Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival

edited by

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Contents

Contributors 7

Preface 13

From Neo-Hasidism to Outreach Yeshivot: The Origins of the Movements of Renewal and Return to Tradition
Yaakov Ariel 17

Performing Kabbalah in the Jewish Renewal Movement
Chava Weissler 39

Self, Identity and Healing in the Ritual of Jewish Spiritual Renewal in Israel
Rachel Werczberger 75

The Contemporary Renaissance of Braslov Hasidism: Ritual, *Tiqqun* and Messianism
Zvi Mark 101

Towards the Study of the Spiritual-Mystical Renaissance in the Contemporary Ashkenazi Ḥaredi World in Israel
Jonathan Garb 117

Building a Sanctuary of the Heart: The Kabbalistic-Pietistic Teachings of Itamar Schwartz
Elliot R. Wolfson 141

The Boundaries of the Kabbalah: R. Yaakov Moshe Hillel and the Kabbalah in Jerusalem
Jonatan Meir 163

Kabbalah for the Gentiles: Diverse Souls and Universalism in Contemporary Kabbalah
Jody Myers 181

Toward a Social Psychology of Spirituality
Philip Wexler 213

Yoga and Kabbalah as World Religions? A Comparative Perspective on Globalization of Religious Resources
Véronique Altglas 233

Kabbalah in *Gnosis* Magazine (1985-1999)
Wouter J. Hanegraaff 251

Paganism: Negotiating between Esotericism and Animism under the Influence of Kabbalah
Graham Harvey 267

Radical Religious Zionism from the Collective to the Individual
Shlomo Fischer 285

Precursors to Postmodern Spirituality in Israeli Cultural Ethos
Tamar Katriel 311

Between Universalism and Relativism: The Acquiring of a Continuously Liberating Self by Buddha-Dhamma Israeli Practitioners
Joseph Loss 329

Contemporary Kabbalah and its Challenge to the Academic Study of Jewish Mysticism
Boaz Huss 357

Between Universalism and Relativism: The Acquiring of a Continuously Liberating Self by Buddha-Dhamma Israeli Practitioners

Joseph Loss

Introduction

Researchers of Buddhism in non-Buddhist cultures often point to their inability to obtain a precise measure of the number of Buddhists.[1] While governmental censuses may reveal the number of Buddhist Asian immigrants and their descendents, the case for "convert",[2] "white", "Western" or "new"[3] Buddhists in the same localities is far less evident. Not all of the non-Asian individuals who are involved in the practice and study of Buddhism, or who were significantly influenced by Buddhism, identify themselves as Buddhists, whether in census or in person. Yet, all these individuals and the groups they form embody the growing influence of Buddhism in non-Buddhist cultures and contribute to the way Buddhism is shaped and perceived in these contexts. This claim is not intended to underestimate the importance of Buddhist Asian immigrants in the shaping of Buddhism in the West,[4] but rather to highlight a derived question occupying several of the leading scholars of Buddhism in non-Buddhist cultures, namely, "who is a converted Buddhist"?

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1 For example, Robert Wuthnow and Wendy Cadge, "Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43.3 (2004): 364. Jan Nattier, "Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America", *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley, 1998), 183-95.

2 Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York, 1999).

3 James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (New York, 2001).

4 A heated debate between non-Asian Buddhists and Asian-American Buddhists took place during the 1990s regarding the ignored share of Buddhist immigrants in Buddhism in the West. See Ryo Imamura, "Buddhist and Western Psychotherapies: An Asian American Perspective", *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkley, 1998), 228-37.

A principal idea that is shared by all Buddhist traditions is the concept of *anata* (non-self) which may be interpreted as a total dismissal of an essentialist perception of all phenomena. Since it is often the case that contemporary academic scholars of Buddhism in non-Buddhist cultures are Buddhist practitioners themselves,[5] it is not surprising that Buddhist reasoning, and in this case the principle of *anata*, leaves traces in scholarly attempts to define the object of study, namely Western converts to Buddhism. Thus, universal objective definition is rejected and instead an extreme relativist approach is presented which, as I claim below, is not helpful analytically.

Based on an ethnographic study of Buddha-Dhamma (the Path of the Buddha)[6] practitioners in Israel, I suggest an alternative approach focusing on processes of becoming rather than on clear already existing objects. First I will present the theoretical problem through a selected survey of existing publications; as a second step I will draw upon a critical analysis of ritual studies to suggest a theoretical shift of the problem. Rather than asking who is X, which assumes essentialist answers, I suggest a different kind of question: How does one become X? In the last phase of the article, I intend to demonstrate an application of this shift with findings from my own study of the Israeli adoption of Buddha-Dhamma.

Unsuccessful Attempt to Escape Essentialism

A basic premise in any field of research is a clear definition of the object of research. While some researchers of Buddhism in non-Buddhist cultures conduct their study in unmistakable Buddhist locations,[7] others

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5 Charles S. Prebish, "Buddhist Studies in the Academy: History and Analysis", *Teaching Buddhism in the West: From the Wheel to the Web*, eds. Victor Sogen Hori, Richard P.Hayes, and Richard P. Shields (London, 2002), 17-36. A proper disclosure: I myself am a Dhamma practitioner as well.

6 Some local practitioners use the Pali term "Dhamma" while others use the Sanskrit term "Dharma". As a general term for the Israeli case at large, I use "Dhamma" since the Vipassana meditation originating in Theravada Buddhism which considers the Pali scriptures as authoritative is the most popular Dhamma practice in Israel.

7 For example, Sandra Bell, "Practice Makes Perfect – Symbolic Behaviour and Experience in Western Buddhism", *DISKUS* 2.2 (1994). Sandra Bell, "Change and Identity in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order", *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 17.2 (1996): 87-107. Sandra Bell, "Being Creative with

are grappling with the ontological query of how to define their non-Asian object of study. Since Charles Prebish explicitly phrased the question in 1979, there have been scholars who responded and generated an ongoing debate. Prebish presented the traditional Asian Buddhist answer which typifies a Buddhist as a person who both "took refuge in the three gems" (Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha)[8] and keeps the basic five precepts (no killing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, no stealing, and no use of intoxicants). However, the traditional characterization, claimed Prebish, is far from satisfactory for the American circumstances since most of the American groups do not implement both of the traditional criteria. Many non-Asians practice Buddhist meditation, or read Buddhist texts, or appreciate Buddhist thinking, values, ideas and teachers, and are influenced to a large extent by Buddhism without necessarily going through any formal ritual of conversion. Therefore, Prebish suggested that a reasonable way out of this conundrum is to rely upon a person's self-identification "when questioned about 'his most important pursuit'".[9] Twenty years later he still sees this as the best solution.[10]

