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Buddhism at the Grassroots

Edited by:
Karma Lekshe Tsomo
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Women in Buddhism at the Grassroots in Australia

Anna Halafoff

This paper seeks to highlight women at the grassroots of Buddhism in Australia, recognizing their important role in the establishment and growth of this religion in a new context. While women have played a prominent role in Buddhism in Australia, at least since the 1880s, they have received relatively little scholarly or public attention.1 As Bouma and Brace-Govan have stated “women [including Buddhist women] have played an undersung role in processes of religious settlement, the negotiation of religious and cultural diversity and in the emergence of multicultural Australia.”2 Paul Croucher’s 1989 study, A History of Buddhism in Australia, provides a comprehensive description of Buddhism in Australian society up until the late 1980s.3 It covers both so-called ethnic and convert Buddhist communities, and women’s and men’s leadership roles. Croucher’s study remains the definitive text on the subject, and many subsequent publications, including this one, draw primarily on his research. As scholars have mentioned, this is somewhat problematic, given that his impressive monograph is more than twenty years old and that it was based on his Bachelor of Arts Honors thesis. Enid Adam published a very short article on “Buddhist Women in Australia,” in the Journal of Global Buddhism, with few citations other than Croucher’s text.4 More recently, Rocha and Barker’s edited collected volume on Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change included several chapters pertaining to issues of gender and Buddhism.5 This paper draws on the above publications, arguing that a more comprehensive inquiry needs to be conducted on women in Buddhism in Australia, in order that their contributions to Buddhism, and to Australian society more broadly, be more widely recognised.

The First Buddhists and Buddhist Organisations in Australia (1840s-1960s)

Although Adam states that the first records of Buddhist women in Australia date back to World War II, Croucher’s account both suggests and then provides evidence of much earlier encounters. Despite tales of possible contact between Indigenous Australians and Buddhist seamen dating as far back as 75 CE, Buddhists are commonly believed to have first arrived in Australia from China in the 1840s. Except for a brief mention of a statue of Kuan Yin, in a South Melbourne temple dating back to 1883, women do not feature in Croucher’s descriptions of Chinese communities on the goldfields. Nor do we find mention of Sinhalese Buddhist women employed in the Queensland sugar-cane industry, or Japanese and Sinhalese Buddhist women immigrants in the northern Australian pearling industry in the mid- to late-19th century. More research needs to be conducted in order to uncover the detailed stories of the first Buddhist women in Australia. Perhaps this information will be uncovered in other literature, such as Australian or Asian studies.

Australian Spiritualists first began to publicize Buddhism in the 1880s, paving the way for Theosophists and thus for convert Buddhism. The ground for Buddhism in Australia seems to have been prepared by pioneers like Emma Harding Britten, an American Theosophist who toured Australia in 1878. In 1889, the first branch of the Theosophical Society (TS) in Australia was established in Tasmania and the second branch was founded in Melbourne in 1890 by Elise Pickett. Pickett, a Russian immigrant from New Zealand, was described as the first “White
Buddhist” to have set foot on Australian shores.” The second, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the TS’s co-founder, toured Australia lecturing on “Theosophy and Buddhism” in 1891 and again in 1897. Both Olcott and TS co-founder Madame H.P. Blavatsky participated in a refuge ceremony in Sri Lanka in 1880, becoming “Buddhists in the formal sense.” Croucher also described them as “great trail-blazers for Buddhism,” stating that “it is only in the context of their efforts that the history of Buddhism in Australia can be understood.” As a result of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, and a consequent decline in the number of ethnic Buddhists in Australia, Buddhism was kept alive by Spiritualists, Theosophists, and other convert Buddhists for much of the 20th century. According to Croucher’s account, women played a significant role in this period of history. This brief account illustrates the central role of women in Theosophy and in introducing Buddhism to Australia.

An interest in and openness to Buddhism flourished following the World War II years. Several pioneering women were instrumental in the development of Buddhism in Australia, including Marie Byles, who, according to Croucher, “was well on the way to becoming a legendary figure” in her own right. Byles was “the first woman to graduate in law in New South Wales... a pioneer conservationist, mountaineer, bushwalker, pacifist, feminist and Buddhist” with “Theravadin leanings.” In 1951, Byles co-ordinated a ‘Silent Retreat’ for eight people in Sydney, which was the first recorded commemoration of Vesak for non-Asian Australians. Her enterprising efforts caught the attention of Leo Berkeley, who had migrated from Holland to Australia and was introduced to Buddhism by Sri Lankan minister of Justice, the Bhikkhu Nerada Thera. Nerada had suggested that Berkeley establish a Buddhist Society in Sydney. Berkeley contacted Byles and in 1951 they collaborated with others to form the Buddhist Society of New South Wales in Sydney, signifying the beginning of “organized Buddhism” in Australia.

