

# Buddhist "conversion" and Christian mission: steps towards a respectful dialogue



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## Introduction

In their introduction to a recent book on mission to Buddhists, David Lim and Steven Spaulding talk of "[communicating] the gospel in culturally sensitive ways and with transformational impact" (Lim et al., 2005a). They go on to talk of "reaching Buddhists for Christ". Indeed two of their books have in the title "sharing Jesus" in the Buddhist world (Lim and Spaulding, 2005, Lim et al., 2005b). These are of course euphemisms for what has historically been called the desire to convert others. "Conversion" has been a commonly used word in Christian mission, particularly amongst evangelicals.

While not using the word "conversion" explicitly, Esther Baker has given us a conversion story in her book *I Once Was a Buddhist Nun* (2009). She uses phrases like "coming to know God", "I submitted willingly [to God]", and "[God rescued me]". (Baker, 2009: 142). These terms all fall within what has generally been regarded as Christian "conversion". When using the word "conversion", two issues present themselves: firstly "what is conversion"?, and secondly "how do people speak of 'conversion'"? It is tempting to impose this category onto those to whom Christians witness, or with whom they "share Jesus". Western Buddhism has been growing significantly since the 1960s particularly, and is widely represented in all Western countries (Prebish and Baumann, 2002). Drawing on empirical research, this paper explores Western Buddhists' own understanding of their so-called "conversion" into Buddhism, and then explores how Christians might re-tool their own expectations and language of mission in light of this.

I wish not so much to look at the technical etymology of the word "conversion" – how it might be defined technically – but how it is perceived by 23 Buddhist interviewees I studied between 2003 and 2008 as part of a post-graduate research project. The word "conversion" and "convert Buddhist" is used so widely and uncritically amongst the literature on Western Buddhism that it begs closer scrutiny (for example Wallace, 2002, 34). Yet my interviewees were decidedly uncomfortable with the word. By examining their understanding of their "conversion" into Buddhism, I wish to hold this as a mirror to those who wish to "share Jesus" with them.

## The problem of "conversion"

Two of the interviewees animatedly argued that "conversion" was not an appropriate word for "becoming Buddhist". Philip Jolliffe, who associates with Zen Buddhism, believed "conversion" was "inappropriate to use". He explained that "in a sense there's nothing to convert to. It's a practice in a religion, something with which you 'engage'". Clara Woodfield believed the word "conversion" was not the right word for what Tibetan Buddhists do: "[the

word is] too Christian". In this she was alluding to the sudden conversion of Saul of Tarsus as described in various places in Acts.

Several interviewees talked of the "taking refuge" ceremony in Buddhism. This is a ritual which is formalised to various degrees according to the tradition in which one "takes refuge". The ritual's core confession is "I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma; I take refuge in the Sangha". This is a ritual which is tempting to elevate as the confession with which one converts to Buddhism. It is used in some traditions to this end, and also as the ordination rite into the sangha. However, many of the interviewees refrained from emphasising a defined or sudden event or moment of conversion. Even those who clearly stated a point of identification – perhaps a "turning point" (Lofland and Stark in Hunt, 2003, 102) – did so as a point on a continuum of increasing interest in Buddhism.

This is especially so of Zen practitioners, where structurally there is an intensification of commitment in the way of formal ceremonies. Stephen Webster for example articulated the "point that I became a Buddhist" was in "becoming a student and taking precepts", both initiation steps within his sect of Zen Buddhism. Philip Jolliffe cautioned seeing "becoming a student" as an initiation rite, but preferred to view it as part of a process. Indeed, Tarchin Hearn, a Dharma Centre teacher, explained that taking refuge "is a life time process, rather than a mere ceremony". Hearn readily utilizes a refuge ceremony in his tradition – adding his own liturgical flurries – but emphasizes that refuge must continue to be taken as an ongoing practice and commitment.

