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ADDENDA

p 72: Add at the end of para 1:

"A more detailed description of the participants is not deemed to be a methodological requirement for this study. Instead of offering a detailed description of each participant in one place, I offer the relevant description of the participants in the context of discussing their experience in concrete situations".

p. 78 line 7:

"The answers to the questions which I raised during interviews, the discussion of my observations, and the analysis of documents provide "three sets of voices", three sets of data, which are each employed and interwoven in chapters four, five and six. They are not dealt with separately but are raised in the context of the relevant discussions":

p. 79: Add at the end of para 1:

"For instance, participation in the Zen groups I studied and my stay at the Bukkokuji Zen monastery allowed me to observe the rigid hierarchy in institutional Zen and its deep immersion in Buddhist beliefs as well as the influence of the Japanese cultural practices. This challenged my conviction that Zen offers an experiential and direct path to enlightenment free from structure, dogma and cultural beliefs. Consequently I came to question Zen Buddhist assertions such as the significance of mediation. The physiological consequences of mediation have been well documented which raises the question for me whether certain states of consciousness encountered during meditation are instances of intuitive insight into the true nature of being or merely a result of changes in brain chemistry. Similarly, given the input of the Zen ideology and the group processes I feel it is possible that experiences of enlightenment may well be both contingent and reducible to these factors".

p. 82: Add at the end of para 1:

"It was not considered necessary to have the codes checked by a third party. Any additional interpretations would not have been objective and equally value-laden. They would have introduced another set of biases hence prompting the need for yet another check. I have adopted the view that because of our embeddedness in specific historical and cultural contexts no individual possesses an objective stance from which a final or absolute statement may be made about meanings declared in contexts".

CONVERSION TO ZEN BUDDHISM

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Ph. D. thesis

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List of abbreviations

CWC - Cultivation of witness consciousness. This is the ability to stand back and watch one's mental states such as thoughts and feelings as they unfold, in a detached fashion rather than identify with them.

MMS - Mountain Moon Sangha

MZG - Melbourne Zen Group

NRM's - New Religious Movements

SZC - Sydney Zen Centre

Abstract

One of the main criteria of religious conversion is personal change. While there is broad agreement on the notion of change as the defining characteristic of conversion, there is less consensus about precisely what the change entails, and also what the key factors are in the process of change. The same thing applies to explaining the process of conversion. Different sociological theories offer divergent accounts of the conversion process.

The objective of the present study is to explore the kinds of personal change which occur in the context of conversion to Zen, by firstly defining conversion to Zen, and secondly, offering a theory of conversion to Zen. Three forms of data were used in the research: a) interview data collected from semi-structured interviews with 34 Zen practitioners; b) field notes taken during a long period of participant observation and participation; c) notes from Zen literature and journals published by a number of Zen groups.

The study firstly found the character and content of changes which the informants attributed to Zen practice and arrived at a definition of conversion to Zen which is consistent with the experience of the informants. Specifically, it was found that these changes fit in with those definitions of conversion which place drastic changes in beliefs and the identity of the converts at the core of the process. The second finding of the study was that, given the experience of my informants a successful account of the process of conversion to Zen should incorporate both the socio-cultural as well as the social-psychological levels of analysis. At the socio-cultural level, conversion to Zen is related to the culture of postmodernity. The social-psychological level of analysis focuses on two key factors in the dynamics of conversion. The role of the Zen community as a reservoir of meaning and a reference point for a new identity, and the role of the actively

negotiating individual. Conversion emerges out of the dialectic between the religious community and the individual.

The results of this study suggest that conversion to Zen involves fundamental changes in the converts and these changes result from a dynamic process involving the interaction of individuals with the broader social, cultural and organisational context. I have conceptualised this interaction in terms of the process of socialisation. Furthermore, I have demonstrated that socialisation into the belief system of Zen Buddhism is best understood by taking an approach based on social-psychology and socio-linguistics. This approach takes into account the normative as well as the evaluative role of the religious group in the conversion process. Among other things this approach suggests that the deterministic theories of conversion, which focus on the subjective and predisposing factors, are inadequate in accounting for conversion to Zen. Furthermore, it addresses shortcomings of models of conversion to Zen which describe it as de-socialisation.

Statement of authorship

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



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Introduction

The idea for this study arose after several years of participation in a Zen meditation course which was offered on the Monash University campus. The group was led by an Australian Zen practitioner who had spent considerable time training in Zen temples in Japan. Each session lasted for an hour and involve a short talk on some aspect of Zen practice and approximately 25 minutes of Zen meditation. The group usually starting with 20 to 25 participants, had a very high drop out rate. Within the first three weeks of the course the numbers shrank to three or four. Some of those who stayed gradually developed a commitment to Zen practice and returned to do the course year after year and began meditating outside the course, attended meditation retreats, read books on Zen and became familiar with the tradition. In my own case, this commitment grew and I went on to develop a strong commitment to Zen practice and ritual, and a concomitant change in my self definition as a Zen Buddhist. I became interested in the details of how and why people become religious and what religion signifies for those who choose to have a religious anchorage in life, and consequently chose to focus on this question in the context of Zen as the topic for my doctoral research. My faith in Zen Buddhism and involvement in Zen practice has been altered as a consequence of the present research. I no longer hold the view that Zen is a special or unique religious practice, I see it as another meaning system rooted in particular historical and cultural antecedents, nonetheless one which strikes a deep chord within me and one that I find personally relevant, meaningful and deeply gratifying in terms of my own search for meaning and transcendence.

Despite its roots in my personal involvement in Zen, this thesis is by no means an autobiographical account of conversion to Zen. Although it was initially motivated by my interest to understand the nature of the participation in Zen, the study is based on extensive field work and strives for a sociological analysis of conversion to Zen. In addition to my own involvement in Zen, the decision to focus on a sociological study of conversion to Zen developed over a long period as I sifted through sociological literature. During this time

my focus shifted from the study of New Religious Movements (*NRM's*) and the secularisation thesis to religious migration and settlement of Zen in Australia, and finally to the study of the process of conversion to Zen. I began by undertaking a literature review which broadly examined the place and significance of religion, the nature of individual religiosity in post-industrial societies, and the way religions impact on the way individuals deal with basic, existential problems. From this starting point, I gradually shifted towards the sociological literature dealing with the emergence of the *NRM's* in the west and its implications for the secularisation thesis. Prior to the 1960's the widely accepted image of modern society was one dominated by secularisation. This picture was challenged by the emergence of *NRM's* which consisted of the rise of Eastern religions, the New Age Movement, and evangelical Christianity. These forms neither fitted the standard pattern of religious revival, nor were consistent with the argument for secularisation. Thus, contradicting the claim that religion is in demise in modern societies.

The second phase of my literature review involved a departure from broad concerns with the New Religious Movements in the west and the secularisation thesis. I focused more narrowly on Zen as an imported religion which is taking root in the Australian society through conversion. This phase of the literature review led to the consideration of the process of religious transplantation itself, and the details of how this imported religion is developing in Australia, as well as the changes it is undergoing in the process of accommodating the new culture. At this point I joined an organised Zen group in Melbourne and participated in a variety of Zen activities in Victoria as well as New South Wales and Queensland. My participation was an attempt to broaden my Zen practice and also to gain a better understanding of Zen practice in Australia.

In the third and final stage of my literature review I looked at the sociological theories of conversion. The two main defining characteristics of Zen in Australia are that it is an imported religion, and that it has been established through conversion (Bouma, *et al.*, 2000). According to the 1996 census of the 199,822 people who identified themselves as Buddhists 1488 said they were Zen Buddhists. Although the presence of Buddhism in Australia is mainly due to an increase in Asian immigration during the 1970's and the 1980's, a strand of Buddhism which has been present for more than a hundred years

consists of Australian converts to Buddhism (Croucher, 1989); all the subjects of this study belong to this strand. As a contribution to the sociology of religion, this study examines the implications of the implantation and the growth of Zen in Australia through the question of what is involved in becoming converted to Zen and how conversion to Zen is achieved in the context of organised Zen practice in Australia within the groups that I have participated in.

This study is a sociological inquiry into the phenomenon of conversion to Zen Buddhism in Australia. The central question of this study is how people convert to Zen. In order to research the central question of my thesis, I have organised the study around two fundamental issues relating to the conversion process: Firstly, the conceptualisation of conversion, and secondly, the dynamics of the conversion process. A thorough understanding of conversion requires a consideration of these two key issues. A clear conceptualisation of conversion is necessary for developing a theory of conversion since it defines the phenomenon under consideration. The identification of the key factors in conversion will enable me to develop a theory of how conversion is achieved. I will set aside the question of why people convert, as well as the issue of predisposing conditions of conversion and the question of who is likely to convert. Therefore, my starting point is the person who is willing to participate in Zen practice. As a member and participant observer I had numerous opportunities to observe and informally converse with the groups' members in various situations. These observations and the study of the transcripts of interviews led to the findings of this study. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the ethics committee at Monash University.

In the present study I will develop a theoretically and empirically based approach to the study of conversion which will redress several shortcomings of present conceptualisation and theories in accounting for conversion to Zen. This study makes three contribution to the study of conversion:

Firstly, I define conversion to Zen, as involving the internalisation of three beliefs - belief in the efficacy of meditation, belief in the sacred essence of the self and mundane reality, and an attitude of surrender and acceptance.

Secondly, I offer a theoretical account of conversion to Zen. It is the central statement of this thesis that conversion to Zen is embedded in a web of social interaction. Conversion to Zen is shaped by the social and ideological context of Zen tradition. At the same time converts will be conceptualised as contextual agents who are actively engaged in negotiating a new identity and novel ways of interpreting their reality. I conceptualise conversion to Zen from a symbolic interactionist perspective, and as a process of socialisation. I will incorporate elements of narrative analysis into a socialisation theory to explain conversion to Zen.

Thirdly, I carry out the analysis of conversion at the socio-cultural level, as well as the organisational.

The introduction set out the personal context of this study and sketched how I came to focus on this particular topic, it elaborated the aim of the inquiry, introduced the research problem and gave a statement of my central thesis.

The main body of the thesis is divided into seven chapters.

Chapter One will elaborate on the research context of this study by reviewing the sociological literature on conversion. This literature review is structured around two key issues relating to the study of conversion, conceptualising conversion and the identification of the key factors in the conversion process. I begin with a summary of the current definitions of conversion and then offer a definition of conversion which is relevant to the findings of this study. Next, I give a critique of the key sociological theories of conversion.

Chapter Two will elaborate the theoretical framework of this study. Symbolic interactionism is substantiated as the theoretical foundation of this study. I then elaborate on the key methodological and epistemological implications of the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Chapter Three will elaborate on how this study was carried out and on the following

aspects of the methodology in detail: methods of data collection, data analysis techniques, the interpretation and presentation of data.

Chapter Four will define conversion to Zen. I first identify the substantive properties of conversion to Zen with reference to the data. I then locate conversion to Zen within a sociological framework. Finally I argue that the changes that take place are sufficiently profound that they can be labelled conversion.

Chapters Five and Six will explain how conversion to Zen is achieved. This is carried out at two levels of analysis, the socio-cultural and the social-organisational. Chapter Five offers an account of how conversion is achieved in terms of the socio-cultural context of conversion and the influence of the culture of postmodernity. I also discuss the consequences of this for the secularisation thesis.

Chapter Six will focus on the interactional dynamics within the Zen group. Conversion to Zen is presented as a process of socialisation where the individuals negotiate change and the Zen community facilitates the process through its normative and evaluative roles. Throughout this chapter I discuss the data obtained from field work.

Chapter Seven will conclude this study by discussing how the aims of the thesis have been fulfilled and relate my data to the gaps which I identified in my review of the literature. In this chapter my research into conversion to Zen Buddhism is reviewed, the findings are summarised, and the appropriateness of the theories and methods employed is assessed. An overall conclusion is presented on conversion to Zen and suggestions are made for future research in this field.

Chapter One

Current theories of conversion

Following Snow and Machalek (1984) and Heirich (1977), I claimed in the prologue that a thorough analysis of conversion requires the consideration of two key issues. Firstly, the definition of conversion and secondly an account of what the process of conversion involves. This chapter organises the review of sociological literature on conversion around these two issues. The review of literature will focus on conversion to the New Religious Movements (*NRM's*). This is because Zen in the West is an imported, non-traditional religion (Bouma *et al.*, 2000) and fits in with that category of the *NRM's* which originated from Asian religions (Beckford, 1987:391).

In the 1970's Heirich set the agenda for a new direction in conversion research based on a social-psychological approach which focused specifically on the patterns of social interaction. He offered this as an alternative to "Classical descriptions of conversion" (Heirich, 1977:653). Snow and Machalek expanded the work of Heirich by offering a formal definition of the convert (1983) as well as conceptualising the phenomenon of conversion and its causes (1984). They also offered a research agenda (1984). The present study of conversion is partly inspired by some aspects of Snow and Machalek's research agenda. Numerous other researchers have focused on the definitions and causes of conversion. This chapter will follow Heirich's view and argue that a thorough analysis of conversion requires a clear conceptualisation of two issues: a definition of conversion and an account of its dynamics, that is how conversion is achieved. A satisfactory definition of conversion is a necessary step in a study such as this because it defines and clarifies the nature of the phenomena under consideration. In addition, once a conceptualisation of conversion which lends itself to empirical investigation is arrived at and it is clearly

established what constitutes conversion, then it is possible to spell out the empirical features which mark the landmarks in the process of conversion (Snow & Machalek, 1984:168,171). Therefore, attempts to theorise conversion should proceed with a clear definition of conversion.

The objective of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, to formulate a satisfactory definition of conversion and establish what constitutes conversion. I will review the key definitions of conversion as well as the sociological theories of conversion and provide a critique of them by assessing their utility to address conversion to Zen and the findings of this study. Secondly, to review the sociological attempts to account for the process of conversion rather than narrowly focusing on the causes of conversion. The bulk of the research on conversion has neglected this and has focused on the causes of conversion and specified the relative influence of various social, psychological and situational factors in relation to the conversion process. Conversion literature has developed in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, history, psychology, psychoanalytical theory, and theology (Rambo, 1982). In order to simplify the organisation of the literature on conversion, the following review will be restricted to the sociological literature. Given the great number of publications on the topic, the present review will be selective rather than comprehensive and only the key sociological works will be reviewed.

Conceptualising conversion

The definition of conversion is problematic. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as 'Turning in position, direction, destination' and more specifically as 'The bringing of any one over to a specified religious faith, profession, or party, esp. to one regarded as true, from what is regarded as falsehood or error' (1991:330). Within the social scientific literature on conversion there is a number of classification schemes, useful in determining whether, and to what extent a person may be thought of as a convert. These encompass a wide range of phenomena, from casual shifts in self-reported affiliation and tentative changes in beliefs and norms to major shifts in one's "root reality" and a total shift in one's "ground of being". What different definitions of conversion have in common is that they involve some form of change (Rambo, 1987). However there is disagreement about the

nature of the changes involved in conversion such as the character of change, or *what* undergoes change in conversion as well as the degree of change, or *how much* change is required for a change to count as conversion (Staples & Mauss, 1987). I take the position that it is vital to acknowledge that the experience of conversion is context dependant and that individuals in different settings experience conversion differently. At the same time I will search for what conversion experiences in different settings have in common, features which distinguish conversion from other kinds of personal change. The definition of conversion which emerges in this chapter will be one which is consistent with the experience of my informants and consistent with their accounts. Therefore I will begin by looking at what becoming a Zen practitioner means to two of my informants Nancy and Clare.

Nancy began to meditate and study Buddhism at a university in the mid 1970's, and this is how she described the influence of Zen on her orientation to life in general:

What meditation has done for me is creating a sense of stability [...] I've developed a new way of dealing with things. I don't think that things come up randomly. I used to think that the universe was there to get me and I certainly had a lot of good evidence for that, and then things started to straighten out and I thought the universe was neutral and now I think the universe is positive. I think there is enormous support just in nature and I now see a lot of goodness in people a lot of support. I think this change in perception is a result of my spiritual experience. Yes, I have to say that because it has shifted my view point, so I see things quite differently. Nancy

Here is an account by Clare, a Zen practitioner for 10 years, of what taking up Zen practice means to her and the significance of Zen practice in her life:

When I think about it, really *zazen* is basis, the absolute basis, for me. I think that comparing to that nothing else is really worthwhile. I think that [...] past a certain stage where you are no longer holding to it, it is holding to you, and when you get to that I think, it just becomes the deepest purpose in your life. I mean, I think what initially kept me going, when it was very tough, like I'd been sitting 5 hour, sittings

when my back and my legs were absolutely killing me, and I persevered and pushed through it, like you did, with all the pain and suffering. I suppose at those stages it was the hope that I would find peace and contentment and *samadhi* and full on. From the glimpses that I have had of emptiness, I can't say that I have had a full scale falling to emptiness, but I have had strong glimpse and it is totally fascinating to actually see that, the ego amounts to nothing and to see that every burden that you hold is self-inflicted; everything. There is nothing, of any consequences, of any weight, that is not put there by yourself. I think for me *zazen* is sort of everything in a way because I can see the effect it has on me as a person. I mean if I look back a few years ago and I can see parts of me that have began to wear away, my feelings towards myself are totally different, more accepting, you know, and all because of *zazen*. I can see that Zen practice is what works for me. Clare

Claims such as these indicate the centrality of the Zen practice in the life of these individuals, and they also clearly demonstrate that these individuals attribute fundamental changes in how they orient and feel about themselves and life to their Zen practice. In the light of the above statements I take the view that the notion of radical change accompanied by subjective commitment is at the core of conversion to Zen. This is consistent with many sociological conceptions of conversion (James, 1902; Shibutani, 1961:523; Travisano, 1970:598; Heirich, 1977:674; Straus, 1979:162; Snow & Machalek, 1984:169) who have generally defined conversion as involving drastic transformation not only in behaviour and identity but a more fundamental shift in one's "root reality" and "grounds of being" akin to Kuhn's (1962) idea of paradigm shift (Jones, 1978).

The above definition of conversion is in contrast to those which define conversion in terms of less profound changes. For instance conceptualising it as affiliation, membership, and disaffiliation. Affiliative shifts such as membership status has sometimes been treated as an indicator of conversion, for example denominational change and changes in the rites of passage whereby a non member becomes a group member (Lofland & Stark, 1965). However, conversion may or may not involve a change in group membership. On the other hand changing group membership may or may not involve conversion. Conversion and affiliation are conceptually distinct phenomena and the relationship between them is

tenuous, as such affiliation is not a sufficient condition for conversion. Thus, for analytic purposes conversion needs to be differentiated from various cases of religious identity change, organisational conformity, membership status, and Church attendance.

Others (Balch, 1980; Long & Hadden, 1983) have argued that conversion does not necessarily entail a radical shift. Instead it is best understood as a form of role learning in which the individuals learn the appropriate roles, norms, values, and beliefs of a groups and this does not necessarily involve subjective conviction or "true attitudinal changes" (Balch, 1980). According to role theory fundamental change is not a necessary feature of conversion, on the contrary, theories of conversion which view it as involving a fundamental shift can be misleading since they attempt to account for changes which may not have occurred. Individuals convert by first learning to *act* like a convert by outwardly conforming to the norms and beliefs of the group but are not necessarily committed. Another approach emphasises the development of interpersonal bonds as the defining characteristic of conversion. According to this perspective conversion involves change in social networks and to convert is 'to come to accept the opinion of one's friends' (Lofland & Stark, 1965). Others (Greil & Rudy, 1984a) have defined conversion as a process "encapsulation" and of identification with a reference group. I will argue that conversion is distinct from both the commonplace role change that occurs without sincere belief change and subjective commitment as well as the development of interpersonal bonds.

It is my position that the above definitions deal with instances of personal change other than conversion, these have been labelled in number of ways. For instance, Nock has drawn a distinction between conversion and adhesion. Nock (1933) defined conversion as a reorientation of the soul involving a conscious shift 'from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another' (cited in Snow & Machalek, 1984:169), he has contrasted this with adhesion which involves "supplementing" but not replacing one's existing belief with a new one. Similarly, Berger (1963) has suggested that because of the individual's repeated movement between different meaning systems in modern societies the term *alternation* be used instead of *conversion*. Travisano (1970) has refined Berger's distinction between alternation and conversion and has suggested that the two are qualitatively different. They

involve two distinct forms of identity change, 'Complete disruption signals conversion while anything less signals alternation' (Travisano, 1970:598).

So far I have defined conversion as a process of personal change involving profound transformation. Following Staples and Mauss (1987) I will argue that the next steps in defining conversion is to articulate what undergoes change and the degree of change. Staples and Mauss (*ibid*) have noted the two trends that have developed in the conversion literature. On the one hand are studies of conversion or self-transformation that focus on the self-concept (Travisano, 1970; Straus, 1979, 1981; Bankston *et al.*, 1981; Gecas, 1982; Thumma, 1991). On the other hand is the approach which emphasises language, rhetoric, and the universe of discourse (Snow & Machalek, 1984; Stromberg, 1993; Yamane, 2000). Drawing on my data I offer a conceptualisation of conversion as a twofold change in self-concept and the universe of discourse. Rosenberg defines self-concept as, 'the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings with reference to himself [sic] as an object' (1979: 7). Self concept is experienced as the core of the individual's interests and has major significance for his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Gecas has conceptualised self-concept as an:

organisation (structure) of various identities and attributes, and their evaluations, developed out of the individual's reflexive, social, and symbolic activities. As such, the self-concept is an experiential, mostly cognitive phenomenon accessible to scientific inquiry. (Gecas, 1982: 4)

Identities are the content of self-conceptions and they, 'focus on the meanings comprising the self as an object, give structure and content to self-concept, and anchor the self to social systems' (Gecas, 1982:4). The changes in self-concept are more fundamental than identity change. Bankston *et al.* (1981) have conceptualised conversion as a radical change in self-identity in which a sequence of stages progressively increases the potential for radical alteration of self, this consists of developing new modes of self-conception through, 'a reorganisation of self about a new core identity trait' (Bankston *et al.*, 1981:282).

In addition to transformation in the self-concept, conversion also involves transformation in what Mead termed the "universe of discourse". Universe of discourse refers to the 'broad

interpretive framework in terms of which people live and organise experience (Mead, 1962:88-90)' (cited in Snow & Machalek, 1983:265). These assumptions underlie the "ultimate grounding" or "root reality" (Heirich, 1977). A shift in the universe of discourse entails more than belief change and, 'entails the displacement of one universe of discourse by another and its attendant grammar or rules for putting things together' (Snow & Machalek, 1983:265).

I will therefore offer a conceptualisation of conversion which involves a twofold change in one's universe of discourse and self-concept. Conversion involves a conscious shift in one's sense of, 'ultimate grounding, one that provides a clear basis for understanding reality, that provides meaning and orientation for understanding one's situation and acting in relation to it' (Heirich, 1977:673). The new framework guides the interpretation of present as well as past events, which are now seen through the lens of a new paradigm. The new orientation is pervasive since it informs interpretation of experience in general. The relevance of this definition of conversion to Zen Buddhism will be substantiated in Chapter Six.

The definition of conversion as a fundamental shift in the universe of discourse and self-concept enables me to deal with a second issue which is crucial to a satisfactory definition of conversion, namely the degree of change that occurs in conversion. This is problematic since it is difficult to designate the exact degree of change which qualifies one as a convert. I support the view that the crucial factor in determining if a change constitutes conversion is to establish to what extent the new meaning system informs other beliefs and one's definition of self is organised around the new self-concept. This view has been elaborated by Travisano who has argued that, 'Conversions are drastic changes in life. Such changes require a change in the "informing aspect" of one's life or biography', quoting James, Travisano continues, 'To say a man [*sic*] is "converted" means [...] that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy' (Travisano, 1970:600). Travisano interprets the changes that take place in conversion as a transformation in "informing aspects" which entails 'a change of allegiance from one source of authority to another' (1970:600), and, 'the adoption of a pervasive identity which rests on a change (at least in emphasis) from one

universe of discourse to another' (Travisano, 1970:600). Similarly, Snow and Machalek (1984:171, 173) argue that conversion is the process by which a new or *formerly peripheral* universe of discourse acquires the "status of primary authority" thereby coming to inform all aspects of a person's life. Therefore in determining the degree of change that occurs in conversion, 'What is at issue is not whether the universe of discourse is entirely new but whether it has shifted from periphery to centre. When such a shift occurs, the corresponding change in consciousness is likely to be as radical in its effects as if the universe of discourse were entirely new' (Snow & Machalek, 1984:171).

An advantage of this view is that it can account for cases where conversion does not involve the adoption of a new belief system, for instance where beliefs which were not fundamental come to take a central place in one's life (Snow & Machalek, 1984:170). Therefore, conversion depends on the degree to which the new belief system informs various aspects of one's experience. Thus, it is not a question of how much change is needed for the change to qualify as conversion, but, how central or peripheral the new meaning system is, and how pervasive in various interactions and in providing a frame of reference which guide ones behaviour. In the case of the self-concept the crucial factor is the coherence of the converts' new self-concept. Namely, how, or to what extent one's sense of self is informed by, and organised, around the new self-concept. This is not to imply that a converts self-concept is completely consistent in all areas of experience. However, the conversion entails a tendency to develop a strong "core identity trait" (Bankston *et al.*, 1981:282) which is applied to societal roles or contexts. Nor is the idea of coherent self-concept necessarily to be understood as involving the complete rejection of a previous identity and its replacement by a new one. Negotiating a new identity may be more complex where the old and new identities are both maintained and combined in novel ways to create a new core identity of say a Catholic Zen practitioner (Thumma, 1991:334, 345).

The personal change involved in conversion has to be qualified in the following ways. The changes which occur in conversion are not necessarily fixed or irreversible. The individual

may try on alternate identities and beliefs and these are endlessly negotiated anew.¹ Conversion is situated in social contexts and involves an ongoing dialectic between the group and the individual and conversion will not be conceptualised as a final or irreversible stage (Long & Hadden, 1983; Griel & Rudy 1984b; Snow & Machalek, 1984; Staples & Mauss, 1987; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989; Thumma, 1991). This is in contrast with the "traditional" view of conversion as a sudden, dramatic and permanent event (Richardson, 1985b:165). This perspective not only views conversion as a single event which thoroughly changes one's life, but it also involves the total negation of the old self and the implantation of a new self where the convert remains committed to the same perspective for the rest of his or her life, or for a significant length of time. This view of conversion has been contradicted by the more recent experience of shifting alliances to a number of different groups and ideologies which started with the growth of the New Religious Movements in the 1960's. Richardson and Stewart (1977) urge a conceptualisation of conversion as a multiple-event phenomena where each single conversion is a step in one's "conversion career". Richardson and Stewart have suggested the term "serial alternative" to illustrate the high degree of ideological mobility of individuals in contemporary society:

We live in a time-space social environment that is a virtual "supermarket of ideas" which might be characterised as a large and differentiated *opportunity structure* of possible ways to interpret and resolve felt problems [...] paradoxically, few of [the solutions] would be defined as lasting solutions for members of certain social groups. Thus many people moved from one alternative to another, in a serial fashion. (1977:828)

The notion of conversion career is compatible with how the informants for this study arrived at Zen, namely after experimenting with a number of different traditions and practices. Conversion to Zen however is not a sudden and all-or-nothing process nor does it involve permanent and irreversible change, rather it is a gradual process of change. Individuals undergo fundamental changes as a result of Zen practice, with the individual actively negotiating the transition over a long period of involvement. The individuals in

¹This position will be elaborated in Chapter Two in relation to the assumptions of the symbolic interactionist tradition.

this study who reported the kind of belief change which characterises conversion to Zen, tended to have been practising for a minimum of 3-5 years.

A review of the sociological theories of conversion

In the process of conversion, Zen Buddhist beliefs and practices come to acquire a new meaning and significance for the individual, this brings about profound transformations in the universe of discourse and self-concept. The following review of the key sociological theories of conversion will assess these in terms of their utility in accounting for the crucial dynamics and patterns which characterise conversion to Zen.

The following review of the sociological theories of conversion is based on the distinction between active and passive approaches which have divided conversion research (Robbins, Anthony & Richardson 1978; Long & Hadden, 1983; Snow & Machalek, 1984; Richardson, 1985b; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989). The active theories of conversion portray converts as agents actively involved in making choices in the search for meaning and purpose, and define conversion as a negotiated activity accomplished by the individual (Balch & Taylor, 1977; Straus, 1979; Thumma, 1991). The passive theories of conversion, on the other hand, view conversion in deterministic terms as something that happens to the individual as a result of external factors such as social and structural circumstances, or internal factors such as the psychological traits of the individuals (Heirich, 1977; Conway & Siegelman, 1978). The passive paradigm employs an image of humans as passive creations of their circumstances (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989:2). I will examine both passive and active theories.

The passive theories of conversion

The passive theories of conversion focus on prior conditioning and circumstances which cause individuals to convert. Snow and Machalek (1984:178) have offered a comprehensive survey of passive theories of conversion by placing these theories in an historical context. They have distinguished between three phases in conversion research. The first wave of the passivist approach dominated the earlier research on conversion which occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century. These theories were

'dominated by theological and psychological explanations (James 1902, Starbuck, 1915, Coe 1917, Thouless 1923, Pratt 1926, E. T. Clark 1929)' (Snow & Machalek, 1984:178). The second phase dominated later attempts to account for the phenomenon of brainwashing in relation to the Korean prisoners of war experiences, as well as the Chinese communists striving for systematic ideological conformity in the 1950's, and the fear of communist brainwashing in general (Snow & Machalek, 1984:178). This perspective later re-emerged in the context of the New Religious Movements such as the phenomenon of cult conversion in the 1960s and 1970s, the revival of the occult and the resurgence of evangelical Christianity (Snow & Machalek, 1984:178; Beckford, 1987:391).

Various passive approaches have emphasised different factors as the primary cause of conversion. The most extreme and controversial of the passive theories of conversion find expression in the pathological and brainwashing perspective. These theories view conversion as a psycho-physiological response to coercion and induced stress. According to this perspective, conversion is the result of coercion and deprivation applied to vulnerable individuals. An example of this approach is the brainwashing hypothesis generally promoted by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists (Long & Hadden, 1983; Snow & Machalek, 1984). This model utilises assumptions from both physiological psychology as well as psychoanalytic theory. Snow and Machalek (1984:179) have described the work of Sargant (1957:132) as an example of this approach which explains conversion in terms of "Induced physiological dysfunctioning of the brain". Sargant focuses on the physiological basis of "conversion and brainwashing" and argues that in most people it is possible to disturb brain function through fear or excitement, once such disturbance has been achieved it is possible to "implant" various types of beliefs.

Among social scientists the most extreme advocates of the brainwashing position are Conway and Siegelman (1978) who argue that in joining nearly all new religious groups, even quasi religious groups such as EST (Erhard's Training Seminars), there is a drastic psychological transformation made under conditions similar to brainwashing. The social scientific theories which take a non-pathological passive approach to conversion (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980a) tend to emphasise the role of "internal" factors such as personality traits and cognitive orientation, or "external" factors such as social attributes or the structural

availability of the converts. Thus the presence of conditions such as stress, tension, deprivation, social networks and affective bonds are seen as the key causes in conversion. Theories which emphasise the role of personality traits (Levine, 1980) generally take a negative approach and view these traits as "psychologically dysfunctional". Levine for instance attribute cult conversion to the converts' desire to escape from freedom which he attributes to specific character disorders (Levine, 1980:146-151).

The approach which describes conversion as a response to stress argues that stressful situations such as personal difficulties, work related problems or the loss of a family member, propel the individuals to convert. Conversion is defined as a pseudo-solution to difficulties where the problems are dealt with, 'either by making an alliance with supernatural forces that could change the power balance or by changing one's frame of reference so that previously distressing material no longer seems important' (Heirich, 1977:656). This approach underlies Marx's notion of religion as the opiate of the masses, Niebuhr's (1929) analysis of sects among the disadvantaged and Wilson's (1973) discussion of the social context of the New Religious Movements. The view which attributes conversion to personal deprivation argues that recruits to religious movements are people who suffer from some variety of deprivation and to whom the religious group offers the most reward.

There is yet another genre of passive theories which focus on the role of the social determinants of conversion and account for conversion in terms of the role of structural factors. The structural explanation of conversion assigns a significant role to the social attributes of the converts such as age, sex, occupation and the social class and argues that these lead one to take a particular frame of reference seriously (Galanter & Buckley, 1978; Bromley & Shupe, 1979). The structural explanation of personal change suggests that in order to produce the behaviour that we want it is enough to create situations which will then coerce people into behaving as we want them to.

The social network theory (Lofland & Stark, 1965; Heirich, 1977, Snow & Philips, 1980; Stark & Bainbridge, 1980a) assigns a significant role to friendship and kinship networks

as the most important factors in conversion and argue that it is through membership in these networks that people join religious groups.

A critique of the passive theories of conversion

The theories of conversion, which emphasise the role of predisposing and motivational factors presented above, share the following shortcomings. Theories which cast the role of social conditions in conversion in deterministic terms neglect the fact that social conditions create the conditions for both change and stability in adult life. Not only do most conversions not occur in the confined and stressful situations proposed by the coercive model (Robbins & Anthony, 1980; Barker, 1983), but there is also a high defection rate and the membership is often voluntary (Beckford, 1978; Barker, 1983). An account of conversion which does not account for the possibility of discontinuity and de-conversion is incomplete. Furthermore, the coercive/brainwashing hypothesis is often based on the reports of ex-converts who have been "deprogrammed". Analysis of accounts of ex-converts who have been deprogrammed versus those who have left for other reasons indicates that the deprogrammed ex-converts show greater hostility towards cults and are more likely to cite brainwashing as the reason for their conversion. In addition, the passive perspective has been severely criticised (Bromley & Shupe, 1979; Robbins & Anthony, 1979, 1980, 1982; Richardson, 1982) for being more of an ideological and political tool for attacking *NRM's* than a scientific tool for understanding them. For example, the coercive perspective treats the personal quest for transcendence as a product of group strategies to recruit susceptible individuals and convert them into followers. The structural characteristics of institutions and organisations provide the framework for actions versus coercing certain lines of action (Bromley & Shupe, 1979). The passive theories which emphasise the role of subjective factors in conversion such as personality traits or stress neglect the role of social processes. Conversion is not merely an individual process but also a collective one. Therefore the changes that occur in conversion cannot be understood in terms of subjective factors alone. Furthermore, Heirich (1977) has demonstrated that the passive theories of conversion fail to determine the causes of conversion since these tend to totally lack a control group therefore the conclusions can not be generalised. Unless the extent to which the general population shares the circumstances of the converts are known we cannot claim that the factors in question are the causes of conversion. For instance, in

an empirical study of the tension and deprivation hypothesis using control groups Heirich (1977) failed to find evidence indicating that stress and tension precipitate conversion. Similarly Snow and Phillips (1980), in their study of Nichiren Shoshu, did not find any evidence to establish that there is a causal relation between tension and conversion .

Conversion is a "social event" in which the individual negotiates certain changes within the relevant group. My view of converts as fully situated but active, and as manipulating and creating actors, shifts the focus of this study from the question of *why* a person converts to *how* personal transformation is achieved. The passive theories focus on the question of *why* people convert rather than explain *how* people convert. Thus instead of asking what is in a person which propels him or her to change I will focus on the interactional dynamics in the relevant social settings and on what conversion means to the convert. As Lofland has suggested, 'Scholars of social life who employ an activist image of humans constructing their action and who are concerned with how people "do things" focus, therefore, on depicting and articulating lines of action that people in fact develop in situations' (1976, 41).

Lofland and Stark's (1965) article titled, "Becoming a world-saver: a theory of conversion to a deviant perspective", was a landmark in the sociological study of conversion and set the agenda for later sociological research on this topic (Snow & Machalek, 1984:184). Since its publication, Lofland and Stark's model has implicitly, or explicitly, guided many attempts to comprehend conversion. It has been applied to the conversion process in groups as diverse as Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism (Snow & Phillips, 1980), UFO cults (Balch & Taylor, 1977), a group of Jesus People (Richardson & Stewart, 1977), and Mormons (Seggar & Kunz, 1972). In some cases researchers intended to test Lofland and Stark's model, in others the model has been applied to analyse the data. Others have conducted comparative studies to reveal the kinds of organisational contexts where the model may fit. Greil and Rudy (1984b) have compared the results of ten case studies in the process model tradition and draw conclusions about the kinds of organisational contexts in which Lofland and Stark's model is applicable. Some (Snow & Machalek, 1984) have labelled Lofland and Stark's as a passive approach to conversion. This is not justified and Lofland and Stark's model depart from a purely passive explanation of conversion by incorporating the role of

interactive factors in the conversion process. In their study of the Unification Church they developed a value-added model. This incorporated motivational and structural factors to account for conversion. Lofland and Stark identified a number of predisposing and situational factors as the necessary conditions for conversion:

For conversion, a person must: (1) Experience enduring, acutely felt tension (2) Within a religious problem solving perspective, (3) Which leads him [*sic*] to define himself [*sic*] as a religious seeker; (4) Encountering the (cult) at a turning point in his [*sic*] life, (5) Wherein an affective bond is formed for (or pre-exists) with one or more converts; (6) Where extra cult attachment are absent or neutralised; (7) And, where if he [*sic*] is to become a deployable agent, he [*sic*] is exposed to intensive interaction. (Lofland & Stark, 1965:874)

The Lofland and Stark's model is passivist to the extent that it focuses on the motivational factors in conversion. At the same time it emphasises the converts' self-definition as a seeker and the role of intensive interaction with other members thus incorporating activist elements (Richardson, 1985b:168). In addition, Stark and Lofland's insights into the conversion process have been later utilised and elaborated by the activist theories of conversion (Straus, 1976; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989; Richardson, 1978; Snow & Phillip, 1980; Greil & Rudy, 1984b). Despite its merits, by virtue of being a "process" model it has serious shortcomings. For instance, to the extent that conversion takes place in different ideological and organisational settings it is context dependant, thus there are as many conversion processes as there are such contexts (Greil & Rudy, 1984b). Therefore, there is no such thing as *the* conversion process, nor an ideal sequence which can universally describe the conversion process. Conversion settings vary and the stages from one setting are not applicable universally. To argue for a single process of conversion neglects the contextual variations. Therefore, instead of asking *if* Lofland and Stark's model is applicable, one needs to ask when or in what ways it is applicable. Later Lofland (1977a) affirmed such an approach and suggested that it is best to report what we see in a particular group rather than taking their model as the basis. A process model of conversion also incorporates a passivist bias, this entails that there are set stages through which the individuals must go through in the process of conversion (Straus, 1976, 1979). Lofland (1977a) later addressed this by encouraging the students of conversion to 'scrutinise how people go about converting themselves', thus assigning an active role to the individual.

The active theories of conversion

The activist accounts of conversion generally focus on the interactions which make conversion possible. Interactional theories of conversion focus on the agency of converts as well as the constraining or facilitating role of social structure. These theories view human behaviour in general, and conversion in particular, as active, negotiated and socially constructed. The passive approaches focus on the "why" aspect of conversion, the active theories generally deal with the "how" of conversion. They focus on the circumstances and interactions which bring about conversion. This perspective casts conversion in terms of the following question: 'how do individuals go about constructing their own subjective realities, given certain social or organisational opportunities and patterns of interaction?' (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989:10). So far as the assumptions of this study are concerned the activist theories signal a positive turn in the study of conversion. The remaining part of this chapter will review the key interactional theories of conversion. Interactionist approaches may vary in how active they are in orientation (Balch & Taylor, 1977; Bromely & Shupe 1979; Grail & Rudy 1984a; Long & Hadden, 1983). In addition they focus on different aspects of social context such as social networks and affective bonds, role play, socialisation, the reference group, and the organisational context. What they have in common is that they view interactive processes as the main mechanism of change in conversion.

Social networks, intensive interaction, and affective bonds

The identification of affective bonds as a main factor in conversion dates back to Lofland and Stark's 1965 analysis of the conversion process. According to this, personal attachments or strong liking for practising believers is central to the conversion process. According to Lofland and Stark (1965:871), the process of conversion is 'coming to accept the opinion of one's friends'. The importance of social networks, intensive interaction and developing affective bonds with group members in religious conversion is widely adopted and emphasised in a number of studies. It has been demonstrated that both in communal and non-communal groups a significant portion of members were recruited from the members' social networks (Lofland & Stark, 1965; Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Bibby &

Brinkerhoff, 1974; Harrison, 1974, Heirich, 1977; Barker, 1981; Snow & Philips, 1980; Snow *et al.*, 1980; Stark & Bainbridge 1980a; Rochford, 1982). Different explanations have been offered about the significance of interpersonal bonds and how it impacts on conversion. These explanations range from active to more passive interpretations of the process.

Some have developed a passivist interpretation of interpersonal bonds. For instance Stark and Bainbridge argue that social networks play an essential role in recruitment to cults and sects as well as to conventional religions; they assert that religion in general is 'sustained by social networks' (1980a), and interpersonal bonds are the fundamental support for recruitment. Stark and Bainbridge incorporate deprivation and ideological compatibility as *contributory conditions* in their theory of recruitment. They argue that to convert, three conditions need to be fulfilled: one needs to feel some form of deprivation/tension, have a religious orientation, namely believe in the possibility of supernatural interpretation of that problem, and have strong personal ties. However, they argue that interpersonal bonds play a more important role in conversion since rather than being drawn to the group because of the appeal of its ideology, individuals are drawn to the ideology because of their ties to the group. Stark and Bainbridge use the notion of direct reward from their general entrepreneurial model to explain the influence of social networks and intensive interaction in conversion. They argue that sects and cults offer a great range of rewards. These are valued because they can serve to reduce various kinds of deprivations (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980a:1393). According to Stark and Bainbridge:

Religious movements do not rely solely upon other worldly solutions to people's problems. Whatever else they may be, religious organisations also are worldly organisations and have at their disposal resources to reward many members. Indeed, the affective bonds that constitute social networks are direct rewards. Humans desire interpersonal bonds, and they will try to protect them from rupture even if that means accepting a new religious faith. (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980a:1394)

Thus, affection and friendship tie individuals to the group and serve as a major source of rewards by which commitment is maintained.

