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A “STUPENDOUS ATTRACTION”

Materialising a Tibetan Buddhist contact zone
in rural Australia

Aerial photo of stupa foundations, courtesy of Wayne Maconachie

Sally Ann McAra

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology, The University of Auckland, 2009
Abstract

When people, ideas or things migrate across cultural *milieux*, many opportunities for cultural transformation arise. The focal point of this thesis is a large stupa/temple (Great Stupa) being built at Atisha Centre, a Buddhist retreat near Bendigo in Australia, by members of an international organisation called the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT).

I approach the planning, promotion and construction of the stupa as an instance of the transplantation of religious material culture, arguing that Atisha Centre and particularly the stupa play a constitutive role by acting as a contact zone (Pratt 1992). Since the Centre is a site of alternate social ordering in which the Buddhists attempt to actualise their universalist ideals in a specific place, I also conceptualise it as a heterotopia (Foucault 1986, Hetherington 1997).

The contact zone entails engagement between different socio-cultural domains. One of the key domains is the globalisation of contemporary Buddhism and its permutations in new locales. Stemming from this is the question of how the Buddhists and their imported material culture engage with wider concerns such as various non-FPMT Buddhist, Anglo-Australian and Aboriginal locals’ responses towards the transplantation of a Tibetan temple into a rural Australian locale. The complex and shifting relationships between different kinds of Buddhism feature in relation to different ideas about the value of holy objects. The FPMT conforms to the enlightenment-oriented ideals of “Buddhist modernism” (McMahan 2008) but appears to depart from it in its pronounced emphasis on merit-making and holy objects. However, the project’s proponents consider the stupa a method for enacting their enlightenment aspirations. I attribute the stupa project’s relatively smooth passage through local planning application procedures to proponents’ prior social and cultural capital, which I link to positive public perceptions of Buddhism, aspirations for Bendigo to become more culturally diverse and the economic development the stupa is expected to bring. The literally concrete structure of the stupa not only provides Buddhists with a tangible focal point for their ideals, but also serves as a vehicle for the establishment of Tibetan Buddhism in a new land.
Preface

The places where the Buddha was born, attained enlightenment, first taught and died constitute Buddhism’s primary pilgrimage sites. As Buddhism and its institutions spread around the world, new sacred places are created, linking the new land to the key symbolic sites of its heartlands (Granoff and Shinohara 2003: 2-3). These sacred places are often marked by the presence of one or more stupas, which are among the most distinctive and important structures of Buddhist architecture. They take a variety of forms, but the archetypal model is a dome on a cuboid base, surmounted by a spire. The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, the focal point of my research, is based on a more complex, multi-tiered design whose interior hall will serve as a shrine room for teachings and meditations. The organisation under whose auspices this structure is being built is the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), a worldwide network of around 140 centres and study groups in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism. The stupa is being built on land belonging to the FPMT’s Atisha Centre, a retreat for Dharma study in Northwest Central Victoria, near the city of Bendigo.

This thesis grew out of my interest in the role of material culture in the spread of Buddhism. I was already familiar with another antipodean stupa at a retreat centre in New Zealand (McAra 2007b), but the FPMT’s Australian one was on a far larger scale, requiring greater resources. It is also potentially much more controversial, given its scale and cost, and its visual difference from the surrounding cultural landscape. So when I first learnt that a replica of an elaborate medieval Tibetan stupa was to be constructed in the Australian countryside, I wondered: how would such an unfamiliar structure change the central Victorian countryside? Would it be adapted for the Australian context? How would non-Buddhist locals respond to the project? What kinds of intercultural engagements would the project provoke?

In Chapter One I introduce my key concepts for investigating the intercultural engagements entailed by the transplantation of Tibetan Buddhism in Australia – “contact zone” and “heterotopia.” While this thesis is primarily anthropological, I also consider the extent to which my FPMT case study meshes with Martin Baumann’s identification of key themes in the adoption and adaptation of Buddhism by converts in Western societies. I introduce the stupa project, Atisha Centre and the FPMT in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three I show how the FPMT participates in and contributes to the phenomena collectively labelled Buddhist modernism, despite its emphasis on upholding a particular Tibetan tradition.

In discussing the Tibetan Buddhist emphasis on holy objects that underlies the stupa project in Chapter Four, I consider the religious motivations for building the stupa and show how its proponents argue that an object of concrete and steel can have salvific powers. The FPMT’s goal is to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings by helping them to become enlightened and the spiritual power of stupas assists in this daunting task. I locate the FPMT’s interest in holy objects within a wider Buddhist history of iconism and aniconism (Swearer 2003), concepts that intersect with discourses of Buddhist traditionalism and modernism.

1 Built by members of an organisation called the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) at Sudarshanaloka retreat centre.
In the remaining chapters I consider how people in various domains interact with the stupa project. The contingencies and “friction” of intercultural engagement (Tsing 2005) mean that the Buddhists’ utopian motives result in sometimes unanticipated consequences. I begin, in Chapter Five, by looking at what FPMT members themselves say about holy objects and link this with the intersection of distinct worldviews in the contact zone. I examine how the stupa builders seek to establish a Buddhist utopia that must, despite the Tibetan-ness of the design, find a degree of grounding in the rural Australian locale. His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s 2007 visit to the stupa site provides an opportunity to explore how Western liberal idealism continues to interact and engage with key aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.

However, the ideal to benefit all beings cannot be realised in exactly the ways that the protagonists hope. In all remaining chapters I thus analyse the dialogue between the stupa’s proponents and recipients and explore the relationship between the intentions of the stupa builders and the outcomes, so far, of their ambitious project. For many non-Buddhist Australians, stupas (if they have heard of them) are exotic Asian monuments that seem out of place in the Australian landscape. Despite this, as I show in Chapter Six, the stupa’s promoters have had a relatively easy time in winning acceptance through the formal planning application process, in contrast with the difficulties encountered by various proposals by ethno-religious minorities. I explore how the Great Stupa, as a strikingly foreign object, is rendered appropriate to the Bendigo public and local government through its alignment with dominant discourses of multiculturalism and economic development. In this discourse, the stupa will “enrich” Bendigo, making it a more cosmopolitan and less provincial city by contributing to its cultural diversity and economic growth.

One area that has received scant attention in scholarship on the spread of Buddhism is that of the implications of settler-indigenous relations for the localisation of Buddhism. In Chapter Seven I focus on a dialogue between the stupa developers and an indigenous woman and her followers who expressed a sense of grievance about what they considered to be the harm done by the earthworks for the stupa to the land and the songlines which they said intersected there. In the protestors’ view, the stupa was another form of harm wrought on a land stolen from indigenous owners. The contact zone, then, is a place where the differences in power relations (whether between immigrant and Anglo-Australian Buddhists or between Anglo-Australian Buddhist and Aboriginal activist) highlight the complexities of realising one set of ideals in conjunction with another.

Chapter Eight investigates another dimension of the interface between FPMT ideals, local understandings and the difficulties of putting ideals into practice in the contact zone. I discuss a touring relic exhibition that is intended to promote and raise funds for the stupa and show how the practice of relic veneration complicates claims by some scholars (and some Western Buddhists) that Western Buddhism discards magical/devotional practices as cultural baggage. Here the interaction with members of one immigrant Buddhist group, associated with a Vietnamese temple in Melbourne, shows that the FPMT Buddhists are a much smaller group with a far less developed sense of community and cohesion, an important reason why the relic tour was a very different affair in FPMT-organised venues than it was in the Vietnamese one.

Each of the main chapters also unearths some of the unexpected contingencies of the zone of engagement, such as how middle-class Euro-Australian privilege and positive media representations of Buddhism shape people’s responses to the stupa project. On
closing, I discuss the Dalai Lama’s address to a crowd of around 2000 people at the stupa during his 2007 visit to the site, a highly significant moment in promoting and advancing the project. The construction of a multi-million dollar, multi-storey religious structure designed to last a millennium, is bound to claim attention and interest. But as I illustrate in this thesis, although it is a key symbol for Tibetan Buddhists, in the Australian setting the stupa is open to a broad range of meanings and consequences, giving rise to the need for considerable translation and renegotiation.

