

**THE GROWING BANYAN TREE:
DEVELOPING THE BUDDHIST PRESENCE IN AUSTRALIA**

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An annual general meeting is always an important event for any organization – it provides the opportunity to review the past 12 months, do a little stocktake and self-evaluation as an organization and begin looking at the coming 12 months. I thank you for the invitation to address the meeting, for your always kind welcome and for the opportunity to reflect on the Buddhist presence in Australia.

However, before doing that, I want to pay my respects to the Venerable Thich Phuoc Hue, the great Australian Vietnamese Buddhist leader who passed away in January of this year. Arriving with his fellow Vietnamese refugees in 1980 just as the huge inflow from Viet Nam into Australia was beginning, he played a critical role in the development of Australian Buddhism, especially in Sydney. His was a pivotal role, and he will be a key figure when the history of Australian Buddhism as it grew exponentially with the refugee arrivals from Indochina is written.

As the invited speaker to the AGM, it is my task, as an interfaith leader here in Australia and in my role with the Religions for Peace Asia with its headquarters in Seoul, to reflect on the Australian Buddhist presence and perhaps to challenge you. In 2006, there were 570 Australian organizations listed in the World Buddhist Directory. In the case of the Buddhist Council of Victoria, as the major umbrella body of Buddhism in the state of Victoria, there are 116 temples, associations, meditation centres, societies etc. listed on its website.

This highlights the complexity of Buddhism in Australia, reflecting the different traditions and strands within Buddhism but also the various countries across Asia from which many, if not the majority, of Buddhists have come. But there is also the important strand of Anglo-Australian Buddhists with their long history going back to perhaps the late 1870s, attracted to the Buddhist faith and who have rejected secularism or organized Christianity. The Australian Buddhist community, as a community of communities, has an important role to play in Australia's social and religious development.

During the Melbourne Parliament of the World's Religions, the world's largest interfaith gathering, held in December 2009 in our large convention centre, there were eight sessions specifically devoted to Buddhist topics. Buddhists played a key role in the organization of this huge event with 6,500 participants, reinforcing Melbourne's role as the epicentre for interfaith activity and initiatives in Australia. Again highlighting the divisions within Buddhism, it was unfortunate that the China Committee on Religions for Peace and the PureLand Learning Centre in Toowoomba boycotted the

Parliament but the presence of the Dalai Lama at the closing ceremony added a spiritual and luminous gravitas to the event.

The Australian Buddhist Presence – the Census Data

On June 21st, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released its first data from the 2011 census. The Buddhists remain the largest religious group that is not Christian though in coming decades it is probable that the total number of Buddhists will be surpassed by the number of Muslims and, possibly, Hindus. The press reports have highlighted the jump in the “no religion” category in the 2006 – 2011 period and this is true. But these reports have not told the full story. Not mentioned has been the significant drop in the “not stated” category – if the two categories are combined, there has been little change since 2006.

What all this implies is that Australia has become more polarised between those with a secular humanist/no religion stance and those with a religious affiliation, especially with non-Christian religions. The figures document the rise of Australia’s emerging religions, most especially Hinduism which grew from 148,119 in 2006 to 275,536 in 2011, an increase of 86.02 percent and reflecting the huge Indian influx over the past five years. Buddhism as Australia’s largest non-Christian religious group grew by 26.32 per cent to 528,977, as did Islam by 39.92 per cent to 476,290. Judaism grew by 9.57 per cent to 97,335 and there was a big growth in the Sikh numbers. Altogether the non-Christian religions represent 7.19 per cent of the Australian population, that is, one in fourteen persons, though heavily concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne. Paradoxically Australia is becoming more religious, but religious in a different way.

THE AUSTRALIAN BUDDHIST PRESENCE – CONTRIBUTING TO AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

What is the role of Australian Buddhism in the coming decades? Firstly, of course, it is to take care of its own followers and to educate its younger generations into the beliefs and practices of the various traditions of Buddhism. The 2011 census highlighted that currently there are almost 100,000 young Buddhists aged between 0 – 14 years of age, 98,605 to be precise, surpassed only by the Catholics (677,935), the Anglicans (339,359) and, very slightly, the Muslims (98,943). Educating these young Buddhists will require many strategies, including to inoculate them against secularist humanism and consumerism with their emphases on selfish individualism and the mindless pursuit of fun and shallow entertainment.