Snow *et al.* (1980) have argued for the influence of social networks on conversion by establishing a relationship between a movement's network attributes and recruitment opportunities. Network attributes function as an important factor in recruitment efforts. Movements which are linked to other groups and networks will grow more rapidly than movements which are structurally more isolated:

the probability of being recruited into a particular movement is largely a function of two conditions: (1) links to one or more movement members through a pre-existing or emergent interpersonal tie, and (2) the absence of countervailing networks. The first condition suggests who is most likely to be brought directly into a movement organisation's orbit of influence and thereby subjected to its recruitment and reality construction efforts. The second indicates who is structurally most available for participation and therefore most likely to accept the recruitment invitation. (Snow *et al.*, 1980:798)

Social networks constitute the most effective source of recruitment by operating as a bridge between the members and non-members. Those outsiders who are linked to one or more members of the movement through pre-existing networks will have a greater probability of being contacted and recruited into that particular movement than will those individuals who lack such ties. In order to explain why all of those in the network do not convert, Snow *et al.* (1980) cite social-psychological susceptibilities and the appeal of the goals and ideology of the movement as one cause, for example, alienation and deprivation as well as the influence of alternative social networks and intensive interaction with members of the religious group.

The more activist interpretation of network theory provides important insights into how conversion is achieved. For instance, Griel and Rudy (1984a), using insights from Mead's ideas about the process of identity transformation, have offered a more activist explanation of the role of social networks in conversion. Greil and Rudy's case studies of the conversion process in diverse groups indicated that only intensive interaction and the formation of affective bonds with group members can be considered an indispensable prerequisites for conversion. They explained the role of affective bonds via the concept of "encapsulation" (Lofland, 1978; Lofland and Lofland, 1969) and argue that an important structural feature of identity transformation organisations is, 'the existence of mechanisms that

serves to restrict communication and interaction between members and non-members (Greil & Rudy, 1984a:261). Greil and Rudy (1984a) describe identity transforming organisations (ITOs) as "social cocoons" and conversion as identification with a new reference group. The process of being encapsulated in a "social cocoon" influences conversion by firstly preventing the recruits from sustained interaction with reference groups who may discredit their new perspective. Secondly, through intensive interaction with other members the novices emergent sense of self and reality is further consolidated through confirmation by others in the group.

A critique of the social network approach

The network perspective emphasises the key role of the converts' social network in the conversion process. However, social networks are important for those who are already involved in a religious quest. Furthermore, if one is not a seeker, contact is usually insufficient to bring about conversion (Heirich, 1977). The network model's conclusions have not been tested using control groups to establish the cause-effect arguments about the impact of network ties. Working with data gathered from a study of Catholic Pentecostals, Heirich (1977) has tested the causal hypotheses of the network approach. According to the test results social-interactive processes related to friendship networks and encapsulation are only one of several factors in conversion, nor are they a necessary requirement for conversion. Heirich (1977) also tested Griel and Rudy's (1984a) attempt to account for the role of networks and intensive interaction through the concept of encapsulation and found the data demonstrated that encapsulation aids conversion. However, for a large number of converts encapsulation did not occur, therefore encapsulation is not a necessary condition for conversion.

In addition, the more passive expressions of network perspective such as Snow *et al.* (1980) and Stark and Bainbridge's (1980a) position are problematic. By focusing on the role of social influence on conversion they neglect the fact that despite one's location in a particular social network, individuals can choose to engage in alternative forms of interaction in search of a new meaning and they may well be radically different from one's existing social networks (Shibutani, 1961; Straus, 1976). Balch & Taylor (1977) have

argued that the role of affective ties has been overemphasised by sociologists in accounting for conversion and have argued that conversion may take place in the absence of such ties if a belief system makes enough sense to the individual. For instance where conversion is perceived as an extension of one's spiritual quest, in such circumstances the convert may seek out others who espouse the beliefs in question. Thus it is possible to achieve conversion without having to establish prior social ties with group members.

Despite the above shortcomings the development of affective bonds and intensive interaction with a relevant reference group is an important factor in the conversion process. However the above problems associated with the social network perspective may be avoided and their role in the dynamics of conversion to Zen Buddhism is best understood by locating them in the context of an interactionist framework.

The role theory model of conversion

According to role theory, changes in an individual's group status and accompanying role² often result in a change in attitude. The role theory model of conversion applies this insight to the study of conversion. Organisational goals and belief are relevant to the analysis of conversion from a role theory perspective. Since roles are consistent with the doctrines, expectations and goals of the religious group, the groups require compliance with these demands.

Role theory is compatible with the activist approach used by this study. The active view of conversion is based on the assumption that individuals use groups to satisfy their quest for meaning and identity as opposed to being shaped by the group, which is the focus of the passive and deterministic theories of conversion (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989). Straus (1976, 1979) has interpreted the process of conversion as an act of creative exploitation of religious groups by "seekers" who adopt an experimental approach towards what the group offers. Although groups seek to shape and control members' behaviour

² The term "role" is used to refer to the 'behavioural expectations associated with a position or status (either formal or informal) in a social system' (Gecas, 1982:14).

participants also possess some degree of influence, for instance they comply with the roles assigned to them in ways which accommodate their own needs. However, as the assumptions and expectations associated with roles are internalised, personality changes occur and these act as a secondary source of behavioural conformity. However, role theories of conversion emphasise that such personality changes are not brought about in a deterministic way and individuals can, within limits, literally play roles without taking on the beliefs and qualities which the roles require (Bromley & Shupe, 1986).

The role theories of conversion challenge the assumption that the behavioural changes that occur in conversion reflect the subjective changes experienced by the converts. Thus rejecting the assumption that the more dramatic the changes in behaviour and the orientation of converts, the more profound are the subjective changes which have brought them about. According to Bromley and Shupe:

the motivational model assumes a three stage sequence in religious affiliation: (1) Predisposing conditions, such as needs and motives, of the individuals (sometimes supplemented with discussion of societal conditions); (2) an exposure to new beliefs which appeal to those predisposing needs or motives (occasionally supplemented with discussion of that exposure's interactional context) and; (3) resulting behaviour as a committed member of the group. (Bromley & Shupe, 1979:161)

According to the role theory model the second and third stages may be reversed, namely, behaviour can precede belief, and this is how behaviour change in conversion is accounted for when individuals first take on a new role. A more thorough acceptance of belief happens later in the conversion process (Bromley & Shupe, 1979:162).

Therefore, sudden behaviour change does not entail profound changes in belief or personality. In many cases it is assumed that affiliation with a group entails a change in identity. According to the role theory model of conversion, much of the affiliative shift can be initially behavioural and role related. This assumption has been validated by the findings of various studies into conversion (Seggar & Kunz, 1972; Straus, 1976, 1979; Balch, 1980). Balch (1980) has argued that it is not necessary to assume that fundamental shifts in personality, values or beliefs cause dramatic behaviour changes. Theories of conversion

which view it as involving a fundamental shift are misleading. Since they attempt to account for fundamental shifts where none may have occurred. According to Balch:

The first step on conversion to cults is learning to *act* like a convert by outwardly conforming to a narrowly prescribed set of role expectations. Genuine conviction develops later beneath a facade of total commitment, and it fluctuates widely during the course of the typical member's career. (Balch, 1980:142)

According to role theory it is *the assumption of the member role* which produces dramatic behavioural changes and over time can lead to deeper personal commitment. The assumption of the convert's role does not entail commitment to the groups' goals nor subjective conviction and familiarity with its ideology beyond a basic knowledge of the groups' beliefs and practices. Thus while it might appear that the novice has developed a deep personal commitment, this may not necessarily be so (Bromley & Shupe, 1979:177). Thus, the role theory model of conversion can adequately account for cases of sudden behavioural change in conversion. Such sudden changes are problematic for the passive theories of conversion and are either interpreted as pathology, or, manipulation and brainwashing by the group. Unlike the passive theories of conversion, role theory can account for the phenomenon of rapid conversion where the exposure to the new beliefs is very brief without resorting to brainwashing or pathology as the cause of change.

A critique of the role theory model of conversion

Role theories of conversion highlight some of the crucial dynamics of the conversion process and also provide a sound theoretical bases for conceptualising conversion in active terms, however they have serious shortcomings. Firstly, they advocate a gap between role and self and fail to account for changes in self-concept and the universe of discourse where the self and role merge or at least substantially overlap. Secondly, the current advocates of role theory do not explain how individuals comes to internalise the beliefs of the religious group thus developing a subjective commitment. I will elaborate on these in detail next.

An attraction of role theory is the dramaturgical distinction between character and actor which reflects the distinction between people and roles. This distinction enables a role theoretic approach to conceptualise conversion as an active accomplishment of the individual, who by taking on the role of the convert circumvents making commitment (Straus, 1979). Contrary to the claims of role theory, conversion involves more than learning of a new role and the accompanying beliefs. These organisational changes fall short of capturing the fundamental shift in identity and meaning entailed in conversion. The neglect of *subjective commitment* creates a gap between role and the person. As such the current approaches of role theory have a limited explanatory power and can only account for affiliation versus conversion. Role theory links active conversion to detachment from commitment (Dawson, 1990). The role theoretic definition of conversion as "creative role play" excludes the definition of conversion as a process involving a shift in meaning and identity, since public displays of conversion may lack corresponding subjective change and only involve compliance with the demands of the group. Therefore, role theory provides an account of compliance behaviour namely behaviour that is expressed in public but lacks private acceptance or commitment versus conversion (Moscovici, 1980; Snow & Machalek, 1984:172).

Therefore, role theory excludes the possibility of conversion involving subjective change which is also active. In equating the degree of activism with role distance it excludes the possibility that conversion entailing subjective change and commitment may be active. The concept of role distance is what enables role theory to account for the agency of the convert; maintaining the gap between professed and real reasons enables an active conceptualisation of the conversion process (Dawson, 1990). Role theory assigns an active role to the converts by theoretically enabling them to move freely between different religions/belief systems. Converts are labelled as "serial alternators", who engage in using the groups to satisfy their needs and avoid making lasting commitments (Straus, 1976; Richardson, 1977b, 1980, 1982). As Dawson has argued the role theory models of active conversion, 'link active orientations restrictively with detachment from religious commitments' (Dawson, 1990:144), as such they cannot account for conversion as was defined in the first part of this chapter, namely a profound change in the universe of discourse and self-concept which is also active.

The above characterisation of the active conversion is not relevant to my data, as we shall see although initially the informants took an experimental attitude to Zen practice, they went on and established a long term commitment to Zen and reported the kind of changes which were indicative of conversion. One reason the role theory approach fails to account for conversion, as it was defined earlier, may be due to the fact that the majority of these theories have focused on cults with a high turn over of members. For instance, Bromley and Shupe (1979) concluded their study of the Unification Church by saying that if the individuals had made a serious commitment to the ideology of the Unification Church it would be hard to account for the large number of defections that occurred during their study (Dawson, 1990). The limits to the explanatory power of the role model theory should be taken into account in the analysis of conversion. The advocates of the role theory model of conversion (Bromley & Shupe, 1986) have attempted to circumvent this difficulty by arguing that over time converts' roles broaden and this deepens the base of their involvement. This deepening of involvement however is explained in terms of a variety of organisational factors such as structural opportunities for leadership and upward mobility in the group hierarchy, growing mastery of theology. These however, fall short of capturing the fundamental shift in identity and meaning entailed in conversion. Turner's (1962, 1965, 1978) insights into the processes of reflexive role-taking and of role-person merger is another such attempt. However, it is not clear how these factors lead to the kind of fundamental changes characteristic of conversion. In Chapter Six I will elaborate on the insights derived from role theory to account for conversion to Zen while avoiding these shortcomings.

The socialisation model of conversion

The socialisation model conceptualises conversion as a form of socialisation. Conversion involves:

The process by which individuals learn the appropriate roles, norms, and status assignments of a group; they inculcate the values, beliefs, and world view of a group (Griel & Rudy 1984a); and they acquire a new social identity(s) based upon their group membership or group affiliation (present or absent). What distinguishes conversion, however, from other

forms of socialisation is the focal emphasis on self-change (e.g. a change in world view) in a religious or quasi-religious settings and the kind of social audience reaction to that self change. (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989:15)

Conversion is therefore like any other kind of socialisation and differs only in the organisational context of socialisation. The difference between conversion and other kinds of socialisation lies not in the psychological processes involved, but in the organisational context in which it takes place. Therefore, conversion ought to be studied like any other kinds of socialisation activity (Greil & Rudy, 1984a; Snow & Machalek, 1984). This rejects approaches such as the brainwashing hypothesis which view conversion as qualitatively different from other kinds of personal transformation requiring its own unique psychological explanation. According to the socialisation theory of conversion, although there are real differences both in content and emphasis between religious conversion and other forms of socialisation, the basic process involved is the same. Therefore:

Socialisation is the process by which the self internalises social meanings, reinterprets them, and in turn, responds back upon society. As such, socialisation can be viewed as the continual formation of self-concept over time. From this perspective, identity negotiation, whether religious or sexual, is a part of the natural process in which people engage to create a more stable and coherent self-concept (Becker, 1953; Straus, 1976; Gecas, 1982). Conversion, from this point of view, is identity negotiation that involves a complete change in the "core identity construct" (Staples & Mauss, 1987). (Thumma, 1991:334)

Out of this fluid process of interaction emerge meanings including self-concept and identity which are internalised. Socialisation theory portrays the converted as active individuals, and at the same time it is sensitive to the ontology of conversion reflecting the inherent sociality of the conversion process.

The socialisation model of conversion incorporates the role model perspective and the role of affective bonds on conversion. The novice initially plays the role of the convert which seems to indicate conformity but without genuine conviction. However, it goes beyond the definition of conversion as role play and accounts for the way in which subjective conviction develops through a process of negotiation between the convert and the group.

The present study of conversion to Zen Buddhism utilises a socialisation model of conversion. However, I depart from the present socialisation theories of conversion in that in accounting for conversion to Zen I will not exclusively focus on the role of interactive processes and organisational factors but will equally take into account the symbols and the language of the group as the crucial vehicle of socialisation in the conversion process. Despite the emphasis on language, my approach varies from a narrow narrative approach. The narrative approach (Habermas, 1988) focuses on the role of the narrative as the most significant factor in defining experience. According to Yamane:

Thus, narratives are a primary linguistic vehicle through which people grasp the meaning of lived experiences by configuring and reconfiguring past experiences in ongoing stories which have certain plots or directions and which guide the interpretation of those experiences. (Yamane, 2000:183)

Therefore, from the point of view of the narrative approach to understand religious conversion we need to examine the converts' speech and particularly how they talk about religious conversion in narratives. The narrative approach focuses on the way in which subjective experiences are rendered meaningful by "emplotment in a narrative" and focuses primarily on the way in which self-transformation is achieved through the use of language in conversion narrative (Singleton, 1999). The narrative approach however emphasises the role of the conversion narrative itself as the vehicle of transformation. For example, Stromberg (1993) argues that language brings about self transformation through the changes that occur in the use of metaphorical language and their transformation into "reconstitutive" language. Rituals, according to Stromberg, create particular social realities. In conversion narrative ritual, this social reality is a particular identity, conversion narrative is the ritual through which the ideology is internalised. According to Singleton, 'as a dominant mode of cultural communication, stories themselves are instrumental in creating and sustaining the very meanings through which experience is interpreted and understood' (Singleton, 1999:21). My account of the role of language in conversion differs from a narrative analysis approach such as that of Stromberg (1993) and Singleton (1999) in that the role of language in conversion will be placed within the context of broader interactional

processes. The present account of conversion to Zen is based on the interface between the language of the social group and the interactive processes within it.

While this study incorporates the insights of the narrative approach, for instance in my treatment of the status of the converts' accounts, I take a social-psychological approach based on premises of the symbolic interactionist perspective and take into account the role of organisational context and interactive dynamics. Language is a resource of symbols which social actors use to realise meaning potential. According to the narrative theory the symbols of the group are internalised via conversion narrative rituals. I, on the other hand equally emphasise the role of interactive processes in internalising these symbols. To do otherwise is a serious oversight and the neglect of the interactive context of narration, and the role of group dynamics in the internalisation of beliefs.

The deconditioning perspective

In order to substantiate the socialisation model of conversion it is necessary to address the position which defines conversion in terms of de-socialisation or de-conditioning. According to this perspective, conversion to groups such as Zen and Yoga which utilise the practice of meditation involves processes and practices which lead to the "de-socialisation" or "de-conditioning" of the individuals (Hargrove, 1978; Bell, 1979; Wilson, 1984; Preston, 1981, 1982, 1988; McGrane, 1993).

Hargrove (1978:263) has drawn a distinction between transformative and integrative religions. Transformative religions help individuals overcome personal alienation, while integrative religions serve those who need stable social structure. According to Hargrove different modes of analysis are needed for understanding conversion into each category. Wilson has adopted Hargrove's distinction between transformative and integrative religions, and has argued that desocialisation is more dominant in conversion to transformative religions than in integrative religions (Wilson, 1984:304). Wilson claims that socialisation and deconditioning are two separate but interrelated types of conversion processes. They are similar in that both socialisation and deconditioning are learning processes. Socialisation refers to the social learning that is required when an individual becomes a member of a new group or organisation such as learning the norms and roles of

a group. However, in some religious groups in addition to the socialisation process, learning processes called deconditioning also occur. Deconditioning is defined as, ' a process where habitual and problematic ways of perceiving reality, resulting from initial socialisation, are eliminated' (Wilson, 1984:301). This is achieved through learning to respond differently at the physiological, emotional and mental level (Wilson, 1984:303).

Preston (1981, 1982, 1988) draws a distinction between mystical or meditative religions and cognitive religions, and argues that different modes of analysis are needed for understanding conversion into each category. Preston's position will be elaborated in detail since he has applied the deconditioning approach to the process of becoming a Zen practitioner which is closely related to the topic of the present study. Preston claims that:

to appreciate what is involved in "conversion" involving meditative practices [...] means going beyond socialisation theory as it is currently used, not only by sociologists concerned with the study of the causes of religious behaviour but also by those addressing how people engage in religious conversion. (Preston, 1988:69)

Preston cites McGuire's view of what is involved in conversion as a concise expression of the socialisation approach to conversion. According to McGuire:

Conversion is essentially a form of resocialisation similar to non-religious resocialisation. Through interaction with *believers*, the recruit comes to share their worldview and takes on a new self consistent with that meaning system. (McGuire, 1981, 72; emphasis added). (Preston, 1988:69)

Preston goes on to dismiss the above "constructionist approach to conversion" (citing Lofland and Skonovd (1981) and Wilson (1984) as the only acceptable exceptions) as inadequate to account for conversion in meditative groups. The reason for the inadequacy of the social learning model is because meditative settings have a "special" quality, this consists of the emphasis the meditative religions place upon direct experience as opposed to belief or analytical knowledge, as well as the experience of altered states of consciousness and the experience of a reality which is a "decided alternative" to that of everyday life (Preston, 1988:70,98). Briefly, in Zen the emphasis is "upon experience, not

belief" (Preston, 1981:53). Elsewhere Preston defines the constructivist model under the broader category of rationalist and cognitive models of social actor and claims that these approaches 'have a blind spot when it comes to ritual and its non verbal consequences' (Preston, 1982:257). This is because the meditative ritual practices lead to changes that occur 'on a pre-verbal, non-symbolic level' (Preston, 1982:260). The cognitive models of conversion on the other hand are confined to the symbolic realm where personal change occurs as a result of learning the symbolic meaning of the new areas of experience (Preston, 1982: 260). According to Preston meditative religions 'emphasise direct, intense and personal experience' (Preston, 1988:68). Conversion into cognitive groups on the other hand, is defined as being based on a detailed articulation of meaning and purpose (1988:69). Preston rejects the rationalist and cognitive theories of the social actor and models of conversion which describe it as a form of socialisation, involving role learning or the learning of a new universe of discourse, a set of symbols, meanings and new definition of the situation. According to Preston:

In contrast to cognitive models of religious conversion where the actor learns the symbolic meaning of elements in one's experience before they can influence activity, what is under consideration here are changes that occur as a result of meditative practice on a pre-verbal, non-symbolic level. (Preston, 1982:260)

According to Preston, meditative settings require their own special explanations:

It is important to see that this practice - that is, the social arrangements of meditative settings and Zen in particular - is not just re-socialisation in the sense spoken of by socialisation theories and especially constructionist theories [...] there is something special about meditative settings that does not allow them to be grasped adequately in such terms. We want to argue explicitly that knowledge and belief are less important than experience in this setting and concentration (*samadhi*) states need to be considered in some detail to be adequate to member's experience. What is occurring in meditative settings is not just the re-socialisation onto another form of local knowledge, according to the theories of Geertz and the lifeworld school of phenomenology, but rather the desocialisation (to a degree) or deconditioning of the practitioners. This process allows an experience of self that is less verbally organised, more absorbed in the immediate present, yet not less effective in the

world of practical affairs. This experience, of course, might be seen as a form of local knowledge, but it needs to be understood that this accomplishment is not simply the product of a horizontal translation from one reality to another. (Preston, 1988:97)

Preston urges a very different approach to the study of conversion in meditative settings, one that 'takes meditative practices seriously and sees them as significantly different from received notions of what occurs in conversion settings' (Preston, 1988:54). This is because becoming a Zen practitioner is different from other kinds of conversion in that it does not involve a drastic conversion involving belief change in the form of propositional knowledge, instead the individuals are encouraged to take an experimental approach and *test* the validity of Zen claims. Neither does conversion to Zen entail intensive interaction with a new reference group, 'While Zen meditation often occurs in group settings, the work is inwardly focused by each individual' (Preston, 1981:53). According to Preston, all that is provided for the practitioners in the way of socially learnt roles is the right posture, how to count the breath, rules such as maintaining silence or not looking around and the rituals governing conduct in the meditation hall. Consequently in the context of Zen practice the individual examines his or her taken-for-granted views of one's self and of reality in general. This examination constitutes a deconditioning process which is qualitatively different from "horizontally" replacing one belief system with another which is what occurs in conversion to cognitive religions and resocialisation in general. Preston, a Zen practitioner himself, reflects the general belief among my informants that meditative states, and enlightenment in particular, are the kind of experience which transcend the contingencies of history, culture, race, gender, personality and social status. Citing a contemporary Zen teacher, Yamada (1975), Preston compares Zen practice with the taste of tea which is the same for everyone, similarly, the experience of meditation is a fact free of interpretation and dogma (Preston, 1981:48).

Preston advocates the process of deconditioning as an alternative to the assumption of the socialisation theory of conversion. Preston argues that:

Seen in this way, then, meditation is a process of learning (or, better, unlearning) that can be said to involve deconditioning of both personal and socially shared habits and processes of reality construction. The process of becoming a member of a group with meditative

practices is not just the learning of a new symbolic universe and role (such as socialisation theory suggests), but a transformation of one's body and mind in the disciplined examination of the origins of one's thoughts, their close articulation with body states (feeling, emotions), and their replacement by still more thoughts and feelings. (Preston, 1988:73)

Preston claims that his approach to conversion complements and is an alternative to the cognitive theories of conversion which explain it in terms of changes in roles and universe of discourse. His theory of conversion attempts to show how ritual practices can bring about transformations in a non-cognitive way such as producing "common energies and realities" within a group, thus producing consequences which impact behaviour and consciousness in ways which differ from what cognitive theories say.

A critique of the deconditioning perspective

Preston's (1981, 1982) work provides important insight into the role of rituals in Zen conversion. Rituals create, shape, and sustain religious and spiritual experience and provide reinforcements for religious belief. In addition his views on the significance of the physiological consequences of meditation are relevant to the conversion process. However, Preston fails to adequately account for the role of social structure and the input of Zen community and belief system in the conversion process.

Preston's position presupposes the theological conviction of the Zen tradition and reflects a common assumption in the Zen tradition. This is the claim that Zen enlightenment transcends language, and that Zen enlightenment is an undistorted experience of "things as they are" thus transcending the shaping power of the religious community and its language (Preston, 1982:260; 1988:68). The metaphors commonly applied to languages are that of filter leading to distortion (Wright, 1992: 113-114). The dichotomy between mediated and unmediated contact with reality are described in terms of: "raw data" versus "meaning", "pure experience" versus "conceptual overlay", "original image" versus "blurring through conceptual filters", "pre-reflective awareness" versus "reflective categories", "primordial given" versus "linguistic construct" (Wright, 1992:117). Preston

(1988) declares that in the context of Zen practice certain extra-mundane or mystical experiences may happen, and this is also confirmed by my data and reported by several informants. However, contrary to Preston, I would argue that spiritual experience is deeply embedded in social interaction, these experiences by themselves are not necessarily significant or meaningful and require subsequent interaction with the group to be labelled and experienced as mystical or "special". Preston (1981:48) on the contrary claims that these experiences are analogous to "the taste of tea" and require no interpretation. I take the view that even one's interpretation of the taste of tea is socially constructed. Preston fails to appreciate the complexity of the relationship of the linguistic expressions of experience to the notion of "experiencing" itself. Individuals do not encounter physiological or spiritual states independent of institutional and cognitive aspects (such as theological convictions) of Zen. Spiritual realities are generally mediated through people, institutions, communities, and groups. Furthermore, the cultivation of body-mind states that Preston refers to, such as *Samadhi*, often requires years of practice; thus, in overemphasising the cultivation of certain body-mind states in accounting for Zen conversion Preston fails to account for the initial stages of Zen conversion, where no such experiences are encountered.³

The above view of the "distorting" role of language and the possibility of transcending the limitations it imposes on experience is the theoretical basis of the concept of "deconditioning" and "desocialisation". Although the notion of "deconditioning" and

³ There is a parallel between Prestons' ideal of pure experience and Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) notion of conversion motifs. Lofland and Skonovd have drawn a distinction between six different types of conversion according to their underlying "motif". According to Lofland and Skonovd conversion motifs reflect the, 'acute, qualitatively different' reality of the conversion experiences themselves, as well as reflecting the objective ways in which the social organisational aspects of conversion differ. These are intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive. Thus, different conversion experiences involve qualitatively distinct kinds of change according to their motif. Furthermore they have distinguished between three levels of reality of conversion and have argued that there is a raw experience of conversion and that there is a fit between the accounts and the raw reality of conversion. The descriptions of conversion are therefore treated as realist representations, and not as interpretations or retrospective accounts which seek to render the experiences meaningful, and which therefore change over time as the life circumstances and social context of the individual changes.

"desocialisation" are consistent with the language and assumptions of Zen Buddhism they pose problems as sociological and philosophical concepts (Moore, 1995:700). As defined and used by Preston (1988) and Wilson (1984) they are too vague. They do not offer a criterion of distinguishing the problematic from the non-problematic aspects of socialisation in order to arrive at a clear a picture of what socialised habits are to be got rid of through the deconditioning process. This leads to a further problem. In the absence of clear criteria to limit the deconditioning process one is led to believe that all socialised habits are potentially capable of being eliminated including the fundamental capacities, acquired through the socialisation process which enable communication and participation in society. Another problematic implication of the concepts of "deconditioning" and "desocialisation" is that they imply that in the process of converting to mystical or meditative religions one loses all socialised habits and learns nothing new. On the contrary, evidence that will be presented later suggests that in the process of conversion to Zen the individuals learn new habits and beliefs and these need to be accounted for in a sociological study of conversion (Moore, 1995). More crucially, notions of "deconditioning" and "desocialisation" are misleading in so far as they perceive human beings to have an independent and controlling relationship to language. The present study on the other hand takes the view that, 'Every act of use or control, whether discursive or not, is already structured for us by linguistically shaped contours of our cultural inheritance. Moreover, transcending these contours, getting back behind them, is no more desirable than it is possible' (Wright,1992:122).⁴ The very attempt to dichotomise a primordial given versus linguistic construct is untenable since human perceptions in general, including those of students of meditation, are shaped by symbols and language in particular. This rules out the possibility of a meditative leap into a realm of pre-verbal, pure experience.

⁴ The concept of desocialisation may be replaced by dereification. Moore (1995) has suggested that in the process of conversion to Zen a dereifying perspective is acquired, whereby the objects of social world are perceived to be contingent upon human perception. This has doctrinal support in the Buddhist notion of "dependent co-arising" according to which social object exists in relation to the context in which it appears, this includes the perceiver. Dereification accounts for the relevant consequences of meditation but avoids the difficulties associated with the notion of desocialisation. (Moore, 1995: 700, 719)

Conclusion

In the light of the above review of conversion theories I propose the following approach to the study of conversion to Zen. Conversion is embedded in a web of social interaction and cannot be studied as a purely subjective experience based on a phenomenological description of conversion. However, while we cannot directly access conversion we have access to the articulation of that experience by individual converts. We can also observe the interactive processes which enable and sustain the conversion process. I take the view that interactive processes are the key to understanding conversion and in order to understand the conversion process one needs to grasp the dynamics of social interaction. I will use the concept of socialisation to account for these dynamics and will endorse the view that conversion to Zen is best understood as a process of socialisation.

I suggest that the following three assumptions are relevant in theorising on conversion to Zen:

- Individuals play an active role in the conversion process.
- The process of conversion is embedded in a web of social interaction. New meaning and beliefs which are acquired in the process of conversion emerge out of a fluid dialectic between active agents and social context.
- Broader assumptions about the nature of belief, namely, meaning is emergent and negotiated rather than given and intrinsic.

In Chapter Two I will elaborate on the above assumptions and place them within the framework of a symbolic interactionist perspective.

Chapter two

The theoretical foundations

In the light of the review of the theories of conversion I suggested three fundamental assumptions which guide this inquiry. Firstly, individuals play an active role in the conversion process. Secondly, the process of conversion is embedded in a web of social interaction and emerges out of a fluid dialectic between active and purposive agents and social context. Thirdly, meanings are emergent and negotiated, rather than given or intrinsic. In the following chapter I will argue that symbolic interactionism is consistent with, and provides a satisfactory theoretical basis for these three assumptions. I will elaborate symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework of this inquiry, and discuss its epistemological and methodological implications. It must be emphasised that the choice of theory, as well as the selection of a particular problem area, represent a highly personal decision. I have chosen to employ symbolic interactionism as my theoretical perspective. Nonetheless, it would have been possible to employ any of a number of other theoretical stances such as, structural functionalism, critical theory, or ethnomethodology. Any of these alternative approaches could lead to significantly different conclusions. Although I will substantiate the choice of symbolic interactionism, nevertheless ultimately the reason for adopting the symbolic interactionist approach is based on its utility and persuasiveness and not because of its superior truth or objectivity. Like all the other beliefs that deal with ultimate or first principles such as those which define, for its holder, the nature of the "world", the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, there is no way to establish its ultimate superiority (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The symbolic interactionist approach to the understanding of human action and the process of meaning making is difficult to summarise because there are several theoretical and

methodological variations to this position. The particular approach which will inform this inquiry is the Blumer-Mead's version of symbolic interactionism as popularised by Becker, Straus and others.⁵

The symbolic interactionist perspective rests on the following three premises. First, social reality as it is sensed, known, and understood is a social production. Individuals provide their own definitions of situations and these in turn shape how they act towards physical reality and the environment (Blumer, 1969:2). Second, these meanings are derived from the social interaction (communication, broadly understood) between and amongst individuals. In the course of interaction humans negotiate to fit their behaviour with that of others. Interaction is symbolic because it involves the manipulation of symbols, words, meanings, and languages because we communicate through language and other symbols; further, in communicating we create or produce significant symbols. Third, these meanings are established and modified through an interpretive process (Blumer, 1969:2).⁶ Therefore, humans are assumed to be capable of engaging in self-reflexive behaviour. They are capable of shaping and guiding their own behaviour and that of others.

The three basic assumptions regarding the nature of conversion which I made earlier, are consistent with symbolic interactionism. The symbolic interactionist perspective accords with the first assumption of this study regarding the active role of the individual in the conversion process. Historically, symbolic interactionism has strongly advocated an active and creative view of the self. Accordingly humans are viewed as autonomous and intentional agents who construct, negotiate and sustain their social and phenomenological realities via social interaction. Human behaviour is purposive rather than mechanistic. Blumer contrasts this approach with the passivist views of the individual such as the structural functional theories in which, 'participants in the given unit of societal

⁵ For a review of variations of the symbolic interactionist position see Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Stone and Farberman, 1970; Hammersley, 1989; Denzin 1989, 1992.

⁶ It is an assumption of the symbolic interactionist perspective that people act on the basis of meanings that objects have for them. In doing so however, they do not respond to an objective reality, but to their interpretation of it. This assumption does not detract from the reality of the objects in question such as religious beliefs and practices.

organisation are logically merely media for the play and expression of the forces or mechanisms of the system itself; [in which] one turns to such forces or mechanisms to account for what takes place' (Blumer, 1969:57-58). According to the symbolic interactionist perspective however, 'the human individual confronts a world that he [*sic*] must interpret in order to act instead of an environment to which he [*sic*] responds because of his [*sic*] organisation' (Blumer, 1969:15).

At the same time, the symbolic interactionist perspective gives full attention to collective behaviour and the role of social institutions. Therefore, it is consistent with the second assumption of this study, namely that the process of conversion is embedded in a web of social interaction. Society contributes two essential elements that reflect directly on concrete interactions: firstly, through the process of socialisation the individual is taught the symbols and the language of the social group to which she or he belongs, and secondly, the concrete behavioural settings which it offers provide the context of interaction (Denzin, 1970:7). Therefore in order to understand meaning we need to understand the symbolic meanings and the way they are translated into and emerge out of interaction, in other words we need to understand both symbols and interaction. This is consistent with the assumption that conversion is not a pure or decontextualised experience, rather it is fully situated and contextual. It is impossible to discover what the "pure" conversion experience is, assuming that such a thing exists. The very notion of "pure" experience assumes that there exists an area of human experience which transcends social structure and conditioning. Rather, human experience is embedded in social interaction and is by definition shaped by it; the relationship between the two is not deterministic but there is a constant dialectic between human experience and the person's environment. The symbolic interactionist tradition addresses this dialectic of self and society, it is particularly emphasised in processual interactionism⁷ which maintains that self and society interpenetrate, and the social situation

⁷ This refers to the distinction between two major strands within the symbolic interactionist tradition. These vary in their view of self and society as well as on methodological issues. The processual interactionist (Chicago school) has a humanist/interpretive orientation, the structural interactionist (Iowa school) a more positivistic orientation (Gecas, 1982:10). This study will follow the assumptions of the processual interactionism in viewing the self as creative and self-reflexive while including the crucial role of organisational factors in the conversion process.

is the context in which identities are established and maintained through the process of negotiation. This reflects Mead's view of self as in flux and identity as something that actors negotiate endlessly:

The individual realises himself [*sic*] in so far as, in some sense, he [*sic*] sees himself [*sic*] and hears himself [*sic*]. He [*sic*] looks in the glass and sees himself [*sic*]; he [*sic*] speaks and hears himself [*sic*]. It is this sort of situation in which the individual is both subject and object. But, in order to be both subject and object, he [*sic*] has to pass from one phase to another. The self involves a process that is going on, that takes one form and now another - a subject-object relationship which is dynamic, not static, a subject-object relationship which has a process behind it, one which can appear now in this phase, now in that. (Mead, 1964:13)

The emphasis on our embeddedness in social structure does not rule out the agency of the individual. Indeed, subjectivity and social structure are best understood as complementary. The interactionist framework requires a view of the individual as an active agent within the context of the social world. Approaches that focus too exclusively on the individual's subjective experience and agency fail to acknowledge the impact of social and linguistic context on experience and vice versa. The rejection of a rigid conceptual dichotomy of individual versus society and subject versus object is central to the symbolic interactionist tradition. The creation of meaning is a consequence of this fluid interaction and is perceived as simultaneously as, 'a personal and a collective accomplishment on the part of the situated, social actors' (Straus, 1979:162).

Discussing Mead's social psychology Blumer notes, 'A society is seen as people meeting the varieties of situations that are thrust upon them by their conditions of life [...] by working out joint actions' (Blumer, 1966:542). The dialectic between the self and the society which is at the heart of symbolic interactionism provides the analytical tools which I need to conceptualise the interface between agency and structure in the process of conversion to Zen Buddhism. I argued in Chapter One that negotiating a new identity in conversion can be best explained as an instance of socialisation. The symbolic interactionist tradition offers a description of the dynamics involved in socialisation (Mead, 1934; Berger & Luckmann, 1966a). It is through the interaction of self and society that

meaning systems are created and sustained. This perspective shifts the analysis from narrowly focusing on the constraining role of social structure to include the active role of individuals in using social structure in the creation of meaning.

The dialectic between self and society is the basis of my socialisation theory of conversion. This particular approach to socialisation enables an active interpretation of the role of converts as they engage in negotiating a new identity through interpreting and internalising meanings that are offered by the religious community (Thumma, 1991:334). Meaning systems are created and sustained through the interaction of self and society. According to Thumma:

The social group is still seen as having a formative function, but it is no longer perceived as the only force in socialisation. It remains a source for social meaning and, at the same time, limits the contents of one's identity through group forms and the availability of role models. But conversion, and identity change, becomes better understood as a product of negotiation between the individual and the social context (Straus, 1976). While social interaction and involvement with others is necessary for the validation and maintenance of a revised identity, the individual is seen as the active agent. (Thumma, 1991:336)

From this perspective conversion is, 'the accomplishment of an actively strategising seeker' who interacts with the group with the attitude of treating it as a resource in order to bring about meaningful changes in his or her own experience (Straus, 1979:158).

Mead's notion of "generalised other" is a useful term for conceptualising the relationship between self and society and accounting for the constraining role of the social structure in a non-deterministic way. According to Mead the emergence of self is influenced by the "generalised other" and its expression in the norms, values, and beliefs of a group:

It is in the form of the generalised other that the social process influences the behaviour of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, that is, that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social processes of community enter as a determining factor into the individuals' thinking. (Mead, 1934:155)

According to the above statement social organisations provide a framework inside which people construct their actions but it does not determine their actions. The interplay between the two aspects of the self, the "I" and the "Me", as the explanatory basis of socialisation theory enables a successful conceptualisation of the interface between the individual and the organisational level of analysis. The attitudes of the others towards the individual constitutes the "Me", the "Me" is the agent of social control. The "I" is the individual's response towards the "Me" and is the source of agency and change (Rose, 1962:12). The two parts of self complement each other, both for the individual and the society:

Action and interaction are seen primarily as indeterminate because of the unpredictable "I" and the problem involved in aligning actions. The construction of identities for self and others in the situation is always a problematic activity based on a tenuous consensus of the participants. (Gecas, 1982: 10-11)

The symbolic interactionist perspective enables me to conceptualise the third assumption of this study, namely the negotiated character of meaning. This study adopts an interpretivist approach towards meaning construction and aims for understanding the process of becoming a Zen practitioner by interpreting the meaning it has for individuals who have had this experience. The interpretivist tradition in sociology is based on phenomenological sociology, philosophical hermeneutics and the work of ordinary language philosophers and it is consistent with the assumptions of processual interactionism (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:12-15). Integral to processual interactionism is the view that:

man's [*sic*] social world is not constituted of objects that have intrinsic meaning, but that the meaning of objects lies in man's [*sic*] plans of action. Human experience is such that the process of defining objects is ever-changing, subject to redefinitions, relocations, and realignments, and for conduct toward any object to be meaningful, the definition of the object must be consensual. (Denzin, 1970:7)

Furthermore, according to the interactionist approach the construction of meaning involves interaction with others. Since individual experience and social context are interdependent, meaning is grounded in community. Language is a crucial factor in the overall process of

meaning construction. Although some symbols such as gestures or rituals can be non verbal, the most important symbols are expressed in language. The language of the social group is used in interaction to construct meaning and it provides the individuals with interpretive frameworks. Within the symbolic interactionist tradition the emphasis on the role of language dates back to Mead's analysis of the role of language on human development and action.⁸

The above position on the emergent nature of meaning echoes the poststructuralist approach to language (Wright, 1992:121). By poststructuralist I mean the view that the structures and "truths" that govern our experience are contingent upon social and historical circumstances. The poststructuralist approach to language may be contrasted with the referential ideology of meaning, namely the view that language simply represents experience, that language points to an independent reality which it can convey without distorting it (Stromberg, 1993:6-9). I reject the referential ideology and argue that language is present at the level of non theoretical experience, language is not therefore to be located at the level of concepts and predictions only. Concepts are also present at the level of perception in such a way that perception, language and thinking are all interdependent. Language structures the "cognitive context" of human perception in general, it also gives meaning and significance to the everyday function of distinction and understanding. This view of the role of language challenges the "myth of the given", namely our ability to access a non-interpreted or "raw" reality. Nor do we have the ability to control the shaping power of language since, 'Every act of use or control, whether discursive or not, is already structured for us by linguistically shaped contours of our cultural inheritance' (Wright, 1992:122). Contrary to the view that language is a barrier, a filter or a lens which may be bypassed, language is not an avoidable and optional element in human experience. Language and experience interpenetrate each other in such a way that the two are interdependent. My approach entails a rejection of the dichotomy between immediate given data of experience and the subsequent interpretations of the data (Wright, 1992:121). This position is based on Heidegger's (1962) rejection of the dichotomy between the reality and

⁸ There are other approaches to the relationship between language and the self not based on a Meadian framework such as Lacan (1970) and Sebeok (1979). I use Mead's approach because it furnishes the concept of socialisation which I will use to account for the conversion process.

our interpretations of it, elaborating Heidegger's position Wright has argued that:

whenever we encounter something, we encounter it "as" something in particular. We see this as a book, that as a door, and so on. Anything not experienced as something in particular (or in general) is simply not experienced. Because this hermeneutical "as" is linguistically shaped, language is always implicated in our experience. Language, and its entire history of involvement in thought and practice, functions to set up a context of significance within which perceptions occurs. By means of language, the world (the given) is focused and organised in advance of every encounter with entities, persons, or situations. Thus, when we see something, we have already interpreted it -- immediately -- as whatever it is. Assigning it an interpretation is not something we do after seeing it. It is the very shape that seeing has already taken. In Heidegger's terms then interpretation is not an additional procedure that we conduct upon the "given". Instead, it constitutes the basic structure of our "being in the world". (Wright, 1992:121-122)

Berger maintains a similar position arguing that:

the fact of language [...] can readily be seen as the imposition of order upon experience. Language nominises by imposing differentiation and structure upon the ongoing flux of experience. As an item of experience is named, it is *ipso facto*, taken out of this flux and given stability as the entity so named. (1969:20)

Rorty (1979) has also criticised the representational or referential theory of language and has argued that language is not a "mirror of reality" in the sense that "reality" does not necessarily determine its expression in language. On the contrary the articulation of an experience in language is "relatively autonomous" from the event itself, therefore there may exist multiple interpretations of the same experience. Similarly, Wittgenstein (1958) rejected the referential view of language which characterised his earlier work as an oversimplification of the relationship between language and reality. His earlier view of language (1921) as a "representing medium" which conveyed how things are in the world and hence a "picture theory of language" was replaced by the notion of language as essentially a "tool" or a "game" which is developed in given social contexts in an ongoing fashion and which is dependent on other aspects of the society. Any given language can

therefore be assessed in terms of its utility or failure within its specific social context and there are no all-embracing criteria of assessment to which we can appeal. The views of Wittgenstein are echoed in a more recent argument put forward by Stromberg (1993). This draws a distinction between the referential ideology as opposed to the referential processes, the latter are crucial to human communication:

referential meanings are simply areas of stability in the constantly fluctuating use of communicative symbols. Once one has gotten beyond the habit of attributing to these areas a real existence, one can then grant their significance as *patterns of use*. That is, referential processes are regularities in use that are of enormous social import. (Stromberg, 1993:9)

This approach rejects the definition of the referential meanings in terms of their utility or ability to accurately reflect a pristine world. The referential processes are therefore to be restricted to the domain of consensual meaning within a community. The implication of this view of language is the rejection of naive epistemological realism about the capacity of language to transparently represent experience and the corresponding naive realism in social sciences aimed at accurately describing and explaining a phenomena such as conversion.⁹ Instead, this entails adopting an interpretivist approach concerned with understanding the meaning of conversion or how people make conversion meaningful and to appreciate how this meaning is conveyed.