In a similar fashion, Thomas Tweed criticizes several of the universal definitions of a Buddhist, such as a person who is regularly practicing meditation or who believes in the non-self doctrine or who is a member in a Buddhist organization. Tweed maintains that a converted identity is usually hybrid and stresses that "for our purposes as scholars, Buddhists are those who say they are".[11] Wendy Cadge accepts the

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Tradition: Rooting Theravaada Buddhism in Britain, *Journal of Global Buddhism* 1 (2000): 1-23. Lionel Obadia, "Une Tradition au Delà de la Modernité: l'Institutionnalisation du Bouddhisme Tibétain en France", *Recherches Sociologiques: Le Bouddhisme en Occident: Approches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques* 3 (2000): 67-88; Cristina Rocha, *Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity* (Hawaii, 2006).

8 Sangha in Pali means "community of practitioners". In the past this concept referred to the community of monks and nuns only. Today, some extend the application of the concept to include both monks and non-monks.

9 Charles S. Prebish, *American Buddhism* (Massachusetts, 1979), 187-88.

10 Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America,* (Berkley, Los Angeles, and London, 1999), 53-6.

11 Thomas A. Tweed, "Who is A Buddhist? Night Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures", *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann *(*Berkeley, 2002), 24.

self-identification thesis and defines four categories of self-identification of Western practitioners.[12] The advantage of this approach is its flexibility. It equally values various inclusion/exclusion criteria that are used by the diverse organizations. Additionally, it enables the inclusion of different aims and varied self images. Nevertheless, as much as such a solution wishes to escape universal definitions, it falls back on it, assuming that all organizations indeed apply clear inclusion and exclusion criteria and that all practitioners understand and accept these criteria in a standard fashion. Jan Nattier also shuns universal definitions finding them too exclusive; however, she doesn't accept Prebish's and Tweed's grim conclusions. She rejects the self-identification approach on the grounds that it is too inclusive.[13] Peter Gregory raises similar concerns.[14] Still, neither Nattier nor Gregory seems to offer an alternative.

All the abovementioned researchers are in agreement in criticizing the so called objective reasoning and universal categories. Yet, the self-identification solution is an extreme relativist position which blurs the subject of study rather than making it clearer. Instead of a different answer, it is a different question that should be asked. Once a better query is formulated one may work towards various possible answers. Angie Danyluk, who studied Canadian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in Toronto, shows that even though most of her respondents (25 out of 30) self-identify as Buddhists, their self-identification is rather ambiguous, unstable, open-ended, processual and situated. Therefore, she offers an alternative track by arguing that we need to abandon the question "who is a Buddhist", but rather ask: "What does it mean to be a Buddhist".[15] Her approach starts off with self-identification and moves beyond it. She assumes, correctly to my mind, that in various contexts the same self-identification might have different meanings for the subjects themselves while they negotiate their identity

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12 Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America,* (Chicago and London, 2005), 166-69.

13 Nattier, "Who is a Buddhist".

14 Peter N. Gregory, "Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America", *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11.2 (2001): 237.

15 Angie Danyluk, "To Be or Not To Be: Buddhist Selves in Toronto", *Contemporary Buddhism* 4.2 (2003): 127-41.

with the surrounding culture at a particular historical time. In this article I present a second viable approach which I will demonstrate by using the Israeli case.

Emphasizing Process Rather than Essence

I draw on Catherine Bell's post-structural criticism of ritual theories to develop a second possible research track which escapes both the essentialist and the extreme relativist approaches.[16] Bell classifies ritual theories into two categories. One includes the theories which conceive of ritual as a natural human activity set apart from daily life. The second category stresses the symbolic aspects of any action. The first views ritual, as a noun, as an object in cultural reality, whereas the second considers it as an adjective which describes a specific aspect of any activity, secular as well as religious, routine as well as unique.

The move from noun to adjective in ritual studies solved the problem of essentialism including the hierarchies which are often involved. Stressing the symbolic communicational aspect of behavior enabled a wider application of the concept of ritual that was once used for non-Western contexts only, to include both Western societies and animal behavior. But, the ironic result of the universally widening of the concept's relevance undermines the actual existence of the phenomenon called ritual. If a ritualistic aspect can be found in any daily activity, how can one distinguish a ritual from a non-ritual?[17] As a way out of this theoretical dead-end, Bell suggests that instead of looking for a universal definition of ritual and endlessly creating additional sub-distinctions, and 'clean' the data, we better shift our attention to processes of ritualization, namely ask how and under which conditions a certain practice is considered a ritual.

In a similar fashion, I assert that if according to the extreme relativist self-identification approach everybody can claim to be a Buddhist it is unclear what Buddhism is, and it is impossible to distinguish between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist. Or from the other essentialist end, if we agree on a clear universal definition for Buddhism and on a series of criteria for being a Buddhist, the question remains as to how should

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16 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford, 1992).

17 Ibid, 72-74.

we consider all those who claim to be Buddhists or were greatly influenced by Buddhism, but do not fit into the definition? Therefore, I suggest that instead of annihilating analytical categories, creating endless lists of sub-categories (for example, converts and sympathizers, night-stand Buddhists, Dharma hoppers, adherents and non-adherents), and ignoring data which do not fit into the predetermined categories, we better inquire how one becomes a Buddhist in specific cultural settings. This re-framing puts aside ontological questions regarding permanent clear-cut entities for the sake of interest in situated processes. It abandons essentialist points of view, yet it does not neglect the act of defining. It leads to the putting together of a clear definition which is context dependent, rather than seek a universal definition.

Still, there is one important difference between my approach and Bell's. Bell establishes her definition of the concept of ritualization on the Foucauldian notion of relationship of power as "a mode of action that does not intend to act directly on persons or things, which is what violence does, but indirectly on actions".[18] Therefore, she defines ritualization as "a strategy for the construction of a limited and limiting power relationship",[19] and as "a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities",[20] and also as "a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations".[21] Consequently, Bell's general theory of ritualization of activity states that "some activities are performed in culturally relevant ways to generate the perception that these activities are both intrinsically different from other acts and privileged in their significance and ramifications".[22]

What I take from Bell's critical analysis is the emphasis on the process rather than the essence. Unlike Bell, I don't emphasize here questions of power and its social dynamics. I prefer to concentrate on the narratives of significant experiences of my subjects of study. It is

18 Ibid, 199.
19 Ibid, 8.
20 Ibid, 74.
21 Ibid, 197.
22 Ibid, 219.

not because I reject or underestimate the analytic importance of Foucault's idea of power. Rather than focusing on institutions, I believe that a clear and careful analysis of the minute ways human beings remember and tell their significant experiences to themselves and to others, should be a necessary preliminary phase upon which the understanding of the social operation of power may be articulated. This preliminary step is the subject of the present article.