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This PhD has been my main preoccupation between mid-2001 and early 2009. I am especially grateful to my primary supervisor, Dr. Christine Dureau in the Department of Anthropology for her patience, encouragement and her beyond-the-call-of-duty efforts to help me hone my writing skills and shape the thesis. My second supervisors, first Dr. Karen Nero and then Dr. Tracey McIntosh have also provided great support.

My trips to Australia were enlivened by the friendship and hospitality of Cristina, Glenys, Heidi, the Heggie family, Kate, Lisa and Vince, Lozang Tenzin, Roger and many others. Numerous other people around Bendigo and Atisha Centre have been kind and supportive, especially Ian, Judy, Lillian, Noel and many others for their patience with my curiosity and awkwardness. I am aware that some FPMT readers may find aspects of my interpretations irrelevant or puzzling. My aim has been to explore the social and cultural dimensions of the stupa project and in so doing I must stress that I have no wish to pass judgement on the FPMT, the stupa project or any of the organisation’s members and their admirable motivations. As listed in the Appendix, I have adopted pseudonyms for those who shared personal thoughts with me unless I had specific permission to use their names. I use the real names of public figures, leaders and those with identifiable positions within the FPMT, stupa project and Atisha Centre.

I must also give credit to overseas friends and colleagues in anthropology and Buddhist studies, including Cristina Rocha, Glenys Eddy, Martin Baumann, Michelle Barker (nee Spuler), who welcomed me into a small international network of scholars researching developments in contemporary Western Buddhism. The Australasian Association of Buddhist Studies (AABS) conferences have enabled me to meet others involved in scholarship on Buddhism. An earlier version of Chapter Seven was published in the online, open-access Journal of Global Buddhism. The feedback I received from Ian Green, Cristina Rocha and an anonymous referee was helpful in its development.

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I am indebted to the many people have assisted me in my research and writing endeavours, but naturally I take full responsibility for my own interpretations, with sincere apologies for any misunderstandings, omissions or errors that have made it into the final version. The Anthropology department and the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand has provided a supportive learning environment. I thank Anna-Lisa, Haralambos, Peter Heggie and Rebekah Williams for computer help, everyone who read and gave feedback on draft sections of the thesis, including Penny Kennett, Venerable Gyälten of DCI, Judy Green in Bendigo, and participants in the PhD writing group. Last but not least, I thank Adrian Croucher, who has not only edited and proof-read most of the thesis and developed my sketch maps into publication-quality graphics, but also been a great support through the ups and downs of this long journey.
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Where using Sanskrit words I do not use the full diacritical markings because they are more specialised than is necessary for this work and in quoting passages with Buddhist terms I use the spelling of the source text, even if they vary (e.g., bodhicitta/bodhichitta). With regard to the spelling of Tibetan words, the FPMT usually uses Anglicised or phonetic spellings and I follow suit, using the more accurate but less pronounceable Wylie transcription only where the source did not provide phonetic spelling. In quoting interview transcripts I edit for flow and clarity, reducing repetition and filler words such as “um” and “sort of” unless they show a hesitation or other non-verbal message that I consider significant. For similar reasons I edit spelling and other errors or inconsistencies when quoting from textual sources.

Atisha (Afiśa) famous Indian scholar (982-1054) who went to Tibet in 1038, founded the Kadampa school that preceded the Gelugpa order; see also Tsong-khapa

Avalokiteshvara (Avalokiteśvara) A buddha / Bodhisattva personifying compassion

BADAC Bendigo and District Aboriginal Council

Bodhgaya site where the Buddha attained enlightenment and thus a key Buddhist pilgrimage site (in the state of Bihar, India)

bodhi (Skt) “awakening,” the supreme knowledge or attainment of the Buddhist path (Keown 2003: 36, 87); often translated as “enlightenment.” An enlightened mind is free from negativity and has perfected its positive qualities.

bodhicitta (Skt) “the will to enlightenment” (sometimes spelt bodhichitta), a state of mind

Bodhisattva (Skt) (a) buddha, saint or archetypal being who works to benefit all beings (b) person who has vowed to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings

Bön, bonpo Tibet’s indigenous religion, although it shares many characteristics with Buddhism; Samuel (1993: 271) considers it a quasi-Buddhist order

Buddha (a) title given to man who attained enlightenment and then taught other people to do so; also known as Śākyamuni Buddha; first aspect of Triple Gem (b) with a lower case “b,” any awakened or enlightened being

Buddhist one who “takes refuge” in the Triple Gem

Chenrezig (a) Tibetan name for Avalokiteshvara (b) FPMT centre in Queensland

Chorten (Tib.) “stupa”; name of Atisha Centre newsletter

Chorten Stupa Edition newsletter for Great Stupa of Universal Compassion

Dalai Lama. His (Tenzin Gvatso) Exiled spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. born
Holiness the XIVth 1935, trained in Buddhist philosophy between ages 6-25; left Tibet in 1959 and now based in Dharamsala, India but tours the world to teach and meet political and other leaders, engage in dialogue with scientists and with other religions.

Dharma (Skt) teachings of the Buddha that help one to reach enlightenment; second aspect of Triple Gem.

Eaglehawk suburb of Bendigo (former borough town) near Atisha Centre.

elementment English translation of bodhi.

FPMT Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition; founded by Tibetan Lamas Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche in the 1970s.

FWBO Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, founded in 1967.

Gen-la (Tib.) term referring to or addressing the teacher (at Atisha Centre it is used for their geshe instead of “Geshe-la”); see also La.

Gelugpa (Tib. dGe-lugs-pa) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders.

geshe academic qualification of Gelugpa teachers, usually available only to monks and involving 1-3 decades of study entailing memorisation of texts and rigorous debate; used as a title.

Geshe Lama Konchog former resident geshe at Kopan monastery, now deceased.

Geshe Konchok Tsering resident geshe of Atisha Centre.

gompa (Tib.) meditation hall (can also refer to a whole monastery).

Guru (Skt) spiritual teacher.

Gyantse city in southern Tibet where the Great Stupa of Gyantse is located.

Heart Sūtra Buddhist text on Emptiness.

International Mahayana Institute (IMI) community of monks and nuns of the FPMT; established by Lama Thubten Yeshe in the early 1970s; now has over 200 monks and nuns.

Jaara, Dja Dja Wrung / Wurrung Aboriginal people recognised as traditional owners of the land in Bendigo region.

Kagyupa (Tib. bKa’rgyud-pa) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders.

Karma (Skt) notion that intentional actions have corresponding moral consequences.

Khata (Tib.) silk prayer scarf, used in ceremonial greetings.

Khensur Rinpoche (Khensur Kangur Lobsang Thubten Rinpoche) Adelaide-based lama who has conducted consecrations at the Great Stupa site.

Kopan FPMT/IMI monastery in Kathmandu where retreats are held for lay Westerners.

La (Tib.) appended to name or title (geshe-la, ani-la) to imply endearment (“our precious geshe”) or respect.

Lam-Rim (Tib.) class of literature providing a systematic and graduated approach to studying key Buddhist teachings (Keown 2003: 154).
lama (Tib.) spiritual teacher (guru); title used for esteemed monks

Lama Ösel born 1985, Granada, Spain, to Maria Torres and Paco Hita, students of Lama Yeshe; recognised as reincarnation of Lama Yeshe and expected to become future FPMT spiritual director.

Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism to which FPMT belongs, associated with Northern and Eastern Asia

Maitreya future Buddha; FPMT plans a 152-metre high statue of Maitreya in Uttar Pradesh, India

Mandala Indo-Tibetan religious symbol (sacred circle); in FPMT usage, the international FPMT community; title of FPMT magazine

mantra (Skt) verbal formula with sacred powers that is used, inter alia, to invoke a tantric deity

Māori indigenous people and language of New Zealand

nāga (Skt) benevolent serpent-like nature spirit, often associated with watery environments (Keown 2003:185)

nirvāṇa the end of existence in samsāra, which for bodhisattvas is a collective rather than individual goal (Keown 2003:194-95); see also “enlightenment”

Nyingmapa (Tib. rNying-ma-pa) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders

Padmasambhava hero of Tibetan Buddhism believed to have been instrumental in introducing Buddhism to Tibet during the 8th century CE.

