



ISSN 1076—9005

Journal of Buddhist Ethics 8 (2001): 61- 74

Buddhist Contribution to Social Welfare in Australia

By

Patricia Sherwood

Lecturer in Social Anthropology

Edith Cowan University

p.sherwood@ecu.edu.au

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to

jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu

Abstract

This article outlines the contribution of Buddhist organizations in Australia to education and social welfare. It is argued that from the viewpoint of Buddhist organizations in Australia, they have always been concerned with social welfare and education issues, and this is not a new phenomenon. This is illustrated through examining services delivered by Buddhist organizations in Australia in nine areas: education of adults; education of children; working with the sick and dying in the community; working in hospitals and hospices; working in drug rehabilitation; working with the poor; working in prisons; speaking up for the oppressed; and working for non-human sentient beings. The worldviews of these Buddhist organizations that state social engagement has always been integral to their tradition will be articulated.

Background

Although Christianity arrived with the first white settlers in 1788, the arrival of Buddhism to Australia is relatively recent. Croucher (1988) suggests that the earliest known Buddhist settlements in Australia were the Chinese migrants arriving in the 1860s during the gold rushes in the Eastern States.¹ The earliest known group of Buddhists in Australia of non-ethnic background was the Theravādin Little Circle of Dharma formed in Melbourne in 1925 by Max Tayler, Max Dunn, and David Maurice. It was not until 1952, in New South Wales, that the first Buddhist society was formed in Australia. Marie Byles and Leonard Bullen were the founders.² In 1960 the Ch'an sect arrived in Sydney, and in the following year, the Soto Zen Buddhist society was formed in New South Wales. It then spread in the next decade to other states.³ The first Tibetan *lamas* came to Australia in 1974, and during the late 1970s and 1980s, a number of Tibetan centers opened across Australia. Buddhism is having an increasing impact on the experiences of Australians as reflected in the proliferation of Buddhist organizations in recent decades. They now number 319.⁴

Research on Buddhism in Australia has focused on migrant Buddhists from South East Asia and their experiences on resettlement in Australia.⁵ There are brief references to the historical development of

Western Buddhists in Australia in Croucher's *History of Buddhism in Australia* (1988)⁶ and in Humphries and Ward's *Religious Bodies in Australia* (1988).⁷ Adams (1995) compares alienation and integration experiences of Eastern and Western Buddhists in Australia.⁸ Much has been written on the contribution of Christianity to contemporary education and social welfare issues in Australia including education,⁹ poverty relief,¹⁰ childcare,¹¹ and homelessness.¹² However, to date only Bucknell (2000) has commented on the contribution of Buddhism to education and social welfare in Australia.¹³ Buddhism's generous contribution to social welfare in Australia has gone largely unrecognized in the research.

Introduction

This paper outlines findings from research conducted in 2000 on the contribution of Buddhist organizations to social welfare in Australia. It demonstrates that Australian Buddhism is clearly socially engaged, not only in practice, but also from the viewpoints of the members of the Buddhist organizations who also argue that such practice has always been integral to their Buddhist organizations and is not a new phenomenon. Fifty-four of the 319 Buddhist organizations in Australia (approx. 17 percent) were surveyed to identify the scope, variety, and involvement of Australian Buddhists in social welfare in Australia. The sample included approximately equal numbers of Buddhist organizations drawn from Theravādin, Mahāyāna, and Tibetan traditions of Buddhism. A total of 96 percent of the organizations were actively involved in education and social welfare activities.

An open-ended questionnaire was used with each organization to explore what socially engaged activities the organizations are delivering. Organizational representatives were also asked their reasons for socially engaged work and whether they saw it as a relatively new practice in their organizations or an ongoing practice integral to their Buddhist tradition.

There is considerable controversy in the research literature of socially engaged Buddhist practice as to whether it is a new phenomenon cultivated in the West, or whether it has always been part of the Buddhist tradition but is now flourishing in an obvious way in the West. Kraft raises questions in his article *Practicing Peace: Social Engagement in Western Buddhism* about how Buddhism, transplanted to the West, will become involved in social welfare.¹⁴ In his introduction to Eppsteiner's collection of essays by leading socially engaged practitioners in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and published as *The Path of Compassion*, Kraft notes that the traditions of socially engaged Buddhism have always been latent in the Buddhism since the time of the Buddha. He goes on to elaborate on why socially engaged Buddhism in the West has made these qualities flourish, stating that

qualities that were inhibited in pre-modern Asian setting . . . can now be actualised through Buddhism's exposure to the West where ethical sensitivity, social activism and egalitarianism are emphasised.¹⁵