Similar to Bell, Robert Sharf is also focused on questions of power. In several articles he criticizes sharply researchers who emphasize and analyze meditative experiences.[23] He maintains that the roots of this rhetoric in modern Buddhism lies in Asian protective response to Western colonialism during the nineteenth century.[24] Although I accept Sharf's historical analysis, I do not succumb to his complete rejection of the research of experience in religious studies at large, and especially in the field I studied, namely the adoption of Buddha-Dhamma in non-Buddhist contexts. There are several apparent differences between nineteenth century Asia under colonialism and contemporary non-Buddhist contexts in the global information age. Also, while Sharf focuses on historical accounts of one type of a universal experience called *nibbana* (the complete liberation), my project is based on varied experiences told to me by living people. Most important, Sharf's main argument rest on a distinction between experience and the rhetoric of experience and argues that the category of experience is essentially

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23 Robert H. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience", *Numen* 42 (1995): 228-81; Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism", *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald Lopez (Chicago and London, 1995), 107-60; Robert H. Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion", *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7.11-12 (2000): 267-87; Robert H. Sharf, "Experience", *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Marc Taylor (Chicago, 1998), 94-116.

24 Janet Gyatso concurs with Sharf's point in general. However, contrary to Sharf's argument, Gyatso shows that the concept of experience has roots in Tibetan Buddhism long before Western colonialism. Janet Gyatso, "Healing Burns with Fire: The Facilitations of Experience in Tibetan Buddhism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67.1 (1999): 113-47. Also, Richard Gombrich argues that experience is at the heart of all religions. Richard F. Gombrich, "Religious Experience in Early Buddhism?" *Religion: Empirical Studies*, ed. Steven J. Sutcliffe (Aldershot, 2004), 123-47. Gombrich has no doubt that the Buddha emphasized experience. Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings.* (London, 1996), 28.

amenable to ideological appropriation and therefore "it is a mistake to approach literary, artistic, or ritual representations as if they referred back to something other than themselves".[25] Sharf calls researchers to focus on the rhetoric of experience and to neglect the demand of the subjects of study to treat their experiences seriously. The words of Thomas Csordas may be used as an anthropological counter argument:

> This position presumes an unbridgeable gulf between language and experience, and is predicated on the notion that language can only be about itself – doubtless a hyper-Foucauldian exaggeration. On the contrary, language is not only a form of observable behavior, but a medium of intersubjectivity, so that it is fair to say that language gives us authentic access to experience.[26]

If indeed all one can say on the Israeli adoption of Buddha-Dhamma is that practitioners use the rhetoric of experience as a protective measure, one remains perplexed regarding the more important question as to why they bothered to adopt Buddha-Dhamma in the first place.

The links between any experience and the words that might claim to be its valid description are never single and permanent but always fluid, uncertain, unstable, fuzzy, and multifaceted. However, these links do exist, and it is the challenge of the researcher to offer a viable interpretation of them. What Clifford Geertz wrote regarding anthropological work in an earlier period and in a different context seems to be relevant here as well: "It is not against a body of uninterrupted data … that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers".[27] Such explication may be based also on negotiation with other forms of knowledge, since the anthropological method allows and even demands that the researcher gathers information in every possible form, including the anthropologist's own experiences (which he expresses in writing).[28]

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25 Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience", 286.

26 Thomas J. Csordas, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkley, Los Angeles and London, 1994), xii.

27 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation Of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 16.

28 Edith Turner, *Experiencing Ritual: a New Interpretation of African Healing*

Contrary to Sharf, I stress that there is no inherent contradiction between the claim that the rhetoric is used ideologically and the argument that the experiences themselves are central in understanding the adoption and localization of Buddha-Dhamma. In fact, the experiences become ideological tools exactly because they were significant, at least for the practitioners. If the experiences related by the practitioners had no weight in reality, how can they assume social power? The power of the rhetoric of experience for the practitioners is necessarily correlated with the actuality of their experiences.

During my time in the field I encountered several Buddha-Dhamma practitioners that shared Sharf's view on the conflict between narrating an experience and the experience itself but in a reverse way. While Sharf held this position in the name of discourse while neglecting experience, they justified it in the name of experience while underestimating language. But ironically, these practitioners were the ones that used the rhetoric of experience ideologically. Though such instances can be described in more detail and lead to interesting conclusions, they tell us nothing of how and why the rhetoric of experience took on social power.

Other practitioners, whom I met often, did not maintain the position that language and experience exclude each other. Reasonably, they argued that an experience can not be exhausted by a conversation, but nevertheless similar to conventional daily practice of sharing experiences with others, they told me of their experiences. More so, ideas, concepts, and interpretations are central means in Buddha-Dhamma practice to stimulate experiences in the three associations I studied. The stories of these practitioners allow me to draw the concept of experience from the realm of vagueness and mystification and to introduce to it concrete meaning.

The Israeli Case as a Paradigmatic Case

While Buddhism first came to the Western countries in the nineteenth century, mainly through immigration, and global forms of Buddhism

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(Philadelphia, 1992); Thomas J. Csordas, "Somatic Modes of Attention", *Cultural Anthropology* 8.2 (1993): 135-156; David E. Young and Jean-Guy Goulet, *Being Changed: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience* (New York, 1994), 19-20.

have been flourishing dramatically in the West since the 1970s due to immigration and conversion,[29] in Israel it has naturalized in distinctive forms only during the last twenty years, through the practice of Jewish-Israelis. Several local branches of global organizations have been established during the last two decades with the scope of their activity steadily increasing. The figures for 2005, the last year in which the research was carried out, show that roughly 6,000 Israeli practitioners, mostly Jewish,[30] had adopted Buddha-Dhamma in meaningful ways, and nearly twenty established organizations, centers, groups and teachers were active.

