

Book Review

Glenys Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist: Experiences of Socialization and Self-Transformation in Two Australian Buddhist Centres*. Continuum Advances in Religious Studies, London, New York, 2012, pp. 288, ISBN 978-1-44111-846-2.

Glenys Eddy has explored the process of conversion to Buddhism in Australia in her new book, *Becoming Buddhist*, which is based on her PhD thesis. She questions what it means to be a Western Buddhist and draws on the religious activity and perspectives of interview subjects at two Dharma centres in Sydney, one Theravadin and one Tibetan Buddhist.

In identifying 'Western Buddhists', Eddy rightly eschews the simplistic 'convert' and 'ethnic' Buddhist dichotomy and prefers Cadge's conceptions of *ascribed* and *achieved* identities. Eddy does not utilize objective means to determine Buddhist identity, such as observing lay vows and so on, and allows her subjects to identify simply as Buddhists. This seems a good solution. Any boundaries would be arbitrary. Convert identities can be ethnically complex, such as Chinese-Australian Buddhists who were raised without religion and who adopted Buddhism in mid-life. Another layer of complexity can be seen in the children of parents who adopted Buddhism before they were born and who have, therefore, an *ascribed* not an *achieved* identity. But people do *become* Buddhists in Australia, and this process of becoming is Eddy's focus.

More specifically, Eddy's central research concern is 'how changes to one's inner life and sense-of-self, and to one's sense of reality, are effected by one's involvement in Buddhism' (p. 3). This is a useful but extraordinarily limited way of appraising conversion to Buddhism. At best it is a start, but it unfortunately overlooks every other dimension of belonging within a Buddhist community. These dimensions include social, economic, political, and relational aspects, among others. Similarly, centres with primarily 'convert' membership have significant and, I suggest, equal relationships with centres and temples whose membership is primarily non-convert.

Eddy's research compared the experiences of converted Buddhists at the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre (BMIMC), a Theravadin *vipassana* centre, and the Vajrayana Institute (VI), a Tibetan centre. Her research included studying the textual materials provided by the centres, attending the classes and interviewing respondents. She interviewed twenty practitioners at BMIMC and nineteen at VI. The average age of her subjects was mid-forties. Nine of the subjects at BMIMC had been meditating for between twenty and thirty years, whereas all of the VI subjects had been involved with Buddhism for less than ten years. As a sample group, it seems unfortunate that none of the VI respondents had had a long-term involvement. People's religious engagement can significantly change over time but perhaps the conversion experience was still 'fresh'.

Eddy explores in extraordinary detail issues around converts' self-concept, self-transformation, changes to worldview, meditation experience, 'perception of doctrine as a coherent interpretive framework of experience' (p.124), commitment, and so on, but she misses the bigger picture. She does not analyse how the Dharma centres are funded and the financial commitment of students. Nor does she ask how the Dharma teachers are

trained and the place of students within the different hierarchical structures within the centres. Typically, Western students become teachers in very informal ways, not on the basis of qualifications but on the basis of social standing in the organisation. The economics of Dharma centres are unexplored. Centre members usually donate a significant portion of their income on a regular basis and volunteer large amounts of time. These unacknowledged contributions are usually the basis on which the centres are founded and maintained. Teachers drawn from overseas and those who come from the 'convert' community are typically supported in different ways.

Eddy is not interested in how these centres—although 'convert' centres—relate to the ethnic communities from which many of their teachers are drawn and this can include political engagement. Significantly the BMIMC has Burmese teachers and the Vajrayana Institute has Tibetan teachers and it would have been worthwhile to find out whether the students are active in exile Burmese or Tibetan politics.

Since questions around economics, hierarchy, and relationships are unexamined, Eddy also does not document whether the convert students marry each other and raise their children as Buddhists or how teachers may take on the role of counsellors and de facto parents or, indeed, any of the extremely complex social relationships that underpin the centres. Her emphasis is on becoming Buddhist through attaining a certain meditative experience or worldview, and yet people become Buddhist for many quite different reasons. Finding a teacher is one, finding a like-minded community of seekers is another, and yet these types of reasons—which are social reasons and not explicitly related to perception of reality—are not mentioned. As Eddy says, her research concern is 'how changes to one's inner life and sense-of-self, and to one's sense of reality, are effected by one's involvement in Buddhism' (p. 3). This she has successfully explored, but in so closely defining her topic there is the possibility she has set out to prove a foregone conclusion—that the conversion experience is a process of shifting worldview—rather than being open to other types of observations. There are an infinite number of possible conversion narratives.

Eddy's contribution is, therefore, limited, but is still significant. This is an important study and its limitations demonstrate how much work remains to be done.

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