However, Queen in his recent work *Engaged Buddhism in the West* emphasizes that socially engaged Buddhism has emerged only in the recent context of global concerns regarding human rights and social justice. He defines socially engaged Buddhism as the application of the *Dharma* to the resolution of social problems. It effectively represents a new chapter in the history of Buddhism.¹⁶ Yarnall, in his article

"Engaged Buddhism: New and Improved? Made in the U.S.A. of Asian Materials,"¹⁷ incisively summarizes the two principle theoretical positions among scholars on engaged Buddhism. One group, like Queen, whom he terms the "modernists," proposes that although there may have been doctrines of sociopolitical relevance latent in early Buddhism, they did not start being developed until Buddhism encountered modern Western society. In fact, this engaged Buddhism has substantial enough differences from its traditional Buddhist roots that it represents a new form of Buddhism. The other group, which he terms the "traditionalists," has never accepted a dualistic split in Buddhism between spiritual and social domains, and from this viewpoint, Buddhism with its two pillars of wisdom and compassion necessarily engages human well-being both individually and socially. Modern forms of Buddhism are essentially contiguous with traditional forms despite different social arenas and cultural contexts. It is the position of the traditionalists that is strongly supported by the Buddhist practitioners in Buddhist organizations in Australia. Their view is strongly emic and very supportive of the view that social welfare activities have always been integral to Buddhism, although the cultural forms may vary. Like Batchelor, they do not separate out enlightenment from engagement. In their experience it is non-dualistic, and enlightenment and engagement, inner and outer work, are not conceived as separable, but, rather, as mutually reinforcing and totally inseparable.¹⁸ Ken Jones further supports this position, arguing that in Buddhist philosophy and practice it is not possible to separate out one's personal benefit from social well-being.¹⁹

Bucknell's view of engaged Buddhism in Australia, although the first article on the subject and as such a hallmark article, tends to regard socially engaged activities as generally incidental to Buddhist organizations, particularly to those organizations of non-ethnic origin. He finds that ethnic Buddhist organizations double as welfare and cultural centers primarily for immigrant communities.²⁰ His position is not supported by the findings of this extensive survey about Buddhist organizations in Australia in the field of socially engaged activities. There is extensive involvement in a range of social welfare and educational activities by 96 percent of Buddhist organizations, ethnic and non-ethnic. The contribution of ethnically based Buddhist organizations in the majority of cases is well beyond their own cultural or ethnic communities. Nor is Bucknell's view accurate that there are two main types of engaged Buddhist actions in Australia: those in the hospice area and those supporting overseas social relief and development projects. Although these two areas are well represented in socially engaged actions in Australia, the field is much broader and encompasses the nine fields of action listed below.

In this paper, I have defined socially engaged Buddhism as Buddhist practice that involves a conscious contribution to relieve the suffering of sentient beings including oneself, but beyond oneself. This position is eloquently expounded by the Thai reformer Sivaraksa when he speaks of the essence of Buddhism, noting that "it means deep commitment and personal transformation. To be of help we must become more selfless and less selfish. To do this, we have to take more and more moral responsibility in society. This is the essence of religion, from ancient times right up to the present."²¹

I have chosen to focus on the arenas of education and social welfare. Buddhist welfare contributions in Australia are comprehensive and can be grouped into the following nine categories:

1. Education of the adult public;
2. Education of children;
3. Working with the sick in hospitals and hospices;

4. Working with the sick and dying in the community and in palliative care;
5. Visiting prisons;
6. Working with drug addicts;
7. Fundraising for the poor and needy (both in Australia and overseas);
8. Speaking up for human rights and against oppression;
9. Compassionate activities on behalf of non-human sentient beings.
10. Education of the Adult Public