This article is based on multi-sited anthropological fieldwork carried out sporadically during 2001-2002 and intensively between October 2003 and February 2005 among the three largest Buddha-Dhamma organizations in Israel. Two of them – Israel Vipassana Trust[31] and Tovana[32] – in the main follow Theravada practices and teach *Vipassana* meditation which is the most popular Buddha-Dhamma practice in Israel. The third – Dharma Friends of Israel[33] – features Tibetan Buddhism. The three local organizations are part of parallel global networks. The Trust is the local node of the internationally growing network of S. N. Goenka students' associations.[34] Tovana has a certain affinity with the loose network of Western centers and teachers, such as the Insight Meditation Society in the United States and Gaya House in Britain;[35] the Dharma Friends have an ideological affinity with the

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29 Martin Baumann, "The Dharma has Come West: A Survey of Recent Studies and Sources", *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4 (1997): 194-211; idem, "Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective", *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001): 1-43.

30 During my field work I encountered a few Christians, one Druze, and one Muslim who took part in courses. The majority, however, were Jews.

31 http://www.il.dhamma.org, accessed 27 January 2010.

32 http://www.tovana.org.il, accessed 27 January 2010.

33 http://www.dharma.org.il, accessed 27 January 2010.

34 Goenka is a former Burmese businessman of Indian descent who became a Vipassana teacher, and is a major figure in the global spread of Vipassana meditation.

35 Gil Fronsdal, "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness", *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkley, Los Angeles, and London, 1998), 163-80.

Foundation for the Preservation of Mahayana Tradition, which is an international association of more than 130 centers of Tibetan Buddhism worldwide, with monasteries, clinics, hospices and prison programs.[36]

The Israeli case of Buddha-Dhamma practice reinforces Prebish's dismissal of the traditional double criteria (of taking refuge and keeping the five precepts) since in this case they draw too broad boundaries. In the Israeli Buddha-Dhamma scene the foremost undertaking of these commitments is made collectively at the beginning of each of the courses organized by the three organizations, and is valid for the time of the course only. The participants are encouraged to observe the precepts in their daily lives, which some do. Yet the large majority observes them only partially, or not at all. As a matter of fact many of the participants attend no more than one course and do not continue practicing afterwards. Only in rare events organized by the Dharma Friends, do these two practices take the form of a conversion ritual but even in these rituals, some of the practitioners take on themselves only four or less precepts according to their individual preferences.

Furthermore, applying the self-identification approach to the Israeli case proves too exclusive, since almost all of the Israeli Buddha-Dhamma practitioners do not identify themselves as Buddhists.[37] To put it more bluntly, a study of self-identified Buddhists in Israel is almost a study of a non-existent phenomenon. Since I wish to remain close to the practitioners' point of view, I use the designator "Dhamma practitioners" rather than "Buddhists". Yet, the need for a theoretical shift remains, namely instead of asking who is a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner, I would ask how does a person in contemporary Israel become a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner?

The Dhamma Course

To begin tackling this question we need to recognize that the focus of the activity of the three organizations, the main rationale for their existence, and accordingly the principle medium through which the

36 Glenys Eddy, "A Strand of Contemporary Tantra: Its Discourse and Practice in the FPMT", *Journal of Global Buddhism* 8 (2007): 81-106.

37 Joseph Loss, "Explicit Non-Religious and Implicit Non-Secular Localization of Religion: Buddha-Dhamma in Israel", *Nova Religio* 13.4 (2010): 84-105.

Buddha-Dhamma is currently localized in Israel, is what I will generally call "Dhamma courses".[38] Therefore, we should focus on the course to work out the process of becoming a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner. A Dhamma course is an event that takes place in a secluded site in the countryside to which a few dozen men and women withdraw for a period of several days or more. During the course they study Buddha-Dhamma and train in meditation within the framework of a well-planned program under the guidance and supervision of experienced teachers.

Most of these courses are characterized by avoidance, silence, non-action, and long periods of meditation. The participants are instructed not to engage in any kind of communication with other participants nor with the outside world beyond the limits of the course. Although communication can take place even without direct verbal or physical contact, such an environment functions as a basis for empowering inward concentration and protected solitude. The rule of no-communication is mostly adhered to by participants in Vipassana courses. Keeping this rule creates an autonomous protected space around each of the participants which follows him or her wherever they go. Thus, the autonomous space of each participant is protected not only by the participant but also by the rest of the group. If one penetrates, unintentionally, the autonomous space of another, even in the most insignificant manner of getting too close in the walkway of the course site, the autonomous spaces of both participants are interrupted simultaneously. Thus, one's concern regarding protecting one's autonomous space is tightly entangled with the concern of protecting the space of others.[39]

Formal meditation sessions fill most of the activity hours in Vipassana courses. Out of 17.5 activity hours during each day of a course of the Vipassana Trust, 10.5 are dedicated to sitting meditation; in Tovana courses, out of 15.5 activity hours, the participants meditate while sitting and walking alternately for 9.5 hours each day. The

38 While the Vipassana associations call their main activities "Vipassana courses", Dharma Friends mainly use the term "retreat".

39 Only few practitioners experienced a "self-retreat" which takes place in complete solitude and with no teacher. In these cases they were the sole protectors of their autonomous space.

instructions given during the meditation sessions develop from day to day in the courses of both Vipassana associations. Although the instructions differ between the two associations in terms of objects and modes of attention, they share a basic and critical common feature. The instructions repeatedly direct the attention of the meditator to the experience of the present moment. Goenka focuses exclusively on the body as a meditative object, whereas Tovana teachers include also thoughts, feelings and the perception of the other senses as legitimate objects of meditation. While Goenka guides the meditators to 'scan' their body with their attention in a fixed and standard way while keeping high level of discipline facing disturbances like pain or noise, Tovana teachers do not demand rigid order of moving the attention and allow for a more open and flexible practice. Tovana's practice may follow spontaneously the dominant internal processes and occasionally direct the attention to the subject's response to these processes. The continuous paying attention to a momentary sensory or mental experience contributes to the fragmentation of familiar experiences into numerous momentary elements and to disassembling of habitual perceptions in unexpected ways. Also, it creates a split within the self between the meditator as subject and her or his experience as object. At the end of the courses of both associations the participants are instructed to practice a different kind of meditation – *Metta* ("loving kindness"). The meditators are instructed to conceive of greetings and wishes for themselves as well as for others. If so far the meditation was based mainly on bodily experiences, during the Metta sessions it is based on verbal imagination.

