

Buddhists in Australia

Adam, Enid and Hughes, Philip J. *The Buddhists in Australia*, Canberra, Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research/Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996, pp 65-66.

From the BIMPR series - Religious Community Profiles

Chapter 7 - Buddhism in Australian Society

For a long time, a small group of Westerners kept alive an interest in Buddhism in Australia. Since the early 1970s the numbers of Buddhists in Australia have increased greatly, and Buddhism has returned to some considerable strength through immigration from South, South-East and East Asia. Buddhism now forms a significant part of the religious mosaic of Australia, and is similar in strength to Islam in this country.

Buddhism has never been a highly organised religion. It has not looked for converts to make a commitment to an organisation. Rather, it is found wherever people absorb the Buddhist understanding of the world, or use its meditative techniques in seeking peace of mind and heart. Many people, including many of those of Anglo-Celtic background, read books about Buddhism or attend courses in Buddhist teaching or meditation but would not identify themselves as Buddhist. In this sense, Buddhism has an influence among a much greater part of the population than the count of Buddhists in the 1991 Census would indicate.

At the same time, Buddhism is an important bearer of identity for many immigrants to Australia. Some Sri Lankans, Burmese, Thai, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese and Koreans see Buddhism as part of their national and cultural heritage. As they seek to

preserve something of their heritage in their new land, Buddhism provides the backdrop, the colour and, in some cases, the organisational structure.

Some Buddhist societies have been organised to provide care, social support, or assistance for disadvantaged people - the aged, women's refuges, homeless youth, counselling and so on. But time has not yet provided the opportunity for much development of this kind. It remains to be seen whether such activities are extended.

Buddhism has exhibited much flexibility as it has been absorbed into the cultures and traditions of various groups throughout Asia. Thus, as it enters Australia, it comes with a great variety of cultural accretions. There is little in common in the practice of the major forms of Buddhism: the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. There are also significant differences within each of these, as Buddhism is combined with the beliefs, practices and cultures of various ethnic groups.

The number of Buddhists in Australia has grown rapidly through the influx of immigrants from predominantly Buddhist countries such as Vietnam. Further rapid growth in Buddhism will depend on continued migration from these countries.

There is evidence of some loss of numbers. In 1986, while approximately 20 per cent of Koreans in Korea were Buddhist, only 3 per cent of Australian Koreans identified themselves as such. There is evidence that many Korean Buddhists convert to Christianity soon after arriving in Australia (Gil Soo Han 1994). While few are as aggressive in their evangelism as the Korean Christian churches, ethnic organisations of several other countries are actively seeking conversions of Buddhists who have migrated from their own countries.

Some Buddhist practices have been difficult to import into Australia. With Buddhists widely spread through many suburbs, it is not possible for monks to walk around the streets to be given food on a daily basis by the Buddhist faithful, as many do in Asia. Nor does the education system make it easy for young men to spend a few months living as monks, as many do in some parts of the Buddhist world. Finding themselves in a different environment, some Buddhists have found their religious consciousness weakened. It has been easy to merge with the largely 'non-religious' environment of Australian culture.

There are some indications, however, that Buddhism is adapting to its new environment in Australia. Although few Australians become monks, many have explored Buddhism through courses and teaching programs. There has been great interest in meditation as people seek a sense of peace in a chaotic and confusing world. While Buddhism has much to offer Australians of all backgrounds, it is not clear how it will develop in Australia. In the immediate future, however, Buddhism will continue to exist in a great variety of forms, reflecting the diversity in ethnic background of Australian Buddhists.