

# SOME THOUGHTS ON BUDDHISM AND COMMUNICATIONS IN MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA

\* by Tuong Quang Luu, AO  
Head of SBS Radio

Abstract:

*In an age of heightened tensions in Australia and around the world, the message of Buddhism has never been more necessary to bring peace to communities and spiritual refuge to individuals. The challenge is how to elucidate that message so that it speaks clearly in diverse voices to different people with disparate needs and to communicate it so that it cuts through an ever-increasing information clutter. As with other organisations, religious bodies are applying a variety of methods utilising specific media or a combination of media, but for Buddhists the central question remains: 'How to keep true to Buddhist principles while promoting them?'*

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The French writer/philosopher André Malraux once famously asked Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, why his country – the birthplace of Buddhism – had all but lost the religion to Hinduism.

In reply, Nehru is reported to have said fine things about Buddhism but in the end he admitted he really did not know why – he just felt it was a great loss to India.

It is still something of a mystery, though different historians, anthropologists, religious thinkers and philosophers have turned their minds to it on many occasions. A Buddhist might think it was just part of the rise and fall of life – indeed, nothing is permanent.

And it has not just happened in India. The

significance of Buddhism to both national and individual life has risen and fallen and risen again in many countries throughout the world. Perhaps it is the ebb and flow of the tides of history.

But it is a question this conference quite rightly addresses as it looks at 'Engaging Buddhism in Australia'. In looking at it from the perspective of someone in the communications industry, I have a special interest in trying to understand why – at any particular time – Buddhism has been either weaker or stronger in people's minds and lives.

When I mentioned that I had been invited to address this conference today, a colleague at SBS Radio asked me: 'Why are Buddhists interested in solving such a question? Surely a Buddhist would simply admit that this is the way it is. Do they want to market Buddhism?'

I replied that many Buddhists – especially members of the Sangha (Clergy) – want to spread the message so that it will save individual souls. For me, a humble lay Buddhist, I believe that in a world where there is so much violence, so much cruelty and selfishness, the message of Buddhism is one that might bring peace to communities and spiritual refuge to individuals.

*'Hatred is not overcome by Hatred; by Love (Metta) alone is hatred appeased. This is an eternal law'. (Dhammapada Sutra).*

So I believe in communicating the message

of Buddhism and I am here to suggest some possible ways in which that might be done to reach more people with a more effective expression of Buddhist teachings on Love, Compassion, Wisdom and Peace.

But first, in order to know where we might go, we must know where we are and where we have come from.

Buddhism goes back a long way in Australia – even though it seems quite recent compared with many of its Asian neighbours. Some people suspect that it goes back beyond the establishment of what is now this nation-state, back to the Fifteenth Century of the Modern Era when fleets of the Chinese Ming emperors roamed the southern oceans. If this was true, Buddhism would be the first religion to have been introduced into Australia, apart from the indigenous system of beliefs.

Certainly Buddhism came to Australia in the 1840s with the arrival in the goldfields of Chinese labourers. While many returned to China at the end of their indentures, many others remained and continued to practise their religions. The next wave came in the 1870s with the arrival of Sinhalese to work in the Queensland cane fields, though an increasingly anti-Asian immigration outlook then severely restricted the inflow of migrants from South-East Asia, including Buddhists.

Interestingly, during the first half of the 20th Century while the physical migration of Buddhism was prevented by anti-Asian sentiment, its spiritual migration continued, albeit in small numbers. The Theosophists, for example, integrated significant elements of Buddhism into their own belief system, keeping the flame alive among non-Buddhists until the 1960s when anti-Asian sentiment moderated and Australia began to again open its borders to migration from the region, especially with the movement of boat people and

other refugees from Indo-China and Tibet.

In the Sixties and early Seventies – the era of ‘Flower Power’ – many younger people in Australia and around the world turned to Buddhist practices and lifestyles – if not necessarily beliefs – in their search for a more peaceful and humane world. During the past two decades, the Dalai Lama came to Australia many times. His visits have certainly enhanced the public awareness of Buddhism and raised the profile of Buddhist activities amongst the broader Australian community.