Over 96 percent of Buddhist organizations surveyed in Australia were involved in public education programs. Several examples have been selected to illustrate the range of activities and organizations involved. This is not an exhaustive listing. The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, with centers in Melbourne, Sydney, and Toowoomba in Queensland, conducts very comprehensive education and teaching programs. They provide public *Dharma* talks to teach the cause and alleviation of suffering and programs for mental health to teach the public skills in meditation and stress management. Their Toowoomba branch also provides a public Kung Fu program to promote education for physical health. The Buddha Light International Association (Fo Kuang Shan), with branches in Wollongong, Perth, Sydney, Brisbane, and Melbourne, also provides a range of public activities for the cultivation of noble thoughts, including *Dharma* talks, meditations, and development programs. Cultural education programs include flower arranging, calligraphy, and vegetarian cooking classes. The Perth temple has conducted a series of public talks and discussion groups on Buddhist ethics. These involved exploring difficult ethical issues such as abortion, divorce, homosexuality, suicide, depression, and drug addiction. The aim is to develop what the Buddha termed "skillful" ways of dealing with life that maximize human happiness and minimize human suffering in light of the essential tenets of the Four Noble Truths. The Brisbane branch clearly illustrates that ethnic organizations are not primarily servicing their own ethnic communities in the areas of education and social welfare. It is true that they conduct weekly Chinese language and culture classes that are open to the general public but are primarily attended by Chinese; however, they also conduct public school programs on Chinese culture and Buddhism, which are attended by over 10,000 children each year. There is a member of the temple assigned to run these programs full-time and to liaise between the temple and the visiting schools. In addition, the Fo Kuang Shan temples in Brisbane, Perth, and Melbourne conduct large festivals for the Australian public on Wesak Day. The Brisbane festival is an educational and festive event conducted on South Bank, in the heart of the city, that attracts thousands of non-ethnic Australians. It involves a number of other multicultural groups and promotes social harmony by exposing the public to a range of cultural practices and traditions. The Hospice of Mother Tara in Western Australia conducts a number of public workshops on contemporary ethical issues from a Buddhist perspective with the express intent of assisting members of the public develop right understanding. They also run a number of retreats to encourage community participation in meditation. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship, with branches in Melbourne and Sydney and just over a decade old, has run a vigorous program of public education on key issues relating to social welfare. This includes Aboriginal rights issues, impacts of globalization, and rights of the East Timorese; currently they are conducting an educational discussion series on the Zapatistas in Mexico. They also run public training workshops on nonviolent protests, mediation, conflict resolution and peacemaking. They have been active in public protests and rallies against globalization, for nuclear

disarmament, and for Aboriginal rights.

All Buddhist organizations emphasized the need to educate the public about the *Dharma* if suffering was to be addressed at its fundamental source of human thinking and understanding. They argue that if people are to be freed from their suffering, of whatever nature, then it is necessary to understand the Four Noble Truths. The Tibetan groups explain that the heart of their commitment to public education comes from a profound commitment to the work of the *bodhisattva*. She is the one who achieves enlightenment, but, rather than leaving the earth, remains to work to relieve human suffering. The depth of this commitment is poignantly captured in the bodhisattva's vow of infinite compassion:

All beings I must set free. The whole world of living beings I must rescue from the terrors of birth, of old age, of sickness, of death and rebirth, of all kinds of moral offence, of all states of woe. My endeavours do not merely aim at my own deliverance. For with the help of the boat of the thought of all-knowledge, I must rescue all these beings from the stream of Samsara, which is so difficult to cross . . . I am resolved to abide in each single state of woe for numberless aeons; and so I will help all beings to freedom.²²

Chinese Mahāyāna groups emphasize that their motivation to engage in public welfare activities is inspired by Kuan Yin, the compassionate *bodhisattva* who is akin to the Tara *bodhisattva*. Theravādin groups emphasize the importance of teaching the Buddhist way of the noble Eightfold Path. This path involves facilitating the development of right view, right understanding, right livelihood, right effort, right speech, right action, right mindfulness, and right concentration. As a result of teaching this path, known as the Middle Way, individuals can take the opportunity to work toward creating these qualities in their lives. Much of their human suffering will then be alleviated by the change in their mental attitude. They hold the view of educating the public through wisdom into skillful action and emphasize the Buddha's statements in texts like this: "He who has this understanding and great wisdom does not think of harming himself or another, nor of harming both alike. He rather thinks of his own welfare, of that of others, of that of both, and of the welfare of the whole world. In that way one shows understanding and great wisdom."²³

Other important public education activities include inter-faith dialogue and reconciliation activities. Venerable Sumedha from the International Buddhist Centre in Darwin is involved in intercultural and religious activities, including a public performance of a drama titled "The Land and The Cross and The Lotus" prepared and performed by representatives of Buddhist, Aboriginal, and Christian religions. This organization has a strong emphasis on building social harmony among a diverse community of cultures. It is involved in the national reconciliation program with aboriginal communities. The philosophical underpinnings of this project lie in the Buddhist recognition of the interconnectedness of all beings and the consequent social harmony that can be created through practicing this insight. The Tara project in Sydney is also actively involved in the reconciliation processes and inter-faith dialogue. This organization provides cultural and religious orientation and education for those planning to work in third-world environments. Again there is considerable emphasis on respecting diversity and on the ultimate interconnectedness of all beings.

Only two organizations out of a sample of fifty-four in the survey did not engage in any type of education or social welfare projects. One of these was a Theravādin organization and another a Zen

organization. Both stated that the rationale of their existence is to provide a forum for intensive meditation practices for their committed members only. Both argued that there were already adequate education and social welfare projects offered by other Buddhist organizations for the public.