Pākehā (Māori) New Zealander of European, especially British, ancestry

puja (Skt) devotional / merit-making practice; offerings are made and sacred texts chanted

Quang Minh temple Vietnamese temple in Melbourne, affiliated to Sydney-based patriarch Thich Phuoc Hue

Rinpoche title used for high lamas

Sakyapa (Tib. Sa-sky-a-pa) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders

Sakya Trizin, HH 41st Patriarch of Sakya order; born 1945, Tsetdong, South Tibet; visited Great Stupa site in 2003

samsāra (Skt) cyclic existence; uncontrolled rebirth due to delusions and karmic conditions

Sandhurst Town former open-air museum near Atisha Centre, undergoing conversion into a Buddhist lay community

sangha (Pali) spiritual community, in FPMT often referring exclusively to ordained monastics

stupa (Skt: stūpa) Buddhist reliquary, ranging from thumb-size to “Great Stupas” that are several storeys high

śūnyatā “emptiness,” a core concept associated with Mahāyāna teaching on Dependent Origination

sūtra / sutta (Skt / Pali) text recording the Buddha’s teachings

thangka (Tib.) religious painting treated as a sacred object
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<td>pre-Mahāyāna form of Buddhism with contemporary expressions that originate in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia</td>
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<td>Thich Phuoc Hue</td>
<td>Patriarch of United Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation (UVBC) in Australia and New Zealand</td>
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<td>Triple Gem, the</td>
<td>(triratna; Three Refuges) Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha</td>
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<td>tsa-tsa</td>
<td>(Tib.) small plaster or ceramic statue or stupa, sometimes containing cremation ashes; sometimes spelt sa-tsa or tsha-tsha</td>
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<td>Tsong-khapa (Lama)</td>
<td>(1355-1417) reformer of the Kadampa school and founder of Gelugpa order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vajrayāna</td>
<td>a branch of Buddhism</td>
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<td>vipaśyanā / vipassanā</td>
<td>(Skt / Pali) “insight”; Pali term refers to a meditation practice around which a Theravādin-derived movement has developed, involving intensive retreats of a minimum of ten days; Sanskrit term refers to meditative practices seeking to cultivate a direct, intuitive understanding of the Dharma</td>
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<td>Lama Thubten Yeshe</td>
<td>(1935-84) founder of FPMT; born near Lhasa; educated Sera Monastery (Je College); often referred to in FPMT as “Lama” or “Lama Yeshe”</td>
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<td>Lama Thubten Zopa</td>
<td>Gelugpa lama; born 1946 to Sherpa parents; current spiritual director of FPMT; often referred to in FPMT as “Rinpoche” or “Lama Zopa;” sometimes the title “Kyabje” is added before “Lama”</td>
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Imagine yourself standing at a junction in rural Victoria, Australia on a winter morning, surrounded by open fields edged with wire fences or trees. Two or three homesteads are visible in different directions across the fields, and you can smell and hear the countryside. A line of power pylons strides across the plain. Turning westward, you gaze across a waterhole in a frosty field and past a group of grazing kangaroos. At the end of the field, an unfamiliar terraced structure protrudes above the treetops, with a golden spire that is catching the morning sun. From beneath the spire a pair of half-closed Buddha-eyes gazes outward in each of the four directions (Fig. 1.1).

At present this structure consists only of its concrete foundations and the steel framework for the ground level. Named “The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion,” if completed the edifice will become the centrepiece of Atisha Centre, a retreat near the regional city of Bendigo (population 93,200 in 2006), 130 km northwest of Melbourne (Figs. 1.2 – 1.3).
The sense of incongruity that a visitor might feel upon encountering this Tibetan Buddhist structure in a rural Australian setting is, of course, subjective. But it is just this sense of strangeness that inspired me to explore what happens when a hitherto unfamiliar religious architectural form is introduced into a locale. Particularly striking when viewed from above, the site upon which the building is being constructed (frontispiece) makes a large, circular footprint in the countryside. The earthworks, consisting of three levels of circumambulatory paths and four access ramps, indicate the extent to which a low hill was sculpted to provide a base in 2000. The footings, laid four years later, are visible in the centre of the picture. This construction site is the launching pad for my investigation of the arrival of one particular expression of Tibetan Buddhism on Australian soil.

Stupas are intended to embody the Buddha (Ricca and Lo Bue 1993: 33-34) and serve as an “architectural expression” of the Dharma, just as the sacred texts are its verbal expression (p. 36). Many Tibetan Buddhist groups build stupas and other sacred architecture, but the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) stands out relative to other international Buddhist organisations flourishing in the Western world because of the scale of their planned constructions. Their most ambitious project is to build a 152.4-metre (500 ft) bronze statue of Maitreya Buddha at Kushinagar, a key Buddhist pilgrimage site in Uttar Pradesh in Northern India. By contrast, the Great Stupa is small but, still, it is 43.2 metres high and fifty metres wide on each side of its square base. Its publicity material proclaims that it will be “the largest stupa in the Western world.” To begin my discussion on this project’s origins, I introduce the three people who are most directly involved.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, two Tibetan refugee monks, Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935-1984) and his disciple Lama Thubten Zopa,1 began teaching Buddhism to increasing numbers of Westerners travelling through India and Nepal. They and their students established the FPMT in 1974 in order to provide a structure through which the Buddhadharma could reach more people. The organisation today consists of an international network of around 140 Dharma centres. Several of the early students now hold senior positions in the organisation.

1 Henceforth I drop the “Thubten” from both names. In informal usage, many FPMT students refer to Lama Yeshe as “Lama” and Lama Zopa as “Rinpoche.” These days more formal FPMT usage refers to Lama Zopa as “Kyabje Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche.” Lama, Rinpoche and Kyabje are all terms of respect and denote high status. I refer to Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa together as “the Lamas.”
The third key person in my account is one such figure: Ian Green is a Bendigonian who has been a student of the two lamas for over thirty years. He was in Asia in the 1970s, taking a break from stressful work in advertising, when he visited a Buddhist pilgrimage site, Sarnath. He found that its peaceful atmosphere contrasted with the tumult of everyday life in India; he was particularly impressed by the large stupa there and in hindsight suggests that his experience there led him to investigate Buddhism. Ian, along with other Dharma students, founded Atisha Centre on a section of land which his father, Ed Green, donated to the FPMT in 1981. Lama Yeshe visited later that year and suggested that a large stupa should be built as the centrepiece of a Buddhist community (see Chapter Two). Over a decade later Lama Zopa identified the Great Stupa of Gyantse in southern Tibet as the appropriate model on which to base the new stupa.

In this thesis I approach the stupa project as an example of transplanted religious material culture, drawing on and adapting the concepts of contact zone (Pratt 1992) and heterotopia (Foucault 1986, Hetherington 1997). Tracing the project from its inception in 1981 through to His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s visit to the partially-completed structure in 2007, I consider its role in establishing Tibetan Buddhism in a primarily Anglo-Australian context. I argue that the Great Stupa plays a constitutive role in the cross-cultural transplantation and localisation of a religious worldview by acting as a contact zone in which converts attempt to actualise their universalist ideals in a specific place. However, the stupa proponents’ purpose and its outcomes sometimes diverge in ways that provide insights into how material culture shapes and is shaped by intercultural encounter.

As an object that many locals deem foreign, the sense of alterity the stupa evokes provides a key theme in this thesis. I focus on the social context of the Great Stupa through an investigation of several interconnected social domains for which the stupa site acts as a “zone of engagement” (Tsing 2005). The first domain is Tibetan Buddhism, with its concept of holy objects that transmit the blessings of enlightened gurus to ordinary beings. In FPMT usage, holy objects are a category that extends from miniscule relics to monumental structures imbued with sacred powers. The category extends to beings and

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2 I use this term to refer to those who take a role in promoting the stupa project, particularly the members of the stupa board of directors and other Dharma practitioners with experience / authority in the FPMT in Australia who support the stupa in some way. I discuss how they explain their support in Chapter Five.
things that embody the enlightened mind; so, for example, revered lamas and Dharma texts can be treated as holy things. These are intended to benefit all sentient beings.

