THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND CULTURE
IN SPIRITUAL GROWTH FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO
ARE CONVERTS TO BUDDHISM

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

Psychology has historically shied away from matters of spirituality. This void is problematic, due to the importance of spirituality in many clients’ lives. A 1998 Gallup Poll reported that 8 of 10 Americans (82%) believe they need to experience spiritual growth, a finding that characterized all subgroups of the population. Several theories of spirituality and its relation to development have been offered within the field of psychology. The current popular theoretical paradigms of spiritual development have, in general, failed to include the social and political systems within which people operate. Most of the theories of spirituality and spiritual development also emerged out of a Judeo-Christian worldview, and have failed to explore the experience of other spiritual communities. Empirically, only two previous studies were located that examined social and political realities, and none explored the community utilized in this sample.

This study proposed to explore spiritual development for individuals who sought out a non-majority religion, examining social and cultural influences on development, building a model of spiritual development from the experience of participants using grounded theory. A short semi-structured interview ranging from 50 to 80 minutes was conducted with eleven participants who were all members of a
small Buddhist community. The sample consisted of six females and five males, with ages ranging from 23 to 70. Concurrent observations and document analysis of items collected from the center were used as a method of triangulating data. Interviews were collected in stages along with observations and document analysis using the constant comparative method. A model of spiritual development emerged from these analyses that describes the shared experience of individuals who converted to Buddhism. Differences were found between those who converted from other religions or no religion compared with those who were raised Buddhist, though all but one participant was new to the particular lineage of the center studied. Gender differences were also found. Confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence as well as a discussion of these results are discussed herein.
Dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings. Tashi Delek.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Psychology has historically shied away from matters of spirituality. There are many reasons for this lack of attention to spiritual issues. First, psychology emerged from a Western background of scientific reasoning and methods (Hothersall, 1995). Spirit is difficult to define and elusive to measure. In addition, spirituality is an ambiguous subject. Currently it is in vogue due to many people’s dissatisfaction with organized religion (for an interesting attempt to delineate the difference between the two, see Zinnbauer et al., 2001), though little research has been conducted in this area. This void is problematic, due to the importance of spirituality in many clients’ lives (Bergin & Jensen, 1990). One historian even argues that psychotherapy arose to fill the void of religion’s decline (Ehrenwald, 1966). Jung (1964) and existentialists like Frankl (1963) also contend that the loss of the spiritual dimension is the root of the difficulties many people are experiencing. Fowler (1981) has also argued that spirituality is a vital aspect of the client-counselor relationship.

At this time, the study of spirituality is quite popular. Several factors are influencing this interest. Several psychologists are seeing the parallels between physics
and psychology and are beginning to view spirituality as a valid scientific concern (Dennis, 1995; Obasi, 2002). Modern physics theories such as quantum theory and relativity predict a similar picture of reality to that of traditional spiritual worldviews (Capra, 2000). Secondly, because of the third force in counseling psychology, the field has become increasingly aware of cultural issues: Spiritual beliefs and interests continue to be very strong in many persons in the United States from various cultural backgrounds (Fukuyama & Sevig; 1999, Sue & Sue, 2003). A 1998 Gallup Poll (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999) reported that 8 of 10 Americans (82%) believe they need to experience spiritual growth, a finding that characterized all subgroups of the population.

Several theories of spirituality and its relation to development have been offered within the field of psychology. The stage theories of Fowler (1981) and Wilber (1986) and Cartwright (2001) have been very influential within the field of psychology and have clearly been influenced by the tendency within psychology to find a clear linear path in developmental theories. Several theorists question this predominance, arguing for different models to describe development, especially for women and different cultural groups (Ray & McFadden, 2001; Rothberg, 1996). Bongma (2001) and Ray and McFadden (2001) both argue for more focus on relationships and political realities. While the linear, developmental theories are elegant, they are deeply ingrained in an understanding of growth that is individualistic and described as distinct and cut off from the lived experience of the person. I believe these theories fail to describe the political and social realities that Bongma (2001) and Ray and McFadden (2001) explore in their discourse about spirituality. I believe this is
especially true for non-majority groups, which have been largely ignored in the spiritual development literature. The most prominent critique of this common flaw is Michel Foucault. Foucault (1981) emphasizes the invisibility and pervasiveness of power in modern society. His argument is that power underlies all social relations from the institutional to the intersubjective: It is local, continuous, and present in the most apparently trivial details and relations of everyday life, and it is *capillary* in its operation, in the sense that power circulates through the lowest extremities of the social web of everyday practices. To ignore the power dynamic, therefore, is to ignore the elephant in the room. This practice has been common in many psychological studies.

Within a qualitative paradigm, the research is either informed by and seeks to support a pre-selected theory, or emerges out of the research experience. This study seeks to build a model of spiritual development using grounded theory procedures, grounded in the work of Bongma (2001) and Ray and McFadden (2001). Similar to the general critique offered by Foucault (1981), Bongma (2001) and Ray and McFadden (2001) question the manner in which research about spirituality has been conducted. The current popular theoretical paradigms of spiritual development have, in general, failed to include the social and political systems within which people operate. In addition, smaller communities have been understudied or not studied, thereby failing to include the unique dynamics that occur outside mainstream spiritual and religious paths.

Only a small number of empirical studies of spiritual development have been done. Fowler (1981) and Wink and Dillon (2001) were able to access large sample
sizes, but were not able to obtain individual detail. Several studies have utilized smaller sample sizes (Hamilton & Jackson, 1988; Isazi-Diaz & Tarango, 1988; Mayo, 2001; Tisdell, 2002), which have allowed rich descriptions of the sample. Some have included social and political realities, others have not. Many of these studies have tried to study spirituality as a separate phenomenon from religiosity and human development, though most individuals in the U.S. identify with a particular religious affiliation. I believe a more complex picture can be achieved through the study of individuals who are engaged in a religious community, thereby allowing spirituality and religiosity to be compared and described in relation to one another. This study seeks to add to the current literature by utilizing grounded theory, based within a stated theoretical paradigm to study growth within a religious community that has not yet been studied. In addition, this community is unique because most of the practitioners are converts. These individuals bring different cultural backgrounds into their understanding of a novel religion that was not presented (for the vast majority) as part of their cultural worldview as children.

There is increasing interest in indigenous mental health practices, many of which are rooted in the community and within the spiritual worldview of the people (Das, 1987). No study to date has examined the political and social context of spirituality within a religious group. Previous studies have looked at individual understandings of spirituality, often utilizing a linear perspective, and are generally Judeo-Christian in origin. Studies that include large numbers of other spiritual traditions or focus entirely on other spiritual traditions have not been conducted. This study is unique because it seeks to explore the understandings of a non-majority
religious group that is comprised mainly of converts from mainly Judeo-Christian
traditions. This study is, then, necessarily exploratory, since no previous research has
been conducted. This study seeks to explore spiritual development for individuals who
seek out a non-majority religion, examining social and cultural influences on
development, building a model from the experience of participants rather than from
expert opinion or prior research as there is no prior research for this population. This
research will also be helpful in providing preliminary evidence for the appropriateness
of the current measures of spirituality and religiosity with this population.

This study is theoretically informed by spiritual developmental theories of
Bongma (2001) and Ray and McFadden (2001) as well as the general theoretical
paradigm of Foucault (1981). Only two previous studies were located that examined
social and political realities (Isasi-Diaz & Tarango, 1988; Jacobs, 2001). These two
studies were important in the development of research questions for this study, as well
as the selection of a qualitative design, utilized for its unique qualities for allowing the
participants to be actively involved in the research.

To date, none of the previous research utilized a research paradigm that
allowed for exploration of the dynamics of a religious community. The element of
community is especially interesting in a community where the individuals mostly do
not share their religious tradition with their family. This study is conducted in a small
Buddhist community, which is largely composed of converts. The choice to convert
from a majority group to a non-majority group likely involves interesting effects for
the individuals involved. For this reason in particular, it was important to study the
impact of community on the participants. In a multicultural society, is it important for
psychologists to understand the unique experiences of different members of society, especially those who are members of a minority population (Sue & Sue, 2003). This population is especially unique because the minority status is generally not shared with member of the individual’s family. These individuals also come from different cultural backgrounds and converge in one place with their cultural lenses likely impacting the manner in which they approach the practices of Buddhism.

In brief, this study seeks to add to the literature by exploring an as yet unexplored spiritual tradition, within a spiritual community, informed by the unique social and political realities of the individuals involved. This study will provide important information for psychologists wishing to work with this population in the future, in both practice and research.
This literature review is divided into five sections. First a review of the current ideas about the definitions of the constructs utilized in this study. Following this, a brief review of the literature regarding the connection between spirituality and mental health will be presented to place the study in a psychological context. A review of the theories of spiritual development will be presented next in chronological order to best present the development of theorizing within the discipline. Following that discussion, a review of the empirical literature on spiritual development will be offered.

2.1 What is Spirituality?

The question of what spirituality and spiritual development are is not a new one. Within psychology, though, it is relatively marginalized. Early psychologists interested in spiritual issues wrote about spirituality outside of psychology. Jung (1933; 1964) believed spirituality to be instinctual and spiritual growth to involve synthesizing conscious and unconscious aspects of the self as well and movement away from ego to the genuine self. Existential thinkers (van Kaam, 1972) argue that spirituality is grounding oneself in something outside of the self and larger than the self. Transpersonal psychologists such as Wilber (1980) argue that all human experience is spiritual. Transpersonal psychologists, agree with Jung in arguing that
growth involves letting go of attachment to ego and identification with a larger view of self. Contemplative psychologists (Benner, 1988; May, 1982) argue that spirituality is a particular way of being, in which a person attempts to fully experience the reality of the world around them. Development involves discontinuing habitual patterns and learning to experience the world in a fresh, new way. Psychologists influenced by non-Western thought (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Myers, 1988; Parham, 2002) argue that spirit is the essence of human nature, and that growth involves the whole self (there is no distinction between spiritual and psychological growth). It is clear from this brief historical review that a clear and comprehensive definition of spirituality does not emerge from these various schools of thought.

As part of an attempt to develop an inventory for spirituality, Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders (1988) synthesized the writings of several seminal thinkers within psychology and created the following definition of spirituality:

“Spirituality, which comes from the Latin, spiritus, meaning ‘breath of life,’ is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, other, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate.” (p. 10)

Another definition was provided by the ‘Summit on Spirituality,’ (1995), which was a meeting of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC):

“Spirituality is described as the capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to the person. This tendency moves the individual toward knowledge, love,
meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness, compassion, wellness, and
wholeness. Spirituality includes one’s capacity for creativity, growth, and the
development of a value system. Spirituality encompasses a variety of
phenomena including experiences, beliefs, and practices.” (pg. 30)

One researcher, drawing on themes from Indian religious texts, contemplative Quaker
autobiographies, and Maslow’s transactional writing, defined spirituality thusly,

“An intense aliveness and a deep sense of understanding that one intuitively
comprehends as having come from a direct, internal link with the mysterious
principle that connects all aspects of the universe. As awakened spiritual beings
we feel our interconnectedness with all things – past, present, and future…”
(Atchley, 1999, p. 328)

Some themes seem consistent in various definitions and conceptions of spirituality: a
feeling of connectedness or community; compassion and forgiveness (some include
inner peace as part of this construct); meaning or purpose; transcendence; and some
sense of morality (Howden, 1992; Mahoney & Graci, 1999; Summit on Spirituality,
1995). However, it is clear that a consistent definition has not emerged.

As the proposed research of this study will be qualitative, the author is the
instrument. I connect with the last full definition provided above. I believe that
spirituality relates to being fully alive, to being aware of self, Self and the
interconnectedness of life. I believe that Spirit is the source of wisdom and compassion,
and my awareness and understanding of this informs my spiritual worldview. At a
deep, fundamental level, I believe that all spiritual worldviews have much in common.
It is this level that I am most interested in, but also in how this diverges between and among different people.

2.2 Spirituality and Mental Health

A relatively large body of research exists that has looked at the relationship between subjective well-being and religious commitment in particular. The large majority of these find a positive relationship between these two constructs. A brief review of those most applicable to the study of spirituality will be presented here.

Ellison (1991) specifically studied religious involvement and well-being. He hypothesized that there are four ways in which religion could enhance well-being. One way is by social integration, which includes providing a social framework and support network, rules of the community that may discourage negative behavior, and collective ritual participation. The second is divine interaction, to which religions provide differential access through means of practice and prayer. The third is a sense of existential certainty, in that religions provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life. There are also effects of denominational variations. Persons from a Methodist denomination differed from Catholic persons. Ellison looked at the relative effects of these four aspects of religious involvement as they related to well-being, using regression analysis. He found that these particular factors accounted for 5-7 percent of the variance in life satisfaction. Religious beliefs do enhance both the cognitive and affective aspects of life satisfaction. The manner in which this enhancement takes place is complex and is different for persons of different denominations within Christianity. For example, members of nondenominational Protestant congregations report significantly greater life satisfaction than those who are unaffiliated, and there is only
weak effect for those of minority Christian groups (e.g., Mormons). In fact, there is a small negative effect for those in the sample with non-Christian religious affiliations (primarily Jewish persons). This negative effect may be a result of not feeling one is part of the majority culture, since Christianity is by far the most common religion in the U.S., rather than an effect of religious beliefs. An alternative explanation may be that the particular differential beliefs of one’s religion are affecting well-being or that religion is not what’s underlying this phenomenon.

A study by Ryan, Rigby, and King (1993) considered two types of religious internalizations and mental health. Internalization is the process by which an individual takes the values of a particular belief system and makes the values or rules one’s own. This group of studies examined Christian adherents specifically. The two kinds of identification were (a) internalization, when a person sees the values as coming from the self and sees personal value for the beliefs, and (b) introjection, where one feels pressure to adhere to beliefs from outside and maintains beliefs through a system of guilt and contingent self-esteem. The internalization style was moderately positively correlated with identity integration, self-actualization, and global self-esteem in two separate studies. The introjection style, on the other hand, was negatively correlated with those three measures. This study indicates that it is not religious commitment that matters, but what type of commitment in terms of relationships with well-being. Contrasting internalization with introjection seems very similar to exploring spiritual versus explicitly religious values and identifies spirituality as the more likely predictor of positive well-being (though one can be positively religious and spiritual as well).
As part of another study, Fabricatore, Handal, & Fenzel (2000) investigated personal spirituality as a predictor of subjective well-being. ‘Personal spirituality’ in this study refers to an active relationship with a higher power. This study was primarily considering personal spirituality as a moderator for stress. In this study personal spirituality was assessed using the Spiritual Life Integration subscale of the Spiritual Involvement Scale (Fenzel, 1996). Sample items include, “I feel close to God” and “I go to God for help.” Higher scores on this scale were interpreted as being indicative of greater personal integration of spirituality. Fabricatore et al. (2000) found no significant differences for religious affiliation or gender for subjective well-being in a preliminary MANOVA. Using multiple regression analysis they found that personal spirituality is a predictor of subjective well-being ($r = .27, p = .002$) and not a predictor of affective well-being. A reason for this may be that spirituality affects how one views life, not how one feels at any particular moment. It makes sense that spirituality would predict subjective well-being since it is related to cognitive appraisals of global life satisfaction and not affective well-being.

2.3 Theories of Spiritual Development

The research suggests that higher levels of spirituality (as measured by the scales used) are associated with mental health. A question that remains from this research is: How does one obtain ‘higher levels’ of spirituality? Spirituality assessments only measure level of agreement or disagreement to various statements, assuming that the more a participant agrees with the statement, the ‘higher’ their level of spirituality. Since there is a positive relationship between spirituality and mental health, an important area of interest is how a person’s spirituality develops over time.
Is a person born with a certain level of spirituality that they express? If the process is developmental, what does that process look like? Several theorists have tried to elucidate this process, and some have been empirically studied as well. Theoretical models will be presented first, with empirical studies presented second.

2.3.1 Fowler

One of the earliest studies of spiritual development is the classic work of Fowler (1981). He began by thinking of his own spiritual (he calls it ‘faith’) development across his life span and then conducted an enormous study to validate his ideas. He believed that faith develops over time in a sequential process that is somewhat correlated to the age of the person. His stages are as follows: (pre-stage) Undifferentiated Faith, (1) Intuitive-Projective Faith, (2) Mythic-Literal Faith, (3) Synthetic-Conventional Faith, (4) Individuative-Reflective Faith, (5) Conjunctive Faith, and (6) Universalizing Faith. He argued that a person moves from stage to stage in a linear fashion, though progression to the highest stages does not necessarily happen.

According to his theory individuals in infancy begin with the possibility of faith, trust, courage and hope and balance these with perceived threats. The child moves to stage one (Intuitive-Projective) with the beginning use of language convergence of thought with the ability to express oneself. The first stage is an imaginative and imitative phase. The child begins to be aware of self and the taboos of the culture. The child moves into the second stage (Mythic-Literal) with the emergence of concrete operational thinking, and an interest in ‘how things are.’ This stage is characterized by focus on narrative and myth to explain the world around
them. The young person moves onto stage three (Synthetic-Conventional) when he or she recognizes the contradictions in the myths/narratives and seeks meaning in this. The third stage involves the creation of one’s own personal myth based on one’s experience of the world. In this stage, the young person is still conformist, and has not yet examined this ideology. It is in the fourth (Individuative-Reflective) stage that the person begins to examine deeply one’s own roles, and the critically reflective development of a personal worldview. The individual moves to the fifth stage (Conjunctive) when the simplicity of the worldview in stage four becomes apparent. At this point the person opens up to a ‘deeper self’ and becomes more aware and open to ‘other.’ The individual transitions to the final stage (Universalizing) through action. Fowler (1981) argues that this person begins to break down loyalties to the idea of self and self-preservation and to live out a transforming vision. Persons who transition to stage six are characterized by a disciplined, activist incarnation of love and justice beyond self and doctrine.

Fowler’s (1981) theory and the included empirical study have had a large impact on the development of other spiritual development theories. One of the most interesting aspects of his theory is how faith development is intricately related to human development. His conceptualization is that the two are interdependent. Though influential, his theory is problematic due to the bias of an individualistic outlook and of an assumed linear model. In his theory, the individual moves through the stages alone; there is no communication or communion with others. In addition, he began his study with the bias of a certain type of development, not allowing his data to fit another pattern. Details of his empirical research will be presented later in this paper.
2.3.2 Wilber

Wilber (1986) developed a model of spiritual development based on Piaget’s cognitive theory of development. He argues that there is a sequential series of stages that lead from birth to final enlightenment. The first structures include Piaget’s stages of development, which are essentially cognitive stages. Wilber then follows these with a stage of ‘vision-logic,’ which is characterized by an intuitive understanding of complex patterns and dialectical reasoning. This stage is followed by three transpersonal stages: the ‘psychic’ which is marked by the emergence of the “soul” and the first glimpses of the pure “witness”, the ‘subtle,’ characterized by the emergence of archetypes similar to Platonic forms, and the ‘causal,’ which is marked by the emergence of pure formless awareness. The final stage, the ‘ultimate’ stage is characterized by the integration of form and formlessness.

In contrast to the Piagetian model, however, Wilber does not believe that each stage integrates and builds upon knowledge acquired in previous stages, but merely replaces the former stage. This means that stages cannot be skipped or moved through in any other sequence, though it may be that it is only the basic structures that emerge in an invariant order. He also notes that there can be temporary regression to previous stages that facilitates further progression along the stages. Wilber argues that spiritual development is independent of other kinds of development, so that morality, sense of self, interpersonal relationships, and affective growth develop independently of one another. He further argues that these stages are universal across all cultures, though not all people progress through all the stages. A limitation of Wilber’s (1986) model is that he does not allow for flexibility or different patterns of growth. In
addition, his model has not been evaluated against the experiences of any group of people, so there is no empirical evidence supporting his theory.

2.3.3 Genia

In 1991, Genia set out to create a scale that would measure spiritual development as part of her doctoral dissertation. She began by synthesizing psychodynamic and object relations theories into a developmental framework. She then utilized this theoretical grounding to develop a stage model to understand healthy religious outlooks from unhealthy ones. In particular, Genia (1991) wanted to illustrate intrapsychic dynamics that underlie unhealthy religious outlooks.

From this theoretical background she postulated five stages of spiritual development. She named the first stage Egocentric faith. Persons in this stage lack ego strength, emotional integration, and basic trust necessary for stable, mature relationships. At this point, God is primarily the personification of emotional traumas. The second stage is Dogmatic faith. At this point, religious experience is oriented toward earning God's approval. Religiosity is characterized by self-denial, submission to authority, and intolerance of diversity and ambiguity. Transitional faith is the third stage. Uncertainty, questioning and doubt plague people at this stage. She postulated that this is a period of affiliational switching or experimentation with nontraditional ideologies. Stage Four is called Reconstructed Internalized faith. At this stage, people are committed to a self-chosen faith that provides meaning, purpose and spiritual fulfillment. Practice is guided by constructive, internalized morals and ideals. Though open to diversity, a person at this stage still has a need to resolve ambiguities. This need may lead them to a religious community that proposes definitive answers to their
spiritual uncertainties. The final stage is called Transcendent faith. People at this stage have a faith commitment that transcends personal motives and enables some to experience a sense of community with people of all faiths and with God. She described people at this stage as being passionately attuned to higher ideals and actively striving to fulfill their highest potentials.

From this, Genia (1991) created the Spiritual Experience Index (SEI), in which lower scores are associated with lower levels of maturity, higher scores with higher levels of maturity. Items are written based on characteristics of transcendent faith. While her study has been cited frequently in the literature, her scale has not been utilized often, and her normative sample was small and homogeneous. Genia (1991) points out that her scale is based on Western conceptions of faith, and this is a major limitation for her scale’s generalizability. In addition, her model postulates a linear stage model, which is likely overly simplistic compared to the lived experience of spiritual development.

2.3.4 Rothberg

Donald Rothberg (1996) assessed the applicability of Wilber’s (1986) model of spiritual development through interviews with three Buddhist teachers. Several basic critiques of Wilber’s (1986) model were presented. Firstly, the teachers argue that there are many different kinds of paths to Wilber’s endpoint, and that his model is only one way. They argue that each person has a particular journey influenced by their particular conditioning and needs. In addition, it was observed that people do not generally go through a clear sequence of stages. Another criticism is the psychological terminology, in that for some people, different metaphors are appealing. For example,
some may prefer a poetic metaphor. Thirdly, the teachers point out that the mechanisms of movement through these stages are unclear. Is it a developmental process that unfolds on its own, or are there particular insights or spiritual practices necessary to traverse these stages?