According to Denzin (1970) the sociological enterprise rests on three interrelated activities: theory, method and substantive interests:

Theory cannot be judged independently of research activity. Research methods are of little use until they are seen in the light of a theoretical perspective. Substantive speciality is of little use or no interest until it is firmly embedded within a theoretical framework and grounded upon sound research strategies. (Denzin, 1970: 4)

⁹ Lofland and Skonovd's (1981:375) position is an example of such an approach. They distinguish between different levels of reality in conversion and social reality in general. The first level of reality constitutes the "raw reality" of conversion experience, they claim that there is often a "good fit" between the actual, "raw" experience and the converts' accounts of it. This line of argument presupposes a split between "reality" and language, the constructivist view which has been adopted in this study on the other hand maintains that language and experience interpenetrate.

Different theories presuppose different ontological and epistemological positions and therefore different models of reality and social reality in particular. These in turn generate different propositions about the ways in which we think we can know the social reality and the ways in which we think it ought to be studied. As Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) have correctly pointed out the theoretical frameworks are "goggles" through which the researcher looks at the symbolic reality and interprets it accordingly. For example, if we believe that social reality exists as meaningful interaction between individuals then in order to understand it we need to find out about the interpretation and meanings that individuals assign to it (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995).

The interactionist perspective that I have adopted not only has consequences for the methods which I have employed but defines the epistemological status of this research. In addition it determines the way in which I have formulated the research problem, since conversion to a religious meaning system may be looked at in a number of different ways. The way in which I have set out to tackle the research question is itself theoretically driven. Therefore, having clearly articulated the symbolic interactionist presuppositions which have informed this research, I can now systematically explore the implications of my theoretical perspective for my choice of the strategies of inquiry which I adopted to obtain the information necessary to carry out the present research. I take the view that *how* knowledge is acquired, organised, and interpreted is relevant to the claims that are made. Then I will elaborate on the epistemological implications of the symbolic interactionist perspective for the status of the findings of the present study.

The methodological implications of symbolic interactionism

Methods are tools which are used to, 'gather observations, to test, modify, and develop theory' (Denzin, 1970:14). The choice of methods are informed by the researchers' theoretical perspective. Research methods in turn imply different modes of approaching the study of reality and reveal or emphasise particular elements of reality investigated. Surveys and participant observation for instance are theoretical tools, the former suits a stable picture of social reality, the latter suits a reality in continuous change.

Demand for an ethnographic approach

It is a requirement of the symbolic interactionist perspective that inquiry must be grounded in the empirical world under investigation, this entails studying people in their natural environment. Acquiring an intimate knowledge of the subjects' perspective, and understanding the emic point of view, requires entering the world of those who live the experience. To do this I adopted a qualitative approach based on ethnography and participant observation as methodological strategies. I asked the informants to present their experience as they had them first hand. The final result of analysis was a series of research findings which I will elaborate in Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis.

It is important to note that although the symbolic interactionist perspective demands an ethnographic approach the reverse is not necessarily the case, there is no single relationship between ethnography and a single theoretical perspective such as symbolic interactionism. For instance, ethnomethodology, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism represent different attempts to confront empirical reality from the perspective of those who are being studied (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994:257).

In the following section I will sketch the interface between symbolic interactionism and the ethnographic approach. There is an affinity between the interactionist's activist view of social actor and the emphasis on the emergent and socially constructed character of meaning and participant observation and fieldwork (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:257). It is a fundamental tenet of symbolic interactionism that people act on the basis of meanings that objects have for them. They do not respond to an objective reality or to how others perceive it, but rather to how they interpret it. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the processes by which meaning is constructed, negotiated, sustained and modified within a specific context of human action (Blumer 1969:81). Human beings experience reality through their definitions of it, irrespective of the "objective" nature of things, these definitions in turn alter in relation to their experience of it. These subjective views and conceptions of reality are constitutive of our experience of reality. If we accept this view then it must be

acknowledged that we can gain access to the objective world only through our socially negotiated subjective views of it.

Thus, the most fundamental source of knowledge is the personal accounts and interpretations that individuals hold about the world (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995). The implication of this approach for my method of studying conversion is that data is not treated as representations of fixed, objective and transparent experiences available for social inquiry. The symbolic interactionist perspective entails an approach to research activity that is based on naturalistic behaviourism (Mead, 1934). According to this, in order to understand social life we need to enter the world of interacting individuals and put ourselves in the position of the actors we study. To actively enter their worlds and look at the world with them to see the situation as it is seen by them by taking the role of the other in concrete situations. This may involve learning the language of the culture one studies. This is consistent with an ethnographic approach which aims for understanding the emic point of view that is the actors' definition of a situation, for *verstehen*, the world of lived reality constructed by the actor in particular times and places through prolonged interaction. Althied and Johnson have defined ethnography in the following way:

Most ethnographers focus on the processes that members used in constructing or creating their activities [...] This focus on what some have termed the "definition of the situation" was oriented to meanings and interpretations of members.

Ethnography involves deep immersion and is seldom accomplished in short periods of time. It is a special kind of description, not to be confused with qualitative and descriptive studies of another kind. The goal of ethnography, as Malinowski put it, is "to grasp the native's point of view, his [*sic*] relation to life, to realize his [*sic*] vision of his [*sic*] world". (Althied & Johnson, 1994:487)

The term naturalistic behaviourism is adopted from Mead's statement on social behaviourism (1934) which directs the researcher to link the symbols with interaction, hence the term symbolic interaction. Symbols are fundamental to understanding human action since humans are able to act because they have agreed on the meaning that they attach to the relevant objects in their environment. A requirement of this consensus is that

common symbolic languages must be present. Naturalistic behaviourism therefore incorporates observation of human behaviour at two levels, the symbolic and the behavioural, this involves understanding the symbolic meaning shared by interacting selves in social situations. From this perspective, to achieve the goals of research activity, symbols and interactions must be included in the study. This leads to an understanding of the symbolic meaning that emerges from the observation of interactions and the behaviour of individuals. According to Denzin:

Symbols are manifold and complex, verbal and nonverbal, intended and unintended. Verbal utterances, nonverbal gesture, mode and style of dress, and manner of speech all provide clues to the symbolic meanings that become translated into and emerge out of interaction. (Denzin, 1970:7)

The qualitative and ethnographic approach to the study of conversion adopted by this study will accommodate the fluid character of social interaction and the emergent and negotiated character of meaning. Theory development will balance understanding the insiders' perspective and rigorous analysis. This is achieved through including the language and definitions of the informants and paying attention to the social dynamics and interactive processes which enable the creation and maintenance of the meaning and particular interpretation of experience.

The interpretive and meaning centred approach of this study raises the issue of the analytical status of the converts' accounts which is the topic of the following section.

The analytical status of the convert's accounts

The analytical status of converts' accounts relates to the issue of how the informants' accounts of their experience should be utilised in a research such as this, and what status should they be assigned. This has been a subject of controversy. Some sociological analyses of conversion have argued that the converts' subjective meaning and experiences should be taken literally as a valid source of insight into the grounds and motivation for conversion (Staple & Mauss, 1987; Bruce & Wallis, 1983). Others have rejected this

approach and have argued that accounts of conversion are carefully constructed according to the converts' theological convictions and other guidelines provided by the religious groups (Beckford, 1978; Snow & Machalek, 1984). My position on the status of accounts is informed by the assumptions of symbolic interactionism and in particular my perspective on the negotiated character of meaning. This implies that experience is contingent upon, and mediated through, a person's socio-culturally constructed categories for understanding. These categories influence individuals accounts of their experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1966a).

I take the view that the self-reported accounts of conversion are 'artfully accomplished constructions' which reflect and are consistent with the theological guidelines of what experiences constitute religious conversion. Therefore, the converts' accounts of their conversion is a "rehearsed script" (Beckford, 1978) rather than an undistorted representation of the actual or "raw" conversion experience (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981). Although I will treat converts' accounts as factual reports of their conversion experience, this realist premise does not imply that the converts' accounts are objective or unambiguous representations of a conversion event. The relationship between the accounts and the original conversion event is problematic because, 'a conversion experience is a combination of historical events and the person's immediate and subsequent relations to those events' (Stromberg, 1993:14). The analysis cannot assume that the conversion experience is identical with the way in which it was subsequently narrated. To do so is to assume that conversion accounts transparently reflect the experience of the convert, thus failing to take into consideration the gap between cultural productions and personal experiences (Geertz, 1986:377-78).

According to Yamane, all narratives spoken and written are constituted of the following three elements: First, they involve selecting specific events and experiences for consideration out of a number of possibilities. Second, these events are temporally ordered; and finally the imposition of a "moral order" on the events:

A sequence of experiences can only be a *meaningful* sequence if they are ordered and reordered according to some overarching theme (Miller 1990:69). Frequently, these themes

are drawn from culturally-available and acceptable "vocabulary of motives" genres, or myths (Wuthnow 1997; Lawson 1997; Stromberg 1994). Ricouer (1991) has used the term "emplotment" to designate this crucial element: not only are experiences and events placed in a sequence, but they are set in motion toward some end goal, given a purpose in the context of the individual's life; in short, they are made meaningful. (Yamane, 2000:183)

Therefore, subjective accounts do not represent the experience in its "pure" form. Rather, any account of a experience is based on retrospection and is always cast in linguistic categories and the two are only loosely related. In addition, the linguistic representation of experience is to some degree constitutive of the experience as well as transforming the lived experience, hence such accounts fall short of capturing the "essence" of the lived experience (Yamane, 2000:173,175). Berger expresses a similar view:

the fact of language [...] can readily be seen as the imposition of order upon experience. Language minimises by imposing differentiation and structure upon the ongoing flux of experience. As an item of experience is named, it is *ipso facto*, taken out of this flux and given stability as the entity so named. (Berger, 1969:20-cited in Yamane, 2000:175)

Yamane's (2000:174-175) analysis of the nature of experience is relevant in substantiating this position. Following Turner (1986) and Dilthey (1976), Yamane draws a firm distinction between actively experiencing something on the one hand, and retrospective reflections on the experience on the other. Drawing on this distinction, Yamane argues that one cannot experience and reflect on the experience at the same time. It is only when the flow of experience is stopped that one can separate a particular aspect of the experience from the rest and reflect on it, meaning is thus assigned retrospectively (Schutz, 1932:45-52). According to Yamane, 'While experiencing is a constant temporal flow from the standpoint of an individual and therefore *cannot be directly studied*, an experience is "the intersubjective articulation of experience" (Burner, 1989:6) and therefore can be studied' (Yamane, 2000:174). Kilbourne and Richardson have expressed a similar view of the conversion experience and accounts of it:

Thus, religious conversion is not an occurrence, like fossilisation or the orbit of a planet, which will occur independent of human experience. The process of religious conversion

as well as the attribution of its cause(s) cannot be understood apart from actor and audience perspective. Converts need the social standards of some reference group (Greil and Rudy, 1984a) against which to measure themselves before their privately made or publicly proclaimed self-attribution of having converted acquire credibility to either themselves or to others. (1989: 15)

Therefore, the original conversion experiences which occasion the interpretation are neither raw, nor uninterpreted, but involve socially transmitted images, language or views which are shaped by the language and culture of the religious community (Ellwood, 1980:141).

The above approach to the status of the converts' accounts is based on a more fundamental assumption on the nature of the relationship between language and experience. This view was elaborated on earlier in my rejection of the referential theory of language and is based on a modified version of Sapier-Whorf (Mandelbaum, 1951; Carroll, 1957) hypothesis. This rejects language as a "neutral tool" or medium for communication and argues that language shapes our perception and interpretation of experience (Schwalbe, 1983:293).¹⁰ Kerby (1991) writing about narrative of the self, puts the argument in this manner, 'language is viewed not simply as a tool for communicating or mirroring back what we otherwise discover in our reality, but itself is an important formative part of that reality, part of its very texture' (1991: 2). Applied to the case of Zen one may argue that the "language games" of the Zen tradition, also employed by the Zen groups in this study, shape the concerns, practices and the experiences of Zen practitioners. Thus:

Zen monks would be pictured as participating in the shared concerns of the monastic community which were constituted and presented in the language they spoke and in the linguistically shaped practices and activities that held them together in their game - the pursuit of "awakening". Their language provided a medium with which this common enterprise could take shape and directed each of them toward the always evolving image of excellence that is projected. (Wright, 1992:124)

¹⁰ Kuhn (1964) considers the Sapier-Whorf-Casirer hypothesis as 'preliminary to symbolic interactionism' and has described it as a 'theory behind a theory'. According to Schwalbe this view of the relationship between language and self are taken for granted premises in areas such as labelling theory, role theory and discussions of identity (Schwalbe, 1983:303).

A similar point of view is also expressed by both Heidegger and Wittgenstein on the social background of thought. According to Heidegger:

Communication [...] is not the transmission of individual thoughts and desires from the interior of one autonomous person to another. It is rather a reciprocally influential interaction within shared contexts of significance established and maintained in language. (Heidegger, 1962:sec.34-cited in Wright, 1992:124)

Similarly, Wittgenstein (1958) understood discourse as participation in diverse "language games". Therefore the assumption that the language of the religious community *mediates* the experience of conversion is well supported. The implication of the above view on language for my study is that it shifts the focus from experience of conversion to their expression in language, because I cannot study the experience itself I am confined to the study of the retrospective accounts of conversion. Thus this study will give full attention to the role of language in the way in which converts make sense of their experience.

The religious group provides the individuals with guidelines for interpreting experiences such as those involved in conversion. Bouma and Clyne (1995) have extended this view to learning of the culture in general arguing that:

Church attenders are taught what to believe, what to do, and what to say by their religious communities [...] it is not that one learns what to believe and the rest follows. Rather, members are taught what range of beliefs, actions and verbal expressions are expected, what the relationship is between these elements of social life, and when each is appropriate. This is true not only of religious communities but of all the learning of the culture of a group. (Bouma & Clyne, 1995:143)

Therefore, the converts' self reported accounts of conversion are shaped by ideological and organisational constraints of the religious group and hence constructed according to a set of guidelines provided by their religious organisation, which teaches "appropriate" ways of talking about conversion. The converts' accounts are created after the event and shaped by subsequent analysis and interpretation. This view of conversion accounts is consistent with the symbolic interactionist assumptions of this study namely, individual self is fully

situated in community, culture, history, and language.

Because language is a communal or social practice, rather than grounding meaning in the private sphere of the individual subject (personal intuitions, intentions, desires, and so forth), the fundamental importance of the shared language of the religious tradition will be stressed. Therefore in studying conversion to Zen Buddhism I go beyond the subjective realm and look at the sociological aspects of religious experience and in particular the ways in which group processes help structure and evoke conversion experiences. It is only in the recognition of the interplay between the retrospective interpretation within specific social contexts that an accurate account of conversion may be generated.

The above perspective on the relationship between language and experience requires qualification in two ways. Although the converts' accounts are constructed according to guidelines which the groups offer to their members for making sense of and interpreting their experiences, this does not imply that the conversion stories are replicas of the groups' ideology. The ideological guidelines offered by the religious community do not determine the converts' accounts, rather they provide a guideline which individuals then utilise in constructing their conversion experience. Schwalbe's suggestion that language should be approached as language-in-use, a tool humans use to organise their experience is useful in avoiding a deterministic view of the role of the language in shaping conversion accounts. According to this the use of languages, 'are not seen as directing human behaviour, but as responses that are skilfully or not so skilfully called forth to facilitate action on the part of a conscious subject' (Schwalbe, 1983:294). This is done through offering a "central theme" or a framework which individuals use to "align" their accounts of experiences with (Snow & Rochford, 1983:176). Furthermore, the assumption that the converts' accounts are mediated representations of experience, does not entail a sharp division between experience on the one hand and the representation of experience in language on the other, the former as objective while the latter as merely subjective reports. There is no such thing as unmediated experience. Retrospective interpretations of conversion are not interpretations of some "raw" or uninterpreted experience of conversion, rather, the social worlds in which we participate affect the way in which we can have a meaningful experience of conversion.

Methodological agnosticism

Another issue which is related to my perspective on the converts' account is the suspension of theological judgements. The *verstehen* approach of this study enables me to utilise and retain the subjective factors in conversion, however, it does not make any assumptions about their validity.¹¹ My treatment of the converts' accounts as after the fact interpretations of the conversion experience neither denies nor confirms the informants' purported transcendental experiences and theological beliefs. I take the view that a sociological analysis of conversion to Zen must exclude ideological and definitional judgements and to be methodologically agnostic. This study will suspend judgement on the ultimate truth of the informants beliefs and claims, and focuses instead on identifying these beliefs and explaining under what circumstances and how these beliefs come to be taken as real by the informants, regardless of their ultimate reality or truth (Barker, 1995:295). More generally, sociological analyses of Zen including the present study, can claim proficiency only within a limited area and does not address the validity of claims such as purported spiritual insights, or the direct transcendental consciousness of the ultimate reality resulting from Zen practice.

The suspension of theological judgements has been criticised: firstly, on the grounds that it is *a priori* inadequate; and secondly, it has been argued that an agnostic approach will lead to an inadequate appreciation or understanding of the beliefs it purports to study. I will provide a critique of both objections. According to Eliade (1963), interpreting religion means presenting its irreducibly transcendental meaning for believers, treating religions as fully situated in social, cultural and linguistic contexts on the other hand, cannot accommodate its transcendental aspect. Thus, although Eliade admits the utility of approaching the religious phenomenon from a different perspective, he maintains that 'it must be looked at first of all in itself'. According to Eliade:

¹¹ An example of an approach which fails to suspend judgement regarding the validity of belief is Stark and Bainbridge's position on the status of the state of "clear" in Scientology. They draw an analogy between clear and *satori* in Zen Buddhism and assert that these beliefs are evidently false. Then they set out to articulate the conditions which has led individuals to adopt these false beliefs (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980).

A religious phenomenon will only be recognised as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it -- the element of the sacred. (Eliade, 1963:xii)

Contrary to Eliade's contention, that a study such as mine is reductionist and therefore inadequate, it is my argument that my interpretation of conversion is not *a priori* inadequate, my approach does not entail a denial of the transcendental elements in religion, it simply brackets the truth or falsity of these claims. Segal has demonstrated that once a distinction is drawn between the reducibility of one theory to another as distinct from the irreducibility of one phenomenon to another, one can argue that 'a scientific explanation of a phenomenon does not dissolve the phenomenon itself but only accounts for it' (Segal, 1983:115). Furthermore, a distinction must be made between the truth of a statement and an assessment of the circumstances under which that statement is made. The perspective which views religious conversion as a human achievement which is rooted in particular social processes can have nothing to say about the possibility that conversion may be related to something other than these social processes. The study of the social structures which support Zen meaning and practice is not intended to have any bearing for the validity or truth of the beliefs in question. The question of truth and falsity of beliefs is outside the realm of sociology, the latter deals with the sociological reasons for people adopting certain beliefs. To argue for the situatedness of religions in specific social contexts does not exclude the truth of their claims, nor rules out the possibility that religious convictions may have an ultimate status independent of human interpretations of it (Berger, 1967:181). Rather, the view of religion as a human product is the starting point. According to Berger:

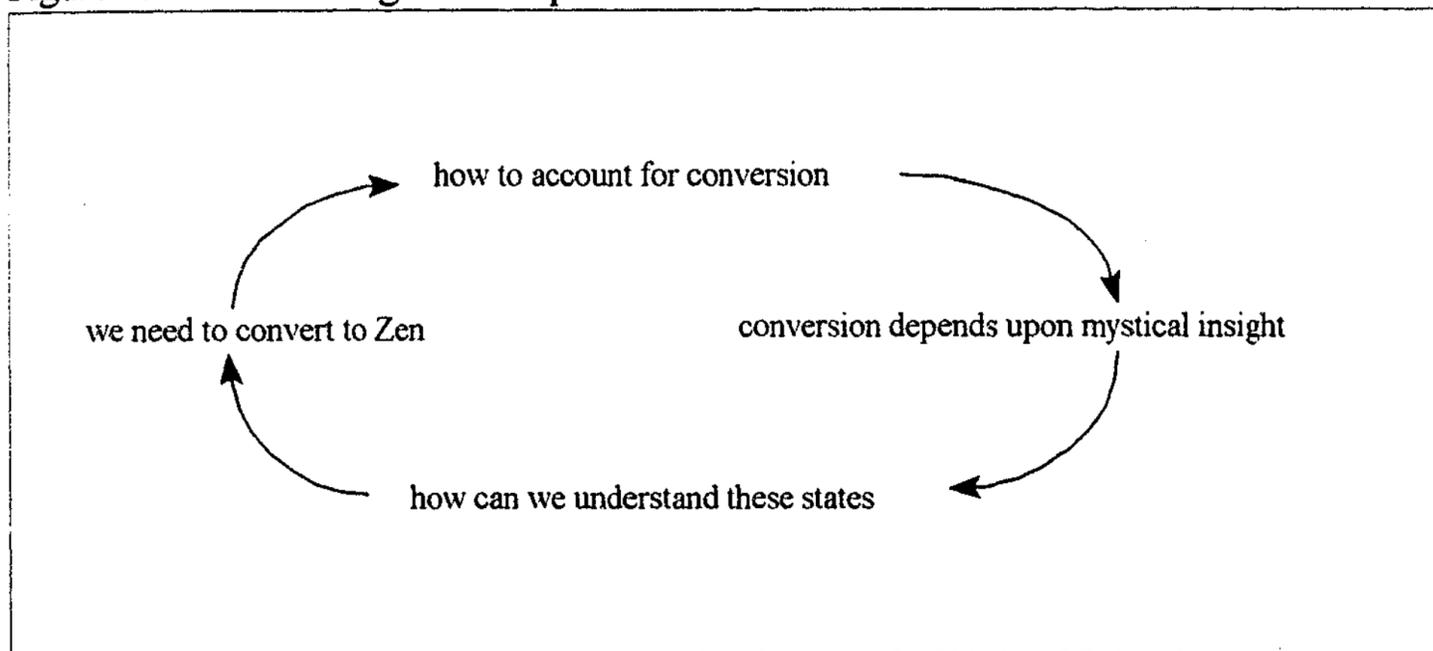
Only after the theologian has confronted the historical relativity of religion can he [*sic*] genuinely ask where in this history it may, perhaps, be possible to speak of discoveries - discoveries, that is, that transcend the relative character of their infrastructures. And only after he [*sic*] has really grasped what it means to say that religion is a human product or projection can he [*sic*] begin to search, within this array of projections, for what may turn out to be signals of transcendence. (Berger, 1967:188)

This study deals with sociological processes by which the Zen meaning system comes to be taken as real by its practitioners, regardless of the reality or truth of the beliefs or experiences in question. The ultimate status of purported mystical insights resulting from Zen practice will rely on answers coming from theology and the philosophy of religion. At the same time, I will argue that these changes cannot be understood in isolation from the individual's embrace of the convert role and a particular normative perspective.

Eliade's second objection is also untenable. According to this an agnostic approach to the study of religion leads to an inadequate understanding of the phenomena studied and to appreciate the meaning of religion it has to be appreciated in the believer's own terms. It is my contention that religion is a multifaceted phenomena and can be looked at from different angles. The present study looks at conversion and offers an analysis of this subject from a sociological, and more specifically a symbolic interactionist perspective. The present study of conversion to Zen is not intended, nor can it, exhaust the meaning of Zen for its practitioners. Although it is too extreme to claim that the meaning of a religion can only be understood from within, nor is it the case that all that is important about a religion is available to a study such as this, or that a sociological study holds a monopoly on the truth of conversion to Zen. I am conscious of the limitations that this may introduce into the analysis and it neither challenges, nor diminishes analyses of conversion made from a theological perspective.

Contrary to Eliade's (1959) contention, it is my argument that the bracketing of the ultimate truth of Zen claims has the advantage of leading to an account of conversion to Zen with a broader validity in the sense that it can be understood by non-Zen Buddhists. An interpretation of conversion such as mine is the only one that can be understood by those who do not share the converts' faith in the transcendental reality of Zen (Segal, 1983:114). Therefore, this approach produces a model of Zen conversion which is more generally appreciated and understood. An account of conversion which incorporates the theological conviction of the converts on the other hand has a limited explanatory power and may be circular in the following way:

Figure 2.1: The Non-Agnostic Explanations of Conversion are Circular



Such "insider's" accounts of conversion to Zen tend to appeal to convictions of the religious traditions they study to back up their claims (for example, Preston, 1985:76). The present study of conversion on the other hand need not convince the reader that the beliefs adopted by Zen converts are ultimately true. The objective is to describe and communicate the informants' experience of conversion to Zen in broader terms, which can be transmitted to a broader audience who do not share the assumption, beliefs and experiences of Zen practitioners. Thus in addition to presenting extracts of the informants' accounts I have also interpreted or translated these accounts. I have not engaged in interpretation and translation in the sense of being untruthful to my informants and their accounts and experiences. Rather to represent their stories in sociological terms, thus blending "phenomenological fidelity" with "analytic distance" which is a requirement of the social scientific approach (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981; Barker, 1995). Denzin (1970) has made a similar distinction between everyday and scientific concepts. He has argued that scientific concepts meet the following criteria:

They must be consensually defined within the community of scientists [...] Everyday concepts seldom possess this quality; often they are not consensually defined, and most frequently they refer to what is sensed, not what is analysed. Furthermore, the everyday concept lacks the development toward systematisation that the scientific concept must have. In short, the scientific concept is continually evaluated by the canons of science; the everyday concept is evaluated by its ability to give order to the life of its users -- everyday

people [...] In contrast to everyday commonsense terms, scientific concepts have careers, demand consensual, scientific definition, and are assessed by their ability to fit into and generate theory. They open the way for new perspective, while commonsense terms only validate and reinforce what is known. (1970:53, 56)

Thus, sociological analysis and concepts in addition to having everyday relevance, in the sense of being derived from closely studying the interacting individuals, must also have a meaning that is strictly sociological.

The epistemological implications of interpretivist approach

In the following section I will elaborate on some of the consequences of my interpretivist assumptions for the status of this study and its validity. It is a tenet of the interpretivist approach that to understand the actors' construction of social reality one must interpret it. This is achieved by elucidating the process of meaning construction, and clarifying what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of the actors while avoiding the "fallacy of objectivism" (Denzin:1970) that is the substitution of my own perspective for that of the people I studied. Therefore this interpretation is my construction of the constructions I have been studying (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Minichiello *et al.*, 1995). Research is always a construction because the researcher has to put himself or herself into the research and interpret what he or she sees or hears. This raises the issue of the validity of the present study as itself a construction, and the criteria for distinguishing it from other constructions such as the actors' own accounts,

My point of departure in discussing the criteria of validity which informs this study is the positivist perspective (Althied & Johnson, 1994:487). According to the positivist perspective an indicator of validity is reliability. Repeatable and generalisable methods and findings are the reliable ones. Philosophical hermeneutics, or post-structuralism are among some of the responses to the positivist approach (Guba, 1990). These have argued that all knowledge is a construction and therefore contingent upon social and historical factors, thus posing serious challenges for the possibility of universally valid social scientific knowledge which is reliable in the sense of reflecting the nature of social reality accurately.

The constructivist position when pushed to an extreme leads to radical scepticism and relativism (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994:252). This study strives for a position between positivism and radical relativism. For instance, the findings of this research are not generalisable since the subjects were not selected randomly from the entire population of Zen Buddhists in Australia (Reichardt & Cook, 1979). Nor does it meet the criteria of comparability and transferability thus reducing its external validity.¹² LeCompte and Goetz offer the following definition of comparability and transferability:

Comparability requires that the ethnographer delineate the characteristics of the group studies or constructs generated so clearly that they can serve as a basis for comparison with other like and unlike groups (Wolcott, 1973). Transferability assumes that research method, analytic categories, and characteristics of phenomena and groups are identified so explicitly that comparisons can be constructed confidently. (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982:34)

Studies such as the present one however do not meet the conditions for generalisation since unique situations cannot be reconstructed precisely, even the exact replication of research methods may fail to produce identical results. In the absence of this the validity and reliability of my findings depends on a precise specification of what was done and how was it done. This requirement is met through providing a complete description of research design, methods of data collection, and data analysis (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Thus, although this study does not meet the positivistic criterion of objectivity and truth, it is neither based on radical relativism as being nothing more than a subjective construction with no, or little, reference to the aspects of social reality it investigates.

Furthermore, my approach diverges from radical relativism in that although I take an interpretivist approach which aims for understanding and reconstruction versus discovery of objective truths, at the same time a realist ontology is adopted which suggests a real world about which various interpretations can be made, even though it cannot be defined or described through a neutral tool such as scientific discourse. The above notion of

¹² The external reliability of research depends on whether its results can be replicated by independent researchers in the same or similar circumstances (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982:32).

analytic realism appeals both to realism, in acknowledging the existence of an objective reality, as well as idealism in that:

social reality exists only as ideas in people's heads; if *no one* took it into account (positively or negatively, consciously or unconsciously), it would not exist (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Put another way, although social reality exists independently of the volition of any particular individual, it can exist only insofar as individual human minds are continually recognising it and acting as the media through which are processed the cultural ideas and meanings, and the roles and expectations that arise from and result in its existence. (Barker, 1995:289)

Therefore the ontological assumption of this research is compatible with the assumption of the scientific ethnography which finds expression in Hammersley's (1992) notion of subtle realism. According to this, 'An account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise' (Hammersley, 1992:69). Subtle realism is the paradigm that views research as an interpretive exercise which may produce different results concerning the same phenomenon depending on the approach used. It shares with relativism the recognition that knowledge is a human construction. In common with naive realism, subtle realism considers that there are independent, knowable phenomena to investigate and criteria for good and bad research. However unlike naive realism, subtle realism rejects the notion that we can have direct access to these independent phenomena. Subtle realism differs from both relativism and naive realism by rejecting the definition of knowledge as justified, true belief based on certainty (Hammersley, 1992:52).

Frequently methodological and epistemological relativism are conflated and it is assumed that the subjective character of knowledge entails epistemological relativism (Guba, 1990). I reject this position and argue that from the premise that we have no direct access to reality and all knowledge is contingent, it does not follow that there is no criteria of validity. In the following section, I will substantiate criteria of validity for this research. I will argue that the present study is a secondary construct (Barker, 1995) which translates the data to a sociological perspective. Furthermore, the findings of this study and their validity is

assessed using the criteria of trustworthiness, confirmability and reflexivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:13-14; Richardson, 1991).

Primary and secondary constructions

I use the distinction between primary and secondary constructs (Barker, 1995:288-289) to articulate the criteria of validity for my inquiry. I distinguish between the sociologist's analysis of his or her subjects' behaviour as distinct from the subjects' conceptions of their own conduct. The primary constructions constitute the basic data of social sciences. For instance, the primary constructions of conversion to Zen are the direct and indirect interaction between the informant, the Zen group and the larger society. The secondary constructs are the sociological constructions of the primary constructs. The sociologist's interpretations of his or her subjects' reality are theoretically driven and may differ with the informants' conception of it. Thus despite some degree of overlap a gap persists between the sociological perspective and the perspective of those studied (Denzin, 1970; Barker, 1995).

The distinction between primary and secondary constructs is related to the *verstehen* method guiding this research. *Verstehen* as a method by which social scientists attempt to make sense of social reality which requires that:

The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men [*sic*], living their daily life within their social world. Thus the constructs of the social sciences are constructs of the second degree [...] constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene. (Schutz, 1967:59-cited in Schwandt, 1994:121)

One is required to take an approach which incorporates both involvement and distance. The former is needed for developing rapport and inclusion in order to understand the perspective of the subjects. However to guard against "going native" one needs to cultivate social distance. An implication of this has been that this perspective has determined the choice of what I included and what I have excluded from the secondary construction of the

conversion phenomenon. I have attempted to make the process of exclusion and inclusion a conscious one and not one done unconsciously because of various conceptual blind spots. The decision to exclude certain things and not others has been partly a methodological one, and partly because it is necessary in order for my work to be more than a repeat of the convert's own accounts. There is no point in reproducing these accounts since to understand them one needs to share the converts' world view and experiences, instead these need to be put in a broader context in order to make sociological sense.

This raises the question of the validity of social scientific inquiry as a secondary construct. I agree with Althied and Johnson that, 'As long as we strive to base our claims and interpretations of social life on data of any kind, we must have a logic for assessing and communicating the interactive process through which the investigator acquired the research experiences and information' (Althied & Johnson, 1998:485). The activities of the sociologists are in many ways no different from those of the persons studied in terms of being embedded in particular contexts and in their involvement in the process of making sense of social reality through agreeing on the definitions attached to it. The sociologists construction of social reality however is different in that it is informed by the sociological theory and methods of inquiry. A consequence of this is the introduction of a different set of biases and limitations into sociological constructions and interpretations of this reality. Given that the sociological secondary constructs incorporate distortions it is required that these biases be taken into account. The criteria of validity adopted in this study are trustworthiness and reflexivity.

Validity as trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an alternative to the positivistic criterion of validity based on knowledge of justifiable claims. It is a requirement of trustworthiness that the research process and its findings are subject to scrutiny through an assessment of the subject of research and its procedures (Hammersley, 1992:69-73; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:480). To make this possible the researcher is required to acknowledge the limitations and the biases of the research and how they impact the findings (Althied & Johnson, 1994:494). According to this criteria of validity:

The ethnographer is not committed to "any old story", but wants to provide an account that communicates with the reader the truth about the setting and situation, as the ethnographer has come to understand it. For the ethnographer, the notion of validity does count, although it is acknowledged that other researchers at different times may come away with different interpretations. (Althied & Johnson, 1994:496)

I have met these requirements by making clear the limits of the present study, marking the boundaries beyond which my findings cannot be safely applied (for instance the discussion of methodological agnosticism), and have articulated that this study looks at conversion from a particular theoretical perspective. Thus, this study tells us only how things look from a particular vantage point (Becker, 1967; Barker, 1995).

Validity as reflexivity

Once the quest for positivist objectivity (namely, pure, undistorted knowledge) is abandoned and it is acknowledged that all knowledge is perspectival, the critical issue is to elucidate the researchers' perspective and biases. Validity-as-reflexive-accounting meet this criteria of validity and this will be elaborated next.

One meaning of reflexivity is that the scientific observer is part and parcel of the setting, context, and culture he or she is trying to understand and represent. This has implications for the validity of ethnographic or qualitative research. Richardson (1991) has defined the quality of being reflexive as being " 'capable of bending back' or 'directed or turned back upon itself' (Webster's Dictionary, 1976)' (Richardson, 1991:305). Validity as reflexivity entails a recognition of the investigators' impact upon the research activity, this renders the research process a self-aware one and as such has impacts for the validity of the research.

This is particularly relevant to the ethnographic method where the researcher is required to be immersed in the social reality under investigation. The research is gradually constructed as the researcher observes, takes notes, talks to people involved, writes up field notes after the event, reflects on them and does some initial analysis which may guide further investigation. Through deep involvement ethnography provides a depth of

understanding lacking in other approaches to investigation. However, the researcher is a person with values and beliefs and his or her background, interests, values, expectations and social position will influence the research process from the selection of research methods to research problems. Although there are rules which govern the research process, the values and ideologies of the researchers determine the application of these rules.

In the process of creating secondary constructs the researcher excludes certain things and include others and the decision to include certain things and not others is influenced by the researchers' values and interests. Therefore, it is important to spell out one's own perspective as a researcher (Barker, 1995). This require a continual attempt to consciously reflect upon one's own input into the research process (Hammersley, 1992; Althied & Johnson, 1994). From this perspective, research such as mine may be evaluated through a clear delineation of the nature of interaction between me, the informants and the method which resulted in the present account of conversion to Zen.

Conclusion

In this chapter I related the three assumptions of this study to the symbolic interactionist perspective. These assumptions are: Firstly, individuals play an active role in the conversion process. Secondly, the process of conversion is embedded in a web of social interaction and emerges out of a fluid dialectical between active and purposive agents and the social context. Thirdly, meanings are emergent and negotiated, rather than given or intrinsic. I elaborated the key methodological and epistemological implications of the symbolic interactionist perspective.

The underlying assumptions of this study require an ethnographic approach. This raises the question of the status of converts' accounts. Accounts were treated as constructions rather than accurate reflections of the raw experience of conversion. At the same time I made no assumptions regarding the ultimate validity of the converts' accounts. The epistemological consequences of the theoretical framework dealt with the status of this study which is itself an interpretation. I argued that this study is a secondary construct and as such it may be

distinguished from the informants views. In addition it is guided by sociological method and the relevant criteria of validity namely trustworthiness and reflexivity.

In Chapter Three I will apply my theoretical assumptions to concrete methods of data collection and data analysis. The objective of this study is to develop a theoretical explanation of conversion to Zen. This is informed by the theoretical framework outlined in this chapter as well as the findings of the study.

Chapter three

Methodology

The following chapter will elaborate on the ethnographic research strategy which will be applied to the concrete methods of data collection and analysis in my research. These consist of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, document analysis and my own personal experiences. The findings are presented in terms of the criteria of grounded theory.

The sample

The observations of this study were made over a six year period in which I visited and participated in the activities of six Zen groups around Australia. At the time of the fieldwork there were 13 Zen Buddhist groups in Australia. I was most actively involved with Zen groups in Melbourne. The choice of Zen groups in Melbourne as the subject of this study was based on geographical proximity and also because the relatively large membership of these groups provided ample scope for finding volunteers to interview. Zen in Australia has been established through conversion (Bouma *et al.*, 2000) and therefore nearly all the members of Zen groups qualify as a subject for this study. Furthermore, because of my own involvement in Zen practice I gained easy access to the groups. The groups' consent was obtained for my participation and observation for the purpose of research, by contacting the committees of the Melbourne and Sydney Zen groups in writing. The Zen groups which were contacted for this study shared a similar organisational structure. They were composed of subscribing members who paid a modest annual membership fee which was mainly used to cover the production cost of monthly newsletters and the hiring of the venues for meditation. The groups had a small group of

core members who organised regular retreats and *zazen* sessions and a committee which fulfilled an administrative role, they also invited Zen teachers from Australia and overseas, organised retreats and regular meditation sessions. The spiritual guidance was restricted to teachers and apprentice teachers. The latter are individuals who have complete their Zen training and who expect to become full teachers. All the groups in my study were connected with Zen teachers who had trained in genuine Zen lineages. Nearly all groups' activities are centred around the practice of meditation: this takes place several times a week, as well as day-long and week-long retreats.

Sampling was guided by the analysis of the incoming data in relation to the developing theory. I concluded my interviews at 34 because I realised that I was not gaining any more relevant information or insights relevant to the conversion process. Furthermore, sampling was guided by the search for contrasting cases which I needed to test the hypothesis. That is the reason I interviewed both beginners and long-term practitioners as well as those who had come to Zen recently from other Buddhist traditions and those who have moved to Zen from traditional Western religions. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the ethics committee at Monash University. Ethical issues considered included the method of recruiting subjects, confidentiality, and that the research was undertaken with the full knowledge of the groups and the individuals involved.

The limitation of my sample are acknowledged. The sample is not representative of the Zen Buddhist population in Australia in general, it is a voluntary sample and over represents the Zen practitioners who are involved in organised Zen groups and thus under-represents those who practice in informal groups which are not publicly known and difficult to contact. Therefore, although my sample incorporates a wide range of practitioners, the extent of this diversity is unknown to me. While the sample is not intended to be directly representative of the Zen Buddhist population in Australia it does describe the membership of the Zen community in a general way. Given the nature of my sample, it is not possible, on the basis of observing six Zen groups, to definitely describe the process of conversion to Zen in general. Therefore, no claims are made regarding the universality of the conclusions of this study. Nevertheless, this study provides a window on the process of conversion and my data provides a viable vehicle for discussing certain fundamental issues

relating to religious conversion in Zen settings. Zen practitioners in the groups which I observed are from a wide range of ages, most in their thirties and forties with the youngest being 23 and the oldest 72. There are slightly more males than females, they are all educated, the majority with advanced degrees. Roughly three quarters are in full time work.

Method of data collection

The objective of data collection was to find out the subjects' experience of their conversion, the circumstances and factors which precipitated their involvement with Zen, and their ongoing commitment to Zen practice. In addition, there was also an aim to find out the factors which help or hinder their commitment to Zen practice. For instance, why they initially become involved with Zen? Why they keep practising? What is the significance of Zen practice to them? What are the changes that they attribute to Zen practice, if any? To achieve the above goals I adopted a multi-method or triangulated (Denzin, 1970, 1989) approach. Triangulation is the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomena (Denzin, 1970:297). Employing multiple methods of inquiry decreases the likelihood of bias since the shortcomings of each are compensated by the others. The tactics I used in collecting data for this study included participation in a wide range of Zen groups' activities such as talks, meditation retreats, meditation sessions, social gatherings as well as gaining entry to special events such as *jukai* ceremonies. I kept in touch with what was happening in the Zen scene in Australia through reading the newsletters and journals published by Zen groups around the country. In addition, in-depth interviews and the content analysis of a variety of documents such as newsletters and Zen literature enabled me to achieve the research goals of the study.

