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Buddhism: One of the Most Influential Faiths in Australia

For this paper, I'll be arguing my thesis that Buddhism is one of the most influential faiths in Australia. Currently living in Melbourne, Victoria, I have a unique opportunity to see first-hand how Buddhism is a principle component of life for many in Australia. I will provide data, both qualitative and quantitative, regarding the impact that Buddhism has in Australia. This data, along with analysis of said data, will be used to argue my stance. First, in order to understand a religion and its impact, one must first be familiar with the history of the religion in order to better comprehend its aspects and the contexts that make it so influential.

Buddhism emerged roughly 2500 years ago. It is widely believed that the original Buddha, Siddhartha (otherwise known as Shakyamuni), was born as a prince, sheltered in his early life from all the negative aspects that the world offers. However, he eventually experiences the sights of a sick man, an old man, a dead man, and a monk. These four sights make him ponder the meaning and purpose of life, and he goes out to travel the world as a student seeking answers. He comes across a couple of gurus in his travels and spends many years attempting to reach what is now known as enlightenment or nirvana. Finally, Siddhartha achieves enlightenment and proceeds to travel for the next forty-five years and teach his knowledge to thousands of people. Before he dies and enters paranirvana, "...he tells [his disciples] to follow

the dharma; thus in Buddhism no individual has absolute authority” (Oxtoby, Amore, Hussain, and Segal 389).

After his death, three main schools of teaching emerged: Theravada (sometimes known as Hinayana), Mahayana, and Vajrahana. These teachings were popular in different regions: Theravada in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand; Mahayana in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam; and Vajrahana in Tibet, Nepal, and Mongolia. These teachings became diverse as they developed within different countries and cultures (Spuler *Developments in Australian Buddhism: Facets of the Diamond* 11).

Theravada Buddhism’s core practices and teachings include “... the Buddha-puja, in which Buddhists chant praise to the Buddha”, as well as promise to observe what is known as the Five Precepts (Oxtoby, Amore, Hussain, and Segal 400). Mahayana teaching (often referred to as the “Greater Vehicle”) differs quite a bit from Theravada in that Theravada teaching tends to focus on a more traditional interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings, while Mahayana’s teachings are a bit more modernized. Theravada focuses solely on Siddhartha, while Mahayana believes him to be only one illustration of many regarding Buddhahood. Theravada focuses on arhats, while Mahayana focuses on bodhisattvas: the difference between the two, to put it in overly simplistic terms, is that arhats are people who have not yet achieved full Buddhahood, while bodhisattvas are people who are farther along the path to Buddhahood than most, but they dedicate much of their time to help all people, including laypeople, reach a higher sense of enlightenment, rather than allow them to try and achieve it on their own. Vajrayana teaching is about a series of steps to complete: Theravada being the most basic, Mahayana being the intermediate, and Vajrayana being the most advanced. These three teachings are popular in

different geographical areas, as mentioned before. A number of people from those geographical areas, many of who were Buddhist followers, traveled to Australia in the mid-1800s. That's where the history of Buddhism in Australia begins.

Before I get into a brief history of Buddhism in Australia, I must first note the lack of academic resources dedicated to providing information on the subject. Even Dr. Anna Halafoff, Ruth Fitzpatrick, and Kim Lam (9) mention the struggle of attempting to find credible and useful sources of information regarding Buddhism's Australian history: "While the presence of Buddhism in Australia dates back to at least the 1840s, and Buddhism is currently Australia's second largest and fastest growing religion, it has received cursory scholarly attention." However, enough information is available in order to give an adequate account of Buddhism's arrival in Australia.

Buddhism made its way to Australia during the gold rush of the mid-1800s. According to Spuler ("The Development of Buddhism in Australia and New Zealand" 2), "Buddhism probably first reached Australia in 1848 ... when Chinese immigrants arrived to work in the goldfields." Spuler goes on to explain that even though Buddhism originated in Australia in the mid-1800s, it didn't become influential until much later; in fact, the first Buddhist organization in Australia, the Little Circle of Dharma, wasn't founded until 1925. By the 1950s, teachers from various traditions began visiting Australia, and by the 1970s, residential teachers began to immigrate and monasteries began being built. As a matter of fact, the largest Buddhist monastery in the southern Hemisphere is located in Australia. "Located in Wollongong, New South Wales, the Nan Tien Temple is part of the Fo Kunag Shan school of Buddhism... The temple is becoming so well

known that in 1999 it was a finalist in the ‘significant regional attraction’ category of the NSW Tourism Awards” (Spuler “The Development of Buddhism in Australia and New Zealand” 2-3).



