Chapter 3

Australia and Buddhism

Australia

Australia is officially the Commonwealth country; it is in the Southern hemisphere. Australia has six states included New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD), South Australia (SA), Victoria (VIC), Western Australia (WA) and Tasmania (TMA) and there are two major mainland territories one is the Northern Territory (NT) and the other is Australian Capital Territory (ACT) which is often call Canberra.

The total population of Australia proximately 22 million peoples, almost 90% of the populations are of European descent. For generations, the vast majority of both colonial are settlers and post-Federation immigrants came almost exclusively from the British Isles and the people of Australia are still mainly either of British or Irish ethnic origin. Australia’s population has increased four times since the end of World War I and World War II. In 2001, the five largest groups with 23% of Australians who were bore overseas were from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Italy, Vietnam and China. Compare to the migrant people the Indigenous population of Australia experience higher than average rates of imprisonment and unemployment, lower levels of education, and lower life expectancies for males and females.
Australia is a developed country, with a prosperous multicultural and multi-religious society. It does not accord the status of state religion to any religion. According to the 2006 census, 64% of Australians were listed as Christian. 19% of the population was listed as “No Religion” which included humanism, atheism, agnosticism, and rationalism. The second largest religion in Australia is Buddhism (2.1%), follow by Islam (1.7 %) and Hinduism (0.8%). Overall less than 6% of Australians identify with non-Christian. As Australian constitution does not recognize any religion as state religion, religion does not play a central role in the lives of a large portion of the population.  

**Buddhism Came to Australia**

India is the land of saints. It has a remarkable tradition of saints appearing in different parts of the country. They saints realize and visualize the ultimate reality and put them into the practice of common men. Their realization is not only for them, but for the benefit of entire society.

In this unbroken tradition, there is a saint in the sixth century B.C. he was the Buddha, the Perfect Enlightened One. After getting enlightenment under the foot of Bodhi-Tree he preached his sermon for forty-five years traveling through villages and cities. His sermons or teachings have been regarded as notable milestone in the history of human ideas. His teachings were such in nature that it did not remain confined within the land of its origin. But it transcended the boundaries in such a way that it did not only

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1 The general information about the Australia and Australian people given in the above passages has been synthesized from the Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia.
become the light of Asia but became also the light of the world, Australia country does not exception.

Since Buddhism as mention above, the second largest religion in Australia country, it is obvious that many scholars would have been attempted to record the history of the origin, nature and development of Buddhism in Australia\(^2\). However, all such writings have mainly focused its attention on demographics, ethics identity and the migrant experience. Very few scholars, like Patricia Sherwood, Michelle Spuler, so on and so forth, have attempted to discuss the engagement of Buddhists and various Buddhist organizations of Australia in social welfare activities.

Australia, one of the Europeans countries has most influence of the philosophy of the Buddha in the ways of their perspectives. The images of silent contemplative Buddha or jovial laughing Buddha always seated and hands resting, in the poses of self absorption. These are the common pictures of Buddhism in the minds of Australians. Buddhism is also often seen as a practice for individual stress management, a way for achieving inner peacefulness, quietness, withdrawal from the world and all its demands\(^3\).

Therefore, in Australia most of the Australians Buddhist practices evoke images of individuals sitting in meditation pose, eyes closed and ‘contemplating their navel’ before statues of golden or burnished bronze Buddha. Passive, inward looking, inactive, contemplative…. These are the words used to describe Buddhist practice. These images

\(^2\) At the end of this paper a bibliography, retrieved from the internet, has been appended for further references.

\(^3\) Sherwood Patricia, (Ed), *The Buddha is in the Street*, Cowan University Bunbury, Malaysia, 2003, p.1
although well known, capture vaguely only the yin side of Buddhism. They ignore entirely the yang or manifest dimensions of Buddhism daily transforming families, communities, our social, cultural, political and economic life.