Two sets of concepts which are taught during Dhamma courses are worth mentioning here. All types of Vipassana meditation and Vipassana courses are aimed to demonstrate these concepts experientially. The first set is named "The Three Characteristics of Existence". *Anicca* in the Pali language is the first concept and it points out the relentless change of all phenomena. The next concept *anatta* means non-self and it indicates the lack of permanent, stable, and separate nature of all phenomena. While these two principles are ontological and thus are unchanged, the third mark of existence is epistemological. It is called *dukkha* and it refers to the idea that any phenomenon necessarily

contains some degree of dissatisfaction or at least a potential for dissatisfaction.[40]

The second set of concepts is named "The Four Noble Truths". *Dukkha* is the first Truth and the second Truth is *tanha* which means thirst. It locates the source of any kind of *dukkha* in the attitudes of desire or attachment. The Buddhist analysis sees at the root of *dukkha* a perception of the self as essential, permanent, autonomous, and separated from others. This perception is considered in Buddhist thought to be an illusion. The third principle states that there is a way to liberate oneself from *dukkha* and the fourth portrays an eightfold path which leads to *nibbana*. In each of the eight components of the path the practitioner is expected to recognize and choose "the Middle Way", namely to avoid the expectation of full satisfaction on the one hand and the attitude of asceticism on the other. These four principles are to be enacted by the practitioner. He or she needs to get to know *dukkha*, to give up the source of *dukkha*, namely the essentially false self-perception, to believe in the potential of liberation from *dukkha*, and to practice the way out of it. At the heart of these four principles rests the wish to liberate oneself from the self-produced dissatisfaction.

From One Course to Many

The most popular Dhamma courses in Israel are those conducted by the Vipassana Trust. They are an extreme case of repetition since they are based mainly on uniform audio recorded meditation instructions and video recorded Dhamma Talks played in all the courses by all the parallel associations following Goenka's teachings worldwide.[41] Additionally, they are managed according to a universally obligatory and detailed protocol. What differs one course from another in regards with the perspective of a single practitioner is more than anything else the practitioner's own state of mind. Compared to the Vipassana Trust's courses, Tovana's Vipassana courses are slightly less uniform. Similar

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40 Mistranslation of this principle to "life is suffering" contributed to the misrepresentation of Buddhism as a pessimistic tradition. See Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge, 1998), 140; Gombrich, "Religious Experience", 130.

41 In meditation centers outside of India, Goenka's voice speaks English followed by a translation into the native tongue.

to the Trust's courses, the daily schedule in Tovana's courses is the same for all the days of the course. The meditation practiced in both courses is minimalist and repetitive. However, the sites where Tovana's courses take place are varied and the style and attitude of the guidance depend upon the preferences of the teachers which are present on site. The Dharma Friends retreats are in several aspects more diverse than the repetitive Vipassana courses. For instance, the daily schedule in a Dharma Friends retreat often changes from one day to another. However, after taking part in several Dharma Friends retreats, one begins to sense some degree of repetition. Therefore, the fact that people return for additional courses, especially in the case of Vipassana courses, begs an explanation. Henceforth, I will focus mainly on Vipassana courses because of two reasons: first, they are definitely the most popular Dhamma courses in Israel;[42] second, Vipassana courses constitute a clearer divide between the motivation to participate in the first course and the motivation to participate in subsequent courses.

The transcribed interviews with the practitioners reveal a basic difference between the initial factors, which drew them to their first Vipassana course and the motives that drove them to take additional Dhamma courses. The initial factors range from curiosity and interest through exotic attraction to what is 'Eastern', all the way to a search for an efficient way to deal with various problems. Practitioners told me of recommendations they had received from a friend, a family relative or a stranger they met during their travels in Asia. Nevertheless, when explaining their recurrent attendance at Dhamma courses, all speak of meaningful experiences and emphasize the experiential level of the course and the practice. Going to the first course always involves ignorance regarding what it means and how it feels to participate in such an event. It differs so greatly from the daily lives of middle class Jewish-Israelis[43] that they can hardly imagine the experience

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42 Dharma Friends Israel infrequently conducts Vipassana courses as well, and during my field work a forth Dhamma association (Newman, http://www.metta.org.il/, accessed 6 April 2010) was established to facilitate Vipassana practice in the tradition of Thai forest monks.

43 The Dhamma practitioners from among middle class Jewish-Israelis form a higher percentage than their share in the larger Israeli-Jewish population. See Loss, "Explicit Non-Religious".

even when given the full available information about the course beforehand. Therefore deciding to participate in a consequent (second, third, fourth …) course is an entirely different issue from deciding to take part in the first. It is no longer based on the recommendations of others, but rather on the way one understood and felt the effects of the first course. Thus, an important distinction divides the participants in Vipassana courses into two groups – those taking only one course and those who return for additional courses.[44] In my study I was interested in the second group of participants since they play a crucial role in the naturalization of Buddha-Dhamma in Israel[45] and represent the operative definition of a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner.

Therefore, in the interviews I asked the practitioners to tell me in a detailed manner about their most significant experiences in the courses or as a result of the courses. The open question allowed two filters. First, the interviewees had to decide themselves which of their experiences seemed to them the most significant. And second, necessarily they narrated the experiences they remembered. My assumption is that the way the experiences are remembered and the way they are told to me and to themselves constitute the basis of the lasting influence of Buddha-Dhamma practice on their daily lives and make up the main reason they continue practicing in courses and in daily life. I did not ask to learn about their first course. However, the interviewees who related to experiences in Vipassana courses often talked of their first course as the source of their most significant experiences.

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44 This distinction is different from the distinction between new and old students operated by the Vipassana Trust. Initially, a "new student" is a person who is participating for the first time in a course by the Israel Vipassana Trust or by any of its sister associations in other countries. Once the course is over, the "new student" becomes an "old student", even if he or she will never return to another Dhamma course. Also, a possibility of downgrading back to a "new student" exists if the student has taken part in a Dhamma course guided by teachers who were not authorized by Goenka, and then asks to participate in another Vipassana course guided by a Goenka teacher.

45 This does not gainsay the part of the one-time-goers in the absorption of Dhamma in the Israeli culture. Yet, their role is minor, limited and indirect. They take part in financing the courses and in spreading the word in growing circles. Also, their effect can be sensed indirectly in the way the more devoted practitioners running the organizations perceive the non-practitioner population which constitutes the pool of possible new participants.