Buddhism, with its lack of religious dogmatism and its balanced moderation in spiritual and moral issues, has much to contribute to the newly emerging Australian society in terms of (1) ensuring a spiritual dimension continues to lie at the base of Australian society and (2) deepening Australia’s engagement with and incorporation into the Asian world.

The Spiritual Dimension in Australian Society: The Gifts of Buddhism

The British historian, Christopher Dawson, always emphasized that a society which has lost its religion is a society that is losing its culture. Along with other spiritualities and religious traditions, Buddhism can play, and ought play, a key role in highlighting the importance of the spiritual and the ethical dimensions into national life, its debates, its policies and its practices. Amongst its gifts are:

(1) the value of prayer, meditation and silence in the development of self-hood

(2) the understanding of suffering or *dukkha* as part of the human condition and its overcoming through enlightenment and self-discipline

(3) the understanding of life as a path along which, as we walk each day, we must always act with integrity, with wisdom and with spiritual mindfulness and

(4) the commitment to knowledge and the gaining of wisdom through the pursuit of learning.

These are beautiful gifts which Buddhism gives and can further give to the Australian nation.

Another gift to the Australian nation is the *sangha*. The monk and the nun hold a revered and special place in Buddhist life in their renunciation of life's pleasures and their dependence on the community for their living and their very existence. This witness as holy or sacred persons giving their lives to the spiritual is important witness in a society that is so materialist and consumerist. However, as spiritual leaders of the Australian nation, members of the *sangha* must be well-educated in the human as well as the spiritual sciences, be fluent in English and understand very well how a multifaith society operates. Concerns about this were uncovered in the 2004 report to the immigration department, *Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia*.

Over the past three decades, Australian Buddhism has been undergoing its growth and building phase as temples have flourished in the different parts of Australia, particularly the suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney. These temples have pleasingly changed the metropolitan skylines in an Asian and Buddhist way. Australian Buddhism has yet to develop a solid financial base as developed by the mainstream Christian churches. This must be planned for systematically and efficiently. Buddhist social organizations do good works in helping the less fortunate members of their communities, and this must continue and be strengthened. And it is more difficult without a firm financial base. The Buddhist community has not gone down the track of building full-time Buddhist schools, and nor are Buddhist Studies appropriately represented in Australian universities – the community needs to address these issues.

In making its contribution, it needs to work closely with national and local interfaith organizations to ensure that Australia continues to be characterized by interreligious harmony and social cohesion. Over the past decade, interfaith dialogue has focused around Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Buddhism unfortunately has not been part of such dialogues – this is something that ought be changed over the next decade. Buddhism and Christianity have much to learn from each other – the academic journal, *Buddhist-Christian Relations*, highlights this.

Engaging with Asia – The Bridging Role of Buddhism

Right from its very foundation as British colony beginning on 26th January, 1788, it was always inevitable that Australia would have to confront its destiny with Asia. That inevitability has now arrived. More than any other religious tradition, the Australian Buddhist community through developing its transnational links with Buddhists in the Asian countries can help Australia become part of Asia where its future destiny lays. The links have been growing for some time, and Australia is becoming accepted as a part of Asia through commercial, trading and sporting links. The Buddhist community must insist to government that as part of becoming Asia-literate younger Australians must appreciate Buddhist religious practice as well as the other major Asian religious and philosophical traditions. Buddhists must also help Australians to forge their identities as Australian Asians, an identity that Australians have not even begun to think about. As well as being Australian, Australians must appreciate themselves increasingly as Australian Asians.

In summary, religious diversity is a gift. The Australian religious tree has had its own roots, but, like the Banyan tree, it is developing new roots, including Buddhist roots, Asian roots; at the end of this century in 88 years' time, when all of us will have passed on, it will be a very different Australian Banyan tree. And one of the biggest and strongest roots will be the Buddhist root.