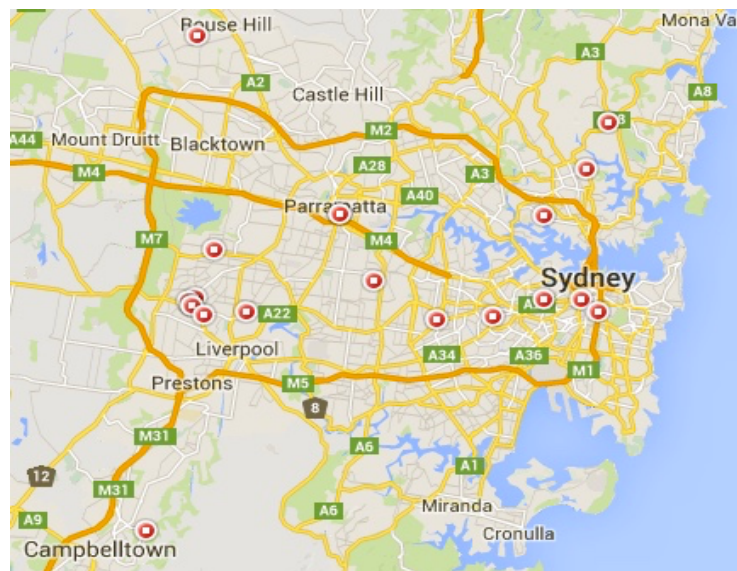
Nan Tien Temple in New South Wales, Australia
Short Monastic Retreat 5. (n.d.). Nan Tien Temple. *Nan Tien*.

The increased amount of Asian immigrants migrating to Australia in the 1970s and 1980s influenced the rise in the Buddhist demographic among Australia's states. In Melbourne specifically, there is a huge population of Chinese people today: according to the *2011 Census QuickStats: Melbourne*, people born in China make up 11.4% of Melbourne's population as of 2011, compared to just 1.5% of the population of all of Australia. Living in Melbourne myself for the past 4 plus months, I've been able to see these trends firsthand. Walking through the Central Business District (CBD) of Melbourne, sometimes I feel like I'm among the minority because of the large population of people of Asian descent. However, Buddhism has a distinct

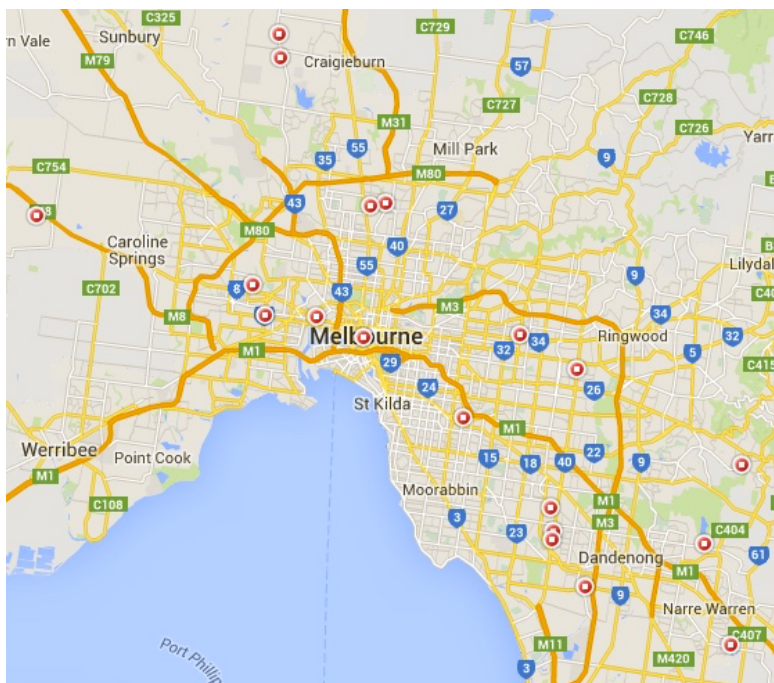
following of westerners as well: 19.7% of Australia's Buddhist population was born in Australia (Spuler "The Development of Buddhism in Australia and New Zealand" 5). While a portion of that percentage is certainly made up of people who come from East-Asian descent, this still shows that Buddhism has somewhat of a large western following. I believe that westerners, Australians included, have shown more and more interest in Buddhism because of the appeal that its teachings draw. Tim Phillips and Haydn Aarons performed a survey to further understand why westerners were drawn to Buddhism. They state (228) that "Buddhism has been seen as exemplary in terms of its association with a new age style of reflexive spiritual involvement." They believed that it appealed to westerners because Buddhism was associated as being a modern spiritual teaching and that's what westerners wanted. Furthermore, they believed that westerners would appeal to an assembly of teachings from various religions, rather than the teachings from one set religion. However, their study "... found that for the majority of respondents Buddhism was the sole source of spiritual interest" (Phillips and Aarons 228). This proves that while Buddhism's teachings are considered new age, the westerners' approach to spiritual devotion is traditional in the sense that they focus on a singular religion. This shows that Buddhism has a strong appeal to westerners, particularly to Australians.