Going through these experiences is in fact the process of becoming a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner, namely one who takes part every now and then in another Dhamma course. If such a transformative event does not happen in their first Vipassana course, the chances they will return for an additional Vipassana course are slim. Because the Dharma Friends retreats are less repetitive, it is more likely that participants might take part in additional retreats even without such a dramatic experience in their first retreat, allowing for it to take place later on. An additional difference is that the experiences occurring in Vipassana courses have a crucial physical quality, while experiences in Dharma Friends retreats are often connected mainly to verbally articulated ideas.

These experiences include an unexpected moment of liberation. For instance, my own experience in my first Vipassana course by Tovana, which marked the opening of my intensive fieldwork, after few years of practicing Tibetan Buddhism, was related to a physical pain in my back that had troubled me for years and limited my movement. Prior to the turning moment of the elimination of this pain during the course, I had had no doubt in my mind that the cause of the pain was purely physical. The thought that Vipassana meditation or any mental practice might be useful regarding this pain had never crossed my mind. Stories of experiences of skilled Vipassana practitioners hinted that this un-preparedness is crucial for the effectiveness of the Vipassana practice in general. In addition, these significant experiences often include encountering a feeling of loss of control, moments of disassembling of the participants' perceptions, of simultaneous articulating of a problem and its solution, and of viewing the liberating experience as a simulation of many other experiences. However, these stories have no trace of mystical, magical, enchanted, or exotic aura. They all deal with mundane, almost boring, issues.

An endless number of experiences may take shape during Dhamma courses or as a result of them. In my Ph.D. dissertation I analyzed nine stories of experiences from Vipassana courses and eleven from Tibetan Buddhism retreats.[46] These accounts vary in length and represent various

46 Joseph Loss, *Universal Experiences in Israel: On Local Modes of Adoption of the Global Path of the Buddha* (Hebrew; Ph.D. thesis, University of Haifa, 2007).

aspects of the process of becoming a contemporary Israeli Buddha-Dhamma practitioner. They do not comprise a representing survey but rather a set of examples hinting at the richness of the possible experiences on the one hand and at some recurrent aspects on the other. For the purpose of this article I introduce below one vivid example of an initial experience of a practitioner in her first Vipassana course, since it clearly reflects various commonly recurring aspects in the stories of experiences of the transformative type.

Einat – The Sprouts Syndrome

Einat is in her mid thirties, after several years of art study abroad. She may be described as energetic and assertive. I interviewed her on one Friday afternoon in June 2004 at her home located in a village where she was born, close to the urban center of the country. Einat is one of the veteran Israeli Buddha-Dhamma activists who initiated the first courses which led to the formation of Dharma Friends of Israel. She took part in Buddhist classes in Dharmasala, India, given by Tibetan monks but was unsuccessful, according to her evidence, in carrying out Tibetan meditation instructions. Only when she took part in a Vipassana meditation course she felt that she succeeded in meditating and experienced "one of the most important events of my life". This course took place in one of Goenka's centers in India. Since then she has participated in additional courses of the Tibetan tradition as well as of the Goenka School in India, Israel, England and Ireland.

During the interview we discussed the issue of food that is being served to participants in the various courses. While in the courses by Tovana and by Dharma Friends there is plenty of food that is served three times a day, in the courses by Goenka the amounts of food are limited and some participants even feel hunger as Goenka's management protocol prescribes serving food only twice a day. "New students" receive some fruit for dinner and "old students" are allowed only to drink. Yet, each local branch of the Goenka School is free to decide on the breakfast and lunch menus. According to Einat's evidence, the participants in courses by Goenka in Israel receive larger amounts of food compared to parallel courses in India.

Einat: I am very, very familiar with this thing people experience [due to the small amounts of food] … I always knew that I eat a lot, but never thought that it was an issue.

Joseph: So, how is it that you are so thin if you eat a lot, or did you lose weight?

Einat: You know about *karma*, and this is *karma* … [My elder sister] 'hated' my younger sister and myself when it came to this. She almost ate nothing. She really ate so little … I ate a lot and did not gain weight … The army didn't want to recruit me because I was so thin… They gave me three months to gain three kilos[47] … This is the sprouts symptom … I arrived on the first day to do the Vipassana. The meditation began at four thirty [AM] ... I get to the dining hall [after the morning meditation ended at 6:30], now, it is not that I was such a great meditator. On the contrary, I couldn't sit, but somehow it turned out that I stayed in the [meditation] hall a couple of minutes longer, and there was this long line for breakfast. There [in India] they hand out the portions. I am telling you: spoonfuls. They actually put the food on your plate. And I came and saw that everybody got sprouts but myself. I did not get sprouts. I really got upset. Never mind, I said. The next morning, half of my meditation period I am planning. Never mind that I planned how I will leave the hall first and get sprouts … But it took me two days before I realized what else was happening. I'll explain at the end of the story. The second day comes. I am all about sprouts. Don't know how such a long line was created that I didn't get sprouts. And on the plates of others I see sprouts. Now wooow. Anger …

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47 Einat is referring to the compulsory army service in Israel at the age of 18. Although she wasn't qualified for service because of her low weight, she insisted on serving and finally the army enlisted her. Einat's statement is a sort of a Jewish-Israeli way of emphasizing. Since the army supposedly enlists who ever it can and use him/her as it sees fit, to say that the army did not want her, means that she was *really* thin.

Joseph: What's the deal with the sprouts?

Einat: Nothing. But it was part of the meal. In any event you get only a spoonful of that rice … a sort of puffed rice with coriander grains … This was breakfast, and sprouts. Therefore I laugh, I say porridge and fruit and cheese and vegetables and bread and an egg [in the Vipassana Trust's courses] seem to me over the top. For the spoonful I got back then I am thankful to this day. I think that my most important realizations were the result of that course. Not the courses I did later where there were tons of food …

The third day I am determined … I will be the first today! And I will get sprouts before anybody else gets sprouts! Now see the negative mind-set. Me and me! And I will get! And I will run! And no more meditation that morning, because all the meditation is sprouts ... I really got there … I was among the first few. On that day there were no sprouts at all. This is so funny. You feel like crying, 'cause its so funny. And I say wooow. No sprouts … you deserve it … I was shocked. I was simply shocked. And then I had the opportunity to start thinking, what did I do the last couple of days since the day I realized that there are sprouts and I didn't get any. And this was such an important thing … I said wooow this course is really awesome … because suddenly I realized that if I eat really slowly [the food is enough.] Why is it a syndrome? Because I managed to understand that I simply was convincing myself. At that point I saw what the mind is, how powerful the mind is. I had simply persuaded myself the first day that this meal was so pathetic that the sprouts were there only because they were the essence of the meal. That if I did not get sprouts another day, I was not sure whether I would be able to keep on thinking, or even living. It reached such proportions that I thought I would probably stop breathing if I did not get sprouts … I didn't come to the Vipassana by accident, just passing by in India and sat the course.