Therefore "taking refuge" is not necessarily a conversion rite. Additionally, it is not uncommon for Western Buddhists to have taken refuge in several traditions, either consecutively or concurrently, indicating the rite's multifarious semantic potential. There is a utilitarian note to taking refuge: it may be often and with which ever teacher one wants, as long as it "strengthens your practice". In addition, taking refuge may not be so much an initiation as confirmation. This was the case for Jennifer Yule. In hindsight she believed that by the time she actually formally took refuge that "in my heart I had already taken refuge". There had been an implicit desire or commitment to the Buddhist path already: she had not formalised it. Therefore her "becoming a Buddhist" was gradual, and the formal ceremonies represented that which had already taken place. She herself did not regard taking refuge as only an entrance rite. Her daily personal meditation practice includes taking refuge every day. Yule believed this to be common practice amongst Buddhists throughout Asia: consequently she located her identity in something much bigger than herself.

Overall, the interviewees did not talk about conversion in any common way, nor did they allude to anything normative. Convert-Buddhists talked of their "conversion" in as many ways as there were individuals, it seems. Indeed the word "conversion", I propose, is problematic, both in the sense of sudden change (as may be inferred from the example of the apostle Paul, and the semantic of the Greek word *metanoia*), and in the means of talking about that change.

## **How Western Buddhists talk about becoming Buddhist**

For those interviewees who talked explicitly about “conversion”, only two were comfortable using it, but eight actively resisted it. Five interviewees talked of themselves “becoming a Buddhist” while eight resisted this phrase. Six were comfortable using “believe”, but nine explicitly resisted its use. Ten “chose” Buddhism, and five “resonated” with Buddhism. Six talked of “embracing”; five “took up”; fourteen used “connect” in some form. These verbs were not necessarily clearly linked to Buddhism per se: they were often used in conjunction with phrases such as “taking up meditation” or “engaging with the practice” or “embracing the dharma”. None articulated religious or spiritual change in any theological or doctrinal categories that were recognisable from either Christian or Buddhist vocabulary.

Nevertheless, what is clear is that the majority of interviewees, those both formally and informally interviewed, could identify a time when they were “not Buddhist” and a time in which they now “are Buddhist”. When pressed as to what they declare on the national census, they write “Buddhist”, thus conceding they are willing in part to identify themselves with some sort of imposed category. Amy Wright talked of this:

Wright: I put “Buddhist” for [census]. But I [did] it from a relative perspective: “yeah, I can say I’m a Buddhist”. But you know “Buddhist” is a Western term invented by Westerners to label Buddhism and make it fit in with other religions. The whole aim of practising the dharma is to not be “..ist” anything. Buddhists would say “I’m a follower of the dharma”.

Kemp: Is that what you [yourself] would say?

Wright: It depends on the situation. If I’m filling out a census form I put “Buddhist”. But “follower of the dharma” gets closer to it, because the “dharma” means “the law”, and that’s what I hope to do, is to be a vessel of the dharma, to live the dharma. Not to be a thing, a fixed thing, but to respond to causes and conditions in life, so I’m not wanting to define myself as an “-ist”.

This section of transcript illustrates the ambiguity that many feel about the restraints of the census. It also illustrates how interviewees may prefer not being described within prescribed categories.

### **“Taking up the practice”**

The most common way of talking about becoming Buddhist, or “converting” to Buddhism was in fact “taking up the practice”. Twenty seven interviewees, both formally and informally interviewed, explicitly spoke of their entry into the orbit of Buddhism as “taking up the practice” or something very similar. These interviewees either volunteered this terminology, or used it freely in their language. For example Charles Markham “began by doing practice”, and Stephen Webster “got serious about practice”. Robert Pierson “developed [his] own practice”. Clare Hardy “came to the practice” and decided to “make a lifetime commitment to practising Buddhism”.

This “taking up the practice” signifies a conversion experience. This experience was not something that happened to them: they remained actors in their own stories as they

made the choice to “take up the practice”. However, as David Yamane (2000) notes, “conversion experiences are often recognized as crucial to religious conversion” (2000, 185).

In other words, the action of interviewees in “taking up the practice” signifies an experience they had during their spiritual journey which was significant enough for them to note it as some sort of turning point, and hence motivated them in a process of self transformation and commitment to some aspects of Buddhism. Following Peter Stromberg (1993), I suggest that “it is through the use of language in the conversion narrative that the processes of increased commitment and self-transformation take place” (1993, xi). Even as interviewees told me their stories, and revealed the significance of the phrase “taking up the practice”, it reinforced, even created the very meaning of that transformation. Following Yamane (2000, 185), I suggest that the telling of experiences are made meaningful after the fact, that is in the telling and retelling of their story. In some sense, their “conversion” continues in the telling and retelling of their experience of “taking up the practice”.