The stupa project becomes entangled in social relations in ways that sometimes confound Buddhist intentions to benefit the world. Indeed, in the domain of the public interface with the stupa project, the proposed structure has sparked diverse responses from people, critical, indifferent or supportive. In this domain, the stupa proponents align the project with the concerns of local government in promoting the stupa’s economic and cultural enrichment to Bendigo. Two further domains that the stupa project intersects with are those of Australia’s ethnic minorities and indigenous people, both of which, despite the nation’s multiculturalist policies, experience discrimination and prejudice. Like these others, the FPMT Buddhists involved with the stupa may be considered a religious minority, but their social positioning is very different, because they fit for the most part within the Anglo-Australian dominant majority and thus enjoy access to substantially more cultural, social and symbolic capital than these other minorities. This, I suggest, helps to explain why the stupa project is already being celebrated as an important contribution to Bendigo’s economy and cultural identity.

![Figure 1.2 (left). Map of Australia showing location of Bendigo](graphics by Adrian Croucher)

![Figure 1.3 (right). Map of Bendigo and Melbourne region showing location of Atisha Centre](graphics by Adrian Croucher)
Zones of intercultural engagement

In a world of hypermobility, the increasing circulation of people and things produces new diversity in the landscape, of which Tibetan Buddhism is one instance. It is undergoing a phase of globalisation stemming from the contact between Tibetan refugee monks and Western travellers in Nepal and India during the 1960s and ’70s (Chapter Two). As a result of this contact, its distinctive architectural constructions are now arising in countries where they create new sites of contact in which converts and non-Buddhist locals respond to the religion’s unfamiliar idioms in various ways.

Atisha Centre is one such site of contact – a place that people visit from Bendigo and further afield to attend teachings, retreats and courses or just look around. When finished, the Great Stupa will provide a significant attraction for the curious. Atisha Centre, including the ground upon which the stupa is being constructed, is what I call, after Mary Louise Pratt (2008 [1992]), an intercultural “contact zone.” By this I mean a specific site where disparate cultural ideas and practices come into contact in ways that stimulate responses from interested parties. Thus in one setting, Anglo-Australian Buddhists are different from the rest of Anglo-Australian society, while in other contexts they are inextricably part of that society. These domains can be broad in scope (for example, the culturally-constructed terms “West” and “East”) or far smaller, such as the sub-cultural category of Anglo-Australian FPMT members and other Atisha Centre attendees in Bendigo, and their non-Buddhist Bendigonian counterparts.

I conceptualise the Buddhist centre (like other Dharma centres in non-Buddhist surroundings) as a site of encounter between these disparate cultural domains. My use of the term contact zone builds on but in some ways departs from Pratt’s definition, which she developed in her analysis of travel writing in the age of European imperialism. She defines contact zones as

social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as lived out across the globe today (2008: 7).

She prefers to conceptualise the encounter of European travellers and colonised subjects in this way rather than in terms of paradigms that privilege the newcomers’ perspectives. The concept illuminates the improvisational, mutually constitutive dimension of people
previously separated by geographical and historical circumstances. Scholars have adopted and adapted the term in a broad range of contexts, applying it to museums (Clifford 1997, Ang 2005), newcomer/native relations with a focus on Canadian Aboriginal women (Pickles and Rutherford 2005), the multicultural classroom (Wolff cited in Hall and Rosner 2004), indigenous/non-indigenous research collaboration (Somerville and Perkins 2003) and many other areas of intercultural contact.

Given the range of situations to which scholars have applied it, it might be suggested that it lacks analytical precision. Indeed, in a review of Clifford’s Routes and Feld and Basso’s Senses of Place, James Weiner (2002: 23) dismisses Clifford’s “far too general” application of the contact zone trope to almost any intercultural encounter as being of little use to anthropology. I think, however, that the concept can usefully be combined with the other theoretical frameworks. In contrast to Weiner, Hall and Rosner (2004) celebrate the flexibility and openness of the contact zone concept. Borrowing from Latour’s discussion of how scientific knowledge moves from speculative hypothesis to apparently stable and unproblematic fact, they suggest that the concept is most promising when people resist the urge to squeeze it into a tidy package (p. 95). They note (pp. 98-99) that Pratt herself revised her definitions over three publications (1991, 1992, 1993) by broadening her examples, increasingly emphasising differential power relations, and elaborating on the specific nature of the interaction in the contact zone. Its applicability to multiple interpretations and redefinitions allows it to accommodate the uncertainty, confusion and fascination of cross-cultural interaction (Hall and Rosner 2004: 107).

I find the idea of the contact zone helpful to think about the localisation of global Buddhist encounters and consequently my use of the term departs from Pratt’s in three ways. The first relates to contact. Pratt’s concern is with the intercultural encounters in places subject to colonisation and, as she notes, this is a space not only of creative interaction but also coercion, conflict and dispossession (2008). Power relations at the stupa site are far less polarised. However, the ongoing backdrop of unequal power relations that is the legacy of colonisation have nonetheless shaped this particular contact zone. A second, closely related difference is that Pratt uses contact to refer to an initial

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3 I refer not only to the colonisation of Australia by the British but also the more recent Chinese occupation of Tibet. The historical circumstances that make the “West” the dominant party in contemporary international relations provide the basic fabric of these power relations.
historical encounter. In discussing contact at Atisha Centre, I refer to visitors who come in search of spiritual enrichment rather than the material enrichment that colonists seek. In contrast to the coercive circumstances under colonisation, this is a voluntary form of contact by people making choices in the so-called spiritual supermarket. It is an on-going mode of contact – in addition to a core group of Dharma students there are also always newcomers. These individuals visit and choose how much future involvement they will have. The stupa itself is intended to make contact through attracting curiosity.

The third difference relates to the term “zone.” Pratt’s geographical range is broad as she discusses power relations between Europe and two entire continents (Africa and South America). My study, in contrast, centres on one physical site in rural Australia as a node in a network of international and intercultural connections reaching to India, Nepal, Tibet and throughout the FPMT’s international network. I thus use the concept not only for analysing the social space of cross-cultural interactions but also its actualisation in a physical place. In contrast with non-spatialised metaphors of cultural mixing, then, “contact zone” highlights space and place, with the stupa site laying the foundations for a new Buddhist pilgrimage site in Australia.

Pratt also adapts the concept of transculturation,4 which she considers a creative phenomenon of the contact zone whereby marginal groups select and invent from materials introduced by the dominant culture. While marginalised groups may not have control over what is done to them, members can determine to some extent what they absorb and how (2008: 7-8). As Pratt notes, however, transculturation is not exclusively an act of the oppressed, which opens up the concept for thinking about its application in other types of power relations. Indeed, European travellers acted as transculturators, for instance, when Alexander Humboldt spent many years in Latin America and returned to Europe bringing back from the contact zone knowledge that in turn influenced European worldviews (pp. 132-33). Euro-Australian travellers acted likewise when they brought home Buddhist knowledge. The members of this relatively privileged social group thus engage in a form of transculturation, adopting a form of Tibetan Buddhism that they

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4 Pratt (2008: 7-8, and pp. 244-5, n. 4) traces the term back to Fernando Ortiz’s work about transformations within Cuban society. Ortiz (1995 [1947]) preferred the word over the then-current term “acculturation” because it better explained the complexity of the situation in Latin America, particularly Cuba, of acquiring a new culture out of the interaction of descendants of indigenous, Hispanic and African peoples.
attempt to both preserve and yet also render accessible to potential Western converts, framed in terms of preserving a tradition that has its own authority and efficacy.

When I refer to what happens in contact zones I find the metaphor of “friction,” borrowed from Anna Tsing’s (2005: 4) ethnography about global connection, to be useful for conceptualising “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference.” Tsing explores international social interactions centering on the capitalist exploitation of the rainforest of the Meratus Dayaks in Kalimantan, Indonesia, through the 1980s and ’90s. She considers how attempts to apply universals (such as “knowledge” and “freedom”) end up entangled in “sticky engagements” (p. 6) instanced in such encounters as that between Japanese trading companies and Indonesian politicians dealing in rainforest timber, between urban university students and village elders, and between army officers and nature lovers. Likewise, the FPMT’s universalist aspirations become entangled in “zones of awkward engagement” (p. x). The stupa site, in being a site of the interaction of different material cultures and senses of place, entails incongruous juxtapositions, bringing to mind the concept of heterotopias.