In 1952, Sister Dhammadinna, a somewhat controversial figure visited Australia. Sister Dhammadinna had a profound influence on Natasha Jackson, a Russian immigrant who was brought to Australia in 1908 by her “radical, anti-Tsarist mother.” Jackson was to become “the dominant voice in Australian Buddhism from 1955 to 1971,” rewriting history and elevating Sister Dhammadinna “to the undeserved status of ‘Founder of Australian Buddhism.’” The fascinating story of Dhammadinna’s chequered past is beyond the scope of this paper. Byles and Berkeley were not impressed with her behavior or scholarship, but Sister Dhammadinna managed to gather a small group of students including Lummechien Berkeley (wife of Leo Berkeley), Graeme Lyall, and Lyn and Eric Penrose. Lyall however was also soon to have “enough of her autocratic ways.” Sister Dhammadinna left Australia in 1953, returning briefly in 1957 before she retired to Hawai‘i in 1958, leading Croucher to conclude that she had “little real influence on the course of Australian Buddhism,” despite Jackson’s claims.

The newly formed Buddhist Society of New South Wales, under the leadership of Berkeley and Byles, concentrated on hosting qualified teachers and meditation sessions and retreats. In 1953, the Society published the Buddhist News, which was later renamed Metta. Natasha Jackson, and Charles F. Knight who had previously led a hermetic life in northern Queensland, were at the helm of Australian Buddhism between 1956 to 1971 as editors of Metta. Jackson, as she put it, kept her “little raft of Dharma” barely afloat through the late 1950s and 1960s with lectures and Metta articles. Knight visited Melbourne in 1959 suggesting that a national Buddhist body be formed. In 1960 the Buddhist Federation of Australia held its first meeting in Sydney voting Knight as President, and Jackson editor of the now national journal Metta. Bhiksu Thich Nhat Hahn first visited Australia in 1966 to plead for an end of the
Vietnamese war. Jackson and Knight marched in anti-war protests and also campaigned for Aboriginal land rights in the 1960s, reflecting their commitment to a socially engaged Buddhism.

During this period, the influence of Buddhism was evident in the work of several Australian artists and poets including Ethel Carrick Fox, Margaret Preston and Harold Stewart in the 1930s and 1940s. Croucher describes how both Preston and Stewart,

... were strongly affected by the “kingdom of nothingness,” the cultural and spiritual void in Australia. They both considered that provincialism, the cult of materialism, and the very spirit of the place stifled artistic vision, and thus turned to Asia... where they found in Buddhism... the promise of a reintegration of man and nature...

“Beat Zen” arrived in Australia in 1959 in the works of Jack Kerouac, D.T. Suzuki, and Alan Watts and also exerted a powerful influence on Australian artists and poets such as Judith Wright and Vicki Viidikas, while the conservative Buddhist Societies were largely horrified by what they perceived as the Beat misappropriation of Zen to justify “bohemian indulgence.”6

The Flourishing of Buddhism in Australia (1970s-2000s)

It wasn’t until the 1970s and 1980s, after the end of the White Australia Policy in 1973, that a massive growth in immigration resulted in a dramatic increase of ethnic Buddhists in Australia. These diverse communities have erected temples and monasteries in Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Singhalese, Cambodian, Burmese, Laotian and Tibetan traditions in urban and regional centers. Adam described how up until the 1970s Buddhism in Australia had depended largely upon lay people, thereby enabling women to play a central role. However, the rise in resident monks and the building of monasteries, introduced a “new time of male leadership” in Buddhism in Australia, although women continued to play a significant part in establishing and managing Buddhist centers.

Women certainly played an important role in introducing Tibetan Buddhism to Australians. Dr. Nick Ribush and Marie Obst (now known as Yeshe Khadro) were among the first Australians to meet Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche in Nepal in 1972. Ribush and Obst, and their friends Kathy and Tom Vichta, donated 160 acres of land to establish Chenrezig Institute (CI), near Nambour, during Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa’s Australian visit in 1974. It was the first of Lama Yeshe’s centers catering to thousands of Western students. Lama Yeshe’s Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition opened centers in Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Sydney and Bendigo in the 1970s and 1980s and continues to be among the most popular schools of Buddhism among Australian converts. Although CI has a resident male Tibetan Geshe and a small monks’ community, it is largely a center for nuns and lay people. Ven. Yeshe Khadro, who formerly managed CI, has also directed Karuna Hospice in Brisbane providing end of life care since 1992.

In 1971 Elizabeth Bell, who had joined the Victorian Buddhist society (formed in 1953) in 1963, became Chairman of the Buddhist Federation of Australia. Jackson resigned from the Buddhist Society of New South Wales when the organization was floundering in 1975. Bell became editor of Metta that same year and continued to build a strong relationship with the Sinhalese community and the Thai forest tradition, hosting regular visits by Phra Khantipalo, who was another highly influential figure contributing to the regeneration of Buddhism in
Australia the 1970s and 1980s.

One of Phra Khantipalo’s first students, German-born Ilse Lederman, donated substantial funds toward the purchase of land north of Sydney to establish Wat Buddha Dhamma, where Phra Khantipalo became a resident teacher. Lederman was ordained in 1979 in Sri Lanka and, as the nun Ayya Khema, became a prominent teacher of Buddhism internationally. Australian Bhikkhuni Chi Kwang (formerly Debbie Cain), another one of Phra Khantipalo’s students, spent seven years in a Korean Zen monastery from 1979 to 1986. As a well-respected teacher, she remains a prominent figure in Buddhism in Australia, serving as chair of the Australian Sangha Association in 2009-2010.

