

[In]visibility of Women in Buddhism in Australia

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Women have played a prominent role in Buddhism in Australia since the turn of the 20th century. Female Buddhists, or women with a strong interest in Buddhism, have brought and propagated Buddhist ideas into Australia, established and held leadership roles in Buddhist organizations, and become prominent Buddhist teachers and scholars who have taught both in and beyond the country's borders. These women include Emma Harding Britten, Elise Pickett, Marie Byles, Natasha Jackson, Elizabeth Bell, Chi Kwang Sunim, Robina Courtin, and Judith Snodgrass. This paper investigates the prominence of women in Buddhism in Australia, and the influence they have had in diverse areas including scholarship, art and social change. In so doing it seeks to make a gender-critical turn, rendering women's role in Buddhism in Australia more visible, and calling for more research in this emerging field of study.

Making the gender-critical turn

While women have played a prominent role in Buddhism in Australia, at least since the 1880s, they have received relatively little scholarly or public attention (Halafoff 2011). As Gary D. Bouma and Jan Brace-Govan (2000: 159) have stated 'women [including Buddhist women] have played an undersung role in processes of religious settlement, the negotiation of religious and cultural diversity and in the emergence of multicultural Australia'. Gender inequalities continue to persist in contemporary religious, including Buddhist, institutions and societies globally (Tsomo 2009: 151). In order to address

these issues, the topic of gender and religion, and in this case Buddhism and gender, is increasingly being explored and contested by scholars in and beyond Australia.

As Ursula King (2005: 1-2) states the wider relationship between religion and gender itself suffers a '*double blindness*' as gender studies are often '*religion-blind*', and studies in religion remain largely '*gender-blind*'. Both are highly contested fields and in order to better understand this relationship King argues that it is necessary to make, what Randi. R Warne (2000) has called, 'the gender-critical turn'. Gender-critical thinking is intentional and developed through educative processes. It 'involves the radical transformation of consciousness, knowledge, scholarship and social practices' (King 2005: 2) in order to 'decentre maleness as the human norm and ideal which informs our imagination... not just in our scholarship but in our daily lives' (Warne 2000: 251). King (2005: 2) elaborates:

Gender studies concern both women and men, yet in practice they still remain mostly concerned with women because of the need to overcome the traditional invisibility and marginalization of women in history, society and culture, but also in the world of scholarship, in academic debate and in the institutions of higher education, especially in university departments of religion.

Patterns of patriarchal and androcentric, that is male-centred, gender relations are 'deeply embedded' in religious traditions (King 2005: 3-4). This '*embeddedness*', writes King (2005: 3), 'means that gender is initially difficult to separate out from other aspects of religion until one makes a "gender-critical turn"'.

While studies in religion have in the past been particularly resistant to feminist critique (Jushka 2001: 1 quoted in King 2005: 5), and male scholars have occasionally investigated the status of women in various religious traditions, more recently women have increasingly 'become subjects and agents of [this] scholarly analysis' (King 2005: 5). As King (2005: 7) states: '[w]hat is evident today... is the fact that the study of religion can no longer be concerned with men alone, but must always be equally concerned with women'.

Rita M. Gross (2005: 18) similarly describes how before the 1960s, women were rarely the focus of scholarship on religion, and when they were studied, they were viewed as 'objects in an androcentric universe'. Gross (2005: 18) states that great progress has been made since that time, which can be 'measured by the fact that the generic masculine has largely gone out of style' in mainstream media, academic journals and textbooks, however addressing gender inequalities within religions is still an ongoing project. She adds that 'insiders' within religious traditions are best placed to offer feminist and normative critiques of their own texts and practices (Gross 2005: 23). 'Insiders', writes Gross (2005: 23) are the 'appropriate spokespeople for that tradition and architects of its future. As such, they cannot be faulted for not having the appropriate credentials for evaluating their tradition.'ⁱ

Gross (2004) argues that, until gender disparities are adequately addressed they need to be exposed and resolved before they can be transcended. According to Gross (2004: 4), who is an expert on gender and Buddhism (see Gross 1993), the appearance of gender differences isn't questioned in Buddhism, what is disputed is that the female gender is

often automatically assigned a lower status. This is despite the fact that texts such as the *Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra* make it clear that the female form ‘does not possess innate characteristics’ and therefore ‘does not really mean much’ (Gross 2004: 6). As Gross (2004: 9-12) states:

... willful ignoring... has nothing in common with transcendence and equanimity.