In terms of a suggestion for a universal developmental model, the teachers suggest that at the basic level there appears to be a movement from the gross to the subtle. By this, they argue that understanding and insight at the initial level is vague and incomplete, and through spiritual practice, their understanding and insight has a quality of clarity of mind. They also argue for the inclusion of metaphors other than that of the linear ‘path.’ Some of those suggested were the mandala, the spiral, and the circle. The mandala has many dimensions, and therefore many different paths. For example, Wilber believed that emotional development, relationships, and cognitive development were separate developmental lines; with the metaphor of a mandala, these are all included in spiritual development. The spiral and the circle metaphors describe the movement in development that may feel like regression, in that many of our difficulties come up again and again in differing arenas. The spiral and the circle metaphors also work against the common idea of an ‘end point’ in a spiritual journey.

2.3.5 Cartwright

Another model of spiritual development follows directly from Piaget’s stage model (Cartwright, 2001). Since the time of Piaget’s theoretical writings, researchers have noted the failure to address cognitive change in adulthood, the exactness with which he argued the stages developed, and the failure to include interpersonal, subjective, intuitive, and imaginative dimensions of development. This author
addresses these criticisms in elucidating how Piaget’s theory could be applied as a model for spiritual development.

The first stage is Sensorimotor. Spiritually, an individual at this stage is not aware of a Power external to self unless a conflict or significant life event brings this reality to awareness. The next stage is Preoperational. An individual at this stage may have begun to explore a relationship with a higher Power may not yet have the ability to explain the relationship. They may have an understanding that ‘something is out there,’ but do not understand how they relate. The third stage is Concrete Operational. At this level, individuals seek out logical explanations for their relationship to their higher Power. The fourth stage is Formal Operational. Individuals at this level begin to consider abstract principles for behaviors that were previously motivated (in the concrete operational stage) by a need to maintain a relationship with their higher Power. In this stage, people are still constrained by the social environments in which the find themselves. In the final stage, individuals are able to select different versions of reality and decide which is right for them. The limitation of this model is its linear nature as well as its individualistic bias.

2.3.6 Bongma

Utilizing several texts from current African authors, Bongma (2001) argues that an understanding of spiritual development in selected African countries emerges. He argues that spirituality begins at birth. Lifecycle rites, matrikin folk, ancestors, and God all help to allow a person to reach spiritual maturity. The use of myth and stories is prevalent to articulate spiritual truths, and these stories allow an understanding of development. It is important to note that these narratives are constantly reconfigured.
to remain salient to the people. Many stories revolve around the idea of growth as a community, highlighting the strength one has in a group as well as the sacrifices one makes within a group. They focus on the concept of sharing, and of a strong belief in being hospitable to guests.

Bongma (2001) suggests that within these cultures, spirituality, politics, and modern life cannot be separated. He argues that spiritual development cannot exist without focus on other people in poverty, harsh political environments, and that development is affected by the plurality of religions in Africa. Art is another method of describing and understanding spiritual truths. African art reveals a focus on destiny and death, with a network of relationships both transcendent and ordinary. This model has not yet been tested in an empirical work.

2.3.7 Ray and McFadden

Ray and McFadden (2001) argue for different metaphors in describing spiritual development. They argue against the stage model of spiritual development, which is mostly based on the heroic journey metaphor. This model, rooted in Greek mythology (Moody & Carroll, 1997) has five stages: the call, the search, the struggle, the breakthrough, and the return. They argue that this model is gender biased, in that is a concept of growth that requires separation and individuation prior to integration into the community. This requirement ignores development and growth that is communal and relational (female). They argue that metaphors, while helpful, by necessity also constrict the way that ideas can be interpreted. They sought to find metaphors that would allow for a more inclusive picture. One metaphor they offered was that of a web. A web is made of many interlocking strands, is strong but flexible, if
parts are damaged it can be repaired, and it can be extended indefinitely. It is based on interdependency, a network of relations. To support this model, they site studies from several researchers and autobiographical writings that support this model. Women in particular tend to describe their growth in collective terms, and to evoke the power of the collective.

A second metaphor that Ray and McFadden (2001) uncovered is the quilt. A quilt has multiple layers and is crafted over time; they may have different functions at different points during the lifespan; and although parts may be crafted individually, traditionally it is the outcome of people gathering to stitch it together. Spirituality is complex (as indicated by the difficulty in defining it) and is a developmental process that changes over time. Sometimes one may reflect on spiritual meaning in distress, sometimes in joy, sometimes it may be background noise. The authors also argue that our spiritual development is nurtured by important others, though some part of our personal spirituality are the result of unique individual experiences. The intricate stitching patterns are often difficult to see unless quite close up. Similarly, as spirituality is nurtured over a lifetime, the particulars of the relational experiences may be difficult to distinguish. One last element of the quilt metaphor is that quilts are often created to care for others, whether to keep a family member warm, as a gift, as donation to raise money, or in the case of the AIDS quilt, to raise awareness. Similarly, caring for others is an important element of spirituality that is not clearly obvious in the journey metaphor. Again, this metaphor appears to apply to various works of scholarship that the authors cited.
2.3.8 Buker

Buker (2003) argues for a spiritual developmental model based on systems theory. His argument is based on our perception of reality and how we come to that perception. He argues that changes in our perception and the related epistemological shifts can be a reflection of spiritual development. First order change in systems theory is change to behavior that does not reflect change to the system. In this state, people are acting on the belief that they are in control. They may make changes to their behavior, but operate within this fundamental belief. He argues that because of this, first order changes are rarely successful long-term. Second order change is when the person changes behaviors and attitudes based on a new system of thought. In second-order change, they begin to see themselves as having no control over the larger system within which they operate. Buker argues that second-order change often results from 'hitting bottom.' At this point, a person may not necessarily fully surrender to this idea. They may act in accordance with this, but may not fully believe it. At the point of third-order change, the person fully accepts this, and lets go of the focus on the self. In other words, persons no longer describe experience only from their own view, but see a connection to the larger system.

Buker (2003) then continues to make his argument for spiritual change, which involves not only changing behaviors, but also changes in relation to the larger system. He argues that those under first-order change are trying to change their behavior so they are do not 'sin.' He argues that Jesus’ method of teaching was to introduce a new way of thinking about the relationship to the law by using paradox, metaphors, and reframes. In this way, people can understand that they are powerless
to attain righteousness, and change their relationship to those behaviors instead of
trying to control them. Buker’s argument is limited to a particular kind of spiritual
development, in that many spiritually oriented persons are not Christians or do not
relate to Jesus’ teachings in such a way. On the other hand, many different
spiritual/religious traditions do use paradox, metaphors, and reframing to make points
about spiritual truths. The idea of an epistemological shift in knowing is an interesting
idea that may be more universal. Perhaps spiritual development does include an
element of changing ways of knowing reality.

2.3.9 Summary

In summary, there are eight spiritual development models within the literature,
some of them in direct contradiction with each other. Four are stage models,
suggesting a linear development (Cartwright, 2001; Fowler, 1981; Genia, 1991;
Wilber, 1986). Others argue for different metaphors such as the mandala, the circle, a
spiral, a web, and a quilt (Ray & McFadden, 2001; Rothberg, 1996). There are
differences in predictions of these different theories, but all of these tend to agree with
the Buddhist teacher cited in Rothberg (1996) in describing spiritual development as a
movement toward increasing understanding. Some argue for more focus on
relationships and political realities within the study of spiritual development (Bongma,
2001; Ray & McFadden, 2001). Another way to represent growth has been offered by
Wink (1999), who describes the process of spiritual growth as one of discovering the
sacred in everyday life and in all relationships. In his terms, the outcome of spiritual
development is not an inner truth, but a different way of experiencing the world as
imbued with mystery.
While all of these theories will undoubtedly influence the research as they are now part of the researcher’s knowledge base, the writings of Bongma (2001) and Ray and McFadden (2001) most strongly impact the theoretical grounding of this study. These theoretical perspectives frame the course of the proposed study. Given the arguments of these authors, the research seeks to direct attention to social and political factors, which guided the choice of methods.

2.4 Empirical studies of spiritual development.

The question then becomes, which of the models seems to fit? Or perhaps, which of the models fits more people than others? And how is this related to the relationship found between mental health and spirituality? Reinert and Bloomingdale (1999) found that spiritual support was inversely related to measures of psychological distress, which validates the more feminist models of Ray and McFadden (2001). It appears that in this sample, across genders, spiritual support from valuable others predicted well-being. A measure of spiritual openness was only related to self-esteem. That is, those who were open and inclusive in their spirituality seemed to also have high self-esteem. This study would appear to validate the models that argue for increasing openness and decreasing fundamentalism during the span of spiritual development.

The earliest empirical study is that of Fowler (1981). This study included a cross-sectional group of over 350 people of varying ages were interviewed over the course of nine years about their life, faith, values, and religious experiences. Demographically, his sample was overwhelmingly White and largely Christian, though evenly divided across sexes and amongst age groups. Each individual was
interviewed for about two hours using an interview guide and these interviews were then transcribed for analysis. Each interview was systematically analyzed by at least two people and assigned to stages based on the average of the individual sections. He found a relationship between chronological age and the stage of the person, with younger people more likely to be in earlier stages and older people more likely to be in higher stages. It is important to note that there are exceptions to this rule, with some older people at earlier stages of faith development. Also within each age grouping, there is a distribution of stages, with some age groups having a large distribution. For example, those in the age group 21-30 were found to range between stage two through being characterized as between stages four and five. It is important to note that because this is cross-sectional data, there may be generational effects here as well. Only one person in the entire study fit the description for stage six (was in oldest age group). He also found some gender differences in age and relationship to faith development, but does not present statistical tests, so these need further study.

For its sheer size, Fowler’s (1981) study is impressive. There are limitations to his empirical work, though, in addition to the theoretical difficulties mentioned in a previous section. Firstly, his sample is too ethnically and religiously homogeneous. His participants were overwhelmingly White (98%) and largely Christian (82%). Secondly, his study merely assigned people to groups based on his theory of development, rather than assessing the process. Those who fit an early stage at an older age were assumed to not have passed beyond that stage. It is possible to argue that those people could have regressed or spiraled back to that place from another stage. In addition, his study assumed a stage developmental process.
In 1988, Isasi-Diaz and Tarango conducted an in-depth study of Hispanic American women’s religious and spiritual beliefs. Their study was theoretically grounded in liberation theology, chosen because of the political nature of spirituality for this group. The authors argued that to choose the label Hispanic is political, to speak Spanish is political, and that religion and spirituality is political because of the reality of the Roman Catholic Church’s influence on Hispanic women. The authors argue that no relationship is private in the sense that they all make up a sense of community. Therefore the personal is political. Community is also part of the personal (one does not have an ‘individual’ religiousness). They conducted in-depth interviews of six Hispanic women, in a combination of Spanish and English depending on the interviewee’s preference, and also brought all of the women together for a group discussion.

Three themes reoccurred: (a) Promesas (promises): one has promises with the divine, that there is a connection between; (b) Sentir, Sentimiento: every women pointed to their hearts when they say they ‘deeply feel” – a deep internal, personal feeling, an intimate connection with the divine; and (c) Iglesia (church) and sacerdote (priest): for these women the church and the priests were almost opposite to their religion or at least different. When they speak of the church they do connect to, they are speaking of the community of people. Given these themes, the authors argue that the idea of God changes and that for Hispanic women to feel, to understand, and to believe is the same thing. Isasi-Diaz and Tarango (1988) argue that Hispanic women have a deep sense of being the church.
Oser (1991) was primarily interested in the development of religious judgment, or changes in the way people thought about certain spiritual constructs. He found seven polar dimensions that emerged in all of the interviews. From these dimensions, Oser constructed seven religious dilemmas. The seven dimensions are: freedom vs. dependence, transcendence vs. immanence, hope vs. absurdity, transparency vs. opaqueness, faith vs. fear, holy vs. profane, and eternity vs. ephemerity. On the basis of his interview data, Oser (1991) suggested that at lower stages, either pole is acceptable in different situations. With more development, people tend to focus on one pole or the other, rejecting the other pole. At the highest levels, the poles are not seen as exclusive or opposite and both are accepted in a deep structure. Given his data, it would appear that the developmental process he found was similar to Fowler (1981) in that development involves movement towards increasing comfort with ambiguity and a decrease in judging one option over another. Similar to Fowler’s (1981) study, Oser’s (1991) assumed a stage developmental process, and did not offer theoretical grounding for his hypothesis.

Cannon (1994) was interested in the relationship between psychological development and spiritual development. She had 100 women in her study, from three groups: acupuncturists, pastoral counselors, and members of a traditional Christian church. . Her sample was 48.8% Protestant, 22.6% Catholic, 3.6% Jewish and 25% ‘other.’ She found a relationship between women’s psychological and spiritual development. Three variables were found to significantly explain spiritual maturity: participation in therapy, group affiliation (acupuncturists and pastoral counselors higher than traditional members), and psychological maturity. Age, marital, status,
and education do not explain variance in spiritual maturity. She did not report the racial or ethnic composition of her sample. This study contributes to the hypothesis that psychological variables are related to spiritual ones. The limitations of this study are that she did not include environmental variables, and the theoretical basis for her choice of the three disparate groups was thin. In addition, her sample was relatively homogeneous given her stated theoretical purpose in designing the study.

Hamilton and Jackson (1998) were interested in spiritual development as it relates to four ideas: the meaning of spirituality, the process of becoming aware of spirituality, the reaction of others to the process, and the blocks to experiencing one’s spirituality. They utilized a focus group methodology, and selected 12 female helping professionals to participate in two 90-minute groups. Hamilton and Jackson (1998) found a three-element understanding of spirituality that included self-awareness, interconnectedness, and a relationship with a higher power. Several themes emerged from the data concerning spiritual awareness. These included: adversity, transcendence, introspection, the impact of parenthood, and sensing an external power. In response to the third arena of interest, and multiplicity of responses emerged leading to the conclusion that the research participants understood spirituality to be something that ‘is’ rather than something that one ‘attains.’ The participants identified cultural barriers, ‘monkey mind’ or racing thoughts, and lack of perceived need as barriers to experiencing spirituality.

Hamilton and Jackson’s (1998) study is very influential as one of the first to explicitly study women’s spiritual experiences within the psychological literature. The use of focus groups is an interesting and useful method to obtain information in a
reasonable amount of time, though their study could be improved by the use of individual interviews as well as group work. A further limitation was a relatively homogeneous sample. All of their participants were helping professionals, 10 of the 12 were European American, and 2/3 identified as Catholic.

A study by Wink & Dillon (2001) followed participants across the lifespan, beginning with intensive assessments in childhood and adolescence, with four in-depth interviews in adulthood from their 30s to their 70s. In addition to interviews, participants also completed self-administered questionnaires. The researchers were particularly interested in the incorporation of spiritual practice in everyday life. Their results indicated that overall, women had higher levels of spirituality, and a greater increase in spirituality over time. They also found that for women and men, spirituality increased significantly from late middle to older adulthood.

A gender specific relationship was found for the relationship between negative life events and spirituality. There was no relationship between these two constructs for males. For women specifically, conflict with spouse, with parents, utilizing psychotherapy, and financial strain were related to higher levels of spirituality. Women also had a significant relationship between prior cognitive commitment (degree to which someone is introspective, evaluate situations and motives of others, a wide range of interests, and thinks unconventionally) and later spirituality as well as the experience of negative life events and spirituality. There was also an interaction between cognitive commitment and negative life events for women in predicting spirituality. This means that spirituality in adulthood was highest for those who were cognitively committed as young adults and experienced negative life events later on.
What this study argues is that there may be differences between men and women in their spiritual paths. For men, there was a simpler path from early religiosity and spirituality to later spirituality. For women, religiosity, spirituality, cognitive commitment, negative life events, and the interaction between cognitive commitment and negative life events all significant predicted later higher levels of spirituality. In addition, their predictors accounted for a large proportion of the variance ($R^2 = .43$) in later spirituality. Limitations of this study are that it was done on a nearly all White sample, and explicitly spiritual questions were only included in the fourth assessment.

Janet Liebman Jacobs (2000) studied spiritual development of Spanish Crypto-Jews using self-in-relation theory. In-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted on 50 individuals: 25 women and 25 men. Ethnically, the sample was heterogeneous, with half reporting mixed Native American ancestry, and the other half as Spanish European. She found that the religious orientation of the family was very important in later spiritual development for both men and women, through the mechanism of a strong relationship with a primary caregiver.

Due to the history of the oppression of this group, elder family members often conducted the spiritual rituals in secret. This fostered a sense of mystery and awe in the younger generation, and in an emotional attachment to the practice. The author argues this is part of a larger Latino/a cultural phenomenon, in which a relational spiritual development takes place within the context of the family. She found that spiritual practice for her participants (both male and female) was a way of connecting with their culture, a way of connecting with their ancestors. This relational paradigm
fits most strongly with the web and quilt metaphors of spiritual development (Ray & McFadden, 2001).

Mayo (2001) conducted a study as part of her doctoral dissertation on the themes of spiritual development. She was specifically interested in the spiritual development of people who believed that spirituality was different than religiousness. Ten people were identified as co-researchers and were interviewed about their spiritual development. Using grounded theory, Mayo discovered 10 themes that were consistent across participants. Her participants all identified (1) an early childhood experience of ‘illumination’ in which they had an experience of ‘something out there,’ (2) contact with nature and other beings leading to new spiritual understanding, (3) growth through pain, (4) a feeling of isolation from those who aren’t ‘spiritually aware,’ (5) a perception of love as an anchor of the universe, (6) a personal relationship or mystical union with God, (7) a feeling of connection/oneness of self and universe, (8) a feeling of security and meaning from spiritual insights, (9) an awareness of the distinction between spirituality and religion, that religion divides from God and spirituality relates to God, and (10) that spiritual insights arise at different intervals of their lives. Mayo’s (2001) research doesn’t really elucidate the process of spiritual development, though it does add to the literature by identifying possible components of spiritual development.

One of the limitations to Mayo’s (2001) study is the homogeneous sample. All of her participants were White, and all of them shared an element of dissatisfaction with religion. Her participants also identified an individualistic journey, which may
stem from lack of connection to a spiritual group or from a tendency towards individualistic orientation among Western individuals.

Gordon (2002) studied spiritual development from a phenomenological perspective. She was specifically interested in how a woman’s life contributes to meaning and her understanding of herself. Gordon posited that spiritual development was identical to the individuation process. 10 female co-researchers ranging in age from 39 – 77 years old were chosen and asked to report their spiritual histories. All of her participants were Caucasian. The co-researchers were allowed to define spirituality for themselves, and a composite definition was created out of the women’s meanings.

Using grounded theory, seven commonalities emerged: (1) The spiritual journey began in childhood, (2) Identity formation developed over time, (3) Daily activities and motherhood were often described as sacred, (4) The Heroine’s journey is a process that includes becoming the subject of one’s own life, not the object of another’s, (5) The concept of God included the Divine Feminine, (6) The direction of the journey was toward wholeness, and (7) Their lives communicated their beliefs. Theoretically, she argued these results support Jung’s concept of individuation, Maslow’s self-actualizing theory, and Huxley’s Perennial Philosophy. Gordon’s (2002) study provides useful information about women’s spiritual development from a feminist perspective, especially as it relates to identity development. A limitation of the study is its homogeneity of sample and its purposeful focus on spiritual development as it relates to identity development.

Tisdell (2002) conducted a study on the spiritual development of female adult educators committed to social change. She argued for this distinct group of people so
that the culture of this group could be taken into account in the description of spiritual experience. Her participants were from various ethnic/cultural backgrounds. Interviews focused on the participants’ definitions of spirituality, spiritual change, and how spirituality affects and informs their work and relation to cultural backgrounds. Through means of grounded theory data analysis, four common themes emerged.

The first theme was that spiritual development for these women was a spiral process of moving away from the spiritual tradition of their childhood, and recreating the meaning of the spiritual attitudes and symbols of their cultures of origin. Though only one of the women was an active participant in the religion of her youth, these women found ways to continue to find meaning within the spiritual traditions of their youth in their adult lives. A second theme was of deep personal spiritual experiences of what was referred to (by the participants) as the Lifeforce. These experiences lead to a belief in the interconnection of all things, and an appreciation for that which cannot be seen as well as creating conditions for healing and strength to take action when needed. A third theme for these women was the development of an authentic identity. Especially for the women of color in the sample, this was about claiming the positive aspects of their ancestral histories and cultural roots as part of how they defined themselves. For all the women, this involved the development of a full and complex self. The final theme was one of social action. Not surprisingly, given the requirements for being included in the study, the women identified a connection between spiritual development and the development of a global consciousness. For these women, their commitment to social change was intricately linked to their spiritual beliefs.
Tisdell’s (2002) study adds to the literature on spiritual development by a greater inclusion of people of color, and the distinctly female voice that seems to come from this study. Clearly, her sample is limited by the inclusion criteria of profession, and the fact that due to cohort effects the civil rights movements and women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s likely affect all of these women. In addition, all of these women were of Judeo-Christian backgrounds.

2.5 Summary

Overall, the evidence for spiritual developmental models is thin. This may be due to the reasonable number of differing (perhaps even contradictory) models of spiritual development, definitions of spirituality, and focus of the study. Fowler (1981) conducted research with a theoretical model in mind, whereas Gordon (2002), Mayo (2001) and Tisdell (2002) utilized grounded theory to allow themes to emerge. Interestingly, each of the researchers conducting grounded theory research had specific elements of spiritual development as a focus, allowing more detailed information about particular elements of spiritual development to more prominently emerge.

Studies focusing on women tended to have a greater focus on interconnectedness and the relational nature of spirituality and spiritual development (though Jacobs [2000] found this for both men and women in her sample). Wink & Dillon (2001) argue for differential patterns of development and correlates to spirituality for women and men. A limitation of most of the research is that it seems to focus on certain groups to the exclusion of others, whether religious, ethnic, or gender groups. This is not necessarily an issue in a qualitative design, but it was unclear in
their designs whether the choice to focus on certain groups was theoretically grounded. Wink & Dillon (2001) were one of a few that were able to access a large sample, and the level of detail was greatly reduced. Many studied spiritual development as completely separate from religion, even though most Americans do affiliate with a particular religious orientation (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999).