This is evidenced by the interviewees freely talking of themselves and other Buddhists as “practitioners”, that is, those who practise Buddhism, or go on practising Buddhism, or, more commonly “practise the dharma”. Three Dharma teachers referred to their sangha as “practitioners” whom they urged on to the “practice” of things Buddhist. To test whether this was in fact a phrase characteristic of converts, I interviewed two recent Chinese immigrants at Fo Guang Shan in Auckland, New Zealand to gain a contrast, if any. Fo Guang Shan is the biggest Buddhist temple in New Zealand, covering some nine or so acres in the south eastern suburb of Howick. It is in the tradition of the Taiwanese-sourced Buddha Light International movement. These two immigrants also talked of having “taken up the practice of Buddhism” when they had personally appropriated their family’s religio-cultural heritage: one of these had “felt empty until I started to practise chanting and meditation”. In other words, in appropriating and internalising the Buddhism of their culture, they were “taking up the practice”. Could they also be regarded as “converts”, and hence challenge the notion of ethnic/convert categories (Tweed, 1999, Tweed, 2002)?

Indeed, when initially contacting Buddhist groups, I usually received an invitation to attend a meditation or chanting event. When visiting Fo Guang Shan, my hostess invited me to the meditation session for English speakers on Sunday. She wanted me to “experience the practice” of Buddhism, before giving me a tour of the site. To experience practice was more important than viewing the buildings, or even talking about Buddhism. When contacting the Mountains and Rivers Order – a Zen lineage – I was invited to a zazen, where my host first taught me “the practice of Zen”, that is, what I needed to do when and where in the zendo during zazen. In essence, I had been invited “to come and have a go” at it. In other words, Buddhism was something one did.

Doing Buddhist practice confirms Buddhists – at least the Buddhists I interviewed – as actors in their own life stories. Buddhism is something they begin to do. Thus the time when they were “not-Buddhist”, means they did not “practise” Buddhism. If they wrote “Buddhist” on a census, they prefer now to call themselves “practitioners”. Therefore “not-Buddhist” could be reframed as “not-a-practitioner” and “Buddhist” as “practitioner”. While it is easy to resort to the word “convert” to locate this transition, it is clearly a word with which they are uncomfortable, and at times actively resist.

What then do these practitioners “practise”? For the vast majority, it is simply meditation, and in particular, techniques of meditation informed by traditions that come from what is understood historically to be Buddhism. So, when visiting a Buddhist centre, I was warned not to disturb the monk who was “doing his practice”, that is, meditating. Likewise, in Zen, those who had “taken up the practice” had “begun to sit” regularly in meditation. Buddhist magazines and Dharma centre news-sheets regularly publish articles on “practice” and tips on “how to practise”.

However, “taking up the practice” is not limited solely to meditation: it can be nuanced differently as well. It refers to “practising the precepts” or “commitment to [a particular] tradition”. It may also imply a willingness to “take up chanting”, or to attend sangha events regularly. Intentionally conforming to ethical precepts was also regarded as a component of “taking up the practice”. Again, it is something one does: one is an actor in one’s own story.

### **Challenging Lewis Rambo’s process model of conversion (1993).**

Because “taking up the practice” is clearly the preferred way of conceptualising the movement from not-Buddhist to Buddhist, I propose that Lewis Rambo’s process model of religious conversion has limited use. The word “conversion” for Rambo means several things. Firstly, it may mean the change from the absence of belief or faith to a faith commitment. For example, from a secular understanding of the world, to an appreciation of the mystical. This is problematic for my interviewees, as only nine were willing to talk using the term “faith in ...” or “trust in...” a belief or philosophy, and three of these resisted the term altogether. In fact, most Buddhists claim that Buddhism is not a Faith (that is, a religious ideological system of thought or belief), and therefore when one “practises”, one does not necessarily have to change one’s Faith, that is, religion. Buddhism is about awakening to how things really are. Amy Wright for example declared that “you don’t have to abandon your Faith in order to practise Buddhism”.

