



Methodology and Meditative Experience: Evaluating My Experience of the *Hindrances* as an Interpretive Tool for Vipassana Field Research

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The academic study of religious experience has always attracted strong criticism. Notable among its critics, Robert Sharf and Thomas Tweed maintain that the correct subject matter of Religion Studies is not mental states or personal experiences inaccessible to researchers, but rather narratives, artifacts, and practices. However, contemporary forms of Buddhist practice popular in the West such as Vipassana and Zen, by emphasizing the experiential, highlight the need for methodology appropriate to the study of the nature of meditative experience in these contemplative settings. The data I collected during fieldwork, conducted between 2003 and 2005, at the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre in Medlow Bath NSW, highlights the role of experiential learning in practitioners' religious socialization and commitment to the Buddhist path.

This paper examines the methodological issues involved in using one's own meditation experience as an interpretive tool for understanding that of others. In order to do this, I reflect upon my experience of learning to identify and work with the hindrances, outlined in the Satipatthana Sutta as five mental states that hinder the meditator's development of mindfulness. This was a significant step for me in understanding both the effectiveness of Vipassana as a self-transformative technique, and in understanding the application of doctrine as a guide for practice. However, this experience was not shared by any of my interview respondents, who instead considered the experiential understanding of dukkha, "suffering", and anicca, "impermanence" to be more significant in their engagement with the Buddhist path. By outlining the usefulness and the limitations of my own experience as an interpretive tool, I demonstrate the researcher's reflexive need to locate and interpret their own experience in the context of their fieldwork data.