Education of Children

Approximately 60 percent of Buddhist organizations interviewed provide education programs for children. Culture and language were provided by some organizations such as the Won Buddhism organization in Sydney teaching Korean language programs. The Fo Kuang Shan organizations provided Chinese language programs for children as well as *Dharma* camps and youth recreation and *Dharma* projects. The Tara project has been awarded the Gift of Service to the world at the Parliament for World Religions for its innovative student exchange program between Australian and Nepalese youth. This exchange contributed significantly to intercultural understanding. The Buddhist Societies of W. A. and N. T. both have active programs in schools educating Australian children about Buddhism, as well as children's *Dharma* groups. The Melbourne Lin Son Buddhist Congregation has a very strong youth focus running extensive meditation, language, and sports programs. They also provide counseling and meditation programs for families of juveniles dealing with drug addiction.

All organizations stated that children's education provides an ideal opportunity for children to experience and practice *mettā* or loving kindness to each other and to all beings. *Mettā* is seen as the core value in the cultivation of the welfare of all beings and a central part of the Buddhist way. The *Mettā Suttas* list fifty blessings that come through diligent practice of kindness to each other. It speaks of sweet dreams, a contented smile, *devas* and angels protecting you, people welcoming you into their homes, pleasant thoughts, a quiet mind, and a soft sweet voice. Elephants will bow to you, your countenance will be serene, and if you fall off a cliff, a tree will be there to catch you.²⁴ This cultivation of loving-kindness is also core to the family program conducted by the Origin Buddhist retreat center in Balingup, Western Australia, that organizes weekends for families to experience and share this quality.

In addition, several Buddhist organizations emphasized the importance of children's *Dharma* activities for the development of social harmony in their families and the community. The Buddhist Society of Western Australia runs an active children's education program for ethnic and Western children alike. In educating the community, adults, and children, groups from all traditions saw this as an integral part of Buddhism. They explained that it has always been part of Buddhism to teach the Four Noble Truths, to assist people in learning the cause of their suffering and skillful means to overcome their suffering through elucidating the aspects of the Eightfold Path. All organizations in this sample saw their educational work as part of Buddhism's long tradition and charter of spreading the *Dharma* to promote human happiness and liberation from suffering.

Working with the Sick and Dying in the Hospitals/Hospices

Approximately 54 percent of Buddhist organizations surveyed are actively involved in working with the sick in hospitals and hospices. They work with the sick and the dying in a range of informal and formal programs.

Mainstream services in Australia in this area are of limited quality. The avoidance of dealing with issues of death and dying by western culture in Australia has meant such services that do exist have little to

offer the patient other than physical care. Buddhist organizations with their insight and compassion are providing innovative and supportive hospice services that are models for service delivery in this area in Australia. Such services are provided by all Buddhist traditions represented in Australia. Examples include the Ammitayus Hospice Service and Respite Care Centre in Mullumbimby, New South Wales; Sydney's Socially Engaged Buddhist Society hospice and retreat center; the Buddhist Compassionate Relief Foundation of Tzu Chi; and the Tibetan Society's hospital program in Perth. The Vipassāna Association in Victoria offers individual counseling and group meditations at the Austin Hospital. These services provide what Jones describes as a process of immense benefit that transforms the dying process into one of spacious living growth.²⁵ This worldview is shared by all Buddhist organizations providing such services. There is a common acceptance that the most important moment is the present moment, and to live fully in the present moment is emphasized. Through right view and right understanding, one can cultivate great peace and joy. Hence Buddhist organizations working with the sick and dying have been able to bring about an atmosphere of authenticity congruent with the client's experience. These organizations claim that such an environment provided by Buddhist hospices opens the door for the client to explore what the present moment means to them beyond simply physical suffering. Rather than living in a state fear, despair, or avoidance, Buddhism offers a way of transforming the experience into one of peace, learning, and emotional growth. Theravādin organizations emphasize that their work with the sick and dying is underpinned by the Buddha's own example of compassionate action and by giving priority to the needs of the sick and dying. They cite the story of the Buddha who placed great emphasis on care for the sick when he visited a monastery. There, he found a monk sick and neglected while the other monks meditated and pushed to hear him speak. The Buddha first cleaned and tended the sick monk with Ānanda and counseled the monks that compassionate deeds in care of the sick must have priority. The Mahāyāna Tzu Chi Foundation from Taiwan, with centers in Brisbane, Perth, Sydney, and Melbourne, also emphasized the story of the Buddha helping the sick monk as a role model for their actions. The foundation conducts an extensive program of hospital volunteering in general hospitals, hospices, c-class hospitals for the elderly, and in disability centers. It has also been very active in fundraising for hospital equipment supporting the Mater Misericordia Hospitals in both Brisbane and Melbourne, as well as a number of smaller hospitals, in this way. Although its membership is primarily ethnic Chinese, it is another outstanding example of an ethnic Buddhist organization in Australia providing extensive social welfare and support services for the Australian public.