> I had studied Tibetan Buddhism for three years, every day in the library,[48] and you know I made an effort to go to the library as often as I possibly could. So I had the basis to build on. To make it short, the incident with the sprouts was so amazing for me, because I suddenly realized throughout this entire episode that I simply played with myself. That was all. I didn't need any sprout. This sprout didn't matter to me … You have invented it to yourself … It made me laugh so much that at the point where I didn't want sprouts anymore – there were sprouts in plenty. And I said OK I will eat sprouts, because there are some. But it didn't seem relevant anymore. If I don't get sprouts, it'll be just the same. *This recognition that if I don't get it, it is also fine.* I said like, I don't feel I was in any kind of Holocaust, but it looks as if I overcame this syndrome in three days.[49]

One main recurring theme in the experiences reported by Buddha-Dhamma practitioners has to do with *disassembling of perceptions*. Looking back at the whole episode, Einat tracked down and acknowledged the preliminary process through which she developed not only the perception that the sprouts were "the essence of the meal", but also that they comprised a vital necessity for her existence, and thus their absence marked a new source for dissatisfaction. This experience is related only indirectly to the meditation practice and is more specifically the result of the unique conditions of the course. It did not occur during meditation or as a direct consequence of meditation. While Goenka's meditation is about observing bodily sensations only, the experience Einat had involved internal dialogue. This story represents the focus of my research, namely not the experiences that should occur according to the teacher's recipe but the actual experiences that took place in the minds and bodies of practitioners as a result of the complex event of the Dhamma course. Also, it is worth mentioning

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48 The Tibetan library in Dharamsala, India, where Buddhist philosophy is taught. www.ltwa.net

49 This is an English translation of a part of a recorded interview held in Hebrew.

that Einat deviate from Goenka's instructions by practicing both his technique and Tibetan Buddhism, while he directs his followers to stick to his technique alone. Einat dismantled her thoughts and perceptions in light of the Buddhist ideas she had studied in advance in the Tibetan library regarding the dissatisfaction which stems from the construction of a perception of permanent and independent existence.

The second recurring theme demonstrated in the above example deals with a feeling of *loss of control*. Einat felt a loss of control over her surrounding environment, and specifically over the quality and quantity of food that came to her mouth. She had to make do with the portions distributed to the participants by the staff during meal times. In daily life, an issue such as control of the food one is eating is taken for granted by middle class young women. It is noteworthy that Einat does not say she felt hunger during the course and mentions specifically that she had no special weakness for sprouts. Thus a reasonable cause for her desire for sprouts was her lack of control over their distribution. The fact that the sprouts were available but not to her, made them an embodied symbol for her lack of control and threatened the wholeness of her self perception as an independent and autonomous individual.

The intensity of her experience of loss of control is epitomized by her last 'clarification' or 'apology': "I don't feel I was in any kind of Holocaust". Einat does not explain this sentence. Yet in several aspects, the events she describes strike a chord of the stories of Jewish inmates in Nazi concentration camps – the lack of food, the loss of control over one's own existence and the daily struggle with others over minimal nourishment. Therefore, I tend to interpret her last sentence as having at least two layers of meaning. One is directed towards me and the other can be understood as part of her self-dialogue. The 'clarification' assures me that she does not overplay her experience and that I can trust her judgment. Secondly, it could be that her dramatic way of expression makes her feel uncomfortable as her story might be understood as an underestimation of the suffering of victims of the Nazis. Therefore, she feels a need to 'apologize'. It is Einat who brings the issue of the Holocaust into our conversation without any trigger on my part.

Understanding the experience of loss of control is crucial for appreciating the feeling of liberation. This loss of control was in itself

limited and regulated since it was Einat who had decided to take part in the course while knowing its terms beforehand. Also, although Goenka warns against early retiring from the course, and despite the efforts of the staff to influence participants who wish to leave, it is possible, and in many courses some of the participants abandon the course before it ends.[50] According to my impression of Einat, nothing would have stopped her from giving up on the course in the middle, if she had been convinced that this was the right thing for her to do. She did not do so and in the interview does not say that she had any wish to do so. Instead she chose to surrender to the feeling of loss of control, even though this surrender was not easy. Actually, the planning she undertook during the second and the third day to get sprouts, at the expense of others, was an attempt at reestablishing her lost control. But, when the sprouts disappeared completely and were unavailable to anyone all possibilities of being in command over the sprouts vanished. This overwhelming and unexpected experience on the background of the Vipassana practice in which the practitioners observe, rather than modify or fix their momentarily experience, finally drove her to accept her inability to be in charge of the state of affairs and led to the moment of release. Because she recognized the limits of her control and accepted them, she regained a new feeling of being in control, which is, more flexible and therefore stronger.

Few minutes later along the interview, Einat tells me of another event thematically connected to the sprouts syndrome. It is of an incident of confrontation with her addiction to chocolate and freeing herself from it. Yet this story is significantly different.

> Einat: Now I know that I always had a problem with chocolate … I never thought of myself as an addicted person. Never smoked. Never drank. Nothing. I remember one evening in Japan, we went to a party, and everybody was taking acid and other stuff. I don't need acid. I don't need anything. But suddenly, I realized that I felt

50 Michal Pagis estimates that on average ten percent of the participants in courses by Goenka in Israel and in the United States leave the course before it ends. Michal Pagis, *Cultivating Selves: Vipassana Meditation and the Microsociology of Experience* (Ph.D thesis, University of Chicago, 2008), 21.

like having some chocolate. It was past midnight … I said I must have chocolate … if I do not get some chocolate within a minute, I would go crazy... Back then I did not know to name it, Mind, or to see how it functions, but I sensed that something very distorted was going on. I walked almost three kilometers until I found a shop … I bought two large bags full of Kit Kat and ate them all on the spot … I almost threw up, and I realized that there was a problem. I said to myself, this is an addiction like any other … I quit eating chocolate that day. Today I can eat chocolate but in a very controlled manner. It is clear to me that, if I feel a need for chocolate after a meal for three days in a row, then there is some kind of a problem, and I quit on the spot … consciously …

Joseph: But back then you already decided to quit and succeeded?

Einat: Of course. I succeeded. This was with chocolate. It was very specific.

Joseph: This insight regarding the sprouts. The sprouts are just a symbol.