Today, Buddhism has become Australia’s second largest religion after Christianity. The 2001 Census showed for the first time that the number of Buddhists had overtaken the number of Moslems. Islam had previously been the second largest religion after Christianity.

This growth has, of course, been largely due to the migration of people from Asia who grew up as practising Buddhists, though we now find ourselves – in Australia – in the interesting position of having overlapping groups of followers, all living harmoniously together and within the wider society.

There are those who have grown up as Buddhists in Buddhist families, with their belief as part of their sense of who they are. Then there are those who have adopted Buddhist beliefs in adult life and now worship at the temple. And there are those who follow the practices of Buddhism without necessarily accepting all the tenets of the faith or the religious rituals. They might be vegetarian, practise meditation and believe in the sanctity of all life yet not have a personal faith in the spiritual world of Buddhism.

Of course, there is a fourth and largest groups – people who have yet to become Buddhists! To all of these groups Buddhism in Australia must find a way of reaching out in voices

they can understand, articulating ideas to which they can each – in their own way – connect.

It goes without saying that this is the great challenge of all religions: how to speak to new or non-adherents in a language that connects with them without demeaning the message to those who already have a deep and meaningful faith.

One answer is by leading by example. Buddhists of all people should be able to do that. Buddha himself was the first and greatest practitioner and the rest of us seek ways of following in his footsteps, constantly balancing a self-conscious desire to share our beliefs with others with the teachings of selflessness and service to all sentient beings so deeply rooted in the basic tenets of Buddhism. It is the conundrum my colleague alluded to when he wondered how Buddhists may proselytise.

Strangely, he had part of the answer before him in his daily work at SBS Radio.

The Special Broadcasting Service Corporation (SBS) has clear policies on the treatment of religions, including Buddhism. It is that while we cover religions in our programming, we do not produce religious programs. It is a fine point, which, until one appreciates it, seems contradictory. Then, when it is understood, it is like a moment of enlightenment. I am tempted to say it is Zen in its simplicity.

In practice it means that while we do not broadcast religious ceremonies to a radio congregation – to use a Christian term – we might broadcast religious ceremonies to listeners who may or may not be believers, to inform and educate everyone. More often, of course, our coverage of religion is simple newsworthiness, perhaps the announcement of a policy change by a specific religion or a

comment on an event from a religious leader.

It is with a certain amount of pride in my staff – more than 300 people either making programs or supporting them behind the scenes – that I can say SBS Radio has become quite adept at successfully walking the narrow line between religious broadcasting and religious coverage. This is especially commendable when one considers how intimately connected some religions are with some of our listening communities. The majority of Vietnamese speakers, for example, are Buddhist adherents, yet they and our program makers co-exist in mutual understanding of each other's commitment to principle but also the limitations on what can be done on air.

True to its multicultural Charter, SBS Radio often deals with religions at their philosophical level as well as their practical application across Australia's culturally diverse communities. Programs on Islam during Ramadan, or Christianity at Christmas and Easter, or Buddhism on the occasion of Vesak and Ullambana help our listeners of all religious backgrounds understand better their fellow Australians of different faiths.

Now, if I remove my hat as head of SBS Radio for a moment and replace it with my cap as a Buddhist, I ask the question how – with Buddhism often so specifically attached to many linguistically or culturally-distinct communities – can we cross those divides to deliver our message? How do we make sure that we communicate it properly to Vietnamese speakers who follow Vietnamese Buddhist practices and also to, for example, Burmese or Thai speakers who follow Burmese or Thai Buddhist ways? If we think that communicating our message is problematic in English, let us also spare a thought for how we do it in the dozen or more languages which serve distinct Buddhist communities here in Australia in such a way as to unite

them in service as the 2001 Census united them in numbers.

