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BUDDHISM - Australia's Reaction to a New Phenomenon

In the year 563 B.C., on the border of modern day Nepal and India, a son was born to a chieftain of the Sakya kingdom. His name was Siddhartha Gotama and, at the age of thirty-five, he attained, after six years of struggle and through his own insight, full enlightenment or Buddhahood. The term 'Buddha' is not a name for a god or an incarnation of a god, despite later Hindu claims to the contrary, but

is a title for one who has realised through good conduct, mental cultivation and wisdom the cause of life's vicissitudes and the way to overcome them. Buddhism is, perhaps, unique amongst the world's religions in that it does not place reliance for salvation on some external power, such as a god or even a Buddha, but places the responsibility for life's frustrations squarely on the individual. The Buddha said:

By oneself, indeed, is evil done;

By oneself is one defiled.

By oneself is evil left undone;

By oneself, indeed, is one purified.

Purity and impurity depend on oneself.

No one purifies another. (1.)

His teaching can be summarised as:

Not to do any evil,

To cultivate good,

To purify one's mind, This is the Teaching of the Buddhas. (2.)

To many people of other faiths the term 'Buddhist' conjures up ideas of idol worship and concepts that are an anathema to the followers of the, so called, 'religions of the book'. Buddhism, certainly, is very different from the Semitic religions, but it may surprise many of its critics to know that the Buddha condemned idolatry. When, just prior to his passing away, he was asked how he could be remembered, he replied that those who practised his teachings would remember him best. Prior to the arrival on the Indian sub-continent of the Bactrian-Greeks, Buddha images were unknown. The Buddha foresaw that worship of him in any form would result in his deification with its consequent emphasis on seeking salvation from an external power rather than identifying Nirvana, the eradication of greed, anger and delusion, as being solely within one's own power. Indeed, he was right. For many ethnic Buddhists, he is a God from whom they ask favours. The Buddha said:

In this very body, six feet in length, with its sense impressions and its thoughts and ideas, I declare to you, are the world, the origin of the world and the ceasing of the world, likewise Nirvana and the Path leading to Nirvana. (3)

Today, apart from a revival amongst the scheduled castes, for purposes, mainly, of upward mobility, Buddhism is almost extinct in India, the land of its birth. Buddhism, in the early years of the Common Era, due to its popularity among the Indian people, was seen as a threat by the Hindus. To arrest its spread, the Hindu clergy spread the rumour that the Buddha was merely an incarnation of the Hindu God, Vishnu, who manifested to reform the excesses of Brahmanism due to its animal sacrifices and corrupt clergy. Therefore, they claimed, Buddhism was only a reform movement within Hinduism and not a distinct religion in its own right. Buddhists, however, would claim that the two teachings have little in common. For example, Hinduism places a heavy emphasis on the worship of God, a practice that has never had any place in Buddhism. The Hindu goal is the unification of the soul with God - Buddhists deny the existence of a soul or ego entity but regard what we call a person to be nothing but a constantly changing collection of elements and phenomena. Buddhism, therefore, shares little in common with Hinduism apart from sharing a common birthplace.

In 712 A.D. Buddhism fell victim to the Arab invaders, led by Muhammad Kasim,

'His soldiers slaughtered a large number of 'samanis' (sramanas) who 'shaved their heads and beards'.---- Toward the end of the 8th century the Arabs swooped down upon the prosperous monasteries of Gujarat and destroyed the Buddhist University at Valabhi on the sea coast.' (4.)

However, during the reign, in India, of Asoka (273 - 276 B.C.) Buddhism spread outside India to Sri Lanka and, possibly, Burma (Myanmar) (5).

It was later adopted by Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. These countries constitute the stronghold of the Theravada or the orthodox school of Buddhism. Another major school, which had its roots in India in the fifth century B.C., but attained fruition at the beginning of the current era, the Mahayana or reformed school, spread to China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. An offspring of the Mahayana school, the Vajrayana or Tantric school took root in Tibet in the seventh century and later spread to Mongolia, parts of China and currently has pockets of followers also in Korea (Chingak and Chongji sects) and Japan (Shingon sect).

