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History of Buddhism in NSW
and Current Developments
Graeme Lyall

Abridgement of Unibuds Dhamma talk given on Friday,
Oct 1st 1993 at the University of NSW.

Buddhism is reputedly the first non-indigenous religion to arrive in Australia. The Chinese Ming Dynasty emperors took a keen interest in exploration and the first Buddhists are said to have touched Arnhem Land with the armada of Cheng Ho in the 15th Century. Evidence of this was a statuette of a soapstone image unearthed one metre under a Banyan tree near Darwin in 1879. Also unlike other tribes, the aborigines in that northern area believe in re-incarnation and practise meditation.

Later the Chinese came to Australia and worked on the goldfields. In his book "Path to Rightousness" Anagarika Dhammapala talks about some Sri Lankan Buddhists who erected a small temple on Thursday Island, the northern most tip of Australia during their fishing visits there in the 1890s.

In 1910, a Venerable U Sasana Dhaja, an Englishman ordained in Burma, arrived in Sydney. (He had visited Australia a few years earlier as a Christian missionary !) He supported himself by selling antique alibaster statues, and was somewhat of a shady character. He said, "Although Buddha was the light of Asia, Christ was the light for the world." So he was really still a Christian at heart.

In 1915, five Buddhist monks of German origin were consigned to Sydney for internment. As you will remember, England and its colonies were at war with Germany at that time. One of these monks was the former world famous violinist, Anton Gueth, who as Venerable Nyanatiloka was one of the greatest pioneers of Western Buddhism.

In the 1950s, Marie Byles, one of the first women to practise law in Sydney wrote six books, four on Buddhist topics, and she also kept a complete collection of the Tipitaka. She came out from England at age 11 in 1911, and gave many theosophical broadcasts on Radio 2GB on Buddhism as well as preaching the Dhamma at the Unitarian Church in Sydney. (She died in 1979.)

Leo Berkeley, a Dutchman met Sir Lalita Rajapakse in 1952, the then Sri Lankan Minister of Justice who was returning to Colombo. Sir Lalita recited the following Dhammapada verse to Leo:

By ourselves is evil done, by ourselves we pain endure,

By ourselves we cease from ill, by ourselves we become pure,

No one can save us but ourselves, no one can and no one may.

We ourselves must walk the Path, Buddhas only point the way.

Leo was very impressed by this wisdom, and was keen to know more. Later, after being introduced to Venerable

Narada Maha Thera in Colombo, Leo received the Dhamma. On his return to Australia, Leo put an advertisement in the Sydney Morning Herald for those interested in establishing a Buddhist society. Twenty people responded, and they began meetings at Leo Berkeley's house.

Soon after this group was formed in 1952, a seventy year old, American born Buddhist nun - Sister Dhammadinna arrived in Australia. She had been living in Sri Lanka for 30 years. Subsequently Leo Berkeley provided accommodation for her and she joined their group.

The Australian Overseas Aid program in the form of the Colombo plan brought many new students to Australia, and I (Graeme Lyall) was involved in welcoming them and taking them on picnics. After meeting a Tibetan monk, I became interested in Buddhism and contacted the Theosophical Society who referred me to Sister Dhammadinna. Sister Dhammadinna conducted dhamma talks and meditation at the home of Mr & Mrs Leo Berkeley. Usually around 15 to 20 people attended these talks and she took 8 of us for personal instruction. She was very explicit about her expectations. She attempted to dissuade her fellow tenants from their carnivorous habits by remarking, as she passed their Sunday roast lamb preparations, "Do I smell a corpse incinerating here??"

At Vesak in 1952, our group of 8 took refuge for the first time.

In May 1953, the Buddhist Society of NSW was formally constituted as a society and Leo Berkeley was unanimously elected as President.

In 1954, Venerable Sayadaw U Thittila arrived from Burma and dispelled many misconceptions about Buddhism that plagued Australian society at several public lectures.

In 1956, two monks arrived from Thailand, Phra Dhammadiraja Muni an abbot who spoke little English, and Phra Sumangalo alias Reverend Robert Stuart Clifton, Superior General of the Western Buddhist Order (Soto Zen). Phra Sumangalo was a charismatic figure who formed a (short-lived) Young Buddhist Association. During their visit, a crisis occurred. Unbeknowns to Phra Dhammadiraja Muni, Phra Sumangalo, in his role as Reverend Robert Stuart Clifton, Superior General of the Western Buddhist Order was privately ordaining his followers, both male and female, as priests in his "Order". These extra-Theravadin activities soon came to the notice of his Abbot and his tour of Australia came to an abrupt end. He and the Abbot hurriedly returned to Thailand where, no doubt, Phra Sumangalo faced the music!

In 1959, the Buddhist Society of NSW combined with the Buddhist Society of Victoria to form the Buddhist Federation of Australia.

In 1960, a lineage holder in the Chinese Ch'an tradition arrived in Sydney and stayed until the end of 1961. He

was the famous master Hsuan Hua, who gained the impression that there were no Buddhists amongst the local Chinese community as he was largely ignored, and was at one stage, on the verge of starvation due to lack of support. He left for California, and with the support of many followers, he established a monastic centre known as the "City of Ten Thousand Buddhas."

