Chapter 4

Buddhist Culture of Peace in Australian Society

As a spiritual system and philosophy, Buddhism is essentially rooted in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama known to the world as the Buddha. Since its origin around 2500 years ago, Buddhism has emerged today as a universal religion following its steady growth and spread over a long period of time. It has been growing at a rapid pace in the Occident, especially in countries like Australia.

Australia is a multi-cultural country with numerous diversities in terms of ethnicity and faith. People from different countries have been immigrating for hundreds of years to live together harmoniously as part of the pluralistic Australian society. It has already been stated in one of the previous chapters of this thesis that Buddhism is the largest religion of Australia next only to Christianity. It is worthwhile to remember that Christianity arrived in Australia for the first time not before 1788 when the white settlers reached there. The arrival of Buddhism to Australian is relatively recent. According to the philosopher Croucher (1988) , the earliest known Buddhist settlers in Australia were the Chinese migrants who arrived in the 1860s during the gold rushes in the Eastern States. Incidentally, most of the researches on Buddhism in Australia conducted so far focus their attention on the migrant Buddhists from South East Asia and their experiences.
Approaches to social suffering, illustrated by the precepts and Peacemaker orders and the lives of the engaged Buddhists, promote open-mindedness, creativity, resourcefulness, solidarity, and a search for common ground and consensus among the actors in social conflicts. Traditional virtues such as loving kindness, compassion, patience, tolerance, impartiality, and the unquestionable commitment to non-violence are practiced in the context of mutuality and non-competitiveness, even regarding ideology and cultural values. That is why the festival days are the best time to visit temples, yielding opportunities to learn about the Buddha and Dharma from the members of the Sangha. It is also owing to the fact that they give a comprehensive insight into the culture of the people residing in Australia. To the people of other countries, Buddhists living in Australia are no exception in this regard. Festivals, especially those celebrated by the Buddhist community, are a major attraction throughout the country and are worth seeing, participating and enjoying.

King Ajatasattu of Magadh, tormented by remorse over a terrible crime, once asked the Buddha about visible fruits of a life of a recluse. “Bhante, the various craftsmen and workers enjoy here and now the visible fruits of their skills, bringing themselves and their families’ pleasure and joy, and supporting monks, which leads to happiness in heaven. Is it possible, Bhante, to point out such a fruit of the contemplative life apparent here and now, pertaining to this life?” The

---

Buddha addressed his disciples in order to answer the question asked by Ajtasattu king.²

All beings want to be happy and avoid suffering. The state of happiness and non-suffering can be attained when beneficial and harmful actions are judged not by the way they seem but by the altruistic or selfish intention behind them and the happiness and suffering that they bring about³. The Buddha also advised his followers that if they were to thrive they should ‘meet regularly and in large numbers’⁴. That probably explains why festivals are so central to the life of the Buddhist community. These festivals provide an opportunity for celebration and expression of devotion and gratitude to the Buddha and his teachings. The principal of Buddhist festivals celebrate ‘the Three Jewels’, the Buddha, the Dharma (the Buddhist Teaching), and the Sangha (the spiritual community).

Besides, there are also many special or holidays held throughout the year. Many of these are celebrated on the birthdays of the Bodhisattvas in the Mahayana tradition or on other significant dates in the Buddhist calendar. The most significant celebration takes place every May on the night of the full moon, when Buddhist all over the world celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha over 2,500 years ago. It has come to be known as the Buddha Day.

² http://www.buddhanet.net.au.
Buddhist Festivals are occasions of joy. Typically, on a festival day, lay people go to the local temple or monastery and offer food to the monks, take the Five Precepts and listen to a Dharma talk. In the afternoon, they distribute food to the poor to make merit and in the evening, join in a ceremony of circumambulating a Stupa three times as a sign of respect to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The day will conclude with evening chanting of the Buddha's teachings and meditation. Some holy days are specific to specific Buddhist traditions or ethnic groups. There are two aspects to take cognizance of regarding Buddhist festivals. Firstly, most Buddhists, with the exception of the Japanese, use the Lunar Calendar and the dates of Buddhist festivals vary from country to country and between Buddhist traditions. Secondly, Mahayana and Theravada, two main branches of Buddhism have unique collection of canonical texts, have developed different practices and observe different Buddhist festivals.

**The Festival of Theravada Tradition**

**New Year:** In countries like Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Lao, where Theravada is the dominant religion, the New Year is celebrated for three days from the first full moon day in April. On this occasion, every house is decorated with colorful bamboo-framed lanterns and people visit temples in large number and offer prayers and foods. In countries with dominant Mahayanist population, the New Year starts on the first full moon day in January. However, the Buddhist New Year depends on the country of origin or ethnic background of
the people. For example, Chinese, Koreans and Vietnamese celebrate New Year in late January or early February according to the lunar calendar, whilst the Tibetans usually celebrate this day about one month later.