Perhaps, the arrival of the first Buddhists in Australia may have been with the armada of Cheng Ho in the 15th century. Professor A.P.Elkin, in his book, "Aboriginal Men of High Degree" suggests that the Ming dynasty emperors took a keen interest in exploration and several of their ships are known to have been in the vicinity of Arnhem land around the early 1400's. In 1879, a statuette of a soapstone image of a Chinese deity, was unearthed one metre beneath a Banyan tree near Darwin. Professor Geoffrey Blainey claims, however, that soapstone would not have survived 400 years and so the statue must have been of more recent origin (6). If this were true, why was it buried so deeply?

In the 1800's, especially during the gold rush era, many Chinese people arrived in Australia. Whether any of them were practising Buddhists, or perhaps more motivated by greed for gold, is unknown. Certainly, the 1800's saw the first establishment of, so called, "Joss Houses" on Australian soil.

Klaas de Jong revealed in his booklet, "A Short Account of the Spread of Southern Buddhism in Australia and Queensland in Particular" (7), that a group of Sri Lankans arrived in Mackay and Burnett in Queensland, on board the ship, "Devonshire", on November, 1882. Attempts were made by a group, known as the 'Ant-coolie Leaguers', to prevent the Sri Lankans disembarking. Stones were thrown and knives drawn and this sad episode became known as the 'Battle of Burnett'. There is evidence that many of these early migrants were Buddhists, but as de Jong noted:

'Pressure from the Christian establishment of the day must have been strong. Within twenty years after their arrival, most if not all those that were still alive had been converted. If some older folk remained Buddhists at heart, their children apparently did not.'

Six years prior to the arrival of the Sri Lankans in Mackay, there was a Buddhist temple on Thursday Island, the northernmost tip of Australia. Klaas de Jong reports that some five hundred Sri Lankans were involved. They were engaged in the pearl trade and they erected a small temple and planted a Bodhi tree, a descendant of the tree under which the Buddha is reputed to have sat on the night of his enlightenment. Although remnants of this temple are reputed to have been incorporated into the present post office, the Bodhi tree, apparently, is still thriving.

In the book, "Path to Righteousness" (8), originally published in the Maha-Bodhi Journal' between 1892 and 1900, it is reported that a Dr. Worthington formed a group called "Students of Truth" that regarded themselves as 'Christian Buddhists'. This group, apparently, had branches on mainland Australia as well as Tasmania and even extending to New Zealand. At that time, there was much hostility from the Christian churches to any favourable mention of Buddhism, let alone its practice. In 1897, a Victorian newspaper, 'The Healesville Guardian' published an article in defence of Buddhism, which resulted in a threatened boycott of the paper by several Christian ministers. Also

in the 1880's, a South Australian newspaper published a long and, reportedly, interesting article on Buddhism that was later reprinted in the New South Wales rural newspaper, 'The Albury Banner'. This article invited the wrath of a Wesleyan minister and much published debate ensued. Anagarika Dhammapala further relates an insulting, unfair and distorted article appearing in a fortnightly Baptist periodical that, he claims, was "full of gross misrepresentations, evidently written out of vindictive malice." A politely worded reply to the editor, pointing out the errors in the article was never published.

In 1890, Elise Pickett, who described herself as a Buddhist, founded the Melbourne Theosophical Society. An active member of this Society was the three-times Australian Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin. Deakin was often lampooned in the press for his interests in Eastern philosophy - so much so that it became an electoral liability. It was Alfred Deakin, however, who, in 1901, introduced the Immigration Restriction Bill - the forerunner of Australia's notorious 'White Australia Policy'. Paul Croucher (9) comments:

"In a curious way his position on the legislation was complimentary to Asians, however, for amid the grossest racism he posited that it was in fact the 'high abilities' and good qualities of these alien races that make them dangerous to us'. His argument was based purely on the fear of economic competition, since he was far too well acquainted with Eastern culture to ever imply an inherent European superiority. The drift towards a White Australia was probably inexorable, and Deakin at least lent the debate a certain reasonableness."