In 1973, Venerable Chao Khun Parityatikavi and the well known teacher and author Venerable Khantipalo arrived from Thailand. Initially, they rented a house in Eastlakes before setting up Wat Buddharangsee in Stanmore in 1975. The opening ceremony, on Vesak Day 25th of May 1975, was performed by His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, in the presence of His Highness The Most Venerable Somdet Sangharaja Phra Nyanasamvara, Supreme Patriarch of Thailand and ten visiting Bhikkhus from Thailand.

Wat Buddharangsee became the focal point for Theravadin Buddhism in Sydney, a function formerly performed by the Buddhist Society of NSW. It has proved to be so popular that it has rapidly become too small to serve its congregation, so a large tract of land was purchased at Lumeah, south of Sydney, where a traditional Thai style Wat Pa Buddharangsee was opened in 1988.

Chao Khun Samai stayed at Wat Buddharangsee when he arrived and tried very hard to develop Buddhism throughout the community. He invited Vietnamese and Sri Lankan groups to the temple that were outside his own tradition.

In 1978, Venerable Khantipalo set up Wat Buddha Dhamma at Wiseman's Ferry. He was a Theravadin monk for 30 years, wrote many books, and made a large contribution towards spreading the Dhamma before joining the Nioxin group last year. (Venerable Khantipalo gave a great deal of support to Unibuds during our earlier years with English Dhamma talks, workshops, and hosting Unibuds retreats at Wiseman's Ferry. -MK)

As an outcome of the tragic war in South-East Asia, many Buddhist refugees arrived in Australia in the late 1970s and 1980s. At the end of 1979, a group of Vietnamese refugees met in Glebe and formed the Vietnamese Society of NSW. Their first ceremonies were held at the Thai temple Wat Buddharangsee in Stanmore.

In 1985, the Vietnamese were able to build their first temple, the Phap Bao Temple at Bonnyrigg. Later, the first Vietnamese monk to arrive in Australia, Most Venerable Thich Phuoc Hue established another Vietnamese temple; the Phuoc Hue Temple in Wetherill Park in 1987.

In the early 1980s, the Korean Dharmakaya Society was formed at Summer Hill, and many Tibetan groups came to Australia and formed Buddhist organisations around that time.

June 1985 saw the arrival of Venerable Mahinda, who has had a long association with both the Buddhist Missionary Society in Kuala Lumpur and the Singapore Buddhist

Mission. He was appointed Bikkhu in charge of the Hock Cheng See Buddhist Vihara at Ambarvale.

In August 1986, Venerable Mahinda suggested that an Australian Buddhist Mission could be set up on similar lines to the B.M.S. and Singapore Buddhist Mission. During its formative years, the Australian Buddhist Mission has organised several meditation retreats, Buddhist Youth Camps with participants from several ethnic groups including Australian born, Burmese, Cambodian, Malaysians, Sri Lankans, and Vietnamese. The aim of the camps was not only to spread the Dhamma, but also to promote mutual understanding and friendship amongst all groups.

In 1989, the Mission sponsored a two year Missionary tour of one of Thailand's great meditation masters, Phra Ajahn Yantra Amaro. In 1990, Mrs Elizabeth Gorski generously donated one hundred acres of land in Bundanoon, so that a retreat centre in the Thai forest tradition could be established in Australia by Phra Ajahn Yantra. This new centre is known as Sunnataram Forest Monastery.

In 1988 Venerable Sayadaw U Zagarabhivamsa, (or Venerable Dr U Zagara as he is known to the Unibuds!) took up residence as Abbot at a rented cottage in North Parramatta to serve the small Burmese community. Venerable Sayadaw U Zagarabhivamsa is a highly respected teacher and scholar, being formerly a professor of Abhidhamma and Pali language at Nalanda Buddhist Institute in India. In 1989, larger premises were purchased for the Burmese Buddhist Society at Merrylands.

In 1977, Venerable Tsang Hui arrived in Australia from Taiwan. In 1979, from a rented house in Redfern, he established the Hwa Tsang Monastery. Being a qualified teacher, he set up and conducted academic classes and helped many students gain places at Sydney Universities and graduate to the professions. The monastery later moved to Greenacre and then to its present location in Homebush West. After overcoming much unsympathetic and racist opposition from local residents, Sydney's first "purpose built" Chinese Buddhist temple was opened in 1993.

Some of the Buddhist groups set up in the 1980s, were by migrants wishing to control their fellow countrymen. Sangha did not stay long at such temples before disputes arose with the sponsoring lay-people who were really trying to use the temple for their own exclusive purposes. Other migrant groups have experienced power struggles between different factions. As a result, community patronage has been split between different temples.

As an outcome of Buddhist students matriculating to the universities, joined by overseas students studying in Australia, university Buddhist societies were formed in the early 1980s. Unibuds was founded in 1981 with Venerable Tsang Hui's and Chao Khun Samai's support. A year later, Sydney University Buddhist Society was

formed. In 1992, a Buddhist Society was formed at Macquarie University.

Abridgement of Dhamma talk given on Friday, October 1st 1993 at the UNSW as reported by Mick Kiddle. Graeme Lyall is President of the Australian Buddhist Mission, and is the author of several Buddhist books, including "An account of the history and development of Buddhism in New South Wales" on which this talk was based. Graeme has very kindly donated several copies of his book to the Unibuds library, and it makes very interesting reading.