All the studies reviewed in this section have lead to increasingly complex understandings of the phenomena of spirituality and spiritual growth. They form a background of understanding of these phenomena and inform the questions I chose as well as informing the methodological choices that would be most appropriate for this topic. Theoretically, I was most influenced by and resonated with the theories of Bongma (2001), Isazi-Diaz and Tarango (1988), Ray and McFadden (2001), Rothberg (1996), and Wink (1999). These theoretical conceptions influenced the site and participants I chose to study as well as the manner in which I currently view growth, and the components I will include in my interviews, observations, and document analysis. Specifically, these theoretical and empirical documents increased my interest in social and political factors in development, such as how a spiritual community impacts development, how marginal group status impacts development and the political dimensions of power and discourse within a community.

Broadly stated, the research questions of this study are: How does membership in a spiritual community affect growth? Secondly, what is the impact of being a member of a minority religious community? More specifically, in a particular community, how do the political realities of spiritual belief and membership within a spiritual community impact the group and the individual behavior within the group.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

3.1 Research Paradigm

Given the inductive, theory-building purpose of this study, I employed an open-ended, multi-method study design. An overview of the theoretical framework is provided first, followed by a description of the proposed research design. Given the importance of understanding a researcher’s relationship to the research topic as a qualitative researcher, a discussion of my role as the research instrument is presented next. Following that is a presentation of my sources of data and methods of collection. Lastly, a discussion of data analysis procedures and ethical considerations will be presented.

3.2 Philosophical Assumptions / Paradigms Underpinning the Research

This study stemmed from particular perspectives, and it will help the reader to understand how these perspectives informed the research process. This study was explicitly qualitative, and was informed by several theoretical orientations to research. Social constructivism provided the major theoretical framework informing the theoretical and methodological analysis of the study. Social constructivism is based on the idea that people’s realities are socially created and therefore in flux (Denzin &
Knowledge is intimately connected with people’s experience, and therefore also with the social and political realities of people’s everyday lives. Ontologically, I am also influenced by critical theory, which argues that political, social, cultural, gender, economic, and ethnic forces shape reality (Ponterotto, 2005). These assumptions about the nature of reality as being both socially constructed and political are important to state, as they affect how I interpreted data.

Epistemologically, social constructivist thought is my primary influence. This theoretical stance is that reality is socially constructed, and because of this, the inter-subjectivity between researcher and participant is central to capturing and elucidating the experience of the participant. Related to this, the values I brought in to the research process need to be acknowledged and clarified, but I should not (arguably cannot) eradicate them altogether. My experience cannot be removed from the research process, especially as the process of research required prolonged close contact with my participants.

To summarize, the theoretical underpinnings of the proposed research involves a social constructivist paradigm with critical ontology.

3.3 Research Design

This study was conducted using constructivist grounded theory (for more information, see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, Ch. 19, Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This approach is grounded in symbolic interactionism and its assumption that people actively construct their realities from the symbols around them via social interaction and that these socially constructed subjective realities have significant consequences for behavior and well-being (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1980). Grounded theory is a
qualitative method for building theory that is inductively derived through an iterative, concurrent process of data collection, coding, conceptualizing, and theorizing. New data are continually collected over the course of this process until no new themes, categories, or relationships are being discovered. Using the terminology of grounded theory, a constant comparison method of analysis is employed, using open, axial, and selective coding. A researcher continues to sample based on the emergent theory that is constantly being verified and modified, until theoretical saturation is reached (Fassinger, 2005). This approach is considered reflexive in that the influences and processes of the researcher are made explicit, with this being captured in memo-writing procedures. These procedures are utilized to monitor the researcher’s internal process during data collection and documenting emerging theoretical formulations.

Grounded theory as a methodological technique as utilized in this study follows logically from the social constructivist theoretical background as outlined above. Grounded theory, as originally formulated, originates from a blend of both the positivist and postpositivist research traditions (Charmaz, 2000). The original developers of grounded theory have since diverged in their elaboration and development. Current elaborations range from postpositivist to poststructural (Fassinger, 2005), so that the method is flexible to fitting a researcher’s theoretical paradigm.

3.3.1 Ensuring Trustworthiness

Although qualitative work is interpretive work, there are standards for judging what interpretations are “better” (i.e., truer to data) than others. Like all research, qualitative research maintains concerns about and has procedures for dealing with
methodological limitations. It is well documented that there are many who feel that to be rigorous, research must describe what is actually there in the world (validity) and is capable of being replicated exactly (reliability). These research criteria do not fit the method of qualitative research, and so corollary criteria are utilized that more clearly fit the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of a qualitative study.

Morrow (2005) suggests that qualitative research conducted under the rubric of constructivism should be evaluated by certain criteria, broadly fitting under the categories of fairness, authenticity, and meaning. Fairness involves seeking out and honoring various understandings of the phenomenon to be studied. The four types of authenticity criteria are: ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity. These four authenticities refer to the extent to which the research clarifies and elaborates upon participants’ individual constructions, that participants be aware of and understand the constructions of others, and the extent to which action is stimulated.

Further characteristics that are important to assure quality in meaning-making include a systematic process that is followed throughout the study and triangulation or including multiple perspectives in the research process. Included as criteria for meaning is the extent to which the researcher is reflexive. Patton (2002) emphasizes the extent to which the researcher integrates theory into research, comes to a deep and enhanced understanding or *verstehen*, and doing justice to the uniqueness of particular cases.

Morrow (2005) adds two addition criteria to evaluate constructivist research. These are: (a) the extent to which participant meanings are understood deeply, and (b)
the extent to which meaning was constructed mutually between and among the researcher and participants (or co-researchers).

3.4 Researcher-as-Instrument

The qualitative researcher is the instrument for collecting and analyzing data. This has two implications. First, the researcher must remain alert and sensitive to what happens at all stages of data collection and analysis and be disciplined about recording the data. Second, it has personal consequences. Conducting qualitative research involves social relationships and personal feelings. The subjective experiences of the researcher become part of the data. Instead of trying to remain objective and minimize personal reactions, qualitative researchers treat their feelings toward events as data. The researcher’s own surprise, indignation and questioning becomes an opportunity for reflection and insight.

The idea of the researcher as an instrument highlights an important ideological principle of qualitative researcher. As mentioned earlier, the intent of qualitative research is not to generalize findings (external validity) but to form a unique and thorough interpretation of the complexity of certain contextual situations. Since contexts are heavily laden with meaning, qualitative research is typically conducted in natural settings; natural settings, in turn, both demand and exploit the power of the human instrument. Making full use of the human instrument allows for the type of flexible, interpretive, and adaptive stance that is necessary to understand the explicit knowledge as well as the contextual knowledge that is shared between participant and researcher. The qualitative researcher is engaged in a continual and interactive process of interpretation and re-interpretation, whether through conversations, interactions,
or the evaluations of the values and assumptions the researcher brings into the interview or observation. The sensitivity of the human instrument is maximized in qualitative studies when the interactions with participants are frequent, enduring, and meaningful.

Recognizing the influence of the researcher in data collection and analysis does not mean that the researcher arbitrarily or haphazardly infuses personal opinions or selectively chooses evidence to support personal opinion. Instead, qualitative research methods always make the researcher’s presence an explicit issue. A qualitative researcher’s firsthand knowledge of events, people, and situations raises the question of bias; but it also provides a sense of immediacy, intimacy, and depth.

3.4.1 Researcher’s Relationship to the Topic

A researcher does not approach a research project as an empty slate, but, rather, brings to it experiences of various kinds. Strauss (1987) refers to this as experiential data. Experiential data includes the researcher’s professional experiences, research skills, familiarity with the literature, and personal experiences (Strauss, 1987). All of these contribute to theoretical sensitivity, or the ability of the researcher to interpret and give meaning to the data and develop a relevant theory. Experiential data also provides an additional basis for making constant comparisons in the data, finding variations that exist within the data, and identifying an appropriate sample in keeping with the process of theoretical sampling.

The use of experiential data is monitored carefully to prevent the researcher from imposing preconceived ideas onto the interview data, thereby deviating from what is found or grounded in the data. Controls on the use of experiential data are
found in the techniques of the grounded theory approach, including the use of theoretical samples, coding, and reflexive memo writing. These data collection and analysis procedures continually challenge the researcher’s biases and assumptions. Appropriate use of experiential data requires recognition of what experiences and skills the researcher brings to the proposed work. Below I describe the skills and experiences that I brought to this study as well as the potential biases that might have influenced how I collected and analyzed the data as well as how I chose to report the findings.

3.4.2 My Competence as a Researcher

Before this study began, I had various opportunities to acquire the skills needed to complete this study. My first introduction to grounded theory was obtained during the development of my undergraduate thesis. I read and discussed this work with an advisor specially selected for his training and interest in qualitative research methods. This research project allowed for experiential learning about the methods, especially due to the large time allowance I allotted to this project and the work done at the beginning of the project obtaining access to a set of participants and setting. The corpus of data collected allowed for complex theory development.

In terms of formal course work, my second year of graduate studies included a course on qualitative theory, allowing me to delve more fully into the underlying premises of qualitative research and the variety of theoretical paradigms within qualitative researcher. I took a course on qualitative methodology in the winter quarter of my third year. This course was geared towards experiential understanding of the basic methods within qualitative research. It was required within the course to
perform at least one interview (and transcribe), observation, and document analysis. Practice with these methods as well as group discussions about our experiences and theoretical considerations were instrumental for my learning in that course. This course also suggested keeping a reflexive journal about what had been learned in the course, creating a simple codebook, and of integrating learning about the theory with practical experience through a journal.

3.4.3 My Experience with the Topic of Interest

I have always been deeply interested in the impact of spiritual and religious variables on a person’s development personally and professionally. My undergraduate thesis was a grounded study of recovery from eating disorders within a 12-step program. The theory that developed out of this study was that recovery could be likened to a spiritual conversion experience. My master’s thesis investigated the influence of spirituality and personal growth on psychological well-being. My understanding of the topic of interest is influenced by both the experiential understanding gained through working on both of those theses, as well as the reading completed prior to the beginning of this proposed study.

In addition to the research experience with the general topic of spirituality, I have personal experience with the population to be studied. I have chosen to study a community population of which I am a member. This results in intimacy with the population and the phenomenon to be studied, but also produces a need to be careful of personal biases and to make explicit attempts to include other diverse perspectives within the population. These considerations will be discussed in the following section.
3.4.4 My Place in the Research

In addition to educational and professional experiences, I have identified several biases or perspectives that I bring to this study. First, as previously discussed, I identify with particular conceptions of spirituality and growth. My perspective is that community and interconnection are important for growth, especially within a community that is sometimes marginalized by family and society. I feel that spirituality is political. The spiritual worldview that one holds can be a cause for division within people. I believe that a supportive community is essential for growth. In fact, it is a central question that guided my inquiry into this population.

Second, I view spirituality as a human phenomenon. I do not separate ‘spiritual’ development from ‘human’ development. This distinction is important, as much of the literature separates the two, or maintains an uneasy alliance between the two. For me, the material is not separate from the spiritual; they are simply different manifestations. I believe that there are cognitive manifestations of growth that are included within my conception of human/spiritual growth. I use the words ‘spiritual development’ to include human development.

My interest in spiritual development stems from my personal experiences of growth over my lifespan. My personal experiences are a rich resource of my personal perspective as I contemplate this research project. It is important to briefly share some of the experiences that have impacted my understanding of the proposed subject. I was raised in a strongly religious family, situated within a small homogeneous community. As an adolescent, I questioned the religious beliefs of my family. These questions came from social experiences of being isolated and rejected by peers, from intellectual
questions about philosophical assumptions, and from transcendent spiritual experiences and intuitions. The spiritual worldview that I had been taught did not explain what I understood and experienced within the world. I explored these questions within myself, through the lessons I learned by means of interactions with others. During my undergraduate education, I was able to explore other worldviews formally. All of this exploration was deeply connected to how I experienced myself as a person, and also related to creating meaning. I found connections to other people, whether in passing or in deep communion, to be deeply instrumental to my growth.

In my situation, my journey has not been linear. Connections to others have been important, and have supported me. In my personal experience, my choices have created distance between my family and myself. This deeply saddens me, as I have no wish to cause them suffering. In my situation, my family cannot see the connections between our worldviews. In my situation, my religious affiliation places me in a small minority, and the community and support provided through connection to this center has been important for my continued growth.

My personal experience very much influenced how I conceptualized this study. Being aware of the personal experiences and perspectives that I brought into this research project was an important first step in managing potential bias. I also kept a research journal during the course of the study. This research journal included reflexive examination of my ideas in relation to the data and the research process itself. Conversations with my advisor, colleagues, and the participants of this study (co-researchers) helped to further identify and manage possible bias.
3.5 Participants

Because the focus of qualitative research differs from the focus of statistical research, it requires a set of standards for the selection process (Polkinghorne, 2005). One of the main foci of statistical research is the ability to generalize, whereas qualitative research focuses on the ability to create ‘thick’ descriptions of a particular phenomenon. Due to this unique focus, qualitative selection procedures differ. Random sampling does not make sense. In the case of qualitative research, purposive selection is necessary. Researchers select participants on the basis of ‘information richness’ (Patton, 1990). There are many different types of purposeful sampling.

3.5.1 Sampling Strategies

This study employed a theory-based or operational construct sampling design (Patton, 1990). As the name implies, theoretical sampling is guided by the researcher’s developing theory and is determined during data analysis. Samples were selected in an ongoing and deliberate manner in order to expand the developing theory and discover new concepts related to the theory. Theoretical sampling also serves to test the emerging theory under which conditions the theory does or does not hold true.

Three steps are involved in theoretical sampling. Each involves a different ‘type’ of sampling that builds upon the working categories and constructs developed in the previous step. “Open” or “maximum variation” sampling guides the initial selection of participants. Five interviews were gathered in this stage, selecting individuals perceived to have maximum variation of age, experience, and ethnic/cultural background. In this step, the greatest variety of data is collected; anything the researcher believes is likely connected to the phenomena under study, looking for as
much diversity within the phenomena as possible. Once the researcher has developed working categories from this step, she or he then moves to the second step in theoretical sampling in which opportunities to explore developing concepts in greater depth and variety is maximized. Using ‘relational’ and ‘variational’ sampling techniques, the researcher again samples on the basis of theoretical relevance but does so with a focus toward clarifying and defining the working categories and constructs identified in the first step. Four additional interviews were collected during this stage. Finally, in the third step the researcher uses ‘discriminate sampling’ to further test previously developed properties, categories, and relationships across categories. Sampling at this point becomes very deliberate, and specific choices are made to fill in data gaps in the theory and to seek out negative cases (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Two final interviews were collected during this stage to fill-in gaps in the data and enrich the data.

In grounded theory studies, sampling is not representative, but contingent on previously sampled elements. This precludes the researcher from stating in advance how much data will be collected (e.g., how many observations, how many persons interviewed). Data collection or sampling proceeds until the researcher reaches a point of theoretical saturation or redundancy (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, the grounded researcher must still identify a starting point for sample. The decision of where to begin is guided by the main research question and the research literature in the general area under study.
3.5.2 The Study Sample

The study sample was drawn from a small Buddhist community. This community has been in place for around 25 years, and as such has practitioners who have been members for years, and those who have recently begun attending. The Buddhist center is mainly comprised of converts to the religion, but is not exclusively composed of converts. Several participants were selected specifically because they were born into the religion and would likely provide rich information about possible differences between converts to Buddhism and those who grew up Buddhist. Patton (1990) suggests that as few as six participants may be enough for meaningful analysis. In this study, five individuals were initially selected and sampling continued until theoretical saturation. Participants were selected for maximum diversity of age, ethnicity, and length of membership at the center. Sampling continued with focus on obtaining unique experiential knowledge, until theoretical saturation. Sampling discontinued after eleven interviews with concurrent observational data from the center.

The final sample consisted of six females and five males, with ages ranging from 23 to 70 (See Appendix A for an overview of the demographic information of participants.). The ages of participants ranged from 23 to 70. The median age of participants was 44, and the average was 44.45 years. There were five males and six females in this sample. Two individuals identified as Caucasian, two as Taiwanese, one as Columbian, one as Indian, one as Thai, one as Irish, one as Russian Jewish and Irish, one as Irish and Slovak, and one as African-American. Ten of the eleven participants affiliated themselves with Buddhism. The amount of time participants indicated as
being affiliated with Buddhism ranged from 3 years to 42 years. Five of the six who indicated a prior religious affiliation indicated they were formerly Catholic.

The participants indicated they engaged in a broad range of spiritual/religious practices. Words that have an asterisk next to them are also defined in a brief glossary contained in Appendix A. Nine of the eleven participants indicated that they engaged in shinay* meditation, which is a term referring to tranquility meditation. Tranquility meditation is a practice in which the participant chooses a meditative focus that can be the breath, a mundane object, or a holy object, and allows the mind to rest. When the mind wanders, the practitioner brings the mind back to the focus of meditation. Nine of the eleven indicated that they regularly engaged in sadhana* practices, which is a broad term referring to practices that involve a liturgy. In this set of practices, the practitioner is chanting out loud, following a precise liturgy involving complex visualizations. These different practices also referred to as ‘creation and completion’ practices are designed to familiarize the practitioner with various enlightened aspects of their mind. Two individuals indicated the practiced ngondro*. Ngondro refers to a lengthy set of liturgical practices designed to develop faith in the path, remove obscurations and obstacles, accumulate merit and wisdom, and connect to the enlightened mind through connection to one’s guru. This set of practices involves a specific number of recitations of each section before one can move on to the next section, the entire practice can be divided into either four or five sections, depending on the lineage of the teacher. Four individuals indicated that they regularly practiced tsok, which is a term referring to feast practices. Tsok practices are part of a liturgical practice (sadhana). Three individuals indicated that they practiced mahamudra,*
which is a term referring to practices that directly examine the nature of mind and reality. These advanced practices are undertaken with the direct guidance of a teacher, as they require specific preliminary practices, and contextual information as well as personalized support. One individual indicated that she practiced tonglen* regularly. Tonglen is also referred to as ‘sending and receiving’ practice. It is a practice in which the practitioner imagines removing other’s suffering and exchanging it for perfect happiness. It is a practice designed to develop loving-kindness and compassion.

Additional practices indicated were prayer, service, teaching, offerings, and a Native American Healing Ceremony. As is clear, the participants engaged in a wide variety of religious/spiritual practices.

3.5.4 Recruitment

Two strategies were utilized to recruit participants that met sampling criteria. First, I recruited participants using purposeful selection, using prior knowledge of the composition of the center. This process was made easier by prior involvement at the center. It was also made complex because of prior involvement. All of my participants already knew me, or knew of me. Reflexivity and attention to the needs of the participants were vital. This was especially true for participant concerns of confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from each interview participant and from the board for observations and document analysis. Observations were done only during public practices and classes. My second strategy for recruitment of interview participants was to ask participants to nominate those they thought might be interested and who might increase the range of experience included in the study. I thought this was an exceptionally useful strategy in this relatively small community.
Determining what constituted enough data for the study was guided by the grounded theory concept of theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theoretical saturation means that interviews are not yielding new concepts or ideas related to the categories that have been developed from the previous data and that have been identified as ‘core categories’ or categories that appear to be particularly meaningful in the data. After thoughtfully selecting participants through ingoing decision-making, qualitative researchers typically begin to see patterns or similarities in the data relative to the core categories. When a pattern within the core categories is apparent, the categories are considered saturated and collecting additional data is no longer useful (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). At this point, the remaining data is collected to confirm categories and the developing theory, add complexity and depth to the theory, and to provide additional opportunities for negative case examples to emerge.

3.6 Sources of data

This section will detail the important sources of information for this study. The sources of data included interviews, observations, field notes, and documents collected from the site. This section will detail the methodological and theoretical background for inclusion of these methods and for the specific approach used.

Interviews were an important source of data in this study. Consistent with a social constructivist methodological approach, the interviews were emergent and semi-structured. A brief set of initial interview questions were derived from the literature, from self, and from informal conversations with colleagues, and potential participants. During the process of collecting interviews, participants were asked for their suggestions and feedback. Due to the emergent nature of qualitative research
under a social constructivist framework, the exact sets of questions were unique to the participant. This practice is consistent with the underlying philosophy of the proposed research.

Initial questions derived from prior research and from personal reflection are included in Appendix A. This set of questions provided a general framework for the interview, with each individual participant being asked variations of questions depending on the richness of information given. Some questions were reframed, as several of the participants spoke English as a second (or third) language. The questions were chosen based on their relevance to the basic research questions stated previously. Eleven individuals were interviewed. Participants were also asked to fill-out a brief demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire is provided in Appendix B. I chose not to report the occupational data in this study, to protect confidentiality and maintain relative anonymity. Interviews ranged from fifty to eighty minutes, with a mean length of sixty-two minutes. These interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed by the researcher to allow full immersion in the data. The interviews were initially fully transcribed, including the researcher’s remarks. Each transcription was checked and rechecked for accuracy of transcription, to make sure the participant’s exact words were transcribed. In subsequent transcription, the researcher’s comments were not transcribed, as it became clear they would not be a useful part of the analysis. Wherever the response of the participant was unclear, brackets were used to indicate possible missing information. Grammar was only modified in the case where the idea was very unclear when transcribed word-for-word.
In all other cases, the exact wording of the participant was protected to maintain the unique vocal style of each participant.

In addition to interviews, participant observations were conducted to allow for some triangulation of data. These observations took place during community practices, classes, and social events with special focus on interactions between and among community members. Field notes also included impressions of the center as whole, with an attempt to describe the detailed impressions of the décor, the smells, and sounds of the practices and classes. Notes were hand-written, and dated. Field notes were also gathered before and after each interview, noting impressions and current theoretical formulations given the data at the time.

Documents were also collected from the site. Documents included holy objects, texts, and words from practices, chants, and paintings. The wording from texts was analyzed to compare to the participants reported experiences and observations. Reflexive field notes were taken before and after interviews, observations, and after document analyses. A timeline for observation, interviews, and document analysis is provided at the end of the methods section.