The people who follow the Theravada tradition are more strict. According to them, the festivals that have been incorporated with religion could sometimes pollute the purity of a religion. On the other hand, a religion without festivals can become very dull and lifeless to many people. Usually, children and youths get associated with religion through religious festivals. To them, the appeal inherent in a religion is based on its festivals. However, to a mediator, festivals can become a nuisance.

There is no gainsaying that some people will not be satisfied with religious observances only during a festival. So, they naturally like to have some sort of merry-making and outward show. Rites, rituals, ceremonies, processions and festivals are organized therefore to quench their thirst for emotional satisfaction through religion. No one can say that such practices are wrong, but devotees are supposed to organize those ceremonies in a cultured manner, without causing a nuisance to others.

It is a fact that Theravada Buddhists do not observe Buddhist festivals by enjoying themselves under the influence of merry-making or holding feasts by the slaughtering of animals because in the deep means of giving alms as foods they
are not allowed to concede to request from lay peoples for vegetables foods or other things, just receive whatever lay peoples offers to them. True Buddhists observe festival days in an entirely different manner. On the particular festival day, they would devote their time to abstaining from all sorts of evil practices. Instead, they would strictly practice charity and help others to relieve themselves from their suffering. They may entertain friends and relatives in a respectable way.

**Buddha's Birthday (Vesak Day):** Following the Theravada tradition, practices observed by lay people on the occasion of the Buddha's Birthday Celebrations include the observance of eight precepts (the regular five plus not taking food after midday and celibacy and not over indulging in sleep). Also, the lay people may participate in chanting and meditation and listening to sermons.

Traditionally, Vesak is the major Buddhist festival of the year as it celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha on the one day, the first full moon day in May, except in a leap year when the festival is held in June. This celebration is called Vesak after the name of the month in the Indian calendar.

The significance of Vesak rests on the Buddha and his universal peace message to mankind. To recall the Buddha and his Enlightenment, the Buddhist fellows are immediately reminded of the unique and most profound knowledge and insight which he attained on the night of his Enlightenment. This coincided
with three important events which took place, corresponding to the three watches or periods of the night.

During the first watch of the night, when his mind was calm, clear and purified, light arose in him, knowledge and insight came. It was at that time that he saw his previous lives, at first one, then two, three up to five, then multiples of them.... ten, twenty, thirty to fifty. Then 100, 1000 and so on.... As he went on with this practice, during the second watch of the night, he saw how beings died and were reborn, depending on their Karma, how they disappeared and reappeared from one form to another, from one plane of existence to another. Then, during the final watch of the night, he saw the arising and cessation of all phenomena, mental and physical. He saw how things arose depending on causes and conditions. This led him to perceive the arising and cessation of suffering and all forms of dissatisfaction paving the way for the eradication of all taints of cravings. With the complete cessation of craving, his mind was completely liberated. He attained the state of Full Enlightenment. The realization d awned on him together with all psychic powers.

This wisdom and light that flashed and radiated under the historic Bodhi Tree at Buddha Gaya in the district of Bihar in Northern India more than 2500 years ago is of great significance to human destiny. It illuminated the way by which mankind could cross, from a world of superstition, or hatred and fear, to a
new world of light of true love and happiness. The heart of the teachings of the Buddha is contained in the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, namely,

a) The Noble Truth of Suffering (Dukkha)

b) The Origin or Cause of suffering

c) The End or Cessation of suffering

d) The Path which leads to the cessation of Sufferings

The First Noble Truth is the Truth of Dukkha which has been generally translated as 'suffering'. But the term Dukkha, which represents the Buddha's view of life and the world, has a deeper philosophical meaning. Birth, old age, sickness and death are universal. All beings are subject to this suffering. Separation from beloved ones and pleasant conditions, association with unpleasant persons and conditions, and not getting what one desires - these are also sources of suffering and dissatisfaction. The Buddha summarizes Dukkha in what is known as the Five Grasping Aggregates and herein lies the deeper philosophical meaning of Dukkha for it encompasses the whole state of being or existence.

Our life or the whole process of living is seen as a flux of energy comprising the five aggregates, namely the Aggregate of Form or the Physical process, Feeling, Perception, Mental Formation, and Consciousness. These are
usually classified as mental and physical processes, which are constantly in a state of flux or change.

