

Book review

Journal of Global Buddhism 13 (2012): 1-2



Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change

Edited by Cristina Rocha and Michelle Barker. London: Routledge, 2011, xviii + 170, ISBN 978-0-415-56818-0 (cloth), USD \$130.00/£85.00; ISBN 978-0-203-84032 (ebook), £71.66.

Reviewed by Emeritus Professor Gary D. Bouma

UNESCO Chair in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations – Asia Pacific
Monash University

gary.bouma@monash.edu



Copyright Notice: This work is licensed under Creative Commons. Copies of this work may be made and distributed non-commercially provided attribution is given to the original source and no alteration is made to the content.

For the full terms of the license:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>

All enquiries to: <http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

B o o k R e v i e w

Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change. Edited by Cristina Rocha and Michelle Barker. London: Routledge, 2011, xviii + 170, ISBN 978-0-415-56818-0 (cloth), USD \$130.00/£85.00; ISBN 978-0-203-84032 (ebook), £71.66.

Reviewed by Emeritus Professor Gary D. Bouma

Rocha and Barker present an excellent introduction to Buddhism in Australia. There is a lack of up to date material on Buddhism in Australia, even though Buddhists comprise over two per cent of the population, making them the second largest religious group in the country. Several authors refer to Buddhism as the fastest growing religion in Australia. This is not accurate—between 1996 and 2001 they won the prize among religious groups over 0.5% of the population, but that prize went to Hindus for the 2001-2006 period. However, Buddhists have clearly formed significant communities in Australia, built their spiritual infrastructure, and are making a significant impact on the society. This book tells the details of these facts in a most readable and enjoyable way, providing the reader a clear, accurate, and interesting picture of Buddhists and Buddhist communities in Australia.

The origins of Buddhism in Australia are richly diverse, even as the current practice of Buddhism is. The editors of this volume are well aware that any local history and description of Buddhism participates in and reflects the global movement of this religion/spirituality/philosophy/way of life. These local-to-global links are made in ways that enhance the understanding of both spheres. The vital diversity of Buddhism is described in ways that ensure the reader finds it impossible to essentialize Buddhism or Buddhists in Australia or anywhere else.

Once the origins are described and a quick socio-demographic profile commenced, the impact of Buddhism on Australia in the form of temple building experiences is covered. These reports demonstrate the difficulties encountered by Buddhists, their creative responses to community challenges, and the outcomes of effort to build temples, meditation centers, and schools. The stories depict clearly the two-way nature of religious settlement—the processes by which a religion moves from one place to another and becomes part of the new home and, in the process, both the religion and the new home change in creative accommodation to each other.

The third section of the book describes developments in Buddhist community organization. Far from being a boring account of meetings and leadership positions held, these chapters address issues such as the ordination of women, the role of laity, creative changes made in response to new contexts, and the ways practices, understandings (I am avoiding the term theologies), and roles have changed. Again, the variety of approaches and the diversity of Buddhist traditions involved are elucidated in a presentation not as a difficulty to be overcome, but as a constituent in the vitality of Australian Buddhism.

Finally, the ways Buddhism finds expression in the lives of Australian Buddhists is made clear through a very interesting set of chapters that describe various ways Buddhists are motivated by Buddhism to address issues in Australian society. To me one of the most valuable approaches to learning about the religions of others is to be able to see, through the accounts of real people, how their religious and spiritual practices and beliefs shape their lives. This section is very rich in the ways depicted.

All the chapters are well written. None are very long, but each is appropriately referenced and grounded in evidence. I had thought I might “dip and skip” my way through the book. No way! I found myself learning something of value on every page. Each chapter opened a new window, a refreshing vista on religion in Australia, on Australians being Buddhists, and on Buddhism becoming a “normal” part of Australia.

I recommend this book to all students of religion, anyone interested in the complex processes by which a religion moves into a society and becomes part of it (“religious settlement” is what I have called this process), and anyone interested in increasing their understanding of what it is like to be a Buddhist in Australia.