Secondly, Lewis Rambo says conversion may mean change from affiliation from one religion, or “faith system”, to another (for example, from Hinduism to Christianity). All but four of the formal interviewees had had some sort of Christian upbringing, and so, according to Rambo’s scheme, they had clearly converted from Christianity to Buddhism. Rambo also defines conversion as change in orientation within a faith system (for example, from Methodism to Catholicism, or from Kagyu to Zen Buddhism). There is no evidence to suggest that my interviewees considered change between Buddhist traditions as religious conversion in any sense.

Thirdly, Rambo says that “conversion” can mean an intensification of an experience or commitment within a group: for example the taking of ethical vows or ordination into the priesthood. This “intensification” is clearly evident in the themes described above (for example in “taking refuge” rites), but I would be slow to name this as a “conversion”. Within their acknowledged terminology of “practice”, this would be better termed an “intensification of practice” or “a greater commitment to the outworking of the dharma” or a “desire to be of more use for the dharma”. These were all phrases used by the interviewees.

While some of the ideas in Rambo's scheme are helpful, as an overall framework it does not account for the ambiguities within the auto-narratives I elicited. This is not so much about Rambo's scheme being unusable in a generic sense, but that the language that Buddhists speak is considerably different to Rambo's. He constructed his model chiefly in a Christian context. If the interviewees say that "you don't have to change your religion to practise Buddhism" then the word "conversion" must surely be rejected outright. The interviewees acknowledge a change from not-Buddhist to Buddhist, but they allowed this only begrudgingly due to the necessity of declaring oneself as something on the census form. However, a move from "not-practitioner" to "practitioner" is widely accepted. Only after having been willing to identify oneself as a practitioner is it then possible to intensify the practice of one's Buddhism.

Yet we are caught on the horns of a dilemma. The fact that Buddhism has come to the West and "set up home" (Baumann, 1997, 204) and in so doing has bedded down in profoundly non-Buddhist cultures and polities, there must be by definition, some sort of entry process or rite, if for no other reason than the host Western context, steeped in the exclusivities of either monotheism or secularism, expects it. This dilemma is embodied in the comment of interviewee Jan Anderton who simply did not know how to become a Buddhist:

Kemp: So why don't you become a Buddhist? You just said you wanted to be one.

Anderton: Why don't I commit? [Long pause]. Don't know. Because I'm not sure if there's anyone... anyway of doing it down here [in my remote place where I live].

I suggest, informed by Rambo, to view conversion to Buddhism as essentially a sociological and psychological process, in which practitioners themselves define how and when they regard they have become Buddhist. They concede moving from not-Buddhist to Buddhist, and they are willing to talk of this as a story. They prefer, however, to articulate language around the word "practice". Rarely, if ever is the change from not-practitioner to practitioner a single event that the word "conversion" may conjure up (although it may well be ritualised in an event). Rather, it is a process, but not necessarily a causative chain of events. This progression has a context, and therefore is influenced by a web of relationships. Multiple factors are at play, and these factors are interactive and cumulative. Rambo concludes that conversion is "what a group or person says it is" (1993, xiv), yet offers a definition of conversion that is so broad it says little:

Conversion is paradoxical. It is elusive. It is inclusive. It destroys and it saves. Conversion is sudden and it is gradual. It is created totally by the action of God, and it is created totally by the actions of humans. Conversion is personal and communal, private and public. It is both passive and active. It is a retreat from the world. It is a resolution of conflict and an empowerment to go into the world and to confront, if not create, conflict. Conversion is an event and a process. It is an ending and a beginning. It is final and open-ended. Conversion leaves us devastated – and transformed (1993, 176).