Truly forgetting gender requires studying gender intensely rather than willfully ignoring existing gender practices that cause suffering while claiming that gender does not matter

...

...if gender is studied honestly and thoroughly, then, eventually, it can be forgotten.

Gross (2004: 12) states that at times there is a need to remove certain references, such as gendered language, and at others, there is a need to retain or include references to address these gender disparities. Gross (2004: 12-13) provides an example where she is comforted when reading adjectives ‘male’ and ‘female’ before the word *bodhisattvas* in Tibetan Vajrayana liturgies, that make it ‘crystal clear’ that she, as a woman, ‘is not being left out’ in a world where she often feels excluded due to her gender.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo (2009: 155) also stresses that critiques of gender disparities and discrimination are vital given that ‘most archetypes of enlightenment and most Buddhist teachers [are] male’ and ‘decision-making power within most monasteries and Buddhist organizations is also generally concentrated in male hands’. However, Tsomo (2009: 152) explains how these inequalities are being challenged and gradually overturned in recent decades:

Parochial attitudes that have kept women in the shadows of Buddhist history are now being brought to light, examined, and reconsidered... Buddhists of all descriptions are increasingly being challenged to expand their thinking and to reevaluate the traditional subordination of women ... A new revaluing of women, incorporating and drawing strength from both Buddhist and feminist values, is one of the most visible and significant features of the current global transformation of Buddhism.

Buddhist women, including nuns and scholars, such as Tsomo and Gross, have been at the forefront of these developments. Tsomo (2009: 152-153) adds that 'Buddhist women's leadership and contributions', to maintaining centres, teaching, translating, fundraising and welfare, 'are becoming increasingly prominent' and valued, in both Asian and Western societies, as over 'the past twenty years in all of these Buddhist communities, a trend toward greater visibility, independence, recognition, and equity for women has begun to emerge'.

While much progress has been made in gender inclusive practices and studies of gender and Buddhism, Gross (2005: 24-26) highlights that contemporary women's studies in religion and feminist theology remain largely Eurocentric and Christian-centred. She argues that these disciplines, that pride themselves on being gender inclusive, need to proactively counter this exclusion and expand their breadth to include Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu and Indigenous perspectives, and scholarship of women and gender in non-western societies.

This paper begins to address some of these issues by presenting a case study of Indigenous, Asian, and Anglo-European women and Buddhism in Australia, cognisant

of the fact that the vast majority of literature currently available focuses on Anglo-European women. It does not seek to elevate the role of Buddhist women above men, nor does it seek to draw any conclusions that might essentialize female characteristics and women's contribution to Buddhism on the basis of their gender. It seeks instead to begin to make women, from diverse backgrounds, in Buddhism in Australia more visible, in order to counter their relative invisibility as described above.

Paul Croucher's (1989) *Buddhism in Australia: 1848-1988* provides a comprehensive description of Buddhism in Australian society up until the late 1980s. It covers both so-called ethnic/immigrant and convert/Anglo-European Buddhist communities, and women's and men's leadership roles. Croucher's study remains the definitive text on the subject, and many subsequent publications, including this one, draw primarily on his research. As scholars have mentioned, this is somewhat problematic, given that his impressive monograph is more than twenty years old and that it was based on his Bachelor of Arts Honours thesis (Halafoff, Fitzpatrick & Lam 2012: 17). In addition Enid Adam (2000) published a very short article on "Buddhist Women in Australia", in the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, with few citations other than Croucher's text. More recently, Cristina Rocha and Michelle Barker's (2011) edited volume on *Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change* included several chapters pertaining to issues of gender and Buddhism. This paper draws on the above publications, arguing that a more comprehensive study needs to be conducted on women in Buddhism in Australia, in order for their significant contributions to Buddhism, and to Australian society more broadly, be recognized.

