

# **Buddhist Contribution to Social Welfare in Australia**

**By Patricia Sherwood**

**Lecturer in Social Anthropology Edith Cowan University**

[p.sherwood@ecu.edu.au](mailto:p.sherwood@ecu.edu.au)

## **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 Theravadin 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 Theravadin, Mahayana, and Tibetan traditions of Buddhism. A total of 96 percent of the organizations were actively involved in education and social welfare activities.

## Visiting Prisons

Thirty-nine percent of Buddhist organizations are involved in visiting prisons in Australia. These include organizations from Mahayana, Tibetan, and Theravadin 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 *samsaric* 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 Nagarjuna. Theravadin 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.