John Lofland (1994) rightly critiques this "everything-is-sometimes-true" as "open-ended indeterminacy" (1994, 100). Ironically Rambo himself calls for conversion studies that address "the nature of conversion in the formation and transmission of religious traditions" (1993, 175), implying that he must concede some sort of formal categories into which one

can convert. In the case of my interviewees, no single group says conversion is anything in particular, and individuals decline the use of the word. Hence if “conversion” is declined both as a word and a concept, then we must reject all further talk of it vis-à-vis Buddhism in Western contexts. Thus the category of “convert Buddhist”, which is often found juxtaposed with “ethnic Buddhist” is put at risk. I conclude that “taking up the practice” and “becoming a practitioner” are more in line with the interviewees’ own understanding of both themselves and the process by which they journeyed from not-Buddhist to Buddhist. Hence I propose to reword the typology of Alan Wallace (2002), that the interviewees are “those who have a self-conscious sense of [moving towards, embracing and taking up the practice of] Buddhism and who thereafter refer to themselves not simply as having an interest in Buddhism or as studying Buddhism, but as being Buddhist” (2002, 34).

To become Buddhist – that is to be able to declare “Buddhist” (or one of the Buddhist sects) on a census form – one “takes up the practice”: this “practice” has various meanings, but more often than not simply means meditation. These actors are more than mere “sympathizers” (Tweed, 2002, Tweed, 1999) who graze on whatever Buddhist idea or ritual takes their fancy. The self as actor perceives that the practice of meditation will fulfil in some way their expressed psychological need. In this, they are willing to be identified as Buddhist.

### **Refuge in practice: re-linguaging the self**

I propose that these practitioners are in fact “taking refuge” in “taking up the practice”, that is they perceive that action is in itself a refuge. It is the action of meditation (primarily), with the intention of initiating “calm” (samatha) (Gethin, 1998, 104, 179, Williams, 2000, 81, Harvey, 1990, 246).

Massimo Leone (2004) conceptualizes a re-stabilization of the self after experiencing “vertigo” when the self had been destabilized. He concludes that “religious conversion is primarily a conversion of meanings, wherein the paradoxical constitution of a stable identity ... is possible only when the elements which compose a soul are rearranged in order to express a different language” (2004, 173). This is a semiotic understanding of religious conversion, and I propose, following Leone that “taking refuge” in “taking up the practice” can be understood as a conversion of meaning. The Buddhist practitioner has not so much converted his or her self, but has re-conceptualised and re-ordered the elements of the self so as to be able to interpret the self within and using a new and different worldview. This allows for the ambiguities expressed, even to the point of allowing oneself to identify concurrently with other religions. In other words, they can say “I do particularities. It doesn’t matter so much what I believe”. Or, to say it another way “I wish to story myself as a practitioner, not a believer”. Both negative and positive factors conspire together so that the actor (that is, the interviewee) perceives that in doing Buddhist practice – mainly meditation – that in some way personal or social negativities will be addressed and positive aspirations will be fulfilled. I propose that Western practitioners are attracted to a sequence of commitment: practice precedes belief.

### **Buddhist identity and the Gospel**

If a British Buddhist conceives him/herself primarily as a “practitioner”, what challenges might this throw up for Christians who wish to “share Jesus” with him/her, especially if one is concerned to do it in ways that are “culturally sensitive and with transformational impact” (Lim and Spaulding, 2005, vii). While no doubt there may be many, I wish to highlight only a few, then finish with a personal example.

British Buddhists are likely to have had some contact with the church, and are likely to have storied a negative response to it. It is common to find prejudice against the church: hence words like “conversion” are anathema; they are likely to know intimately so-called strategies of Christian mission and evangelism, and therefore resist any moves towards them that smack of a heresy-rationalist approach of evangelism (Johnson et al., 2004, Neumann, 2004).

Hence British Buddhists are likely to resist a presentation of propositional truth, especially if that truth draws on authorities they perceive as not relevant to them, like the Bible. This is not only because of the reason above – many are precisely converts out of Christianity because propositional truth claims (or at least the way they experienced them to have been presented) were deemed irrelevant – but also because they are not concerned as much with Faith, or Religion, of Truth, but with practice. All but four of my 27 interviewees – granted, interviewed in a non-British, but nevertheless Western context – had had some sort of Christian contact, experience or upbringing. Christians should not be surprised if belief follows practice. This, it could be argued, is possibly more a post-modern utilitarian phenomenon – “if it works and I find it helpful, I’ll use it” – rather than uniquely Buddhist per se, but nevertheless, Christians may serve their Buddhist friends better if they did religious things with them first.