Einat: This is exactly what I'm saying … It solved other cases in point as well. Even with regard to attachment.[51] Although craving and attachment are not the same. Attachment was solved in another Vipassana. But with regard to craving, I can do with nothing! Really! After that, I realized that. I truly think this is one of the most important events of my life …

Joseph: The sprouts?

Einat: Yes … It is true for many other issues as well. It wasn't the sprouts.

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51 It is a common practice for Israeli Dhamma practitioners to use the English words of "attachment" and "craving" in Hebrew daily discourse instead of the Hebrew translation of these words.

The chocolate incident occurred few years prior to her encounter with Buddha-Dhamma, and it emphasizes the last two recurring themes. While the story of the chocolate was linear – the recognition of the problem came before finding a solution – the sprouts episode was not since *the problem and the solution emerge concurrently.* Only once the solution is found, can the problem be articulated properly. Never before had Einat regarded her nutrition habits as exaggerated, rather the opposite. Her ability to eat without limit and never gain weight was considered an inherent advantage by her and by her siblings. This ability granted her freedom from the anxiety of getting fat, common to so many women and men in current affluent societies. In the interview, Einat does not claim that the problem of overeating appeared concurrently with the solution but rather that it had always existed and that she had lacked the proper awareness to its existence. Yet, no attitude and no problem ever exist in itself or in a culturally neutral context.

In contemporary affluent society overeating is not considered a harmful habit per se; it is problematic because of its health or aesthetic implications. In contradistinction, eating a lot is deemed a predicament as such only in cultural environments that value modesty and humbleness. In contrast to current Western values, within the Dhammic framework of concepts and ethics, eating too much comprises an obstacle whether it leads to gaining weight or not, since it is a type of addiction and self-indulgence and therefore forms a definite basis of *dukkha*.

The fourth theme that is demonstrated by Einat's story is the characterization of the transformative experiences as *simulations* on various levels. When Einat compares the "chocolate story" with the "sprouts syndrome", she does not regard it for more than what it was – a release from a specific addiction. In contradistinction, she testifies that the sprouts incident solved for her the attitude of craving at large. One source of strength of the "sprouts syndrome" for Einat is that it embodies and simulates experientially the Buddhist ideas she had learnt earlier in lectures given in the Tibetan library. Furthermore, while the chocolate addiction was probably an inclination shaped through long daily processes and developed to be a seemingly natural aspect of her self-perception, the short time it took to construct vital relations between herself and the sprouts in the context of the course, made it possible

for Einat to track down the process, disassemble it and realize its fictive character. Thus, it is exactly the fact that, different than the passion for chocolate, the craving for sprouts was a new fabrication with no roots in Einat's daily life that it could acquire the status of a simulation of her daily life.

Moreover, she considers the sprouts experience as a universal simulation, rather than a personal issue only. When she recognizes "how powerful the mind is", she does not refer to her own mind as specifically and uniquely powerful. Any person's mind is powerful. In her view the sprouts syndrome is important because it points to processes that all human beings undergo. It allows her not only to understand herself, but rather to understand humanity. Last, although both the sprouts and the chocolate experiences were highly grounded in the body, while the solution to the addiction to chocolate was behavioral, the foremost value of the sprouts syndrome rests in the mental processes of expectations and dissatisfaction build-up that, in other cases, might rest on various bases, physical or not.

I can not determine whether the attitude of craving at large was genuinely solved for Einat or not. However, it is possible to claim that this story do testify a significant change in Einat's life, namely her transformation into a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner. Did this transformation bring a new object of craving to Einat's life? Possibly, the answer is positive. But, it is also likely that Einat's attitude to Buddha-Dhamma practice is more flexible than her compulsory attitude to the sprouts or to chocolate.

Concluding Notes

The Israeli Buddha-Dhamma practitioner is mainly a practitioner of Vipassana meditation and the Israeli Buddha-Dhamma scene is characterized mainly by repeatedly taking part in repetitive Vipassana courses for the sake of experience. The practitioners report that the most meaningful experiences they had as a result of Vipassana practice occurred in their first course or as a result of it, and they describe these experiences as being transformative.

Analysis of the reports of the practitioners shows that the transformative experiences are based on continuous fragmentation and disassembling of perceptions. They include dimensions of loss of control

which lead to an unexpected moment of liberation once the practitioner gives up the effort to be in command. They also, bring about the simultaneous emergence of a re-defined problem and a feeling of release from it which are then reconstructed under a new conceptual framework. The practitioner internalizes a new definition of problems which is based on Buddha-Dhamma and is considered more accurate, true, and manageable. The transformative experiences are understood and remembered by the practitioners as simulations of many other incidents and are loaded with meaning that reaches far beyond the boundaries of the course and even beyond the boundaries of the individual practitioner.

The experience of liberation and the new definition of problems bring about a continuously *liberating self*. Not fully liberated, but rather a self prone to liberation, namely a self who has an acquaintance with the experience of liberation, aspires to multiply its occurrences and believes in the possibility of accomplishing it over and over again. A different motive and a different problem definition are what distinguish a participant in just one Vipassana course and a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner who regularly participates in courses. In other words, the process that transforms a new participant in a Vipassana course into a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner is the process of acquiring a self susceptible to liberation based on some understanding of the four noble truths and the three Characteristics of Existence and on an actual intimate experience of liberation that is understood in these terms.

In spite of the differences between Tibetan Buddhism practice and Vipassana practice in Israel, Tibetan Buddhism practitioners also point up their experiences as the main reason for their recurrent participation in retreats. Because Tibetan Buddhism retreats are less repetitive, the gulf between practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism who underwent a transformative experience and those who have not yet gone through one can not be marked by a participation in a second retreat. Therefore, a more inclusive definition of an Israeli Buddha-Dhamma practitioner to include both Vipassana practitioners and Tibetan Buddhism practitioners who acquired a continuously liberating self is a person who regularly participates in Dhamma courses.

This article offers an alternative route to the extreme relativist approach of self-identification on the one hand and to essentialist

approaches of universal definitions with multiple sub-categories and unfitting data on the other. It is a call for a more nuanced contextually situated research of the processes of becoming a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner based on reports of the practitioners of their most important experiences. In addition, a similar course of analysis can be useful in other current cases of cultural adoption, be it spiritual or not, so prevalent today in times of globalization. Instead of looking for an accurate, stable, universal and a-historic definition of a specific identity, one had better aim at articulating an evolving, processual, context dependent and historical definition of the locally transformed identity.