2 Venerable Robina Courtin
An unconventional Buddhist?

Anna Halafoff

Venerable Robina Courtin is one of Australia's most prominent Buddhist teachers. Born in Melbourne, she has been a Buddhist nun in the Tibetan tradition for over 30 years. As founder of the Liberation Prison Project and a teacher of international renown, Venerable Robina has been the subject of two Australian documentaries, *Chasing Buddha* (2001) and *Key to Freedom* (2007). The wisdom, directness and humour of her teachings, coupled with her limitless compassion, have served as inspirations to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Arguably, it is her particularly Australian down-to-earth style that has enabled her to deliver Buddhism in a practical and accessible way to westerners both in and beyond Australia. This chapter draws on Australian media sources, including transcripts of documentaries, radio interviews and newspaper articles, to provide an account of Venerable Robina's life story and her insights on practising and teaching Buddhism, particularly in the Australian context. In so doing, I examine her supposedly unconventional approach to Buddhism, arguing that she may, in fact, be more traditional than the Australian media have led their readers to believe.

Venerable Robina Courtin in and beyond Australia

Robina Courtin was born in Melbourne in 1944 into a Catholic family, the second of seven children. Despite economic hardships, she was educated at Sacred Heart, a prestigious Melbourne girls' school in East Malvern. As a young girl, Robina was a devout Catholic with a questioning and rebellious nature, whose good heart remained largely hidden behind her bad behaviour. At the age of 12, she begged her mother to let her become a Carmelite nun like her hero, St. Therese of Lisieux, who was ordained at 14. Yet by 19 Robina had traded her religious aspirations for the experimental life of a hippy in the 1960s. She moved to London in 1967, dedicating the next decade of her life to left-wing, black and feminist politics in the United Kingdom and Australia (Hurrell 2000; Simpson 2002; Compass 2007; Irving 2007b).

In the mid-1970s, Robina also became a passionate student of martial arts, until a car accident abruptly cut short her karate career. During her recuperation in Melbourne she saw a poster advertising a Buddhist course with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the first Tibetan Lamas to visit and teach in Australia, at Chenurezig Institute in Southern Queensland (Croucher 1989: 98-92; Simpson 2002). Robina was immediately attracted to the reflexive and devotional nature of Tibetan Buddhism, which was well suited to her questioning mind and sat comfortably with her Catholic upbringing. It was at Chenurezig Institute that she finally realized: 'Ah! That's the kind of nun I want to be!' and 18 months later Lama Zopa ordained her at Kopan, the Lamas' monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal (Irving 2007b).

Venerable Robina then spent the next 10 years studying Buddhism while working for Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa's Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), helping to develop Wisdom Publications in the United Kingdom and overseeing its editorial and production departments. In 1987 at the request of Lama Zopa she began teaching Buddhism in Australia and, in 1994, she was appointed editor of FPMT's *Mandala Magazine* in California. In 1996 the magazine received a letter from an 18-year-old Mexican-American prisoner, Arturo, a Los Angeles gang member who had been incarcerated since he was 12. Venerable Robina responded to his message and sent him a book on Buddhism. Word spread and, by the end of 1997, she was writing to more than 40 inmates throughout the USA. This led her to establish Liberation Prison Project (LPP) as a non-profit organization in California (Curtis 1998; The Spirit of Things 2003; Compass 2007; Irving 2007b).

Venerable Robina's story was widely publicized in Australia when *Chasing Buddha*, an Australian Film Industry award-winning documentary made about her was shown on SBS (the Special Broadcasting Service, Australia's multicultural and multilingual radio and television public broadcaster) in 2000 and given a theatrical release in several Australian cities. The film follows Venerable Robina crossing-countries as she teaches Buddhism at FPMT centres and in maximum-security prisons. Due to *Chasing Buddha*'s success, Venerable Robina was invited to visit prisons and to give public talks throughout Australia (Hawker 2000; Walden 2000; Walker 2000). What began with a letter from one prisoner in 1996 has grown into an organization with offices in the United States and Australia and branches in Mongolia, Spain and Mexico. LPP receives hundreds of letters a month and over 13 years has corresponded with or visited thousands of prisoners. In 2007, *Key to Freedom*, a documentary about Venerable Robina's work in Australian prisons, was screened on Australia's ABC TV (Compass 2007; Irving 2007a; Irving 2007b).

Despite what appears as many different tracks within one lifetime, Venerable Robina well describes the continuity of her experiences:

(IT) Look back on my life, externally it looks very different, the threads ... but internally to me it’s completely constant, and from the beginning that I can remember, I always had this wish to understand the world ... and having a lot of energy, wanting to do something about it. So that really hasn’t changed.