It is only when we train our minds to observe the functioning of mental and physical processes that we can realize the true nature of our lives. In that condition, we will see how it is subject to change and dissatisfaction. In other words, one must engage oneself in the Buddha’s teaching in order to relieve suffering. Thus, there is no real substance or entity or Self which we can cling to as 'I', 'my' or 'mine'. When we become aware of the unsatisfactory nature of life, we would naturally want to get out of this state. It is at this point that we begin to seriously question ourselves about the meaning and purpose of life. This will lead us to seek the Truth with regards to the true nature of existence and the knowledge to overcome the state of absolute discontent or dissatisfaction. So, from the Buddhist point of view, the purpose of life is to put an end to suffering and all other forms of dissatisfaction to realize peace and true happiness. Such is the significance of the understanding and the realization of the First Noble Truth.

The Second Noble Truth explains the Origin or Cause of suffering. *Tanha* or craving is the universal cause of suffering. It includes not only the desire for sensual pleasures, wealth and power, but also attachment to ideas’, views, opinions, concepts, and beliefs. It is the lust for flesh, the lust for continued or eternal presence in the sensual realms of existence, as well as the realms of form and the formless realms. Besides, there is also the lust and craving for non-
existence (or nihilism). These are all different forms of selfishness, desiring things for oneself, even at the expense of others.

Not realizing the true nature of one’s Self, one clings to things which are impermanent, changeable and perishable. The failure to satisfy one's desires through these things causes disappointment and suffering. Craving is a powerful mental force present in all of us. It is the root cause of our sufferings. It is this craving which binds us to Samsara - the repeated cycle of birth and death.

The Third Noble Truth points to the cessation of suffering. Where there is no craving, there is no becoming, no rebirth. Where there is no rebirth, there is no decay, no old age, no death, hence no suffering. That is how suffering is ended, once and for all.

The Fourth Noble Truth explains the Path or the Way which leads to the cessation of suffering. It is called the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold path avoids the extremes of self-indulgence on one hand and self-torture on the other. It consists of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. These factors may be summarized into three stages of training, involving morality, mental culture and wisdom.

Morality or good conduct is the avoidance of evil or unwholesome actions - actions which are tainted by greed, hatred and delusion; and the performance of
the good or wholesome actions, free from greed, hatred and delusion, but motivated by liberality, loving-kindness and wisdom. The function of good conduct or moral restraint is to free one's mind from remorse (or guilty conscience). The mind that is free from remorse (or guilt) is naturally calm and tranquil, and ready for concentration with awareness. The concentrated and cultured mind is a contemplative and analytical mind. It is capable of seeing cause and effect, and the true nature of existence, thus paving the way for wisdom and insight.

Wisdom in the Buddhist context is the realization of the fundamental truths of life, which are basically the Four Noble Truths. The understandings of the Four Noble Truths provide us with a proper sense of purpose and direction in life. They form the basis of problem-solving.

The message of the Buddha stands today as unaffected by time and the expansion of knowledge as when they were first enunciated. No matter how much scientific knowledge can extend man's mental horizon, there is room for the acceptance and assimilation for further discovery within forming the fundamental framework of the teachings of the Buddha. The teaching of the Buddha is open to all to see and judge for themselves. The universality of the teachings of the Buddha has led one of the world's greatest scientists, Albert Einstein to declare that 'if there is any religion that could cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism'.
The teaching of the Buddha became a great civilizing force wherever it went. It appeals to reason and freedom of thought, recognizing the dignity and potentiality of the human mind. It calls for equality, fraternity and understanding, exhorting its followers to avoid evil, do good and purify their minds on this most important festival day (Vesak).

Realizing the transient nature of life and all worldly phenomena, the Buddha has advised us to work out our deliverance with heedfulness, as 'heedfulness is the path to deathlessness'. His clear and profound teachings on the cultivation of heedfulness otherwise known as Satipathana or the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is the path for the purification of beings - for the overcoming of sorrows and lamentation, destruction of all mental and physical sufferings, attainment of insight and knowledge, and for the realization of Nibbana. This has been verified by his disciples. That is why it is regarded as a path, a technique which may be verified by all irrespective of caste, color or creed.

In Thai villages, people get ready during the day. They clean their houses and hang up garlands of flowers. The men take clean sand from the river bank and spread it over the temple courtyard, where everyone walks with bare feet. Statues of the Buddha are brought out of the temple to be washed and polished and all the books come out to be dusted. When it gets dark, the villagers gather with candles or small oil lamps. The biggest Buddha statue is put on a platform outside the temple and lights are put on to shine all round it. Scented water is thrown onto it.
Holding their lights, everyone starts to move round the Buddha statue so that in the end it is encircled with light.