This work reveals the intimate relationship between the inner and the outer dimensions of Buddhism forming an inseparable modus operandi in the life of Australia. Transforming ourselves and coming to know ourselves deeply through sustained spiritual inquiry and practice, we may only make things worse. We also run the risk of not having the kind of resources of wisdom, compassion, equanimity, and perseverance necessary to respond to the great needs of the times without being quickly burned out by anger and frustration. Outer transformation thus entails inner transformation.

The present’s of silently, unspoken, unacknowledged images of Buddhism in Australia. There are the images of Buddhism as a socially transforming force in the prisons, in human rights arenas, counseling, in palliative care, in education, among the poor and needy, working with drug addicts, advocacy and in activism on behalf of forest, and in animal rights. The human existence where life is marked by the struggle for survival, economically, spiritually, socially, and where there is the grasping for happiness and fleeting moments of joy. It is the image of the Buddha who hears the cries of the world, and who from the inner place of peace can walk the Bodhisattva path in the human daily life.

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4 Sherwood Patricia, (Ed), *The Buddha is in the Street*, Cowan University Bunbury, Malaysia, 2003, p.1
Buddhist and Its Developed Period in Australia

In comparison to Buddhism’s lengthy history in many Asian countries, development of Buddhism in Australia has hardly begun. The major historical account of Buddhism in Australia was completed by Croucher in 1989, and provides an excellent chronology of events. Since Buddhism’s introduction to Australia by Chinese immigrants in 1848, a number of events heralded new stages in its development.

The founding of the first documented Buddhist organization, The Little Circle of Dharma, in Melbourne in 1925, signaled the beginning of interest by convert Buddhists. With the arrival of the first teachers, beginning with an American-born Buddhist nun, Sister Dhammadinna, 1952, more groups formed. Resident monastic and monasteries further enriched the scene from 1971 onwards. Refugees from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam changed the demographics substantially in the mid-1970s, as did increasing visits from teachers from widely diverse lineages.

Since the early 1970s the numbers of Buddhists in Australia have increased greatly, and Buddhism has turned to some considerable strength through immigration from South, South-East and East Asia. Buddhism now forms a significant part of the religious mosaic if Australia.

Buddhism has never been a highly organized religion. It has not looked for converts to make a commitment to an organization. Rather, it is found wherever people

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absorb the Buddhist understanding of the world, or uses its meditative techniques in seeking peace of heart and mind. Many people, including many of those of Anglo-Celtic background, read books about Buddhism or attend courseds in Buddhist teaching or meditation but would not identify themselves as Buddhist. In this sense, Buddhism has an influence among a much greater part of the population than the count of Buddhists in the 1991 Census would indicate.

At the same time, Buddhism is an important bearer of identity for many immigrants to Australia. Some have come from Sri Lankans, Burmese, Thai, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese and Koreans see Buddhism as part of their national and cultural heritage. As they seek to preserve something of their heritage in their new land, Buddhism provides the backdrop, the colour and, in some cases, the organizational structure.

Most Buddhist societies have been organized to provided care, social support, or assistance for disadvantaged people- the aged, women’s refuges, homeless youth, counseling and so on. The time has provided the opportunity for much development of those kinds.

Buddhism has exhibited much flexibility as it has been absorbed into the cultures and traditions of various groups throughout Asia. Thus, as it enters Australia, it comes with a great variety of cultural accretions. There is little in common in the practice of the major forms of Buddhism: the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. There are
also significant differences within each of these, as Buddhism is combined with the beliefs, practices and cultures of various ethnic groups.

Some Buddhist practices have been difficult to import into Australia. With Buddhists widely spread through many suburbs, it is not possible for monks to walk around the streets to be given food on daily basis by the Buddhist faithful, as many do in Asia. Not many the education system make it easy for young men to spend a few months living as monks, as many do in some part of the Buddhist world. Finding themselves in a different environment, some Buddhists have found their religious consciousness weakened. It has been easy to merge with the largely ‘non-religious’ environment of Australian culture.