3.6.1 Ethical Considerations

I made every effort to uphold the ethical treatment of the participants in this study during data collection, data analysis, and reporting the results of the study. To ensure confidentiality, I utilized pseudonyms that the participants selected. These pseudonyms were used to mark my transcribed interview and any accompanying forms or notes from the interview. Where data from interviews are reported, identifying information was either modified or removed from the report. I have chosen
not to report the occupational data collected in the demographic form as it may identify particular individuals. To protect the confidentiality of the center, I have described it only in very broad terms.

I also chose to present data in ways that most closely represented the intentions of the participants. The original style of the participant was honored; any changes made to interview data were done only for situations in which meaning was lost. These changes were made through notes made to myself post-interview and through member checking with participants.

3.7 Data Analysis

The grounded theory approach to data analysis and theory development is based on the methods and techniques developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). Grounded theory is an inductive approach to generative theory through the constant comparative method. It blends systematic data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling into a comprehensive research strategy that is to generate a theory.

3.7.1 Constant Comparative Method

Glaser and Strauss (1967) outline four stages in the constant comparative method. These include: (a) “comparing incidents applicable to each category; (b) integrating categories and their properties; (c) delimiting the theory; and (d) writing the theory” (1967, p. 105). The first stage involves the collection and coding of data into as many analytical categories as possible. These categories are abstractions based on the data that the researcher develops as she or he compares data sets with other data sets throughout the first stage of the research process. As categories are further
supported by subsequent data collection, the researcher begins to discern the theoretical properties of each category, as well as the dimensions and the conditions under which it is supported or minimized. The purpose of this stage is to ‘take apart the story’ within the data set.

The second stage, then, tries to reintegrate that information taken apart in the first stage. In this stage, the researcher focuses on the attributes within each category and the conditions that support or fail to support it. At this stage, the researcher may ask new questions designed to facilitate the identification of relational patterns between attributes and categories. These proposed relational patterns are subject to continuous examination and verification throughout the entire research process, and must be constantly supported by new data to be retained or modified in the emerging theory. As relationships between categories and their underlying attributes are better understood, the emerging theory coheres and becomes more fully integrated.

During the third stage, the emerging theory is gradually delimited. This occurs in two ways. First, as the researcher seeks to understand relationships across categories, she or he may begin to see uniformities in the data that previously went unnoticed. These uniformities can lead to the development of a smaller set of more abstract categories. Identifying uniformities within and across categories is advantageous because it not only delimits the theory but it also contributes to the emerging theory’s parsimony and broadens its scope (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 111).

Delimitation occurs in a second way as well. As categories become more clearly defined, the researcher begins to engage in further verification activities. Frequently, the researcher will re-examine the original data set and include other data sources –
such as field observations and documents – in an effort to further test the salience of refined categories in the developing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categories that are not supported in this process are dropped, further delimiting the theory. When the comparisons of data no longer yield new categories or embellish existing categories and properties, the theory is said to be ‘saturated’ or sufficiently delimited.

Once the researcher is satisfied that the theory is integrated and has met the requirement of theoretical saturation, she or he can move on to the fourth and final stage of the modified comparison method: writing the theory. This theory is presented as either a discussion or a proposition. This study also utilized qualitative management software to validate the emergent theory, by corroborating connections between categories and within categories as well as searching for themes across data sets.

3.7.2 Managing the Data

Each interview was fully transcribed word for word and the digital copy of the audio was stored on a hard drive safe. Notes about the individual’s behavior and affect were included in parentheses. Words that the participant emphasized were italicized; emotionally laden words were underlined. Each interview yielded between seven and fourteen typed, single-spaced pages of interview text. I transcribed each interview myself to allow for greater immersion in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As I transcribed each interview, I wrote memos about themes and phrases that seemed particularly interesting or salient. Transcript memos were most useful for creating in vivo concepts that arose from the language and words the participants chose to describe their experiences. Although verbatim transcription and the initial memo writing process was a lengthy one, averaging between six to nine hours for each hour
of the interview, it was an essential aspect of the data analysis process and greatly facilitated my awareness of themes and constructs that emerged during data collection, through the intense immersion in the interview data. Observations and document analysis were also typed up. All of this data was managed using qualitative management software.

3.7.3 Building the conceptual framework and theory

Once I created a transcript and wrote brief memos for the *in vivo* codes that emerged from the interview data, I focused on generated conceptual memos. These conceptual memos provided a place for me to write about what was being discovered in the data and to begin asking questions about the data that could reveal possible meanings and further avenues for exploration. In very broad terms, the questions asked of the data are intended to help me answer the very broad question of “what is going on here?” In grounded theory, this process is referred to as ‘dimensionalizing’ the data because it allows the researcher to critically examine the different dimensions of concepts that emerge from the data (Strauss, 1987). In keeping with the symbolic interaction approach that is at the heart of grounded theory, dimensional analysis allows the researcher to understand the social context and the elements that contribute to meaning making.

The process of coding and memo writing created many terms, concepts, and phrases. Making sense of them led to the creation of core categories or themes. Using a constant comparison method (Strauss, 1987), I reviewed the interview data and memos for evidence of places where certain phrases or concepts, though perhaps worded differently, seemed to be describing similar experiences. When this occurred, I
assigned a broader term or category, which evolved as I reflected on the unique experiences of each participant, searching for both confirming and disconfirming evidence for each category.

Once I identified several categories, I created a flowchart through the data, challenging me to step back from the data and see process within and among categories. According to the grounded theory method, theory building involves the search for patterns of action and interaction among concepts in the data. After transcribing and coding eight of the eleven interviews, I was convinced that many of the core categories that emerged were theoretically saturated and that I had made sufficient progress toward explaining linkage between them. I then checked these interactions using NUD*IST, a qualitative analysis software, and began writing outlines and drafts of my Results section. True to the emergent, interwoven nature of qualitative research, writing and rewriting this draft prompted even further analysis and re-working of the developing theory. Trying to describe the processes I found in the data, and explaining the interrelationships between concepts to colleagues forced me to arrange the data in a more conceptually integrated manner. It was at this point that discussions with colleagues helped to more clearly articulate the patterns found in the data, and to question the concepts that had been generated.

3.8 Timeline for the Study

Because of the emergent and self-reflective process of grounded theory, it was proposed that the data collection occur in stages. An initial period of data collection occurred during the months of July and August 2005. During this time, five preliminary interviews were conducted, as well as weekly site visits and initial
document collection. After this initial stage, I stopped collecting for several weeks and spent time immersing myself in the initial data collected. This allowed for a time to clarify research questions, identify holes in the data collection, and to detect emerging questions within the data. A second period of data collection occurred during the months of October and November, with four additional interviews, weekly observations, and document analysis. A second break in data collection occurred during December 2005 and January 2006, to identify remaining gaps in the data, and lingering questions. A final set of data collection occurred during March 2006, collecting two final interviews, and concluding observations and document collection. At this time, data collection focused on specific gaps in the theory, sought out data to increase richness, and allowed for possible negative case examples to occur.

Due to the constant blend of data collection and data analysis, the emerging theory cohered rather tightly by the time of the final data collection stage, so that the months of March through May 2006 were sufficient time to clarify and write up the emergent theory.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

What became increasingly clear, after conducting several interviews was that every individual had his or her own unique path and unique understandings. This was very clearly noted by one of my participants, Edna, when she said:

“They may have some similarities, similar traits, but in general they are very different. I am completely convinced after having worked at this for almost 10 years now; that everyone is truly unique. And all of the aspects of their spiritual life are truly unique. There are some trends, but mostly they are completely unique, totally and utterly unique.”

What was discovered through the process of transcribing, coding, and synthesizing was that while the particular stories were unique, there was a relatively similar process of development that the participants undertook. A model outlining this process will be provided with preliminary hypotheses about directionality in this section. Figure 1 presents the model, without directional hypotheses, to familiarize the reader with the components of the model that will be discussed. Throughout the chapter the words ‘aspect,’ ‘component,’ and ‘category’ will be used interchangeably to describe the elements of the emergent model. Each aspect of the model will be presented in a narrative fashion so that it is easier for the reader to understand the roughly chronological order of the model. Some of the aspects do not have a particular chronological order, but are placed after aspects that appear to occur prior and before
Searching

Relationships

Spiritual/Religious rituals, values, and beliefs

Disconnected to Spiritual/Religious Background

Non-Majority Religion (Buddhism)

Loss of Cultural Context

Early Spiritual Experiences

Suffering

Confusion or Uncertainty

Individual Difference

Disconnected to Spiritual/Religious Background

Figure 1. Aspects of the Emergent Model
aspects that appear to occur later in the participants’ development. Each aspect will be presented along with the relevant evidence from interview, observation, and document analysis that support it. Any disconfirmatory evidence for a particular category or concept will be presented in the same section. Although this process of spiritual development does not appear to be strictly linear, the aspects will be presented in a linear fashion for simplicity. A summary of the process will be presented at the end of this section along with a figure and the emergent metaphor for the process.

The results will be presented in roughly chronological order, beginning with the spiritual/religious cultural context. The spiritual/religious context is the setting within which all of the elements of the emerging model occurred. Several aspects of the participants’ spiritual/religious cultural background were particularly salient in their impact on the participant’s reported path. Secondly, the participants noted particular circumstances unique to themselves that influenced their path. These will be presented second. Thirdly, the participants’ description of their searching process, followed by their descriptions of their early connections to Buddhism will follow. At this point, the experience of confusion or uncertainty about their decision is presented. Following this is the participants’ description of the influence and impact of relationships on their developing spiritual worldview. The worldview that slowly emerged for the participants is presented last, followed by a summary of the model that developed from the data.

Supporting and disconfirmatory evidence will be offered along with the emergent categories. Quotes from the participants will be included along with evidence from observation and document analysis. For clarity, some of the interview,
observation, and document analysis will not be presented. The clearest representations of the emergent categories that are will be included. To describe the number of participants who supported a particular concept, several descriptive words will be used. ‘Some’ or ‘several’ will be used to denote evidence from about 25% of participants. ‘Many’ will be used to denote at least 50% of the participants discussed a particular category or concept. ‘Most’ will be used to denote that at least 75% of participants discussed a particular concept. Sometimes there will be fewer than this number of quotes presented in the results section, as some participants were not as clear in their depictions. In some cases, participants failed to discuss certain topics, not clearly confirming or disconfirming the concept. The participants utilized the terminology of Buddhism to explain many of their experiences. While the terminology is avoided as much as possible to improve clarity for the outside reader, occasionally the concept was central to the comments. An asterisk will be placed next to those words that may not be familiar to the reader, and the reader is directed to Appendix A, which contains a brief glossary.

4.1 Spiritual/Religious Cultural Context

The first element that has an obvious impact on the participants’ spiritual worldview is the spiritual/religious cultural background of the participants. As the participants were from different cultural backgrounds, obviously the particular elements varied. The important categories of elements that participants described were (a) cultural values, (b) significant mentors, and (c) beliefs and rituals.
4.1.1 Values

The first element that will be outlined is the importance of cultural values on spiritual development. Values consist of ideas about what seems important in life. They guide other aspects of culture (Wikipedia, 2006). All of the participants indicated values and beliefs from their cultural background that influenced them. The influence could be either positive or negative. For instance, Jorge, a Latino, noted that hard work, family, and helping others were important values:

“Well, you know like I say, we are coming from a poor family and you see my mother she used to work really hard, my father too, they worked very hard. And she [my mother] was very Catholic, and she was the, you know, over there, the family, the extended family is very important, it’s as important as your own family, the immediate family. It’s very very important, so, and I grew up with this, a lot of people, a lot of family. You know, everybody try to help each other, and not only the family, the neighbors too, everybody.”

MIT noted the importance of helping others close to you, hard work, making money, and the strong goal-orientation of his cultural background. He also noted that immediate concerns were of much more importance than thinking about larger political or social forces:

“So your parents raise you up and they all try to teach us, my grandma try to teach us to help people. And money is important too, it’s true everything we do is all about money… It was really goal-oriented. And the measure of how I do is how much I can make. And what your status in the social standing… Study hard, work hard. Immediate things. And hoping my neighbor is not suffering too much. I think that’s more how Chinese people think, the peasants, they don’t care who the emperor is, that changes a lot.”

Star reported that she perceives other individuals to value making money, and hard work. She noted that the cultural value of Buddhism where she grew up is to get blessings from teachers rather than learning, “They have lots of book in Chinese. But I guess most people that go to the temple, they hardly read those, and if they do read
some, I doubt they understand the meaning or not. They just want to get the puja*, get the blessing from Rinpoche*. And money, money, money, okay go home, and go to work another day.”

_Tsultrim_ felt that the value of logical thinking and tolerance were very important values from his childhood, as well as a general sense that being different is good, “I would say a lot of the characteristics that describe [me] are directly related to my upbringing. You know, growing up in a place like I grew up in, a liberal town, a lot of tolerance, a lot of naïveté, very naïve, a certain amount of skepticism and you’ve got to prove your points… Where I grew up, weird is kind of good, weird is fun, weird is unusual, weird is interesting.”

_Surfergirl_ noted the importance of devotion from her Catholic upbringing, “I haven’t really expressed this, but for me spirituality is about devotion, devotion is the most important thing for me, which of course, came from my…I believe I was born with it, Catholicism, I really glommed onto that…”

_Tsundru_ noted how his Catholic education taught him the value of service, “Hearing about St. Francis of Assisi and other Catholics and women and their service I think also motivated me along service lines.”

_Turtlehawk_ talked about valuing her cultural roots, in the continuously evolving African-American culture, as well as deep ancestral roots in Africa, and how that impacts her openness,

“It allows me, if gives me the okay to be more expressive, to be open more because my parents [encouraged me to explore African-American culture]… Paul Lawrence Dunbar, still today moves me to tears. I think in some way I understand. With that and knowing that that was pretty much like an American-thing. Knowing that it probably changed them, the rhythms or
whatever, somewhere in Africa, whatever, but it plays differently, it was more open and free. I think that the freedom, being able to flow freely… I think that the roots that my ancestors had a lot more freedom of movement, then I can definitely do that, explore and not be so closed-minded.”

All participants talked about the impact of the values they learned on their later development, whether they continued to connect with these values or not. All of the participants selected some values they continued to connect to. Many noted feeling connected to the values of helping others and hard work, and some noted the importance of family or community connections. Several noted they were disconnected to the value of hard work and seeking money if it was not rooted in a deeper meaning structure. In general, the values they selected were unique to their background and cultural experience, and impacted what they were attracted to in Buddhism. It appeared that they approached Buddhism with these values, and were connected to the similarities that existed between the values of their cultural background and those espoused by Buddhism.

4.1.2 Mentors

All of my participants also mentioned important individuals in their lives who were important influences on their development. Most of the individuals mentioned were close family members. These relationships also included a mix of positive and negative characteristics. Some of the participants mentioned they were exposed to the negative examples of some elders, as well as more positive examples. Edna noted that her great-grandmother was a significant influence on her spiritual development because of her kindness, “…the other person who was really inspirational to me when I was a child was my great-grandmother who I had the privilege of knowing because
she was a very religious woman who read the Bible daily, and as my aunt would say, ‘never ever said a harsh word about anyone ever.’”

*Pat* reported that he felt his father was a great mentor and that he did not feel very connected to how his mother related to the world, “I think for the spirituality, I think I am more influenced by my father, I think he is a spiritual man. My mom, I think, not quite there, she [is] still caught up in the culture, the way work and society dictated, meaning, she probably cares more about what other people think, as opposed to what is it I want to do.”

*Maple* had an experience very similar to Pat’s. She felt her father was a great mentor but notes that her mother’s way of being in the world challenged her, “I think that [my father] was always a very optimistic, spiritually oriented, good person…. My mother on the other hand, was a very emotional, needs-driven person and probably she had impact on my spiritual life and my development in the sense that instead of having a mother that could cater to my needs as child, I was really in the position of having a mother that had wants and needs. And that challenges you as an individual, even as a young individual, to do something to adapt to that.”

*Jorge* spoke very positively about the influence of his mother, “My mother, we were so poor, and she was helping everybody. How, I don’t know, I don’t know, but she was helping… She was really great because she was so good and she had very little school, probably she went six months to school and she raised nine brothers and one sister, and I remember you talk to her and you talk to a person with a lot of education.”
**MIT** spoke about his grandmother’s influence on his interest in helping people, “So your parents raise you up and they all try to teach us, my grandma try to teach us to help people.”

**Star** noted that she was heavily influenced by the female members of her family, especially in the realm of faith, “While I was very young, I know there’s a Quan-Yin*, something like that. And this is something interesting, one of my aunts; she told me she can see that. I’m never sure it’s true or not because I never ask her these questions as I grew up, but she always told me she can see that. So, she would say, ‘See, do you see the sky, she’s there.’ And I would say, ‘I can’t see anything.’ Yeah, but she would say she’s there; she’s protecting me.”

**Turtlehawke** emulated her father in his interest and value for questioning and exploring different ways of thinking, “My dad was someone who loves to talk, he loves to explore all the different kinds of things… I lean more toward my dad’s kind of philosophy, in exploring. That’s the route I always wanted to go.”

**Tsultrim** noted his mother’s influence on his value for well-thought out arguments and good logic, and his father in his value for service, “My mother, not in an unpleasant or confrontational way, but she’ll put you through it. She wants to know, and if you haven’t thought about what you’re doing, she’ll show you that you haven’t…. but I also know that something about me, and something I think I got mostly from my father, is that I do… my dad literally said this, ‘If you’re benefiting from it, you owe it something back – you have to give back.’”

**Surfergirl** talked about her mother’s value for thinking about others, and her father’s positive qualities, “From the time I had breakfast and dinner my mother was
always reminding me about people starving somewhere. Which was wonderful, because you started off thinking about other people besides your own little life… My father was a man of incredible integrity and honesty, so he didn’t have to live a spiritual life.” Surfergirl also spoke about her grandmother’s deep faith, and how that affected her, “My grandmother called the Catholic church the Holy Mother of the Church. It was never, ‘Are you going to church?’ it was ‘Are you going to visit the holy mother of the church today?’ She was, her parents were directly from Ireland, and everything had to be religious, but she was very lenient. It wasn’t just church it was the angels. She was a little bit more of a mystic.”

Tsundru was deeply moved by the example of Mother Theresa, “…folks like Mother Theresa, who I think was exemplary in her example of, in her display of spirituality. Her service was - should make everyone cry at their lack of so much service.”

Some of the participants emulated the example of their mentors, and many learned to value different qualities from their mentors, such as kindness, faith, service, or a focus on others. It appeared that the importance of helping others and living a moral life (whether overtly religious or not) were two significant similarities among the many of the participants’ mentors. These mentors influenced the participants’ later spiritual development, in the values they continued to hold, and the focus of their paths.

4.1.3 Beliefs and Rituals

Many participants connected to beliefs and rituals from their childhood, and these beliefs and rituals impacted how they approached their spiritual development, in
general and Buddhism, in particular. *Pat* grew up with his father’s strong belief in Buddhism and learned to meditate. This is what he noted, “…when I was growing up, my dad, he was a Buddhist monk for like 17 years, and then when he met my mom, he was still a monk, and then he got out of monkhood and got married. So as I was growing up, I was taught Buddhism, and he also taught me how to meditate, growing up, so I did learn how to do that. I was just watching him do it, and he would just tell me what to do. I had exposure to it.”

*Star* and *MIT* also grew up in predominantly Buddhist cultures. *Star* noted the cultural blend in Taiwan of Taoism and Buddhism, and the importance of horoscopes, “…Buddhism say there is a level for the gods so that’s what I believe. And in Taiwan, there is Taoism. Most people believe in Taoism, so they believe in so many gods. Like there are thousands of gods for the sea, for protection, for the harvest …people use horoscope like when you are born, and which year, and what character, something like that. They have their own way…because they change, right. So many people collect data on everything, so you take the conclusions from some of them, so I believe some of them…”

*MIT* noted his perception of what God was from cultural practices in his childhood, “I come from Taiwan, so there was God before I got into Tibetan Buddhism. God means, if you want something you pray, like if I go to temple, Buddhist temple you pray, and you say ‘Well I wish that I could do better on my test’ something like that, so I always ask… Yeah. Just like here, you go to church and pray to God. In Taiwan it’s the same.”
Maple noted the influence of Hinduism on her early understanding, “I also come from a Hindu background so… in that tradition there’s many gods and goddesses… We had retreats that we would go on occasionally, there was an adult section where they would attend lectures, and there was a children’s section. And I did actually liked those very much, and I was really attracted to it.”

Tsultrim, as the only individual in the study to be raised agnostic, noted the impact of not having a background of a belief in God, “…my background never really posits a creator being, god, whatever. My parents didn’t impose or imply such a thing…So given that the household didn’t have that as part of its credo or life, it came to me probably beginning in adolescence as I started to think of such things, that I had a very critical view of organized religion.”

The participants who grew up Catholic (Jorge, Surfergirl, Tsultrim, Edna, and Dechen) all mentioned the impact of the culture of Catholicism on their preferences for rituals and the beliefs they connect to now. Jorge spoke about his appreciation for ceremonies, “…you know, in a way, I like the ceremonies. I went to Rome and St. Peter’s Cathedral and it’s unbelievable. You go over there and you feel you are really close to God.”

Surfergirl talked about Catholicism as the base for her growth, that she felt she filtered everything through her first lens of Catholicism, “I think I will always be a Christian, no matter, no matter, I have to admit that, so I’m always praying to something (laughs)…. I liked all the saints in Catholicism. So I prayed to saints, and Jesus and Mary, but never God… I tired to bring it real personal, real quick,
absolutely, immediate satisfaction (laughs)…. being raised Catholic, I know I’m
backtracking, it was like the carpet of my life.”

Tsundru noted that he felt his early training in Catholicism helped him connect
to Buddhism, “As a Catholic, there were also saints, people just like me, and so I think it
translates later into my acceptance of Buddhism, even more so, because of that… Of
course my family first introduced me to the concept of Jesus and God and right and
wrong and how that related to God – right and wrong and God were similar things.
And the whole glory of heaven and the whole majesty of ritual, Catholic ritual and the
pictures of the majesties of heaven and all that and the glory of it all and believing in
Buddhism is not that much different at all (laughs).”

Edna focused on the warmth of community she felt within her early
Catholicism, and her positive relationships with nuns and priests as a young girl,
“…from the time I was a child, I was sort of protected in the container of Catholicism,
and all the communities and the supportive structures of Catholicism, the nuns
particularly because I went to a school that was taught by nuns.”