Interviews

Denzin (1970) has divided the subjects studied by the participant observer into two categories: respondents and informants. Informants are, 'those persons who, ideally, trust the investigator, freely give information about their problems and fears and frankly attempt to explain their own motivations; demonstrate that they will not jeopardise the study' (Denzin, 1970:202). Respondents are those who do not demonstrate special trust and

answer questions they are asked and no more. Because of my own involvement in Zen practice I have utilised both forms of observations in both formal interviews and informal talks with Zen practitioners. I established rapport with the informants through our previous acquaintance or through the knowledge that we both belonged to the same religious tradition. I engaged in lengthy talks with informants in most social gatherings. Typically, I was asked how my research was going, or what has it revealed so far. I would then describe my research, this often initiated a discussion which at the time was not intended to further my research nonetheless upon subsequent reflection they frequently led to important insights on the meaning and significance of various aspects of Zen for the practitioners. In addition to these informal talks, I also carried out in-depth interviews (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995:69). These interviews were very effective for accessing the meaning of conversion for the informants through their constructed interpretations of it. The primary purpose of these interviews was to elicit a narrative about the process leading the subjects from being a non-Zen practitioner to developing a commitment to Zen practice and labelling themselves as Zen Buddhists. In order to reduce the likelihood of distorting or suppressing the informants' views I did not interrupt the informants during the interviews except where material was incomplete or obscure and needed to be clarified, or where I needed to check the accuracy of what was being said.

The criteria for selection of subjects were involvement with Zen practice regardless of length or intensity of practice. Some of the participants approached me and asked questions about the nature of the research and volunteered to be interviewed. In addition, appeals for members to participate in the study were made either by sending letters to the groups which subsequently appeared in their newsletter, or at group meetings. After contacting the informants I briefly explained the general nature of the research and how I intended to collect the data required and obtained their signed permission prior to the interview. Once the objective of the research was decided I conducted 11 pilot interviews between September and March 1998. There were 5 female and 6 male participants, 10 were involved with either the Melbourne Zen Group (MZG) or the Sydney Zen Centre (SZC), one participant was not involved with any group at the time.

The interviews were unstructured and the participants were encouraged to talk about how they became attracted to Zen and what the process has been like for them. During the pilot interview I took detailed notes during or shortly after the interview. I noted the key aspects of the interview using key words which later helped me to remember a whole event or incident which had been mentioned during the interview. The data from the pilot interviews and participant observation was used as a bouncing off point for my in-depth-interviews. Between March and May 1999 I conducted 23 interviews, including Augusto Alcalde and Subhana Barzaghi, two Zen teachers associated with Zen groups in Australia. I also interviewed an ex-practitioner (an overseas resident) via electronic mail. Of the 23 subjects who participated in the final interviews there were 10 male and 13 female ranging in age from approximately 23 to 72. All but one of the 23 informants were actively involved with a Zen group. The length of involvement with Zen ranged from 3 to 28 years. The interviews were conducted at roughly 90 minutes in length and were taped and later transcribed by the author. All, but two of the interviews were conducted face to face, the majority at the homes of the participants, and three at the meditation hall of the Zen groups. One of the interviews took place over the phone. Except for the two teachers, all the informants participating in this study are assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and any other characters mentioned in the stories also have pseudonyms, the names do not disguise the gender.

The following list contains the details of the participants in my research, pseudonyms, approximate age at the time of interview and length of time involved in Zen practice:

Table 3.1: A profile of informants

Name	Year starting Zen practice	Age
Ann	1996	mid forties
Augusto Alcalde	Zen teacher in the Diamond <i>sangha</i> tradition since 1985	mid fifties
Barbara	1983	late thirties
Ben	1993	mid forties
Chris	1997	early fifties
Clare	1991	late forties
Eric	1971	late forties

Hyden	1986	mid fifties
Jack	1985	mid forties
James	1997	early fifties
John	1992	early fifties
Joy	1991	mid twenties
Julian	1977	late thirties
Justine	1976	mid fifties
Kate	1986	late forties
Ken	1998	early fifties
Kristen	1991	early forties
Lucy	1998	late thirties
Luke	1982	early forties
Lyn	1988	mid sixties
Mandy	1995-1998	mid twenties.
Mat	1996	late thirties
Max	1981	late thirties
Molly	1983	late fifties
Nancy	1996	early seventies
Patricia	1985	early forties
Penny	1985	mid forties
Rick	1991	mid forties
Rodney	1988	early fifties
Rose	1993	early forties
Sara	1987	late fifties
Subhana Barzaqni	Zen teacher in the Diamond <i>sangha</i> tradition since 1987	mid forties
Sue	1993	mid fifties
Thea	1984	late thirties

To achieve the research aim of this study it was necessary for the interview schedule to include questions which encouraged the informants to maintain a focus on their conversion experience throughout the interview and the journey from being a non-practitioner to

developing a commitment to Zen practice. Prior to the interviews I developed an interview guide around a list of topics with the aim to understand the experience of the informants as their involvement and commitment to Zen practice grew (Riessman, 1993:54). The interviews were structured around these issues which I raised in the form of open ended questions. The wording was not fixed, nor was the order in which questions appeared therefore the schedule did not dictate the order of the conversation, in fact the order varied from interview to interview depending on the direction the interview took. This was to allow for flexibility and accommodate the individual variations in the experience of conversion. The interview guide was also revised several times as I interviewed more people on the basis of the information provided by the informants which I had not previously considered. I avoided structuring the interviews rigidly around pre-formed questions because I did not have any firm hypothesis about what is involved in becoming a Zen practitioner which the interview was supposed to test, rather I was interested in gaining insight into the process from the interviews. Narrowly focused questions could deter such an insight by preventing the informants from describing experiences which could turn out to be relevant to the research, for instance the informants could have relevant experiences to report but may not disclose them if they are not addressed by the focused questions. Focused questions may be worded in such a way as to be meaningless to the informants, thus failing to generate any response.

In the interview I followed a "funnelling method", starting with some general and broad descriptive questions (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995). The reason for using the funnelling strategy is that sometimes it is difficult to start the interview by talking about issues which the informant might find uncomfortable or threatening to talk about. The general questions at the beginning of the interview allows the informants to take control of the flow of information by giving them the choice to start where they feel comfortable, as rapport develops more specific questions are asked (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995:84).

The following list contains the general questions or areas which the interviews covered:

- How did you initially become interested in Zen practice, you can go as far back as you wish to trace the circumstances and the reasons which led you take up Zen practice?

- Why do you continue to practice Zen?
- Do you relate the realisation of any aims as an incentive for the actual practice of meditation?
- In the initial stages of practice what motivated you to continue with the practice?
- Elaborate on the changes (if any) that you have undergone as a result of Zen practice?
- What are the landmarks in your practice?

Important issues which were not covered in the interview were addressed at the end of the interview. I had a series of more specific questions which I intended to cover, and also to cross check in cases where I felt there was some inconsistency in the informants views and interpretations. Sometimes these more specific questions were raised to test the validity of the assumptions I had formed during participant observation, or as a result of previous interviews or to better understand the meaning of the participants' accounts (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995). Although there was no standard set of specific questions the following questions are examples of the kinds of question I asked to stimulate further discussion or to cover areas which the subjects had not covered.

- When you first started Zen practice how did you feel about Zen rituals? When practising by yourself do you follow the appropriate rituals?
- How often do you practice with a group? Describe the importance of sitting with a group in various stages of your practice?
- What is the importance of being assigned leadership roles within the group?
- What has been your view on reincarnation, Buddha-nature, and *zazen* as a means of achieving enlightenment at various stages in their practice?
- How do you describe the role of the Zen teacher in your practice?
- Have you had and how do you deal with "barren" periods in your practice?
- Do you share your insights and experiences resulting from Zen practice with others?
- Over time have you tended to narrow your circle of friends to other Zen practitioners?
- At what stage in your practice did you begin to see yourself as a Zen Buddhist? For example, to identify yourself as a Zen Buddhist on the census form?

- State the most important changes that you have undergone as a result of Zen practice?
- To what extent does Zen provide ethical directions in your life?
- If you ever had to tell others about Zen, what do you believe is the most important thing for them to understand about Zen?
- What is your attitude towards public demonstration of commitment to Zen?

The interviews were continued until "saturation" occurred, where no new theoretical forms were generated and new data did not add to the existing ones.

Participant observation

The ethnographic approach of this study requires immersion in the life of the groups I investigated in order to understand their perspective, meanings and symbols. In order to address this requirement I took up participant observation. Lofland defines participant observation in terms of the, 'free flowing and prolonged immersion [which] first, and ideally, may take the form of direct, bodily presence in the physical scenes of the social life under scrutiny, either in an indigenous role or in the role of someone known to be studying the world' (Lofland, 1976:8).

The condition of sharing the life of one's subjects is most appropriate for symbolic interactionism since it enables the researcher to establish the relationship between concrete patterns of interaction and its underlying symbols (Denzin, 1970:187). Participant observation in the Zen groups in my study involved attending formal functions such as weekly meditation sessions, full-day meditation (*zazenkai*), full moon meditation as well week long meditation retreats (*sesshin*). I also participated in administrative and social activities of a number of Zen groups. In addition in May 2002 I spent 4 weeks at *Bukkokuji*, a traditional Zen monastery in Obama, Japan. Although the objective of the visit was to engage in a period of intensive meditation in a Japanese Zen monastery, nonetheless this experience provided the opportunity to observe Zen practitioners (both Japanese and Western converts) in a traditional setting and further test the validity of the findings of this study.

To clarify the nature of my role as I participated in these activities I will use Gold's (1958) and Junker's (1960:35-38) widely used fourfold typology which distinguishes between four theoretically possible roles for sociologists conducting fieldwork. These range from complete observer to complete participant and in between these two extremes is the participant-as-observer and the observer-as-participant (Gold:218). Each of these roles entail a set of relationships with subjects and yields a specific perspective on the research question. My involvement with Zen practice predates this research.¹³ I had been involved in Zen practice since 1988. Therefore initially my role in fieldwork was that of a complete participant, as the research progressed it changed to that of participant-as-observer and the last two years of the research the role of observer-as-participant became salient. These changes in roles offered possibilities of learning about aspects of behaviour that might have otherwise not been identified. At the initial stages of research, as a participant and later as a participant-as-observer most of my time was spent participating rather than observing. At this stage I participated "naturally" for my own benefit and was not consciously observing the individuals or the groups. The data flowed from my interaction with people who were friends and co-practitioners. It was only later that I began to reflect on my experience in Zen groups and relate this to my research. The insights which I had gained through the many years of participation in Zen groups became a vital and valuable source of insight into the process of conversion. As an observer-as-participant at times I observed formally, such as in interviews. Other times it was more informal, such as when I attended social functions. Participation in some activities like committee meetings and AGM meetings, was purely for research purposes and to further my understanding of the organisational structure of the groups, something that I would not have done in my capacity as a practitioner alone. Moving to the position of observer-as-participant has had a significant impact on the nature of my own religious faith and practice. Once I began to consider the meaning of Zen Buddhist beliefs and practices from the point of view of an observer-as-participant I found myself no longer sharing the conviction of my informants and had to rethink many of the ideas which I formerly took for granted. I had to examine my own commitment to Zen practice, and this has been an ongoing challenge since.

¹³ Once I commenced my PhD, my identity, my interest in Zen practice as a researcher, and the nature of my research was fully known by other practitioners.

My role as a complete participant, participant-as-observer and observer-as-participant helped me deal with some of the difficulties associated with the insider-outsider controversy. The key methodological issue in the above controversy is who can provide more satisfying or better insight into the aspect of social reality it investigated. One perspective is that insiders have a special knowledge of their own group reality that may not be available to an outsider. For instance, 'insider researchers pose different questions due to their insight into various nuances of behaviour which an outsider may interpret as merely typical of the entire sample under investigation' (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995:183). The other perspective argues that only outsiders can develop a non-prejudiced knowledge of the group and the subjectivity of the insider will introduce bias to data gathering and interpretation, for instance the researcher may identify with the informants and lose her or his stance as a researcher. This criticism is flawed since it presupposes that the observations and interpretations of the outsiders are value free. However it was argued earlier that all observation is theory laden. On the other hand, the problem of over identifying with the informants remains and where the researcher shares the beliefs of the informants she or he may come to take for granted the meanings, concepts and behaviour under investigation. To deal with this issue the insider perspective must be constantly checked by one's stance as an outside researcher through adopting a reflexive stance.

Given my own experience as an insider as well as almost an outsider, my response to the above controversy is as follows. An advantage of being an insider for me was that it was relatively easy to gain entry to the field and enabled extensive unhindered participant observation. In addition, if it was not for my personal commitment to Zen practice I doubt if I would have been willing to partake in the majority of group activities as often as I did because of the physical pain and emotional difficulties associated with long hours of sitting meditation which is typical of these activities. Furthermore, although observation and interviews took place in full knowledge of the groups and the individuals involved, there were many insights into the process of conversion which I gained during my informal participation in various activities as a practitioner and where the aim was not the collection of data. I believe this is a strength in a study like this because it enables an emic approach to the study of conversion. I argued earlier that over objectifying the conversion process can miss the significance and the meaning which the practitioners assign to their

experience. The major drawback arising from my position as an insider was that my convictions created blind spots which prevented me from probing into the cause and the nature of the informants' beliefs. Because I shared many of the beliefs and assumptions of the informants I did not see them as problematic for non-Zen Buddhists or requiring justification or clarification, instead they presented themselves to me as self-evident. The pilot interviews were very helpful in detecting my blind spots. I also had to listen critically and reflect on each interview after it was done and found myself becoming more aware of the hidden and problematic assumptions shared by the subjects. Therefore as the interviews progressed I found myself probing more and more into the reasons why the informants held certain beliefs rather than treating them as natural. Consequently, I took a more objective approach in interviewing the subjects and in order to overcome difficulties associated with my own involvement I keep a constant vigilance by maintaining reflexive awareness (Richardson, 1991).

Data analysis

The process of data analysis consisted of open coding and identifying the main themes and concepts, refining these themes by translating them into a systematic theory of conversion to Zen and writing up the final report. I started the coding process through a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts. Coding the transcripts involved going beyond the factual reports of the informants and instead aimed at understanding the meanings they ascribed to their experiences and events. I extracted these meanings in the verbalised accounts of their conversion experience. In order to achieve this, prior to coding I read each transcript many times to familiarise myself with the data and gradually began to recognise patterns of meaning in the transcripts. Connections were made between events and a pattern was gradually revealed, where gaps or inconsistencies were encountered I relied on the data from participant information or informal talks to address these. After assigning codes I assembled all the data coded to each category and sorted them into sub-files. I decided not to use qualitative analysis computer software because of the time and the preparations involved. After looking at the software and speaking to other post-graduates who had used it I realised that I had to set aside a considerable amount of time to become fully familiar with the software, and it would not provide sufficient benefit to justify this effort. Instead

I opted to use WordPerfect to sort out and index the data in sub-files, my familiarity with this particular word-processing system made it a good choice, and my familiarity with the data made the task of managing the data easier. This was followed by axial coding where the data was put back together in new ways and where new connections between categories emerged, paving the way for theory construction.

The interpretation and presentation of data

Data collection, data analysis and theory construction are presented here in a linear fashion. In practice they were not entirely separate states, but were interacting with each other from the very beginning. Codes and themes emerged from the data and the theoretical framework. Identifying and refining themes and relationships and data collection often occurred simultaneously. Refinements in themes and relationships further refined the collection of data, such as the revision of the interview questions. The data analysis involved a constant movement between my theoretical assumptions and the data which led to a significant revision of some of my earlier assumptions regarding the nature of the conversion process.¹⁴

My concern in building a theory of conversion to Zen rests on the interpretivist assumption that "reality" cannot be known but can only be interpreted. My interpretations of the phenomenon of conversion to Zen are constructs based on my attempt to make sense of what I learned in the course of my research, and the final document presents the constructs using a grounded theory approach (Straus & Corbin, 1990:21; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:15). The grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) requires that the entire research process should be consistent and validated by the informants' accounts and experiences of empirical reality under investigation in order to avoid, 'constructing and imposing on that

¹⁴ Initially I had adopted a position based on the work of Preston (1988). According to this earlier position I treated conversion to Zen as something unique and special. As the interviews and participant observation progressed and as result of ongoing discussion with my supervisor, Prof. Gary Bouma, I began to question and revise my earlier assumptions about the nature of conversion to Zen. Consequently, I shifted towards symbolic interactionism as a more satisfactory theoretical framework for conceptualising and accounting for conversion.

informant a fictional view of their reality' (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995:69). In my study of conversion, I set out to explore the informants' experience of conversion to Zen rather than test pre-existing hypotheses about it. Therefore, I began with a vague and loose concept of conversion to Zen and how it is achieved and employed multiple research methods to elaborate and refine these concepts and codes. I constantly moved back and forth between emerging concepts and theories and data. The grounded theory approach is evident in the constant reference to the informants accounts. Throughout the study I use extracts of interviews. Including the complete version of conversion accounts were impractical due to the length of the interviews which varied between 1919 to 7858 words, the mean average being 4320 words, hence I decided to include only selected excerpts. These are word for word renditions of the informants narratives. However the transcripts do not include details such as tone, pitch and volume of the narrative nor the time taken to utter sentences and the length of pause. Such details of the speech act are not important for this study, the focus is on the content not the manner in which the account conversion is narrated. In addition while transcribing I punctuated and removed pauses such as "er's" and "um's". The quotes from the interviews in this document are in bold. When some part of the transcript is omitted the gap is indicated by three dots enclosed in square brackets. On occasions when I had to ask a question to clarify a point or obtain more details my speech is included in the transcripts, to differentiate between my speech and that of the informants, my speech is represented in italics enclosed in square brackets.

Chapter four

Conversion to Zen

I argued in the prologue that a thorough analysis of conversion is contingent on the consideration and eventual resolution of two key issues: conceptualising conversion and accounting for how conversion is achieved (Snow & Machalek, 1984).¹⁵ Conceptualising conversion is a necessary step in a study such as this because it defines and clarifies the nature of the phenomenon under consideration. It is also a prerequisite for developing a theory of conversion to Zen. In Chapter One I reviewed a number of key classificatory schemes which dealt with determining whether, and to what extent, a person may be thought of as a convert. I identified conversion as a fundamental change in the universe of discourse and self-concept in "a religious or quasi-religious setting" (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989:16). The aim of this chapter is twofold. In the first part, I will draw on the data to articulate the content of conversion to Zen. This will be preceded by a brief description of the Buddhist context, this forms the theological backdrop of conversion to Zen. The second part, will elucidate on the sociological significance and relevance of my definition of conversion to Zen, by placing it in the field of sociological study of conversion. I will argue that the changes which take place in becoming a Zen practitioner meet the criteria of conversion which I set out in Chapter One and therefore these changes are sufficient to qualify as religious conversion. Before setting out to describe what

¹⁵ Snow and Machalek have also urged researchers to articulate the characteristics of the converts themselves and to distinguish converts from other religious types in the same way we distinguish conversion from other kinds of religious change (Snow & Machalek, 1983). For the purpose of this study it is not necessary to be able to distinguish between people who are born into a religion as opposed to converts because all my subjects are converts, as Zen in Australia is predominantly established through conversion (Bouma *et al.*, 2001).

constitutes conversion to Zen I will deal with two preliminary issues which shape my definition of conversion to Zen. First, the difficulties associated with defining Zen practice. These are due firstly to certain characteristics of the Zen traditions. Secondly, to what extent my own involvement in Zen practice posed difficulties and influenced how I arrived at this definition of conversion to Zen.¹⁶

From the outset of this research I realised that the definition of conversion to Zen was going to be problematic. I was not able to use the criteria of conversion set out in Buddhist tradition for two reasons: firstly, traditionally, the highest level of conversion in Buddhism has been to become a monk or a nun, take vows of celibacy and dedicate oneself gaining merit and attaining enlightenment by practising in a monastic setting (Malony & Southard, 1992:19). However, given that Zen in Australia is a lay practice, the traditional definition of conversion to Buddhism as entry into a monastic community is not relevant. In Australia becoming a Zen practitioner consists of practising meditation and related rituals privately in the home or in the company of other like-minded people. Secondly, during the pilot interviews and from the outset of participant observation it became clear that Zen practitioners were negatively disposed to the term Zen convert and were keen to dismiss the notion of conversion to Zen. The reason for rejecting what occurs in becoming a student of Zen as conversion is based on Zen beliefs. The Zen tradition emphasises experiential knowledge and it rejects belief change as a means to enlightenment. The distinction is between direct knowledge that is experiential and non-conceptual on the one hand, and conceptual and intellectual knowledge on the other hand. The majority of subjects indicated that Zen's emphasis on direct knowledge was a major attraction of Zen. The above distinction dates back to the very beginning of Zen it is attributed to Bodhidharma (the first patriarch of Zen Buddhism) who de-emphasised the focus on rituals and the endless chanting of the *sutras* or Buddhist Scripture which dominated Buddhist practice in his time. Bodhidharma advocated an approach which dispensed with language and talk altogether and it is believed that he taught directly through act and silence. Consequently, Zen is often characterised as:

¹⁶ This self-reflexivity is a requirement of my criteria of validity which was elaborated in Chapter Three.

- A special transmission outside the Scripture;
- Having no dependence upon words and letters;
- Directly pointing at the human heart;
- Seeing into one's nature and the realisation of Buddhahood.¹⁷

Thus, Zen de-emphasises scripts and dogma and places greater emphasis on the practice of meditation. The Zen tradition and Zen teachers generally only encourage the students to incorporate regular *zazen* and mindfulness in daily life, and it is believed that Zen does not prescribe anything in the way of moral guidelines or dogma. Students are encouraged to take an experimental attitude and test the claims experientially rather than blindly adopting them as true. The only commitment which is encouraged is the regular practice of meditation. The informants' response reflected this aspect of the Zen belief system.

The inapplicability of the traditional criterion of conversion such as becoming a monk or a nun together with the fact that Zen tradition does not provide a set of criteria for conversion to Zen in the way of belief change compounds the difficulty of articulating a satisfactory definition of conversion to Zen. Because of the above difficulties, I was not able to take a "direct approach" to defining conversion and did not rely on the individuals' reports or their self-definition as converts for determining if conversion had taken place. Some (Staples & Mauss, 1987) have suggested that a *verstehen* approach to social reality must take a direct approach and suggests that in order to determine whether or not someone is a convert all we need to do is ask them the question 'are you a convert?' (Staples & Mauss, 1987:138). This may be applicable to instances of religious conversion where the label of convert is sanctioned by the religious group and has theological support. I found this approach unhelpful in dealing with conversion to Zen.¹⁸ The process of conversion to Zen is a very gradual and slow process and does not involve sudden change in the

¹⁷ This description is often cited but not referenced for example in Preston, 1988; Batchelor, 1994:212; Ross, 1960:5; Wright, 1992:129.

¹⁸ The methodological difficulties discussed in Chapter Two concerning the status of converts' accounts is relevant to the informants' rejection of the term conversion to Zen and supports my approach to the study of conversion to Zen despite the informants' ambivalence about the term "conversion" and what conversion to Zen involves.

individuals' beliefs by way of rapidly adopting the Zen Buddhist dogma. Furthermore, none of the Zen groups in my study are conversionist and individuals who join the groups did not do so because of the systematic activities of the group to gain recruits. The Zen tradition itself discourages rigidity, and the informants perceived attaching fixed labels such as "Zen Buddhist" to oneself as an indication of a rigid and dogmatic approach. Zen converts 'wear their identities loosely', especially in words and are tentative in labelling themselves as Zen Buddhists, or making public displays of their identity as Zen Buddhists such as wearing a *rakasu* or adopting Zen Buddhist names. The difficulty in defining conversion to Zen is that the informants tend to repeat the Zen Buddhist belief, namely, Zen practice is purely experiential and there is no or little belief change accompanying it. The Zen literature, and the informants never referred to themselves as converts, they used the term "student of Zen" or "Zen practitioner". Therefore, I could not establish if an individual has converted by asking him or her directly. When I did so, they repeated the Zen ideal of it being totally non-conceptual and dogma free. This is how Lyn expressed the nature of her commitment to Zen:

I was attracted to Zen because it has no dogma which is what I rejected in Christianity. I also liked the looseness of the Zen groups, I felt the freedom to do my own thing. I started to practice with the Melbourne Zen Group in 1989 and *zazen* has been a part of my daily life since [...] I wouldn't define myself a Zen Buddhist but a Zen practitioner. Becoming a Buddhist is incidental as far as my practice is concerned. I like Zen's direct approach, I don't read much on Zen either, I want to go to the core and *zazen* is what takes you there. Lyn

According to Molly:

The conversion model for me has more to do with enlightenment experience, for want of a better name, than to do with 'being a Buddhist'. 'Being a Buddhist' seems essentially to do with taking up the Way. One's practice is not about beliefs but about experiences, seeing into reality. The enlightenment experiences are not exactly 'conversion' experiences, but the view is altered. Something hits, that "hit" alters everything and having seen it in a different way you can't ever see it only as you first

did. So it is a sort of 'over-turning', the view broadens, the container expands and experiences of self and others radically changes. Molly

Another difficulty which I faced in determining the nature of conversion to Zen was my own blind-spots. Because of my own involvement in Zen practice I initially shared the beliefs of my informants and perceived Zen as free of dogma and as a non-conceptual spiritual path (versus a religion) and saw the beliefs which I had gradually adopted as self-evidently true. For instance, when I participated in Zen activities and failed to see those as religious rituals, or when reading the Zen literature or listening to talks by Zen teachers I could not see a lot of the assertions as being beliefs whose acceptance requires faith. Therefore, initially I failed to notice the Zen belief system because I was immersed in it myself. Gradually, after going through the interview transcripts many times, I began to distance myself from the material and look at it from a sociological point of view. I began to identify hitherto "true" assertions as mere beliefs, which far from being self-evident, were essentially the same as items of faith in any other religion and I noticed that their plausibility required considerable social organisational effort and therefore I began to see that for a non-Zen Buddhist they can be problematic. I will elaborate on the plausibility structure of core Zen beliefs in Chapter Six.

Once I was able to distance myself from the process I was studying, I began to see the belief system that the Zen converts come to embrace. In determining the content of conversion to Zen I adopted an indirect approach. I stopped using the term conversion in interviews and informal conversations, instead I asked the participants to describe the most important changes which they believe have resulted from their practice or what they believe to be at the core of Zen. This re-wording produced a more informative response which led to important insights into the nature of changes in belief and orientation which the informants experienced in the process of conversion to Zen. The definition of conversion to Zen which I have constructed is a secondary construct based on my interpretation of the informants reports about their experience of becoming a Zen practitioner. The above approach is consistent with my *verstehen* orientation since my definition of conversion to Zen is based on the data and reflects the view of the informants and is faithful to their own account of what becoming a Zen practitioner involves. In

defining conversion to Zen, I have relied on the data to identify what are the statements which are considered to be *true* according to my subjects in order to establish the content of the belief system which Zen practitioners in my study shared, and I used this to define conversion to Zen.

Before articulating what constitutes conversion to Zen, I will locate it within the broader context of the Zen Buddhist belief system. This introduction is necessary since to better understand the process of conversion to Zen, as was experienced by my informants, it is helpful to become familiar with Zen Buddhist beliefs and practices and their origin in Buddhism. However, my description of the history and core beliefs and practices of Zen will be brief since the focus of this research is not religious but sociological.¹⁹ Following this I will use the informants' narratives to describe the generic features of conversion to Zen.

Zen is a religion built up around the teachings of Buddha. There are three main streams in Buddhism, *Theravada*, *Vajrayana* and *Mahayana*. *Theravada*, was the first to emerge and is also known as the school of elders, or *hinayana* (Lesser Vehicle). The second tradition, *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle) emerged in the first century BCE. *Vajrayana* (the Diamond Vehicle) developed in the seventh century. Although these traditions share a set of core beliefs they involve additional beliefs, rituals and practices as well as being practised in different geographical regions.

Zen is a branch of *Mahayana* Buddhism which originated in India. According to legend, the Buddha established the foundation of Zen Buddhism during a discourse on Vulture Peak where one day the Buddha was standing in front of an assembly, everyone was waiting for him to begin his talk, but he remained silent. After a long time, he held up a flower, still not uttering a single word. Everyone in the assembly looked at him without understanding Buddha's gesture. Only one monk in the assembly understood Buddha's message and had an experience of enlightenment. The monk was Mahakashyapa. The

¹⁹ For an in-depth study of Zen Buddhist beliefs, rituals and groups in Australia see Croucher, 1986; Bucknell, 1992; Spuler, 1999.

Buddha said, 'I have the treasure of the vision of the perfect Dharma, the marvellous spirit of nirvana, the reality without impurity, and I have transmitted them to Mahakashyapa' (Nhat Hanh, 1995:45). This laid the foundations for the Zen Buddhist belief in the possibility of the direct experience of reality without the distorting influence of analytical or intellectual knowledge. Mahakashyapa became the first Indian patriarch in the Zen Buddhist lineage. These teachings of Buddhism were later brought to China by Bodhidharma, an Indian monk in 520 BCE. Bodhidharma's teachings in conjunction with Taoism in China evolved into methods and techniques which are characteristically Zen and therefore formed a new school of *Mahayana* Buddhism, called *Ch'an*. In Japan, *Ch'an* became known as Zen. Bodhidharma is considered the first patriarch of *Ch'an*, and the twenty-eighth patriarch in the Indian lineage. It is believed that the insight of Mahakashyapa is "transmitted" from teacher to student, and Zen teachers today trace their lineage directly to Bodhidharma and Mahakashyapa.

In common with other schools of Buddhism, the Zen tradition is centred around the four noble truths, namely life is suffering, the cause of suffering is craving, the elimination of craving and desire removes the cause of suffering and finally, to achieve this one is to follow the eight fold path (Humphreys, 1987). Zen however emphasises the importance of meditation and holds out the promise that by following its method of meditation an experience of enlightenment can be achieved in a single life time.²⁰

The core of Zen practice is *tso-ch'an*, *zazen* in Japanese. *Tso* literally means sitting, *Ch'an* is a derivative of the Indian *dhyana* which is the yogic practice leading to enlightenment through meditation. In a broad sense, *tso-ch'an* or *zazen* refers to any type of meditative practice based on taking the sitting posture. In a narrow sense, it indicates the method of meditation that was developed by and characterises Zen (*Ch'an*) Buddhism.

Zazen is believed to be the primary means of preparing the mind for enlightenment, by leading to a state of "emptiness", it is believed that it is from this state that one can attain

²⁰ Most schools of Buddhism believe that the realisation of enlightenment takes hundreds of life times, in which the consciousness evolves until the Self is totally relinquished and released from the cycle of birth and death (Humphreys, 1987:21).

enlightenment (Kapleau, 1965:12; Kraft, 1988:30,38). *Zazen* involves maintaining a particular mental and physical posture. The mental posture involved in sitting meditation is that of concentration. The physical criteria for *zazen* consist of sitting on the floor with the legs either crossed or in a kneeling position. The spine must be upright, the shoulders relaxed, hands placed in front of abdomen. The eyes should be slightly open, gazing downward without focusing on anything in particular (Kapleau, 1965:20). One is then asked to sit facing the wall and engage in the prescribed mental task for the period of meditation. It is believed that the prescribed posture settles the body and mind in a quiet state, it is from this state that the meditator engages in examining his or her own true nature using Zen meditation techniques as tools. These techniques include focusing one's attention on an object such as one's breathing or on a *koan*, or the attention may be concentrated without focusing on an object, as in "just sitting" (*shikan-taza*).

The students start with the practice of concentration meditation, the technique involved is counting each exhalation to ten and then starting again. When concentration on the breathing becomes such that awareness of the counting is clear and the count is not lost, the next step is the following of one's inhalation and exhalation. This involves not attempting to control the breath but observing it as it happens naturally and aiming at "being at one" with each breath. Once the student has cultivated a high level of concentration he or she then proceeds to do *koan* practice or *shikan-taza*. The two main sects of Zen namely *Rinzai* and *Soto* differ on the method of training adopted at this point. The trainees in *Rinzai* tradition begin *koan* study under the guidance of the teacher. *Koans* are paradoxical phrases or stories which cannot be solved intellectually and provide a focus for meditation. The *koan* replaces the breath as the focus of attention. Ideally, a *koan* must be kept in mind and investigated in the midst of all activities, though the sitting posture is the one most conducive to concentration. The *Soto* tradition requires the more advanced students to practice "just sitting" (*shikan-taza*). In this practice concentration is maintained without focusing or directing the mind on any particular object and the attention is directed on the activities of the mind itself (Kapleau, 1965; Kraft, 1988).

Because of the emphasis on *zazen* in the Zen tradition in all the groups in this study the majority of Zen activities are centred around the practice of *zazen*. Zen groups provide

various opportunities for the individuals to practice *zazen*. The *zazen* period is accompanied with a variety of rituals such as bowing, prostrations, chanting, ringing bells and clappers to signal various activities. In some groups these rituals are emphasised, and the practice is heavily ritualised whereas other groups have minimal rituals.²¹ In a typical *zazen* period the participants bow to the alter as they enter the meditation hall (*dojo*) they bow once more facing their meditation mat and a third time facing their fellow meditators before sitting in a cross-legged or kneeling position facing the wall. Each meditation period is signalled when the bell is hit three times and varies in length between 25 and 50 minutes, depending on the group, during which one is to sit still. The end of each meditation period is marked by the hitting of bell and wooden clappers. The meditators then bow with the palms of their hands put together, turn on their mats, stand and bow once more before starting a short period of walking meditation (*kinhin*). Walking meditation ends when wooden clappers are hit, everyone gets back to their mats bows twice and sits for another period. Depending on the occasion and the group the meditation periods may be punctuated by a number of different rituals such as chants, readings, teachers' *dharma* talks (*teisho*) and offerings of incense and prostrations to the alter.

Definition of conversion to Zen: the human issue

The substantive properties of changes that occur in conversion are contextually determined. Zen classics offer various interpretations of what is involved in taking the path of Zen Buddhism. I do not disagree with these characterisations of becoming a Buddhist and my findings are consistent with these textual definitions. However, my *verstehen* perspective requires a description of conversion to Zen which is consistent with the informants' narratives. Therefore, my definition of conversion to Zen is based on my data and reflect the beliefs of the informants. I attempted to discover if there are characteristics common to Zen converts which reflects the core changes that conversion to Zen entails and what that means to the convert. According to the findings of this study conversion to Zen involves the following three salient features:

²¹ See Spuler (1999) for a detailed account of the use of rituals in Zen groups in Australia.

- 1) Belief in meditation as a meaningful, significant and efficacious activity.
- 2) Sacralisation of the self and mundane reality.
- 3) Adopting an attitude of acceptance and surrender.

These three characteristics are interrelated and throughout the discussion I will refer to the connection between them. Next I will elaborate on the above aspects of conversion to Zen and define them with reference to the data of this study and Zen texts.

Belief in the significance and efficacy of *zazen*

A significant aspect of conversion to Zen involves perceiving *zazen* as a profound and meaningful activity. *Zazen* (*za*=sitting, *zen*=meditation), the practice that gives the tradition its name, is the fundamental aspect of Zen practice. The word "Zen" is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese *ch'an*, which is in turn an abbreviation of *ch'an-na*, the Chinese rendition of *dhyana*, which is the Sanskrit word meaning meditation. So the term Zen itself means meditation.

The informants held a similar position in how they perceived *zazen*. According to Kristen:

I find the more I sit the more I am understanding, it has come from my practice. So, now when I read that information I really am understanding that information because it is occurring in my practice [...] I have to practice to understand it, you know what I mean? I mean I have been reading a few things in Buddhist texts years ago and it meant nothing to me could have been any thing, you know. But now the more I sit the more I understand what that text is about. Kristen

The core principles of Zen Buddhist theology offer a synthesis of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy. A pertinent element in Zen philosophy is that the practice of *zazen* and mindfulness are defined as core practices required for spiritual growth. *Zazen* is perceived as a profound activity because it is believed to lead to mindfulness. Mindfulness is the capacity to live in the present moment, in the here and now, fully engaged with whatever activity or state one is in. Zen practitioners are taught that the most fundamental goal is to

be mindful and fully attentive and attuned to the moment by moment unfolding of reality, and the inner and outer states. The practice of *zazen* and mindfulness are incorporated in the member's day-to-day activities. Here is an account of the significance of *zazen* and mindfulness for Eric, it is typical of the views of other informants on this subject:

I believe in *zazen* itself as the Way. *Zazen* is the core and you cannot do much without mindfulness or that awareness that comes to you. You cannot bring mindfulness to life in any other way. Just the act of sitting, the act of sitting will lead by itself, for most people, to a certain mindful state [...] If you practice a lot it does. Eric

Two reasons emerged from the data for the perception of mindfulness as a positive state. Firstly, according to Zen tradition, mindfulness is the precondition to enlightenment. Secondly, and paradoxically, mindfulness is itself an expression of the enlightened state. These will be elaborated upon next.

***Zazen* leads to enlightenment**

A fundamental belief change which occurs in conversion to Zen Buddhism is the idea that there is a state of consciousness available to us called enlightenment. Furthermore, that this state of consciousness is identical to the enlightenment experienced by the historical Buddha over 2000 years ago. Zen Buddhism regards enlightenment as the most profound realisation possible for a human being. Essential to the practice of Zen is having faith that the practice of *zazen* will one day culminate in the experience of enlightenment, namely a sudden and intuitive insight into the essential nature of all being (Kapleau, 1965:31). The conviction that the act of *zazen* can lead to enlightenment is clearly indicated in the following extract:

***Zazen* is a way of understanding or realising your Buddha-nature, realising what the self is and its relationship, I mean this is putting it more formally, and what its relationship is to the universe I suppose. Lucy**

The belief in enlightenment is based on the essential teaching of Buddhism which consist of the 'four noble Truths', according to this teaching human life involves a constant pattern of change and this gives rise to dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction together with ego driven selfish desires constitutes a universal pattern of suffering. The highest goal for human beings is to liberate themselves from desire and the suffering that it leads to. This is the Buddhist conception of nirvana or enlightenment. Zen shares with other Buddhist traditions enlightenment as its ultimate goal.

The Zen approach to enlightenment is described as being "independent of texts" and *zazen* is valued because it is through Zen meditation that one can attain *satori* - awakening or enlightenment. Literally, *satori* means seeing into one's true nature and at the same time seeing into the true nature of all being. *Satori* is attained when the meditator's ego is completely dissolved, and he or she experiences the universe and him or her-self as a non-dualistic whole. According to the teachings of Zen Buddhism one can be confident that one is "ripening" all the time while practising *zazen*, therefore by following its method of training an experience of enlightenment or *satori* can be attained in a single life time (Kapleau, 1965:xv; Humphreys, 1987:1; Kraft, 1988:2; Humphrey & Ward, 1995: 211). Therefore, the spiritual awakening which in other schools of Buddhism is believed to take several lifetimes is considered to be a realistic prospect for all who practice *zazen* rigorously (Suzuki, 1961:114; Kapleau, 1965:30, 79, 143-44; Moore, 1995:705-706). Zen teacher Philip Kapleau (1965) refers to the countless number of Zen practitioners who have attained enlightenment through the practice of *zazen* as the proof of the effectiveness of *zazen* as the technique for attaining enlightenment.

According to Zen Buddhism enlightenment cannot be achieved by merely thinking or reading about it. The Zen approach rejects scripts and dogma and is primarily concerned with meditation as the instrument of enlightenment. The way in which *zazen* leads to enlightenment is through enabling the practitioner to calm the mind and cultivate mindfulness. The physical immobility of the *zazen* posture, the slowing down of the breath and the stilling of thoughts achieve a stillness in the mind which is referred to as *samadhi*, where the mind is "empty", yet wakeful and alert. *Samadhi* is the precondition for enlightenment, since it is in the context of this state that an insight into the essential nature

of the self and all beings is possible. Lucy related her conviction of the reality of enlightenment to personal experience:

[Where does your faith in these ideas come from, like *zazen* leading to enlightenment?]
It just makes sense to me, you know from certain experiences, and everyone has had this you know, I mean the experience with my mother you know when she was dying and just certain nature, I guess you can call these nature mystical experiences particularly by the sea. I grew up by the bay and I spent a lot of time there you know I have had these feelings, intuitions and whatever that you are not different. What you ultimately are is what the universe ultimately is and somehow, for some reason or other, we don't know this, it has to be realised or we have to be wakened and *zazen* is the way to realise this. Lucy

According to the Zen tradition, *zazen* is the focus of Zen practice regardless of the stage one is, it is necessary to calm the mind, after the attainment of initial insight further *zazen* is necessary to deepen it. For those who are enlightened *zazen* is the way of sustaining and deepening it. Without *zazen*, the insight attained at the moment of enlightenment will lose its ability to transform and shape one's life and will fade into a memory (Kapleau, 1965:20; Kraft, 1988:43).

Mindfulness as enlightenment

Mindfulness is considered to be not only the means to attaining enlightenment, but as one and the same thing as the enlightened state. Therefore, there is no difference between the practice of *zazen* and enlightenment and it is believed that:

Zazen embraces everything essential and valuable in Buddhism. In Zen practice and enlightenment come together. The seed of Buddhahood planted in each individual at birth so that it might blossom to fulfilment - that is, Buddha-nature inherent in all reality - is disclosed in *zazen*. (Dumoulin, 1987, vol.15:563)

The idea of the unity of *zazen* and the enlightened state is particularly prominent in the

teachings of Dogen Kigen (1200-1253), the founder of the *Soto* school of Zen. Furthermore, since all the groups in my study incorporated elements of both *Soto* and *Rinzai* schools of Zen the belief in *zazen* as enlightenment was evident in the way in which they approached Zen practice. For instance, Robert Aitken, the founder of the Diamond Sangha to which most of the Zen groups in Australia are connected, rejects the notion of *zazen* as a tool, '*Zazen* is not merely a means, any more than eating, and sleeping are means or method, "*zazen* is itself enlightenment". This unity of ends and means, effect and cause, is the *tao* (way) of Buddha, the practice of realisation' (Aitken, 1982:14). Hogen Yamahata, a Japanese Zen teacher who resides in Australia and leads the Open Way Zen groups, takes this position a step further and advocates the unity of the enlightened state with that of ordinary mind and activities, 'We do not try to gain enlightenment. We just leave our body and mind in the void, and sit whole-heartedly and are *Buddha* ourselves right here now. We need nothing other than this' (Yamahata, 1992:119).