In the 1950's, at the height of the 'McCarthy Era', Leo Berkeley, the founder of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales was visited by the Special Squad of the New South Wales Police inquiring if Buddhism was connected in any way with Communism. The large increase in Australia's Buddhist population since the mid 1970's has been largely due to refugees seeking a safe haven from the onslaught of Communism in Asia. The majority of these Buddhist newcomers came from Vietnam with a large number also coming from Cambodia and Laos. In recent years, an increasing number of Chinese Buddhists is arriving from Hong Kong due to the uncertainty of the imminent Communist Chinese takeover.

Many ethnic Buddhists, trying to establish places of worship in Sydney, have encountered problems, both from local councils and from the residents. Due to their poor economic circumstances, inadequate awareness of Council planning regulations and the lack of local support organisations, many have resorted to establishing places of worship in rented houses. The Councils threatened prosecution for illegal use of residential premises and the local residents objected, some with genuine concern about excessive parking, whilst others were more motivated by their inherent racism.

In 1972 a group of Australian Buddhists applied to the Blue Mountains City Council for permission to establish a Buddhist meditation retreat centre in Katoomba, west of Sydney (10). They chose Cliff Drive, one of the most prestigious locations in the area. The local residents closed ranks and vehemently protested to the Council. One of the neighbours stated that she had lived in India for many years and knew that Buddhists chanted day and night accompanied by the 'ringing of bells, the clashing of cymbals and the sounding of gongs'. Apart from the Tibetan refugees now settled in India, Buddhism, as mentioned earlier is almost extinct in that country. The proposed development was for a meditation retreat in the Sri Lankan Theravada tradition. In actual fact, more noise was likely to emanate from the nearby residences than from the proposed Buddhist Centre. If anyone was to be the likely victim of noise, it would be the Buddhists. The Council rejected the

application and an appeal was launched with the Local Government Appeals Tribunal. The Tribunal instructed the Council to offer alternative land or purchase the proposed site from the Buddhists. As the Council had not responded by 1974, the Tribunal brought down a decision in favour of the development stating that the Council and residents had misconceptions about the practices of the Buddhists. The Centre was opened in 1975 and, since that time, no further complaints have been made about the existence of this Centre.

At the end of 1979, a group of Vietnamese refugees met at a restaurant in Glebe, an inner city suburb, and formed the Vietnamese Buddhist Society of N.S.W. The first religious ceremonies organised by the Society were held at a Thai temple, Wat Buddharangsee, at Stanmore. Premises at Lakemba, a western suburb of Sydney, were later leased by the Society, to serve as a temporary temple, prior to the arrival of their monk, Venerable Thich Bao Lac. It was not long before they struck problems with the local Council and the racism of the local residents. This forced the Society to seek Government assistance to find a more suitable place and to establish a more permanent place of worship. Land at Bonnyrigg, an outer western suburb, was leased to the Society by the Housing Commission of N.S.W.. Today, on this land stands the first, purpose built, Buddhist temple in metropolitan Sydney.

The proposed development for a recently opened Chinese Buddhist Monastery at Homebush, in the Strathfield Municipality, created a furore among some of the older Australian residents of the district. Although figures are not available for the Strathfield Municipality alone, the 1986 Commonwealth Census revealed that in the Inner West Region of Sydney, of which the Strathfield Municipality forms a part, 10,513 residents are of Asian ethnic background - a not insignificant number. (11) An intensive letterboxing campaign by the next door neighbours of the monk, Venerable Tsang Hui stated:

If this type of development is allowed in A2 Class residential area, your street may be next, or even the back garden next door. The value of your home, your most valuable asset will be eroded. What some people or organisations would like to put in our garden suburb!!! It WAS called "Oasis in the West" in our Council's Centenary year JUST three years ago!!! I know that most of us have worked all our adult life to own a place of our own to relax in, in the evening of our life. Not to be faced with a fight to maintain our peace and tranquillity and protect our landscape and view, and the sight of native birds feeding in our garden and nestled in the many trees, that would be affected by this proposed development. Please act now, you have only until 4 p.m. Friday 19th August, to protest in writing. You may view the plan and model as suggested in the letter (from the Council), but your own intelligence will paint in your mind's eye this hideous development to a back garden landscape. (12)

The Strathfield Municipal Council, despite receiving 890 individual letters and a petition containing 840 signatures supporting the application and a petition, organised by the neighbours, containing 273 signatures opposing it, unanimously rejected the Monastery's development application, so an appeal was lodged with the Land and Environment Court of N.S.W.. Mr. Justice Cripps of the N.S.W. Land and Environment Court ruled, on June the first, 1989, in favour of the Monastery's development application. He stated in his judgement:

It became plain that the intensity of the opposition to the subject development was, in some instances, influenced by the circumstance that the religious institution was a Buddhist monastery. All residents were at pains to volunteer that their views were not "racist" and I accept their assessment of their objections. The question of what does or does not qualify as "racism" was not explored in the proceedings but because the word was bandied about during the course of the hearing, I feel bound to express my opinion that I do not think any

objector is a "racist" just because he or she objects to a Buddhist temple functioning next door or in the near vicinity. It was stated explicitly by some and was implicit in the evidence of others that the opposition would not have been so intense had a comparable Christian establishment been proposed. By way of illustration, none of the residents seems to be duly concerned about the activities of the Lutheran church (nearly opposite) It is made clear by the evidence, there is a need for the monastery in the sense that there are many people who wish to congregate as Buddhists. The subject land is zoned residential but churches and educational establishments are permissible in residential areas. There are many churches in residential areas in Sydney, some of which have functions and undertake activities more intrusive than the subject proposal. It is, of course, not possible to speculate on the attitude Mr. and Mrs. Heath (next door neighbours) will have to the development if it proceeds. I am, however, confident that most other people who have expressed hostility to the concept will, with the passage of time, accept the monastery in the same way they presently accept the Lutheran church. (13.)

Reluctant to accept the umpire's decision, the Heath's formed an organisation called 'Strathfield Overdevelopment Saviours (S.O.S.)' which enlisted the support of the local State Member of Parliament, Paul Zammit. He requested the Council to seek further legal advice in the hope that an appeal could be lodged against the judgement. In a letter to the Town Clerk, he wrote:

I therefore respectfully request Council to urgently call an extra-ordinary Council meeting to discuss this matter in the hope that a second legal opinion be obtained with the full knowledge of certain inconsistencies and possible moral turpitude that have come to light. Should Council decide to proceed to hold this meeting I strongly urge that S.O.S., on behalf of the residents, attend this meeting. (14.)

A copy of this letter was circulated to the local residents. When Ven.Tsang Hui's solicitor queried Zammit regarding his allegation of 'moral turpitude', he suggested that he suspected that the signatures on the Monastery's petition were faked. He withdrew this comment after it was suggested that a defamation action could result unless he did. The Town Clerk wrote to the then N.S.W. Minister for Local Government and Planning, Mr. Hay, requesting that he overturn the Court's decision. The Minister replied:

I have noted the Council's views on the development, however, the council has presented its case to the Land and Environment Court and I have no power to overrule decisions of the court. It is therefore inappropriate for me to meet with the council to discuss the issues. Should the council wish to pursue the proposal further within the court, it should seek further legal advice. (15.)