Women and Buddhism in Australia

Sally McAra, Franz Metcalf and Anna Halafoff (*forthcoming*), in their survey of the interconnected landscapes of Buddhism in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA – and drawing upon earlier periodizations for Buddhism in Western countries by Martin Baumann (2001), Croucher (1989), and Michelle Spuler (2000) – divided their historical discussion of Buddhism in these countries into four overlapping phases; tracing Buddhism's movement from the margins to a more mainstream position in each of these societies. These periodizations focus on early contact, early immigrant Buddhists, early converts of European ancestry, and the Buddhist Boom. This discussion on women, Buddhism and Australia is also organised according to these categories.

McAra *et al.* (*forthcoming*) also describe many frameworks devised and utilized by scholars for understanding the global spread of Buddhism, and particularly its manifestations in Western societies. While a detailed discussion of these theories, and their critics (see McAra *et al.* *forthcoming*), is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that Western countries, including Australia, 'are now home to a burgeoning array of Buddhist denominations and lineages' (McAra *et al.* *forthcoming*), that no-longer neatly fit into the 'Two Buddhisms' (Prebish 1993) framework of ethnic/Asian immigrants and Anglo-European/Western converts (McAra *et al.* *forthcoming*). The prevailing characteristics of Buddhism in Australia, as in other Western societies, are instead 'plurality and heterogeneity' (Baumann 2001: 22 cited in McAra *et al.* *forthcoming*).

Scholars have also recently attempted to classify Buddhism into another dualistic framework of traditional/modern Buddhism (Baumann 2001; McMahan 2008 cited in McAra *et al. forthcoming*). According to McAra *et al. (forthcoming* citing McMahan 2008):

Modern Buddhism distinguishes itself from traditionalist forms that have consciously attempted to resist adaptation to forces such as industrialization, commodification, globalization, creolization, etc. Traditionalist Buddhist practice is collective, primarily entailing ritual, ethical conduct, and (for lay people) service to their community's monastics. By contrast, Buddhist modernism is characterized in part by a shift of emphasis to the private individual who engages in practices intended to transform the mind. It is also characterized by its international orientation and spread.

'The active and visible role of women' has also been cited as an important characteristic of modern Buddhism (Lopez 2002: xx). Buddhist modernism arose in Asia, in reformist movements such as 'Protestant' Buddhism in Sri Lanka, 'Humanistic Buddhism' of Taiwan, Tibetan Buddhism in exile under the leadership of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and the Order of Interbeing, led by Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh (McAra *et al. forthcoming*). This framework has also been criticized, for example Natalie Quli (2008: 241 cited in McAra *et al. forthcoming*) questions this division of traditionalism/modernism in Buddhism, and instead applies Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt's framework of multiple modernities to her study of contemporary Buddhism in the USA, where she found both traditional *and* modern elements to be present concurrently.

Martin Baumann has also proposed a new 'post-modernist' Buddhism, which acknowledges the 'interconnectedness of East and West' and post-modern qualities of 'plurality, hybridity, ambivalence, globality and de-territoriality' in Buddhism in Western societies (Baumann 2001: 4). Baumann (2001: 5) calls this 'global Buddhism', 'characterized by more intense transnational and trans-continental flows of Buddhist ideas and practices, disseminated by the global travels of Buddhist teachers and pupils'. Barker and Rocha (2011: 2, 15) have recently applied this framework to their study of Buddhism in the Australian context arguing that 'the development of Buddhism in Australia does not happen in a vacuum, but is part of an intense flow of ideas, teachers, students, practices and material cultures between Australia and other countries.' The following account of women in Buddhism in Australia certainly substantiates this claim.

Early contact

While Baumann's 'early contact' phase refers to early European contact with Asian thought, McAra *et al.* (*forthcoming*) use this term to describe accounts of contact between Indigenous people of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA and Buddhists from Asia. In the Australian context, tales of possible contact between Buddhists and Aboriginal Australians include Gujarati seamen who had trade links with Java in the first century CE, fifteenth century Ming-dynasty maritime explorers and seventeenth century Japanese Samurai (Croucher 1989: 1-2). More research into past and present relations between Indigenous peoples and Buddhists in Australia needs to be conducted in order to validate these claims and also to investigate whether women

feature in any of these early stories, and what roles they might have played, as Croucher provides only a brief mention of these anecdotes.