**A Buddhist heterotopia**

In combination with “contact zone,” I incorporate the term “heterotopia” to show how the stupa is a site of alternate social ordering. As a locus of transculturation between Tibet and Australia, Atisha Centre is a place of juxtapositions. Here I rely primarily on Kevin Hetherington’s (1997) development of Michel Foucault’s (1986) concept but also refer back to Foucault.

As the actualisation of a Utopia, the heterotopia is what Foucault (1986: 24) calls a “counter-site” that stands in a contrastive, marginal relationship to the “real sites” around it, even going so far as to re-present, invert and even contest elements of the surrounding society. Utopias, as Foucault (ibid.) says, are imaginary places that “present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down.” I revisit the idea of the counter-site where the stupa proponents attempt to create a Buddhist antidote to the world’s malaise in Chapter Five, but here I wish to provide a little background on heterotopias.

Hetherington (1997: viii) proposes that heterotopias play a crucial role in the social and spatial ordering of modern societies through their alternate ordering derived from
ideas about the good society. The double meaning of Utopia, suspended between *eu-topia* meaning “good place” and *ou-topia*, “no place,” hints at the tension between the desire to create a perfect place and the impossibility of creating something perfect in an imperfect world (ibid.). In attempting to create a perfect society, utopians create a counter-site that, because of its alterity, can seem out of place to those not involved in their project and disillusioning to participants who discover how hard it is to actualise. Heterotopias are also “places of Otherness” and this Otherness is determined through interaction with sites around them (ibid.). Hetherington defines otherness in terms of incongruity, while also allowing for its meaning of something that differs from the norm within a particular cultural context (p. 8, citing Said 1991).

Focusing on three historical examples of heterotopias, the Palais Royal in Paris, eighteenth-century British freemasonry and the early British factory, Hetherington shows how each of these sites became a way to re-order social and spatial relations, creating a new bourgeois class. He suggests that the Palais Royal’s gardens and cafés provided a space for social interactions that gave rise to the development of cosmopolitan and activist values that were important in sparking the French Revolution. He conceptualises the Palais Royal not as the “island of nascent but perfectly formed modernity” it was conceptualised as, but as a heterotopia that defined itself against a despised Ancien Régime and embodied an alternate ordering.

Freemasonry was an invented tradition (p.76), which drew its imagery from the stonemasons’ guild and their past association with the construction of Europe’s great cathedrals. The stonemasons saw themselves as re-shaping both the external world and the moral order (p. 87). Their guild provided not only a bond in a time of social and political change (p. 86) but also “the spatial symbolism of order in its emphasis on the architectural, Euclidean geometry and mathematical skills of the stonemason” (p. 86). The Freemasons drew on this in their masonic lodges, which provided an exclusive space for enacting their ideals for a utopian society that was, in practice, heterotopic. In this heterotopia, the lodge became a space for the moral ordering of men and contributed to the development of a middle-class, masculine public sphere (p. 106). Further, this moral order helped strangers to establish relations of mutual trust in a changing world (p. 76).

As Hetherington cautions (pp. 8-9), the concept of heterotopia is just that, a term to think about things with rather than something inherent in a place that leads us to identify it
as heterotopic (p. 8). Rather, “[i]t is the heterogeneous combination of the materiality, social practices and events that were located at this site and what they came to represent in contrast with other sites, that allow us to call it a heterotopia.”

Hetherington’s three case studies\(^5\) serve as heterotopias in that they were founded on a particular ideal and, in doing things in differently, stood somewhat apart from and even in contestation of society. What makes the stupa site a heterotopia is its relationship of otherness to other sites. Like the Palais Royal, the Buddhist centre contrasts itself with the society around it by offering a better alternative. And like the masonic lodge, the retreat centre, as a site for exploring Tibetan Buddhist knowledge, promotes a complex mixture of sometimes contradictory idealisms (e.g., equality and hierarchy) and combines “arcane and secret knowledge” with a discourse of enlightenment and rationalism. The stupa, as a heterotopic project, contributes to a kind of moral and spatial ordering and reordering that is always caught between its ideals and social contingencies.

Miles Ogborn (2001) argues that Hetherington’s heterotopias are too simplistic, being represented as exceptional spaces within homogeneous surroundings. I agree that Hetherington’s case studies are only briefly sketched. But rather than analysing the encompassing society, Hetherington wishes to explore how the alternate, utopianist ordering arises. Utopians may imagine their relationship to the society they seek to transform in somewhat simplified terms (as if to say, “society has a malaise and we have a solution”), but this does not mean that complexity is not there. Indeed, this is where the contact zone metaphor contributes to a more complex understanding of heterotopias, in its focus on the conjuncture of manifold influences.

It is the alterity of heterotopias that makes the concept useful for thinking about a Tibetan stupa in rural Australia. In medicine, the term “heterotopic” describes something anatomically out of place or alien, such as a tumour (Hetherington 1997: 42). Foucault’s usage, as adopted by Hetherington, emphasises the marginality and difference of a place (p. 8). This difference, Hetherington stresses, is “relational rather than ontological” (p. 141) and this certainly applies as much to the stupa as the masonic lodge or Palais Royal.

\(^5\) The third example is less relevant here. Hetherington (p. 110) writes that the social space of the factory as it emerged during the Industrial Revolution had a strong influence on the emergence of modern industrial capitalist production, inter alia shaping the development of technology as well as labour, class and gender relations.
Heterotopias unsettle taken-for-granted spatial and social relations and provide alternate representations of them, challenging the sense of certainty in the established social order (p. 50). Through the contrastive relations that they entail, places like the stupa are built on utopian ideals that, in practice, create “unsettling juxtapositions of incommensurate things” (p. 8). The idea of constructing a replica of the fourteenth-century Gyantse stupa in rural Victoria strikes me as just this kind of juxtaposition. Thus I conceptualise Atisha Centre and the Great Stupa together as a heterotopia, because of the idealism that motivates them and their alterity in relation to their surroundings. The rural setting of Atisha Centre, with its visibly Australian flora and fauna, gives some indication of how the locale itself becomes a constitutive part of the character of this contact zone for Tibetan Buddhism in Australia. Although the stupa and the Buddhist centre on which it is being built constitute a bounded rural property, the monument will have effects well beyond its immediate location. Its underlying idealistic impulse will be, and indeed already is being transformed through praxis.

**Modelling the cross-cultural transplantation of Buddhism**

The transformation of Buddhist material culture can be situated within a relatively new research focus, the study of adaptations of Buddhism in the West. For this reason, I take up a conversation with Buddhist studies scholars seeking to characterise key features of Western Buddhism.

Like all sociocultural phenomena, world religions undergo translation and adaptation when they move between cultural contexts. So it is to be expected that the symbols and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, which arose in their own historical context, speak differently to those in different social and historical positions (cf. Norris 2003: 171). Converts undergoing what Rambo (1993: 14) calls “tradition transition” must learn new sets of ideas and imagery deriving from socio-cultural contexts quite distinct from their own and this is necessarily filtered through prior worldviews (Norris 2003: 179). Further layers of translation must take place as converts attempt to express their adopted religion to non-converts and when they begin to make visible changes to the built environment.

Scholars of Western adaptations of Buddhism have attempted to chart the kinds of transformations involved, for instance to assess the relative flexibility or inflexibility of various organisations. Martin Baumann (1994) has developed a typology of
transplantation⁶ that models how Buddhist converts in Germany adapt Buddhism for their own needs. As summarised in Tables 1.1 & 1.2, he identifies five processive modes and seven strategies of transplantation (1994: 39-57). With some adjustments and additions, this is a useful tool for thinking about the Western Buddhist/Tibetan contact zone.

