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## Critical Notes

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Buddhist Women in Australia

By Enid Adam



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## **Buddhist Women in Australia**

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Australia's proximity to Asia ensured that, sooner or later, Buddhism would reach its shores. This began in the nineteenth century when Chinese men came to mine gold and Sinhalese to cut sugar cane. The pearling industry along the northern coastline also employed Sinhalese and Japanese divers. But the influence of these men was short lived as most returned to their homelands. Not until the twentieth century did small groups of Western Buddhists form, but the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 put an end to this activity.<sup>1</sup>

The first records that we have of Buddhist women in Australia date from the end of the second World War. Marie Byles, Australia's first woman solicitor, began writing about her Buddhist beliefs in books and articles. In 1951, Sister Dhammadinna was the first Buddhist nun to visit Australia. Born in the United States, Sister Dhammadinna was ordained in Sri Lanka and lived there for thirty years. A benefactor paid the fares for this elderly nun to come to Australia to present the *Dhamma* to people of European origin. Although she had little money and no security as there were few Buddhist organizations to support her enterprise, charisma and dedication enabled Sister Dhammadinna to survive in Australia for eleven months. During this time she conducted what is believed to be the first *Vesak* ceremony in the country.

The stimulation of Sister Dhammadinna's visit resulted in the formation of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales, Australia's oldest Buddhist organization. Marie Byles was a founding member of the society, and she was followed by Natasha Jackson, whose interests were more intellectual. Jackson, Russian-born but Australian-educated, was a qualified nurse and school teacher. She was a communist and was interested in history and philosophy. When Jackson met Sister Dhammadinna, she

was so influenced by her that the nun assumed a mythological importance beyond her actual achievements.

In 1953, the Buddhist Society of New South Wales was experiencing a time of schism. Some early members left the society, and Natasha Jackson assumed control. With Charles Knight, Jackson propagated her rational, modernistic interpretation of Theravāda Buddhism, minimizing its religious aspects. Her interest in socialism led to activity in social humanitarian issues such as Aboriginal land rights, and she gave erudite, entertaining lectures. In 1961, Jackson became editor of *Metta*, the journal of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales, for which she wrote intellectually-stimulating articles. With her strong anti-clerical bent, she discouraged visits by overseas Buddhist monks, and she had no time for meditation. She was opposed to Mahāyāna Buddhism.

By the 1970s, Natasha Jackson's influence was waning on several fronts. *Metta* was then being edited in Melbourne to suit the counter-culture of the time. In New South Wales, ethnic Buddhist centers were threatening the supremacy of the local Buddhist Society. Within the society, Japanese Rissho-Kosei-Kai teachings became favored, and in 1975, Jackson was ousted from leadership. Croucher comments that "it was naturally very sad that a lady who had poured more than twenty years of her life into the Society should have felt compelled to resign under such a cloud of ill-feeling. Until 1971, at least, the Buddhist Society of New South Wales had been the focal point of Australian Buddhism, and Natasha Jackson its dominant personality."<sup>2</sup>

Gradually Buddhist Societies were formed in other Australian states, with visits being made by monks from Burma and Sri Lanka. When Sister Dhammadinna returned to Australia in 1957, she was banned from public speaking, although she was supported by Buddhist societies.

For the first 100 years of European settlement in Australia, Buddhist presence depended on lay people. However, by the 1970s, people felt the need for resident monks, and a new phase in Australian Buddhist life began. This was a time of male leadership, with Theravādin monasteries being established in New South Wales and Western Australia. In New

South Wales, Ilse Lederman became one of the first students of Phra Khantipalo, a highly respected British Theravādin monk who led a peripatetic existence. Lederman later donated 32,000 Australian dollars for the purchase of an eighty-nine hectare property surrounded by a national park at Wiseman's Ferry, north of Sydney. In 1978, the property was named Wat Buddha Dhamma and became the home for an isolated but energetic lay community led by several monks and nuns. Phra Khantipalo became a resident monk, regular meditation classes were held, and visiting teachers of all traditions were welcomed.

In 1979 Ilse Lederman was ordained in Sri Lanka. As Ayya Khema, she became head of a nunnery there, but continued yearly visits to Australia. Now a resident of her native Germany, Ayya Khema continues to teach and write on Buddhism.

The arrival in 1974 of two Tibetan lamas led to the establishment of Vajrayāna societies in Victoria, Queensland, and Tasmania. Following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Indo-Chinese refugees began to arrive in Australia. The Vietnamese brought their Mahāyāna tradition and the Laotians and Kampuchians their Theravādin practice. The arrival of monks from Vietnam in the 1980s enabled the Vietnamese refugees to establish their own Buddhist centers. The one woman to emerge as a Buddhist leader during these years was Lynne Tetley, who, with her husband Barry, established in Kingston, Tasmania, a Dhammadinna Centre named Woodward House after an Australian Pāli scholar. Monks made frequent visits to that center.

In 1982, the Dalai Lama visited Australia for the first time, and he was warmly welcomed despite some controversy. When he returned in 1992, the growing acceptance of Buddhism as a minority religion in Australia was evident from the record crowds that flocked to hear him.

After these years of male dominance in Australian Buddhism, the 1990s again brought women to the fore. When Nan Tien Temple was built at Wollongong, south of Sydney, at a cost of 30,000,000 Australian dollars, it was the largest Buddhist complex in the southern hemisphere. The temple is run by Taiwanese nuns who follow the tradition of Fo

Kuang Shan Buddhism established in Taiwan in 1965 by Founding Master Venerable Hsing Yun, who used innovative methods of propagating the *Dhamma* in order to meet contemporary needs. The Venerable Abbess of the temple is Man Chien, who is assisted by *bhikkhunnīs*. The temple is influential locally, Australia-wide, and internationally. There are many visitors every day, and a conference with 20,000 delegates from 50 countries has been hosted there. The nuns of Nan Tien Temple play an influential role in Australian Buddhism today.