Early immigrant Buddhists

Although Adam (2000: 38) states that the first records of Buddhist women in Australia date back to World War II, Croucher's research both suggests and then provides evidence of much earlier encounters. Despite the tales of possible contact between Indigenous Australians and Buddhists briefly described above, Buddhists are commonly believed to have first arrived in Australia from China in the 1840s (Croucher 1989: 1-2). Except for a brief mention of a statue of Kuan Yinⁱⁱ, in the South Melbourne temple dating back to 1883, women do not feature in Croucher's (1989: 2-6) descriptors of Chinese communities on the goldfields, Singhalese Buddhists employed in the Queensland sugar-cane industry, and Japanese and Sinhalese Buddhist immigrants in the northern Australian pearling industry, in the mid- late eighteenth century. Again, more research needs to be conducted in order to uncover possible stories of the first Buddhist women in Australia, that may well exist in literature of other disciplines such as Australian or Asian Studies.

Early converts of European ancestry

As a result of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, and consequently the decline in the amount of ethnic/immigrant Buddhists in Australia, Buddhism was kept alive by Spiritualists, Theosophists and other convert Buddhists for much of the 20th Century. According to Croucher's account, women played a significant role in this period of history. Australian Spiritualists first publicised Buddhism in the 1880s, paving the way

for Theosophists and thus for convert Buddhism in Australia. Emma Harding Britten, an American Theosophist toured Australia in 1878. In 1889, the first branch of the Theosophical Society (TS) in Australia was established in Tasmania and the second branch was founded in Melbourne in 1890 by Elise Pickett. Pickett, a Russian arrival from New Zealand, was described as the first “‘White Buddhist” to have set foot on Australian shores’. The second, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the TS’s co-founder toured Australia lecturing on ‘Theosophy and Buddhism’ in 1891 and again in 1897. Both Olcott and TS co-founder Madame H.P. Blavatsky participated in a refuge ceremony in Sri Lanka in 1880, becoming ‘Buddhists in the formal sense’ (Croucher 1989: 7-10). Croucher (1989: 8) also described them as ‘great trail-blazers for Buddhism’, stating that ‘it is only in the context of their efforts that the history of Buddhism in Australia can be understood’. This brief account illustrates the central role of women in Theosophy and thereby also in introducing Buddhism to Australia.

Despite somewhat of a lull in the early 20th Century, an interest in and openness to Buddhism once again flourished following the war years, a period in which several pioneering women were instrumental in the development of Buddhism in Australia. Leo Berkeley first came to Australia in 1947. Born in Holland he had run an antiquarian bookstore in London and was introduced to Buddhism by the then Sri Lankan minister of Justice and the Venerable Nerada Thera in Colombo. Nerada suggested Berkeley establish a Buddhist Society in Sydney. Berkeley contacted Marie Byles, who, according to Croucher, ‘was well on the way to becoming a legendary figure’ in her own right. Byles was ‘the first woman to graduate in law in New South Wales... a pioneer conservationist, mountaineer, bushwalker, pacifist, feminist and Buddhist’ with

‘Theravadin leanings’. In 1951, Byles co-ordinated a ‘Silent Retreat’ for 8 people in Sydney, which was the first recorded commemoration of Vesak for non-Asian Australians. Later that year, she, together with Berkeley and others, formed the Buddhist Society in Sydney signifying the beginning of ‘organised Buddhism’ in Australia (Croucher 1989: 32-36).

In 1952, Sister Dhammadinna, ‘an elderly American nun’ and somewhat of a controversial figure first visited Australia. Sister Dhammadinna had a profound influence on Natasha Jackson, a Russian immigrant who was brought to Australia in 1908 by her ‘radical, anti-Tsarist mother’. Jackson was to become ‘the dominant voice in Australian Buddhism from 1955 to 1971’, rewriting history and elevating Sister Dhammadinna ‘to the undeserved status of “Founder of Australian Buddhism”’. The fascinating story of Dhammadinna’s chequered past is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice to say that Byles and Berkeley were not impressed with her behaviour or scholarship, however Sister Dhammadinna gathered a small group of students including Lummechien Berkeley, Lyn and Eric Penrose and Graeme Lyall. Lyall however was also soon to have ‘enough of her autocratic ways’ (Croucher 1989: 36-41). She left Australia in 1953 and returned briefly in 1957 before retiring to Hawaii in 1958, leading Croucher (1989: 42) to conclude that she had ‘little real influence on the course of Australian Buddhism’, despite Jackson’s claims.