Tibetan Buddhist organizations emphasize in their rationale for providing services for the sick and dying the significance of the moment of dying. They argue that the patterns of thinking and feeling engendered by the individual at the moment of their dying have profound consequences for their future rebirth. One can therefore have a deeply significant effect on the future of individuals by providing an environment for the dying that maximizes the opportunities for the most productive outcomes. They see this approach to dying as integral to the long tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Working with the Sick in the Community

Sixty-one percent of organizations in this sample are involved in working with the sick in the community. Innovative programs include the Buddhist Society of Queensland's chronic pain management services offered by Terry McDonnell and the Employer Assisted Programs for employees in national

corporations, which are delivered by Graeme from the South Australian Meditation Centre. In addition, there are home visits to the sick on an individual basis offered by many of the Buddhist organizations from all traditions. Those delivering these services cite as their rationale for engaging in such activities the need to demonstrate compassion and loving-kindness toward the ill. Some also emphasize the need to teach meditation and skillful ways of thinking to the sick so that they are better able to manage their illness, particularly if it is chronic and associated with pain. Two Tibetan-based Buddhist organizations in Queensland, Karuna, and Cittimani, whose activities are well documented by Bucknell,²⁶ are leaders in palliative care work in Australia. Founded by Pende Hawter, on advice from Lama Zopa, so that conditions could be created that reduce human suffering particularly at the moment of death. These services promote peacefulness and spiritual dying according to the dying person's spiritual tradition that will lead to a productive rebirth. These organizations are leaders in palliative care in Brisbane and in the Sunshine coast and are noted for their excellence in service delivery. For over a decade, the Tara Institute in Melbourne has conducted support workshops for the seriously ill in the community to assist them in dealing with their troubled mental and emotional conditions. Bob Sharples has been the facilitator of this innovative support program. In caring for the sick in the community, Buddhist organizations are playing very active roles both formally and informally. They all maintain that this is contiguous with the long practice of caring for the sick in Buddhism as a practice in compassion.

Visiting Prisons

Thirty-nine percent of Buddhist organizations are involved in visiting prisons in Australia. These include organizations from Mahāyāna, Tibetan, and Theravādin traditions. Prisoner rehabilitation services are underdeveloped in Australia, with a paucity of counseling and support services.

The Association of Engaged Buddhists located in Sydney is a powerful representative of socially engaged Buddhism in the area of working with prison populations, addicts, hospice, and health work. They are at the cutting edge of innovative and compassionate prison rehabilitation programs working in liaison with the State Department of Corrective Services. The Buddhist Council of Victoria is very active in many Victorian prisons in counseling and teaching meditation, stress relief, and pastoral care as well as in providing positive educational reading material. The Fo Kuang Shan organization in Brisbane has responded to requests to assist prisoners and has visited prisons as far afield as Alice Springs in Central Australia. Emanating from Chenrezig, the Tibetan Buddhist center at Eudlo in Queensland, is a prison work program led by the Venerable Namsung.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the co-founder of Chenrezig, encourages work in the prisons to assist inmates in working through their suffering and finding peace. In the prisons, the programs include meditation practice and *Dharma* teachings about the cause of suffering and the way to find release from suffering. Other teachings include the *bodhisattva* vows of compassion that are the Buddhist commitment to work for the release from suffering of all sentient beings and the Eight Precepts for leading a skillful life taught by the Buddha. The purpose of the prison intervention projects is to assist prisoners; Lama Zopa describes the situation of these prisoners accurately by noting that they are "physically in the house of no release but when the mind is practicing dharma it becomes the house for achieving ultimate real liberation from the real samsaric prison." The *samsāric* prison is the delusion that happiness can be found by attachment to the material world of the senses and of the desires. Venerable Namsung has commenced a prison project at the

Woodford maximum security prison north of Brisbane. Venerable Namsung, a member of the Chenrezig nuns community, works as a legal secretary several days a week to earn her keep and devotes her remaining time to prison work. She liaises with the Education Department and the Department of Corrective Services to provide classes for the prisoners on anger management, thought transformation, drug issues, and the benefits of changing their ways of thinking about themselves and the world.