Prominent female Buddhist leaders in Australia include the former Abbess Man Chien, and current Abbess Man Shin, of the Taiwanese Buddhist Nan Tien Temple built in Wollongong, south of Sydney, in the 1990s. It is a temple run by Taiwanese nuns in the Fo Kuang Shan tradition, and the largest in the Southern hemisphere. In 1996, Subhana Barzaghi Roshi, became one of the first female Zen teachers in the Diamond Sangha, establishing the Sydney Zen Center in new South Wales. Ajahn Vayama, an Australian nun, became the abess of Dhammasara, the first Theravada nuns community in Australia in 1998. In 1999, Elizabeth Bell was awarded the Order of Australia by the Federal Government for her service to Buddhism in Australia and, by the turn of the 21st century, Buddhism was firmly established on Australian soil.

As Halafoff, Fitzpatrick, and Lam have noted a growing number of scholars have specialized or are currently specializing in studies of Buddhism in Australia in recent years. The majority of them are women including Enid Adam, Michelle Barker (formerly Spuler), Sally McAra, Cristina Rocha, Patricia Sherwood, Judith Snodgrass, Shiva Vasi and Glenys Eddy. In addition to her research on Buddhism in Australia, Snodgrass is a world renowned scholar of Buddhist modernity, the president of the Australian Association of Buddhist Studies, and editor of the prestigious journal Japanese Studies. Rocha is also an expert on globalisation, religion, and transnationalism, particularly focused on interactions between Japan, Brazil and Australia, and editor of the highly regarded Journal of Global Buddhism.

A number of chapters in Rocha and Barker’s collection examine issues pertaining to women and/or feminism and Buddhism in Australia. Among them are my chapter on the nun Robina Courtin, Ruth Fitzpatrick’s research on Green Tara practices, Barzaghi’s chapter on her journey as lay female Zen teacher, Elizabeth Bowen’s chapter on Soka Gakkai, and Nagasuri’s chapter on ordaining women in Australia. The nun Robina Courtin has received a significant amount of media attention in recent years in Australia for her supposedly “unconventional” communication style and continues to draw large audiences of mostly women to her teachings in and beyond Australia. In October 2009, four women practicing in the Thai forest tradition received Theravada bhikkhuni ordination in Perth, which generated a great deal of controversy. It was the first Theravada bhikkhuni ordination in Australia and the first internation bhikkhuni ordination in the Thai forest tradition ever. As a result, Ajahn Brahm and the Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery were excommunicated, even though their actions were widely supported by those in favor of full female ordination.

Gender Inequality: A Global Issue

Gender inequalities continue to persist in contemporary Buddhist institutions and societies globally. In order to address these issues, the topic of gender and Buddhism is
increasingly being explored and contested by scholars in and beyond Australia.

As Rita M. Gross has argued, until gender disparities are adequately addressed they need to be exposed and resolved before they can be transcended. According to Gross, the appearance of gender differences isn’t questioned in Buddhism, what is disputed is that the female gender is often automatically assigned a lower status. This is despite the fact that texts such as the Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra make it clear that the female form “does not possess innate characteristics” and therefore “does not really mean much.” As Gross states,

... wilful ignoring... has nothing in common with transcendence and equanimity. Truly forgetting gender requires studying gender intensely rather than wilfully ignoring existing gender practices that cause suffering while claiming that gender does not matter.... [I]f gender is studied honestly and thoroughly, then, eventually, it can be forgotten.

At times there is a need to remove certain references, such as gendered language, and at others, there is a need to retain or include references to address these gender disparities. Gross provides an example where she is comforted when reading adjectives “male” and “female” before the word bodhisattvas in Tibetan Vajrayana liturgies, that make it “crystal clear” that she “is not being left out” in a world where she often feels excluded.

This short paper does not seek to elevate the role of Buddhist women above men, nor does it seek to draw any conclusions that might essentialize female characteristics and women’s contribution to Buddhism on the basis of their gender. It seeks instead to make women at the grassroots in Buddhism in Australia more visible, to address these gender disparities.

Conclusion

The above accounts demonstrate the prevalence of women in leadership roles in Buddhism in Australia, as teachers and scholars, in organisations and in social engagement. It also indicates that at times female Buddhists, or practices involving women, have been deemed controversial in Australia and internationally. As Brooke Schedneck has argued Buddhist life stories can offer an important resource for understanding the characteristics of modern Buddhism, including gender equality. This paper presents a brief sketch of the prominent role of women in Buddhism in Australia, a topic that is worthy of further investigation. A detailed historical and sociological study investigating memoirs, diaries, correspondences, and published material, alongside interviews with contemporary female leaders, could explore the issue of gender and also questions of tradition and modernity in Buddhism in Australia in more detail.

NOTES


11. Ibid., p. 9, 12.