The Buddhist Society of New South Wales, under the leadership of Berkeley and Byles concentrated on hosting qualified teachers and meditation sessions and retreats. In 1953 it produced the *Buddhist News*, which was renamed *Metta* in 1955 (Croucher 1989: 42-

43, 53). Jackson and Charles F. Knight, who had previously led a hermetic life in northern Queensland, were at the helm of Australian Buddhism between 1956 to 1971 as editors of *Metta* (Croucher 1989: 53-55). Jackson (Croucher 1989: 60-62) as she put in, kept her 'little raft of Dharma' barely afloat through the late 1950s and 1960s with lectures and *Metta* articles. Knight visited Melbourne in 1959 suggesting that a national Buddhist body be formed. In 1960 the Buddhist Federation of Australia held its first meeting in Sydney voting Knight as President, and Jackson editor of the now national journal *Metta* (Croucher 1989: 62). Venerable Thich Nhat Hahn first visited Australia in 1966 to plead for an end to the Vietnamese war. Jackson and Knight marched in anti-war protests and also campaigned for Aboriginal land rights in the 1960s, reflecting their committed to a socially engaged Buddhism (Croucher 1989: 75-76).

Also of note during this period was the influence of Buddhism on several Australian artists and poets including Ethel Carrick Fox, Ian Fairweather, Margaret Preston and Harold Stewart in the 1930s and 1940s (Croucher 1989: 28). Croucher (1989: 29) describes how both Preston and Stewart,

... were strongly affected by the 'kingdom of nothingness', the cultural and spiritual void in Australia. They both considered that provincialism, the cult of materialism, and the very spirit of the place stifled artistic vision, and thus turned to Asia... where they found in Buddhism... the promise of a reintegration of man and nature...

'Beat Zen' arrived in Australia in 1959 in the work of Jack Kerouac, D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts and also exerted a powerful influence on Australian artists and poets such as Fairweather, John Olsen, Brett Whiteley, Robert Gray, Colin Johnson, Judith Wright

and Vicki Viidikas (Croucher 1989: 64-65, 85-88). However, the conservative Buddhist Societies were largely horrified by what they perceived as the Beat misappropriation of Zen to justify 'bohemian indulgence' (Croucher 1989: 64).

While Croucher's (1989) account of this period no doubt demonstrates the prominent and highly significant role that European women, and notably Russian and Russian-Australian women, played in establishing Buddhism in Australia, more rigorous analysis is required to truly understand the significance of their contributions that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. Memoirs, letters, and journal articles written by these women need to be sourced and studied and in-depth interviews conducted with these women's descendants and pupils in order to document their lives and connection with Buddhism in more detail. In addition, the influence that Buddhism has had on female and male Australian artists, and also social activists, such as the environmentalists, needs to also be further investigated (see Sherwood 2003 on contemporary socially engaged Buddhism in Australia). Again, there is a strong likelihood that, in addition to the information that can be sourced from primary data listed above, relevant secondary data on women such as Preston and Wright may well exist in literature of other disciplines, including Australian Studies and Australian Art History.

The Buddhist Boom

It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s, after the end of the White Australia Policy in 1973, that a massive growth in immigration resulted in a dramatic increase of ethnic/Asian Buddhists in Australia. These diverse communities have erected temples and monasteries in Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Singhalese, Cambodian, Burmese, Laotian

and Tibetan traditions in urban and regional centres (Croucher 1989: 99, 106, 109, 114). Adam (2000: 139) described how up until the 1970s Buddhism in Australia had depended largely upon lay people, thereby enabling women to play a central role. However, the rise in resident monks and the building of monasteries, introduced a 'new time of male leadership' in Buddhism in Australia, although women continued to play a significant part in establishing and managing these Buddhist centres.