Tibetans argue that prison projects are a manifestation of the compassion taught by the Buddha. Such social welfare work has always been part of the Buddhist traditions, as reflected in the counsels of Nāg ā rjuna. Theravādin workers in prison also maintain that relief of suffering in prison has always been integral to the compassionate worldview and practice of Buddhism. One organization cites among their prison work the story of a woman prisoner who became a Buddhist nun after release from prison. All organizations express the view that prison work is, and always has been, an essential expression of the compassion of Buddhism. Some cite the great Buddhist sage Nagarjuna in his counsels to rulers in which he emphasized the importance of compassionate and nonviolent treatment of offenders. All organizations emphasize that commission of evil does not imply a permanent habit of doing evil and that by providing prisoners with skillful and loving ways of managing their suffering, it may provide significant opportunities for the prisoners to change their lifestyles both within prison and upon release. Such a story is told by one Buddhist organization of a prisoner who was a regular recipient of the Buddhist teachings and, despite his record for violence and homicide, developed a new perspective on his life. He refused to continue working in the prison abattoir where his job was to stun the cattle prior to their death. The way he treated those around him changed from very difficult to skillful.

Working with Drug Addicts

Twenty-four percent of organizations are actively engaged in drug counseling. A range of formal and informal services is offered for those suffering from addictions. The Alice Springs Pallyal Dharma group is active in running an addictive behavior program based on an innovative fusion of the twelve-step program and the *Dharma* program. This is particularly directed toward alcohol and glue-sniffing users, the addiction of which is a considerable problem in this region. Through the Buoyancy Foundation, the Vipassāna Association in Victoria offers meditation practice for drug addicts. There is a commitment by such organizations to teaching the *Dharma* so that they may provide addicts with a more skillful means of dealing with the stresses in their lives. Some organizations also emphasize the need for addicts to experience unconditional love, loving-kindness, so that they can regain a sense of self-worth. The Melbourne-based Lin Son Buddhist Congregation, a Vietnamese-derived organization, also works strongly with youth and in counseling those with addictive behaviors. All Buddhist organizations involved in drug counseling and rehabilitation in Australia see this as an integral part of the Buddhist tradition. It is based on upholding the Five Precepts that include refraining from drugs and alcohol, substances that add to the mind's difficulties.

Fundraising for the Poor and Needy in Australia

Although Bucknell cites charitable work for the poor overseas as one of the socially engaged practices of Australian Buddhist organizations,²⁷ he overlooks the substantial charity work done by these organizations for needy Australians.

Giving money, time, energy, skills, and goods helps cultivate the awakening to the compassionate heart of the Buddha. This is the worldview of over 61 percent of Buddhist organizations in Australia that are actively involved in fundraising for the poor and needy in Australia. Buddhist organizations have, in some cases, provided the geographic and demographic base for social workers to work with the needy through programs sponsored by the Australian government. This has been the case when the Buddhist organizations have supported Buddhist refugee communities from South East Asia, particularly Vietnam. The Buddhist Society of Western Australia ran a government-sponsored migrant support program from its premises; a social worker was employed for over a period of eight years for this purpose.

Several of the above organizations explain the need to give to the poor by arguing that giving is both a profound way of developing *mettā* and an essential part of human karma. One member explained that giving was essential and pointed to the laws of karma as expounded by Nagarjuna in his counsel to rulers: "If you do not make contributions of wealth obtained from former giving, through such ingratitude and attachment you will not gain wealth in the future."²⁸

The Tara project is a multi-faceted support program in Sydney that works with people with alcohol and drug addiction, as well as runs woman and children's welfare projects to alleviate poverty and destitution. Another organization actively involved in fundraising for disasters in Australia and refugees overseas are the Lin Son Buddhist Congregation and the Lotus Buds Sangha. Sponsoring poor monks is common practice among Buddhist organizations with Tibetan teachers. The Drol-Kar Buddhist center in Geelong has funded a website for establishing a Tibetan school in Tibet for needy Tibetan children. Buddha's Light International Association of Victoria is active in funding scholarships to a Chinese Buddhist ethnic school in Australia. The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tau-chi Foundation is a national body with state branches that raises funds for local disasters, as well as to regularly supplement the income of the poor. They have regular volunteers assisting charity organizations such as the Salvation Army, St. Vincent de Paul, and the Red Cross in raising funds and collecting donations of food, clothing, and furniture. The process of supporting existing Australian charity groups is common among ethnic Buddhist organizations in Australia. The Amitābha organization has made a substantial donation to a food program for Aboriginal children, who represent the poorest and most disadvantaged group in Australia. In addition, several ethnic Buddhist organizations are also staffing Meals on Wheels services. The Melbourne Tzu Chi group has recently raised funds to purchase a bus for the Children's Cancer Support Group in Victoria.

Speaking up for Human Rights and against Oppression

Twenty-four percent of Buddhist organizations in Australia are involved in such activities. Included among these are several groups publicizing, educating, and/or lobbying for human rights. The Tibetan groups are particularly active for working for human rights in Tibet, while the Mahāyāna groups in this sample are working primarily for human rights in China and Vietnam. For example, the Lin Son Buddhist Congregation is lobbying for the release of nuns and monks in Vietnam and other human rights issues in Vietnam. The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order are committed to work to support the rights of and fund activities for the ex-untouchables in India through their Karuna project. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship is extremely active in campaigns promoting human rights both in Australia and overseas. Programs in Australia include prisoner's rights, Aboriginal rights, and rights of workers in the clothing industry.