Baumann’s five processive modes are: contact; confrontation and conflict; ambiguity and adaptation; recoupment and reorientation and innovative self-development (pp. 39-50). The recoupment and innovation modes operate as a pair in tension with one another as Goldberg (1999) suggests, so I combine them here. The five modes and seven strategies interplay constantly, rather than being indicative of linear development over time (Baumann 1994: 38).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Arrival of imported religion (IR) into host culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation &amp; conflict</td>
<td>Protagonists of IR stress differences between their religion and existing religions, which may cause conflict with other worldviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguity &amp; adaptation</td>
<td>Subconscious or intentional ambiguities arise as converts interpret and adapt IR on own terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recoupment/ Reorientation and innovation</td>
<td>Recoupment/reorientation and innovation are attempts to address ambiguities arising from adaptations. Former seeks return to established ways, latter seeks to develop new solutions from within.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.1. Baumann’s (1994) processive modes of transplantation

The ways in which the first category, “contact,” applies here includes overseas travel, local Buddhist centres and books. In the first instance, Australians travelling through Asia came into contact with Buddhist teachers and were impressed by the monuments and sacred sites left by earlier generations of Buddhists. Opportunities for contact increased in the host country as the new Dharma students returned home to bring Tibetan lamas to the West on teaching tours, make teaching transcripts available through publications and establish Dharma centres. Contact continues with each newcomer. I suggest that every anything (and any place) providing an opportunity for contact with Buddhism is a contact zone.

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⁶ He defines transplantation as “the processes of transmitting or transferring a symbolic system – in this case a specific religious tradition – from one geographic/national location to another,” that is, into an “alien cultural milieu” (Baumann 1996: 367).
Adoption of a new religion requires adaptation but, in the process, ambiguities tend to arise, resulting in misunderstandings. Baumann (1994: 41) identifies “ambiguity and adaptation” as unavoidable consequences of the transplantation of a religion between cultural *milieux*. A mutual influence may occur, wherein converts take up aspects of the imported religion, while it in turn adopts aspects of the host culture, such as organisational structures and expressive modes. Misunderstandings and reinterpretation are inevitable since people in the receiving culture cannot help but filter the imported religious symbols and ideas through their own prior conceptions about the world. Likewise, those teaching the imported religion bring their own understandings which inflect their interactions with Western students (ibid.).

In their attempts to make the imported religion more intelligible and accessible to themselves and other potential converts, Buddhists involved in the task of transplantation engage in innovative activities that combine elements from the imported religion and the host culture (p. 46). However, innovations may give rise to ambiguities and conflict as people disagree over their legitimacy and authority. In response to such contestation, people re-examine and perhaps prune back recent innovations (p. 44), resulting in “recoupment” and “reorientation.” A noteworthy Tibetan Buddhist example is Chogyam Trungpa’s Vajradhatu organisation, which underwent reforms during the mid-1970s after the visit of the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa to their USA headquarters. This recoupment shifted emphasis away from Americanised conventions and sought to return to more strictly Tibetan forms (p. 45). Likewise, the FPMT has scaled back some of its innovations, for example in the options that it considered for the stupa design (Chapter Two).

Innovations are also emerging out of Buddhism’s adoption in the West, for instance through feminist challenges to institutionalised androcentrism and the application of Buddhist thought to proposing solutions for world environmental issues (Goldberg 1999: 343). Innovators may consider their approach a creative overhaul of an “ossified tradition” while those who consider themselves “custodians of tradition” may condemn innovations as heretical (Baumann 1994: 47).

The rarity of finding a Tibetan stupa in a rural Australian setting raises the question of whether and how the stupa proponents seek to render it intelligible and how the locals, whether they be complete outsiders to Buddhism, new converts or senior FPMT students, comprehend it. This brings me to Baumann’s investigation of strategies of transplantation.
In the contact zone, the actors involved engage in both unconscious and intentional strategies of translation. Baumann (1994: 50-57) compiles an extensive list of such strategies (Table 1.2) that flexible religious organisations pursue to facilitate cross-cultural transplantation. The first strategy is translation, both philological and cultural. I consider the remaining six categories to be aspects of translation in that they all entail the choices that Buddhism’s translators must make, especially reduction, reinterpretation and absorption.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Imported religion (IR) must render itself comprehensible in the host society.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduction</td>
<td>IR de-emphasises ideas that are difficult or unacceptable for host culture and highlights those that meet a positive reception.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinterpretation</td>
<td>IR interprets ideas in a manner compatible with the worldview of the host culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toleration</td>
<td>IR opposes certain local customs but chooses to tolerate them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>For expedience, IR brings elements of host culture into meaning system to meet requirements / expectations of host society. This may involve compromise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>IR absorbs extraneous elements, interpreted on its own terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acculturation</td>
<td>IR adopts elements from host society that it values positively.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2. Baumann’s strategies that facilitate transplantation

Baumann’s typologies provide a point of reference against which to assess, from one side, how much the FPMT fits these characterisations and, from the other side, what this anthropological analysis can contribute to such characterisations. The strategy of translation is of particular relevance when considering the stupa as a material expression of Tibetan Buddhism that seeks to render itself comprehensible to its new host society.

Materialising Tibetan Buddhism in Australia

Buddhism has a long tradition of monumental-scale holy objects, including temples, statues and stupas. The Swayambhu and Bodha stupas in Nepal, the stone stupa complex of Borobudur in Indonesia and the Great Stupa of Gyantse in Tibet, upon which the Bendigo stupa is modelled, are part of this history. Contemporary stupas of a similar scale include the Dhammakaya Foundation’s cetiya (stupa) near Bangkok in Thailand.
(Snodgrass 1999) that is 108 metres in diameter and the Vipassana Foundation’s new, 96.12 metre high “Global Vipassana Pagoda,” a replica of the Shwedagon pagoda in Burma, near Mumbai in India (Goenka 1997).

Stupas are central to the Buddhist “cult of saints” (Ray 1994: 325) and represent the Buddha’s enlightened mind. Once relics are interred within, the stupa serves as a substitute for the body of the Buddha (Mus 1998: 90). In Tibetan Buddhism their spiritual powers serve a range of purposes beyond the immediately religious ones. The monument not only commemorates the Buddha’s Enlightenment, but also exerts spiritually transformative powers on all who come into contact with it, human, animal or spirit-being, through making positive karmic imprints (Chapter Four). A material culture perspective investigates the agency of these holy objects in sociocultural contexts.

Two prominent Buddhist stupas feature in other anthropological analysis. Writing about Swayambhu in the Kathmandu Valley, Bruce McCoy Owens (2002: 269) notes the complex intersection of interests at this Buddhist stupa and world heritage site. He considers how this “heterotopic arena” has become enmeshed in international and local contestations over ethnicity and religious practice. Another large Kathmandu valley stupa, Bodhanath, is the centrepiece of a neighbourhood that Peter Moran (2004: 8-9) briefly identifies as a contact zone. It is both a tourist highlight and pilgrimage site for Buddhists of diverse origins (including Tibetans, overseas Chinese and Western converts). A Tibetan exile community has formed in its neighbourhood and Kopan, the FPMT’s Kathmandu monastery, is located nearby. Thus the two Kathmandu stupas and the Australian one are contact zones that serve as sites of intersecting trajectories in the intercultural and transnational spread of Tibetan Buddhism. What sets the Great Stupa in Australia apart from these examples is its newness and its transposition into a cultural setting in which Buddhism is a minority religion with which only a small percentage of citizens have sustained interaction. The stupa is thus a translated object, in the dual senses of movement from one place to another and from one system of meaning to another.

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7 Here “cult” refers to a set of religious rites and practices and “saint” refers to the most advanced and revered arhats, practitioners, teachers and the forest ascetic monks of Theravāda Buddhism, as well as the yogins, tantric deities, bodhisattvas and Buddhas of the Mahāyāna tradition (Ray 1994). In place of saint FPMT people tend to use “holy being.”
Ethnographies of religious conversion can benefit from investigation into the roles that material culture plays. Fred Myers (2001: 3) suggests that studies of the intercultural movement of art objects should include an investigation of how they “convey and condense value” as they travel locally and internationally, passing through different value systems and participating in both the construction of social identities and the demarcation of cultural differences. The stupa, as a transplanted religious monument, conveys new ideas and practices in condensed form and participates in a transformation not only of the visible landscape but existing intercultural relations.