Buddhism in Melbourne is very popular: 10.4% of people living in Melbourne said that they identify as Buddhist, compared to just 15.2% for Catholicism. That 10.4% is a relatively huge number, especially if you compare it to the 2.5% of the entire Australian population that identifies as Buddhist (*2011 Census QuickStats: Melbourne*). This of course coincides with the higher population of East-Asians living in Melbourne. Again, I can plainly see the Buddhist influences all over the place: there are small meditation centers disbursed throughout the CBD,

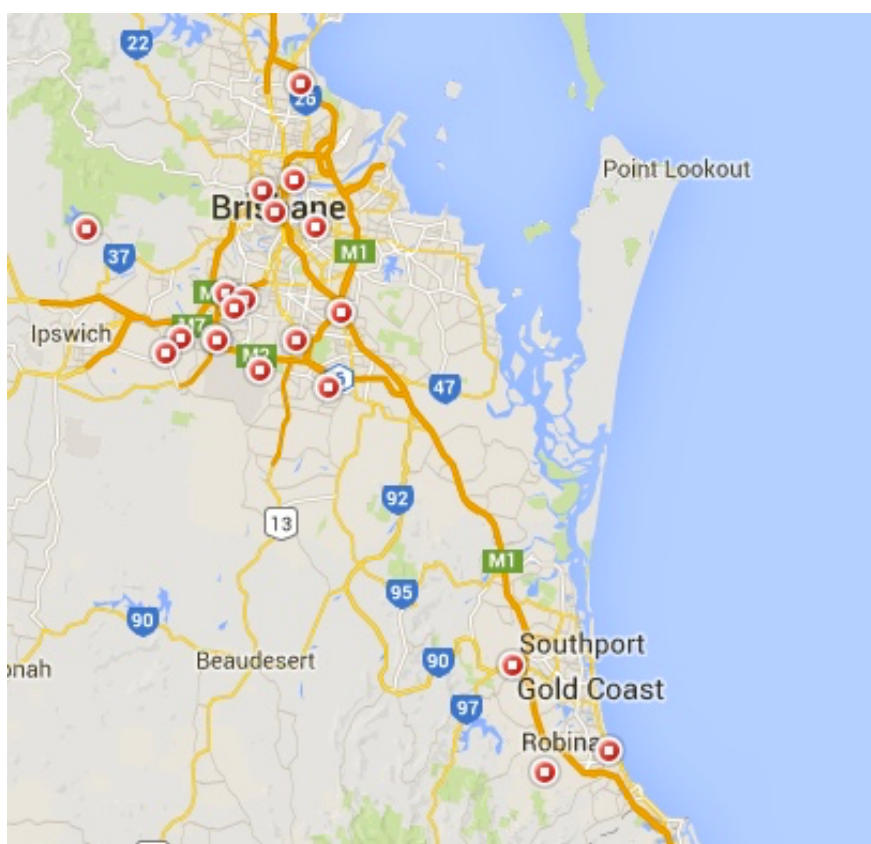
there are numerous temples in the outer eastern suburbs, as well as the northern suburbs, and I've even encountered monks in robes walking through the streets of Melbourne. Meditation is important in all teachings of Buddhism. Oxtoby, Amore, Hussain, and Segal (415) state that "The goals [of meditation] include quieting the mind and heightening mental alertness, with the ultimate goal of breaking through into a state of pure mind known as the buddha-mind or emptiness (*shunyata*).” The temples are important to Buddhists because this is a place that devotees can come to worship the Buddha, devoting themselves to his ways. There are many various mantras and rites that are performed for the Buddha, differing between the different teachings of Buddhism. If you look at the maps of Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane, Australia's three biggest cities, you can see just how many temples are in or near the cities. This shows just how influential Buddhism is.



"Sydney Buddhist temples". Google Maps, 3 Dec. 2015. Author's screenshot.



“Melbourne Buddhist temples”. Google Maps, 3 Dec. 2015. Author’s screenshot.



“Brisbane Buddhist temples”. Google Maps, 3 Dec. 2015. Author’s screenshot.

There are many Buddhist festivals throughout Australia that draw thousands of people: the Sydney BLIA Buddha Birthday festival, The Buddha Birth Day Festival in Brisbane, Buddha's Day and Multicultural Festival in Melbourne, and others throughout the country. Buddha's birthday is considered the biggest celebratory event in Buddhist culture. And as Shi Juewei (1148) states, "When religious celebrations go outside the temple gates, it is an indication of wide acceptance of Buddhism by its host populace." These festivals and the success that accompanies them prove that Buddhism is a large part of society in Australia.

Australia is a culturally and religiously diverse country. While Christianity is by far the most popular religion in terms of followers, there are several others that have a social impact, Buddhism included. Australia has proven to be accepting of other cultures. In fact, Bouma and Singleton (16) mention in their article about successful religious diversity management in Hong Kong and Melbourne that "One of the most important government policies which has shaped Australia's cultural profile is that of multiculturalism." They go on to say on page 17 that "The ideology and policies of multiculturalism foster religious ... diversity in a number of ways." Because Australia has this system of multiculturalism in place, it has allowed other minority religions to flourish, most notably Buddhism. The influence of Buddhism is apparent in Australia, given the history of the religion in the country, the quantitative data provided by censuses, the presence of various Buddhist temples and sites of devotion, and the social impact that it has, including gatherings and festivals. I believe that it is safe to say that Buddhism is one of the most influential faiths in Australia.

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