The origin of the belief that *zazen* and mindfulness are the same as enlightenment rests on the doctrine of non-attainment as well as the notion of "aimlessness" in early Buddhism. The early Buddhist texts (*Vibhassa*, *Abhidhanmakosa Sastra*, *Visudhimagga*) define "aimlessness" as non-desire that is the practice of not placing any goals in front of oneself. This is based on another fundamental belief in Buddhism namely the idea of emptiness or the absence of a permanent identity in things. Therefore it is believed that since things are impermanent one should not strive to obtain or realise anything. The *Soto* school of Zen in particular emphasises these principles and applies them to meditation, it teaches that *zazen* should not be done with the attitude of wilful striving for enlightenment. Indeed one must not strive, nor wait for awakening since *zazen* and awakening are not two different things and there is no awakening to be obtained. Therefore it is believed that *zazen* itself is the goal of practice. According to the Zen tradition, we are all Buddha's in substance and therefore there is no need to strive, nothing to attain, nowhere to go, and indeed, 'To practice sitting meditation is already to be a Buddha' (Nhat Hanh, 1995:85-6).

Comprehending this more subtle aspect of Zen belief requires greater familiarity and longer involvement with Zen practice. Generally, in my sample the novice practitioners were more goal directed and perceived *zazen* as a means to enlightenment. On the other hand, the

long-term practitioners who were more familiar with the idea of mindfulness *as* the enlightened state declined to talk about enlightenment or any other goals as the reason for their practice. The following extracts compares the degree of goal directedness between two long-term Zen students and one beginner:

I asked Max who has been practising Zen since 1981 and Kate who has been a practitioner since 1986 why they continue to practice and this is what they replied. According to Max:

With different periods in my life the motivation has had a different basis. So, at the beginning I wanted to achieve something, enlightenment and these kind of ideas, but now I just want to sit because I treat it as a, as a sense of life, or an awareness of life flowing through me. Max

Kate responded to the same question by saying:

One of the things I like about Zen practice is it hasn't got a goal, you don't sort of measure how far you have got you just do it. I am wary of, sort of being too goal orientated and saying you know, I want to get enlightenment and that is why I am doing it. Seems to me that is the wrong approach. Although I wouldn't say I am doing it for no reason, it is very difficult to articulate. I suppose I could say it makes sort of my experience and my position in life sort of more meaningful but it is not that there is a specific meaning, but that it is more imbued with a sense of meaningfulness. Kate

Lucy who had practised Zen since 1998 responded differently to the same question:

[What motivates you to practice?]

I try not to have expectations, but I do. I guess in a way my hopes and my expectation is to achieve some kind of awakening, even though the official line is that even in saying that now I am so far away from it. But I guess that is the, that there is a belief there or a basic faith there, that this is pointing to what we all intrinsically are and what the universe that we inhabit intrinsically is. To see that I suppose is my aim. Lucy

The same change of attitude towards the goal of *zazen* was evident in numerous informal discussions I had with various Zen students and teachers. The senior students often commented on their initial goal-directed approach to *zazen* as naive or misguided. Over time the intention of getting enlightened as soon as possible through intense practice was replaced by coming to see that *zazen* and mindfulness are an end in themselves and one and the same as the enlightened state. According to the teachings of Joko Beck who is a contemporary American Zen teacher associated with several Australian Zen groups:

Enlightenment is the core of all religions. But we have quite often a strange picture of what it is. We equate the enlightened state with a state in which we have become quite perfect, quite nice and quite calm and accepting. And that's not it.

[...] This is the enlightened state: the state of a person who, to a real degree, can embrace any or all conditions, good or bad. (Beck, 1989:108, 109)

The belief in Buddha-nature as the essence of the self and the reality

Closely related to the merging of enlightenment and the mindfulness of the present moment is the Zen Buddhist definition of the self and the mundane in sacred terms. Conversion to Zen Buddhism involves a fundamental change in the convert's perception of the self and reality in general. It involves a re-definition of self in sacred terms and replacing one's previous views of oneself as sinful or incomplete with one of perfection and inherent purity and wholeness as one is right now. The sacralisation of the mundane is achieved through redefining one's essential or true self in terms of Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is located in the inner self of the individual as well as mundane reality. The sacralisation of mundane reality and the self is expressed in *The Hakuin Zenji, song of zazen* which is chanted daily during meditation retreats in the groups associated with the Diamond Sangha tradition:

All beings are by nature Buddha, as ice is by nature water. Apart from water there is no ice, apart from beings, no Buddha [...] Truly, is there anything missing now? Nirvana is right here, before our eyes: this very place is the Lotus Land; this very body, the Buddha.

Augusto Alcalde, the teacher associated with some of the groups in my study, expressed the above belief in the following way:

I don't object to the word religious in describing Zen, I think the religious is a part of Zen but the religious as a sign of mystery of the ordinary is what I am more interested in. Augusto

This is how Joy expressed her belief in the Buddha nature as the essence of self:

I definitely have seen glimpses of things that make me believe that yes you may get in touch with the more essential self, so if you want to call it Buddha-nature or something you can. At the beginning when people talked about that I thought that it sounds pretty crazy. But now I definitely do see myself as essentially embodying this.

Joy

This redefinition of oneself and reality in general in sacred terms is related to the Buddhist context of Zen. According to *Mahayana* Buddhism, the school of Buddhism where Zen belongs, all living beings possess a Buddha-nature and there is no difference between us and the Buddha with regards to the substance. What Buddha said at the moment of his enlightenment varies according to different Buddhist Scripture, however, according to *Avatamsaka sutra* Buddha spontaneously cried out: 'Wonder of wonders! Intrinsically all living beings are Buddhas, endowed with wisdom and virtue, but because men's minds have become inverted through delusive thinking they fail to perceive this' (Kapleau, 1965:31). Thus, regardless of who we are, we are whole and complete as we are (Durckheim, 1987:9).

In Zen, enlightenment is defined in terms of identification with, and the recognition of a universal Buddha-nature in human essence. *Satori* is the Japanese term referring to the gnostic experience in Zen, it means, 'to see into essential nature' (Aitken, 1982:140). According to Zen tradition, at the moment of enlightenment one's essential nature or Buddha-nature is revealed (Kapleau, 1965:31). Therefore Zen practice brings about a shift from ignorance of Buddha-nature to its realisation (Aitken, 1982:89; Nhat Hanh, 1995:77). Augusto Alcalde, describes the embodiment of this essential nature in the following way:

a Zen Buddhist teacher is not the one who has grasped essential nature and is helping the student to grasp it also, but is the one who has been already grasped to the bones by that essential nature and cannot go away. So are everyone of us, and the geckos and the plants and the clouds. The role of the teacher is to point to that stuckness in you yourself. Point to the student that they are already there stuck in essential nature and cannot go away from it. [...] We ruin our lives searching for essential nature all over the place in the future or the present or whatever, looking for a different role or trying to be a different person. There's just this living fact of your own life. It does not depend on your practising or not. It's there anyway. (Tindall, 1992:41)

Similarly, Joko Beck has defined spiritual awakening in terms of realising the sacred nature of all beings:

From the very beginning, there's nothing wrong. There's no separation: it's all one radiant whole. Nobody believes this and until they have practised a long time it's hard to get. Even with six months of intelligent practice, however, there begins to be a little shake in the false structure of our beliefs. The structure begins to fall apart here and there. As we practice over the years, the structure weakens. The enlightened state exists when it falls apart completely. (Beck, 1993:77)

This normalisation of transcendence is even applied to transcendental or mystical experiences in such a way that the experience of enlightenment and mindfulness merges with even the most mundane aspects of experience. This normalisation of the transcendent is evident in how Luke expressed his struggle to give up thinking of achieving mystical experiences as the goal of Zen practice:

You know it took me eight years to give up doing *zazen* for experiences. Because I had more experiences and I guess they became more normal. I mean they are just experiences you know, they become experiences like any other experiences you know. They may be transcendental, spiritual experience, but being some transcendental, spiritual experience is just another way of seeing things. So, they became more everyday or more normal I guess, and something that you know will come at its own time under certain circumstances that you can't predict. Luke

Hogen Yamahata urges the students of Zen to replace any expectation of "progress" with that of mindfulness of the present moment:

Recently, I had a shock from one of my European friends, who has practised for more than 25 years. He confessed "I haven't progressed in Zen meditation at all", he complained about and confessed such an unhappiness [...] Such a fixed idea of progress prevents you accepting, to perceive, THIS moment of real peace. When we keep such a fixed idea, we cannot mindfully accept, meet or harvest THIS one moment of peace [...] Progress implies toward a certain fixed direction, but if you don't have such a fixed direction there cannot be any progress. Whenever you miss THIS, this one encounter of peace, all the 'progress' you have done, suddenly disappears [...] Outside of this encounter, this peace, is it possible to find any progress, or direction, or any enlightenment even? (<http://www.openway.org.au/openway/teaching-progress.html>- accessed 6th June 2002)

Adopting an attitude of surrender and acceptance

This third aspect of conversion to Zen involves a shift in the attitude towards acceptance and surrender of what *is* and coming to place a value in oneself and all things *as they are*. Therefore, one opens up to the present moment as it is, and cultivates a moment by moment awareness of reality instead of losing sight of the here and now and pursuing goals. This attitude of surrender is a consequence of the second aspect of conversion to Zen namely, the realisation that the enlightened state is manifested in the present moment, and reality as it reveals itself moment-by-moment. The acceptance of self and things as they are in return reinforces the redefinition of the mundane as sacred. According to Hogen Yamahata, 'when you accept your suffering one hundred per cent, the suffering disappears. It is no longer suffering. The problem is in refusing to accept your reality, that is, the pain' (Yamahata, 1992, 41).

Conversion to Zen therefore involves a fundamental shift in one's definition of self and reality. This redefinition involves, 'the acceptance of this actual world which is so miserable, imperfect, and rotten as the most perfect, irreplaceable, and finite one' (Yamahata, 1992, 34). The same perfection is attributed to one's self regardless of whatever state one is in (Beck, 1993:211).

The data indicated that the participants, the long-term practitioners in particular, had adopted this attitude of non-attainment and acceptance. Furthermore, this leads to a significant shift in many other areas of the informants experience. For instance Sara described *zazen* as a:

practice of getting out of the way [...] the acceptance of things just as they are and working with that and that is very liberating and very, very beautiful. For me what really has been the core of Zen practice is letting go of that separation, that this is good and this not good and, and trying to avoid this. Embracing, embracing what is and working with that, and finding great joy and great compassion. For me this has been the basis of the experience of interconnectedness. Sara

Thus for Sara the cultivation of acceptance of "what is" has been the basis for adopting crucial aspects of Buddhist ethics and metaphysics, namely, compassion, interconnectedness and non-duality. This is how Sue described the influence of adopting an attitude of surrender and acceptance of her life and the shift in the way which she interprets everyday objects:

There is a sense of having a home, a sense of being at home. Also getting better at not choosing just being with whatever is there. Before if I went anywhere I would always say that bit is wrong, that needs to be changed, you know what I mean? Like a journey out from Melbourne, and you see all these factories and see the broken glass, I used to spend my whole time in this sort of, 'yes, I like that bit. No, I don't like that bit'. As if somehow the world ought to deliver to me what I wanted and when the plastic bag was there it was like a personal assault, how dare it be there. Now I still feel that throwing plastic bags around is a very bad habit, but it is not the same, now I still deplore the behaviour but I don't keep editing the earth, I don't keep editing life. I still don't like it, sometimes I even catch myself liking those bit, the very little humble bits like the weeds that grow through the gravel, just a sort of a resting in the world, in the place wherever it is and in the sounds. Sue

For Kristen the attitude of acceptance informed her interpersonal relationship as well as her feelings towards herself:

[What do you see as the most significant changes resulting from your practice?]

The first thing that comes to mind, my first gut reaction is I am far more loving with myself, and it is not the ego love. I really do respect Kristen more since I have been practising. I have always been one for quiet and being alone, not lonely but aloneness, it is very important to me but I find that I can do that for longer periods of time now. So, that respect and being able to, not being able to, but being aware that everybody has got something to offer and everyone is extraordinary in their own way and my tolerance and patience has increased. I don't blow it as much any more, don't feel the need to blow it. So, the impatience is not as intense anymore that is in everything just allowing things to be as they are, as opposed to what they could be, this is how they are not pushing it as much. That has been very empowering in everything. Kristen

Luke described how the attitude of surrender and acceptance has altered the way he meditates leading to a more positive experience of *zazen* which he now describes as "enjoyable" as opposed to it being a "struggle":

When I actually sit down and do it I enjoy it, I really enjoy it. You know, I just sit there and you know sometimes I make an effort and actually bring some, effort or, or conscious purpose to sitting and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I just sit and let it come to me and, but I always enjoy it, and that is I guess one of the things that I have gained over the years of sitting that I have done. That focus or that settledness does come and it will come at its own time. I guess that is the difference between sitting now and sitting years ago. I don't struggle with it anymore, and so the stuff comes up and I am either attentive or I am not, I day dream a bit or I don't. I mean it is not like I am not making any effort at all but you know it is nice to sit like that, not fighting to fit some ideal of sitting. Luke

This is how Zen teacher August Alcalde expressed the significance of acceptance in Zen practice:

one of the you know burning points in the west for Zen Buddhism is that we are basically talking about humanity, realising our own humanity not becoming a super being [...] I think what we are talking here is about our own humanity and first step in accepting that obvious fact we are not cats, we are human beings. Cats have their certain skills [...] we have our own strong points and some points that are not that strong and this is our humanity. How do we deal with that, what do we do in that for a better world and harmony around all beings is what matters more than getting some kind of special understanding. [*Would you say that this accepting of our humanity is an indication of the senior Zen practitioner?*] I agree with that, yeah. Augusto

Having articulated the changes which occur in converting to Zen it is important to emphasise that not every single person in my sample has adopted and internalised the above beliefs to the same extent. The participants were individuals at different stages of their journey. One has since stopped Zen practice altogether, others have gone on and intensified their commitment in a number of ways such as spending extended periods of time in Zen monasteries or taking the Buddhist precepts. The data and my observations indicated that the length of involvement in Zen practice was directly related to the extent the three characteristics of conversion to Zen were present in the informants' conversion narratives and guided their actions in general.

Definition of conversion to Zen: sociological interpretations

The remaining part of this chapter will deal with two issues. Firstly, I will endeavour to make sociological sense of the phenomenon of conversion to Zen by fitting the three belief contents of Zen conversion discussed already into sociological typologies and offering a sociological interpretation of the Zen belief system. Secondly, I will argue that the changes which take place in conversion to Zen are sufficiently profound to constitute conversion.

A sociological typology of the substantive properties of conversion to the Zen belief system

In the process of acculturation, the teachers and students of Zen in Australia have been striving to come up with the kind of Zen practice that fits in well with the Australian culture as well as meeting the needs of the individuals who are attracted to Zen practice. In this process elements of Eastern mysticism, the New Age movement, the Human Potential movement, psychotherapy, the Green movement and feminism are being incorporated into the traditional Zen beliefs.²² Therefore it is difficult to fit Zen neatly into any one category such as Human Potential or Eastern religions (Glock & Bellah, 1976), since it incorporates elements of both.

The classification of non-traditional meaning systems which more accurately reflects the nature of Zen in Australia is the one offered by Robbins, Anthony and Richardson (1978).²³ This classification divides belief systems according to their content and meaning and it focuses on the distinction between monistic and dualistic meaning systems. Dualistic movements have a tendency to be more regimented both in their institutional organisation as well as in their representation of morality. Monistic or Eastern mystical movements on the other hand take a "relativistic and subjectivist" approach towards organisational and moral matters (Robbins, Anthony & Richardson, 1978:101). The monistic movements as described by Robbins, Anthony and Richardson (1978) bear remarkable resemblance to the Zen Buddhist emphasis on spiritual awakening and insight as well as the sacralisation of the self and mundane reality, 'monistic ideologies tend to employ a vocabulary of cognition or perception ("realisation", or "enlightenment") in contrast to the vocabulary of volition associated with dualistic movements' (Robbins, Anthony & Richardson, 1978:102). Furthermore:

Monistic mystical groups and quasi-monastic therapeutic movements stress experiential communion with a latent holistic "self" which may be equated with a "universal self" or

²² See Spuler (1999) for a full discussion of the religious transplantation of Zen in Australia

²³ Compared to the Glock and Bellah's 1976 model, this typology has a broader utility since it applies to a number of different movements.

universal consciousness. Such movements are thus often associated with notions of *immanence* and conceptions of divinity or ultimate reality as a depth of self (Stone, 1978a; Nordquist, 1977). (Robbins, Anthony & Richardson, 1978:102)

The belief in our innate perfection, that our lives are not as they should be, and that there are ways to realize this innate perfection characterise monistic belief systems. These are also expressed in Zen Buddhism. For instance according to Joko Beck:

The fact is that for most of us, our lives are *not* working well. Until we engage in a serious practice, our basic view of life usually remains pretty much untouched. In fact, life continues to aggravate us, and even gets worse. Serious practice is needed if we are to see into the fallacy that is at the bottom of almost all human action, thinking, and emotion. (Beck, 1993:75)

Beck goes on to explain that this fallacy is based on the illusion that we are essentially separate entities. Beck rejects this and makes the following claim:

Now the truth of the matter is that we're not separate. We are all expressions or emanations of a central point - call it multidimensional energy. We can't picture this; the central point or energy has no size, no pace, no time. I'm speaking metaphorically about what can't really be spoken of in ordinary terms. (Beck, 1993:76)

The above monistic beliefs however are expressed in a variety of ways in different monistic traditions. In order to systematise these differences Robbins, Anthony and Richardson (1978) have developed a sub-typology of monistic and quasi-monistic movements. Depending on how they approach spiritual realisation these movements may be divided into 'technical' versus 'charismatic', and 'one-level' versus 'two-level' conceptualisations of spiritual realisation. In order to achieve their spiritual goals, the technical movements claim to offer procedures which are 'pragmatic, empirical, and even "scientific"' (Robbins, Anthony & Richardson, 1978:105). Since the individuals are invited to test the purported claims of the group and the efficacy of the technique as opposed to blindly embracing it.

The Zen Buddhist belief in *zazen* as an efficacious means leading to enlightenment corresponds to this, and qualifies Zen as a technical monistic movement. Robert Aitken's

description of *zazen* demonstrates the belief in the empirical validity of *zazen* as the technique of realisation in Zen:

The heart of Zen training is *zazen*. Without *zazen*, there is no practice, no realisation, and no application of the practice. It has its roots in earliest Vedic times and was probably well established by Shakyamuni's day. It has since been refined by trial and error in countless training centres through some ninety generations of Zen teachers. By now its form is well established.

[...] We are concerned with realising the nature of being, and *zazen* has proved empirically to be the way to settle down to the place where such realisation is possible. (Aitken, 1982:13, 14)

Robbins, Anthony and Richardson (1978:105-106) draw a further distinction between one-level and two-level conceptualisations of spiritual realisation:

One level monistic systems treat the monistic vision as having existential and experiential validity for its adherents as soon as they are converted to it as a value-orientation [...] These movements generally promise a fairly rapid enlightenment, i.e., a realisation of monistic wisdom quickly in a "once and for all" manner. (Robbins, Anthony & Richardson, 1978:105-106)

According to the *two-level* monistic movements enlightenment is a rare spiritual attainment. Considering charismatic-technical and one-level-two-level variables, enables a conceptualisation of Zen as a two-level technical movement.²⁴ This is because of the emphasis on meditation as the technique which contributes to a gradual spiritual evolution culminating in the experience of enlightenment. In addition, in Zen like other monistic movements the technique is not confined to specific times and informs other areas of the converts' life in general.²⁵ This is evident in Zen via the converts' efforts to practice *zazen*

²⁴ This is consistent with Robbins, Anthony and Richardson's (1978) classification of Zen as an example of a two-level, technical movement alongside Eastern mystical groups such as the Hare Krishna and the Tibetan Buddhist groups.

²⁵ The two-level charismatic movements on the other hand emphasise the role of the spiritual master in guiding the individual on the path to spiritual realisation. Given the primacy of the role of the master, other

daily and to incorporate mindfulness into all aspects of life. Therefore the mindful state comes to be regarded as the ideal state from which the practitioners strive to orient towards reality and experience life in general.

Despite sharing the core beliefs of the monistic movement, Zen is characterised by defining the sacred in terms of the mundane. This particular orientation to transcendence will be elaborated next. According to Bouma, 'Religion binds the here and now with that which is beyond in order to make the now meaningful' (Bouma, 1992:1). Through these experiences:

We are lifted out of ourselves, the humdrum, the rat race and for a moment something beyond has broken in to force a kind of transcendence, an awareness of another world, or plane of existence, or something beyond ourselves that touches us. (Bouma, 1992:69)

This is achieved in a variety of ways depending on the religious tradition and it may take the form of, 'awe and wonder' (Bouma, 1992:69). The Zen idea of immanent as transcendent is an instance of the sacralising process which binds the here and now to the eternal. The following extract illustrates this:

One extraordinarily precious thing is that I think I have always had a capacity for wonder. You know for awe and that, [I] feel that I have regained that. Like I was in the country somewhere sunbaking I could feel this delightful little beautiful feeling like someone is gently tickling me and after a while I realised that they were flies walking on me. I normally don't like flies walking on me one bit and I realised that there was a fly walking on me and I liked it, so, it is a bit like that. There is a sense that the more I practice in a way, the less I have to do, and enables me to see that I don't have to fix it and I can't fix it. All you have to do seems to me is just sit there you know, sit there and watch what happens. Sue

Through the practice of *zazen* one is able to lend oneself to precisely this kind of experience of transcendence, of awe and wonder, hence the emphasis to constantly bring

technical rituals such as chanting or meditation are relegated to a secondary position and therefore do not shape the life style of the converts (Robbins, Anthony & Richardson, 1978:108).

one to the present moment as the main focus of Zen practice. Furthermore, this mode of transcendence is characterised by acceptance. As Bouma has pointed out in this mode of transcendence:

The response to that which is beyond is described not in terms of belief or feeling, but of surrender, waiting, obeying [...]. When the transcendent is encountered in this way the person ceases to will, ceases to strive but rather simply allows self to be. (Bouma, 1992:70)

This aspect of Zen will be further elaborated on in Chapter Five where it will be related to the type of spirituality which prevails in today's post-industrial societies.

The degree and character of changes that occur in Zen warrant the term conversion

In the remaining part of this chapter I will refer to the definition of conversion to Zen, and the typology of the Zen belief system to argue that the changes which occur in conversion to Zen are sufficiently profound to meet the criteria of conversion which I elaborated in Chapter One. In Chapter One I argued that not all forms of religious change qualify as conversion, and distinguished conversion from less radical forms of religious change, such as affiliative shifts, changes in group membership status or church attendance. Conversion involves a radical shift in one's sense of self and "ultimate grounding" in general. This ultimate sense of reality (Berger, 1967; Heirich, 1977) is by and large taken for granted in normal situations. In conversion on the other hand the assumptions of the core reality are scrutinised leading to a transformation of self-concept and the universe of discourse. As a result of the radical changes in the universe of discourse, one's frame of reference is altered and an alternative sense of grounding is adopted and maintained. The new framework is adopted as a master role which guides the interpretation of present as well as the past events, which are now seen through the lens of the new frame of reference (Mead, 1934:88-90; Snow & Machalek, 1984).

In the process of conversion to Zen the shift in the converts' core reality consist of sacralising the self and mundane reality. The consequence of this is a reorientation based

on mindfulness and living in the present moment. In addition, acceptance and surrender is adopted as a master role which the converts endeavour to apply to all situations. The student of Zen strives to achieve this new orientation in all aspects of daily life and not only during meditation and it is believed that every action taken with conscious awareness thus becomes a form of Zen practice, this is sometimes referred to as meditation in action (Preston, 1982:260-261). This new definition constitutes a new ground of being that informs the experiences of the converts (Heirich, 1977:673-674). Conversion to Zen also signals a change in self-concept. Gecas (1982:3) defines self-concept as, 'the concept the individual has of himself as a physical, social, and spiritual or moral being'. According to Rosenberg (1979:7) self-concept is, 'the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself [*sic*] as an object'. I distinguished changes in self-concept from lesser changes involved in role-change and affiliative shift and argued that self-concept plays an important role in guiding our actions and feelings by influencing our thoughts and feelings regarding who we really are versus who we might be in a particular role or under certain circumstances (Rosenberg, 1979). Conversion to Zen involves redefining who we really believe we are in terms of the notion of Buddha-nature.

Rose experienced a change in how she feels about herself as a result of Zen practice:

Took me a while to really get into my practice [*then*] I was reading every book I could get my hands on. There were people sitting with me every morning and evening and I just started to feel so right, really right. Everything became, mountains became more beautiful, my life just started to improve -- like I became more powerful just within myself. A lot of negative, sort of neurotic aspects started to kind of fall away. But the more obvious one was I used to have this really bad temper smash things [...] that sort of started to ease off, I didn't feel so guilty about my action I would not do such things to embarrass myself. I started to feel a bit better about who I was, have a bit more integrity. Another thing I like to share is that a very important *sesshin* I went to, I started bowing to my cushion and saying good on you Rose, every time I bowed, and for a year I did that. That was an important process of learning to be more loving towards myself, and the more I have done that, and still keep on doing that. When I think I am not good in doing this, I recognise that voice is disrespectful

to my essential nature, not to me as an individual, but to my Buddha-nature -- to Buddha-nature am doing this disservice, I am dishonouring the life force to speak of myself in that way. So, consequently I have been more self loving. I became more empowered and was able to do a lot more. I have always been an active person and done a lot but I have also had an enormous baggage that I have dragged around with me, a lot of anxiety and that tired me out terribly and caused enormous emotional upheavals, and some of that has kind of changed. I still have enormous upheavals but it is somehow like more productivity comes from it that seems to resolve into something more life affirming, where as before it would just repeat and repeat because there was a lot of self criticism, that cycle is not so strong now. Rose

Nancy experienced a similar re-orientation as a result of Zen practice which altered how she perceived her place and relationship with "the universe":

I used to think that the universe was there to get me and I certainly had a lot of good evidence for that, and then things started to straighten out and I thought the universe was neutral and now I think the universe is positive. I think there is enormous support just in nature and I see a lot of goodness in people a lot of support. I think this change in perception is a result of my spiritual experience. Yes, I have to say that because it has shifted my view point, so I see things differently. Nancy

The sacralisation of the self and the mundane, namely, the belief that the self and mundane reality are essentially sacred is the most significant transformation in the converts' universe of discourse in conversion to Zen; it also leads to transformation in the converts' self-concept.²⁶ This points out to the sacralising power of religion whereby hitherto ordinary objects take on a sacred quality. According to Bouma, 'Religions are all about transcendence, moving beyond the obvious, going deeper than the surface, relating to the permanent, the absolute, the ultimate' (Bouma, 1992:67).

²⁶ Self-concept is theoretically linked to the universe of discourse (Staples & Mauss, 1987), therefore changes in the universe of discourse influence self-concept via the use of language.

This is how Rose expressed the nature of changes which had taken place since she began Zen practice:

What definitely changed was my frame of reference. I started not to perceive everything in relation to Rose, it somehow became less, I began to see things with bigger eyes. When I think of my earlier years I was more enmeshed in daily kind of thought and then as the meditation became, and Zen became primary I began to see things through the Zen lens. Rose

In the context of Zen conversion, mundane reality, the here and now, and the self are the objects of this sacralising activity.²⁷ There is a concomitant shift in authority from outside to inside the self. As a result the self is perceived as the authority which validates belief and values. Self-authority is the assumption that truths coming from outside one's self cannot be relied upon. They can only be taken as true when they have been shown to be right, through testing them by way of one's own experience. Hence the emphasis is on one's subjective experience as the basis for belief and action rather than rules and commandments imposed from outside which were perceived to be based on "blind faith". Evidence of this is the distinction drawn by the participants between experiential and intellectual knowledge, and belief shared by the informants that Zen is "pragmatic" and "scientific". This belief in the experiential nature of Zen dominates the Zen Buddhist texts. It is generally claimed that, 'Zen has been transmitted directly by the *Buddha* and has nothing at all to do with the Scripture and doctrines you are studying' (Nhat Hanh, 1995:35). The participants believe subjective experiences are the ultimate source for validating the truths of Zen and claim that Zen beliefs are based on and are generated through experience rather than faith and analysis. The following quotes validates the assumption of self-authority in Zen:

[I have a] resistance to joining clubs and categorising myself and labelling as a religion you know I don't, I sort of don't see Zen Buddhism as a religion I see it as a path, a

²⁷ The notion of sacralisation of the self and the mundane is related to the broader issue of self-spirituality which has been discussed in detail by Heelas (1996) in the context of the New Age Movement.

spiritual path. I don't have any trouble with the word spiritual but religion to me is sort of has a guru [...] There are world religions that are religions of a book. For instance, there is a book of Christianity. There is a deity figure somewhere on the scheme of things and to me what is required in all those spiritual paths which they are also, is a degree of faith and I see it as a blind faith.

[How about the idea of Buddha-nature and zazen as the means for obtaining realisation. Have you embraced this aspect of Zen dogma or are you keeping an open mind?] Sure, Joko Beck talks about the necessity for faith in early days, Aya Khema used to talk about that, well to sit there in the first place you have got to have some sort of faith that there is something in it for you. Because you can't, you can't get that after one minute or five minutes or one week, so you have got to have faith that there must be some positive outcome from this activity. But that faith in that really small sense I think is O. K. whereas the faith required for a Christian practitioner is bloody awesome you know. I think the apostles creed which one, I used to recite in school assembly 'I believe, I believe, I believe'. As a five year old I can remember where we lived and the church we went to and me looking around me and all these people saying this stuff and I think I am not real I don't belong to these people. At five years of age, I can remember thinking how can they say this stuff, where does it come from, and it is a faith and I think it has got to be a blind faith, it is unquestionable. Whereas the benefits of *zazen* it's like this experiential you know, "knowledge at the experiential level" you can experience everything, everything, everything that you know. The Buddha actually says in writing that don't take a word I say for gospel, don't believe anything a guru ever tells you unless you can put it into practice and experience it within your own body in this life time [...] otherwise it is wishful thinking and faint hopes and blind faith and I think it is either one or the other. James

Sara related the experiential character of Zen practice to the mindfulness of her immediate and therefore non-conceptual experience of here and now:

The most important aspect of Zen practice for me is the emphasis on experience, one's own experience. Being told to explore for oneself and the experience of interconnectedness [...] is the core to practice, hearing the chattering of the child and

the sound of the wind. Yeah, it brings what is right here in this moment, out of the concepts. Sara

Therefore, for Sara the Buddhist idea of interconnectedness is validated through her immediate experience of the oneness of the 'chattering of the child and the sound of the wind'. The emphasis on subjective experience further supports the argument that in conversion to Zen the orientation of the convert are altered in fundamental ways. The converts undergo a major reorientation in their definition of the authority. As a result of this redefinition the informants referred to their experience as "the teacher". For instance, according to James:

It is all very well reading a stack of books on the subject but to me book knowledge is absolutely nothing compared to knowledge at the experiential level. You sit there for whatever, six or seven days, and you observe the sensation in the body on the surface, going through part by part and observing sensation [...] dozens and dozens of sensations are observable but then they are not there next time you come through that same part of the body. That is what I understood to be learning about impermanence at the experiential level, actually experiencing it within your body. So because I thought that was hugely significant, that it is possible to learn something with such impact, day after day after day doing nothing but being aware of the reality of impermanence. James

The belief that authority resides within the experience of the individual harbours a "detraditionalised" (Heelas, 1996:23) approach to Zen, which includes de-emphasising external authority. The detraditionalisation of Zen was indicated in the interviews and manifested itself in a number of ways. For instance, all the informants, except for two, rejected the traditional Zen hierarchy where the master has complete control over the practice. This approach is also encouraged by Western Zen teachers. According the Thich Nhat Hanh, a contemporary Zen teacher:

When we believe something to be the absolute truth and cling to it, we cannot be open to new ideas. Even if truth itself is knocking at the door, we will not let it in. The Zen student

must strive to be free of attachments to knowledge and be open so that truth may enter. The teacher must also help in these efforts. Zen master Lin Chi once said "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet the patriarch, kill the patriarch" [...] If the student is strong, she will have the capacity to liberate herself from all authority and realise ultimate reality in herself. Truth is not a concept. If we cling to our concepts, we lose reality. This is why it is necessary to "kill" our concepts so that reality can reveal itself. To kill the Buddha is the only way to see the Buddha. (Naht Hanh, 1995:53-54)

The emphasis on a detraditionalised view of Zen also impacts the nature of teacher-student relationship. According to Rodney:

[having a Zen teacher] is very important but because we don't have a resident Zen teacher it seems that we are developing a new model where you are thrown back on your resources a lot. That could be a plus in that eventually everyone has to come to the fact that they have to give up the teacher. I would say, because I mean you are born on your own, you die on your own. And to become completely whole yourself, I think you eventually have to give up the teacher, I don't know, I just have a feeling that this is the way. So, by doing it the way we do, you are not so formally attached to one teacher and totally devoted to that teacher, it has got its pluses and minuses. It's minuses are that in a way you don't build up that strong personal relationship because you sit with lots of different teachers, so that is the minuses. The pluses is that it makes you more independent. Rodney

For some informants the detraditionalisation of Zen involves disengaging their practice from the broader Buddhist dogma and doctrine. Lucy declared:

I did study Buddhism and Hinduism so I am aware of it and the more I practice the more the Buddhist context comes into it and becomes more meaningful but I don't feel caught up with them or try to embrace them. To me Zen practice is not about the Buddhist religion, although I can relate to Buddhism. Lucy

The majority of the participants valued the Zen idea of "not putting anything in front of oneself". The detraditionalisation of Zen practice and the value that practitioners have

placed on self-authority was demonstrated in the informants willingness to engage in personal interpretation of the meaning of various Zen beliefs and practices to make them comply with what they find acceptable. For instance, in Zen Buddhism there are occasions when one is required to bow to the teacher. Ann found this ritual unacceptable and engaged in reinterpreting the act and its meaning in order to render it acceptable:

I have a real problem bowing to the teachers that I don't particularly feel a great you know deal of respect for, [...] what I have really done is redefine the experience [...] you are bowing to the world, you are bowing to what that person represents which is basically your own sacred nature you are not bowing to that person, so I can quite easily bow to [...] someone who represents spiritual knowledge that you know I wish to have myself or someone who is in a spiritual position that I have respect for, so I can, it is like respecting the teacher sort of thing because they are the teacher, you respect the position or the role and not necessarily the person, so this has been a way to negotiate that. Ann

Another upshot of self-sacralisation and the belief in the primacy of subjective experience in guiding the converts' belief and action is self-ethics. When I asked questions about the relevance of Buddhist precepts as ethical guidelines, the majority of participants rejected the relevance of Buddhist precepts to their day-to-day conduct and to Zen practice. Some acknowledged their acceptance of the precepts but rejected any dogmatic adherence to them. Instead it was generally believed that the decision about what is right or wrong depends on the circumstances and the Buddhist precepts were treated as moral rules of thumb rather than as invariant rules. Therefore the self becomes the basis for deciding right and wrong depending on what the circumstances require. This is how Jack related the relevance of the precepts to his daily conduct:

Personally I can't stand if I were, if I find I was going to the world thinking, "well, now I have to relate to these people as a Zen Buddhist", I would give myself a kick in the butt if I did. I couldn't stand that, I mean to act in a certain way because you are "Buddhist", in quotation marks is ludicrous. I think Zen is about making you more genuine and reflecting who you are, rather than following commandments. Jack

For Eric right action is not based on precepts but is a consequence of the insights which one attains as one's practice "deepens":

There is a certain point in practice where you develop an understanding of certain mental processes which lead to certain negative behaviour and this understanding leads to a shift in behaviour. I think the ability to be in the now is what leads to being able to maintain the precepts. Right action comes out of practice. Eric

Conclusion

A clear articulation of the meaning of conversion to Zen is a necessary requirement in a study such as this. It defines the subject of the study and is also a preliminary for the primary objective of the thesis which is to explain *how* conversion to Zen is achieved. This chapter approached defining conversion to Zen from two perspectives. Firstly, it offered a definition which was inscribed in the views of informants. Secondly, the informants' experiences were interpreted in sociological terms. Conversion to Zen involves three changes in beliefs and orientations of the individuals:

- Belief in the significance of meditation and its efficacy in attaining enlightenment, and the redefinition of enlightenment as mindfulness.
- Sacralisation of the self and the mundane.
- An attitude of acceptance and surrender guiding one's orientation towards the self and mundane reality.

The above beliefs reflect the views and experiences of informants and are also related to the general Zen Buddhist doctrines.

The above characteristics of conversion to Zen permitted a sociological definition of the Zen belief system as a monistic, technical, two-level belief system. It was argued that the definition of self and reality as essentially sacred is the most significant aspect of conversion to Zen. It leads to fundamental changes in the converts' universe of discourse and self-concept. The sacralisation of the mundane and the self, leads to a fundamental

reorientation based on surrender, acceptance and mindfulness of what *is* rather than striving for a goal. The sacralisation of the self has also important consequences for the way in which the converts approach authority, tradition and ethics. These consequences were elaborated and linked with the data.

Having articulated the meaning and content of Zen conversion, I am now in a position to focus on the question of how individuals adopt these meanings which, is the objective of Chapters Five and Six.

Chapter five

The socio-cultural context of conversion to Zen

In Chapter Four I elaborated on the substantive properties of conversion to Zen. In the process of conversion to Zen, specifically Zen symbols and beliefs are internalised and come to acquire an intense personal meaning, thus bringing about transformation in the converts' orientation to, and interpretation of, themselves and reality in general. The objective of the next two chapters is to find out *how* conversion to Zen is achieved, *how* Zen beliefs are internalised, and *how* this leads to profound changes in self-concept and the universe of discourse. The sociological theories of conversion generally focus on the role of organisational and/or social-psychological factors in conversion and with a few exceptions (Beckford, 2003; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981; Robbins, Anthony & Richardson, 1978; Lukmann, 1967) the role of the broader social context has often been neglected in the sociological theories of conversion. Lofland and Skonovd (1981) have argued for the social origins of conversion by demonstrating that social and historical factors lead to significant variations in "conversion motifs":

There are probably trends and subtrends in the prevalence of particular conversion motifs and in the social conditions with which such trends are correlated. Among other possibilities, we have suggested that in the media-drenched ("advanced") societies, intellectual and experimental conversions are on the increase, and revivalist in relative decline. A wide variety of other conjunctions of social circumstances and conversion motifs are likely discernible. (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981:383)

Similarly, Robbins, Anthony and Richardson (1978:99) have developed a typology of new religions in which they argue, 'different spiritual "types" embody different responses to normative breakdown'. Kilbourne and Richardson have argued along the line of Sampson's

(1981) position that, 'The paradigm of a discipline reproduces the social structures of which it is a part and from which it has risen' (Kilbourne and Richardson, 1989:17). They further elaborate the two implications of the above relationship. The conflict between active and passive theories of conversion reflects as well as reproduces parallel conflicts within the broader American society. In addition, different theories of conversion appeal to different groups in the society. The passive perspective on conversion is adopted by those who wish to maintain the status quo, active theories of conversion appeal to those who want to change it (1989:17). This study will address the above gap and carry out the analysis of conversion to Zen at two different levels; the socio-cultural and the social-psychological. This chapter will elaborate on the socio-cultural context of conversion to Zen and will demonstrate that this is an integral part of the analysis of conversion by illuminating the nature of conversion to Zen in our time and in the Australian society today.²⁸ Chapter Six will focus on the social-psychological aspects of the conversion process.

This chapter will conceptualise the macro-micro interface in conversion to Zen by linking the broader socio-cultural processes and conditions to the specific aspects of conversion to Zen. Conversion is a complex process in that it operates at different levels and to better understand the process the characteristics of the broader social context needs to be understood. Taking into account the prior cognitive orientation of Zen converts and locating it in the social context, will establish that Zen conversion is facilitated by the way in which the self, its value, capacities and problems is perceived by the culture of post-modernity. This will enable a better understanding of the important features of contemporary conversion also prominent in conversion to Zen, such as active seekership and multiple conversions (Richardson, 1980) and further substantiates the first theoretical assumption of this study, namely the agency of the individual. I will argue that Zen converts are seekers who actively engage in reconstructing and reinterpreting the Zen Buddhist doctrines to make it more consistent with their individual quest for meaning within the framework of the postmodern condition and their location within the sub-culture milieus of Human Potential and Eastern Mysticism.

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of the characteristics of Zen in Australia as an imported religion see Bouma et al., 2000.

An important reason for including the social context in my analysis of conversion to Zen is that it enables an appreciation of the fact that conversion into the world-view of Zen Buddhism is not an isolated or anomalous occurrence. I will demonstrate that Zen converts are a part of a broad and loosely connected network consisting of self-growth philosophies, Eastern Mysticism and the Human Potential Movement who pursue personal growth and development through a search for the truths of self (Balch & Taylor, 1977; Campbell, 1978). Although Zen practice is firmly grounded in the teaching of Buddhism, converts to Zen often experiment with and receive support from this sub-culture in the way of roles and metaphors or interpreting and aligning their experience with the Zen belief system.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the total socio-cultural context of the conversion process is related to the interactionist assumption which concerns embeddedness and the sociality of the conversion phenomenon. This was elaborated on in Chapter Two. Briefly this is the view that:

No individual is ever just an individual, he or she must be studied as a single instance of more universal social experiences and social processes. The person, Sartre (198:ix) states, is summed up and for this reason universalised by his [*sic*] epoch, he [*sic*] in turn resumes it by reproducing himself [*sic*] in it as a singularity. (Denzin, 1989:19)

This chapter explores the overlap between the individual converts and the societal conditions that surrounds the subject's conversion experience in order to further our understanding of the meaning attached to conversion in this particular society and in this moment in history. Although societies influence what form religious beliefs and practices take this is not a one way deterministic process. I will take a dynamic approach where religion is both created and sustained by social interaction, as well as shaping social action and society (Berger, 1967). This dynamic approach is implied by the symbolic interactionist assumptions of this study regarding the dialectic between agency and structure. It requires conceptualising converts as individuals who are located within particular socio-cultural and organisational settings and who actively negotiate changes which constitute conversion such as changes in core identity and self-concept. Conversion to Zen will next be related to the fragmentation of identity and consumerism which characterise the postmodern culture (Lyon, 2000).