(The Spirit of Things 2003)
Not your average nun? Aussie, down to earth and accessible

Following the release of Chasing Buddha, which includes a scene of Venerable Robina using four-letter words, journalists frequently used extreme and sensationalist descriptors depicting her as somewhat of a subversive superhero. This is well illustrated by headlines and phrases such as: ‘There is nothing passive about this Buddhist nun’; ‘a violator of expectations’ (Hawker 2003); ‘Wilder than your average nun’ (Morgan 2000) and ‘the girl who put some attitude into Buddhism’ (Brundrett 2003). Journalists have concurrently juxtaposed Venerable Robina’s ‘unflinching honesty and gutter-mouthed outbursts’ with her ‘brilliant … compassion and wisdom’ (Walke 1998), her ‘open and infectious’ smile (Curtis 1998) and ‘hard-boiled humanity’ (Rouch 2000). She has been described as ‘a diminutive dynamo with a big heart’ (Irving 2007b) and a ‘surprisingly soft centre’ (Hall 2000). Indeed it is her ‘life of extremes’ that has arguably made her so interesting to the Australian media and public (Byrnes 2000).

‘Forget your image of an obedient and mild-mannered Buddhist’, says Rachel Kohn, ‘she does wear the maroon robes of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but Australian. Robina Courtin, has brought her edgy personality and boundless energy to her 24 years as a Buddhist nun’ (The Spirit of Things 2003). Indeed it is her ‘fortnightly’ and ‘matter-of-fact Aussie attitude’ that has been described as having ‘prepared her perfectly for her work with prisoners in some of the United States’ toughest jails’ (Passmore 2001; Brundrett 2003). Prisoners from Kentucky State Penitentiary (quoted in Chasing Buddha quoted in Sunday Herald Sun 2000) described her teachings as ‘very easy to relate to because she puts them in a way that everyone can understand’. They also described her as having an ‘easy-going’ style and her teachings as ‘accessible’, ‘fun’ and ‘interesting’.

In addition, Venerable Robina’s own experiences of suffering and violence in her youth, including both incest and rape (Irving 2007b), have enabled a level of empathy to develop between her and the prisoners and also with female students both inside and outside the prison system. As the majority of Buddhist teachers, and particularly Tibetan Buddhist Lamas, who have visited and taught in Australia have been men, it follows that Australian women are drawn to the teachings of Buddhist nuns in the Tibetan tradition, such as Venerable Robina Courtin and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, with whom they can more easily identify. In 1996 Lama Zopa Rinpoche wrote in a 21st birthday card to Aruna, the first prisoner that Venerable Robina had responded to, ‘your prison is nothing in comparison to the inner prison of ordinary people’ – the prison of attachment, anger, depression and the other everyday unhappy emotions (Courtin quoted in The Religion Report 2005). Consequently, Venerable Robina’s advice is the same to all ‘prisoners’, regardless of gender. It’s about developing self-respect through enhancing one’s positive qualities: ‘The bottom line … is that a human being looks at themselves, takes responsibility and knows they’ve got potential to change for the better’ (Courtin quoted in Irving 2007a). According to Venerable Aileen Barry of Liberation Prison Project in Australia, not only does Venerable Robina have a profound understanding of suffering, ‘what she’s able to put across to people very clearly is it is possible to transform [it] … she’s a very grounded, practical, living example of that’ (Compass 2007).

Unconventional or traditional?

Scholars have noted that Australians – and the media – hold a very limited understanding of diverse Buddhist traditions and of Buddhism’s history in Australia (Croucher 1989; Sherwood 2003: 1, 3). While Australians commonly view Buddhists as either in silent contemplation or jovial laughter, the contributions that Buddhism has made to social change and that women have made to Buddhism in Australia remain largely unrecognized (Adam 2000; Sherwood 2003: 1, 3). In actuality, eccentric, strong teachers and women have played a leading role in Buddhism in Australia since the nineteenth century and a commitment to a reflexive, pragmatic approach to Buddhism and to Buddhist-inspired methods of social change have long been prevalent in Australia (Croucher 1989; Adam and Hughes 1996; Adam 2000; Sherwood 2003). As Sherwood (2003) explains, a commitment to social change among Buddhists is not a new or western development, it is a continuation of the tradition of the Bodhisattva Path, as described by Shantideva, the eighth-century Indian scholar and monk, which stresses the Mahayana ideal of altruism and of the Bodhisattva’s pledge to take whatever form may be necessary in order to be of most benefit to others (Shantideva 2000: 33).