The Council's 'further legal advice' was that there were no grounds for an appeal. At the official opening of the Monastery, early in 1993, I questioned the Mayor of Strathfield on the current attitude of the local residents. The Mayor said that the Council had received no complaints and that the local residents, with the exception of the next door neighbours, had accepted the presence of a Buddhist monastery in their suburb. Mr. Justice Cripps was proved correct.

Partly due to the efforts by the Ethnic Affairs Commission and the Department of Planning of New South Wales, to educate the public and draw the attention of Local Government to their obligations under Australia's 'Multicultural Policy' less problems concerning developments for places of worship are encountered today than has occurred in the past. Despite the efforts of Government, however, racism and prejudice are still alive and well among many members of the Australian community. Many laws aimed at countering racism, though well intentioned, are inadequate. Following a postering campaign by the neo-nazi, 'Australian Nationalists', criticising the 'Asianisation' of

Australia and urging their readers to refuse to be served by Asian shop assistants, I lodged a complaint with the N.S.W. Anti-Discrimination Board. Although I felt highly offended by material that could cause hurt to my fellow Australian residents, no action was taken because I am not of Asian background. The law states that action can only be taken if the offending material actually causes offence to the targeted group. I was asked by the Board to find an Asian who objected to the material and then a prosecution could, perhaps, be launched. Many of our newcomers either have insufficient English to lodge a complaint or they fear the consequences if they 'make trouble', so, this deviant fascist minority gets away with its venomous propaganda despite our much touted racial vilification legislation.

Many ethnic Buddhists believe, quite wrongly, that Australia is a Christian country and to indicate a deviation from the norm could be disadvantageous. Although the Christians are numerically the major religious grouping in Australia and carry the highest profile, Australia is a secular society and has no state religion. There is also a bias against Buddhists in the general Australian population as indicated in a 1989 Government study which showed that Buddhists were second only to Muslims as Australia's least popular religious group. It should be noted that Asians, the majority of whom are Buddhists, are fairly recent arrivals in, what may be considered, significant numbers. They have replaced the Greeks, Italians and 'Balts' as the whipping boys for Australia's ills. McAllister and Moore, the authors of this study conclude that: 'There must always be a group that is marginalised, against which frustration could be vented. This, of course, implies that the removal of one 'out' group will merely witness its replacement by another group in a continuous cycle.'

According to the 1991 Commonwealth Census, 139,847 people in Australia, of whom 58,743 resident in New South Wales, listed their religion as Buddhist. This showed an a significant increase since 1986 when 80,387 Buddhists were listed for Australia. The question pertaining to religion is the only non-compulsory question on the Census form with tick boxes being provided only for Christian denominations. Many ethnic Buddhists are not fluent in English, and therefore are less likely to answer questions requiring a written answer. Due to this possible bias in favour of Christians, the actual numbers could be considerably understated.

Prejudice has been amply demonstrated earlier in this article by the problems encountered in the past by the Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhist groups, especially at local government level. Buddhism, as such, has not been as subject to the degree of venomous attacks as has Islam but many Asian Buddhists have shared the indignity with Jews of being attacked purely on account of their ethnic origin. Hopefully, as time passes, Australia's multicultural community will become more coherent and we may set an example to the world that diversity is a characteristic to cherish. Diverse input to our developing culture and identity can only enrich Australia and demonstrate to the world that it is possible for people of many cultures, religions and ethnic backgrounds to live together harmoniously - free of the racial tension that is destroying communities in other parts of the world.

May I conclude with the words of the former Premier of New South Wales, Barrie Unsworth, spoken at a State reception for the Buddhist community in 1987:

'Yours is an ancient philosophy that has had a beneficial influence on the development of the world. As a movement for peace, moderation and tolerance, you have always been and remain contemporary. That is why you are most welcome in New South Wales, as fellow citizens and as seekers and teachers of truth. As followers of his Path, you bring to

your new life in New South Wales that same spirit of tolerance, gentleness and kindness that has continued through more than two and a half thousand years of your culture. That spirit is entirely complementary to the path of multiculturalism that I see as the future of this State.'

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