But why investigate the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion (henceforth, “the stupa project” or “the Great Stupa”) before it is completed? To study the site “under construction” allows me to capture how its advocates explain the purpose of their stupa and what happens as they struggle to bring it to fruition. As they establish its design, apply for building permits, negotiate with council and the public during consultation procedures and engage in fundraising and promotion, the conversations, struggles and successes involved help to shape contemporary Tibetan Buddhism while also highlighting the complexity of Australian intercultural relations.

Daniel Miller (1998: 3) notes that materiality constitutes social worlds as much as social worlds constitute the material world. The material world participates in the production of culture and meaning and some objects, such as those to which people attribute spiritual powers, are more thoroughly and assertively entangled in re-shaping social relations than others. Taking this approach in her analysis of the Greek Acropolis, Eleana Yalouri (2001: 17) analyses how, as a world-famous landmark with changing meanings across time and space, it has become a “vehicle of agency” which informs Greek understandings of their national identity. The Acropolis “condenses understandings about Greek identity,” simultaneously providing a medium for the re-organisation and ordering of ideas, experiences and actions (p. 192). Sites do not merely contain or reflect action: they also influence and help to produce cultural activity (ibid.).

Likewise, the concrete-and-steel edifice of the Great Stupa is not merely a passive container to transplant Tibetan Buddhist ideas from one location to another. Rather, the Great Stupa is a vehicle of agency for the settlement of Buddhism in the antipodean landscape. It may become a famous local landmark and an agent in the establishment of Buddhism in the Australian cultural landscape, reordering a place according to imported
ideals while also being shaped by the new environment. As a key symbol of Tibetan Buddhism and an index of the religion’s contemporary spread, the Great Stupa is a religious idea in the process of being concretised and I explore how this initially “out of place” monument (deemed alien by some locals) is in the process of being appropriated by and adopted into its host society.

Monumental architecture can serve as landmarks whose meanings change historically and geographically, but their monumentality itself has real consequences. As the Egyptian pyramids and European megaliths attest, such architecture has long been a tool for the materialization of systems of ideas by those with access to the necessary resources and power. Owens (2002) calls this “conspicuous construction.” I am interested in how the Great Stupa operates as a monument, a particular kind of large object vested with complex symbolism that can become a vehicle for differing worldviews and be read in multiple ways. Further, it is enmeshed in relations of power that extend beyond the physical site. I investigate the intricacies of meaning condensing into and radiating from the stupa site, tempered by an awareness that those who own the site and those who govern the locale tend to have the greatest influence in defining its meaning and the greatest scope to strategically re-define it as necessary (cf. Burns and Kahn 2005: xii, x). But it can be even more complicated than this, such as when initial efforts to define the monument’s meanings are lost or interwoven with new meanings.

Nelson and Olin (2003: 7) draw on Alfred Gell (1998) when they suggest that monuments are very “motivated” objects that are intended to transform the world. The stupa too is a very motivated object, but the Buddhists’ intentions are not the end of the matter. Nelson and Olin suggest that “[t]he monument expresses the power and sense of the society that gives it meaning, and at the same time obscures competing claims for authority and meaning.” The stupa is intended to transform the world in line with Buddhist ideals but it also has the potential to obscure competing claims for authority and meaning, for instance with regard to certain Aboriginal concepts of land (Chapter Seven). In writing of the effects of a Buddhist monument on the Australian landscape, I thus have in mind the sociocultural and political landscapes as much as the physical one.

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8 The Great Stupa is a monument because it is a large object whose primary intention is to re-present an idea. It is also, of course, a temple, since it will have a major ground-floor shrine room to accommodate large gatherings.
**Following the connections in the contact zone**

For the first two months of my 2003 stay at Atisha Centre I was the sole resident with a large load of *karma yoga* (work done to create good *karma*, especially at a Dharma centre). I worked for the Centre in return for my accommodation, undertaking a range of jobs including working in the office three afternoons a week, answering phone calls and emails and doing administrative work, showing visitors around, helping to orientate retreatants, setting up the *gompa* (the main shrine room) for night classes and *pujas* and cleaning the toilets. I also filled and emptied water-bowl offerings on the shrines. Through these activities I learnt first hand about the struggles of an organisation that depends on volunteer labour.

Much of this work brought me into only intermittent contact with other people, since I did most of it alone, but this in itself indicates the nature of a rural Buddhist retreat centre. Most of the volunteers juggled their Atisha Centre commitments with full-time jobs and/or caregiving, their cars arriving and departing in clouds of dust. The more involved students tended to have a number of pressing meetings and chores to attend to, while others came and went for teachings and other events on the Centre’s regular programme. I found myself reluctant to interrupt these harried folk to converse about the kinds of things I had come to investigate and in the first weeks I was somewhat flummoxed as to how to proceed. However, besides being of assistance to the Centre, the volunteer work I did helped people to accept my presence as both researcher and participant the more readily: in working as hard as they did, I demonstrated a degree of commitment to and sympathy for the aims of the Centre. I was also able to compensate for the brevity of interaction on a daily basis by participating in occasional, sometimes spectacular, events that brought many people together.

As well as the stupa events discussed below, I participated in activities including fundraising dinners, weekend retreats, night classes, the monthly working bees and shared lunches, and the weekly open meditation classes followed by morning tea on Sundays. Another fruitful way to spend time with people was to accompany FPMT members on their inter-city car trips, where I found people willing to pass the time conversing about their roles at the FPMT and their thoughts on the stupa. During the total research period
from 2003-2007 I also undertook a total of 36 semi-structured and informal audio-taped interviews (Appendix I).\(^9\)

My primary research site was a single physical location, Atisha Centre. To account for the multiple overlapping contexts that meet in the contact zone of the stupa site I needed to ensure that my “strategically situated (single site) ethnography” (Marcus 1995: 110) was embedded within a multi-sited context by following networks and connections further afield. In accounting for the ways that the stupa project seems alien and “Other” to some non-Buddhist locals, and to situate the stupa in its local context, I move beyond the Buddhist centre around Bendigo and beyond to Melbourne and Auckland, following connections, as Marcus (pp. 106ff) suggests, of people, things, metaphors and conflicts.

In following the connections, I attended events at the site and a range of meetings concerning the stupa, for example when Ian met with the Melbourne-based structural engineers and architects involved with the project and with the stupa board of directors. I also assisted with four public exhibitions of the collection of relics intended to go inside the Great Stupa, three in Australia and one in New Zealand.

At the local level I “followed the people” by staying at Atisha Centre and in households around Bendigo for six months in 2003 and three shorter trips in 2004, 2006 and 2007. The people I encountered came from diverse backgrounds, including ethnically-Tibetan Buddhist monks, Westerners looking to Tibetan Buddhism for meaning, and people of Asian origins curious to investigate this project or seeking to make merit by donating to it. In following antipodean and international FPMT connections I visited the Dorje Chang Institute in my home town of Auckland, Tara Institute in Melbourne and Chenrezig Institute near Eudlo, Queensland.

Literature on Western Buddhist/Tibetan Buddhist contact internationally (e.g., Moran, 2004, Zablocki, 2005) helped me to contextualise local members’ narratives about their experiences of India, Nepal and Tibet. FPMT literature gave me access to the organisation’s key discourses and highlighted the extent of its internationality. The proliferation of FPMT literature online and on paper also helped me to offset, at least partially, a limitation of this research, which is that although I seek to cover the project

\(^9\) I presented participant information letters on my research to members of Atisha committee meeting (16 April 2003) and received expressions of support and curiosity.
from 1981-2007, I was only present for a small portion of that time. Worldwide, FPMT centres are connected through shared media, including the FPMT website, *Mandala*\(^{10}\) (the organisation’s international magazine) and Wisdom Publications, the Foundation’s own publishing house. The textual material issuing from these institutions provides insight into the workings of the shared international culture of FPMT centres. Through subscribing to several different e-mail lists I was able to verify that the Foundation offers similar teachings around the world. Two newsletters, both of which are called *Chorten*\(^{11}\) (Tibetan for stupa), have been essential to my research. The first provides news of developments at Atisha Centre and the second version, which uses the subheading *Stupa Edition*, began in 1996-97 as an insert for Atisha *Chorten*. It later became a separate newsletter solely for the stupa project and is distributed to a distinct (but overlapping) mailing list. By February 2008, the Stupa office was sending *Chorten Stupa Edition* to over 1600 addresses, including 1200 in Australia, 344 in Singapore, 59 in Malaysia, and 44 in the USA (Hankel, pers. comm.). Most recipients are benefactors so the numbers give some indication of where they are located.