Dechen noted the similarities in what she connected to in Catholicism and
Buddhism, “They’re saints who can actually help you, and they’re like you, faults like
you. And you can pray to them. And I really liked that. I like the imagery, I liked the
symbolism, and I could relate to that… And so, and then also the other thing, there’s
actually quite a bit of praying, you know, we had the rosary…”

It’s striking how many of the participants were formerly Catholic (five), and
how they all noted strong connections between the religion of their childhood and the
religion they chose as adults. The background of the participants was not known prior
to data collection, so the large number of Catholics was surprising, and likely an important factor in the ability of the participants to relate to the particular lineage of their conversion. All but two of the participants (Pat and Tsultrim) reported being raised with a strong notion of a God or some kind of deity to whom they prayed. All of the participants noted the importance of these early beliefs and rituals on how they began to understand their own experience.

4.1.4 Summary

The context of the participants’ early experiences was noted by all participants as being formative in their developing understanding of themselves and the world around them. The mentors, values, beliefs and rituals of their religious/spiritual background impacted how they interpreted Buddhism, which will be discussed in later sections. The particular combinations of values were unique, but many participants indicated values for hard work, benefiting others, and openness to others. Most of the participants indicated that their mentors were their parents, and that they learned the qualities of a deeply spiritual life from their mentors. They also noted that they directly learned values from these particular mentors. Several participants were also negatively influenced by significant persons in their life whose spiritual path or way of being they didn’t connect to. Most of the participants (nine of eleven) connected to the ritual of praying from their cultural background, and while that context was different, it was something many of them brought to Buddhism. The individuals who grew up Catholic in particular noted the appreciation of ritual, prayer, and community were aspects of their cultural background that they continued to value.
4.2 Personal Context

The spiritual/religious cultural background of the participants then appeared to be filtered through the unique details of each participant’s experience. In particular, several circumstances were brought up by participants as being important to how they began to understand the world and themselves. They are presented in no particular order, as the participants spoke about the salience of these contexts at differing time points in their lives.

4.2.1 Feeling ‘Different’

A first quality that all the participants, including those who grew up culturally Buddhist, noted as important to their spiritual development was the impact of ‘feeling different.’ The women of the group appeared to discuss ‘feeling different’ within their important social relationships, and how being different impacted their relationships with others, either peers or family.

Both Star and Surfergirl noted that they were very religious when they were young. Surfergirl reported that her father was worried she was “too religious.” “My father thought I was getting too religious too early, I wanted to be a nun at a very young age because I used to… there were tons of little booklets, so every week I was almost stealing them to bring them home and read them. And I read them at a pretty fast rate, and I collected all the saints cards all in my room, and so my father was very concerned, and talked to the nuns about it.”

Star’s religiosity appeared to be normalized by her mother, “I was like, yes, I believe in Quan-Yin, and while I was like five or so, I would have a necklace that was special for Quan-Yin. I would put it on a blanket on a desk or something, and I would
put it there and pray. I would tell my mom, see, I’m doing that. And my mom would say, you know you don’t need to do that, actually we have a big room for that.” While her mother supported her religious inclinations, she reported feeling different from her peer group. She stated that friends say to her, “Yeah, like okay, life is good, life is fun, where are you going, wasting your time, when you can go drinking and party and I do that also, but sometimes I just wonder if they’re happy at all, just hang out with friends, stupid stuff. So I’m kind of different like that…”

*Dechen* noted that she felt that she had a different orientation to the world than others around her when she was growing up. She wanted to explore and felt others did not, “…when I was growing up I really felt out of place in my environment, kind of in my family even, I was different. I wanted to know about the world and they didn’t, and they’re still like that.”

*Edna* reported that she felt very isolated and lonely as a child and that she didn’t realize until she was in high school that how she felt was not the norm, “I was a very unhappy child, and I really remember specifically feeling very isolated and alone… I remember very clearly when I was in high school and college talking with friends and realizing that how I felt was not normal.”

*Turtlehawk* discussed the importance of her race on her socialization, and how she felt, and continues to feel, that she could not be fully herself in social situations, feeling that she has to play a role. “Say I’ve gone somewhere, like to a concert with my father and we’re the only black people in the audience, there’s a certain way to act. So you know, that’s just the way it is. I can’t just be wandering around thinking, ‘Oh this is great,’ I have to be aware of my surroundings and how people are reacting to me.
It’s kind of sad, because when I go on vacation, I have to think about how people are reacting to me. Unfortunately, that’s the way I’ve always functioned.”

The five males in the group mostly spoke about the feeling of difference as a preference for being different, or liking to think independently, or doing things one’s own way. While they framed their interest differently, there was no difference in their value for being part of a community, with one exception, which will be discussed in later sections. For instance, Tsundru noted, “I think I’ve always been attracted to minority groups. Be it a theatre troupe, be it a commune, be a non-profit organization, a little group of hippies doing some collective work together, alternative groups have always been, either creative, or spiritual, or political, socially political, have always been attractive to me.”

Tsuntrim stated that he felt similarly, and also felt many others were attracted to Buddhism for similar reasons, “I think, myself, and a lot of people who pursue this path are attracted to that for that very reason. I like being in the minority. I try to not have that be part of the attraction. I hope over time, that it plays less of a role, but I know for a fact that it was part of the initial attraction that it was a little bit unusual. I’m not someone who seeks comfort in conformity.”

Pat noted his preference for thinking for himself, and stated his belief that people in general come to Buddhism looking for something different, “Even though I don’t like to be a leader, but I like to think for myself. I like to analyze, test it out, does it work… I think that people come to the Buddhist center looking for something different.”
*Jorge* spoke about how he had thought for a long time about religion, and had come to believe he did not need faith in God to be a good person, but understood how it was important for many people, “Now I do realize that for me, I am thinking this way because I am thinking about this for so many years. For me, it’s like that. But for a lot of people, you know, my sisters, they need God, they need religion. So you know I say, it’s great, go and pray, because it’s important, because if you have faith in something, it’s going to help you. “

It’s interesting to note the noticeable gender differences in how the participants reported ‘feeling different.’ All of the women spoke in terms of connection to others, and the impact on relationships. All of the men spoke about ‘feeling different’ as a personal preference, or noted the importance of thinking independently.

4.2.2 Direct Experiences

A second quality that all the participants noted as important to their spiritual development was direct spiritual experience. All of the participants indicated valuing direct experience as an important source of spiritual knowledge. Several of the clearest examples are presented in this section. *Edna* reported having a strong spiritual experience at a very young age in concert with the teachings about and experience of communion, “When I was actually receiving instruction for first communion, the nuns basically said when you receive the wafer, this means you are actually receiving Christ… And I actually had a very strong spiritual experience at that time that lasted for several weeks, of a feeling of transcendence, a feeling of unity and I was only seven and I had utterly no idea what it was about, but it was renewed every time I took communion and that lasted maybe several weeks to a month and then it faded.”
Turtlehawk described an experience she had with music, “One of the coolest things, they had us lay on our backs on the floor just listening to this music, just drumming. And I remember I had this visualization of my mother. Just swinging around, very free, both of us in yellow dresses. That was the first time I had the idea that there was some kind of connection with music.”

Tsundru described a desire for experiential understanding of religious concepts very early on, “I wanted the experience of the seventh heaven. I wanted to go there. I wanted to know what that was about experientially. I didn’t want to read it in a book. I didn’t want someone to tell me about it. I thought it was something that one could only experience, and I’ve always been on that quest…”

Pat reported an experience that made him believe that minds were connected, “There are a couple of things that have happened that make me believe all minds are connected. But I think what happened, a couple of days before I found out that there’s a move in the office, I had a dream that I had to move away from the office. It doesn’t mean I’m going to see into the future, the more I thought about it, probably not, but when I had the dream just a couple of days before that happened, things had already started, but I’m just happy that I’m connected to that somehow.”

4.2.3 Suffering

A third experience that all the participants noted as important to their spiritual development was experience with suffering. Suffering connected the participants to themselves and to others. Many noted that suffering was the reason they sought out Buddhism. Two participants spoke about difficulties within a romantic relationship. Pat spoke about a difficulty within a romantic relationship that led him to focus on
spirituality as well as his beliefs about what brought others to spirituality, “I think what happened to me, was that I was in a romantic relationship that didn’t work out, and for some reason I just got really really depressed over that person… I think that’s probably when I started getting more in touch with my spirituality.” Tsundru also noted that relationship difficulties, as well as work dissatisfaction, contributed to his seeking out the Buddhist center, “I wasn’t really at peace, a whole lot, at that time I don’t think. Lauren (not her real name) and I were in rough spots in our relationship, things like that, didn’t like the work I was doing, trying to be a good person through it all.”

Several participants noted that problems in physical or emotional health spurred interest in spirituality. Star reported that her emotional and physical well-being were the primary cause of her interest in spirituality, “Because how I came to this Buddhism, is because I really feel something, and I really, I kind of have depression. I think I do have depression, but I’ve never go to see a psychiatrist or something. And why I have cancer, I think it was because I was too depressed… When you know you are going to die very soon, and when you are only my age, 20, and it’s really hell because no one can help you. For me, death, this world, no one can teach you what’s the life after that.” Surfergirl noted the impact of physical illness on her experience and her understanding, “So a lot of my lessons have been because of major physical breakdowns. When I was about four I couldn’t… walk, my hips weren’t finished forming. So I had to stay in the hospital for a few months. So even at a young age, I got to really see a lot of suffering… So when I was 28, and I had a lot of problems… And I was in a hospital with everyone just full of fear. I just felt it was a
great opportunity, to either freak out and try and get well my whole life, or instead change my mind.” Maple noted emotional concerns as being primary to seeking spirituality, “That’s where I got the interest in meditating. I was interested in gaining more peace of mind. I was also having trouble emotionally at that time.” Edna also reported that mental well-being was a primary focus, “So I went through a lot of difficulty as a teenager and in college and it really, I remember writing in my diary, if I can’t get a hold of this, I’m in trouble, in terms of my psychiatric health.”

Jorge noted that going through his daughter’s death led him to conclude that he agreed with certain philosophical aspects of Buddhism, “I am convinced, you know, I went through really rough periods in my life, specifically with my daughter dying. I find out she was really a strong person, and she taught me a lot. And my conclusion is that if anybody can help yourself, it’s you. So I really believe this in myself. “ Dechen also spoke about death. Her mother died at a young age, and it and caused her to think about life and death, “My mother actually died when I was really young of breast cancer, so that had a certain impact on my life. It actually made me think about impermanence because I was so young and she was really young when she died.”

Several individuals noted their general belief that suffering attracts people to Buddhism. For instance, MIT noted, “I think that’s how most people start. You want something so you go some place. Or you want to be healthy, so you exercise. So that’s what gets you there, I think.” Maple concurred, “I’m starting to feel that people that are attracted in this country in this culture (of course this is just a small microcosm) to Buddhism are those that really need it. You know. Myself included, you know.” Pat, “Usually if they come there [to the Buddhist center], it’s to increase their
spirituality, look for something to overcome suffering of some form. If they are stopping there, it sort of their last attempt to get better (laughs)… Star noted that she felt young people were unlikely to seek spirituality unless they encountered obstacles, “I think it is hard for young people, only if they meet something they can’t figure out.”

All of the participants noted that the experience of suffering brought them to spirituality. Some mentioned physical illness, some noted the experience of a close person’s death, some mentioned difficulties in relationships, and some mentioned psychological issues. There was a consensus among all the participants that suffering was a very important factor in spirituality. It appears that they sought out a particular kind of spirituality because they felt disconnected in some way to the spiritual or religious aspects of their cultural background.

4.2.4 Disconnect with Spiritual/Religious Background

A fourth experience that the participants noted as important to their spiritual development was feeling disconnected to their spiritual/religious background. The lack of complete connection with the religion or spiritual practices of their family and culture was indicated by most of the participants, including those who grew up culturally Buddhist. This concept of disconnect is contrasted with the ‘feeling different’ category by the fact that the participants who reported feeling disconnected (nine of eleven), noted feeling there was something wrong with the match between themselves and the spiritual/religious background, whereas they spoke about ‘feeling different’ as being something related mostly to their own personal characteristics. Two of those who grew up Buddhist noted elements of how Buddhism was practiced in their culture that they felt disconnected to.
There were two exceptions to this general pattern of disconnection, *Pat* and *Tsultrim*. *Pat* reported continuing to feel very connected to the Buddhism his father taught him, but he doesn’t like the divisiveness of religion in general, “I think religion divides people because they are excluded. Some religion excluded certain group of people because of the different practices they do. So I think religion divides people. I don’t think God intended us to be divided. So when people ask me, ‘What religion are you?’ I tend to answer, ‘I practice spirituality.’ As someone who did not come from a particular religious or spiritual background, *Tsultrim* continued to value the skepticism, logical thinking, and analysis of his cultural background, “If somebody is trying to explain something to me and they resort to ‘Just because it is, or because the book says so,’ then they haven’t made their case. You have to make your case to me…”

As one of those who was raised culturally Buddhist, *Star* talked about her mixed feelings about the blend of Taoism and Buddhism where she grew up, and the use of horoscopes, “For Taoism part, I would go to temple, sometimes… I believe in them still, I still respect them, but I hardly go their temples. I believe there’s god there, but it doesn’t really pertain to me… I don’t really like to go to those people [who create horoscopes] to ask them what will happen in the future. I hate to do that. I don’t like to know my future. You know, most of the times, when they tell me what to do, it hardly happens, so that’s that I think.”

*MIT* noted that the main difference between his experience of Buddhism before and after he began attending the local Buddhist center here in the U.S. is that he feels he is more informed about Buddhism and the Buddhist system of thinking, “God means, if you want something you pray, like if I go to temple, Buddhist temple you
pray, and you say ‘Well I wish that I could do better on my test’ something like that, so I always ask. But when I come here I learn that’s not really the purpose of it… I didn’t know better so I just followed what most of the people did. We had the food offering, and hope their family will be well next year… I was not as informed in Taiwan, you just do it and are not informed.”

Maple felt connected to her Hindu background as a child but not strongly rooted, and failed to keep up the connection. She also noted that she knew she wasn’t connected to Christianity, as she understood it, “I didn’t have sort of strong roots in practice or a religion and I would say that I was technically Hindu and had gone to temple and done practices, but in my adult life I wasn’t making the effort to go to temple to go to practices, schools… I always felt an aversion to Christian… the Christian culture and the way that Christianity has developed…”

Jorge reported having several powerful experiences, as well as increased historical knowledge that changed the way he thought about his Catholic background,

“I was taught that God is so powerful and just and good. I really believed that in my youth. I was really really… I went to communion almost every day, it was the day I find out that… It started with the Christian Brothers. There were two or three guys who were very close to the Brothers and so then they jump to the next class. They went to the fourth grade, but they weren’t very smart! Everyone was surprised. We were playing soccer in the country and so that day we were walking home, and these guys who stay all the time with the Brothers, they were having sex over there. And of course, we find out, oh this is what happened. So you feel really bad because you say, well, these guys are God guys, they are helping God, they are with the same God here… These two brothers, young guys, two young guys, they belong to the Democrat party and the Brothers they are very conservative, and they really give a hard time to these guys. And one day, they [the Brothers] started with one boy, and they started hitting the boy, then turned to the other, they started hitting the other boy. So, you know, I say, this is not right, and then little by little, you start studying and looking at history, you know, what happened, you know. The Catholic Church has a pope 13 years old because the family bought the title.
You know, things like that, all these guys, Copernicus, and all these guys they try to kill. I saw in Cartegena, the things they used to torture people, during the Inquisition. All these things, and you say, well, this is not right. What kind of God is this?”

Surfergirl noted that she started to feel a disconnect during adolescence, when she was beginning to discover her sexuality, “It was difficult in high school because the nuns were much stricter, especially regarding sexuality. Oh my God, if you kiss a boy, it’s someone you’re stuck with. It was tough because I felt a part of me was being snuffed, because suddenly all these rules were coming down on a part of me that was waking up, which was my sexuality. And these nuns were really repressing it.”

Dechen noted that she felt a lack of connection to elements of Catholicism at a very early age as well as feeling that she did not belong to the community she grew up in, “…even at a really young age, I remember just thinking, ‘I don’t feel connected to this, this doesn’t make sense to me,’ most of it… I was always curious about the world, because I felt kind of like I didn’t belong there, where I grew up.”

4.2.5 Summary

All of the participants reported ‘feeling different’ in one way or another, valuing direct experience as a source of knowledge, and the importance of experiencing suffering. Nine of the eleven participants noted feeling disconnected in some way to their spiritual/religious background. Of the two who reported contradictory findings, one was raised Buddhist, and the other was raised agnostic. They both continued to value the traditions of their childhood.
4.3 Searching/Seeking

All of the personal elements: feeling ‘different’, various personal experiences, both overtly spiritual and not spiritual, and feeling a lack of full connection to the spiritual/religious community of birth led the participants to go searching for something they did connect to. For those who were raised Buddhist, it was a reconnection to their own cultural background of Buddhism, but within a different cultural experience here in the United States. For others it was a search to find something that felt like the right match. The participants underwent this search at varying times of their lives, and their search appeared to reflect the culture of the time, as well as personal variables. What was similar among all of the participants was the high level of importance they attributed to their search.

For instance, both Surfergirl and Tsundru noted using drugs to increase spiritual understanding or experience. Tsundru: “I think that truthfully, it’s hard to talk about spirituality and me and how it transformed my life without bringing drugs into the equation. Because drugs were very much a part of opening windows of perception in the mind that otherwise would not have been opened. That led me towards paths as well of meditation, and how do I achieve this state without drugs was really the question. It’s all mind, and I know that.” Surfergirl: “I did take drugs around 1970-72, good drugs back then. Took a lot of acid, a lot of trips. I didn’t want to just get high. Ever since I was very young I was always on a spiritual quest, so I was trying to figure out myself, God, spirituality, all these things you’re asking about.”

Some participants noted a journey through several paths, seeking several things at one time that were becoming available. Surfergirl, “…we would go to the food
co-op, and we would have Sufi dancing one night, yoga another night, yoga chanting another night, so I felt like I suddenly went through a spiritual smorgasbord.” Maple, “I became interested in the natural world around me. That led more to reading about spirits in nature, mysticism, shamanism. I did some work with that, with energy channeling and … energy. The other way to describe it would be paganism. So I took a little bit of that and developed some sort of ritual, basically whenever I felt in tune with nature and the earth and that sort of thing.” Tsundru, “I was part of a commune culture back when I was in my early 20s. It was that whole spirituality of back to the land, spirituality and respect for each other and the land and nature and also medicine lodges and meditation and dancing in circles and chanting and all kinds of stuff was real big.”

Most of the participants noted the influence of books and educational experiences. Dechen, “I was always reading about psychology and human behavior and everything like that. And then I started reading about other cultures, and everything like that. I didn’t ever find any books about Buddhism exactly, but a little about Eastern religions that interested me even back then - just the philosophies and the beliefs and everything like that… my whole reason for going into science and for my major in college, which was molecular biology, it was a spiritual thing to me… I’m going to find out why we exist” Tsundru, “Also the books back then too, in the late 60s, early 70s, that I was sort of reading parts of and the discussions around all of that what was going on and stuff.” Surfergirl, “So unusual things were starting to appear in bookstores about Buddhism and Hinduism and yoga, it was just starting to pop up.” Maple, “I was attracted to literature like great classic fantasy novels like the “Lord of
the Rings’… picking up a book called “The Way of the Mystic’ and it got me interested about like things that are in nature.”

Many of the participants also noted time spent practicing yoga, or that yoga was a gateway into meditation. Tsundru: “I was lucky to study yoga at a real young age, and be turned on to it by nuns in high school, and then practicing at 16, 17, 18 quite a heavy duty practitioner of it, and all that.” Dechen: “I took a yoga class, and I started to meditate, you know, a little bit.” Edna, “At this same time, I had started learning yoga and meditation.” Surfergirl, “I lived in an amazing yoga ashram in the 70s and 80s with a really interesting group of people. I had taken pre-monastic vows, I was somewhat monastic for about four years.”

For Turtlehawk, her primary mode of seeking was through movement and rhythm, “It was during college that I was really trying to search for something that would make my mind [calmer]… so I got into Tai Chi… I was tunnel visioned, when I got into ballet, I love classical ballet because I get to make myself into, you know, something different… I started to want to see people who really just enjoy dancing – what was that? What does that feel like to be so free, and not care like if your toes are pointed or your arms are straight? What was that like when movement and dance that have to do with life: expressing, celebrating, warning, I wanted to see more of that because that to me was more like life, it’s real, it’s true…”

For the participants whose cultural background included Buddhism, the personal contexts of suffering, feeling ‘different’, and feeling somewhat disconnected, were met with attempts to reconnect to Buddhism. Star, “Before I want to get help only with my mental problems, I don’t really care for all that religion. I have been to
church, but it doesn’t help. I don’t really understand it because it’s too far away from my culture, from my family, so I don’t really understand that stuff. I don’t know how come they can believe in God so much they also tell me they see something, feel something, but it’s too far away from me. I prefer to stay with Buddhism.” Pat, “One day I thought I think what was missing in my life is something that I would like to practice meditation more and I’m just not doing it enough. And maybe because I don’t know if I’m doing it correctly, I think that’s what’s missing.” MIT, “And then eventually, you got there, and you look around, and you want – more. I was drawn to Buddhism, so I pick that up again.”

In the search process, books and educational experiences appeared to be very important. Eight of the eleven participants specifically mentioned the importance of access to books and educational opportunities. Several participants noted the emergence of books about different spiritual topics in the late 1960s early 1970s, and the increased availability to different worldviews through the medium of books and formal educational opportunities. Another significant theme was the number of participants (n = 7) that specifically mentioned yoga, tai chi, or chi gong as being a gateway to a formal meditation practice.

4.4 Connecting

Remarkably, each participant noted an instantaneous connection to Buddhism. All of the participants noted feeling that they knew they had found the right path immediately. They reported feeling strong connections to four major categories: connection to the teachings, connection to the practice/rituals, connection to the local community, and connection to teachers. These will be presented in turn. Individuals
experienced connections differently as a function of cultural context and personal experiences. All of the males (five) noted connecting to Buddhist teachings while only two women did. Eight of the participants noted feeling immediately connected to the practices and rituals. There was a mixed initial connection to other members of the center; six specifically mentioned positive initial impacts and three mentioned either negative or mixed connection with the community. The six participants who commented on an immediate connection to teachers all reported a very positive impact.

