai, Kwan Um)

Pure Land

Soka Gakkai International. (SGI)

This does not necessarily mean that Buddhism is a popular religion in South Africa. According to the official census of 1994 the total number of adherents is 2391, which is equivalent to 0,008% of the South African population (Clasquin and Krüger 1999: 3). What does seem to be occurring is that Buddhism is growing in South Africa and the " informal estimates of the number of Buddhists in South Africa vary from six thousand to as many as thirty thousand" (Clasquin in Prebish and Baumann 2002: 153). An interesting fact is that the majority of these Buddhists are made up of white, middle-class South Africans.

Buddhism in South Africa is an adopted religion. There were in the early twentieth century some born-Buddhists amongst the Chinese community in the Cape, but most eventually converted to Christianity and Buddhism soon disappeared. Also in the early twentieth century there was a conversion of some Indian immigrants, these were low-caste Hindus, who really converted to improve their social position, but these eventually also faded away.

There is not much information on Buddhism in South Africa before the 1970's when small Buddhist groups began to appear in urban areas and were almost entirely made up of white, middle-class members. Most of the schools of Buddhism were represented, but the main type of Buddhism practiced was a non-denominational Buddhism with Theravada teachings as the basis. In these groups "it was impossible to tell if one was attending a nominally Tibetan, Zen or Theravada meeting" (Clasquin in Prebish and Bauman 2002: 155). This type of Buddhism is still practiced at the Buddhist Retreat Centre at Ixopo in Kwazulu-Natal, this center was established, by Louis and Molly Van Loon, in 1980. The establishment of this centre was very important in the propagation of Buddhism in South Africa and although Theravada based, it promotes all schools of Buddhism. Louis Van Loon stressed that "although the Buddhist Retreat Center would be essentially non-sectarian and ecumenical, it would conform to a style of

"tolerant", "practical", practice "founded on sound Theravadin principles" (Wratten 1995: 251). The center offers retreats and seminars in traditional meditation, but it has expanded to offer workshops in art, ecology, philosophy and psychology (Van Loon in Clasquin and Krüger 1999: 40). For over thirty years the Buddhist Retreat Center at Ixopo has provided perhaps the most important location for Buddhist practice in South Africa (Wratten 1995: 262).

In the late 1980's Buddhism began to change from this westernized approach to a more formal approach as a result of increased links with Buddhists and Buddhist organizations from the Asian homeland of Buddhism. An example of this is the Dharma Center in Somerset West, which was established in 1982, Heila Downey being one of the founders. This center had in the past hosted teachers and participants from various Buddhist traditions, but in 1989 it became an integral part of the Kwan Um School, which is an international Korean Zen organization headed by Zen master Seung Sahn. This resulted in a more formal type of practice with an introduction of grey Korean robes, prostrations, chanting in Korean and a semi-monastic discipline (Clasquin in Prebish and Bauman 2002: 156). This Dharma Center, which has now moved to Robertson in the Cape Province, is the leading Zen organization in South Africa, although there are other Zen organizations especially in Johannesburg.

A similar type of formalization has occurred with the Tibetan schools of Buddhism. The Kagyupa School has been in South Africa since 1969 with the founding of a Tibetan Friendship group, which aimed to aid Tibetan refugees in India materially and to spread knowledge and understanding of Buddhism in South Africa. Over the years Kagyu groups were established in most of the main cities in South Africa and had close ties with the Zen and Theravada Buddhist organizations. The first teaching given by a Tibetan Lama, Akong Rimpoche, was given at Nieu Bethesda, which is a small village in the Karoo, in 1982. This center was founded by Rob Nairn, who is presently Akong Rimpoche's representative in Southern Africa (Laue in Clasquin and Krüger 1999: 73). This center subsequently moved to Kensington in Johannesburg, with branches in Cape Town and Harare. It is under the direction of Akong Rinpoche and is directly linked to the Samye Ling Temple in Scotland and Tibetan monks from here visit regularly (Clasquin in Prebish and Bauman 2002: 157).

Venerable Geshe Damcho Yonten, a Gelugpa abbot and spiritual director of the Lam Rim Tibetan Gelugpa center in the Black Mountains in Southern Wales, came to Southern Africa in 1988 and visited some of the major cities (Wratten 1995: 228). By February 1992 the Gelugpa lam Rim Buddhist Center of South Africa had formed in Johannesburg with Geshe Damcho as the spiritual advisor, who visits regularly.

In 1981 a Theravada Buddhist Group was founded in Pretoria by Alison Smith, it aimed to provide support for people interested in meditation and to teach the basics of Buddhism. The group were Theravada in nature as Alison felt that the other traditions required specialized and initiated teachers, the Theravada were "considered to allow a more democratic system of self-reliant dharma leaders" (Wratten 1995: 265).