It follows that the so-called unconventional Venerable Robina Courtin is actually quite traditional. She follows the Bodhisattva’s path of altruistic motivation for personal and social change. She begins and ends her teachings with traditional prayers. She dispenses traditional methods of practices, meditations and vows. She encourages her students to study Buddhist texts and to meet with qualified teachers (The Spirit of Things 2003; Irving 2007b). Due to her appearance, as an Australian woman and down-to-earth dynamo, who has travelled many difficult periods in her own life: ‘[i]n her own special way she has humanized Buddhism, made it more accessible and within reach for people with normal conditions and failings’ (Brundrett 2003). In so doing, she has proven ‘inspiration comes in all shapes and sizes’ (Rouch 2000), following the Bodhisattva’s tradition, appearing where and when needed and enabling whatever it takes to help all beings to be free from suffering and to find happiness, thus challenging prevalent notions of what a Buddhist in Australia ought to be like. Consequently, Venerable Robina can be viewed as a proponent of the Bodhisattva’s tradition, appearing where and when needed and enabling whatever it takes to help all beings to be free from suffering and to find happiness, thus challenging prevalent notions of what a Buddhist in Australia ought to be like. Consequently, Venerable Robina can be viewed as a proponent of the Bodhisattva’s tradition, appearing where and when needed and enabling whatever it takes to help all beings to be free from suffering and to find happiness, thus challenging prevalent notions of what a Buddhist in Australia ought to be like. Consequently, Venerable Robina can be viewed as a proponent of the Bodhisattva’s tradition, appearing where and when needed and enabling whatever it takes to help all beings to be free from suffering and to find happiness, thus challenging prevalent notions of what a Buddhist in Australia ought to be like. Consequently, Venerable Robina can be viewed as a proponent of the Bodhisattva’s tradition, appearing where and when needed and enabling whatever it takes to help all beings to be free from suffering and to find happiness, thus challenging prevalent notions of what a Buddhist in Australia ought to be like. Consequently, Venerable Robina can be viewed as a proponent of the Bodhisattva’s tradition, appearing where and when needed and enabling whatever it takes to help all beings to be free from suffering and to find happiness, thus challenging prevalent notions of what a Buddhist in Australia ought to be like. Consequently, Venerable Robina can be viewed as a proponent of the Bodhisattva’s tradition, appearing where and when needed and enabling whatever it takes to help all beings to be free from suffering and to find happiness, thus challenging prevalent notions of what a Buddhist in Australia ought to be like. Consequently, Venerable Robina can be viewed as a proponent of the Bodhisattva’s tradition, appearing where and when needed and enabling whatever it takes to help all beings to be free from suffering and to find happiness, thus challenging prevalent notions of what a Buddhist in Australia ought to be like.
This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30043326

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2011, Taylor & Francis
References

Hawker, P. (2000) 'There is nothing passive about this Buddhist nun', The Age, 12 September: 5.
Waldron, S. (2000) 'She's a tough, foul-mouthed brawler, She's also a Buddhist nun', The Age, 15 March: 15.

3 Being all of who I am

Buddhist monk and chaplain

Venerable Thich Thong Phap

I grew up a Methodist. At five years of age I announced to my entire family that I wanted to be a minister of religion. As I grew older I thought about becoming a chicken farmer and a linguist but at age 15 I returned to my original vocational choice. By age 17, when my idealism was at its peak and I had read a Life of Saint Francis of Assisi, my vocation transformed into a desire to become a monk. I tried to test my vocation in an Anglican religious order at age 18 but that did not work out. By the end of my nineteenth year and my first at teacher's college, I had lost my Christian faith but not my monastic vocation. What to do? About seven years later, in 1978, I discovered Buddhism. Thoughts of becoming a monk returned to me and I explored the possibility again, but the time was just not right. Another 17 years went by during which I found my way to Vietnamese Zen. In 2001 I met my teacher in Vietnam who gave me permission to ordain. In 2004 I was made a novice and, 20 months later, I was ordained a bhikhu. It took 47 years from the first recognition of my vocation to my ordination.

All the monks and nuns in my tradition are primarily meditators, but in Australia we all live singly or in very small groups and many are involved in teaching meditation. I do not have a group of lay people to support me, neither do I have a private income. So I receive government benefits and work three days a week as the volunteer Buddhist chaplain at Flinders University, which is my ‘temple’. The path of a Buddhist pastor is not clearly set and I constantly ponder on what it involves. In this chapter, I reflect on how to integrate these two aspects of my work.

In February 2007 I spent Vietnamese New Year in another Australian city staying in a temple with a monk ordained in my tradition. I enjoyed very much the company of my brother monk and the lay people who support the centre. On New Year's Day a man visited the centre and we engaged in conversation. He had very certain ideas about what Zen was and felt perfectly at ease in sharing his views with me. After a short while two ladies arrived and wanted to meet the Australian monk. They were lovely, genuine people. One of them was a registered nurse in a nursing home. After about an hour of conversation they made me an offering and left. In the meantime the man had returned. 'Why did you waste your time talking to those two women?' 'Well, that's my job. 'You are not a Christian pastor. You are a Buddhist monk', he continued, taking up quite a bit more of my monastic time.