4.4.1 Connection to the Teachings (Dharma)

All of the male participants reported that they found the Buddhist teachings they were exposed to confirmed opinions they already held. They also noted appreciating the opportunity to obtain knowledge and the logical presentation of the teachings. Tsultrim, “When I encountered the dharma* my reaction was - I had two reactions to almost everything I saw. One was hey- that’s what I already think. And two – that just makes good sense.” Jorge, “…actually Buddhism is the closest thing to what I already believe.” Pat, “To me I believe these people speak of the truth, for example, detachment from the outcome, practice kindness, and practice non-judgmental… I knew all along that that’s how I should live my life, but just couldn’t put it into words, I couldn’t express it very well…” MIT, “I think it was because you’ve got teachers here, and you go to the classes, the eight beginning classes, and you read, so you know a lot of stuff.” Tsundru, “I found there, and continue to find there, a spirituality that I can relate to. I can’t find much fault, I can find absolutely no fault in the dharma.”
Two of the women specifically mentioned being attracted to the teachings as a strong factor in their initial connection to Buddhism. *Maple* noted connecting to the teachings on Buddha nature, “I think, the things that really appealed to me about Buddhism, the thing that made me feel, ‘yes, this is right’ and I remember the teacher saying that every being has that spark within them that is ‘Buddha nature’ and that really relieved me to hear that because I always wanted to believe that. I always wanted to believe that.” Dechen noted that she really connected to a path that focused on helping others. She reported that her first exposure was a very basic teaching on Buddhism she went to at the Buddhist center. *Dechen* stated, “I will never forget that night with Lama [name], well it’s even better than falling in love, it’s that feeling that you’ve found your home… He talked about compassion, and wanting to benefit others, and that’s what the path is, talked a lot about that. I was connected, I felt very connected to that. I felt very connected to that. I didn’t have to search any more, I knew. I was ecstatic that I had found that, so I kept going back to the center, gradually.”

4.4.2 Initial Connection to the Practice/Ritual

Most of the participants noted simply enjoying the practices and rituals of Buddhism, or feeling that it was the right activity for them. *MIT* stated that he always felt connected to Vajrayana* practices, “I like vajrayana better. I always like that a lot, when I was growing up, because I have a lot of opportunities to go to do Chinese Buddhism stuff, that’s why I was not real into it before. But I know I liked it.” *Pat* concurred, “Once I went, I knew it would be something good for me, focusing on meditation, which is something that I was looking for.” *Jorge*, “…what I really enjoy...
more is the meditation. This is my favorite; I really enjoy that because when I do this, I kind of dream, you know.” Surfergirl noted feeling very excited, “And I felt great confidence that this was it, the tools were there, the techniques were there…” Turtlehawk, “They [her ancestors] told me as soon as a sat on a cushion, that this was my path.”

Edna described the changes that began to occur, “…once I took hold of the practice of meditation, and I began to actually feel some sense of relief from the depression that I was feeling and the sort of out of control emotional responses to everything that was happening to me, that I said, ‘Wow, this stuff could really work.’” Jorge similarly noted the benefits of meditation; “I really believe that spirituality is something so great, so good, so helpful that I find out that meditation is really helpful. I say, through my rough periods of life, I find out that that helps a lot.”

4.4.3 Initial Connection to the Community

Most of the participants noted initially feeling very connected to at least some of the other individuals at the center and appreciating the community for their help and support. Two noted that they initially did not feel connected to the community. One participant noted mixed feelings of connection to others, and one individual noted her hesitation to connect with others due to her own feeling of intimidation.

Tsundru noted that his initial connection to a Buddhist community occurred during a talk the Dalai Lama was giving, “I saw thousands of people who had similar… or a thousand people who were like me. I didn’t feel so weird anymore…” He spoke about the relief he felt when he first met the others at the Buddhist center. This
is what he stated, “I found some comfort there at KTC, I guess. Thought I had found people that were interested in very similar things as I was…”

_Turtlehawk_ reported being very interested in a community to support her practice, and feeling immediately excited about seeing others doing practices at the center, ‘I finally got there. And there are all these people doing all these things, and I thought, ‘Wow’… I knew for sure that was where I was supposed to be. I didn’t have to think about it. I didn’t have to go into that mode. For some reason, I knew. I felt confident… that it didn’t matter if I felt judged. I knew that I was supposed to be there. I knew that I was supposed to learn and grow and heal. I knew that was my path.” Another aspect that _Turtlehawk_ noted was her appreciation of the intimacy and accessibility in her experience of Buddhism, “Another thing which was very interesting, I could get close to the shrine, which growing up in a Methodist church or whatever I wasn’t allowed to get close unless I had a special purpose to be up in the altar…I thought, I can get up close…This was where I was meant to be.”

_Surfergirl_ stated that she felt a very strong connection to the center immediately, “I saw the shrine and everything clicked because most of the images on the shrine had been on our refrigerator since the late 60s, early 70s… it’s been so generous to give [to] me from the first week or two… in the early days there weren’t so many people, so [the center director] would almost give you an assignment immediately, so you owned it. It was your center. It wasn’t a place you visited; you were part of the group. That was very powerful for us to be part of it that way.”

_Tsultrim_ and _Dechen_ noted the changing importance of the community in their experience. They both noted that the community was very important at first, and
served different functions than it did later. Tsultrim, “When I first got to the KTC I thought, we’re all beginners, where are all the senior students? I knew they were around, I knew their names, and once in a while I’d see them. I couldn’t understand why they weren’t there more. I understand now. It’s that, you get what you need and you go do it. You don’t stay at the grocery store and eat the food. It’s kind of like that in some ways.” Dechen, “When I first started going it was more like, it was a place of being nurtured in a way, with the classes, with asking people questions, with talking with people who are doing similar practices, you know, meeting a lot of teachers, basically trying to figure out what should I be doing.”

Jorge and Maple, both newer to the center, both noted a lack of connection to the other members initially. Jorge reported feeling that there were some people whom he connected with and others he did not, “Well, okay I went to several classes, the 11:30 class; I went to these classes. And okay, two persons impressed me very much, [names]. I like these two classes, I enjoy, I like. The others are okay.”

Maple noted the hesitancy in her connection to others, stating that she had to overcome some obstacles, “I thought, yeah, that would be really great to meditate with a group... I really didn’t have a whole lot of interaction until probably quite recently, and once I started to be more involved and actually talking to people, you know, and all that. It was like it took me a while to understand that these are just people too. Yes, they’re the sangha* and all of that. But it was like there had to be that kind of discrimination that yes, they’re just people just like you, you know.”
4.4.4 Initial Connection to Teachers

The participants who reported an immediate connection with teachers (eight of eleven) had very positive comments. It was clear that they felt this connection very powerfully. It is interesting to note that those individuals who reported making a connection with a teacher are generally (with two exceptions) the individuals who also reported undertaking more advanced Vajrayana* practices.

*Edna* had a very strong, positive connection when she first met her teacher,

“I met [*teacher’s name*] in September of that same year. So when I saw him, I said ‘this is what I want to do. This man has really got it. He really understands me, he understands what’s needed to be done…I asked him, ‘I’m new to meditation, what advice do you have for me?’ And I may be remembering this sort of imperfectly because it’s a long time ago, but what I remember him saying is, ‘There will be a time in your life when you will want to leave everything behind and undertake a meditation retreat and then there will be a time when you will have returned to your life and you will be sort of swimming in your daily affairs and you will always remember.’ And so I took ‘you will always remember’ I took it to mean that you will always remember what you learned when you were on retreat. He may have said other things to me at that time, but I don’t remember them, that’s what I remember. I remember being a little befuddled by that, and it wasn’t until some years later that I realized he was predicting I was going to do three-year retreat. On his first meeting with me, he knew. And I don’t know how he knew, and I don’t know what he knew.”

*Surfergirl* spoke similarly about the teacher with whom she felt an immediate connection, “I met [*my teacher*] before my surgery when I was 28. I was not involved in Buddhism, and I felt something so strong there, but I thought I couldn’t go there. I was too sick. So many, many years later I went back and of course he remembered. He even touched the scar, it was my pituitary gland, so it was very major surgery I had. And he asked me how everything went and from that moment on, it been like my
head’s really been on fire, everything’s really sped up, it was like big love, and everything really sped up.”

Tsundru talked about the positive impact of seeing a visiting teacher on his first visit to the Buddhist center, “…there was something about him that told me I want to come back here because I like what I felt listening to him, you know. I just liked what I felt.”

Dechen also described a similar experience, “When I met [my teacher], all those things started going real fast after I connected there. It was an immediate connection. I had no doubts. Nothing. There was nothing missing. It was like, yes, right on. Fits. I’ll never forget that. It was this feeling I don’t think I’d ever had before. No doubt. This is it.”

MIT described the effect of having a resident lama at the center. The lama at the Buddhist center finished retreat about 10 years ago. Prior to that time there was no resident lama. He stated, “Let’s say I started 10 years, ago, she wasn’t a lama yet. Would I be attracted to the center? Probably not... It just happened, it’s my karma; she’s my lama. Makes a big difference. Makes a big difference. I’m really fortunate…” He also spoke about a similar positive reaction to another teacher, “You could call [it a] connection, it just happened that way. And then also, actually, [it] is good, because his teachings are so simple. He’s young, and his teachings [are] real simple. He’s great.”

Both Tsundru and Turtlehawk had strong reactions to teachings they attended by the Dalai Lama. Turtlehawk: “I saw the Dalai Lama in Pittsburgh. That’s when I decided I’m going to be a Buddhist. I never met a person who generated so much love
and compassion. We were in this stadium, and he was on this little stage. I was very far away, but he made you feel as if he was sitting as close to me as you are now. So whenever I can get a chance to see him talk, I do…” Tsundru: “And I think my visit with the Dalai Lama in ‘99 really sparked a lot of that with me… again I had read the Dalai Lama for years and all that, but it was the experience of him that re-motivated me.”

4.5 Confusion

After the initial excitement, many participants (six of eleven) indicated feeling confused or lost. All three of those who grew up culturally Buddhist also expressed some confusion about either the cultural practice of Buddhism where they grew up, or confusion with the cultural context of the center they began attending here in the U.S. They reported not understanding the rationale behind certain practices, various teachings, or why there were differences between teachers in the same lineage. The individuals who spoke about this confusion were newer to the lineage than those who failed to note this confusion. Several of the participants were still feeling uncertain or confused at the time of the interview.

Star noted that she recalled being confused about the practice of bowing (or prostrating) when she was a child. She noted that this confusion precluded her from making a connection to a particular teacher, “And there was a Rinpoche there, Rinpoche was Taiwanese, and my mom asked me to bow to him, sometimes I feel that’s, I don’t know why… I don’t see, I know he’s a great teacher, but I don’t know why I need to bow to him, especially using your head to touch the ground, you know.
So I feel doubtful about that, he treated me well, but sometimes I feel scared, at the time I feel scared.”

*Jorge* stated that he felt confused about certain practices, but felt optimistic that if he was better informed he would appreciate the practices more. “I went to this retreat and you know, I enjoy that and I feel that it is very good, very helpful. However, for me, when they read all these prayers, you go and stay there for an hour doing that. I didn’t know what is that, what that means, nothing. I say, you know, this is crazy, but of course, you know, I didn’t know. It’s something that I have to know, I have to get familiar first. And maybe if I do it again, probably it is going to be better.”

*Maple* also reported feeling a culture shock, but for her it was related to teachings she was exposed to, “…in this tradition, there’s a lot of symbolism and detail. And so, in reading what the practice is really about… all the different realms and how people can fall into different realms and the level of diligence and all those disciplines that seemed so beyond and so overwhelming to human beings who are trying to be a good person and everything. But thinking, oh this is not good enough. It gave me a real heavy feeling. And I think it took me a while to get over that, to kind of digest that and to just you know, I think as a person, not be so perfectionist, but just kind of know where I am.”

*MIT* stated that he was confused about differences between teachers, “I still notice a lot of discrepancy too here, for example, when we do Chenrezig*, the hand gestures, everyone does it differently. I’m taking some pictures for Green Tara* with Lama [Name]. And I say, ‘Well listen, [this teacher] he make a whole book, Green
Tara book, and I saw it in there, and actually they’re different than what you do’… and so even those little tiny things there’s difference already.”

*Pat* noted that he did not understand the purpose of certain practices, and it was a strong barrier for him. In fact, it was the main reason he had not been to the center in a while. The cultural lineage of the local Buddhist center is different than that of his father, and it reminded him of cultural practices his mother engaged in, “Part of the reason that I haven’t been going to the Buddhist center anymore because I know some of the things that they practice, the ritual things that they do, you know, certain practices that seem very um, very disciplined like retreats, the silence vow, things like that… I don’t see the connection of how doing that is actually impacting the world… I guess my point is, I think for myself, anything I can do to make the world better… Maybe it’s just because my mother used to do a lot of ritual things, and it doesn’t make any sense how that impact[s] the world.”

These personal experiences of being confused and uncertain about the meaning of practices described by participants were also observed on every observation date. The Buddhist center has newcomers nearly every weekend during the regular open hours. The center is traditionally decorated with images of deities and an elaborate shrine. On several occasions, it was noted that some individuals were standing close to the shrine, having the elements of the shrine explained to them. On several different occasions some individuals appeared confused about announcements being made. Some people approached those who were newer to the center to explain the practices being offered, but this was not done on all occasions. As most individuals are converts to Buddhism, and are not familiar with the cultural practices, it was common to see
individuals appear confused about what they were supposed to do and what certain rituals meant.

4.6 Relationships

After this initial state of confusion, all the participants noted that their worldviews evolved slowly over time, and it appeared to evolve within the context of continuing relationships both within and outside of the Buddhist community. The next section details the impact of continuing relationships on the participants and their emerging worldviews.

4.6.1 Relationships with Community Members and the Center

The relationships with other Buddhist community members and the relationship with the center as a whole had a remarkable impact on the participants. Many discussed how conflict at the center has impacted them, and the cautiousness they have felt at times at the center, for different reasons. Several individuals who had been involved for some time noted how their own relational patterns were impacting their relationship with the group. Several also noted very positive aspects of the community experience on their practice.

*Pat* described a possible barrier to connection with the Buddhist community. He stated, “You know, I think as human beings, we are looking for a perfect place to be. But we need to start with ourselves; we need to look internally. I think… it’s easy to look for the external things, to make things perfect. For example, coming to the Buddhist Center, hoping that everybody and all the things there will be…. And all things will be perfect.”
Tsundru noted that he felt this expectation of perfection in his experience, “I had a connection and disconnection. So it was it my own sense of expectation and not having those expectations met that made me disconnected. It was really my own fault for walking in with hopeful expectations to begin with (laughs).”

Maple also mentioned, “…[there are] things going on that are not necessarily the nicest things or the things that you feel are the most Buddhist. And so I do notice that a lot, and it does kind of burst one’s bubble in thinking, ‘Well, these are all Buddhists, and so there should be an elevated level of compassion or’ … or all of those things that are just basic qualities that every human being has you know, so you expect more. But human nature is still there…”

Star noted, however, that she felt the center was very supportive and open compared to Buddhist centers she had been a part of in Taiwan, “People here are nice. I don’t if you guys have drama or not, but for me it’s very peaceful. Maybe I didn’t get into this, but any place always [has] obstacles, always [has] conflicts because everyone want[s] the place to be better…, but every people have a different way to do this stuff, so there’s always… conflict. For me, I think everything, it’s very good there. We have some problem [in the monastery where I grew up], maybe there are too many older people, don’t really treat the outsiders, which is the newcomers, well.”

Pat also noted the conflict found in groups, and stated that he preferred to remove himself from them. He was especially surprised by his experience as a monk, “I feel I almost feel I am alone. Not really part of the community, even though I’d like to be. I think that being in a community is great, but it also causes problems, because people we are at a different level. If you put a bunch of people together, I can
guarantee there’s conflict. Because of that, I’d rather remove myself from being part of that thing that, to me, conflict is silly… When I was 29, I went home and was in the monkhood for over three weeks. From the outside, things look perfect, but once you get in, it’s a different story. It wasn’t any different than going into the office, politics and personality conflicts; all that existed. It was saddening. And I didn’t know the extreme, I thought here conflict, is to be expected. I didn’t know the extent; in how big a conflict it was, nothing different from the outside world.”

*Turtlehawk* noted that the context of race occasionally led to feelings of cautiousness with others at the center, “There have been a couple of times at the Buddhist center, where I’ve felt that because of the color of my skin people had to be cautious of me. That’s just the kind of world we live in.”

Several noted that the center was a place where they were trying to practice the path as best they could, given their own weaknesses. For instance, *Tsultrim* noted, “They give me a venue for trying to practice, to try to do the things we’re trying to learn to do. Learn patience. It’s like our lab. If you can keep it together there, you get a chance to practice. Hopefully, we’re kind and patient enough with each other to give each other some room to really do it, make mistakes and not let them be fatal.”

*Tsundru* concurred, “…there have been bumps and hard times because of the level of involvement administratively that I’ve had at the Buddhist center, parts of my own kleshas* have been laid bare.”

*MIT* noted the natural association between people that is built through familiarity, “So I got to the Buddhist center, people that I know, I tend to be more connected to them. So other people I don’t know that well, I’m just not as interested in
them. I think it is human nature.” Jorge described a similar organic process evolving, “But you know little by little, I enjoy more and more. Now I feel I belong to that group. Little by little, I start to know more of the people, and enjoy, you know, because I think that it’s something that I believe is going to help me.”

Several participants noted the support they felt within the community for their practice. Dechen stated, “It was very supportive for my individual practice, and even just like, in a social way, to be able to communicate with people who are doing similar things. Not only, it’s nice to talk to people who understand what you’re saying and kind of agree with Buddhism, but to really actually talk with people who are doing exactly what you’re doing. That’s pretty amazing to have that, and be able to discuss it with other people.” Edna also spoke about the importance of community for practice, “It is a fact that we do need peers. And we find them in dharma communities. And even among the dharma communities there are subgroups of peers, there are people who are beginners, there are intermediate students, there are people who are doing ngondro*, and then there are people who’ve received pointing out instructions who do need to help each other a lot to support each other’s practice.”

Surfergirl noted that she felt a sense of community wherever she practices, “When I’m practicing and we’re all saying the same prayers quietly or out loud, and I’m here and I know people are doing practices all around the world at the same time, it makes me feel happy…. So as long as I can get down there and sit on a cushion, I always feel at home.” Dechen reported that she feels at home at the center, even if she has not been to the center in a while, “I still feel home there when I’m there. I can walk
in and really seriously, not know anybody, but I still feel very comfortable there, very much at home. It’s like the place that I grew up.”

While Pat noted that he appreciates practicing with people, he feels he could practice without it, and be fine. “I like to practice around people, definitely am more serene, see people practicing chanting or meditating, nourishing to your spirit. But if you don’t have that option, you survive. It’ll be okay.”

Overall, there was a wide spectrum in the participant’s feelings of being supported and connected to the Buddhist community. Several noted oscillating feelings of connection and disconnection, so it is difficult to provide stable numbers of participants who felt disconnected and connected. What is clear is that feeling disconnected to the Buddhist community had a very negative impact on the participants. This may be particularly difficult because there are only a small number of Buddhist communities available, and as reported above, these individuals did not feel as fully connected to other traditions as they did to Buddhism. As Tsundru noted, “…one of the shortcomings of it being a minority religion is that there’s not a [name of the lineage] center around here that I could just hook up with and quietly walk into as a non-board member, whatever. As a Catholic, if I burned people out over here, I could just go over to the West side where they don’t even know my name, and I could still receive communion. And you can’t do that. So that’s one of the shortcomings, it really bothers me.”

Information collected from observations indicated this mix of connection and disconnection. On most occasions, about half the participants came for an hour of quiet sitting meditation, and then left, with no apparent interaction. While this does not
necessarily mean they felt disconnected to the community, the clearly observable aspect was missing for these individuals. It was observed that individuals who were visiting for the first time (who were not visiting for a class requirement) were generally very timid about approaching others. A greeter was available at the door to direct them to the beginner’s class, but it varied widely how interactive the members of the center were with new individuals during the half-hour break between quiet sitting meditation and a teaching. About half the time, the new individuals all socialized with each other during this time, or had tea and a snack alone. The other half of the time, regular members approached some or all of the new individuals during this time. Every time a regular member (or members) approached new individuals, it was received very positively.

Among those who had been members for some time, break time served a clear social function. On every observation, there were groups of regular members chatting with each other during this break time and outside the center afterward. To these individuals, this was a time to talk about their practice and their lives in general. It appeared that there were many close friendships between individuals at the center. There was, though, a small group of people who had been attending regularly who did not interact with others on most occasions. They either attended only the practices, leaving directly after, or they stayed through the break time but did not seek out social contact.

4.6.2 Relationships with Teachers

In contrast to the mixed comments on relationships with peers and the Buddhist center as a whole, the comments made about teachers were overwhelmingly
positive. There was one participant who was wary of the importance of the student-teacher relationship, but this sentiment was unique among participants.

*Dechen* spoke about the impact of her teachers,

“...having the teachers, we host the teachers coming there and being able to connect with authentic lamas who’d been doing this their whole lives, and actually embody what the practices are, is incredible. And the blessings that I feel I’ve received from meeting them, is incredible and has definitely changed my life...I think our western idea of what a blessing is, is different than what it really is in Buddhism, but to me, I think it’s a connection between the mind of a teacher who does have the kind of, such true compassion and wisdom and the aspiration of a student trying so hard and wanting that. Something happens there. I believe that that can transform a person’s mind and everything about them really.”