Because of the South African context they felt that direct practice was impossible and hence books and tapes became "the framework upon which most participants "hung their practice" (Wratten 1995: 265). This group was against ritual and they provide a 'secular dharma' which is "the basic teaching, in their essential purity, divorced from any overlay of folk tales, myths, local superstition, accretion and commentary" (Wratten 1995:266). Alison also formed a similar group in Cape Town in 1990 when she moved there.

A recent phenomenon in Buddhism in South Africa is the development of "culture-bound Buddhist communities" of which there are two examples, the Taiwanese complex in Bronkhorstspruit and the Burmese Buddhist monastic settlement in Pietermaritzburg (Van Loon in Clasquin and Krüger 1999: 35). The Nan Hua temple complex near Bronkhorstspruit, which is part of the Fo Kuang Shan school of Buddhism, offers a traditional Chinese

form of Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism. The temple serves two purposes: "it ministers to the needs of the Chinese Buddhist community in South Africa and it has established the African Buddhist seminary, where young African men can train to be Buddhist monks in the Fo Kuang order (Van Loon in Clasquin and Krüger 1999: 157). This temple is ultimately going to become the largest Buddhist temple in the Southern Hemisphere and has a resident teacher, the Venerable Hue LI. What is unique about this form of Buddhism is that it has an active missionary goal and gets support from Taiwan.

In Natal, a small Burmese community has been established, the Myanmar Buddhist association in a house in Pietermaritzburg. Burmese monks are invited to the center to provide teachings to the community in traditional Burmese fashion; it will be interesting to see whether in the future people of other nationalities would be attracted to the center.

In the 1990's, Buddhism in South Africa entered a new period in that permanent teachers began to be established at various centers. At the Buddhist retreat center two Theravada ex-monastics, Kittisaro and Thanissara, committed to spend half the year in Ixopo to teach. At the dharma center in Robertson in the Cape, Heila Downey was given the title Poep sa Nim and so has been allowed to teach as an instructor of the

Kwan Um School. At the Tibetan centers there are no permanent teachers but Tibetan lamas' visit on a regular basis, as do Chinese monks at Bronkhorstspruit and Burmese bhikkus at Pietermaritzburg.

In 1983 the South African chapter of Soka Gakkai International was formed. Soka Gakkai is the lay society of the Japanese Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement for peace, education and culture. Groups of this movement, which are under the guidance of SGI in Japan, are established in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town their membership has a wide variety of people and differs in this way form the other Buddhist groups in South Africa. As mentioned before the membership of Buddhist groups tends to be white, middle class South Africans, whereas Soka Gakkai has a mixture of white, middle class South Africans, Japanese and Taiwanese immigrants and a fairly large number of Black South African converts.

Two recent phenomena in Buddhism in South Africa are, firstly, there seems to be an increased isolation of the Kagyupa and Gelugpa Buddhist groups from the Zen and Theravada groups, who still tend to work together and share teachers and venues. The second phenomenon is that some groups tend to adapt the Buddhist teachings to local needs,

while others "desire to stick as closely as possible to various original Asian models" (Clasquin in Prebish and Baumann 2002: 161).

Besides the more formal Buddhist groups, which comprises a small number of committed Buddhist, there are a larger number of what Tweed call 'night-stand' Buddhists (Clasquin in Prebish and Baumann 2002: 159). These sympathizers or night-stand Buddhists are people who have "some sympathy for a religion but do not embrace it exclusively or fully" (Tweed in Prebish 2002: 20). They would not consider themselves Buddhist, but if their lives where examined signs of interest and influence from Buddhism would be found, the significance of these sympathizers on the growth of Buddhism in South Africa, if any, is yet to be seen.

# APPENDIX B

# QUESTIONAIRE

1. Age- now and at the time of conversion?

2. Sex

3. Education- high school, graduate, post graduate.

4. Occupation

5. Social background, where they grew up, the social sphere in which they grew up, siblings, activities in social or sporting areas.

6. Religious education – what type of education, was religion involved, parent's religion and if they had any influence on the choices made, was there a loss of faith in traditional religions?

7. Was there any active searching for a spiritual or religious experience? Any feelings of needing to belong to some religious or social group?

8. Was there a crisis of some sort that initiated the conversion process?

9. How did they first hear about Buddhism?

10. To what tradition of Buddhism were they attracted and why? Do they still belong to that tradition now?

11. What was the attraction to and in Buddhism and is the attraction still the same?

12. What was their first encounter with Buddhists, was it a particular person, group or setting?

13. What was involved with their interaction with Buddhism? Did it involve meditation courses, retreats, going to a temple, speaking to people in their homes, reading books?