Chenrezig Institute at Eudlo, Queensland, was founded by the first Tibetan monks in Australia, Thubten Yeshe and Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, who came from Nepal in 1974. The institute is a member of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition. The Chenrezig Nun's Community is unique in the southern hemisphere. The ordained community provides a life of study, meditation, and practice. The nuns are taught by Yeshe Nashi Tsering. The manager, Venerable Yeshe Khadro, is also the director of the Karuna Hospice, which provides care for people in their own homes. More than 500 patients have been helped by the hospice,<sup>3</sup> whose mainly non-Buddhist patients react well to subtle Buddhist compassion.

Another woman who made history in the 1990s was Subhana Barzaghi Roshi, who in 1996 became the first woman *rōshi* of the Diamond Sangha in Hawai'i. Subhana grew up as an active Anglican, but then began her search for Buddhism at Bodh Gaya, continued in Nepal and Bombay, and finally with Robert Aitken in Hawai'i. She practices in the Zen and Vipassanā traditions and has established centers in New South Wales. During women's retreats, Subhana encourages participants to make creative contributions in art, experience, and chanting. She realizes that some aspects of classical Zen are alienating to women and tries to adapt the tradition to meet women's needs. Also innovative is her encouragement of the use of indigenous artifacts in ritual. Zen, she believes, is being integrated into Australian soil.<sup>4</sup>

In Western Australia, progress has also been made, this time in the Theravādin tradition. In 1995, the Venerable Ajahn Brahmavamso, abbot

of Bodhinyana Monastery near Perth, noted as a weakness of Theravāda Buddhism the lack of a female counterpart to a monk, and the necessity for local women, who aspired to that role, to go overseas to be ordained. The abbot recognized the Buddha's original intention to have both male and female monasteries, but that in the Theravādin tradition, *bhikkhunī* orders had died out centuries ago. Ten precept nuns provided an alternative in many countries. The inclusion of nuns at Bodhinyana Monastery was not a success, as they existed only in the monks' shadows. Western nuns had difficulty accepting the lesser role accorded to them by Thai-trained monks.

At that time, financial considerations placed a separate nuns' monastery out of reach. Three years later, however, the idea had been embraced enthusiastically by the Buddhist Society of Western Australia, and substantial donations enabled the purchase of 200 hectares of bushland at Gidgegannup, in the hills behind Perth. An Australian nun, Sister Ajahn Vayana, who had experience in New South Wales, Sri Lanka, and England, was invited to become abbot of the new monastery, Dhammasara (the heartwood of the *Dhamma*). This is the first Theravāda nuns' *Sangha* in Australia. By the end of 1998, Sister Vayana and an attendant were in residence, living in a mobile home. Fundraising and voluntary work by the Buddhist community enabled electricity to be connected, a water supply to be provided from nearby creeks, and basic amenities installed. A *dāna* tent was erected. This progress took place in bushland still inhabited by kangaroos, wallabies, and emus. Sister Vayana's deepest inspiration is to attain *nibbāna* while assisting others to fulfil their potential.<sup>5</sup> This independent monastery complements Bodhinyana Monastery for the teaching and practice of Buddhism. For Buddhist women, it presents a rare opportunity to enter the ordained lifestyle.

In Victoria, Elizabeth Bell has served the Buddhist Society of Victoria for more than thirty years, even offering her suburban home to the society. In the 1970s, she became chairperson of the Buddhist Federation of Australia. In 1988, she was appointed editor of *Metta*, including more news and practical information, and her tolerance and broadmindedness

were appreciated. With strong links with the forest tradition of Thailand, Bell worked for Buddhism virtually full-time. She has served as president of the Buddhist Society of Victoria for several terms and continues to lecture on Buddhism today. Her leadership has been characterized by kindness, humility, and wisdom, all of which have contributed to the success of the Victorian Society.

In these different ways, Buddhist women in Australia are making notable progress. This has been recognized not only in the various local communities, but also by the Australian Government, which in 1999 awarded Elizabeth Bell the Order of Australia for her outstanding service to Buddhism in Australia.

Buddhist women are now in a position to play an active role in the further development of Australian Buddhism. Although Buddhists comprise only 1.1 percent of the mainly Christian population of Australia, that proportion is slowly rising. More than half of Australia's Buddhists are women (102,340 out of 199,175).<sup>6</sup> As more women in various Buddhist traditions become ordained, they will contribute effectively to a balanced representation in Australia of the original teachings of the Buddha.

## NOTES

1. More detailed accounts of the introduction of Buddhism into Australia can be found in *Buddhism in Australia 1848-1998* by P. Croucher, New South Wales University Press: Sydney, Australia 1989, and in *The Buddhists in Australia* by E. L. Adam and P. T. Hughes, Australian Government Publishing Service: Canberra, Australia 1996.
2. Croucher 1989: 96.
3. Karuna Hospice Service, PO Box 2020, Windsor Queensland 4030, Australia.
4. Subhana's transmission is described in *Blind Donkey: Journal of the Diamond Sangha* Hawai'i: Vol. 16, No. 1, Spring 1996.
5. The development of the nuns' monastery from idea to reality is to be found in the newsletters of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia from September 1995 to November 1999.
6. Australian Census 1996.