*Star* spoke about her relationships with her teachers as being important as a source of guidance and advice. She noted that she sought advice about her depression, “So I was a little depressed at the time, I don’t know what to do. And I don’t know what should I do after I die. So at the time I meet Rinpoche, he told me this one sentence, I still remember. He tell me life is like a dream. So I believe that. So he really helped me.” She noted that her relationship with the teacher she grew up with is very close to a parental relationship, “Sometimes I feel like he’s my father. Just go there to chat and to focus on my problems, and he sometimes he would tell me, ‘Oh you should do that.’ I really like it there…”

*MIT* spoke about the impact of the center’s resident lama. He noted that he sometimes felt visiting lamas taught on subjects that were too complex, “So the resident lama is very, very important, here. Even if she don’t teach that often. I would hope she would teach a lot more, and the ones, the Rinpoches are good, but some of them blow my mind. You know, I’m not at that level, so I’m not liking that.”
Tsundru spoke very positively about the impact of visiting teachers, and the example they provide for him,

“It has encouraged my practice, because when I see examples of the benefits of practice like [names several high lamas] or people of that stature. When I say stature, I don’t mean title. I mean what they bring to the table, I mean their very presence, their very ambiance about them. They are wise not because they say they’re wise, but because most of the world recognizes them as wise. They are at peace for the most part, but not completely, but they themselves have encouraged that. Maybe if I could be disciplined enough to practice enough, to love enough, to be selfless enough, all of that enough, I too could be an example as they have been an example for me.”

Edna spoke about how her relationship with her teacher has changed her, “I didn’t really understand it at first, but you know the teacher really does introduce you to your mind. I didn’t understand that. I just knew that he was training me how to do meditation, and that he was leading me through ngondro*, and all the of confusions, difficulties that have ever been in any of my relationships with anyone, all of them came up in my relationship with him… I have invented just about every obstacle I’ve experienced in a relationship. I projected it onto him.” She spoke about how she worked through her habitual relationship tendencies with him.

“And one time he said to me, you have to remember that I am with you all the time…. But it was through that statement that I came to understand what in twelve step programs they call the conscious contact with the god of your own understanding… Because at first the teacher is external to you, but then he becomes internalized because every thing they taught you begins to arise. Then you begin to see how you have become them. How you are slowly becoming them…. Anything I have today is because of his influence. The main influence was on the subject of bodhichitta, * and how important he felt it was. And how important that he felt it was to continuously wish to benefit others… I mean, if you read in the Lamp of Mahamudra*, the one thing that makes the biggest difference in your entire life forever, the only thing that makes any difference in your life and that makes your life completely meaningful, is knowing the nature of your own mind. How can you thank somebody for that?
And how can you explain that to somebody who doesn’t know what that means? I would have to say that that has changed everything.”

*Pat* was the only participant who reported that he felt wary of the student-teacher relationship, and felt it was important to value choice and independence, “I feel like it should be my choice, if I don’t feel it will be beneficial, then I don’t have to do it. Certainly I feel you should be able to have a choice, you can pick and choose…I think because some people go to the Buddhist center, they [don’t] feel like… they belong to the organization, they may feel they have to do everything the teacher does. Almost like a follower mentality, if the teacher teaches you need to do retreat or something like this, do different practices, do all of them. I see that things like that, and think, if you don’t want to do these things, you don’t have to do them.”

Observations were only conducted during teachings by the resident lama and more advanced students from the center teaching both intermediate and beginner classes. The center was nearly always completely full when the resident lama taught, and it was observed that many people came only to her teachings. Teachings on intermediate topics offered by advanced students at the center were not as well attended. The beginning classes generally held about 5-15 people, and for some participants the relationship with the instructor of the class appeared very important. Significant relationships appeared to form between some of the advanced students teaching the class and the new individuals. On several occasions the new person would seek out the beginning class instructor during the social time.

It was clear that the student-teacher relationship was held in esteem from the practices offered at the center. All three of the chanting practices offered at the center
included sections offering homage to teachers, and prayers are offered at the end of one of the practices so that the lineage holders may live long and help many. One example during the lineage prayer chanted prior to the Chenrezig practice, “... As is taught, devotion is the head of meditation, the lama opens the door to the profound oral teachings, to the meditator who always turns to him (sic), grant your blessing that unconstrived devotion be born within.” Several classes were taught on the topic of the student-teacher relationship during the time of observation.

4.6.3 Relationships with Family

Of the nine participants who brought up this topic, eight reported that their spiritual path has had a mixed impact on their relationships with their families. Most (eight of nine) noted that there were negative interactions with some family members, but not with others. The only person who noted a uniformly positive reaction from her family had been raised Buddhist, as was the rest of her family. Tsundru noted that there was tension with his brother, but most of his family was accepting. “I have a fundamentalist brother who thinks I must be of the devil. I mean, we talked about this blasphemous attitude. To him, what I’m describing is absolute blasphemy. And it is to him. His narrow-minded[ness] blasts me, though, you know. It’s created some tension... It hasn’t really isolated me a lot from my friends or my family. It hasn’t. I know for some people I think it has, but just because I’ve always been so weird, they just think, ‘It’s just [his name].’”

Tsultrim spoke about the conflicts with his wife about both his preference for nonconformity and his value for service at the center, “It actually causes friction in my marriage because my wife is very much concerned about those sorts of things. Weird
is bad. Where I grew up, weird is kind of good, weird is fun, weird is unusual, weird is interesting... it also gives me a way to offer service in a way that I feel is meaningful. My wife doesn’t think it’s particularly meaningful, but I do. Those are important to me, and those are part of my practice.”

Dechen also reported a mixed experience with her family, “I mean at first they all thought it was really weird... But over time, actually, my sister and my nieces, they’ve learned a lot, they’ve asked me a lot of questions and they’re actually very interested... Now, you know, more extended family members who hear about it, they actually think it’s a negative. Some people think it’s a negative, which is, you know, they’re Christian-minded, like kind of look at me like they’re afraid of me. I’ve had that experience a couple of times.”

Turtlehawk noted, with surprise, how some people in her family were more open than she thought they would be. “My dad is pretty open about it. Now, the rest of my family, I had to be very cautious. I was really surprised when I lost an aunt on my mother’s side and an aunt on my father’s side and they were both ministers, and I thought they would not be very open to Buddhism, but actually I found out when I was talking to them before... they very much wanted to talk with me about it.”

Jorge stated that he simply doesn’t talk with anyone other than his wife about his interest in Buddhism, “I try to keep it to myself because I never talk about this with my daughter because I don’t want to, if she feel she believe, you know, I don’t want to change her. I talk to my wife, and the way we agree, I mean, we agree that she believe in God and she’s there and it’s alright, and she agree that I don’t believe and
it’s okay. We talk about it, but we respect each other. So in that situation, it’s okay, but with nobody else because it’s kind of difficult.”

Like Jorge, Maple stated that she tended not to share her religious affiliation, but she felt this was a personality trait rather than something she was purposefully being cautious about. “I guess not a lot of people know. It’s not that importa…I mean, yes, my parents know, but I had to think about that for a second… I’m just in the habit of not sharing things about my beliefs to people that are close to me, family, friends. If they ask I definitely share, but I don’t volunteer.”

Star noted that her mother was very happy that she became interested in spirituality. “My mom, she’s so happy, she say, ‘You should feel grateful, because you are sick, so you can get into this. If you were not sick you wouldn’t get into it until, you know, how old.’”

It was noted during observations at the center that the vast majority of participants did not attend with a family. There were several couples, but there were only two cases in which both members of the couple appeared connected to the center. Family members were more likely to attend public talks, but it was still rare for individuals to bring their families to the center.

4.6.4 Relationships with the ‘Majority Religious Culture’

Eight of the eleven participants specifically commented on their interactions with the ‘majority religious culture.’ In the United States, the majority religious affiliation is Christianity, and this majority has a strong cultural impact. Seven of the eight noted that they generally held back information about their religious affiliation, or that they were careful whom they spoke to about their affiliation. Tsultrim: “I still
don’t really volunteer the information about my spiritual path unless I really trust the person I’m talking to. If it comes up, it comes up, I don’t conceal it but I also don’t usually go around talking a whole lot about it, unless someone comes to me, because you can’t control what people think, and what’s more, you aren’t likely to have the opportunity to provide enough information to for them not to say, take their label that you give them and put it on whatever they think that is. Oh – Buddhist-freak – whatever – whatever stereotype they have for whatever they think you are.” Pat:

“…when people ask me, ‘What religion are you?’ I tend to answer I practice spirituality. Because I think we ought to be united, not separated from one other.”

Tsundru: “I’m shy to mention my religion, especially in my current role. Very shy to do it. Buddhism is misunderstood. For a lot of Christians and Catholics, it’s blasphemous, it’s literally blasphemous. It’s against every grain of their being, what Buddhism is about.“

Edna reported that her interactions with Christians have changed over time. “I know I was embarrassed to be a Buddhist because I thought it was too weird. And I thought that the Christian majority would just really dislike it. In fact, I lied about it more than once during this period… This went on for years, three years or four years, and then finally, I don’t know what it was, maturing as a person, I don’t know if I was recovering from my depression, I just didn’t care any more. “ She also described discrimination that she’s experienced over the years, and that it has lessened over time. “I’ve had people shout at me from the street as I was going into the center, saying, ‘Hey you need Jesus!’ This has only happened maybe two or three times. For a while we had harassing phone calls in the 70s or 80s and people said, ‘Why don’t you guys,
all you Buddhists, just go and die.’ It’s been a lot better now, than it was back in the 70s and 80s. One time we actually had picketing…”

Dechen’s first comment was that there was generally positive interest, some negative, but that she was really fascinated by the surprise she noticed from outside groups, “…mostly they’re interested, they’re like wow that sounds really interesting and why are you doing this, and what do you do. You know, lots of questions and lots of interest I’ve found in people…. I did more talking about Buddhism to the public and people coming to the center a lot … a comment that was always made. ‘You look so normal, and you’re Buddhist? Not only that but you’re a woman, and we thought Buddhists were only men or that if you were really practicing you were a man.’”

Tsundru also reported some people reacted very positively. “Buddhism is also hip and cool, so some of my friends accept it just because there’s something hip and cool about being a Buddhist these days.”

Surfergirl was the only participant who spoke on the topic who felt that she always could be completely open about her religious affiliation. Surfergirl spoke about how her perception of people’s underlying goals helped her connect to those outside of Buddhism. “In terms of interfacing with Westerners that aren’t part of that, I just feel that their essence or Buddha nature is just doing something else to uncover their Buddha nature… I don’t feel any difference.”

4.7 Emerging Worldview

It appeared that the individuals interviewed for this study slowly formed ideas about what reality consisted of, taking into account their original cultural context, filtered through their personal experiences, and evolving over time in connection to
others both inside and outside the Buddhist community. The next two sections present the participants emerging worldviews.

4.7.1 Emerging View of the World

All of the participants who grew up with an idea of God (9 of 11) noted their evolving understanding of God and the struggle as their ideas changed. They either noted a radical shift in their understanding of God, or that the idea of God was not prominent in their worldview. Jorge, “I cannot say for sure there is no God, because [shrugs], but so far, I don’t see proof that there is a God, and I don’t see proof there is no God, so you know for me something still in the air…. You know, one of these days, maybe I found God, and that’s okay. But in this moment I don’t.” Tsundru: “My understanding of God has been a struggle since I’ve approached this whole Vajrayana Buddhism and such and even Buddhism period. And hearing from the Dalai Lama both yes you can believe in God and no you cannot believe in your traditional sense of God as a Buddhist, there is no one who made you.” Pat, “I don’t think that God is something that take[s] the form of [a] human being. I don’t think that God is a male or female…I believe in the universal law of physics, and so I think there’s a science that goes with God.” Dechen: “I mean, the closest thing, if I had to choose something, that would be similar to what I think God is, I would say Buddha Nature. That’s what I would say. If I had to.” Edna: “When I was younger, I thought that it was a very relevant thing, but now I’m finding the concept of God to be rather irrelevant.” Turtlehawk: “I don’t know if it’s God that is important to tell you the truth. I really don’t, and I’m really kind of struggling with that because I grew up with that…” Maple: “if I were to think of God it would be something that’s not the sort of dualistic
concept of God… something that can be in everything and in people and beings.”

*Surfergirl*, “I was raised Catholic, and because I’m of the generation of Vatican II, there was so much emphasis on the Christ within. As a Buddhist, I have just automatically turned that into the nature, you know, the essence, the nature of beings.” It’s interesting to note that while none of the three liturgies frequently practiced at the center uses the term “God,” there is mention of various deities. These deities are described as being able to help a person, and the meditator prays to the deity. For example in the Chenrezig* practice, “I pray to you, Lord of Love, Chenrezig, Buddha of Great Compassion. Hold me fast in your compassion.”

What participants reported was a focus on understanding their reality, wanting to explore their experience in the present moment, being aware of the impact of their actions, and wanting to help others. *MIT*: ’Past: you cannot change. Future: you cannot change. Present: you can change. And then tomorrow, I cannot change that. I can’t correct that. So I just do whatever I can right now. And try my best, since I’m here, let’s make my time more efficient, more productive, whatever. That’s what I feel.”

*Pat*: “I think it’s how you live your life, how you practice living your life… Create action, do something about it.” *Tsultrim*: “…the more I can think that way, the more my regular world is transcendence, so instead of striving towards it, it’s just sort of relaxing into it.”

Several spoke about the effects of meditation on their existence. *Star*, “…as long as you do meditation, and sometimes after a long time, your spirit, you can go to another realm… I believe that people have souls and this body is only used for a while, and after that your soul will come to another body, or you know, maybe you can...
go to another level.” Tsultrim: “What I can tell you for certain is that it is not going to be what you think it’s going to be and it will teach you things that you won’t be able to explain to somebody else.”

Some noted that they began to perceive the material world as an illusion. MIT, “The view of the world, never in my priority at all. Just live one day at a time. This whole world is unreal, so I don’t have big vision to save to the world, like, go do this or whatever.” Surfergirl: “…you know you get these momentary snapshots of how it really is, so you can’t take it for so damn real. It’s just such an…illusion (laughs)…” Pat: “I don’t care about watching the news, showing conflicts and things like that. It really doesn’t mean anything.” Edna: “slowly we analyze external phenomena for their ‘reality’ or ‘unreality,’ but really then the attention turns to the mind itself, the projector of reality. At first we’re looking at the movie, and trying to understand the movie that is our ‘reality,’ and then we have to actually start looking at the projector and when we start looking at that we have a different view entirely.” Tsultrim: “…our teachings are very clear on that. That we aren’t what we think we are, and reality isn’t quite what the way we think it is, and we’re changing all the time, etc. etc. My understanding of what we view as a linear path, time, is changing too. I don’t understand it.” This is reflected in the liturgy recited in the Chenrezig practice three times a week at the center, “…All knowledge, sound, and all appearances become inseparable from emptiness.”

An important thread that ran through the interviews was the importance of helping other beings who continue to suffer. Edna: “If bad things happen to you, you think, well this is karmic, but now I must turn it to the benefit of beings…” Star: “I am
willing to help people now, because I believe so many people have the same problems like me; they don’t know what to do with their life…for me Buddhism really work out, so I’m willing to help them to understand more about this stuff.” Jorge “…I feel I want to do anything I can to change the situation in Latin America, especially my country in Latin American, you know. I consider that is spiritual work.” Tsundru: “I think in losing yourself to others, you find yourself in others.” Pat, “I guess my point is, I think for myself, anything I can do to make the world better.” This is reflected in the liturgy of the Chenrezig practice, “…may I achieve buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

Edna spoke in detail about what the transition was like for her, extrapolating to the experience she feels others go through as well,

“I think people, as they are going through that bardo* of having been Christian, and leaving Christianity and all of the subconscious baggage that goes with that. You’re going to hell and all that, bad things are going to happen to you because you left the church of your childhood. I mean, it’s a heavy deal because we think about stuff like this. I had a conversation with God, basically saying, ‘Look God, if this is wrong, I’m way sorry. And If I’m going to go to hell for this, I do understand. But I sort of don’t think so, and you know why? Because I’m healthier and saner than I’ve ever been before, and I know that’s what you want for me.’”

The worldview that the majority of participants reported (with no disconfirmation, but some failure to discuss) included several main themes. The first was that the idea of a personal God was changing, though the participants were not necessarily endorsing atheism either. They noted the importance of fully understanding their experiences in the present moment as well as trying to live a good life, and being aware of the impact of their actions. The participants felt strongly that it was important to help others in some way. This theme appears to run through, from
early-learned values, to being an element that participants connected to in Buddhism. The last theme that participants noted was the belief that the material world around them was an illusion, having a dream-like quality.

4.7.2 Emerging/Changing Self

Most participants reported that they just wanted to be good people. *MIT* voices this feeling, “Maybe a better person, that’s the bottom line really, a better person. And I think it’s really important to be aware of the suffering of other people.” Overall, participants noted feeling more relaxed, open, and less attached to their ideas of themselves, and found themselves more open to other individuals.

Many noted that they can “let go” of their worries and anxieties much more effectively. *Pat:* “Let the universe take care of the details. Do your part yourself. I think that’s how I’ve grown, learned to practice that more and more…” *Turtlehawk:* “I can sort of drop the worry, just do my practice, and not have any expectations, and that may allow me to be somebody.” *MIT:* “If I have a problem, I don’t worry about it anymore. It comes and goes. Before I wouldn’t get worried, I would get angry or stressed out.” *Star,* “Before getting to this [the dharma or Buddhism] I was very sensitive to a lot of stuff, and I think this whole world didn’t treat me well.” *Dechen:* “Just being more calm, gradually over time, and more focused…” *Edna:* “I really feel like the practice of meditation has allowed me to be more patient.”

Many noted that they were more open to examining themselves openly and honestly. *Tsundru:* “I’m more aware of my shortcomings than I used to be. I used to think it was just about sitting peacefully and meditating.” *Dechen:* “It has changed the way I feel about myself and others in the world, basically, in terms of us all not being
perfect. We all have these faults, but it’s okay, it’s not a big deal. It’s just that you’re working with these things.” *Tsultrim:* “I’m far more open to doubting myself now. And that’s not a bad thing. It doesn’t bother me to not be as certain of myself as I used to be. It’s okay. In fact, it’s a relief sometimes.” *Surfergirl:* “Sometimes I feel very misunderstood, misperceived, and therefore, I’m trying to understand people better. Not so much how they think of me, but maybe how I should be thinking of them.”

Many reported that they were increasingly open to other people, respecting others, and interested in helping them. *Turtlehawk,* “Everyone in the whole universe wants to be happy. The way that they do things, I’m respecting that, more so than I would in the past. I’m more open. I’m like, ‘Hey this is the way they do things.’”

*Tsundry:* “I think just the way I look at the world, accept what I see, and I have deep compassion, deeper and deeper compassion for what I see. By compassion I mean that I want to remove suffering, not for your eternal happiness which I think is love, but actually want to remove your suffering.” *Surfergirl:* “…one day you wake up and it’s not all about you.” *Dechen:* “I know for sure that I’m much less judgmental of people in general, cause I know that it’s just negative emotions coming up, and people sometimes can control that, sometimes they can’t.” *Edna:* “…it’s allowed me to be of benefit to others, which I could never have imagined-being able to benefit others.”

Several stated they noticed a decrease in tension and an increase in lightness or humor. *Surfergirl:* “I had a great deal of anger, which I believe had to do with wanting to be perfect, and that’s really calmed down.” *MIT:* “I notice that I don’t get agitated as much, I just say, ‘Fine. Ok,’ But I still do what I have to do.” *Surfergirl:* “I think my humor has been incredibly tweaked, maybe even by the stroke, I don’t know.
Everything is funny to me now.” *Edna,* “The other thing is that I feel that it has sort of turned up my ability to be happy in lots of different kinds of circumstances, and I like that.”

Several speculated on the cause of the changes. *Surfergirl:* “But I think maybe, in the last 20 years or whatever the biggest thing was when I took Bodhisattva* vow. That, I think, changed my life.” *Pat:* “Pain and suffering is something that teaches me to grow.” *Dechen:* “I think the cause is actually the practice, the meditation practice over time… The other thing I should say about this, that I believe, I think blessings from the teachers…I think it’s a connection between the mind of a teacher who does have the kind of, such true compassion and wisdom and the aspiration of a student trying so hard and wanting that. I believe that that can transform a person’s mind and everything about them really.” *Edna:* “…it really was through that, that inculcation of the idea of wishing to benefit absolutely everybody that you come into contact with, that to me was the engine of change in me as an individual.”

4.9 Summary of the Emergent Model

The interviews and the observations of participants (as well as others at the Buddhist center) seem to indicate a relatively common experience for individuals who convert to Buddhism. This appeared to include those who grow up culturally Buddhist, but either attended a different cultural tradition here in the U.S. or the same lineage within the different cultural frame of the United States. Above, the participants’ narratives were artificially broken up to illustrate the various aspects. Their narratives were much more connected, and seemed to indicate a similar journey. A graphic representation of this emergent model is presented in Figure 2.
Disconnected to Spiritual/Religious Background

Searching

Spiritual/Religious rituals, values, and beliefs

Non-Majority Religion (Buddhism)

Confusion or Uncertainty

View of Self

View of World

Relationships

Individual Difference

Suffering

Early Spiritual Experiences

Disconnected to Spiritual/Religious Background

Cultural Context

Figure 2. Emerging Model of Spiritual Development for Individuals who Convert to Buddhism
First, the participants’ spiritual/religious cultural background is very important and influences how they perceive spirituality and religion. Participants noted important community values, beliefs and rituals, as well as important mentors. The participants appeared to choose which elements of their cultural background continued to be salient in their adult lives. This choice of which elements had continued salience appeared to be filtered through their personal experience.

The participants noted distinct personal experiences that led them to their current situation. They noted that direct spiritual experiences, suffering, a feeling of ‘being different,’ and a feeling of disconnection (at least partially) to their spiritual background led them to begin searching until they found something they connected to. In the case of these participants, the connection was to Buddhism or the practices of Buddhism.

The participants uniformly reported a strong connection to Buddhism, though they differed in what they described as the strongest connection. Some noted being immediately connected to the teachings of Buddhism. Others noted being immediately connected to the practice of meditation, or being immediately connected to teachers/Still others noted the impact of having a center and the community of other similar individuals.

After this immediate connection, though, there appeared to be a period of confusion or uncertainty about their choice. Individuals described feeling culture shock, and not understanding the meaning of some of the practices or the teachings. This was true for those who converted from other religious/spiritual traditions and those who were raised Buddhist within another cultural tradition. Those who were
newer to the center reported this in the interviews. Their reports may illuminate an experience that the individuals who have been members of the center longer may have either forgotten or minimized.

It is important to note the continuing salience of the individuals’ spiritual/religious backgrounds at this point. The elements of their spiritual/religious backgrounds are very important in how they made meaning out of the worldview they are currently adopting. Participants noted relating to qualities of Buddhism that were similar to values, beliefs, and rituals they were exposed to as children. Within that original cultural context a worldview developed, and that worldview continues to be modified and expanded in the current context of Buddhism.