Most of the Theravedin countries also celebrate the Festival of the Tooth of the Buddha. The tooth can never be seen, as it is kept deep inside many caskets. But once a year in August, on the night of the full moon, there is a special procession for it. All the meanings of festivals are construed by the members in different nations. In other words, the groups of engage Buddhists stand for nothing more than the benefit of well beings from different cultural groups living in Australia.

**The Festival of Mahayana Tradition**

The celebrations observed on the occasion of Mahayana festivals are not much differ from Theravada tradition but especially on the day of celebration of Buddha’s birthday (Vesak). On this particular festival day, they would devote their time to abstaining from all evil, practice charity and help others to relieve themselves from their suffering. They may also entertain friends and relatives in a respectable way. People come from China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, etc. They mostly belong to the Mahayana tradition. To them, the New Year starts on the first full moon day in January\(^5\).

\(^5\) [http://www.buddhanet.net.au/festival](http://www.buddhanet.net.au/festival)
However, the *Buddhist New Year* depends on the country of origin or ethnic background of the people. For example, Chinese, Koreans and Vietnamese celebrate late January or early February according to the lunar calendar, whilst the Tibetans usually celebrate about one month later. On this day, many peoples attend the festival, whether they are Buddhist or non-Buddhist, the organist would remind the lay peoples about the Buddha’ discourse such as life is impermanent, life is like a bubble, etc. in order to help them to overcome their desires or miseries of their attachment.

Several members come from different places to the temple offer incenses, flowers, candles and fruits and so on. They pray for their relatives on such good health, good fortune on the New Year Day so that all the bad fortune on the year may go away quickly. They also wish for their relatives who had passed away to be reborn in a good world or a good realm. Then, they enjoy different kinds of the vegetable foods and feel happy on the first day of New Year in Temple.

However, in the Buddhist tradition, there’s a constant attempt to get rid of contingent influences of that kind. For instance, the motivation behind an act of charity needs to be examined very carefully. Are we being generous out of respect for social conventions, or are we really expressing a spontaneous altruistic impulse? 6 To be perfect, giving should be free of any expectation of something in return, any reward, any hope of praise or gratitude, and even any idea of gaining

---

‘merit’. To be a true source not only of merit but also of wisdom, an act of giving has to be free of three concepts: belief in the true existence of the subject, the person who gives; of the object, the person receiving the gift; and of the action, the actual giving. Euthenics giving is accomplished with a purity of intention devoid of all attachment.

Buddhists do not pray to a Creator God, but they do have devotional meditation practices which could be compared to praying. Radiating loving kindness to all living beings is a practice which is believed to benefit those beings. The sharing of merit is a practice where one dedicates the goodness of one’s life to the benefit of all living beings as well as praying for a particular person.

**Ancestor Day (Ullambana):** It is celebrated throughout the Mahayana tradition from the first to the fifteenth days of the eighth lunar month, with much popularity in many countries including China, Vietnam, Japan, and Malaysia. On the Occasion of Ullambana, it is widely believed that the 'Gates of the Hell' are opened and the dead ones pay visit to their loved ones". Therefore, offerings are made to the spirits of the dead and to the hungry ghosts for good fortune and luck. It falls on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month.

Ullambana is a key Mahayana Buddhist concept based on the story of 'Mahamaudgalyayana saving his Mother'. A Sanskrit word, it means "rescuing
those who are hanging upside-down." Traditionally it is referred as 'seeking salvation for the anguished souls in hell'.

By the Buddhist legend, a disciple of Buddha, Mahamaudgalyayana (Mogallana or Moelin) on obtaining the six spiritual penetrations uses his Way Eye and meditative skills and finds his deceased mother reborn but tormented with hunger and starvation. Deeply sad, Mahamaudgalyayana started a journey to the netherworld. Finding her in a poor state, he tried feeding to ease her hunger but before she could eat, it all erupted into ball of flames. A dejected Mahamaudgalyayana begged to Sakymuni to provide him a solution to allow salvation for his mother. But Buddha answered; "her past sins are deep and huge for you alone to save". Although your filial respect move the heaven spirits, the earth spirits, twisted demons, and those outside the way, Brahmans, and the four heavenly king gods, are also without sufficient strength. So, the awesome spiritual power of the ten (community of Monks) 'Sangha' from all ten directions is necessary for salvation to be restored.

Buddha also advised Maudgalyayana to make the best offering of five fruits, incense, oil, lamps, candles, beds and bedding to the assembled ten monks of the Order and pray along with them for the salvation of her mother's soul. Also
added that such an offering will not only redeem salvation for her mother but also all his kith and kin and forefathers will escape suffering and attain eternal bliss⁷.