In speaking up for human rights, and in making stands against political oppression and injustice, Buddhist organizations argue that the light is shone into dark places and a peaceful stand is made for truth and justice and to liberate others from hatred and delusion. They cite the Buddha as having spoken up against human rights transgressions including the treatment of the lower castes, of women, and of animals. They see their actions as continuing this essential aspect of Buddhism's commitment to work for the liberation of humans from suffering.

Buddhist organizations emphasize that it is part of a process of developing *mettā* first to oneself through loving-kindness meditation. This frees oneself from enmity, ill will, and distress and invokes happiness. From oneself it can then be directed outward toward loved ones, acquaintances, and finally enemies, until all beings are embraced by *mettā*. It becomes the fundamental gesture to support ethical economic and social justice movements.

Compassionate Activities on Behalf of Non-human Sentient Beings

Although only 11 percent of organizations have animal welfare programs, many other organizations mention that individual members have commitments to animal welfare. The Tara project in Sydney is known for its animal welfare project, which is being developed in association with the Nepalese Veterinary Association and the Nepal Veterinary Council. They train animal carers and plan long-term strategies for animal welfare and community education. The Hospice of Mother Tara in Bunbury is committed to a vigorous animal welfare program involving the purchase and release of hundreds of battery hens and other animals facing death, such as shellfish in restaurants, farm animals, and dogs in public pounds. The very socially active Lin Son Buddhist Congregation is also working against vivisection and to support animal rights in Australia, as is the Buddhist Council of Victoria, which releases live bait, among other animal release projects. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship has lobbied against the exploitation of mares to produce hormone replacement therapy drugs.

There are only 4 percent of organizations involved in compassionate work on behalf of forests in Australia. The need for such work in Australia is recognized by Unibuds, the University of New South Wales Buddhist Society, with members being proactive in campaigns to save native forests. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship is active in meditation vigils and in creating public awareness about respect for trees and animals. The Buddhist Council of Victoria is active in tree-planting programs in Australia as well as "Clean Up Australia" days. Many ethnic Buddhist organizations, including Fo Kuang Shan, Tzu Chi, and the Lin Sohn Congregation, have regular commitments to participate in "Clean Up Australia" days.

In the worldview expressed by these Buddhist organizations, the interrelationship of all beings is emphasized. Social welfare is seen to encompass all sentient beings. Tibetan groups are particularly active in the release of animals facing death, as they hold the worldview that this has profound effects on transforming the karma both of the being facing death and of the one who releases it. They chant daily, "May all beings be freed from suffering. May all beings be happy." They point out that this does not restrict social welfare work to human beings. There are no Theravādin Buddhist groups in Australia involved in social welfare projects for non-human sentient beings at this point in time that I can locate. Mahāyāna groups explain that work to promote the well-being of non-human sentient beings has always been a critical part of Buddha's teachings, and in addition to their community work, these groups practice vegetarianism in their temples and educate the public about healthy and compassionate eating practices.

Conclusion

Central to the Buddhist worldview, as expressed by Buddhist organizations in Australia, is the issue of human suffering and the search for the means to reduce and eliminate it. On the great day of the Buddha's enlightenment, he uncovered the nature, the cause, and the means to end suffering. This constituted his great wisdom, or *Mahāprajñā*. The first great result of his *Mahāprajñā* was his *Mahākaruṇā* or expression of great compassion. It is evident that there is a deep and extensive commitment by Buddhist organizations in Australia to teach skillful means and practice compassionate actions for the well-being of sentient life. They see their behavior as contiguous with the teachings of the Buddha and integral to the Buddhist pathway. Consequently, there is deep involvement in extensive education programs for both adults and children to teach the skills of the way of the *Dharma*. Their social welfare work is making a significant contribution to the well-being of the Australian community. Buddhist palliative care work alone has a national reputation for quality. Organizations providing these services also offer help in areas of serious need, in the prisons, during times of crisis, among the poor, and among those suffering from drug addiction. Their commitment to the welfare of all sentient beings also involves them in activities on behalf of the welfare of animals and the physical environment. The extent of the education and social welfare activities of Buddhist organizations in Australia, given their relatively small numbers (estimated at 200,000),²⁹ is impressive. Only recently have they begun to be documented through the organizations themselves and in research. When I asked the chairperson of the Tzu Chi Compassion Relief Foundation in Melbourne if social welfare was a new emphasis for Buddhism or whether it had always been part of the Buddhist tradition, she replied,

Suppose we do something good . . . before in the past we always try to do good as good Buddhists, but we think we don't have to tell anybody. After we help some-one, we already forget about it. In the past, we think the only important thing is the moment we help another but that means other people don't know what we do. Today in the West, people need to know that Buddhists like Tzu Chi are very active in helping people in a range of activities. We need to tell them. Otherwise they won't know, and they won't understand that Buddhism is about helping relieve suffering of all human beings. (interview, 22/3/01)

This paper is a contribution to profiling Buddhist involvement in education and social welfare activities in Australia. Its findings support the view that Buddhist organizations see their social welfare and educational involvement not as a new phenomenon, but as an ongoing integral practice of the Buddhist pathway.