Fragmentation of identity

From a socio-cultural level of analysis, conversion to Zen may be understood as religious self-construction in the context of a more general response to the identity fragmentation which characterises postmodern times. Unlike the members of traditional societies who are assigned stable and definite identities, the identity of individuals in postmodern societies are characterised by uncertainty and flux (Berger, 1963:48; Lyon, 2000:88-96). The fragmentation of identity necessitates an ongoing process of identity negotiation which is carried out in a variety of ways, using different resources and symbols (Lyon, 2000:88-96). Religion is one such cultural resource (Beckford, 1989) which offers a range of symbols individuals may choose to use in dealing with the fragmentation of identity and self-construction in flexible and unpredictable ways. Two salient characteristics of identity construction in conversion to Zen are: the relocation of the sacred to within the self, and the tendency of individuals to move between various options and choose in a consumerist fashion from the wide range available.

The relocation of the sacred within the self and mundane reality is a defining feature of conversion to Zen Buddhism. This, may be explained in terms of the current social conditions where the fragmentation of identity is dealt with by adopting an holistic conception of self. This is consistent with and may be analysed using Durkheim's hypothesis concerning the integrative capacity of religion in the increasingly individualist post-industrial societies. At the end of *Suicide* he wrote:

As societies become greater in volume and density, they increase in complexity, work is divided, individual differences multiply, the moment approaches when the only remaining bond among the members of a single human group will be that they are all men ... since human personality is the only thing that appeals unanimously to all hearts, since its enchantment is the only aim that can be collectively pursued ... it raises far above all human aims, assuming a religious nature. (Durkheim, 1951:336-cited in Westley, 1978:136)

Durkheim claimed that individualistic religions prevail in highly diversified societies:

As societies become more voluminous and spread over vaster territories, their traditions and practices ... are compelled to maintain a state of plasticity and instability which no longer offers adequate resistance to individual variations. These latter being less well contained, develop more freely and multiply in number; that is everyone increasingly follows his own path. (Durkheim, 1969:26-cited in Westley, 1978:137)

Durkheim (1969:27) attributed increasing individualism to factors such as geographical mobility, social differentiation and population increase, as well as the relocation of morality and sacred in general from outside to within the individual and hence the perception of the individual as the "sovereign judge" (Westley, 1978:137).

Durkheim's predictions about the future of religions are consistent with recent studies on spirituality and religiosity in postmodern societies (Bauman, 1997; Heelas, 1996; Lyon, 2000). For instance, Heelas has distinguished between two aspects of individualism which is a dominant feature of today's postmodern societies. Utilitarian individualism is characterised by self-interest and the satisfaction of the individuals's wants and material consumption in general. Expressive individualism on the other hand emphasises experience and self-actualisation in the form of 'discovering and cultivating "true" nature' and, 'the quest for creativity, personal "growth", "meaningful" relationships, being in tune with oneself' (Heelas, 1996:156).

The above analysis of the cultural conditions facilitating self-spirituality and expressive individualism enhances an understanding of conversion to Zen Buddhism. Expressivism characterises and guides the search for a religious identity and meaning among Zen converts, the following quote is typical of how participants perceive Zen:

Zen is about looking deeply and uncovering who you are I mean that's how I see it. I mean at a very fundamental level I think it is very much a practice which enables you to look deeply within yourself and find answers you know. It is something that you can't take up casually, it is the sort of practice that you either need to do or you don't need to do and [...] in some ways there is not much that needs to be said. It is sort of -- if you need to do it you'll be drawn to it and you will begin that practice and what you need to learn you will learn. I feel that if some one tried to educate me in

Zen beforehand it would have really had very little meaning and, all of those words, it could almost be off-putting. Because for me it is very experiential, it is really what has happened along the way. So, I would say if you have a deep curiosity, a lot of doubt, and a lot of questioning, a lot of curiosity about who you are and what you are doing on this earth, it is a good place to start. Just sitting down and being still, I mean going within. Joy

The expressivist orientation of the informants is further evident in the interest that the majority expressed in the study and exploration of one's self through involvement in a variety of the Human Potential Movements, Psychotherapy, experimenting with psychedelic drugs and various New Age therapies. The following quotation clearly indicates this:

My upbringing was religious I went to Anglican Sunday school until I was 14. I was a fervent Born Again Christian for a number of years but I had doubts about Christianity, about the promise of heaven, and dropped Christianity and went to the other extreme of joining a humanist society. I had read books many, many years ago in early seventies on Zen, I didn't do anything about it then, I was interested in TM [*transcendental meditation*] at that stage, I suppose I was interested in one own's mind. At that point I moved in with a group of students and, so I experimented with drugs, LSD, smoked dope. I reached a point I stopped doing that and became more interested in the meditation side of things that is when I started using TM. I left TM after a while and read on philosophy and psychotherapy. I ran into a friend who told me about the Tibetan [*Buddhism*] and I saw the flier for the Melbourne Zen Group in the Kebi, I liked the idea that it is more intellectual than Tibetan Buddhism [...] so it has been very interesting, very chaotic. Chris

According to Heelas (1996:116) the expressivist values are often expressed in humanist or psychological terms. This involves the belief that we can improve our lives through exploring, developing and expressing our psychological or spiritual capacities. Thus a great deal of value is placed upon attributes such as, ' "awareness", "insight", "empathy", "creativity", "autonomy", "authenticity", "being loving" and seeking "fulfilment" ' (Heelas,

1996:115-116). Zen provides a spiritual interpretation of the assumptions and values of humanistic Expressivism via the belief in Buddha-nature and enlightenment. Self-spirituality is the aspect of Zen which made it particularly attractive to my informants. Furthermore, the belief in *zazen* as the path to realisation echoes the expressivist assumptions of self-responsibility, ' "You can do it", "everybody can do it", "whether you do it, is entirely up to you". "If you fail to do it, you have only yourself to blame" ' (Bauman, 1997:70). Relegating the responsibility for self-actualisation to the individual to some extent accounts for the perception of *zazen* as an efficacious means or technique for attaining insight. As Bauman has pointed out, from this perspective having a transcendental experience is not something that happens to the individual such as receiving grace, rather it is perceived as a "technical problem", and can be attained through cultivating and repeating the appropriate techniques:

The whole experience of revelation, ecstasy, breaking the boundaries of the self and total transcendence-once the privilege of the selected "aristocracy of culture" (saints, hermits, mystics, artists, monks, *tsadiks* or *dervishes*) and coming as an unsolicited miracle, in no obvious fashion related to what the receiver of grace has done to earn it, or as an act of grace rewarding the life of self-immolation and denial -- has been put by postmodern culture within every individual's reach, recast as a realistic target and plausible prospect of each individual's self-training. (Bauman, 1998:70)

Consumerism and identity construction

The postmodern culture is characterised by a fragmentation of identities as well as the structuring of lifestyle and culture around consumption. The two are related since individuals engage in identity construction through selecting, in a consumerist way, from a range of symbols available in the culture (Lyon, 2000: 74-75). This is also applicable to the construction of religious identities such as in conversion. Taking up Lifton's (1970) argument, Balch and Taylor (1977:847-848) have used the term "Protean man" to describe the contemporary convert's style of seeking. According to Lifton because of rapid social change, the spread of mass communication and the consequent "historical dislocation" and "flood of imagery" the individuals adopt a protean style of seeking. Named after the Greek mythical figure, Proteus, who was able to change his form at will, the contemporary

seekers try alternatives paths on their quest for meaning:

The protean style of self-process is characterised by an interminable series of experiments and explorations-some shallow, some profound-each of which may be readily abandoned in favour of still new psychological quests. (Lifton, 1970:319-cited in Balch & Taylor, 1977:848)

Luckmann (1967:102-203) predicted a consumer approach to selecting religious beliefs and norms. Luckmann (1999) has linked the privatised form of religion with the pluralism inherent in today's society. An aspect of this pluralism is that a variety of world views are available to everyone and individuals are able to choose from competing world views. Religious activity is therefore optional and increasingly subject to personal choice. Luckmann traces this view of life to the joint effect of democracy and market economy. The absence of censorship and an overarching religion or world view creates a religious "market place" where the individual may select from a number of religious beliefs (Luckmann, 1999:253-255).

An upshot of describing religious choice in terms of consumption is that it can account for the tentative nature of religious affiliation characteristic of many contemporary seekers, such as many informants who move freely in and out and across religious boundaries, many of whom combine elements from various traditions to create their own personal, custom-made meaning system. Wuthnow (1998) has termed the contemporary religious life "seeking" as opposed to "dwelling". Richardson and Stewart (1977:828) have suggested the term of "conversion careers" to account for the high mobility of some individuals from religion to religion. Jack moved between several meditation groups before settling on Zen practice:

My first introduction was, I was involved with karate and have always been interested in Asian and particularly Japanese arts, antiques, and all that. That is why I took up Karate. Karate-do means the way of empty hand and I always suspected that there was more to this emptiness than carrying no weapons, and I saw pictures of martial artists, especially kendo, meditating and just noticed this. A few years later some

friends started telling me about this meditation they were doing which was "dynamic meditation" related to *Rajneesh* the Indian guru [...] I decided to go along. First I thought they were nuts, kind of scared me actually it was a bit full on, gradually something, kind of a hook got me and then I did a week-end meditation and they took me through different kinds of meditation chanting, whirling [...] So I went into that and I thought it was pretty good. I became more and more involved and decided to become a disciple of *Rajneesh* [...] later I came to Australia and went to Perth, in Fremantle there was a big *sannyasins* community and there was a lot of support for meditation. At the time I stopped meditating for a while and then I heard about a Zen group in Perth and I thought I like to go and check it out, so I went along and sat. Jack

The notion of religious seekership as selective consumption characterises the approach of all the informants. All the participants in my study demonstrated a selective approach in that they had been "shopping around" before stumbling upon Zen. However, the data also indicated a fair degree of consistency in that they chose eclectically, their search was confined to a particular genre where self-spirituality is emphasised, such as a variety of self-improvement, Human Potential Movement and Eastern Mystical type of spiritualities. Rose experimented with a number of Eastern practices prior to taking up Zen practice:

I was brought up as a Catholic and I actually loved my Catholic upbringing [...] then when I encountered feminism I was so shocked by feminism it blew my world apart completely. I dumped the Catholic church and [...] became politically active. I think what I also should mention is environmentalism, I became also an environmental activist, but all the way through there has been a thread of oriental or Eastern aesthetics in me. I took up Japanese martial arts at the age of 17 and I was a very fervent practitioner for years. I tried different kinds of martial arts until I found one that had spiritual depth to it [...] after that I moved into yoga and trained and ended up teaching yoga. I still felt dissatisfied, it wasn't getting to the heart of the matter. I then began *Tai Chi* training, I trained two hours everyday, very disciplined, and I started teaching *Tai Chi*. But still things were not right [...] I was in Sydney and I looked up Zen in the phone book and Sydney Zen Centre was listed under Zen. I went and sat there just once and I just enjoyed it. Being in the *Dojo* and having the black

zabutans and just sitting in silence, I really enjoyed it. It was more than a year after that before I went back to do more again and in the meantime I picked up D. T. Suzuki's books and read his *Introduction to Buddhism*. Rose

The following extract demonstrates a similar pattern in Mat's path to Zen:

When I was about 17 or something I went through an awareness of change in my personality, that things were not as they seemed in the world, there was some drive in the world that didn't seem to be true to people's true nature or something like that. And, so I became a vegetarian and I started to look at the Eastern philosophy and Western religion and Eastern religion and all of that and found good and bad in both [...] I started to play around with meditation [...] then I got interested in *Tai Chi*. I did get interested in formal Zen sitting at about 18, I think I read some books on Zen sitting, I don't know what drew me to Zen but the time was not right. It was a lot later that I came back to Zen [...] I started to sit with the Clifton Hill Zendo four years ago and my practice has been growing stronger since then. Mat

Implications for the secularisation thesis

The current trends towards self-spirituality, self-authority, relativism, and religious consumerism and the simultaneous decline in traditional religious authority have been interpreted by some as evidence of secularisation (Lambert, 1999:321). This thesis presents evidence of change but not of a demise of religion. The objective of this section is not a general critique of the notion of secularisation. The discussion is confined to the criticisms made by the advocates of the modernisation argument.²⁹ Namely the claim that the complex range of processes which characterise modernisation undermine "the traditional bases of authority", this includes the traditional forms of religious authority thus leading to the demise of religion (Beckford, 2003:45, 50).

²⁹ Beckford (2003:45) has divided the arguments for the secularisation thesis into three groups: differentiation, rationalisation and modernisation.

According to Lambert certain characteristics of modernity such as the primacy of reason, the craving for freedom and individualism influences religion in four ways, "decline, adaptation and reinterpretation, conservative reaction, and innovation" (1999:325). Only the decline of religion indicates secularisation. Religious adaptation, reinterpretation, and innovation on the other hand only involve challenging "conservative religious authority". Following Berger (1967:107-108), Lambert (1999:324-325) has drawn a distinction between religious institutions as distinct from religious symbols and has argued that although there is evidence of "institutional decline" religious symbols persist. Such Zen Buddhist symbols were present in the groups which were the focus of this study and embodied in a variety of Zen Buddhist rituals. After an examination of the impact of modernity on religion Lambert concludes that self-spirituality and religious consumerism are indications of a loss of religious monopoly and authority and a shift of emphasis in religions towards the more general sacralisation of self and not an indication of secularisation:

Nothing permits us to announce a necessary link between modernity and a disappearance of religion or of the religious (except in their most traditional forms or as a monopoly), but rather of a religious reshaping within a general symbolic reshaping, including both secular and religious focuses. (Lambert, 1999:324)

Others (Beckford, 2003:52; Luckmann, 1999:253), have defined the current transformations in the forms of religion as a "metamorphosis" where religions are expressed in new forms. According to Beckford :

evidence of declining support for conventional forms of religious beliefs, practices and organisations does not necessarily indicate secularisation. Instead, this decline is taken as evidence that religion is metamorphosing into new and different forms at various levels. (2003:52)

Therefore, those who reject traditional religions are not rejecting religiosity *per se* but seeking a "spirituality without the mediation of a religious hierarchy" (Bouma, 2000:22) one which emphasises the individuals' authority and choice:

Crudely, detraditionalised people want detraditionalised religion: a "religion" which is (apparently) more constructed than given, with practices which emphasises the authority of participant; which enables participants to be personally responsible for their salvation; which says that "sacred texts should confirm what is in you" or which refers to "God/Goddess/Source", as you experience "Him/Her/It"; which provides guidance and personal experience rather than belief; which does not demand that one should belong to a particular organisation. This, then, is a spirituality which (it appears) enables one to explore one's *own* inner Self; which allows one the freedom to *be* oneself, which enables one to discover oneself, rather than handing the task to others. (Heelas, 1996: 172)

A result of the decline of religious hierarchy and institutions in today's society is that the sacred is no longer confined to organised, institutional religion but is relocated to and is sustained at different layers of culture and life. According to Lyon:

So more consumption may mean less puritan-style religion but not less Durkheimian sacred. The new symbols that excite, inspire, or give a sense of connection with others may actually be cultural commodities, available in the mall, on TV, or on CD. In this light, the sacred may in one sense be reduced, in another relocated, in a third redefined. The processes have huge implications for understanding both the postmodern and its relation to the contemporary religious life. The grand narratives of modernity or of the so-called Christian West may in some respects be fading. But does this really mean that no narratives, no stories are available any longer, or that what remains has no sacred aspects. I think not. Rather, the stories are much more fluid, malleable, and personalised. (Lyon, 2000:84-85)

The contemporary pursuit of spirituality and experiences of transcendence outside the traditional religious institutions has been criticised for being shallow (Bauman, 1997) and have been labelled as "this worldly ecstasy" (Bauman, 1998:70). This criticism is based on idealising the traditional religious hierarchy and institutions such as the monastic approach to spiritual practice. However, in the absence of traditional Zen monastic institutions in Australia the practitioners face the challenge of integrating their spiritual practice into daily life. Lay practice has been an area of lively debate within Zen, and Buddhism in general. It has been argued that lay practice is a necessary requirement of the adaptation process

into the Western cultures (Spuler, 1999). Furthermore, given the rigorous character of Zen practice in the West (Bouma *et.al*, 2000), and the criteria guiding the training of Zen teachers, lay practice is neither a watered down version of the traditional monastic Zen, nor consists of individuals succumbing to "consumer self-indulgence".

The absence of overarching moral codes and values in the form of religious institutions and religious authority has resulted in individual freedom as well as, "the *need* to make their own sense of their lives and of the rapidly changing world in which they live" (Beckford, 2003:56). The ideological mobility and the consumer orientation which are characteristic of today's "ideal-typical religious actors" are the response to this freedom. While some individuals' experiments with religious forms may be transient, others who take an experimental and consumerist approach to constructing their religious identities, take their choices seriously. Therefore, the consumerist orientation in itself does not imply superficiality. This is particularly so if we take the experiences and the statements of these individuals seriously. Therefore, far from implying secularisation, ideological mobility and experimentation implies individuals who are, "figures in movement against a background of religious current that are also flowing in various directions. The only landmarks in this confusing panorama are the great religious traditions, to which reference can be made" (Beckford, 2003:56). Therefore, the fundamental processes of religious meaning construction and sacralisation are present, as they have always been, in today's societies. According to Bouma:

The changes occurring in religious beliefs and practices at this time in Western society take the form of increased localism, a movement toward the tolerance and celebration of diversity, a shift of emphasis from the urgent rush to remake, change, conquer or save the world either in terms of this life or the life to come to the celebration and appreciation of what is and a lessening of the hierarchical structure of religious organisations. (Bouma, 1992:167-168)

Conclusion

It is an argument of this thesis that to understand conversion to Zen requires taking into consideration the broader socio-cultural processes as well as the situationally specific Zen settings. This chapter located the informants within the framework of the postmodern condition as well as the subculture milieu of the Human Potential Movement and Eastern mysticism. I referred to the data to establish that the informants actively negotiated the conversion process and adopted an experimental and tentative approach to conversion to Zen. This approach was located in, and understood in the context of the broader cultural interest in self, its values, capacities and problems.

Two aspects of the postmodern are in particular relevant to understanding conversion to Zen. Firstly, expressivist individualism as a response to the fragmentation of identity. Secondly, the consumerist attitude which guides identity construction. The implications of these were elaborated on in relation to conversion to Zen, and for my rejection of the secularisation thesis. Clarifying the socio-cultural context of Zen enables a more thorough understanding of the conversion dynamics at the group level. It also helps understand the plausibility of the Zen belief system for the converts by relating it to their cognitive orientation and cultural conditioning.

Chapter six

The interactional context of conversion to Zen

This research into conversion to Zen is organised around two central issues: a satisfactory conceptualisation of conversion to Zen and an account of the process of conversion, or *how* people convert to Zen³⁰ (Snow & Machalek, 1984; Heirich, 1977). Chapter Four elaborated on a definition of conversion to Zen based on the beliefs and orientation of my informants. Conversion to Zen was defined in terms of the following three changes to beliefs and orientation. Firstly, belief in the significance and efficacy of *zazen*, and mindfulness as the goal of Zen practice. Secondly, the sacralisation of the self and reality. Thirdly, cultivating an attitude of acceptance and surrender. These changes were located within the Zen tradition and relevant teachings of Zen which embody these beliefs were cited. I further argued that these beliefs lead to changes in identity and orientation which are sufficiently profound to qualify as conversion. The objective of chapters five and six is to elaborate on the processes by which individuals adopt the above beliefs.

It is the most fundamental assumption of this study that conversion is fully situated and contextual, and that the process of conversion is embedded in a web of social interaction. Like all meaning systems, the Zen belief system has a plausibility structure, this consist of social arrangements which maintain, 'the believability, the general plausibility, the appearance of truth of a set of beliefs' (Bouma, 1992:107). It is my argument that

³⁰ There is a parallel between this approach and Bouma's (1992) suggestion that religious meaning systems may be analysed in terms of two basic concepts: meaning system and plausibility structure. My definition of conversion to Zen deals with the meaning system in Zen in relation to conversion. My account of conversion to Zen looks at the plausibility structure of Zen belief system.

plausibility structures cannot be reduced to private and subjective experiences of individuals. On the contrary, subjective experience is contextual; its origins and maintenance is shared and socially created. The total socio-cultural environment as well as the particular interactional setting are relevant to how a belief system is internalised and maintained. Therefore, in accounting for conversion to Zen, allusions are made to both the societal as well as organisational level conditions. In Chapter Five I discussed the role of the broader social context in conversion to Zen. This chapter will focus on the analysis at the level of interactive processes within the Zen group.

In developing a theory of conversion to Zen, I begin with determining the scope of the theory. It is my assumption that there is no single type of conversion. There are many different paths to conversion. Theories of conversion may focus on different aspects of the phenomenon:

No theory is universally applicable (at least in human sciences), and no theory is vast enough to embrace everything. In the study of conversion, various theories should be explored and assessed according to the degree to which they point to important and interesting dynamics, processes, and patterns of religious change. Some theories are more useful for particular religions and for certain historical situations. (Rambo, 1999:260)

Therefore, rather than taking a single model of conversion and applying it universally, the process of conversion should be studied as it occurs in different types of settings. This study will do just that. None of the theories of conversion which I reviewed in Chapter One by itself can adequately account for conversion to Zen, each one sheds light on one particular aspects of the conversion process. Therefore, I take an eclectic approach and apply themes from a number of different sociological theories of conversion to account for conversion to Zen Buddhism. While using socialisation as an umbrella concept to explain the main dynamics.

This study of conversion to Zen will be guided by two considerations. Firstly, because of my ethnographic approach, I will build my account of conversion to Zen from actual observations of individuals engaging in Zen practice. Throughout the study I will establish

the groundedness of my theoretical account on the data of this study. Secondly, the three assumptions which emerged from the review of conversion theories in Chapter One will guide the theory of conversion to Zen Buddhism. These three assumptions were:

- Individuals play an active role in the conversion process.
- The process of conversion is embedded in a web of social interaction and emerges out of a fluid dialectic between active agents and social context.
- Meaning is emergent and negotiated versus given and intrinsic.

The following account of conversion to Zen emerges from a constant dialogue between the data and the above theoretical assumption.

In the light of the above assumptions conversion to Zen will be understood as a socialisation process (Long & Hadden, 1983; Griel & Rudy, 1984b; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989; Thumma, 1991). I reject the passivist interpretations of the socialisation theory as a complete explanation. These emphasise only one aspect of the socialisation process, namely, the role of society to, 'successfully shape new members toward compliance with, and adjustment to societal requirements' (Long & Hadden, 1983:3). An activist definition of socialisation on the other hand equally emphasises, 'the process by which the self internalises social meanings, reinterprets them, and in turn, responds back upon society' (Thumma, 1991:334). In the light of this definition of socialisation, I suggest that conversion to Zen may be advantageously studied in terms of changes in meaning and interpretations. This is consistent with the symbolic interactionist assumptions of this study. The symbolic interactionist perspective (Mead, 1934; Berger & Luckmann, 1966a) offers a description of the dynamics involved in socialisation. According to the symbolic interactionist perspective human beings act towards things on the basis of the *meanings* that they attributed to them. The meaning is not intrinsic but is attributed and maintained through symbols in a continuous process of interaction of self and society (Blumer, 1969). I adopt recent approaches in conversion studies which frame it as a socialisation process (Long & Hadden, 1983; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989, Thumma, 1991). This approach is consistent with the activist perspective of this study and incorporates the dialectical relationship between society and individual.

Conceptualising the process of conversion to Zen as socialisation gives a narrow focus to how I will account for the conversion process to Zen. Socialisation is the internalisation of new meaning, responding back upon the normatively relevant group and receiving feedback from them. I will focus on the question of *how specifically Zen meanings are internalised thus leading to profound changes in the converts' self-concept and the universe of discourse.*³¹

Internalising a belief system results from using it as the basis for interpreting and evaluating one's experience, consequently the new belief system is experienced as subjectively real as well as acquiring intense personal meaning and may lead to personal transformation. Conversion to Zen involves internalising the three elements of Zen belief system. Thus, the converts experience *zazen* as a meaningful activity, mindfulness as profound, feel and believe that the self and reality are essentially sacred, and their orientation to day-to-day activities changes and is characterised by an attitude of acceptance and mindfulness of things as they unfold. It is my position that the interactive processes within the group are the key to understanding the transformation of meaning of the above activities and beliefs. Encompassing sociolinguistics and social-psychology, I will utilise the distinction between the normative and the evaluative roles of the religious group (Garrett, 1979:47) and will argue that the group, as the socialising agent, plays a fundamental role in facilitating the transformation of meaning in two ways:

1. Through its *normative* function, the group acts as a reservoir of meaning and conveys these to the individual as a framework for interpretation.
2. The group plays an *evaluative* role, through its response the religious community enables the formation of the new identity and meanings in the convert.

Briefly, it is my hypothesis that conversion to Zen involves socialisation in a religious setting (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989:16). Socialisation is the internalisation of new meaning offered by the group, and responding back to the group. The group through its

³¹ This approach to conversion to Zen has been regarded as too narrow (Preston, 1988). I have responded to this criticism in the Chapter One, pp. 36-38.

evaluative function facilitates or hinders the emergence of the new identity and meanings in the individual. The remaining part of this chapter will apply these assumptions to the data.

Conversion to Zen is a gradual process, although it does not proceed in a rigid sequential form, or causal deterministic stages. However, to reflect the experience of the informants I will draw a distinction between two separate but inter-related stages in the conversion process. Firstly, discovering Zen and incipient involvement; and secondly, intensive interaction and conversion (Straus, 1976).

Stage one: discovering Zen and incipient involvement

Individuals may embark on a search for a new belief system for a number of reasons, the interactionist theories of conversion tend to emphasise the 'active, negotiated, and socially constructed aspects of human behaviour (e.g. the search for and creation of meaning, identity, and community)' (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989:9-10). From this perspective individuals embark on a search when their existing belief system ceases to offer a sense of meaning. According to Greil:

If we are willing to accept that man [sic] is a meaning-seeking animal who cannot endure the sense of being bereft of a viable world view, then we may also accept that those whose identities have been spoiled become "seekers" who search for a perspective that can restore meaning to the world (Klapp, 1969:22, Lofland, 1965:166). (Greil, 1977:120)

The following extract illustrates the kind of difficulties which may precipitate individuals to embark on a search for an alternative belief system. For Rose her encounter with feminism was the catalysis:

I was brought up as a Catholic and I actually loved my Catholic upbringing, the church the statues of Jesus and Mary. I was really quite a lot of times quite devout and went to church every Sunday, and did confessions every week, even in my teens still did quite a lot of that. But then when I encountered feminism I was so shocked

by feminism it blew my world apart complete. I dumped Catholic Church and started asking questions about the role of women in the Catholic church, it all just seemed so patriarchal, so I dropped it completely and I became politically active. Rose

The initial encounter with the Zen group is merely the point of departure in the present study of the conversion process. The question of *how* individuals become attracted to Zen and begin participating in Zen groups is not the primary focus of this study and will be dealt with briefly in so far as it can illuminate two issues. Firstly, it enables an understanding of the role of cognitive orientation (Lofland & Stark, 1965) of the Zen converts. This is relevant to the conversion process. Secondly, it sheds light on the active role of the individual in the conversion process.

The data indicated that cognitive orientation and prior socialisation influence the individuals in becoming attracted to Zen. This is consistent with previous research which has shown that prior socialisation is an important variable in the study of conversion, it not only provides a perspective for defining and solving problems but it also contributes a basic general orientation or a "cognitive style" to people (Lofland & Stark, 1965). According to Greil, '*Cognitive style* refers not to the content of that which is to be taken to be true but to the individual's characteristic procedures for accepting and validating new propositions' (1977:115). Although theoretically it is possible to adopt any given belief system and in some cases there is no connection between the previous world view of the individual and the world view to which he or she converts, in practice the cognitive style influences what one may take to be true (Greil, 1977:117). The cognitive orientation of my informants consisted of their previous interest and participation in a variety of Human Potential, Eastern mystical and meditation groups. This influenced their involvement in Zen in a number of ways. For instance, they established networks of friendship with Zen practitioners which for some was a factor in how they began Zen practice. Furthermore, participation in different groups usually meant that the informants had acquired a reservoir of terms and concepts which they applied to make sense of some of the beliefs and practices that were offered by the Zen groups. Thus, upon arriving at Zen the informants were familiar with terms such as enlightenment or Buddha nature and rituals such as bowing or chanting seemed familiar. Furthermore, prior to their participation in the Zen

groups the informants would have already established some criteria of what they wanted. For instance, the informants rejected dogmatic approaches, a heavy emphasis on dogma and rigid ethical prescriptions. This facilitated their assessment of Zen Buddhism since they had some expectations of how things should be. This is how Sue described her initial evaluation of Zen:

I was at the Uni. in 86 and I decided that I wanted to meditate. I didn't know anything about it. My therapist had mentioned it and it sounded like a good idea, so I went along to a couple of groups, but they had a sort of a cultish flavour, a couple of things that happened there really distressed me. I remember going to this meditation workshop and afterwards a couple of people came to me, and there was a picture of this chap and it was sort of on an alter you know, the guru, and one of the people said that the guru could see us as we sat there and meditated. I thought this is not for me, I am very anti guru. So, I have had a positive structure and a negative structure. There is a whole lot of things that when I see it is like a fire alarm, you know get out of here fast. The first retreat I did was with Aya Khema, and I don't know if this is true but I had this memory of her saying one day at the retreat about something being unwholesome and then she added that like sex and drugs she said as if sex was sort of unwholesome, and then, and that was extraordinarily painful thing for me. Sue

After leaving the Catholic Church Ken embarked on a search for a new way of making sense of experience and coming to terms with his difficulties:

I was raised in a Catholic orphanage and all my life my spirituality was Catholic [...] but I have had to drop this personal God. I didn't think I will ever be able to do that, but I can do very well without him thanks. So, I have had to find some way of looking at the world and looking at existence that sustains me I began to read spiritual books and wanted to work out things for myself and come up with a story which sustained me. Basically I wanted to keep evolving until I could reach a more peaceful co-

existence with myself. I tended to live in my discursive mind because the way I experienced my inner life, my emotional world was very, very miserable, the feelings were of a total waste of space and a total alien, not fitting in, also the feeling of regressing into this incipient paralysis where I would freeze and couldn't do anything was always with me [...] A still sort of experience these sort of debilitating paralysis where I just don't want to face even the trivial, I don't want to. So I have got to try to find a spirituality that just helps me to relinquish or renounce suffering itself, which as I understand it, is the promise of Buddhism. Ken

Clare embarked on a search in order to understand certain experiences which her previous belief system could not explain to her satisfaction:

I had a couple of quite deep experiences when time stood still and I felt this oneness with everything, tables and chairs and the whole thing, and sort of all fear of death left me, it was quite an extraordinary experience. I had other experiences of, when I was driving my car through bush seeing every tree, every leaf in minute detail like under a magnifying glass in its superb colour, and that happened a few times. So, these were sort of things that I didn't know what they could be, I had no background to explain them at that stage and I sort of had no one that I could even ask. Because I was still in the Catholic hierarchy, I still had my children going to Catholic schools, I was still going to mass on Sundays, and you know I didn't think it would be very, it would help much to go to the local parish priest and ask about all of this. So, I investigated and that is where I first came across some descriptions of the sort of experiences that I had already had. Clare

Jack was a long term disciple of *Rajneesh* prior to taking up Zen practice and through his prior spiritual practice he had formulated clear criteria for the kind of meditative practice that suited him. He assessed Zen by comparing it with his notion of what meditative practices are right for him:

Later I came to Australia and went to Perth, in Fremantle there was a big *sannyasins* community and there was a lot of support for meditation. At the time I stopped

meditating for a while and then I heard about a Zen group in Perth and I thought I like to go and check it out, so I went along and sat, that was with Ross Bolleter and that felt really good to me and suited how I wanted to sit. Jack

Another consequence of looking at the process of how individuals arrive at Zen is that it confirms the active role of the individual in the conversion process by portraying them as actively defining, and constantly reframing the nature of their quest as they go. This lends support to the assumption that conversion is an active and negotiated process.

The majority of informants did not have a precise idea of what they were looking for. A clear definition of problems and goals emerged gradually in the process of interacting with other practitioners as well as participating in group activities such as attending workshops, mini-retreats or reading about Zen Buddhism. According to Straus, 'At first, the seeker was found to comb through social networks, chance encounters, mass media and any other available source of information, looking for leads to prospective means of help' (Straus, 1979:162). Straus's description of seeking is reflected in how Ben arrived at Zen:

[How did you first become attracted to Zen?]

Through my friend. Prior to that I got a book about Philip Kapleau but I didn't like it and thought, "what a stupid concept", it felt too much like a dogma, at the time I didn't know anything about Zen. Then I met my friend and through that I started Zen. He attracted me not to Zen as a philosophy, he attracted me through his behaviour, was quite a nice person, he didn't talk me into doing Zen but only set an example through his behaviour. I didn't join a group immediately, I sat with my friend first. Then I started to go to *sesshins* with another friend. Ben

Sara also stumbled upon Zen inadvertently, her previous involvement and interest in other meditation groups such as Vipassana meditation led her to Zen:

I became involved in Zen in 1987, and for 25 years prior to that I was involved with Indian teachers of yoga and Vedanta and practised with many different teachers. I met this guy in an ashram in India and he said that he had found Vipassana very

helpful. So I went to this retreat which I thought was vipassana but it turned out to be Zen, so that it is almost by chance that I started the Zen practice. Sara

Stage two: Intensive interaction with the group and conversion

Consequent to discovering and participating in the Zen group one is increasingly exposed to the socialising activities of the group and is expected to learn and accept the norms and beliefs of the group as well as pressure to conform to ritual practices of the group. I will draw on the work of Long and Hadden (1983) to conceptualise socialisation in the context of conversion to Zen Buddhism. Their definition of socialisation is adopted because it enables an activist account of conversion. According to Long and Hadden membership in any group requires the fulfilment of the following three factors relating the individual to the group: knowledge, skill and commitment. The group's demand for knowledge, skill and commitment however does not entail total compliance. In order to conceptualise the individuals' active role in responding to the group's socialisation efforts, Long and Hadden have made a distinction between the activities which constitute socialisation as distinct from the outcomes that they generate such as the internalisation of the group's norms and beliefs (Long & Hadden, 1983:5). This enables an active rendition of the socialisation process. The passive theories of conversion, on the other hand, conflate *both* the *activity* of socialisation *and* its *results*, the relationship between learning and training is taken for granted and the individual's commitment is perceived to follow naturally from the group's training. Socialisation is therefore equated with learning as well as internalising the norms and values of a social group (Long & Hadden, 1983:4).

Long and Hadden have argued that the primary content of socialisation consists of the "creation" and "incorporation" of the novice. Thus, socialisation is defined as, '*the social process of creating and incorporating new members of a group from a pool of nonmembers, carried out by members and their allies*' (Long & Hadden, 1983:5). The group attempts to create members by "showing" the novices the knowledge and skills required of members and to "shape" their behaviour towards meeting the group's expectations. Cognitive socialisation into the belief system of Zen is a key factor to this aspect of conversion. The group shows the novice the norms, values, beliefs and rituals of

the group. Communicating the belief system of the group to the novice fulfils the following two purposes:

First, the teaching must denigrate the former position by identifying the faulty reasoning and incorrect learning from which it arose. Then, the instruction must provide information to replace the former thoughts about self-identity, redefine the supportive meaning system, and prescribe the direction of future action. (Thumma, 1991:340)

The development of commitment is achieved through the "incorporating" activities of the group, and involves the evaluation of individuals' progress and "placing" them within the appropriate role in the group hierarchy (Long & Hadden, 1983:6-7). For example, as the following extract indicates in the case of Anna being assigned the position of the cook (*tenzo*) at a meditation retreat fulfilled such a function, it needs to be noted that traditionally the position of cook is a significant one and is often assigned to the more experienced practitioner or the senior monks within monasteries:

I was chatting with Augusto and he suggested I share some of this with you um about how being the *tenzo* at the *sesshin* this January has been so useful for me. I return to that memory of the feeling of cooking completely quiet when I'm in the kitchen now at home (and in other situations too). I feel very fortunate to have had that experience and recommend it to anyone who wants to have a go. It's helped me to see how I value some moments over others and I've been translating that onto yoga and Zen practice such as asking myself, do I value the time spent in a yoga class as "special and important therefore I must pay attention" - value it more than the time spent getting the food on the table more than the moment of pulling the grater out of the drawer? And then I see I value some imagined "outcome" at the "end" of a *zazen* session more than what's happening now. Anyway, it's all been very interesting and the cooking experience has helped me start to realise how I'm most deeply happy not depend on what I'm doing but that I'm THERE DOING IT. (Anna Crowley, private correspondence, 2nd April, 2003 - cited with the author's permission)

The distinction between learning and training will be elaborated further. The role model theory of conversion is useful in conceptualising the distinction between the socialising efforts of the group and internalisation of the belief system in Zen conversion. The role

model theory of conversion views conversion as the learning of a new role in a religious setting (Bromley & Shupe, 1979; Balch, 1980; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989). From a symbolic interactionist perspective however role is not a rigidly prescribed list of behaviour, rather the individual negotiates the appropriate roles through an interpretive and interactive process. Thus, although the religious group sets up role expectations, the individuals are able to make choices and negotiate the fulfilment of the expected roles. Turner's (1962) definition of role together with Becker's notion of situational adjustment will be used to illustrate this more flexible approach to role learning. According to Turner the structure of a role:

falls [somewhere] between the rigidity of role as a set of prescriptions inherent in a [social] position [i.e., the traditional structuralist reading of role theory] and Kingsley Davis' view of role as the actual behaviour of the occupant of a status. (Turner, 1962:25-cited in Dawson, 1990:154)

The notion of situational adjustment enables us to conceptualise this approach to role since:

It allows us to deal with smaller units and make a finer analysis. We construct the process of learning an adult role by analysing sequences of smaller and more numerous situational adjustments. We should have in our minds the picture of a person trying to meet the expectations he [sic] encounters in immediate face-to-face situations [...] Sequences and combinations of small units of adjustment produce the larger units of role learning. (Becker, 1964:44)

Clare's response to some of the rituals guiding Zen meditation demonstrates the relevance of the above definition of role:

[My initial reaction to rituals] was hysterical, absolutely hysterical inside, I could hardly stop laughing because like my husband's worst fears for me came true, and if we were doing *zazen* which I hadn't had experience of up until then or *kinhin* and everyone was solemnly tramping around the room, I'd be stuffing the laughter down and thinking what on earth he would say if he saw me. So, it took me a little while to overcome that. I think I just tried to take it one step at a time and wait and see what happens. - Clare

Applying the above definition of role to the experience of informants it may be argued that at the beginning the student of Zen responds to the group's attempts to shape his or her beliefs and behaviours by playing the role of the convert, exhibiting conformity but lacking genuine conviction and subjective commitment. Subjective conviction and commitment develops gradually and tentatively through negotiation between the individual and the group and yet it is identified by them as happening in that manner, in other words, the individual consciously adopts a tentative approach giving the group a try but withholding conviction. Thus, 'The first step in conversion [...] is to *act* like a convert [...] genuine conviction develops later after intense interaction' (Balch, 1980, 142). Therefore, the role model of conversion is partially relevant to conversion to Zen and can successfully account for behavioural conformity and at the same time retain the tentative, experimental, gradual and active nature of the conversion process.

I established earlier that because of their cognitive orientation upon first encountering Zen the novices have preconceived ideas as to the validity of claims made by the Zen tradition. For instance, they may have heard from others or read in books about what the possible consequences of meditation are, and are eager to test these claims. Another example of prior exposure to ideas which are relevant to Zen is that the informants made a distinction between experiential knowledge as opposed to dogmatic belief and blind faith. This distinction was generally made prior to involvement in Zen groups and acquired through interaction with other meditation, or Human Potential Movements. Because of the value placed on experiential knowledge, the novices initially adopted an experimental attitude towards Zen beliefs and practices and attempted to test the truth of these claims and the efficacy of practices offered by Zen tradition for themselves.³²

The Zen groups in this study accommodated, and the teachers encouraged, an experimental approach. In particular at the initial stages of involvement in Zen practice the groups did

³² This characteristic of allowing the individual to "look into it" without committing is consistent with the notion of self-authority discussed in Chapter Four. According of this, Zen converts place a great deal of importance on adopting an experimental approach in their spiritual quest and believe that truths can be relied on only if they have been tested and validated through one's own experience or intuition.

not demand extensive knowledge, ritual competence or subjective commitment from the participants. All that was required of the individual was compliance with a variety of rituals involving bows, prostrations, and chanting, the practitioners were told that it was alright to make mistakes and were asked to remain mindful of their activities instead of worrying about getting everything right. They were also required to learn the "transformative technology" of the group which consisted of sitting meditation, walking meditation, listening to *dharma* talks, interviews with the teacher (*dokusan*) and the practice of mindfulness. An important demand exerted by the groups in this study was the maintenance of correct sitting posture during meditation. Although the informants often found this difficult they nonetheless conformed. Following the prescribed posture for long periods of time was perceived by others as a sign of commitment to practising meditation, since the ability to maintain the physical posture is acquired after long years of practice. Upon joining the group the informants responded to these demands by taking the role of the convert and gave Zen practice a try. Sometimes this continued for a considerable length of time. Joy's initial response to the demands of the Zen monastery was to take on an experimental approach by acting like a convert while suspending judgement:

At first I was a little bit overwhelmed, at the same time, I liked it and felt very comfortable. It was a combination of feelings like, "what am I getting myself into here?", it felt like I was to embark on something much larger than what I was intending to, on the other hand, it felt very, very, just felt right. The sitting itself, then the instruction, the chanting, the walking meditation and meeting these monks was a bit overwhelming for me at first because those traditions are in some ways so foreign to anything we know, especially chanting in another language. I found the rituals very strange, I really questioned what am I doing, why am I bowing just because everyone else is bowing. Why am I chanting in these weird languages, or even in English, and saying things that actually having no meaning for me at the moment. Because they didn't. It was like I grew into having a meaning with a lot of these things, still questioning all the time. When I first arrived there I had no idea what I was doing there in some ways, like how did I end up in this monastery with all these monks? I remember feeling a little bit uncomfortable that we always had a meal with the monks as well, after the meditation on Sundays. There was a very formal way of

having meals, they didn't have an *oryoki* meal at all, it was an informal meal but before the meal there was all these gongs and bell rings and bowings and offerings and chanting and I felt that, everyone would bow in front of where they ate, and they were bowing after they left their seat, and I really felt that I should do this too because everyone else is doing it this is the proper conduct, but to me I wasn't, it wasn't like it was me who was bowing. So I never really felt fully in it and that, then it felt what am I doing here? But I did it any way to see sort of how the clothes fit you know it was like putting on clothes and suddenly you are that, you know. It is a very strange feeling, you try it on and it either fits or it doesn't fit or you grow into it and I just felt, well try it on. Joy

Conceptualising the initial phase in conversion to Zen as taking the role of the convert raises the question of how individuals go about learning new roles. The first requirement is some degree of familiarity with the ideology of the Zen group:

Beliefs are critical for the role-theory approach, however. Beliefs structure and legitimate roles, the conceptual tools for understanding organisational behaviour. The structure of roles determines the pattern of behaviour by incumbents that lead to goal achievement. (Bromely & Shupe, 1979:165)

Roles demand that the participants' behaviour should be consistent with the groups' ideology. For instance, as was demonstrated in Chapter Four, the concept of mindfulness in Zen Buddhism draws validity from within the Zen tradition and it legitimates a number of roles such as participation in rituals. Once the individual is familiar with the ideological and behavioural demands of the group he or she is able to "pass" (Becker, 1964) in a given role by acting in ways which are consistent with the expectations of the group and which imply conviction and commitment. The concept of passing is related to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgic model of social behaviour used to explain the discrepancy between belief and behaviour. Goffman distinguishes between front-stage and back-stage behaviour. Individuals who are engaged in front-stage behaviour act in compliance with the group's demands thus presenting an image of themselves as sincere and committed converts. For example, wearing certain clothing, chanting *sutras* and participating in various rituals.