Women certainly played an important role in introducing Tibetan Buddhism to Australians. Dr Nick Ribush and Marie Obst (now an ordained nun known as Yeshe Khadro) were among the first Australians to meet Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the first Tibetan Lamas to visit Australia, in Nepal in 1972. Ribush and Obst and their friends Kathy and Tom Vichta donated 160 acres of land to establish Chenrezig Institute (CI), near Nambour, Qld, during Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa's Australian visit in 1974. It was the first of Lama Yeshe's Centres catering to thousands of Western students (Croucher 1989: 92-93). Lama Yeshe's 'Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition' opened centres in Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Sydney and Bendigo in the 1970s and 1980s (Croucher 1989: 112-113) and continues to be among the most popular schools of Buddhism among Australian converts. Although CI has a resident male Tibetan Geshe and a small monks' community, it is largely a centre for nuns and lay people. Ven. Yeshe Khadro, who formerly managed CI, has also directed Karuna Hospice in Brisbane providing end of life care since 1992 (Adam 2000: 141; Karuna Centre 2012).

In 1971 Elizabeth Bell, who had joined the Victorian Buddhist society (formed in 1953) in 1963, became Chairman of the Buddhist Federation of Australia, while Jackson resigned as the Buddhist Society of New South Wales was floundering in 1975 (Croucher 1989: 77, 81, 95). Bell became editor of *Metta* that same year and continued to build a strong relationship with the Sinhalese community and also the Thai forest tradition hosting regular visits by Phra Khantipalo, (Croucher 1989: 98-99) who was another highly influential figure who contributed to the regeneration of Buddhism in Australia the 1970s and 1980s (Croucher 1989: 106-107).

One of Phra Khantipalo's first students, German born Ilse Lederman, donated substantial funds toward the purchase of land north of Sydney to establish Wat Buddha Dhamma, where Phra Khantipalo became a resident teacher (Adam 2000: 140). Lederman was ordained in 1979 in Sri Lanka, and as Ayya Khema became a prominent teacher of Buddhism internationally. Australian Venerable Chi Kwang, formerly Debbie Cain and another one of Phra Khantipalo's students, spent seven years in a Korean Zen monastery from 1979 to 1986 (Croucher 1989: 103-104). As a well-respected teacher, she remains a prominent figure in Buddhism in Australia, serving as Chair of the Australian Sangha Association between 2009 and 2010.

Venerable Adrienne Howley, also known as Thich Nu Tri Anh, was born in Australia and later ordained by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1982. In 1993 she took bhikkhuni, the highest form of, ordination with the Most Venerable Dr Thich Huyen-Vi, a Vietnamese Buddhist master. Venerable Adrienne Howley was a resident teacher at Chenrezig Institute in the 1990s (Selway 1995: 22) and is the author of several books

including *The Naked Buddha: A Practical Guide to the Buddha's Life and Teachings* (1999) and *The Naked Buddha Speaks* (2002).

Prominent female Buddhist leaders in Australia also include the former Abbess Man Chien, and current Abbess Man Shin, of The Taiwanese Buddhist Nan Tien Temple built in Wollongong, south of Sydney, in the 1990s. It is a temple run by Taiwanese nuns in the Fo Kuang Shan tradition, and the largest in the Southern hemisphere (Adam 2000: 141; Spirit of Things 2004). In 1996, Subhana Barzaghi Roshi, became one of the first female Zen teachers in the Diamond Sangha, establishing The Sydney Zen Centre in new South Wales (Adam 2000: 141) and Sister Ajahn Vayana, an Australian nun, became the Abbot of Dhammasara, the first Theravada nuns community in Australia in 1998 (Adam 2000: 142). In 1999 Elizabeth Bell was awarded the Order of Australia by the Federal Government for her service to Buddhism in Australia (Adam 2000: 143) and by the turn of the 21st century, Buddhism was firmly established on Australian soil.