Clearly we are not going to achieve a unified voice throughout the world of Buddhism, even if this was desirable. We cannot – perhaps we should not – attempt to overturn thousands of years of history that have seen the development of many different schools of Buddhism. There is strength in pluralism where a similar message can be delivered in different languages. As SBS Radio is proud to say, we are ‘The many voices of one Australia’.

In communicating the message of Buddhism, we must acknowledge there are different methods to achieve different outcomes. To reach within communities speaking one language, we should speak in that language about the Buddhism associated with that culture. In reaching out across communities – especially to those who have no tradition of Buddhism in their culture – we must use one language but many approaches.

We might look at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (the ABC) to see how this can be achieved. The ABC has established religious affairs units and produces programs about religion and belief on both radio and television. Many of these have been very successful in informing listeners and viewers about the world’s religions. ‘The Spirit of Things’, ‘The Religion Report’, ‘Compass’ and other programs examine a variety of religions and religious issues. The Buddhist congregations of Australia must ensure that their voice is heard among the many voices seeking the attention of the listeners and viewers.

Both the ABC and SBS television run frequent series looking at the world’s religions. SBS Television in February 2004 ran a two-part documentary on ‘The life of Buddha’. Rather disconcertingly, it was part of a se-

ries titled ‘Lost Worlds’, which perhaps says something about the task we face to convince non-Buddhists that Buddhism is more than a two thousand five hundred year old religion of strange gods and crumbling idols (in the eyes of non-believers). While we can never shed – nor should we wish to – the images of traditional Buddhism – for example the temples clinging to the mountainside of Lhasa, the shaven monks kneeling and chanting prayer amidst clouds of incense – we must also communicate the modern reality of Buddhism as a living, breathing and evolving religion here in Australia.

It is interesting to look at how other religions have shared their message and how successful they have been in retaining or increasing adherents.

Probably the most successful in raw numbers have been the evangelical Christian churches. Their numbers are multiplying rapidly for many reasons.

Obviously a principal reason they would ascribe would be that God is speaking to the hearts of more and more people through their churches. In a social and cultural sense, it has to be acknowledged that the ‘service’ (for want of a better word) that they provide is something increasing numbers of people want – perhaps a sense of community, a set of moral values to guide their lives, even the comfort of ceremony in its widest sense.

But they have also been extremely successful in getting their message ‘out there’, especially to non-believers.

The great success started in the United States, where some evangelical churches expanded to hundreds of thousands of adherents almost overnight and raised millions of dollars in church funds. Some of them were able to start their own radio networks and television channels, which itself multiplied the effect. Of

course, as we all know, some of these churches and their leaders turned out to be less than ethical in their practices or personal lives, but many of those which have survived – and many of the evangelical churches in Australia – provide faith, service, community and support to their expanding congregations.

Television, as we all agree, is perhaps the single most powerful medium in Australia today. Viewers to the top-rating network – Channel Nine – regularly number in millions across Australia. It is a good medium for communicating clear messages but it suffers two major shortfalls: it is limited and it is expensive.

Television is limited in that just five channels – three commercial and two publicly-funded – control the free-to-air market across Australia. While cable and satellite subscription services are growing, their multiple services fragment the market and lose the kind of mass coverage of the free-to-air networks. Cable is not yet a mass medium.

Television is also expensive to produce and expensive for advertisers. A prime time spot on a commercial television can cost between \$17,000 and \$27,000 for 30 seconds, depending on the time slots, and double that for top rating shows. Few but the largest corporations can afford such advertising. As you would expect, SBS Television's rates are much more reasonable – between \$4,000 and \$7,000 for 30 seconds, depending on the show's rating.

On the other hand, programs broadcast during the day or late at night on the commercial networks are cheaper to produce and to place. Of course, they do not reach the same size audience as prime time TV and they can still cost millions of dollars a year, but anecdotal evidence from the churches that use them suggests they do get their message

across, either directly by people viewing them or by word-of-mouth.