Clare's (page, 145) compliance with meditative rituals which demanded a "solemn" attitude while feeling "hysterical inside" is an example of front-stage behaviour. Individuals are back-stage when they resume the kind of behaviour which feels natural and is compatible with how they want to behave. Moscovici's (1980) analysis of the differences between compliance and conversion behaviour is also relevant to explaining the behaviour of the informants in groups settings. Compliance involves behaviours which are not accompanied by subjective conviction and commitment, conversion requires genuine belief and may or may not involve public display. In Zen settings playing the role of the convert involves acting as if one believes in the efficacy of *zazen* and the profundity of mindfulness; for instance, by engaging even in the most mundane tasks mindfully and demonstrating this mindfulness in a variety of ways such as doing the task in slow motion or, not doing two things (like eating and talking) at the same time. Although at the initial stages of conversion individuals may be highly sceptical about the ideal of mindfulness as the same as enlightenment, they nonetheless act as if they believe in this aspect of the Zen belief system, enacting the value that Zen places on mindfulness. The same principle applies to participation in rituals. This is how Rodney felt about participation in rituals of the Zen group:

My initial reaction [to rituals] was that I was prejudiced against it [...] so I just switched my mind and did it. It is all pretty meaningless to me, it doesn't seem to be doing anything, it seems to be utterly pointless but I just do it you know, but I don't participate in the enthusiasm or the feeling that people have for it. If I got into a debate or a dialogue I'd probably alienate them so I don't think about it, just do it.

Rodney

While back-stage Rodney felt "prejudiced" against rituals, and perceived them as "meaningless". He described that despite performing them when front-stage, he did not share the "enthusiasm" that others seemed to feel about the rituals.

Role theory has a further utility as a theory of conversion since it is also consistent with and explains the tentative and experimental approach of the informants to Zen practice. According to Ken:

That is something about me if I think you are going to put a label Buddhist on me I say no, no, no. I do always duck identification, I don't know why, it is a label, isn't it? We are just ourselves, so, I am only looking for unifying aspects. I listen carefully and sit on the fence. Through my life I see so many millions of people convinced that they have got something of interest and, and that can motivate and determine their life and it sustains them and because it sustains them they rightfully out of compassion probably want to share that to sustain us. But I think in a way each of us have to find a unique interpretation which is incommunicable to other people. And so when I read about reincarnation, well I can't sort of say if it is true or not, I don't know what truth means, I don't think there is absolute truth. Ken

For Ann the ritual of bowing to the Zen teacher was problematic, she dealt with this requirement by engaging in reinterpretation of the meaning of bowing:

I have a real problem bowing to the teachers that I don't particularly feel a great you know deal of respect for[...] what I have really done is redefine the experience [...] you are bowing to the world, you are bowing to what that person represents which is basically your own sacred nature you are not bowing to that person, so I can quite easily bow to [...] someone who represents spiritual knowledge that you know I wish to have myself or someone who is in a spiritual position that I have respect for, so I can, it is like respecting the teacher sort of thing because they are the teacher, you respect the position or the role and not necessarily the person, so this has been a way to negotiate that. Ann

The haphazard approach of Zen groups to attract new members facilitates the experimental approach of the Zen practitioners. In the groups in this study there was no evidence of structural arrangements to recruit new members. All the groups emphasised the Zen view that the Zen path is an individual path and the novices are free to decide the extent and intensity of their involvement. Ann regarded this aspect of Buddhism as a positive feature of Zen groups and said:

Initially there were a lot of beliefs that I found a bit strange. But one of the things that

attracted me to Zen, which seem different from Christianity, is that you don't have to buy the whole thing up front, you can pick and choose a bit and say well I think this is all right, but I am a bit unsure about that. So, you could take on what is important to you and not take on the rest. That was one of the things that attracted me to Zen, that I didn't have to make a total commitment to everything that was supported by Buddhism, that I could work with what felt comfortable and put the rest aside. I think gradually I came to see, or came to accept more and more of Buddhist philosophy.

Ann

Augusto Alcalde who has been a Zen teacher for over 20 years described his relationship to Zen in the following way:

I don't see that I have an established commitment to Zen practice. I feel renewing that commitment from moment to moment at different stages of my life, renewing it. It is not my assumption that I will be a Zen student or much less a Zen teacher all my life [...] My teaching or my practice is a function of the quality of life. I don't say, "O.K. now I have been practising for so many years and now I am here I won't go anywhere". I tend to be glad about the possibility of moving in any direction. I have got the freedom to move in any direction and for now I stay in Zen practice.

Augusto
Alcalde

Rose expressed her non-committal approach to Zen and used the teachings of Zen to lend ideological support to her approach:

It seems like an eternal quest to always understand, understand everything fresh because everything keeps on being fresh each moment, each period of time in my life, like this week is different to last week and will be different to next week and my interaction with you this week will be different to next week, it is always new and what I like about Zen, our lineage, particularly with the *koan* curriculum, is that there is virtually endless re-knowing to be done. As soon as you pass one *koan* here is another one, it just does not stop. So, for me that is a really strong reminder that not to become dogmatic, not to become complacent, to always keep an open mind, not to

ever think that I have got there or that I know the Truth about anything, which is the basic teaching of Zen. Rose

In Chapter One role theories of conversion were criticised for not allowing for subjective commitment which is a requirement of conversion. To overcome this deficiency I propose to apply role theory to explain the initial stages of conversion to Zen only, namely, the process by which individuals arrive at a position where they can go on to cultivate conviction by internalising the beliefs of the group. Role theory of conversion is useful in accounting for the "compliance" behaviour that characterises the initial stages of the individuals involvement with the Zen groups where less drastic changes take place. This however, does not detract from the important role that compliance or front-stage behaviour plays in the overall process of conversion. Furthermore, these less fundamental changes need to be explained in a successful account of conversion, since it is the argument of this section that role performance not only precedes but is also required for successful conversion.

However, in explaining the way in which individuals arrive at subjective commitment we need to move beyond role performance. A role can only carry the individual so far without subjective conviction and commitment. The problem with focusing on front-stage behaviour and situational adjustments to explain the behaviour of the novices is that these concepts do not explain the continuity of behaviour outside the situations that demand it. Conversion requires precisely this kind of continuity. This "ubiquitous utilisation" (Travisano, 1970:605-606) of the identity associated with the convert role is a hallmark of conversion and indicates that the convert role is not assumed temporarily in response to situational demands, rather it is central to all situations and the converts' other roles flow from his or her identity as a convert (Snow & Machalek, 1983:277; Thumma, 1991:334). I will use Turner's concept of role-person merger to conceptualise role stability and subjective conviction in conversion.

According to Turner (1978) person and role are said to be merged when there is a systematic pattern involving the following four characteristics:

The first is failure of role : a subject can continue to play a role in situations where the role does not apply [...] A second criterion is similar in principle to the first: one resists to abandoning a role despite available, advantageous, and viable alternative roles [...] A third way [...] is indicated by the acquisition of attitudes and beliefs appropriate to the role [...] A fourth but less conclusive criterion also exists: the experience of learning a role or putting it into practice. (Turner, 1978:3-4)

Therefore, although playing the role of convert is not the same as internalising it, nonetheless it is a requirement of conversion to Zen, since it plays an important part as a first step for the internalisation of beliefs and transformation in the individual. Since:

The central theme of realising transformation is that the seeker, through action within the shared human world, immerses self, consciousness, and life within the taken-for-granted reality of transcendence. The central tactic of immersion is: the way to *be* changed is *act* changed. (Straus, 1976:266)

This "immersion" has profound consequences for conversion. Since through immersion the subject not only acts changed but also makes these changes experientially real to him or herself. Luke described the intensity of "immersion" in the following way:

The training in the year before going to Hawaii was quite intense, in preparation for training in Hawaii, but it didn't prepare me. [In Hawaii] I was immersed in the tradition [...] I stayed there for three months, very intense training, yeah, painful and difficult. It was quite a shock, I didn't know how to relate to Aitken *roshi*, a lot of times when we had *teisho* I thought he or I was from another planet. They had this huge library and so I go to the library and read all the Zen books, at first nothing was making any sense, it was really, really a pressure cooker [...] I left Hawaii a different person. Luke

In the remaining part of this chapter I will use the conceptual tools discussed so far and draw on the data to explain the process of internalisation of Zen beliefs and the cultivation of subjective commitment. Participation in the group is a crucial factor in this process.

While playing the role of the convert the novice is exposed to the socialising efforts of the group. According to Kilbourne and Richardson:

The process of religious conversion as well as the attribution of its cause(s) cannot be understood apart from actor and audience perspective. Converts need the social standards of some reference group (Greil and Rudy, 1984a) against which to measure themselves before their privately made or publicly proclaimed self-attribution of having converted acquires credibility to either themselves or to others. They need to know how to talk like a convert (Taylor, 1976; Beckford, 1978a, 1978b), how to behave like a convert, and how to look like a convert (Balch, 1980). Social audiences also need the social standards of some reference group in order to evaluate a reported conversion experience. Conversion can be meaningfully understood, then, only within a social context and appears to always involve some choice of perspective by both the convert and the observer. (Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989:15)

As such the group plays a crucial role in the conversion process in two ways (Garrett, 1979):

- Through its normative function, the group acts as a reservoir of meaning and conveys these to the individuals as a framework for interpretation.
- The group plays an evaluative role through its response. The religious community, enables the crystallisation of the new identity and meanings in the convert.

The remaining part of this chapter will apply these factors to the data to illustrate how they facilitate transformation.

The normative capacity of the group: the Zen community as a reservoir of meaning

Upon entering the group the individuals are taught the rituals, ideology and the appropriate roles within the group. The group also teaches the individuals how to use these to organise and interpret their understanding of the world and of who they are by integrating the

relevant areas of their experience with what is offered by the religious community (Becker, 1964; Garret, 1979; Wright, 1992). However, this does not mean the individuals mechanically follow the instructions of the group. Using data from my study I will argue that individuals use the ideology of the religious group to interpret experience via an "alignment process" (Snow & Machalek, 1984) which involves a dialectical process of negotiation between the individual and the religious group.

In interpreting subjective experience according to the symbols of the religious group the believers have to establish some connection between the language of the group and their own experience. The *symbolic language* of Zen serves as a link between a believer's *subjective experiences* and the *ideology* of the Zen community. The individual interprets and makes sense of his or her concerns, experiences and emotions by using the symbolic language of Zen to label his or her experiences, emphasising some parts, down playing other parts so that he or she finally comes to see himself or herself in terms of the language which both shapes as well as represents his or her experience. Therefore in accounting for conversion, I link social-psychology and socio-linguistics and argue that the religious community engages in interaction with the individual and offers him or her the symbols to create new meanings and to interpret and understand his or her experience in ways which are consistent with the group's religious doctrines. In this way language leads to transformation. Therefore the focus of this analysis is both on the role of language as well as the interactive processes within the group. Internalising the beliefs of the group is achieved where the canonical language³³ of the group and the subjective experience of the individual overlap or merge. Converts assimilate the teachings into their world view establishing a "subjective reality-base" for the religious doctrines (Garrett, 1979:46). Thus, in the process of conversion to Zen the language of the Zen tradition is applied to redefine relevant areas of the practitioners' experience and to align them with the canonical language of Zen. The consequence of this process is that the convert comes to see these experiences in terms of the language of Zen. The canonical language of Zen Buddhism is used to interpret and organise one's experiences, through incorporating and aligning the experience

³³ According to Stromberg, "canonical" refers to information linked to 'enduring aspects of nature, society, or cosmos, and [...] encoded in apparently invariant aspects of liturgical order (Roy Rappapert, 1977:182)' (Stromberg, 1993:11)

and interpretations of self and reality into those offered by Zen Buddhism, thus coming to experience these beliefs as real. Such a transformation is not a one-off transformation, rather a gradual transformation which takes place over time as individuals learn to redefine the relevant aspects of their reality in terms of the canonical language of Zen (Stromberg, 1993:11).

The utilisation of the role of language in accounting for conversion is by no means unique to this study. The importance of learning the symbolic language of the group and the appropriate way of talking and reasoning as crucial factors in the conversion process has been emphasised by various researchers and was discussed in detail in Chapter Two in relation to the analytical status of the converts' accounts. The narrative analysis (Schwalbe, 1983; Stromberg, 1993; Yamane, 2000) is an example of such an approach which emphasises the role of the conversion narrative as a vehicle of personal transformation. Stromberg has utilised aspects of the philosophy of language to argue that, 'it is through the use of language in the conversion narrative that the processes of increased commitment and self-transformation take place' (Stromberg, 1993:185). I argued in Chapter One that the narrative approach sheds valuable light on how new beliefs are internalised through narrative. However I take the view that conversion is not just a narrative activity and interactive processes play a crucial role in bringing about personal transformation. Therefore, my analysis of the role of language in conversion differs from a narrative analysis approach in that the role of language in conversion will be placed within the interactional context of the Zen group. Thus, the beliefs and practices of the group begin to make sense subsequent to interaction with others in the group. For instance, many of the informants said that at first they found many Zen beliefs and practices puzzling. Through interaction with the teacher and the other practitioners as well as increasing familiarity with Zen literature they began to make sense. Gradually they began to internalise the Zen beliefs by learning to interpret their experience using Zen Buddhist concepts such as Buddha-nature, compassion, acceptance, mindfulness, and impermanence, which they did not have at first. According to Rose:

When I came across Robert Aitken's writing that was very important for me, I resonated with his writing really quickly [...] read the "Gateless Barrier" which again

I didn't understand at all. It was all sort of weird stories to me at the time but I loved reading them although I really didn't have any idea. They just got me on an edge and I like to be on an edge [...] After I began to sit with the Sydney Zen Centre, I picked up D.T. Suzuki's books and read his "Introduction to Buddhism" and just fell in love with some of the *koans* which he described I just loved them like, "be like a dead man, be completely dead and all will be well". Now, I don't know what I was thinking about them at the time I certainly didn't understand them but they pointed to something profound I knew that. I knew they weren't jokes or just tricks, there was something embedded in them that I didn't understand but I wanted to understand. This is where Subhana [Rose's Zen teacher] stepped in, this was really helpful and there has been a lot of clarity. Rose

Over time Rose increased her active involvement with the Zen groups she was a member of and became a senior member of the Melbourne Zen Group.

The evaluative capacity of the group: the principle of reflected appraisal

The group plays a crucial role in conversion through its normative and evaluative capacities. As a source of doctrines, norms and values the group serves a normative function, and offers a new interpretive framework for understanding self and experience. In addition to acting as a reservoir of meaning and guiding new interpretations of experience, the religious community also has an evaluative function. In its evaluative role it functions as an "audience group", it observes, evaluates and gives feedback to actors as to how successful they are in meeting the groups' norms (Garrett, 1979: 47). Furthermore, as an audience group, 'the actor sees his role performance observed and evaluated, and he [sic] attends to the evaluations and expectations which members of the group hold toward him [sic]. The actor takes the role of his audience reflexively' (Turner, 1965:328).

The evaluative function of the group is a significant factor in conversion dynamics. The groups' positive feedback to the claims made by the individual, 'objectifies a subjective experience and "fixes" it as reality, both for the convert and for his [sic] group' (Gerlach & Hine, 1970:136)

The significance of affective bonds and intensive interaction with group members in conversion has been noted by various researchers (Lofland & Stark, 1965; Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Greil, 1977; Heirich, 1977; Richardson & Stewart, 1977; Snow & Philips, 1980; Stark & Bainbridge, 1980a) and was discussed in Chapter One. The present discussion of the evaluative role of the reference group sheds valuable light on the significance of affective bonds in conversion. According to Greil and Rudy, the process of identity transformation involves coming to see oneself and one's world from the perspective of one's reference group:

If one's beliefs and self perceptions are in large part a function of the definition of reality and of self made available by one's reference group, then it stands to reason that transformation of identity are likely to be accomplished by changes in the perspective of one's reference others. (Greil & Rudy, 1984a:262)

Hefner explicates the relationship between conversion and the formation of the reference group:

Bridging social psychology and the sociology of knowledge, reference group theory emphasises that self-identification is implicated in all choices [...] reference group theory stresses that in the course of their lives individuals develop a real or imagined reference group - an anchor for their sense of self and other and for the entitlements and obligations thought to characterise relationships - and refer to that reference group when evaluating people, situations, and life projects. As the philosopher Lawrence Blum (1987:331) has observed, such a viewpoint challenges the "too-sharp separation between self and other" [...] it emphasises instead that "our connection to others and our capacities for responsiveness are a central part of our identities, rather than being sentiments or voluntary commitments". (Hefner, 1993:25)

Hefner refers to Giddens (1984:6) concept of "reflexive monitoring" and argues that identities are neither purely subjective nor entire socially determined but contingent upon the interaction between the individual and the society (Hefner, 1993:26). The symbolic interactionist tradition supports this view. Mead granted the individual agency by drawing a distinction between the self as agent and the self as object of the person's own knowledge

and evaluation. According to Mead the individual has a capacity to experience him or herself as both subject and object simultaneously. Thus the term "self" is reflexive and the individual can stand outside himself or herself and look at himself or herself as an object, describing it, evaluating it, responding to it; but the object he or she is perceiving and evaluating is himself or herself. This is based on Mead's distinction between "I" and "Me" as two aspects of the self which also represent the individual's relationship with the society. The "I" part of the self is the spontaneous initiator of action. "Me" is the product of viewing oneself as object, as one would be viewed by another. The "I" and "Me" are in constant interaction with each other reflecting the dynamics between the individual and the social group.

All identity changes come to be defined as such in the context of interaction with others. As one changes, it is through others' responses that the change begins to be experienced as real by the individual. Travisano expresses this view on the interactional quality of identity. For Travisano identity formation involves a "placed or validated announcement" (1970:597). The positive response of others, validates the feeling that one has the quality one has announced to have, this gives him or her, "an experiential sense of felt identity" (Travisano, 1970:597). Thus, 'To establish a new identity, a new announcement must be recurrently made and validated. But one does not take on only an abstract property called an identity, one takes on new definitions of situations and new situated behaviour' (Travisano, 1970:598). Similarly, Kilbourne and Richardson (1989:16) have placed claim-making at the centre of the socialisation process. This involves the validation of the claims by one's reference group and leads to establishing a new identity as a convert.

In the Zen groups in this study a number of avenues were available to the individual for the purpose of the public declaration of oneself as a Zen practitioner. For instance making progress in the *koan* curriculum, the ability to sit in demanding postures such as the full-lotus position for extended periods of time, a regular regime of daily meditation, knowing the *sutras* by heart, taking the precepts and wearing the traditional Zen robes. The group "validated" the individual's declarations in a number of ways. For example by "incorporating" (Long & Hadden, 1983:7) them into the group hierarchy by giving them positions such as leadership roles, the permission to give talks and public lectures or the

authority to teach. The data indicated that "placing" the individual in prestigious roles often led to further commitment. This is how Penny described the influence of being given leadership roles in the Zen group:

Initially the Zen community was secondary to my practice, but over the years it has come to become very important, now I find the two inseparable and feel my practice is impoverished without the *sangha*, almost all of my friends are from the *sangha*. So this has been a very important change as far as my practice is concerned. Another landmark was taking up *dojo* leadership roles which started when I became *Jiki* at the *sesshin*, this strengthened my practice a lot. Also another milestone was meeting with John Terrant [*Penny's Zen teacher*]. John confirmed the importance of being given leadership roles as a form of practice itself. Penny

The groups in my study provide ample opportunity for movement within the organisational hierarchy. There was an elaborate system of "placing" the individuals within the groups' hierarchy. The groups had a number of positions, each carrying different degrees of prestige reflecting various degrees of seniority in terms of the length of practice, level of understanding and insight, and the level of commitment in terms of the time and effort dedicated to Zen practice. The positions in the group include the teacher, assistant teacher, *dharma* leader, chant leader, time-keeper, *dokusan* leader, person responsible to look after the meditation hall, as well as a variety of administrative roles. Through "placing" the individuals in a given role within the groups' hierarchy the group gave feedback to the individual about their performance, or where they are perceived to be in terms of seniority. Another way the individual is incorporated in the group is through the "certifying" activities of the group (Long & Hadden, 1983:7). For instance, the person who is appointed by the teacher as the *dharma* leader is perceived by others in the group as having attained a certain degree of insight, or passed a certain number of *koans*. The importance of "placing" and "certifying" activities in Zen conversion is evident in the following quote from the American Zen teacher, Bernard Glassman:

Although in Zen we say that there is no place to go and nothing to learn, but most people benefit from some sense of progression [...] When I came to New York I felt that we

needed to create some rites of passage for people to be comfortable in their practice. You can't forget about the form [...] You have to have the form. But just having it isn't enough either. (Tworkov, 1994:145-146)

Glassman refers to the necessity of the "form" and at the same time de-emphasises it with reference to Zen tradition as not being "enough either". This is relevant to the Zen Buddhist rejection of a formal and dogmatic approach to practice, it was also evident in the groups that I studied. Because of this often the feedback from the group regarding one's progress is subtle, this was the case for Mandy:

[I had the impression that in the MMS (Mountain Moon Sangha, Zen group) one's spiritual insights were common knowledge since you told me that other members knew when you had kensho and vice versa. Can you please clarify this point?]

We all knew where each other was up to, who had *kensho* and who was up to where in the *koans* but we didn't discuss our actual insights. We didn't even directly discuss where each other was up to, you could tell by signs. For example, we had a ceremony to confirm *kensho* done in front of the whole group so that is obvious. And you could tell who was close to *kensho* cause they'd suddenly start having long *dokusans*, also if they didn't go to *dokusan* Roselyn [Mandy's Zen teacher] would make a point of calling them in so you'd notice the *tanto* come and tap them on the shoulder during *zazen*. So because you knew when people had *kensho* you could also guess where they were up to in the *koan* books. For example, two people had *kensho* the same time as me, and sometimes when I was sitting in the *dokusan* line I'd overhear something that I knew came from a *koan* I had just done, for example the noise of a certain animal or a certain saying.. Occasionally someone would make an indirect comment like "Nansen's cat really pisses me off" and thus you could guess where they were. Other times [the teacher] would say during a *teisho* that someone was about to do this *koan* that she was discussing, so she'd better not give it away. Sometimes people would leave *dokusan* with a new book "hidden" down their shirt and you knew they were onto a new book. That sort of thing. Mandy

I will use the concept of "reflected appraisal" to explain the significance of the affirmation of "significant other" in internalising change. The concept of reflected appraisal is fundamental to the symbolic interactionist perspective on self-concept formation and explains the social-psychological dynamics of the process of internalising a particular self-concept through interaction. According to the principle of reflected appraisal, we are deeply influenced and our self concept is shaped by responses of others and the attitude they take towards us and overtime we come to view ourselves as we are viewed by others (Rosenberg, 1979). Other people's view of us is a critical source of information about ourselves; in fact, according to Mead (1934) the very sense of self arises through the process of taking the attitude of others toward one's self.³⁴

The individual experiences himself [sic] as such not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalised standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he [sic] belongs. (Mead, 1934:138-cited in Rosenberg, 1979:64)

Through the process of communication the individual adopts the attitudes that significant others take towards him or her and becomes an object to himself or herself. This implies that there is a general correspondence between the attitudes others take towards us and our attitude towards ourselves (Rosenberg, 1979:64). The way in which our self-concept is shaped by the response of significant others is through *our perception* of the attitudes others take towards us. This is the idea of "perceived self". Cooley's (1998) notion of "looking-glass self" is relevant to this. According to Cooley's "looking-glass" principle we come to see ourselves as we believe others see us, thus there is a relationship between the "perceived self" and the individual's own picture of what he or she is actually like (Rosenberg, 1979:65).

³⁴The notion of role-person merger discussed earlier together with the present discussion enhances our understanding of the extent of personal change in conversion. Self-conception is "conceived subjectively" whereas role-person merger 'indicates the quality of situational involvement in a role' (Turner, 1978:2-3) and as such is a behavioural complement to the notion of self-concept.

In Zen tradition, the awareness of the attitude of others towards oneself leads to changes in self-concept. The appraisal of others is communicated in a number of ways. For example, the ritual of bowing occurs in all meditation settings. As a part of the meditation rituals prior to starting to meditate the participants stand in two rows facing each other. The sound of a bell or wooden clappers indicates that all must bow to each other before turning around, facing their cushions and bowing again, sitting down and commencing meditation. A large number of the informants said that the rituals of bowing and being bowed to by fellow practitioners was felt as a great affirmation of their sacred essence and instilled in them a deep reverence for their Buddha-nature. The following extract indicates the impact of the teacher's feedback on Penny's self-perception:

I recall this *sesshin* where I was plagued by feelings of worthlessness. I related these feelings to [*teacher*] in *dokusan*, and he stood up and bowed to me and said "I bow to the Buddha-nature in you" this was a milestone, to have this enlightened person bowing to me and paying respect to my essential self -- the sacred self. I feel I have so much more love and self respect towards myself now. Penny

It is my argument that through interaction with other Zen practitioners the Zen converts come to establish some connection between the language of Zen and their own immediate situation as well as their interpretations of past experiences. The outcome of this process is that firstly, the convert comes to interpret familiar areas of their experience in terms of the Zen dogma and secondly learns to interpret novel experiences in a meaningful way. I demonstrated in Chapter Four that conversion to Zen involves internalising the following beliefs:

- *Zazen* is an efficacious activity and mindfulness is a profound experience
- The perception of the self and mundane reality as sacred.
- An attitude of surrender and acceptance towards the self and reality as they *are*.

In the following section I will apply the normative and evaluative role of the Zen group to account for the internalisation of these aspects of conversion to Zen.

***Zazen* as a significant and efficacious activity**

In my earlier typology of Zen, I classified it as a technical religion and argued that the mastery of the technology and coming to see it as efficacious and transformative, is an important aspect of conversion to Zen. The Zen groups offer meditation as the "technology" and the means by which personal transformation is brought about, therefore *zazen* has a central significance. *Zazen* is the technology of transformation that the Zen groups in this study offer as well as the experiential means to test out the validity of Zen Buddhist beliefs and claims. The Zen groups communicate these ideas to the individuals through informal discussions within the group, formal discussion groups and also through student-teacher interaction. This may be a one-to-one interview (*dokusan*) or through the teacher's *dharma* talks (*teisho*). The latter consists of a commentary of approximately an hour. The majority of subjects in this study reported that prior to embarking on Zen meditation they had preconceived ideas as to what meditation involves and what it may lead to. For instance, they had heard from friends or through the media and were curious to test the validity of these claims or eager to have these experiences. However, the informants initial encounter with Zen mediation was generally not a positive experience as the following extracts demonstrate:

[How did you find the Zen rituals when you first started Zen practice?]

I didn't think much about formality and structures at all. The pain was so great you know it took over completely, it was just the pain and nothing else. I just wanted to survive for another hour, it was like that. It was horrible because I didn't have any, any, I didn't sit much before going to my first *sesshin* so I had no idea what I could expect [...] I went with no experience in sitting basically and suddenly I was in this ocean. Max

This is how Thea described her initial reaction to *zazen*:

I thought this is crazy, it is very hard, I couldn't cope, I thought this is just far out I can't handle this and you know all the French villages they have this church and they

have bells and they chime they also chime for the hour one struck, two stroke, three strokes, four stroke for the hour so I would be sitting for the half an hour and waiting for that stroke, I couldn't just handle it because they were at that time very strict with the sitting. You sit, you don't move, you sit possibly lotus position or as close as you come to lotus position and then you don't move. I drag my partner along one day, said that you must, you must, you must, so he came. He is a dude who wants to impress, so he sat in full lotus, I looked at him and thought, "oh my God" and I knew he couldn't do it and from the corner of my eyes saw him tense up and move inch by inch and the teacher saying when we sit we don't move. He only came once but I went there again and again. It must be my masochistic streak, a sort of punishment or something like that. Thea

Sue had a similar experience:

The first retreat was extraordinarily painful for me, I had never done anything remotely like it before I was only there for two days I think, but just the silence and the sitting, it just terrified me, I was absolutely freaked. Sue

It is important to understand that in theory the practitioners are free to leave the meditation hall or the retreat at any time. Therefore the experience of intense physical pain and frustration is purely self-inflicted. When the author first began to practice *zazen*, my teachers often described *zazen* as like the "bitter taste of green tea" and described the pain in the knees as the "taste of Zen". It is my argument that the taste for such experience is a socially acquired one. At the beginning the novice copes with physical pain and the frustration of not gaining quick results in a number of ways. As the individuals become familiar with the beliefs and doctrines of Zen Buddhism, these are used to redefine *zazen* and to render their experience of meditation into a positive one. It is my argument that the shift in the meaning of *zazen* is not intrinsic to the nature of this activity but it depends on the Zen beliefs, the symbolic language of Zen and the response of the Zen community. The redefinition in meaning of *zazen* occurs in interaction with the Zen teacher and other practitioners whose orientation has already shifted. They help the novice to make a similar redefinition. The end result is that what was initially experienced and defined as

"puzzling", "crazy" or "terrifying" comes to be redefined and experienced in positive terms. This redefinition of activity is a condition for continued commitment and the likelihood of such redefinition depends on the practitioners' level of participation with a group or interaction with a teacher well as increasing familiarity with the Zen ideology. As a result, over time a gradual shift occurs in the meaning of *zazen* and the individuals come to see *zazen* as a positive activity. This is how Claire perceived *zazen*:

I think that compared to that [Zen meditation] nothing else is really worthwhile. I think that without that now, that I think, past a certain stage where you are no longer holding to it, it is holding to you and when you get to that I think it just becomes the deepest purpose in your life. Clare

Julian described *zazen* as a very important part of her daily life:

I look forward to *zazen* everyday, I have reached a stage where I feel my life is not worth living without Zen practice, sometimes I get up in the morning feeling really crappy then I sit for an hour and afterwards feel like I have a whole new perspective on things. Julian

The individuals are taught to frame an activity, such as *zazen*, appropriately by a grounding in the ideology of the group. The novice comes to define *zazen* as a meaningful activity and as an effective technique for attaining insight. Preston (1981, 1988) has applied Becker's (1953) analysis of learning to become a marijuana user to the initial stages of involvement with Zen practice. The group teaches the novice the technique and the activity and imparts the beliefs that the practice of *zazen* can lead to the cultivation of spiritual insight and a certain state of consciousness namely enlightenment which are highly valued in the Buddhist tradition. The novice is taught that meditation results in certain experiences, such as mindfulness, they offer theological legitimation of the view that these experiences are significant and profound.³⁵ In addition, the individual is taught to detect these outcomes in

³⁵ This sheds light on the relevance of cognitive orientation as a factor in conversion, since the individuals already value spiritual insight and are willing to try the techniques offered by the Zen tradition.

his or her experience. Through interaction with the group and increased familiarity with the doctrine the individual acquires the relevant concepts necessary for labelling experiences which might have otherwise gone unnoticed. Thus, one comes to acquire the belief that meditation results in novel experiences. For instance, while one has always encountered mindfulness, that is the quality of being attentively focusing on an activity, through interaction with the Zen group, the teacher, and the labelling process, mindfulness comes to be redefined as a profound experience and perceived to be a direct consequence of meditative practices. Thus, meditation acquires a new significance and meaning for the practitioner as an efficacious activity which can produce desirable and meaningful outcomes. The presence of these experiences are communicated to the others in the group, and to the teacher in particular, whose positive response further confirms that the technique is being applied correctly and that one is getting results,³⁶ and therefore the activity is continued. Only getting results in the above sense will lead to a continuity of meditation, otherwise meditation becomes meaningless and one will cease to continue it.

Preston's analysis though relevant cannot adequately explain the process of conversion to Zen because he takes the position that Becker's model is only applicable to the initial stages of Zen practice and can only deal with 'certain mundane aspects of Zen practice that allow the beginner to come to participate in the activity of Zen' (Preston, 1981:48). Preston denies that Becker's analysis is equally applicable to the experiences of the more senior students of Zen. Preston goes on to assert that:

it is extremely difficult if not impossible for Western categories of thought to grasp Zen adequately [...] It has been suggested (Yamada, 1979) that the experience of zazen (sitting meditation) is a fact that needs no interpretation just as the taste of tea is the same for everyone. There is no philosophy attached to sitting, and thus Catholics, or persons of any other religion, can do zazen without giving up their own beliefs. (Preston, 1981:48)

³⁶ There is a continuous process of redefining what the "results" of meditation are. For example, as was discussed in Chapter Four long-term practitioners redefine the goal of Zen practice and no longer view the attainment of enlightenment the purpose of Zen activities. Instead the idea of wanting to achieve a goal is redefined as "craving" which according to the fundamental teaching of Buddhism is the root of all suffering, thus, acceptance of what *is* and mindfulness comes to be seen as the same as the enlightened state.

Preston concludes that *zazen* as a spiritual practice does not depend on interactive processes within the Zen group and argues that, 'the consequences [of *zazen*] are regularly encountered by even the isolated practitioner' (*ibid*, 49). Preston fails to recognise that what is at stake is not what "isolated practitioners" may come to experience but the activity of *recognising* these as the consequences of Zen practice and coming to interpret them as positive and significant. Similarly, where the relevant explanatory models and reference group are lacking, no special significance may be attached to a transcendental experience. The following story was related to the author in a personal interview with the Zen teacher Augusto Alcalde. He described a woman who had an experience which Augusto Alcalde described as a deep realisation of emptiness and non-duality. This experience occurred spontaneously while she was playing golf. She had never meditated before and was not familiar with any mystical traditions, she was puzzled by the experience and sought explanation from a psychiatrist and left it at that until by chance she met Augusto Alcalde and mentioned the experience to him. Augusto confirmed that it had been a profound experience of emptiness but the woman did not attach any significance to this and did not want to repeat the experience through joining a meditation group. This story supports the view that the significance and meaning of spiritual experiences depend upon the input of the tradition and the religious community, as such these experiences are deeply embedded in social interaction. According to Becker:

the individual that comes in contact with a given object may respond to it at first in a great variety of ways. If a stable form of new behaviour toward the object is to emerge, a transformation of meaning must occur, in which the person develops a new conception of the nature of the object. This happens in a series of communicative acts in which others point out new aspects of his experience to him [sic], present him [sic] with new interpretations of events, and help him [sic] achieve a new conceptual organisation of his [sic] world, without which the new behaviour is not possible. (Becker, 1953:242)

For instance, as the following quote indicates, Ken's perception of *zazen* shifts from being a "non-event" to "extremely profound". Ken refers to his previous involvement with psychotherapy as well as his knowledge of Buddhist dogma to support this redefinition. He is also trying to make sense of *zazen* by referring to its possible stabilising effect at the unconscious level or with reference to the Zen idea of acceptance:

I try to sit in the quarter lotus position which was hard at the start but it seems like a tremendous achievement that I can sit in that position for half hour and not be preoccupied with pain. What helps is this notion of accepting what is, here and now. So, I try to accept whatever the experience is which generally is a non event. I suppose that is important that most of my Zen practice my sitting is experienced as a total non event because I just sit. But I know it has meaning you know it has meaning for me, touches the deep, very deeply down but one second it is extremely profound, next second its gone sort of, its nothing. But the fact that you just sit, sit there everyday through good and bad it goes very far back in your subconscious I think it would have an stabilising affect. Ken

Similarly, Luke used the Zen idea of acceptance in order to interpret *zazen* as a meaningful and positive activity:

What keeps me coming back to *zazen*, but also the fact that when I actually sit down and do it I enjoy it, I really enjoy it. You know, I just sit there and you know sometimes I make an effort and actually bring some, effort or, or conscious purpose to sitting and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I just sit and let it come to me and, but I always enjoy it, and that is I guess one of the things that I have gained over the years of sitting that I have done. That focus or that settledness does come and it will come at its own time. I guess that is the difference between sitting now and sitting years ago, I don't struggle with it anymore, and so the stuff comes up and I am either attentive or I am not, I day dream a bit or I don't. I mean it is not like I am not making any effort at all but you know it is nice to sit like that, not fighting to fit some ideal of sitting. Luke

Kristen referred to *zazen* as a profound activity and when I asked her to elaborate on that she referred to the notion of surrender and used a well known phrase in Zen, "dropping away the body and mind", which refers to the essence of enlightenment to clarify the significance of *zazen*:

Some one asked me not long ago "oh what do you do, do you meditate" I said yeah and they said why do you do it? and I go because I don't know anything and I still don't know anything. So, that is the whole notion of not knowing. I sit because I don't know, it is like a place to come home to, coming home to something very familiar that makes you feel that you can surrender, that notion of surrender. So, yeah, and I love what August [Zen teacher] often says you know that whole notion of dropping away the body and mind, this makes *zazen* very special. Kristen

My informants frequently cited the cultivation of witness consciousness (*CWC*) (Moore, 1995) as a positive outcome of Zen practice. This is the ability to stand back and watch one's mental states such as thoughts and feelings as they unfold in a detached fashion rather than identify with them. One may be instructed by one's teacher to label these internal states or just watch them as a part of Zen practice, in both cases the objective is to detach oneself from them and take the role of an observer with regards to these states. The aim is to notice these states arising and then allow them to pass by not responding to them or getting caught up in an internal dialogue with them. For instance, while meditating one may notice a painful sensation in one's ankles, during *zazen* one is asked to just observe the pain or label it, "pain in the ankle". This is in contrast to most people's habitual response such as wanting to move to get rid of the pain, or getting angry. To the majority of the informants *CWC* was regarded as the single most important outcome of Zen which has changed how they go about living their lives and relating to themselves and others on a daily basis. The experiences of witnessing one's subjective states rather than identifying with them is congruent with Zen Buddhist belief in the illusory nature of human suffering and the possibility of "detachment" from life experiences which lead to suffering. The converts experience salvation and release from suffering by coming to interpret *CWC* as a way of achieving detachment from such ups and downs. *CWC* was perceived as the practical way in which Zen fulfils the promise of freedom from suffering fundamental to Buddhism. According to Joko Beck:

We *can't* be upset unless our mind takes us out of the present, into unreal thoughts. Whenever we're upset, we're literally out of it: we've left something out. We're like fish out

of water. When we're present, fully aware, we can't have a thought such as "oh, this is such a difficult life. It's so meaningless". If we do this we've left something out. Just like that!
(Beck, 1993:160)

The informants reported a similar belief. According to Clare:

I think for me *zazen* is sort of everything in a way because I can see the effect it has on me as a person. I mean if I look back a few years ago and I can see parts of me that have begun to wear away, I can see that this is what works for me. I think probably the biggest change is that I can see the emerging emotional circumstances. Like if any emotions arise, you know fear or jealousy or anger, I can certainly still get involved in them but they can much more quickly drop away and I can, you can almost physically see at times when something is looming about to lure you into it. You almost have a choice of, do I step into this cloud and be swallowed up for a certain length of time, or do I not? Clare

James interpreted the efficacy of *zazen* in terms of leading to *CWC* which he valued as an effective way to achieve mental health:

[What keeps you motivated to practice?]

Well, I think the number one reason and there may well be just one reason is that it helps, it keeps me mentally healthy. What I mean by that is that it allows me to maintain a position whereby I am not my thoughts. As my thoughts arise in me, from reading all these other bits and pieces down the years I gather that it is a human condition that my thoughts are more unhelpful than helpful, if I get stuck into believing my thoughts in some way represent reality, the reality of my situation in life and the reality of my relationship with other people, I can get into all sorts of strife and trouble. As a result of practice, of the actual sitting meditation practice, I am, through actually observing, of the huge, innumerable number of times I can see that thoughts just arise and pass away and then another one arises and passes away and sometimes they accurately reflect what is happening in the world around me and more often than not they don't accurately reflect.

Back in the early days when I was starting, my thoughts rarely, if ever accurately reflected what was happening out there. My thoughts were more likely to be based on an emotional state which most people describe as angry, angry thoughts, based on the emotional state of anger. So the thoughts that arose while I was in that state were coloured by the emotional content underlying them namely anger and you know the part of the great vows that goes you know like what we chant in Zen that "greed, hatred and ignorance arise endlessly" you know to me that is just a clear statement of life as it is, that is what life is, just rings so true for me [...] What keeps me going is the knowledge that if I don't keep going I can get off the track again. It is like, I guess it is a matter of contrast you know. I am so aware of the fact that compared to the endless, unremitting pain of my previous existence, I can put it that way, my previous way of living a life, living my life, and now at the moment, the awareness of impermanence is a constant reminder that feelings come and go, that it doesn't go on for ever, it isn't for all time. So, I wake up some mornings and feeling black and you know "what is the point of it all" and "God, I wish it would all go away and I could stay in bed all day" and "I can't face work", and then rather than getting stuck in that as being an all time, you know, totally permanent thoughts and feelings, I can realize that this is impermanent, this is going to fade, you know. As soon as I get up and move my body and have a shower that story line will just drop out of its own accord I don't need to do anything active about it you know. Whereas previously it could take me hours and hours and hours to get that first movement of the day happening. James

Nancy described *CWC* in terms of increasing one's ability to maintain an aware and mindful state of mind:

somebody who is enlightened is totally aware all the time [...] I mean you watch the Dalai Lama he feels great sorrow, tears come to his eyes, but he is not that sorrow he is not putting it on it is not an act it is a human-body response. That he is totally stable he is not swept away by it all, so he is in that constant stable, aware state that is where I want to be and meditation has been very valuable in helping me become like this. To be able to take things into my mind and keep stable about it, not get carried away by

emotional instability[...] you can sort of deal with these things so much better with Buddhist practice and that is why I practice. Because it has meaning, it makes a difference in my life, makes a positive difference and you know the whole question of why this has happened. You can see causes and conditions in that the whole thing is interdependent. It is a whole lot of stuff that is coming together and I see many things in my life that way, I see it through meditation which doesn't mean you only see it when you are sitting on a cushion, you see it by being, trying to keep your mind stable in your daily life. So it is meditation in your daily life where you can put that space between you and what is right in your face and not get swept away and then say wait a minute [...] and you can handle things differently and better and what is important to me is that you don't need, you don't hurt other people as much [...] if you can step back you can see what you are doing and you can stop it [...] so to me it has got all these positive things, not a spiritual search -- its a search for a living I guess. Nancy

The above quotes reflect of the informants beliefs that there is a causal link between the practice of *zazen* and the emergence of witness consciousness. Therefore, *zazen* is perceived as a positive activity because of the outcomes it generates. This supports my argument that through interaction with the other practitioners and exposure to the language of the Zen tradition certain experiences are labelled as positive. Although one may have encountered witness consciousness in one's experience prior to taking up Zen practice it could have gone unnoticed. Through interaction with the group and the Zen teacher it comes to be defined as a significant experience, for instance by relating it to the idea of impermanence in Budd'ism as James (page, 172) did.