Notes

- ¹ P. Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia 1848-1988*. Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1989.
- ² E. Adams, and P. Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia*. Canberra: AGPS, 1996, p. 7.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ⁴ Venerable Pannyavaro, *Buddhanet's Buddhist Australia Directory*, Sydney: Buddha Dharma Education Association, 2000.

- ⁵ Examples of such research include: A. Ata, (Ed) *Religion and Ethnic Identity: an Australian Study*. Vol 1. Richmond, Victoria: Spectrum, 1988; J. Knowles, *When I Came Here I Was a Vietnamese*, Richmond, Victoria: Clearinghouse on Migration Issues, 1988; J. Jupp, ed., *The Challenge of Diversity: Policy Options for a Multicultural Australia*. Office of Multicultural Affairs, Canberra: AGPS, 1989; and D. Jayasuriya, and P. Sheldrake, *Mainstreaming: Meeting the Needs of Ethnic Minorities in the 1980s*, Richmond, Victoria: Clearing House on Migration Issues, 1982.
- ⁶ Croucher, 1988.
- ⁷ R. Humphreys, and R. Ward, *Religious Bodies in Australia*. Melbourne: Wantirna, 1988.
- ⁸ E. Adams, *Buddhism in Western Australia: Alienation or Integration*. Perth: Art Enterprise Publishing, E.C.U, 1995.
- ⁹ Mc Lay, A. *Women Out of Their Sphere*. Sisters of Mercy in W. A. Perth: Vanguard Press, 1992.
- ¹⁰ P. Hollingworth, *Poverty in Australia*. Canberra: APAIS, 1977.
- ¹¹ B. Dickey, *Evangelicals and Welfare in Australia*. Canberra: Zadok Institute, 1989 Serial no. 44.
- ¹² J. Harris, *Homeless Youth: The Facts and a Christian's Response*. Canberra: Zadok Institute, 1989, Serial no. 43. Melbourne: Humphries and Ward, 1988.
- ¹³ R. Bucknell, "Engaged Buddhism in Australia" (in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. by Christopher S. Queen, Boston: Wisdom, 2000) pp. 468-484.
- ¹⁴ K. Kraft, "Practicing Peace: Social Engagement in Western Buddhism" in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 2 (1995), pp. 1-17.
- ¹⁵ K. Kraft, "Engaged Buddhism: An Introduction" (in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. by F. Eppsteiner, 1988) pp. xii-xiii.
- ¹⁶ Christopher S. Queen, "Introduction: A New Buddhism" (in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. by Christopher S. Queen, Boston: Wisdom, 2000) pp. 1-34.
- ¹⁷ T. Yarnall, "Engaged Buddhism: New and Improved? Made in the U.S.A. of Asian Materials," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* Vol. 7 (2000) p. 1.
- ¹⁸ S. Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs*. New York, Riverhead Books, 1997, p. 90.
- ¹⁹ K. Jones, *The Social Face of Buddhism*, London: Wisdom, 1989.
- ²⁰ R. Bucknell, op cit., pp. 470-471.
- ²¹ S. Sivaraksa, "Buddhism in a World of Change" (in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. by Fred Eppsteiner, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988) p. 18.
- ²² E. Conze, et al., eds. *Buddhist Texts through the Ages*, Massachusetts: Shambala, 1954, pp. 131-132.
- ²³ K. Jones, *Buddhism and Social Action*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981, p. 8.
- ²⁴ J. Kornfield, "The Path of Compassion: Spiritual Practice and Social Action" (in *The Path of Compassion*, ed. by F. Eppsteiner, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988) p. 9.
- ²⁵ K. Jones, *The Social Face of Buddhism*, London: Wisdom, 1989, p. 220.
- ²⁶ Bucknell, op cit., pp. 472-474.

²⁷ Ibid., p.471.

²⁸ Thurman, "Nagarjuna's Guidelines" (in *the Path of Compassion*, ed. by F. Eppsteiner, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988, p. 131).

²⁹ Bucknell, op cit., p. 470. This number is only an estimate, as the Australian census data leaves the question of religious affiliation as an option.