14. Their commitment to Buddhism, was it a public or private demonstration? In other words at what moment did they decide they were a Buddhist and was it a difficult decision? When and under what circumstances did they take the Three Refuges and did they have to do any courses, retreats or studying to understand what this process was all about?

15. What have been the consequences of this decision? How has it positively or negatively affected their lives and in what way? Have there been any negative implications to their conversion process? Do they see themselves as remaining Buddhist in the future?

16. What is their present involvement with Buddhism? Are they active institutionally in that they belong to a temple or group and regularly meditate or go on retreats? Are retreats and meditation beneficial, especially if they live very active busy lives, do they feel that they need time-out from everyday life?

# APPENDIX C

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# APPENDIX D

## Personal reminiscences of the interviewing process.

Being of quite a shy disposition it was quite a daunting task finding people to interview for this thesis. I did know some Buddhists and had been to a number of temples and centers for meditation or teachings but really only knew one person well enough to ask to be interviewed.

There were two ways I decided to approach this situation the first was to go on the internet and the second to put up a notice at the temple I was most familiar with. When I went on the internet I knew that I had to get interviewees from all the different schools of Buddhism and one that popped up and that I knew little about was SGI. Over the internet I explained what I was aiming to do and they kindly invited me to attend one of their weekly meetings on a Sunday morning. It is a very different form of Buddhism to what I was used to but I thoroughly enjoyed the chanting and found the people really friendly and the atmosphere cheerful and exuberant. They had arranged for me to interview two people at tea time, but I had an unexpected confrontation with one member of the congregation. She was mistrustful of what I was doing and

told people not to speak to me, but the two people I was scheduled to interview were not concerned with what she said and the interviews proceeded. The only issue was that I felt uncomfortable pulling out a tape recorder in light of what had happened and therefore these two interviews were conducted without a tape recorder. The interviews went very nicely and I collected all the information I received although it was not the best way to begin my interviews.

I did not get any replies from the notice I had put up at the temple and so decided to go for the one on one approach over the telephone. There was a small Zen centre down the road from my home at which I had attended a meditation evening and so phoned the lady in charge and explained what I needed. She was very willing to participate and gave me a list of people whom she thought would be willing to be interviewed. She was a very nice lady to interview and it really gave me confidence to move on with my work.

Just after this I received a telephone call from someone who had seen my notice at the temple and I had another very interesting and successful interview.

I then phoned some people from the list I had been given and organized two interviews. I must admit it was difficult to phone strange people and ask to meet them and be interviewed  I kept expecting people to be rude and put down the phone as I think I was making quite an unusual request. I did have one person who I phoned who said they were not a Buddhist and put down the phone, but generally people were very open and interested in what I had to say.

The one person I interviewed was a member of FWBO and invited me to attend there weekly meditation session which I did and subsequently arranged three more interviews. From some of these interviews I heard about the Emoyeni retreat center and decided to go on a weekend retreat which was a wonderful experience in a really beautiful setting. I subsequently returned to Emoyeni and interviewed two of the residents.

I then went to the initial temple where I had put up my notice and managed to secure an interview from one of the members. Subsequent to that I received five phone calls from people who wanted to be interviewed, I think people had seen my notice but were wary of replying but once someone had said it was fine they were then very keen. One of the people I interviewed was associated with Bronkhorstspruit temple and

she told them about me and they e-mailed me and I went out for the day and interviewed three people.

As I had never interviewed people before, the initial interviews were quite difficult but by the third or fourth interview I had learned how to steer the conversation in the direction I wanted and how to make sure all my questions were answered. The length of the interviews varied from half an hour to an hour depending on the different interviewee's personalities. I conducted the interviews not really as questions and answers as such, but more as discussions around a certain topic. Some people were much more open than others and so the discussions would go beyond a specific question, other people were much shorter and more concise in their answers. Although I enjoyed all the interviews there were some, I think because of the personalities of the people and their openness, which really made an impression on me. There was such variety of ways that people encountered Buddhism and their experiences in life that I looked forward to each interview and would come away with a lot to digest and think about. I must admit that the interviews were quite exhausting as one really needed to be focused and listen very carefully to ensure that all the things I needed to know were in the interview.

The other interesting thing is that some people were very interested in what I was doing and wanted to read my thesis when it was completed while others did not even really ask what I was doing and just took part in the interview and left.

The transcribing and analysis of the interviews was a mammoth task but also a very interesting and rewarding one. Transcribing the recorded interviews was a long and laborious process needing a great deal of patience. Analyzing the interviews was initially a daunting task, but once I began, because of the material collected became a very interesting and enjoyable experience.  The whole process of the interviews and writing this thesis has been a learning experience, at times overwhelming, but totally rewarding.

# INDEX