The Zen community not only enables the individual to define *zazen* as efficacious by relating it to certain experiences which are believed to be positive, but it also helps account for the lack of expected results and therefore enables the individual to cope with cases which from the point of view of a non-practitioner negate or contradict the perceived efficacy of *zazen*. In the early stages of involvement with Zen the informants reported to have had a more goal directed approach towards *zazen*. They viewed *zazen* as a tool for achieving enlightenment. In addition, there was also the expectation that enlightenment will obviate all emotional, and physical difficulties. For instance, Jiyu Kennett, an American

Zen teacher related the story of a person who left her monastery soon after joining. The reason she gave for leaving was that because Jiyu suffered from diabetes she could not possibly be enlightened (Friedman, 1987). This reflects the view of many beginners who believe that through enlightenment they will become perfect and acquire super-human qualities. The realisation that Zen practice does not smooth one's way in life and that conflicts, frustration and hang-ups continue to emerge requires explanation if the practitioners' belief in the efficacy of *zazen* and therefore commitment to Zen practice is to be maintained. Once again, the language of the Zen group offers such an explanation. For instance, James used the Buddhist notion of impermanence to deal with lack of results:

Whenever I begin to worry about results I just remind myself of *anicha*, which is the Pali word for impermanence so today no progress, next second may be deep realisation. James

Some informants referred to the Buddhist renunciation of attachment as the cause of suffering to deal with the absence of enlightenment experiences, this is what Ken said:

I have been fortunate enough to read some books which say not to have expectations to gain something from the practice, that it should be a gain free exercise, which is essentially what the Four Noble Truths are about you know, craving is the source of suffering. So, craving for enlightenment means you are back where you started [...] I am happy to go along with that so the idea of gain is irrelevant, one always wants blue sky but the reality is that life is not like that. Ken

Mat reconsidered his previous ideas about Zen practice offering a quick path to enlightenment. Although he continued to maintain his belief that progress on the Zen path leads to enlightenment, through interacting with other practitioners and listening to their stories he came to redefine enlightenment as a rare stage in spiritual development:

After joining the Clifton Hill Zendo I began to realize that meditation like any practice, any art form, just takes a lot of commitment and a lot of time and it is a life long practice you know, and I think meditating at the Zendo with the Zen group made

me more aware of that. Seeing people that had really committed large parts of each day, and continually, to meditation was a good awareness for me to realise that it does take a lot of practice. Mat

The following extract from Molly reflects the view of the majority of informants who reconciled themselves with the reality of enlightenment as a rare attainment through the belief that *zazen* works in its own mysterious ways, and that a ripening process takes place within the individual all the time which in its own time will lead to spiritual realisation:

I am constantly aiming, or at least hoping for these changes to happen but there is a ripening process I find which has a momentum of its own and can't be hurried. Molly

The idea of *zazen* triggering an unconscious and karmic ripening process is supported by the Zen tradition. For instance, Aitken (1982) describes Zen as a zig zag path and reassures us that while practising *zazen* one is continually progressing and in time this will lead to realisation. Clare engaged in revising her previous ideas regarding what to expect from *zazen*, admitting they were "silly" and adopted a very different attitude towards the outcome of Zen practice:

I have had large periods of time when nothing seems to be happening and you know even though I mentioned before that I try not to seek out psychic things or that sort of stuff because I can see that is just something you have to let go of. But with human nature the very fact that you are not having little dollops of visualisations and this that and the other or the experiences, you suddenly think, well what has happened, am I doing it right? What has happened to me? Is there a block in my *chakras*, you go back to all of those sorts of silly things. But I think, I hope that I have enough sense to realize that it, that *zazen* is working on its own level and you can't judge, you can't really judge what is happening. The most barren periods might be your best periods and it is the same with *sesshins*. I mean I have had probably three [*sesshins*] in a row where I would say I hadn't had I suppose ecstatic experiences but in a way, although you know different things have happened and you know you have been to a *sesshin* and you have got that joy at the finish. But then again I sort of think well, I don't

know what level it is working so I don't worry. I mean I think if it went on for an interminable time and I was really worried then I would probably seek out somebody and ask them about it, but from what I have read and what I have asked from teachers it seems to be just a normal phase [...] it has its own time and its own ways you know you just, I think you just have to believe that *zazen* is the teacher and accept it as it is. Clare

Rose referred to a past experience of realisation and said that she deals with "barren periods" through the belief that they herald enlightenment:

When going through barren periods I think always I manage to keep a little bit of my mind that says this is fine this is, this is what you are working with, this is O. K. this will pass. Keep, keep going, just keep retuning to the *koan*, returning to the breath and I have found, it has been documented so many times in all different religions that often after those kind of bleaker periods shifts often occur. So often that bleak feeling has been like a warning period I know a chunk of deluded thinking is about to fall away and that is why you don't want it to fall away it is a bit scary. When I was working with the first *koan* it was on days before breaking through that I was filled with these feelings of shame, shame was the theme of that *sesshin*. I cried and cried and it was very painful, in hindsight I was, I felt, in hindsight it feels like I was going over and over and over my habits. Getting ready to actually say, O. K. enough of being shameful, this is an excuse to not get on with it, this is just another neurotic mechanism to not, fulfil your potential to not actually experience your Buddha-nature. I was going over and over it because I was just about to go of it which is what actually to some extent transpired, not a 100% but a major movement from shameful thinking occurred as I passed through *koan* preceded by days of days of this tearful shameful thinking. Rose

Some deal with the lack of results by redefining enlightenment in terms of mindfulness or "undivided activity" as one and the same thing as enlightenment. According to Max:

With different periods in my life the motivation has had a different basis. So, at the beginning wanted to achieve something, enlightenment and these ideas, but now I just

want to sit because I treat it as a, as a sense of life, or an awareness of life flowing through me. So your life is very dense, very dense when you sit, you can see what is happening when you sit and it is a good test to see where you are and why you are here. When you sit meditation you can't lie to yourself you see straight away where you are and this awareness of what is really is the motivation. Max

The above redefinition of mindfulness as a positive and desirable experience which results from meditation is achieved through immersion in the Zen tradition and interaction with other practitioners. The Zen tradition contains an extensive vocabulary of meditative mindfulness, the emphasis on mindfulness in Zen makes it noticeable, so although it may be present in the experience of converts prior to conversion, it is not defined or perceived as anything significant. Within the Zen tradition symbols and beliefs point to the profundity of mindfulness as highly significant, not as a precondition of enlightenment but is itself an expression of the enlightenment. All of these elements of understanding make the experience of mindfulness in Zen the particular kind of experience that it is.

The Zen teacher also plays a role in confirming the conviction in efficacy of Zen by emphasising the importance of *zazen* and reassuring the student that he or she is on the right path. According to Rick:

for a while I had doubts if Zen is the right path for me. I pulled through this phase because I felt there was something in there. I remember John Terrant [Rick's Zen teacher] who told me, trust me, keep doing *zazen* and the transformation will happen.
Rick

Conversely, perceived defects in a teacher can hinder commitment to Zen practice. In the following quote Mandy indicates that her decision to leave Zen Buddhism was because she saw significant people, such as Zen teachers who must have practised *zazen* for years, still suffered from personality problems:

My dissatisfaction had been quietly building since my visit to Perth 6 months earlier [...] It is still hard to explain exactly what my dissatisfaction was. I think the issue

contributing to my unhappiness was that having seen so many Zen groups and Zen teachers as part of my research, they seemed to all suffer the same personality hang-ups and group in-fighting as any other people, so I was losing my faith in the value of Zen practice in its most essential form. Mandy

The sacralisation of the self and the mundane

The second aspect of the Zen belief system which is internalised in the process of conversion to Zen is the belief in the sacred essence of the self and the mundane. This redefinition is acquired through exposure to Zen beliefs, participation in Zen rituals, and interaction with the Zen teacher and other practitioners and their feedback, the perception of self and reality as sacred emerges gradually out of these processes. The following extracts illustrate the gradual and negotiated character of the process of sacralising the self and mundane reality. According to Jack:

I think through practice clarity comes about that [*one's Buddha-nature*], you know you have a lot of ideas in the beginning about various things, I mean I thought I am *Buddha* sure, but you don't believe really, I mean even now, it is, it's a process. Some people obviously from what I have read and seen, some people get it like that -- straight away. But it is taking me you know, a long time but I don't have much of a problem with it. I think there is a sort of boundary between realising that you have *Buddha-nature* and sort of thinking that maybe I have a *Buddha-nature*, that is sort of like a capsule that melts in the heat of practice. But then again that really hinges on what you think *Buddha-nature* is. In the beginning it seems like you are, whatever you are, a *Buddha*, but those ideas gradually fall away and then *Buddha-nature* becomes more normal than you know. Jack

Joy related the value she attaches to mundane things in terms of the notion of mindfulness, as well as to her teacher as her role model:

I think even the way that I would go about doing things has changed because of *zazen*. I mean, just my approach to put flowers in a vase or doing the dishes or very simple

tasks feels like its a kind of awareness. I think it is a kind of awareness, bringing attention to all the things that you do to all aspects of your life. So it is not just about this higher spirituality it is really about very mundane aspects of living as well [...]. I think it is very important to pay attention in your life to be attentive to what is, it means to be alive, and to bring attention to just very small things in life, paying attention to the way you relate, and the choices that you make, and the all the small gestures add up. I don't know, it feels like those tiny things actually have a profound affect. I guess it would be easier for me to live just kind of mindlessly, but I see it in someone like my teacher or other people I have met who have done Zen practice for a long time. I can see a certain care in the way that they live and certain quality in the way that they live, and I like to bring that quality into my life. Joy

Jack refers to the teachings of Buddhist teacher Jack Cornfield to redefine seemingly mundane experiences as profound and cited this as a motive for the practice of meditation:

I had never tried that [*silent retreat*] before and of course by the end of it I didn't want to speak, and when I actually started to speak I kind of felt that words were just like butterflies you know. And you know, that sort of experience keeps you going in some way without even consciously thinking "I want that again" as a some sort of knowledge that there is kind of possibility of that state I guess. Also driving back from *zazen* in Perth I always remember this one tree that had a light behind it and whenever I passed it seemed to smile, and after meditation there was this feeling of joy in a way you know. After the *sesshin* when everything is shimmering and yeah that is pretty joyous times, and so that keeps you going. But then that starts to wear off. Sitting doesn't bring that after a while you know and then sort of you have to sit when nothing is happening. So I would not say that what brings me back is to try and retain that or rediscover that because it still happens. I mean I feel a big difference, sometimes when you are sitting life is easier, problems are not problems any more, that is the feeling you know. So that still happens but even when it does not happen there is, still is, something that feels very important about sitting. It brings you back to here and now you know. Like Jack Cornfield says, sitting is like eating and breathing and all those things and once you start doing it is there and it is sort of hard

not to do and you miss it so yeah, which sometimes in my life has been hard, realising I am sitting here, my knees are really hurting, my back is, and I sort of have a headache and all that has come through my head is crappy thoughts and what am I doing here? You know and yet you know you begin the *kinhin* and you are back on the cushion again so you know I don't think it is masochistic tendencies. I think it definitely brings you back to the cushion, the here and now, and I guess once you felt a glimpse sort of you get that feeling of you know of "big mind" is awakened in you and you just realize that the only thing to do is to keep going. Jack

In addition to language the other symbols of the group such as the Zen rituals also play an important role in conveying the Zen Buddhist doctrines to the individual and making them experientially real. Thea and Ann related the ritual of bowing to their redefinition of self in sacred terms:

Before you sit you bow to the *sangha*. Its just the symbol of acknowledging kind of I appreciate being here, and also acknowledging the Buddha-nature in all of us, like saying I love you all you know, may you all have a good sit or whatever. Then you bow to the wall, to your own space and appreciate myself, treasure my essential self as much as I appreciate my neighbours, so yeah, may I have a good sit too. Thea

According to Ann:

In the meditation retreat we were told that we had to bow when we entered the room and it felt silly to me so I didn't do it. It took me about a day before I felt comfortable in myself about doing it so I have to feel comfortable in myself. I don't feel this is as important to me as much as it used to be before but at that stage I felt that I didn't want to be doing something that felt insincere so I had to feel sincere about bowing before I was willing to bow. But now I do it as a choice, I do it because I believe the bowing is a respect, it is a respect for the teachings and respect for the Buddha-nature in myself, so I do it because of that respect. [*Can you elaborate on how you lost your initial resistance to bowing?*] I think it was a process of as the meditation retreat went on what I find, and I have had this happen before, is that you become more and more,

devoted is not the word, but it is a word that will do, you start to feel more devotion to the practice or devotion to the spiritual experience and the environment. You sort of believe more, I don't know if I am expressing it clearly, but it becomes a deeper experience and you start to feel, with me I feel a sense of almost gratitude that I am there, of reverence. So that feeling increases to the stage that the bowing becomes something that I feel I want to do and by the end of the retreat I mean you could have me doing a hundred prostrations because of, my own feelings have changed. Ann

The ritual of bowing is also emphasised by some teachers as a vital aspect of Zen practice. Describing the life and the teachings of Nakagawa Soen, an influential Zen teacher who helped establish Zen in the United States, Besserman and Steger write:

In the middle of a Dharma talk he would spontaneously organise a bowing session, encouraging students by bowing in front of them, assuring them that "each one of you is a Bodhisattva". Then, directing them to bow to each other, wife and husband, friend and stranger, he exhorted everyone to "bow to the living Bodhisattva that is in each of you". Words were never sufficient to communicate the Great Matter. Only experience conveyed it, only action and being. The Ten Commandments and the Buddhist precepts themselves were simply words, "Don't, don't, don't see them as bindings! They make us free ... they are important. But do not be bound up by commandments. *Everything is yourself. Everything is myself.* Each one of you is a master of this whole universe. (Besserman & Steger, 1991:171-172)

Note, how in the above quote the ritual of bowing is used to support the Zen belief in the sacred nature of the self. Similarly, for Rose the notion of Buddha-nature acquired personal meaning and significance, through the ritual of bowing:

Another thing I like to share is that a very important *sesshin* I went to, I started bowing to my cushion and saying good on you Rose, every time I bowed, and for a year I did that. That was an important process of learning to be more loving towards myself, and the more I have done that, and still keep on doing that. When I think I am not good in doing this, I recognise that voice is disrespectful to my essential nature, not to me as an individual but to my Buddha-nature-- to Buddha-nature I am doing

this disservice, I am dishonouring the life force to speak of myself in that way. So, consequently I have been more self-loving. I became more empowered and was able to do a lot more. I have always been an active person and done a lot but I have also had an enormous baggage that I have dragged around with me, a lot of anxiety and that tired me out terribly and caused enormous emotional upheavals, and some of that has kind of changed. I still have enormous upheavals but it is somehow like more productivity comes from it that seems to resolve into something more life affirming, where as before it would just repeat and repeat because there was a lot of self criticism, that cycle is not so strong now. Rose

Adopting an attitude of acceptance and surrender

The third aspect of conversion to Zen, namely adopting an orientation of surrender and acceptance emerges out of one's definition of the self and reality as sacred and the definition of enlightenment as the mindfulness of the moment-by-moment unfolding of what is. According to Patricia:

What I try to do is to just stay with precisely the thing that is right at the front of my eyes [...] yeah so I suppose in the other sense, for me it is to be where I am rather than try and make things as I want them [...] the practice is not striving for something in a way I guess in a sense you could call that a goal but it is not a goal you can strive for.
Patricia

Furthermore, the revised self-identity and definition of self in sacred terms lead to a deep sense of self acceptance, self-love and confirmation of one's intrinsic worth and this acts as a further confirmation of the new interpretation. This is related to the symbolic interactionist assumption discussed at the beginning of this chapter namely, human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) and when the habitual meanings cease to be satisfactory in guiding action they engage in redefinition. The data suggests that this can explain the attraction of the notion of the self and mundane reality as sacred, since this replaces unsatisfactory or enigmatic areas of the converts' experience. For instance, some informants used these

concepts to replace previously inarticulate aspects of their identity, or redefined hitherto ambivalent or mysterious experiences. In being thus used to label various areas of personal experience these concepts acquired meaning and significance for the individuals and come to be experienced as real (Stromberg, 1993:55). The following two extracts indicate how the notion of surrender enables the individuals to redefine as positive experiences which they previously perceived as negative or destructive:

A lot of the unconscious, preconscious energies that led me to practice was an ability to acknowledge that I really didn't have it together even though I thought I had it together. Now I say I don't have it together, but it is conscious and that is O. K., there is freedom in it but before it was unconscious. So my early being, my early life is perfectionism, now I am not worried about perfectionism, its acceptance and a spaciousness in that acceptance. That means you don't have to be ruled by those nagging fears and dis-ease. John

For Rose the notion of acceptance enabled a redefinition of anger and changes in how she coped with anger. This is how she described the changes which occurred after practising meditation for a year intensively:

There were people sitting with me every morning and evening and I just started to feel so right you know really right everything became, mountains became more beautiful, my life just started to improve, like I became more powerful just within myself a lot of negative, sort of neurotic aspects started to kind of fall away. But the more obvious one was I used to have this really bad temper smash things [...] that sort of started to ease off. I didn't feel so guilty about my action I would not do such things to embarrass myself. I started to feel a bit better about who I was, have a bit more integrity. Rose

Interpretation of the spiritual experiences

In Chapter Four I did not include spiritual experiences of the informants as an aspect of conversion to Zen; because the Zen tradition and the more experienced informants

dismissed the notion of enlightenment as the goal of practice and down played the importance of having "special" experiences as the objective of their practice. These experiences are nonetheless reported by some of the informants and were viewed as an important outcome of Zen practice. I established in Chapter Four that the belief in the efficacy of *zazen* in achieving enlightenment and gaining spiritual insight is shared by Zen converts. In addition many of the informants said they have had spiritual experiences and viewed these as the experiential evidence for the efficacy of *zazen*. Therefore the discussion of the data is incomplete without an analysis of this aspect of the findings. The enlightenment stories cited in Zen literature (Kapleau, 1965) and reports of my informants indicate that Zen practice can result in unusual sensations and bodily experiences, serenity, as well as transcendental experiences of non-duality where the experience of ego as a separate entity disappears. These experiences are crucial to conversion since they precipitate the dual process of self-transformation and commitment to Zen Buddhism. For instance, the experiences encourage participants to accept the meaning which surrounds them. The fact that the participants have now an experience which can be redefined as spiritually significant validates the assertion that *zazen* is efficacious and therefore increases their commitment to *zazen*.

I take the view that experience of transcendence is firmly embedded in the interactive processes within the group and the language of the religious community in particular. My assumption about the sociality and the emergent character of meaning is relevant, as well as the argument that all human experiences are embedded in language and we have no access to a pre-linguistic, primordial realm. This is based on the symbolic interactionist assumption that meaning emerges among interacting selves who share a set of symbols and these enable the individual to share the attitude of the other in response to given events or experiences (Mead, 1934:75-90). Using the data I will demonstrate that these processes are equally present in and mediate the transcendental experiences encountered in Zen.

Socialisation into the religious community plays a crucial role in fostering the transcendental experiences which the informants attributed to Zen practice. Through being socialised into the perspective of the religious community the individuals acquire the concepts which they use to label certain experiences as transcendental. Garret's

conceptualisation of different stages in the "encounter process" is relevant. Garret (1979:48-52) distinguishes between three such stages, the preparatory socialisation into the belief system of the relevant reference group, the "encounter experience", in Zen this consists of the experience of unity and dissolution of a separate ego, and finally the 'denouement process whereby the encounter experience is interpreted, evaluated and then amalgamated with the testimony of other believers' (Garret, 1979:51). This approach may appear to contradict the claims made by the Zen tradition or the informants. The Zen Buddhist texts from Sung dynasty Chinese classics through to modern publications claim that the experience of transcendence in Zen is ineffable, it is a direct experience of reality which circumvents discourse, concept and analysis altogether. The Zen path is described as, 'A special transmission outside the *Sutras*, not dependent on language and texts, direct pointing to mind, one sees the true nature of things and becomes the Buddha' (Wright, 1992:129).

My focus on the role of interactive processes within the group and the language of the Zen community in mediating the experience of transcendence does not deny the experiential legitimacy of subjective experiences of transcendence reported by some of the participants. Nor do I deny the transcendental dimensions of Zen, what I do emphasise in my approach is the contextual nature of such experiences and the extent to which that dimension rests upon learning the cognitive parameters offered by Zen tradition and the mastery of the Zen Buddhist "language games" (Wittgenstein, 1958, Wright, 1992:124). To locate Zen enlightenment within the language of Zen tradition does not mean that the experience is itself reducible to language. What I have established here is that making sense of mystical experiences requires considerable training and is usually achieved through intense interaction with the teacher and other practitioners. Regardless of their ultimate status the interactive processes within the Zen community and the language of the community plays a significant role in the experience of enlightenment. As was argued in the earlier discussion of Becker's (1953) model and its relevance to Zen practice, through the process of labelling and communicating the experience to oneself and significant others such experiences acquire meaning and coherence for the individual.

This is consistent with a socialisation theory of conversion to Zen. Previous socialisation is a prelude for transcendental experiences, without the input of the social group the

experience may be meaningless, nonetheless transcendental experiences are not necessarily reducible to the latter. All that my position entails is that we need the organisational structure and the symbols of the Zen groups in order to articulate and make sense of the converts' spiritual experience. The Zen tradition, 'supply a framework of coherent categories for comprehending the meaning of transcendental experiences which might otherwise remain so diffuse that they relate only tangentially to the spiritual life of actors' (Garret, 1979:48). Therefore, the experience of enlightenment, regardless of how intense it is, is by no means self-interpreting and the way it is comprehended and the subsequent accounts of it are shaped by the Zen tradition. For instance, in the following extract Eric applies the concepts of mystery, acceptance and compassion towards oneself to reinterpret seemingly mundane experiences as "rich experiences" and Zen practice as leading to deeply inside one's self:

In the monastery it was quite hard, it was cold and harsh discipline and very little encouragement but there were things that motivated me along the way. Like the *sesshins* were barely survivable still after *sesshin* you get those feelings and you get clarity and during *sesshin* you have certain realisation experiences. They can be just, I can remember noticing my body for the first time, noticing my hands, being aware of my hands. I have always had a sense of intolerance towards my body there was a contrast, maybe some form of negative self image that I projected into my body but I remember looking at my body and feeling that it was really wonderful and feeling like a compassion just looking at my hands, and being really struck when saliva came in my mouth and just thinking well I didn't know anything that was going on or how it was working and medical texts could not adequately describe it, a sense of mystery came through strongly. It was a very rich experience and yeah various other things happened to me like that. I could see that this really is a wonderful practice and yet at the same time there was a road which to be travelled, to go much deeply inside. Eric

Jack drew on the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness in order to define an experience he had at a meditation retreat as *kensho*. The notion of interconnectedness infused the experience with spiritual significance and as a result the experience was reconstructed as a spiritual one:

I guess I had a few spontaneous experiences when I joined *Rajneesh*. First I did not know what they were but now I suppose they were like *kensho*. But, and I think what kept me going is that I knew something is changing something is happening in the way you relate to the people, allowing the heart to open and all that was a big thing. Basically I was kind of [...] always thought of myself as a loner and felt distrustful and [...] gradually I realised that I was not alone, I liked my aloneness but I also knew that, using Thich Nhat Hanh's phrase, interconnectedness with other people, inter-being, inter-are. Jack

Through interaction with the Zen teacher students learn to define certain experiences as spiritual. On both individual and collective levels Zen students are encouraged to ground their practice in the form of choosing a lineage or Zen teacher and the necessity of guidance by a teacher is emphasised. It is believed that not only do teachers show their students the way (to realise their true nature), and help them to stay on the way, they also embody and transmit the meaning and purpose of Zen. Robert Aitken describes the role of the teacher in the following way:

The *roshi* is a guide through unknown lands [...] Since the object of zazen is the falling away of the ordinary self in the act of uniting with breath counting, of the *koan*, the *roshi* stands to one side and encourages the student to experience this falling away. When the self does fall away completely, it can be a wonderful experience. The *roshi* then encourages the student to understand that experience and to learn how to present it in all circumstances. (Aitken, 1982:89-90)

The students' interaction with the teacher occurs at both formal and informal levels. Formal interactions consist of private interviews with the teacher or *dokusan*. During the periods of intensive meditation there are times during the morning and evening meditation periods when the students are given the opportunity to have a personal interview with the teacher.³⁷

³⁷ Kraft traces the origin of *dokusan* to the time of Buddha when, 'monks assembled in caves for training during the three months of the rainy season. Later in China a more open form of encounter between teacher and student developed. In Japan and Korea the Zen masters added a new and vigorous dimension in which *dokusan* became less a matter of didactic instruction and more a form of testing' (Kraft, 1988:45).

In *dokusan* the teacher examines the level of the student's insight, and gives him or her instructions for future practice (Kraft, 1988:44-45). The first interview with the teacher, or *shoken*, begins when the teacher rings a bell to summon the student, in response the student hits a larger bell twice. Upon entering the teacher's room the student makes nine full bows (prostrations), three at the threshold, three in front of the teacher, and three at the doorway before leaving, also she or he may offer incense, this represents the student's faith in the teacher as one's guide. The interview ends when the teacher rings the bell, the student makes three full bows in front of the teacher and leaves the room. A regular interview with the teacher (*dokusan*) follows the same format except that upon entering the teachers room the student makes three full bows instead of nine (Kapleau, 1965:52). Kapleau explains the format as well as the meaning of full bows from a Zen perspective:

In making your prostrations you should touch the tatami mat with your forehead, with your hands extended in front of your head, palms upward several inches above your head. This gesture of receiving the feet, the lowliest members of the Buddha's body, symbolises humility and the grateful acceptance into your life of the Way of the Buddha. Unless you have submerged your ego you cannot do this. Bear in mind that the roshi is not simply a deputy of the Buddha but actually stands in his place. In making these prostrations you are in fact paying respect to the Buddha just as though he himself were sitting there, and to the Dharma. (Kapleau, 1965: 52)

Furthermore, it is the Zen teacher who determines the level of a student's insight as well as the presence or absence of realisation. For instance, according to Kapleau it is possible that a student may believe he or she is enlightened when it may not be the case. Kapleau claims that in some cases there may be insight on subconscious level that has not yet found its way into consciousness hence one has become enlightened but is unaware of it. In *dokusan* the students relates unusual or ambiguous experiences which may arise during or outside meditation to the teacher for the purpose of confirmation (Kapleau, 1965). For instance, Luke's teacher labelled an experience he had during a Zen retreat as a transcendental experience:

I was in this *sesshin*, and had this experience. There was this fly on my nose and I only had an awareness of the nose and the fly and a feeling of being in a field of grey ice,

I had no sense of myself or anything else. When I told John Terrant he said that it was a profound experience of emptiness. Luke

The teacher assesses the students' progress in a number of ways. Where the students are assigned *koans*, the teacher follows their progress through the *koan* curriculum³⁸ by asking questions during *dokusan* to determine their understanding of the *koan* and whether they should pass the *koan* and be assigned a more advanced *koan* or continue to work on the same *koan*. Upon presenting their understanding of a *koan* the teacher may ask "capping" questions to verify if the student has had a genuine insight, or how deep their insight is.

The above quotations illustrate the way in which the base line against which the Zen students measure their subsequent apprehension of transcendental reality is laid through the interaction with the teacher. Therefore the student turns to a Zen teacher as a source of confirmation by testing his or her perceptions against the knowledge possessed by the teacher. The Zen tradition views private encounters with the Zen master as an essential element of Zen training which provides the student with the opportunity for personal growth and spiritual awakening. Kapleau goes as far as saying that, 'Without this individual guidance we cannot say that our practice of zazen is authentic' (1965:50).

Conclusion

This chapter explained conversion to Zen by focusing on the interactional dynamics within the Zen groups in this study. The analysis incorporated both social-psychological and socio-linguistic approaches to conversion, and was based on the interaction between the findings and the theoretical assumptions of the study. The theoretical assumptions consist of:

- Individuals play an active role in the conversion process.
- The process of conversion is embedded in a web of social interaction and emerges out of a fluid dialectic between active agents and social context.

³⁸ In many Zen Buddhist sects completing the *koan* curriculum is a necessary, though not a sufficient, requirement of becoming a Zen teacher.

- Meaning is emergent and negotiated rather than given and intrinsic.

Conversion to Zen was conceptualised as a process of socialisation. Socialisation was defined as involving exposure to new meanings, responding back to the normatively relevant group and receiving feedback from them. The new meaning is internalised over time as a result of this process. The initial stages of conversion to Zen were conceptualised as playing the prescribed roles without subjective conviction or commitment, the individual adopts this as a strategy to cope with the demands of the group for compliance. If the individual decides to continue his or her involvement with the group, over time he or she is increasingly immersed in the local reality of the group and is exposed to its socialising efforts. The group, through its normative and evaluative functions offers the individual new interpretive schemes, the individual applies these to experience and responds back to the group. The group through its positive feedback fixes the new interpretations and meanings as real for the individual.

The above argument was applied to the three key aspects of conversion to Zen identified in this thesis. It was demonstrated that through interaction with the group, the individual learns to define as significant experiences such as mindfulness and the cultivation of witness consciousness, the self and mundane reality are redefined as essentially sacred, and the practitioners adopt an attitude of acceptance and surrender. The converts also learn to recognise certain experiences as spiritual insight and to relate these to the practice of *zazen*. Thus, the converts develop a conviction in Zen practice as a positive and efficacious activity. In Chapter Seven I will relate the findings of this chapter to the sociological theories of conversion.

Chapter seven

Conclusion

Discussions

This chapter will review the outcomes of this study and establish the significance of my findings for the sociological study of conversion. The central question of this study was to explain the process of conversion to Zen in the groups I studied. I organised the study around two fundamental issues relating to the conversion process. The first objective was to formulate a clear conceptualisation of conversion to Zen. The second objective was to arrive at a theoretical explanation of the process of conversion to Zen. Both these aims have been achieved

The review of literature in Chapter One revealed that both issues -- namely a definition of conversion and the process of conversion -- are subject to controversy among sociologists. There is disagreement about what constitutes conversion. I reviewed and assessed the key sociological definitions of conversion against the informants' accounts of their conversion experience and consequently defined conversion as a fundamental change in the convert's universe of discourse and self-concept. The substantive properties of conversion to Zen were elaborated in Chapter Four. The following three key changes emerged as a common descriptor of the changes which occur in conversion to Zen. Firstly, the informants perceived *zazen* as the most important aspect of Zen practice. *Zazen* was believed to be the means to attaining enlightenment and mindfulness. Secondly, the informants defined the self and mundane reality as essentially sacred. Thirdly, the informants rejected a goal driven attitude in general and in their practice in particular and came to value acceptance and mindfulness of what *is* as the goal of practice. Zen Buddhism offers a very specific

technology, namely *zazen*, which enable the practitioners to tune in to the minute details of their experiences, even the most mundane, and to redefine these as sacred. A reorientation based on surrender and acceptance emerges as a result of this.

The second objective of the thesis was to offer a theoretical explanation of the conversion process in Zen. In Chapter One the sociological theories of conversion were divided into two broad categories, passive and active theories. The passive theories of conversion are inapplicable as the theoretical basis for this study, because they focus on the question of *why* people convert, the focus of this study is *how* individuals convert. Furthermore, the passive theories do not adequately reflect the actual conversion process as indicated by the data, namely the negotiated character of change and the active role of converts throughout the conversion process. The active theories were reviewed and although they were found to vary in their degree of activism, they all explain conversion from the standpoint of agency and negotiation and are more consistent with actual conversions to Zen. The social network and role theories of conversion were found to be particularly relevant, both highlight crucial dynamics of the conversion process. However, neither was adequate as the sole theoretical basis for explaining conversion to Zen. Role theory successfully conceptualises active conversion but fails to accommodate subjective conviction. The social network approach correctly emphasises the significance of the religious group in conversion, but incorporates a passivist bias in accounting for conversion. Furthermore, neither approaches takes into account the role of the socio-cultural context in conversion to Zen.

This study has addressed all the above gaps which were identified in the review of sociological literature on conversion. Firstly, I have acknowledged the role of social and organisational factors in the conversion process without compromising the active role of the convert; hence avoiding the bias inherent in the passive theories of conversion. At the same time, I have offered a theory of conversion to Zen which can accommodate the active role of individuals in the conversion process as well as the crucial input of the reference group and significant others and which at the same time accounts for subjective conviction. Therefore, avoiding the shortfalls of the current expressions of social network and role theories of conversion. The reason role theory does not explain subjective commitment is

not because it is inherently inadequate to deal with fundamental changes that occur in conversion. Rather it is because role theoretic approaches to conversion have predominantly been used to explain the phenomenon of rapid conversion into, and disaffiliation, from the New Religious Movements. Therefore, the full potential of the role model theory has not been utilised. Similarly, the passivist bias in the social network theories of conversion can also be avoided if it is related to the symbolic interactionist expressions of reference group theory. I have applied both role theory and reference group theory to explain the phenomenon of conversion to Zen. I have achieved this by adopting the assumptions of the Blumer-Mead theory of symbolic interaction as the theoretical framework of this study. Theorising conversion to Zen was also guided by the interpretivist perspective, according to which the social world is an interpreted world, not a literal world, always under symbolic construction and deconstruction.

I have emphasised the role of symbols and the language of the Zen community in the socialisation process. Through socialisation into the perspective of the Zen group the individuals are taught the symbols of the group, and are also taught how to use these to interpret their subjective experiences. I agree with the assumptions of the narrative approach according to which social actors use language to realise meaning potential. At the same time, I have maintained that linking this use of the language to the process of socialisation enriches a narrow narrative approach. The narrative approach emphasises the role of *conversion narrative* and related processes such as reconstruction, codification, redefinition and metaphorical predication as the instrument of change in conversion. It argues that the individuals utilise these as tools to interpret, evaluate and amalgamate new symbols and meanings that the group offers. This study on the other hand has emphasised socialisation and reflected appraisal as the key aspects of the conversion process which facilitate the evaluation, interpretation and the amalgamation of new meaning offered by the religious community and tradition. The symbolic interactionist perspective provides concepts such as socialisation, role play, reflected appraisal, significant other and the dialectic between "I" and "Me", these have enabled a theoretical explanation of the process of conversion to Zen,

The second gap in the conversion literature which this study has addressed is that conversion is historically and culturally shaped and its structure depends upon specific

socio-cultural conditions, hence I included the socio-cultural context of Zen in my analysis of the conversion process. The inclusion of the socio-cultural context is particularly important given the tendency in conversion research to either psychologise the conversion process and confine it to the subjective factors within the individual, or limit it to organisational processes within the group. The inherent sociality of conversion has been a fundamental assumption of this study. I demonstrated that the socio-cultural context plays an important role in shaping the conversion process. The experimental and gradual character of spiritual search and the tentative and non-committal approach of Zen converts are related to the broader cultural conditions such as a consumerist approach to religiosity. The cultural trends also influence the cognitive orientation of the converts and hence the plausibility of the Zen belief system for the individual is also influenced. For instance, the distinction between experiential as opposed to intellectual knowledge and the appeal of the view of self as essentially sacred are both fundamental to the Zen belief system. These were related to broader cultural trajectories which emphasise expressive individualism.

In the light of the gaps in the conversion literature the present study has made three contributions to the study of conversion:

Firstly, I have conceptualised conversion and have offered a definition of conversion to Zen as involving the internalisation of the following three beliefs - the belief in the efficacy of meditation, the belief in the sacred essence of the self and mundane reality, and to value an attitude of surrender and acceptance.

Secondly, I have offered a theoretical account of conversion to Zen based on the symbolic interactionist perspective. According to the symbolic interactionist approach converts are contextual agents who actively engage in negotiating a new identity and new way of interpreting reality. I have incorporated elements of narrative analysis into a socialisation theory and have argued that through socialisation new meaning is offered by the religious group. This new meaning is applied to the experience, and is internalised over time as a result of the positive reaction of the significant others.

Thirdly, I have carried out the analysis of conversion to Zen at the socio-cultural level, and have demonstrated the relevance of the broader social conditions to the conversion process.

The present study has been limited by theoretical as well as practical constraints. At the theoretical level the present study has been informed by the theory of symbolic interaction. As I argued in Chapter Two, the theoretical perspective informs the epistemological and methodological assumptions of the research. Therefore, although the analysis of conversion to Zen has emerged out of an interaction between the theory and the data, it is likely that a researcher with a different set of underlying assumptions would view conversion to Zen differently. This has consequences for transferability and comparability criteria of validity in social research. At the level of practical limitations, the present study has been shaped by my involvement in Zen practice. Throughout the thesis I have maintained a reflexive approach and have referred to the constraints and possible distortions caused by my beliefs and involvement in Zen practice. The character of my sample is another limiting factor which needs to be acknowledged. Through studying converts, I am by definition dealing with the successful end-products of the conversion process. Thus, the question of how the majority of persons who were exposed to the same processes but failed to convert, cannot be answered, though it could be informed by this study. Furthermore, the sample was voluntary and although it offered a window into the conversion process I cannot generalise my findings to *all* Zen practitioners. Similarly, Zen groups vary in their style of practice, therefore, the results of this study are only valid for the groups that I have studied.

Several directions for future research are suggested. The current emphasis on either social-psychology or socio-linguistics in the study of conversion benefit from the interface of the socialisation and the narrative approach which I have used. The emphasis on symbols and language as well as the interactive exchange is fundamental to symbolic interactionism, this makes it a suitable framework for future studies which utilise the exchange between social-psychology and socio-linguistics. This research has suggested the utility of the concepts of role, socialisation, reference group and the language of the group as the primary vehicles

of change in conversion to Zen. One possibility is to find out the extent to which and the ways in which these concepts may be applied to explain radical personal transformation in different social and organisational settings. This research has established the importance of the socio-cultural context in personal transformation. A related direction for research is a comparative study of the meaning content of conversion to Zen for persons who were brought up in the Zen tradition, in different socio-cultural settings. Comparing the meaning of Zen for Australian converts and the Buddhists who are born into the tradition could lead to insight into the influence of cultural context on how Zen is defined. Durkheim's notion of the "cult of man" was briefly discussed in relation to the sacralisation of the self in Zen, this topic may be elaborated further and insights from Durkheim's position may be applied to the study of mystical or the New Age forms of spirituality which define the self in sacred terms, and the relationship of these spiritualities with the broader socio-cultural environment. The argument for the sociality of experience in general and the rejection of a dichotomy between pure experience and concepts has been explored in narrative analysis. However, the position of this study that concepts themselves are communal and embedded in social interaction opens up many areas to sociological investigation hitherto perceived as purely subjective.

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Glossary

Anicha - Impermanence, change. One of three characteristics of being in Buddhism

Bodhisattva - One whose life is dedicated to the service of others, it is the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism

Buddha - Enlightened one

Ch'an - Chinese term for Zen

Dharma - Law, phenomena, teaching

Dhyana - The yogic practice of attaining enlightenment through meditation.

Dojo - The meditation hall

Dokusan - To go alone; to work alone; the personal interview between Zen teacher and student

Gassho - To join the palms of hands in reverence or respect

Hinayana - Lesser Vehicle, the term for the Southern Buddhism of Sri Lanka, and South-east Asia

Jikijitsu - Head of training and timer of zazen period

Jisha - Head of logistical arrangements in the zendo

Jukai - Taking the Buddhist precept

Karma - Cause and effect; the world of cause and effect

Kensho - To see into true or essential nature; gnostic experience in Zen practice

Kinhin - Walking meditation; the formal walk between zazen periods

Koan - A paradoxical phrase which is the focus of meditation to be made clear and solved

Mahayana - Great Vehicle; the Northern Buddhism of China, Korea, and Japan

Nirvana - Extinction of craving, release from the cycle of life and death

Oryoki - Formal meal time rituals

Rakasu - A bib like piece of clothing worn by Zen Buddhists who have taken the Buddhist precepts

Rinzai - The Rinzai sect of Zen, emphasizing sudden awakening and using koans as the focus of practice

Roshi - The title used for the Zen teacher

Samadhi - Absorption, the quality of meditation

Sangha - Buddhist fellowship

Satori - The experience of enlightenment in Zen

Sesshin - To touch, receive, or convey the mind; the Zen retreat, usually seven days long

Shikan taza - "Just sitting"

Shoken - A student's first interview with the teacher.

Soto - The Soto Sect, de-emphasising a goal directed approach to Zen practice and using shikan-taza as the focus of practice

Sutra - A sermon of the Buddha

Tanto - The person in charge of monitoring the meditation hall

Teisho - The Zen teacher's dharma talk

Tenzo - The position of cook, often assigned to the more senior practitioners

Theravada - The Way of the Elders, Buddhism in South and South-east Asia

Tso-chan - Chinese term for *zazen*

Zabutan/Zafu - Meditation cushions

Zazen - Seated meditation, Zen meditation

Zazenkai - Zazen meeting, a lay Zen group

Zen - The Zen sect of Mahayana Buddhism, advocating a direct approach to enlightenment, transcending the intellect