This of course may be problematic to many a Christian. How does one actually do Buddhist things if one is a Christian? At what point might meditation, for example, become “too Buddhist” for comfort? Prostrating before a Buddha will probably compromise a Christian. Nevertheless, doing practice may well open the windows of conversation, I suggest. It may not be Buddhist practice, but Buddhists appreciate seeing Christians doing Christian things. It’s in the doing (rather than the believing) that a Buddhist appreciates that their Christian friend is serious in their Faith. Belief is not seen, but religious practice is: belief is trans-empirical, while practice is empirical.

Hence there is an implicit call in mission to Western Buddhists, that Christians be disciplined in their own routinized ritual. This may seem odd to some Christians, but it is second nature to others. Daily devotional “quiet time” is well embedded in evangelicalism. Ritual mass/eucharist happens every week in Catholic and many Anglican churches. Overlap in ethical commonalities offers contact points for involvement with Buddhists in service opportunities and or relief and aid projects. This means that Christians must have disciplined religious practices, and they must also have the skill and will to be able to speak about them. Conversations therefore can and should be about what one does before (or as much as) talking about what one believes. A Christian who seeks to relate to a Western Buddhist could open a conversation with “what do you do?” rather than “what do you believe?”, then “why do you do that?”, or “what benefits does that practice bring to you?” Comparing and contrast of practice can lead to many worthwhile conversations.

## **A personal story: working it out in practice**

I wish to finish by describing a personal story where I tried to apply what I've been discussing: as a Christian I sought to meet with a group of Buddhists and prioritise ritual practice. I took up an invitation by a local chapter of a Zen group to join them in zazen.

Knowing that I was a Christian, they explained in detail what to do and expect. In deference to me, they changed the Buddha image at the front of the zendo to a pile of round river rocks to represent the Buddha nature instead. They figured I'd be unlikely to want to prostrate to the Buddha, and the pile of stones was a less explicit substitute. I then "sat" with them in a 20 minute silent meditation, then 5 minutes of walking meditation, then another 20 minute silent meditation. My back and knees have never ached so much in my life!

I found the mode of practice remarkably refreshing. Silence had been missing for some time in my life; the simplicity of the Zen practice was not immediately threatening due to the simplicity of the zendo – there were no fierce deities looking down on me, as one might find in a Tibetan temple. I drew two lines: I did not prostrate to the three stones, and I did not "empty" my mind.

On completion, these Zen Buddhist practitioners related to me as if I'd passed some sort of initiation rite: "you're the first Christian we've met that has actually taken an interest in what we do, rather than trying to convert us". They invited me to stay on for lunch, which I did, and some robust yet gracious conversation emerged naturally over good food and in warm sunshine. Having "practised" with them, they were now curious as to know what my Christian practice was, and what might be common with them, or different to them. I was ready for the questions, and so I told them the things I did that facilitated my following Jesus. In other words I told them what my religious practice was. The conversation naturally ended up in questions of worldview, belief, and theology. And I stayed on to do the dishes with them.

While no one explicitly made a decision to follow Jesus, windows of trust were opened. Like Paul in Acts 17: 32, "some wanted to hear more on the subject", and I found myself with a group of new friends. It was these new Zen Buddhist friends – of the same culture, ethnicity and language as myself – who then invited me to a barbeque several weeks later. Because of the relationship we had built, the conversations moved to yet a deeper level. At the barbeque, some saw an irony: these new Zen Buddhist friends had welcomed a Christian to their Christmas barbeque.

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## **Biographical Details**

Dr. Hugh Kemp has broad experience of living amongst Buddhists. Having grown up in India and gone to school in Mussoorie, one of the hill stations where there is a large Tibetan community, he has come to understand something of Tibetan Buddhists' religion and culture. Additionally, he has lived in Mongolia, a Tibetan Buddhist nation, and then went on to complete a PhD in 2008 on Buddhism in the West. This was a sociological study, asking the question 'why do Westerners convert to Buddhism?'. Being a New Zealander, the field work was undertaken in New Zealand, but nonetheless, having lived now in the United Kingdom for two years, he believes there is much in common. Hugh is Academic Dean and Head of Mission Studies at Redcliffe College.

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