As Halafoff, Ruth Fitzpatrick and Kim Lam (2012: 11-12) have noted, a growing number of scholars have either specialized or are currently specializing in studies of Buddhism in Australia in recent years. The majority of them are women including Enid Adam, Michelle Barker (formerly Spuler), Sally McAra, Cristina Rocha, Patricia Sherwood, Judith Snodgrass, Shiva Vasi and Glenys Eddy. In addition to her research on Buddhism in Australia, Snodgrass is a world renowned scholar of Buddhist modernity, the President of the Australian Association of Buddhist Studies, and editor of the prestigious journal *Japanese Studies*. Rocha is also an expert on globalization,

religion, and transnationalism, particularly focused on interactions between Japan, Brazil and Australia, and an editor of the highly regarded *Journal of Global Buddhism*.

Moreover, a number of chapters in Rocha and Barker's (2011:12) collection examine issues pertaining to women and/or feminism and Buddhism in Australia including: Halafoff's (2011) chapter on Venerable Robina Courtin; Fitzpatrick's (2011) research on Green Tara practices; Barzaghi's (2011) chapter on her journey as lay female Zen teacher; Elizabeth Bowen's (2011) chapter on Soka Gakkai; and Nagasuri's (2011) chapter on ordaining women in Australia.

Some of these events and teachers have generated a significant amount of attention.

Venerable Robina Courtin, in particular, has received extensive media coverage in the last decade in Australia for her supposedly 'unconventional' communication style and continues to draw large audiences of mainly women to her teachings in and beyond Australia (Halafoff 2011). On October 22 2009, four women received Theravada Bhikkhuni Ordination in Perth, in the Thai-Forest Tradition also generated a great deal of controversy. It was the first Theravada bhikkhuni ordination in Australia, and the first bhikkhuni ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition ever internationally. As a result, the prominent Buddhist teacher Ajahn Brahm, who conducted the ordination, and his Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery, were excommunicated although the actions were widely supported by those in favour of full female ordination in Australia and also internationally (Brahm 2009; Sujato 2009).

While Croucher's (1989) history of Buddhism in Australia begins to describe the Buddhist Boom period, so much has occurred since the late 1980s and remains largely undocumented. While many notable, largely Anglo-European Australian, female Buddhist practitioners, teachers, leaders and scholars of Buddhism have been cited above, many more remain unnamed. More research needs to be undertaken particularly on Asian-Australian women's contribution to Buddhism in Australia. Again, memoirs, letters, and journal articles written by these Anglo-European and Asian Australian women need to be sourced and studied. In-depth interviews also need to be conducted, with the women who are still living and with these women's descendants and pupils, in order to document their lives in more depth.

Conclusion

The above accounts demonstrate the prevalence of women in leadership roles in Buddhism in Australia, as teachers and scholars, in organizations and in social engagement. It also indicates that at times female Buddhists, or practices involving women, have been deemed controversial in Australia and internationally.

This brief account of women and Buddhism in Australia certainly provides further evidence supporting the argument that global flows of Buddhists and Buddhism have circulated both into Australia from Asia, and other parts of the world, notably New Zealand, Europe and North America, and also that women have also played a significant role in these global flows of Buddhism both in and out of Australia. However, more research will be required to ascertain the degree to which gender disparities and discrimination have been, and continue to be, addressed among Buddhist practitioners

and institutions in Australia. This research could include interviews with female teachers, surveys of male and female practitioners and studies focusing on women's ordination.

As Brooke Schedneck (2007: 57) has argued Buddhist life stories can offer an important resource for understanding the characteristics of modern Buddhism, including gender equality. This paper presents a brief account of the significant role of women in Buddhism in Australia, a topic that is worthy of further investigation. A historical and sociological study investigating memoirs, letters, and published material, alongside interviews with contemporary female leaders and practitioners, could explore the issue of gender, and also questions regarding tradition and modernity, in Buddhism in Australia in more detail.ⁱⁱⁱ

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Endnotes

ⁱ The author self-identifies as a Russian-Australian Buddhist in the Tibetan tradition.

ⁱⁱ Kuan Yin can be depicted as either female or male and as Croucher does not specify the gender of the statue in the South Melbourne temple it may or may not have been female.

ⁱⁱⁱ The author acknowledges and thanks Ruth Fitzpatrick for her constructive comments on earlier drafts of this article.