There are some indications, however, that Buddhism is adapting to its new environment in Australian. Although few Australians become monks, many have explored Buddhism through courses and teaching programs. There has been great interest in meditation as people seek a sense of peace in a chaotic and confusing world. While Buddhism has much to offer Australians of all backgrounds, it is not clear how it will develop in Australia. In the immediate future, however, Buddhism will continue to exist in a great variety of forms, reflecting the diversity in ethnic background of Australian Buddhists.

In 1996, 199,812 people, or 1.1 per cent of the Australian population, identified themselves as Buddhist in the Australian Bureau of Statistics census. Ethic Buddhist comprise the majority of Australian Buddhists; the 1996 census showed that only 19.7
per cent of the Buddhist population had been born in Australia and a quarter of these are probably second generation ethnic Buddhists). While at least 70 per cent were born in Asia.

In 1995 Humphreys and Ward identified 156 Australian Buddhist organizations and in 1996 Adam and Hughes’ estimate totaled 167. In January 1998 Michelle Spuler identified 310 Buddhist groups, almost double the 1995 1996 figures. In June 2000 Jones provided a listing on Buddha Net of 315 Buddhist groups. Despite the continuing increases in the number of Australian Buddhist groups. Neither the percentage of groups representing the major traditions and lineages has changed to any great extent⁶.

The rise of Buddhism in Australia is a compelling tale of a resilient religion that has survived despite the odds. How is it possible for a 2,500-year-old philosophy, which began five hundred years before Christianity and one thousand years before the Muslim faith, to be relevant to modern life in Australia? Considering all the other ancient religions that have faded from contemporary practice, such as the sun worshippers of Ancient Egypt, the human sacrifices of the South American Mayans and the Druids from the Dark Ages of England, Buddhism has outlasted them all.

It does not preach the dogma of a strange cult, nor seek converts with evangelistic fervour. Those Australians who actively convert to Buddhism do so voluntarily, and are usually well-educated middle-aged professionals who are attracted to a sense of inner peace. This documentary therefore, seeks to immerse itself in the substance of this

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⁶ Wwww. Buddhanet.net
seemingly magnetic Buddhist approach. Perhaps it will be like seeing Australia for the first time, through ancient eyes.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the recent increase in Buddhist numbers across Australia, Buddhism has actually played a part in Australian history for some time. It did not just suddenly arrive in a recent wave of migrants. Some anthropologists, in fact, have suggested that Buddhism was possibly the earliest non-indigenous religion to reach Australia before white settlement.

Between 1405 and 1433 the Chinese Ming emperor, Cheng-Ho, sent sixty-two large ships to explore southern Asia. Although there is evidence that several ships from that armada landed on the Aru Islands to the north of Arnhem Land, it is not known whether they reached the mainland.

According to Professor A.P. Elkin belief that some Northern Territory Koorie tribes in reincarnation, psychic phenomena and mental cultivation is evidence of early contact with Buddhists. Despite certain rock paintings that possibly depict Chinese junks weighing anchor or images of the Buddha, actual material evidence remains to be seen.

Therefore, the first documented arrival of Buddhists in Australia was in 1848 during the gold rushes, when Chinese coolie labourers were brought into the country to work on the Victorian gold fields. These workers represented a transient population that usually returned home within five years. It was not until 1876 that the first permanent

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Buddhist community was established by Sinhalese migrants on Thursday Island. There the ethnic Sri Lankans built the first temple in Australia, while they were employed on the sugar cane plantations of Queensland. From the late 1870’s onwards many Japanese Shinto Buddhists also arrived and were active in the pearling industry across northern Australia, establishing other Buddhist enclaves in Darwin and Broome. Buddhist cemeteries were kept and festivals celebrated. Official government statistics compiled as part of a national census in 1891 indicate that, at the time, there were slightly more Buddhists in Australia, than there are today.\(^8\)

Buddhist numbers would have continued to increase if the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 had not been introduced to combat the ‘yellow peril’. Alfred Deakin, who was destined to be Prime Minister three times, drafted the legislation to pacify a somewhat xenophobic Caucasian electorate. This bill later grew to represent the more broadly implemented White Australia Policy.