One effective and affordable electronic means being utilised widely at present is the Internet. Most temples, monasteries, and other Buddhist organisations have their own websites to communicate locally and globally with believers and non-believers alike through text, sound and voice. Dhamma talks can now reach an audience beyond the temple gate as a low cost way for the dissemination of Buddhist teachings and life experience.

Perhaps it is time for Buddhists in Australia to consider making the electronic media a more integral part of sharing the message? If such a decision were to be taken, a major consideration would be how to fund it. Considerable sums of money could be involved, because no matter how expensive a spot on television might be, that is really only the start of the cost.

Successful promotion of anything on television cannot be achieved with an occasional advertisement here or a feature story there. Communications campaigns have to be well planned and fully integrated. They have to have clarity of purpose and reality of targets. To be most effective, they also need to be coordinated across a variety of media, so the messages leverage off each other, to use the language of the advertising world. By that I mean that buying one 30 second spot on television – whether SBS or a commercial network – will have little effect. You will only 'hit' a small proportion of viewers tuned in during that 30 seconds amidst approximately 21 hours of TV viewing per week by the average Australian.

However, repetitive spots linked to perhaps a campaign on radio and some print media advertising will be much more effective. Even more effective is coverage in editorial



programs, segments or sections of a newspaper or magazine. Australians are increasingly skilled in 'reading' the media. Young people in particular are taught in school and learn by consuming the media that advertising is quite distinct from editorial. They are bombarded with advertising day and night and learn to be quite cynical about the claims that are made for products and services – and even religions. On the other hand, there is still enough credibility in Australian journalism for people to consider news, current affairs and other journalistic programming to be more factual, accurate and objective. In advertising terms, a story that is part of editorial programming has greater 'cut through' than advertisements. In a world of communications clutter, people will start to notice it and start to think about the message.

It is the message above all else that matters. Unless we have a clear concept of what we want to communicate, no amount of advertising, press releases, media conferences or special events are going to keep people coming back. They may dip in because of curiosity, but to improve their lives in the long term one needs to have something worthwhile for them to share.

One of the most interesting and perhaps also very valuable outcomes of this conference could be a redefinition of Buddhism in Australia. If we can draw together the main elements of what it is, we can then interpret them in terms which ordinary Australians as well as believers can understand. We can get the message clear.

This is especially important in communicating with younger people because, although as I said earlier young generations are increasingly adept at 'reading' the media, they will still struggle as generations before them have with the core issues such as faith, practice and ethical behaviour. Each person arrives at enlightenment in their own way, making their own footprints on the earth, however well worn the path might be and however often it has been travelled and will

continue to be travelled.

Education is still a vital element in guiding younger people to the truth. The education system today is vastly different to that which applied when monks taught their novices in temples in Lhasa or Hue and Saigon a few decades ago, so we must adapt to that too, while retaining the guiding light of meaning and belief.

Many religions in Australia are increasingly turning to their own school systems to fill in the spiritual gaps left by secular education which concentrates on such valuable skills as the 'three R's' – reading, writing and arithmetic – as well as science, history, social and cultural studies and even physical education, but which cannot – and perhaps should not – attempt to instill religious belief. Currently it is a live debate in Australia, recently given new impetus by the Prime Minister when he spoke of teaching values in state schools. It is not a debate I have time to enter into here, but I mention it because this too is an issue we must get clear before we can attempt to communicate the message of Buddhism.

Some people like the challenge of complexity and contradiction. Some people even thrive on it and might respect a religion more if it contains challenging contradictions. But others, when they are new to a belief, search more for the certainties under whose shade they can rest for a while before continuing their journey to their chosen spiritual goal in life.

By all means let us have debate and even disagreement within and about Buddhism – as long as it is done in the true principles of Buddha – but let us also try to distil from that debate the essences of what makes 'Australian Buddhism' relevant and valuable today, then let us communicate that message loud and clear across the continent.

Thank you for your attention.

\* Australian Buddhist General Conference: *'Engaging Buddhism in Australia'* at Victoria University, Melbourne, from 20th to 22nd February 2004.