Ullambana festival chiefly reinforces the concept of filial piety. It signifies the importance of performing "good deeds" to accumulate spiritual merit. Most significant is to share the merit with the departed souls, to help them reborn in good realms and end their suffering.

Legend of Ullambana has passed over ages and is celebrated by Buddhists all over, by holding ceremonies of charity to make the outcast and famished ghosts cross over to salvation. Thus, the 15th day of the seventh moon has become an Occasions for teaching the virtues of filial piety. The date of Ullambana depends on the calendar that is followed, and varies slightly in different parts of the world. Ulambana is also a Japanese Buddhist festival known as Obon, beginning on the thirteenth of July and lasting for three days. It marks the reunion of family ancestors with the living.

Robe Offering Ceremony (Kathina Ceremony): It is celebrated in both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions. It is held on any convenient date within one month of the conclusion of the Vassa Retreat, which is the three month rains retreat season (Vassa) for the monastic order. It is the time of the year when new robes and other requisites may be offered by the laity to the monks.

⁷ http://www.buddhanet.net.au/culture
**Avalokitesvara’s (Kuan Yin) Birthday**: In this festival, people celebrate the Bodhisattva ideal represented by Avalokitesvara. He represents the perfection of compassion in the Mahayana traditions of Tibetan, Vietnamese, Chinese, Taiwanese, etc. It takes place on the full moon day in March.

In Tibet, prayer is observed regularly. Tibetans pray in a special way. They believe that when certain sounds and words, called mantras, are said many times, they arouse good vibrations within the person. If a mantra is repeated often enough it can open up the mind to a consciousness which is beyond words and thoughts.

In Japan, millions of Buddhists pray to the *Amida Buddha*, the Buddha of Infinite Light. They believe that the *Amida* has created a Pure Land in the west and that those who have faith and repeat the Amida’s name in prayer will go there. Yet they also believe that the Amida is actually within them.

Large communities of Vietnamese people living in Australia celebrate three main Buddhist festivals by the Buddhist community include Vesak (Buddha's Birthday), Vulan (Ullambana) and New Year. A traditional Buddhist also visits the temple on the fifteenth day of the Lunar month (Ram), and on various other festival days of the Mahayana Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhist communities in Australia are also large. The festivals that they celebrate are not different from those celebrated by Vietnamese people. On the holy days, the Chinese Buddhists visit temples to make
offerings of prayers, incense, fruits, flowers and donations. On such days, they observe the moral precepts as well as having only vegetarian food.

All the festivals mentioned above are marked by different ways of activities from different nations, organize by the groups of engaged Buddhists in various Temples. Some of them try to distribute the free publishing of Dharma, in different mediums such as books, CD, DVD, VCD and so on, nothing more than the benefits for other in order to help all sentient beings to relieve their mental obstacles and lives happy life.

**The Annual Buddhist Conference**

The annual Buddhist conferences are held every year in Australia. During these conferences, Buddhists would like to elaborate some of their understanding in defining the essence of Buddhism in term of its practicality in social life contexts. Engaged Buddhism is not some new, intellectual paradigm being invented; in fact it dates back to the time when the Buddha discovered the ultimate truth of the unfolding of the universe and thereafter taught his methods to others. Annual conferences are an opportunity to discuss the necessary paths to be taken in order for Buddhism to become a way of life in the contemporary world.

Engaged Buddhism has become widely known in many parts of the world and was one of the significant developments helping to bring about a new understanding of Buddhist teachings. People from different states and from
different Buddhist organizations are encouraged to take part in local social services and to be more engaged in overall well-being of the communities in where they live. For a long time, Buddhism has been misperceived to be a religion of pessimism, in which Buddhist monks, nuns and followers’ emphased self-refuge and practiced this as their only method. In fact, this interpretation undermines people’s ability to fully comprehend what Buddhism really is all about. Buddhism is essentially about the cultivation of compassion. When people make an effort to open up, let others come in, and establish meaningful relationships, growing their own compassion. 

The idea of bringing Buddhism into real life responds to many new, complex needs and thoughts resulting from social changes over time. It urges Buddhism to come into a new role in order to continue to the relevant spiritual guidance for people. It’s crucial to keep in mind that if Buddhism weren’t able to become more involved in this secular world, it could become something very rigid, like a treasure locked up in a museum which is quite enjoyable for spectators to look at, but offering no real value in terms of insights that can help them resolve real-life problems once they have left the museum. It is in the light of this time-tested assumption that we can infer that the purpose of conference to bring Buddhism into real life contexts is ultimately to transform society.

---