For the next fifty years the benefits of mind training and meditation, as taught by Buddhism, would be disregarded as some sort of obscure ‘eastern mysticism’. Except for some remote surviving pockets of Buddhists (such as Broome and Thursday Island), the religion became virtually extinct in Australia.

A small group of committed western Buddhists formed the earliest known Buddhist organization in Australia, The Little Circle of the Dharma, in Melbourne in 1925. Progress was slow though, until after World War II when local enthusiasm for the

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White Australia Policy began to decline. In 1951 the first Buddhist nun visited Australia. Sister Dhammadinna, born in the USA, ordained and with thirty years experience in Sri Lanka, came to propagate the Theravadin School of Buddhist teaching. She received nation-wide media coverage.

Inspired by this visit, the next year the Buddhist Society of New South Wales was formed under the presidency of Leo Berkley, a Dutch-born Sydney businessman. This organization is today the oldest Buddhist group in Australia. Its membership was, and still is, compromised mainly of people from Anglo-European backgrounds.

In 1958 the Buddhist Federation of Australia was formed in order to co-ordinate the growing Buddhist groups that had sprung up around the country in Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland and Victoria.

The Buddhist presence in Australia had depended for the first hundred years on lay people with only the occasional visits by ordained members of the Sangha (the Buddhist clergy). But in the 1970’s the growing number of Buddhists created a need for resident monks, and a new phase in Australian Buddhism began.

In 1971 the Buddhist Society of New South Wales established the Sri Lankan monk, Somaloka, in residence at a retreat centre in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. This became the first monastery in Australia. A succession of monasteries representing different aspects of Buddhism slowly became established around Australia; in 1975 at
Stanmore in Sydney, in 1978 at Wisemans Ferry in country NSW and in 1984 at Serpentine in Western Australia.

The charismatic face of Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, (who was awarded the Noble Peace Prize in 1989 and describes himself as ‘a simple monk’), has travelled the world constantly giving lectures and answering questions in 20,000 seat pop concert halls. John Cleese speaks out for him in London, Henri Cartier-Bresson records his teachings around France and Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys pop group has even interviewed him in Rome for Rolling Stone magazine.

The three visits of the Dalai Lama to Australia in 1982, 1992 and 1996 were joyful occasions for Buddhists of all traditions, and huge crowds of Buddhists and the general public gathered to hear him speak. On the third visit, and despite virulent Chinese protests, the Dalai Lama met with and was photographed with the Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard. It was now clearly evident at this stage, that Buddhism had become a significant minority religion in Australia which has a big influence and trace back to its origins.

The Origins of Buddhism

Buddhism is generally accepted to have originated in the historical figure of the Buddha. Born in approximately 563 BCE in what is now southern Nepal, the Buddha was born a prince in the Shakya tribe. Legend has it that the prince led a secluded and luxurious life before one day encountering sickness, old age and death. Shocked by this,
the prince left his household, wife and son, and went on a quest to learn how to end human suffering. He studied under a number of spiritual teachers and became skilful in the practices they taught, but he did not find these to be adequate solutions to the problems posed by human life. Finally he found his own path to enlightenment, becoming the Buddha, or Awakened One. What the Buddha claimed to have realized was insight into the nature of suffering; its cause and the means of ending it. The Buddha then taught his new-found knowledge as the Dharma (the ‘way’ or ‘law’) for the next forty-five years and founded a monastic order for his followers, the Sangha.

There are three main Buddhist traditions have developed since the Buddha’s death. The first to emerge was the Theravada tradition, also known as the School of the Elders or Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle). Theravada Buddhism is now the main Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. In the first century BCE the Mahayana (or Great Vehicle) tradition emerged, and gradually spread into China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. The third major tradition, Vajrayana (the Diamond Vehicle) developed later and in the seventh century its spread to Tibet, Nepal and Mongolia. These three major traditions developed differently in different countries, diversifying even further through the development of different groups within and across geographical regions. It is generally accepted that all Buddhists affirm a few core tenets (although they may express or emphasize these differently): the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eight-Fold Path, the Three Universal Characteristics and the Three Jewels.