Participants reported that current relationships both within Buddhism and without were strongly impacting their spiritual development. Converts from Christianity noted the negative impacts relationships with family members and the majority public most strongly. Many reported unsupportive reactions from family members and feeling that they need to refrain from being open about their spirituality with members of the majority religious culture. Some noted surprise with the openness with which some family members related to their choice of religion. Nearly all the participants noted very positive relationships with teachers. The negative impact of unrealistic expectations for the Buddhist community was noted; again this appeared to be more true for converts than for those who grew up Buddhist. Several participants noted that their interactions with other community members were a barrier to their spiritual development. Others noted strongly positive impacts of connection with peers. Several noted how they were learning their own habitual patterns in their
relationships with their peers and their teachers, and how they were slowly opening up to different ways of being.

The emergent worldview appeared to surface out of the cultural context of the participants’ cultural background, filtered through their personal experiences, and then continued to evolve in ongoing relationships with Buddhist teachings and other individuals. Overall, participants noted that they were much more interested in the present moment, in helping others, and feeling that the apparent reality of the world around them was an illusion. The idea of a personal God either underwent a radical transition or simply decreased in importance. The major impact on their view of themselves was that they were more open. They were less worried and agitated, more open to their own weaknesses, and much more focused on other people.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gather exploratory data on the experience of individuals involved in a small Buddhist community, and build a model of spiritual worldview development from data collected from individuals and the site. Particular emphasis was placed upon understanding the participants’ relationships and the participants developing worldview. This study validates and expands upon the spiritual development literature through the examination of an entirely new population, a Buddhist community, and as such, offers several interesting areas for future exploration for both quantitative and qualitative studies. Firstly, a discussion of the support this study provides for current conceptions of spiritual development in the current literature will be presented. Following this, a discussion of the limitations of the study will be provided. Finally, there will be a section delineating findings suggested specifically by this study, along with future research directions.
5.1 Connections to Extant Literature

The arguments offered by the three teachers Buddhist teachers interviewed by Rothberg (1996), appear to have some validation in the experience of the participants in this study. Firstly, the participants followed different paths, and appeared to have different needs and interests based their particular history. It was suggested by these teachers that a clear sequence of ‘stages’ would likely not fit the majority of people. The path or process narrated by the participants in this study did not appear to have stages per se, although there did appear to be important developmental factors or milestones. For example, the personal experiences of suffering, of feeling different, of early spiritual experiences, and feeling disconnected to their spiritual/religious background appeared to be important in the participants’ interest in seeking out another spiritual/religious path. This process, though, was distinctive for individual participants. For example, men and women’s descriptions of feeling different were dissimilar, though the concept appeared the same.

This study also lends support for a non-linear model of development. Some of the models offered in the extant literature are the mandala, the spiral, the web, the quilt, and the circle (Ray & McFadden, 2001; Rothberg, 1996). Some of these metaphors better describe the important aspects of community and relationships for learning than a linear model can describe. During the phase of building and testing model fit, it was difficult to find a manner in which to portray the emerging model. Certain elements appeared to be somewhat sequential, others less so, and it was difficult to capture the interdependent nature of some of the concepts that emerged from the participants’ narratives. The model is described somewhat linearly, to
facilitate discussion of hypotheses. It appears that after the participants converted to Buddhism, the interaction between relationships, Buddhism, and worldview could be better metaphorically or visually described as a web, spiral or quilt.

Several prior articles, both theoretical and empirical, found the role of context to have a significant impact on spiritual development (Bongma, 2001; Isasi-Diaz & Tarango, 1988; Jacobs, 2000; Ray & McFadden, 2001; Tisdell, 2002). The experience of the culturally Buddhist participants was uniquely different from those who did not grow up culturally Buddhist. It was found that the cultural context of Catholicism appeared to facilitate a connection to this particular Buddhist lineage. The participant who grew up agnostic interacted with Buddhism in a way consistent with his value orientation. The participants who did not grow up Buddhist were more aware of the political nature of their choice to be Buddhist than those who were raised Buddhist. All of those who were raised culturally Buddhist also spent their formative years in other countries, where Buddhism was a cultural norm. It may be possible that those who grew up in this country are more attenuated to the cultural climate towards religion and religious identification. Those who grew up in this country reported feeling compelled to refrain from speaking about their spirituality, and reported tensions with family members who were Christian. The relationships with family members and the majority religious culture strongly impacted these participants’ experience.

Gender differences were found within several categories, for example in the discussion of ‘feeling different’ and in the proportion of males versus females who indicated an immediate connection to Buddhist teachings. The women in this study framed their experience of ‘feeling different’ through its impact on their relationships.
The men in this study framed their experience as one of needing to follow their own path, or being true to their own thinking about the world. This finding is especially interesting, as the gender difference appeared consistently across the different ethnic backgrounds of the men and women in this study. Hamilton and Jackson (1988), Isasi-Diaz and Tarango (1988), Ray and McFadden (2001), and Wink and Dillon (2001) all discussed this gender difference. It appears there may be important gender differences in the way women and men construct meaning around spirituality and spiritual development. Women may be more likely to frame their experience in terms of relationships, and men may be more likely to describe an individual quest model.

All of the participants appeared to make shifts in their ways of knowing, including those who grew up culturally Buddhist. This was especially apparent when they discussed worldview shifts, particularly in relation to the idea of God. Buker (2003) argued for the use of systems theory in describing spiritual development. He described the importance of metaphor, paradox and reframing to help make shifts in how individuals relate to particular concepts. He discussed this in terms of Jesus’ teachings, but based on this study, it appeared important to those who were relating to Buddhist teachings as well. Tisdell (2002) also noted the experience of worldview shifts in her sample. She described her participants as spiraling away from the religion of their childhood, and recreating the meaning of the spiritual attitudes and symbols of their cultures of origin.

5.2 Limitations

There are several important limitations for this study. The first limitation may also be seen as strength. As the researcher was familiar with the lineage, the
participants felt free to utilize commonly used terms within the lineage and likely did not feel the need to explain their understanding as much as they would with a person unfamiliar with the lineage and practices. This likely also impacted the observations, even though an attempt was made to observe with an open mind, and to examine preconceptions. The deconstructive process of analysis was very beneficial for combating this bias, as well as discussions with colleagues who were unfamiliar with the lineage. There were also benefits to the researcher’s familiarity, as it increased likelihood of culture-specific model emerging than would be the case if the researcher were not a member of the community.

It is also important to note that while the researcher utilized member checking to ensure the participant’s experience was being clearly elucidated, discussed important ideas and concepts with other colleagues, and validated the components of the model with qualitative analysis software, this research was developed and created in a particular context, with a small number of participants. While the document analysis and observations lend additional support to the emergent model, the specific data generated is not meant to generalize to other populations.

5.3 Further Research Directions

Continued research and validation of the emergent model suggests several areas of exploration. Several hypotheses for future study emerged from the data. The first is the hypothesis that individuals who experience suffering, a sense of personal difference, and a sense of being disconnected with their spiritual/religious tradition are more likely to seek out a different religious/spiritual path. Several other studies have noted the importance of adversity (Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; Mayo, 2001; Wink &
Dillon, 2001) in spiritual/religious development. It would be interesting to more closely examine which of these factors has more predictive power, or if some of these factors overlap in variance, especially for individuals who are converts to a religion. Future research could also explore if there is a linear or non-linear quality to these factors, using path modeling. In this research these factors did not appear to occur in any particular order. It would be useful for future research to explicate the possible chronology of these factors, or to explore the interrelationships between these variables.

The second hypothesis to emerge from the model is that this pattern may not be exclusive to converts to Buddhism, but may extend to any individual who converts to a minority religion. All three of the participants who were raised Buddhist continued to seek out Buddhism as adults, though for two of the three participants, they were attending a center that was different from their cultural tradition. They reported some of these personal context variables, but not all. All three noted the importance of suffering, and one noted feeling different than her peers in the level of her religiosity, but not the choice of religion. They continued to value the religion of their cultural background, even as they continued to examine and explore their understanding of Buddhism as adults. The participant who was raised agnostic, and therefore also did not technically convert, also failed to note the sense of disconnect, and noted that seeking out minority groups and being “weird” was actually a cultural value for him from his cultural background. It makes intuitive sense that individuals who feel out of place, and who feel a sense of disconnect with their spiritual/religious tradition would be likely to seek out a new tradition. The factor of early spiritual
experiences may predict the importance of spirituality for that person and may also predict seeking behavior if the individual does not connect to the spiritual/religious tradition of their background.

It is possible that the experience of suffering may be more a more general predictor of spiritual seeking, as it was found to be important in previous studies not utilizing converts (Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; Mayo, 2001; Wink & Dillon, 2001). On the other hand, Buddhism may more clearly address suffering than other world religions. The Four Noble Truths, said to be the first teaching of the historical Buddha address suffering explicitly. It would be useful for future research to examine the possible attraction that Buddhism has due to its emphasis on suffering and its explicit discussion of a path to end suffering.

A third hypothesis is that individuals who convert are more likely to be attracted to traditions that share some similar elements to the spiritual/religious tradition of their childhood. A striking finding was the number of former Catholics in the sample. The participants’ similar backgrounds were unknown to the researcher, and attempts were made to find more individuals who were formerly of Protestant affiliation. The individuals who were raised Catholic noted the similarities they appreciated between Catholicism and this particular lineage of Buddhism. In particular, they appreciated the ritual aspects of many of the practices and ceremonies, the similarity between prayer to saints and prayer to deities, the importance of devotion, and the value of a long tradition. It would be of interest for future studies to examine if different Buddhist lineages with different foci would attract individuals from different former affiliations.
A fourth hypothesis is that converts will experience a period of confusion or uncertainty about their attraction to their new spiritual/religious tradition. In particular, several participants noted that they simply did not understand some rituals, including those who grew up culturally Buddhist, but within a different tradition. This confusion is likely especially heightened in this tradition, as many practices are chanted in a foreign language, and the Buddhist center is decorated in a traditional manner, which is foreign to most converts. Traditional iconography specific to the ethnic and cultural lineage of the center is displayed prominently in the center, the meaning of which would not be clear to converts unless they had completed extensive background reading. There is evidence from the acculturation literature that transition to a different culture is facilitated by building familiarity with the new culture, and social support from significant relationships (Berry, 1994). It would also be interesting and useful for future studies to examine the factors that may facilitate examining and overcoming confusion and uncertainty. This study did not address these questions.

A fifth area that would benefit from further examination is the impact on members of a non-majority religion of interacting with individuals who are affiliated with the majority religion, in this case, Christianity. For some participants these were members of one’s own family, for some these were simply interactions with individuals they knew to be Christian. It appears that the impact was much stronger for those who grew up in the United States and converted to Buddhism from another tradition. Interestingly, the three individuals who grew up Buddhist did not note any experiences of discrimination. This, again, may be a factor of socialization. For those
who were raised Buddhist, Buddhism was the majority religion of their country. All of those who converted to Buddhism grew up in a culture where Christianity is the majority religion.

The participants who grew up in the United States and were converts to Buddhism noted that they held back in public settings, regardless of whether or not they knew the affiliation of those they were interacting with. The participants reported varying degrees of discrimination, but it appears that the experience of being marginalized in some manner was relatively common. Several noted feeling stereotyped and sometimes needing to confront these stereotypes directly. It would be useful for future research to examine these experiences of discrimination more fully to allow for a deeper understanding of the experience. There is ample evidence of the impacts of stigma on individuals, groups, and group interaction (for a thorough review, see Levin & van Laar, 2006).

It is possible that there is an elevated importance for a safe, nurturing community as a result of not feeling accepted or a part of the majority community. If the individual does not feel safe in the majority community or the local Buddhist community, it would likely have important psychological effects. There is a line of research on acculturation that suggests that those who are marginalized (not fitting in new culture or home culture) experience the greatest degree of acculturative stress (Berry & Kim, 1988). Also supporting this argument, Reinart and Bloomingdale (1999) found that spiritual support was inversely related to measures of psychological distress.
It appeared, though, that despite the likely elevated importance of community, some participants experienced difficulty connecting to the Buddhist community. It is possible that participants might simply have unrealistic expectations of the community. These unrealistic expectations may serve as a barrier to building connections with the new community. Several noted feeling disappointed that the community had similar issues that other communities have. It is also possible that the similar history of feeling different had an impact on how easily they were able to reach out to other members of a new community. The similar personal experiences described by the participants may make building trusting relationships with a community more difficult. This is of concern, as the participants may not have other communities they feel safe in. Those who had been community members for a longer period of time were more likely to report the positive impact of other community members in their development. It may be that those who had been members for a longer period of time had overcome the barriers to building community that the newer members described.

A uniformly positive finding from this study is the impact of relationships with Buddhist teachers. Edna described her relationship with her teacher as being similar to the relationship one might have with a therapist. Several researchers are beginning to investigate the impact of spiritual mentors (Oman, 2006). Using Bandura’s Social Learning theory (Bandura, 1977), several researchers are assessing the learning of spiritual qualities through important mentors, and then using the theory to assess the impact on psychological and physical health. It appears that there are important health benefits to learning from a positive spiritual model, and the student-teacher
relationship that is built in to this Buddhist lineage would be an interesting model to
study in future research.

One incidental finding was that the participants did not report finding meaning
in the current terms used in spirituality research. This finding calls into question the
use of Judeo-Christian derived spirituality assessment tools with this population for
several reasons. Firstly, the vast majority of spirituality assessment tools utilize the
term God. Most participants did not find the concept of a personal God to be
meaningful. Secondly, the spirituality assessment tools that do not use the term God
tend to use the term “transcendent.” The participants who spoke English as a second
or third language (4 of 11) generally did not understand the term. Even after I defined
the term, it did not appear to have personal meaning. For those who were native
English speakers, with two exceptions, the word did not have personal meaning.
These findings indicate the need to develop culture-specific assessment tools for this
population.

In general, it would be useful to assess the validity of the model in other
samples of individuals who are converts to Buddhism. This model appears to have the
best fit for those who grew up in a country where Buddhism is a minority religion, and
who made the decision to convert to Buddhism from the cultural traditions of their
youth. The participants in this study who grew up culturally Buddhist were still
converts in some sense, though, and still appear to fit the model. The tradition of the
center was a different lineage from the culture of their youth for two participants, and
the third noted cultural differences between the ways the same lineage was practiced
within the culture of the United States versus the way it was practiced where she grew
up. It would be useful for future studies to examine the model fit for converts from other spiritual/religious traditions, and for converts from different cultural lineages of Buddhism.

5.4 Implications for Counseling

The findings about the participants’ worldview may be useful for counselors working with these clients, especially clients who are struggling with spiritual questions. Clearly, additional research needs to be conducted, and it would not be useful to create more stereotypes, but there did appear to be common themes in the participants’ worldviews. In particular, these participants were very interested in understanding their own experience, and wanting to live a moral life. Several participants’ discussed feeling less focused on the material world, as they perceived it to be an illusion. There was a strong theme of wanting to benefit others.

Further findings from the interviews about the participant’s worldviews that would be germane to counselors working with the converts in particular are the difficulties they reported in several areas. They noted struggling with the worldview change, with failing to connect to the spiritual/religious tradition of their childhood, and a lack of connection to the majority religious community or the local Buddhist community. All four of these concerns could have a strong negative impact on the individual. There may be elements of the individuals’ Buddhist practice that may be helpful for alleviating some of these difficulties, as other participants noted that the practice had positively changed them. It would be useful for counselors to be open to exploring these practices with clients, to examine the beneficial effects for clients.
5.5 Summary and Conclusion

In summary, this study offers several new and important directions for research. The first is the examination of factors that lead to spiritual seeking and conversion, including an examination of whether factors are similar or different for converts to different religions, under different socio-cultural contexts. A second area of interest is the experience of confusion and uncertainty following conversion, and possible factors to facilitate examination and triumph over the period of confusion and uncertainty. A third major area of interest is the continued exploration of the impact of discrimination, both subtle and coarse, on converts to Buddhism and other non-majority religions. On a more positive note, it would be useful for future researchers to examine the benefits of positive spiritual mentors, which could include research on psychologists or pastoral counselors. This research also suggests that culture-specific measures for spirituality and religiosity may be more appropriate for this population.

As the first study to examine the in vivo experience of Buddhists in the U.S., this study is an important contribution to the largely Judeo-Christian literature base. Secondly, the participants in the study indicated a relatively similar conversion experience, generating useful and interesting hypotheses about the conversion process that will be beneficial for future research with this population and with other populations of converts. Thirdly, evidence for a non-linear model of spiritual development is provided by the participants’ discussion of their spiritual worldview development after they converted to Buddhism.
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APPENDIX A

BRIEF GLOSSARY OF TERMS
BRIEF GLOSSARY OF TERMS:

BARDO (Tibetan): a gap or intermediate state. Often used in reference to the chonyl bardo, the intermediate state between death and rebirth. Other bardos include the dream bardo and the meditation bardo.

BODHICHITTA (Sanskrit): Mind of awakening. Relative bodhichitta is the desire to practice the six enlightened qualities to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings; absolute bodhichitta is immediate insight into the emptiness of phenomena.

BODHISATTVA (Sanskrit): In the Mahayana tradition, a bodhisattva dedicates his or her existence throughout all rebirths to the attainment of enlightenment in order to liberate other beings who are suffering in samsara.

BUDDHA NATURE: refers to the basic goodness of all beings; the inherent potential within each person to attain complete buddhahood.

CHENREZIG (Tibetan): The bodhisattva who embodies the compassion of all buddhas. Chenrezig is the patron deity of Tibet. Both His Holiness the Karmapa and His Holiness Dalai Lama are manifestations of Chenrezig.

DHARMA (Sanskrit): The teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha (the historical Buddha); one of the three jewels in which one takes refuge.

GREEN TARA (Tibetan): The emanation of Skilful Means or Active Compassion

KARMA (Sanskrit): Action. The universal law of cause and effect according to which one inevitably experiences the results of one's own positive and negative actions.

KLESHA (Sanskrit): a mental state the produces conflicting emotions and confusion, and thus disturbs mental well-being and peace.

MAHAMUDRA (Sanskrit): Literally, ‘great seal.’ Mahamudra is the direct experience of the empty, luminous, and pure nature of mind.

MAHAYANA (Sanskrit): The ‘greater vehicle.’ The teachings of the second turning of the wheel of Dharma in which emptiness and compassion for all beings are emphasized.

MANTRA (Sanskrit): Sacred sounds representing various energies that symbolize and communicate the nature of the deity. Mantras, which are manifestations of the speech aspect of enlightenment, range from single syllables to lengthy combinations. Om mani peme hung, the mantra of Chenrezig, is among the most widely practiced.
MUDRA: (SANSKRIT): a mudra maybe any sort of symbol. Specifically, mudras are symbolic hand gestures that accompany sadhana practices.

NGONDO (Tibetan): The preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism in which the practitioner begins the Vajrayana path, performing 111,111 repetitions of refuge prayers and prostrations; 111,111 Vajrasattva mantras; 111,111 mandala offerings’ and 111,111 guru yoga practices. These preliminary practices prepare the student for the successive stages of the Vajrayana path.

PUJA (Sanskrit): Buddhist ceremonies that range from the very simple to the most elaborate.

RINPOCHE (TIBETAN): Honorific for teachers, literally, “precious one.”

QUAN-YIN (Chinese): Female Bodhisattva of Compassion.

SADHANA (Sanskrit): Literally, ‘means of accomplishment.’ A Vajrayana liturgy and method for one of the many deities that includes chanting, visualization and mantra recitation.

SAMSARA (Sanskrit): cyclic existence, in which ordinary beings are trapped in an endless cycle of rebirth in the six realms of existence, which contain endless suffering. The state of ordinary beings bound to suffering by attachment, aggression, and ignorance.

SHINAY (Tibetan): Literally, ‘calm abiding.’ Tranquility meditation in which the meditator uses techniques, such as following the breath, to attain a calm and focused mind.

SIDDHI (SANSKRIT): Blessing or accomplishments. The ordinary sides involve mastery over the phenomenal world. Supreme siddhi is enlightenment.

VAJRAYANA (Sanskrit): the indestructible path. The Vajrayana follows the bodhisattva path of the Mahayana and is characterized by an additional set of teachings based on the tantras, which emphasize deity practice using visualization, mantra, and mudra. Also sometimes called tantayana, or secret mantra.
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<th>Sex</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Time Affiliated</th>
<th>Prior Affiliation</th>
<th>Parent's Ethnicity</th>
<th>Parent's Affiliation</th>
<th>Spiritual Practices</th>
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Note: Terms are defined in the Glossary in Appendix A.
APPENDIX C

INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Initial open interview questions as suggested by the literature, expert opinion, and personal interest related to research questions.

1. What is your understanding of the transcendent?

2. What is your understanding of the concept of God?

3. What does spirituality mean to you?
   a. For the first three questions, are there better ways than prose to communicate your understanding? For instance, are there works of art, songs, or poems that express something deep and meaningful to you about these ideas?
   b. Are there particular experiences you’ve had that have led you to these understandings?

4. How have you changed as a person over your lifetime?
   a. How do you think those changes have come about?

5. How have other people impacted your spiritual (or human) development?
   a. How has your family and cultural background impacted your development?
   b. How has the larger community in which you grew up impacted your development?
   c. How has the spiritual community of which you are currently a member impacted your development?

6. How do you feel your cultural background impacts your understanding of spirituality, and your interest in spirituality?

7. How does being a member of this spiritual community impact you (specifically because this tradition is in the minority in the United States)?

8. How connected to the community do you feel?
   a. What does the community mean to you?
   b. Where and when do you feel the most connected?

9. What brought you to this community? What specifically attracted you to this center?

10. Are there any questions, given what I’ve asked so far, that you would add?
APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
## Demographic data

Name: ___________________________  Pseudonym: ________________

Age: __________  Ethnicity: ________________

Occupation: ___________________________  Religious Affiliation: ______

How long have you identified with current religious affiliation? ______

Prior (if any) affiliation (s)? __________________________________________

Ethnic/Cultural background of your parents: __________________________

Religious/Spiritual affiliation of your parents: __________________________

What spiritual/religious practices do you do regularly (if any)? ____________

____________________________________________________________________