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Review

Becoming Buddhist: Experiences of Socialization and Self-Transformation in Two Australian Buddhist Centres, by Glenys Eddy. London and New York: Continuum, 2012. xiii + 209 pp. $130. ISBN 978-1-44111-846-2 (hardback).

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Glenys Eddy's *Becoming Buddhist* describes two sets of experiences of what it means to adopt Buddhist practices in the contemporary West. She compares, in sociological terms, two Australian Dharma centres, one in the Vipassanā/Theravadan tradition and the other in the Vajrayāna/Tibetan tradition.

She finds that they are similar in the structure of the 'conversion' process—mainly that this is a gradual, cumulative process—in contrast to the more sudden, emotional, intuitive conversions commonly ascribed to the Abrahamic traditions, for example. The Western Buddhist conversion process is described as 'experimental', based on the 'show-me' attitude of the Western empirical world view. Buddhist doctrines are accepted intellectually and provisionally, while they are tested to see if they produce effects in daily life.

In making distinctions between the two centres, beyond the factual differences about the primary Buddhist texts used in the two traditions, the author identifies differences in the role of socialization. Socialization, or the influence of one's fellow practitioners, seems to play a more important role in the Vajrayāna centre (Vajrayāna Institute in Ashfield, NSW) than in the Vipassanā centre (the Blue Mountain Insight Meditation Centre, Medlow Bath, NSW). While she does not explicitly say this, the way in which she describes the teaching styles at the Vajrayāna centre suggests a reason for the different role of socialization. At the Vajrayāna Institute, there is a much greater variety of types of teaching. Both Western-style teachings, involving lectures and question-and-answer, and traditional Tibetan-style teachings, with a teacher interpreting a root text in a more one-way style, are offered. There are, additionally, group discussions, various rituals and prayers, and a variety of 'empowerments' and other long-term commitments to certain practices that individuals can choose to make.

Thus, multiple combinations of these factors result in a large variety of types or sets of practices (and lifestyles). In addition to concentration and

insight-style practices, there are deity-visualization practices and other Tantric teachings. While there are, of course, teachers to recommend specific paths through these choices suited to an individual, it seems that socialization—specifically, asking one's peers for advice on practices, teachings, life-experiences, and so on—plays a much greater, more important role.

Based on this reviewer's two decades of experience in Western Buddhism, including one decade living in a Dharma community, the author does succeed in describing the process of becoming Buddhist in the West. She makes clear at least some of the differences in how this works in two centres following different traditions. Whether the sociological analyses are successfully applied to the data is beyond the expertise of this reviewer. Suffice it to say that to a non-expert in sociology, it appears that the author has a wide familiarity with sociological models and has put a great deal of thought into how to apply them. That the Western Buddhist experience does *not* fit the sudden, emotional model that sociologists have found in Christian conversion, for example, is clear.

Common to both Buddhist experiences is the thread of disaffection from early Christian experiences, in which morality is seen by the young as a sham (when compared to the behaviour observed in adults); their early experiences of hypocrisy may have been the motivation to seek another tradition. This dovetails nicely with a phenomenon that the author notes: After initially achieving some calm through meditation, and acquiring intellectual knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, a mark in 'becoming Buddhist' occurs when practitioners begin to appreciate the link between ethical behaviour and the incorporation of practice into their daily lives. The matrix of meditation, ethics, relief from mental distress, and daily life emerges as a coherent structure supporting the conviction that the practitioner is on the right path. This leads, in varying ways, to either a formal commitment to Buddhism or simply to a deep recognition that Buddhism is the appropriate form of practice for the individual.

It is also interesting to speculate that distrust of their earlier Christian frameworks—which explicitly include examples of radical, sudden conversion—leads those moving into Buddhism to remain more sceptical (once burned, twice shy), and to require more cognitive support—and more time—before making a firm commitment.

Regarding the author's adherence to constructivism (in brief, that all interactions among people are mediated by language), this seems to contradict her finding that 'religious change...as distinct from surrounding social forces...is essentially a cognitive process' (p. 16), since both social interactions and other cognitive functions are mediated by language. In my experience, it is the dynamic among the language of Dhamma (doctrine), social interactions (largely, though not exclusively, through language), and experience (in meditation and later in practice in daily life) that constitute progress in spiri-

tual development. How these factors interact differs among individuals, some using one more than the others.

The author does successfully suggest that different centres may have distinct patterns of this dynamic (in her research, more socialization in the Vajrayāna centre for example). Whether this pattern holds in a wider sense will of course require more research. I have seen enough variation among individuals in centres I have known to conclude that this remains to be shown.