Seeking to follow the conversations that the stupa project stimulated, I sought evidence of the responses of non-Buddhist locals, including ordinary citizens and representatives of communities and organisations that I had identified as having some kind of response to the stupa, whether supportive, antagonistic, or somewhere in between. This dimension of the research required attention to discourses that exclude some worldviews while making others appear normative. I have attempted to alleviate concerns of the stupa proponents, some of whom felt that my interviewing the few individuals who were vocally opposed to the project might encourage them to become more vocal and, further, that in writing about those views I might lead readers to assume the opposition was widespread. While I did not wish to misrepresent the stupa project, it was essential to explore the range of responses not only as a cultural but also a social and political phenomenon. It is in the nature of scholarly research that analytical interpretations will differ from those held by

\(^{10}\) Sections of *Mandala* are available online at [http://www.mandalamagazine.org/](http://www.mandalamagazine.org/).

\(^{11}\) Lama Yeshe suggested “Stupa,” but because this word resembles the English word “stupor,” the name *Chorten* was adopted instead and has remained since, although in 2003 the management committee re-titled the newsletter “The Lamp for the Path” after a famous text by Lama Atisha (to differentiate the Centre newsletter from the stupa edition), but after an objection from an old student the old name was reinstated. In 2008 *Chorten* was re-named *Atisha News.*
the people most involved. Because of this, I do not always represent the stupa project and the conversations it stimulates in the ways that its proponents would like.

In terms of following the conversations (and sometimes contestation) that the stupa project provoked around the region my own reticence, combined with time-consuming involvement with Atisha Centre and stupa activities, sometimes hindered my attempts to access networks of locals not associated with the Buddhist centre. My best opportunity to discover local attitudes toward the stupa project was through picking up connections as they arose, networking, leisure-time rides with the Bendigo Bicycle User Group and through chance meetings, such as people I met when travelling by train between Melbourne and Bendigo. I also looked at the news media, reading letters to the editor and checking the archives of the *Bendigo Advertiser*. The City of Greater Bendigo’s local government archives provided access to the stupa project’s planning application and the formal responses it elicted.

In order to learn about the formal religious concepts motivating the stupa project, I also “followed the teachings” by attending many FPMT classes and teachings, including a weekly formal commentary on the classic text by Śāntideva, “The Bodhisattva’s Way of Life,” which the geshe taught via the interpreter, and several modules of the “Discovering Buddhism” curriculum. Since I am a student of Buddhism myself I also attempted to follow the teachings at a more personal level, for example, by exploring mind-training techniques that were taught at Atisha Centre to see how they affected my mind and emotional well-being. My conclusion was that although I learnt some very valuable things, the FPMT approach, at least as I understood it at the time, was unsuitable for my personality – I found myself becoming even more self-judgemental than I normally am, as I saw how far I fell short of the high ideals about compassion and selflessness that Buddhism espouses.

My previous research about the construction of a much smaller stupa in New Zealand (McAra 2007b) meant that when I first came across the website promoting the Great Stupa I was intrigued. The scale and expense of the Australian project far outweighed the New Zealand one and the rationale for the Great Stupa made far grander.

claims about the benefits of the project (Chapter Four). The overlaps and differences between the two projects also highlight aspects of my exploration of traditionalist and modernist themes in Western Buddhism (Chapter Three).

Because I was a New Zealander carrying out research among Anglo-Australians, I was in a cultural setting that had many familiar aspects for me, especially in comparison to my experience of travelling internationally in the past. Linguistically and culturally, Australia and New Zealand have much in common. Many New Zealanders live and work in Australia, to the extent that we sometimes jokingly call Australia “the West Island.” Both nations are post-industrial and urbanized societies with an indigenous population, an ancestrally-British/Irish/Scots settler population, and other immigrant communities that have been growing in number and diversity since the mid-twentieth century.13

One important difference between the two countries influenced my research. Although both countries underwent British colonisation and settlement, the dispossession of Australian Aborigines has been even greater than that of New Zealand Māori. Further, Aboriginal issues remain near-invisible to most Australians, while in New Zealand, Māori issues receive relatively more attention. At secondary school I took courses in Māori language and during my university education through the mid to late 1990s I learnt about and engaged with Māori approaches to research that not only highlight how colonisation continues to affect indigenous peoples but also attempt to reform research to better serve indigenous purposes (e.g., Smith, 1998). As a Pākehā, a New Zealander of European ancestry with no known Māori ancestors, this was an often uncomfortable but nonetheless valuable experience, helping me to see how contemporary Pākehā benefit from past dispossession of Māori. This influenced my decision to study Pākehā Buddhists and their relationship to land in New Zealand (McAra 2007b) and meant that I was curious to learn about how the Buddhists addressed prior claims to the land they now owned. This personal and research background predisposed me to observe how people involved in members of the Australian FPMT engaged (or not) with the politics of Aboriginal-settler reconciliation. Having read Kolig’s (1997) account of collaboration between Māori and

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13 The biggest difference is one of scale: Australia’s landmass and population are far larger and more multicultural than New Zealand’s. Australia is home to 21 million people, compared with New Zealand’s four million.
Tibetan elders in a New Zealand stupa blessing I also wished to know if Aboriginal elders had participated in this Australian stupa project.

During my research I have attended teachings where my motivation to attend came both as an anthropologist and through my personal exploration of Buddhism, although my preconceptions about Buddhism constrained my ability to understand some aspects of the FPMT’s approach. Over the years I have also participated in four other Buddhist groups\textsuperscript{14} that, based on my knowledge of research surveying developments in Western Buddhism (see Chapter Three), I gauge to be typical of the more “modernist” approaches to Western Buddhism. My liberal Protestant, Pākehā origins, my personal involvement with Buddhism, strong environmental convictions and education as an anthropologist give me a shifting set of “multiplex identities” (Narayan 1993) and ways of looking at the world, with which I have attempted to work as openly as possible. I arrived at Atisha Centre with mixed feelings about the stupa project because, while on the one hand I was uncomfortable with the scale and cost of their stupa, I also shared their belief that Buddhist teachings offer valuable methods for overcoming suffering and delusion. The collection of relics that will one day be interred within the stupa, the ringsel (tiny opaque or transluscent globules that are said to be crystallisations of lamas’ spiritual realisations) in particular held a particular fascination for me, not as a source of inspiration but because they disrupted my culturally-inherited view that a spiritual qualities could not leave a physical residue.

The standard anthropological research tool of participant-observation gave me ample opportunity to enter into the stupa builders’ worldview. An exercise I devised for myself was to imagine I had won five million dollars: how much of the total would I donate to the Great Stupa or other charitable causes? When I was most fully involved with events at and around the stupa site my imaginary contribution to the project increased, and when I was in the company of friends back in Melbourne or New Zealand who questioned the project, most of my imaginary donations went to charities that were more directly involved in social and environmental welfare. Like a chameleon, my views “changed colour” as I moved between perspectives, empathising more deeply with the stupa proponents’ wishes at times of more intense involvement. During fieldwork, my shifting

\textsuperscript{14} A Vipassanā course; the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order; a group affiliated to Thich Nhât Hanh; and since 2007, a group affiliated with Rochester Zen Center in the USA.
feelings made me uneasy and my ambivalence continued throughout the research and writing period. On the one hand, whatever good intentions motivate the project, I cannot help but also see how the structure’s size, carbon footprint and expense also index the conspicuous construction (Owens 2002) of a globalised system where the differences between the powerful and the disenfranchised, the rich and the poor, are widening. On the other hand, if the stupa is completed I would love to visit it and would rejoice in the perseverance of those who strove to complete the bold task of attempting to create a durable symbol of their highest ideals.

**Mere labels**

By way of introducing some of the terms I use in this thesis, I evoke the Buddhist concept of śunyatā, a term that is often translated in English as “emptiness” or “wisdom-realising-emptiness.” Emptiness is best understood in relation to the concept of dependent origination, which teaches that all things, including the idea of an independent self, arise in dependence upon prior causes and conditions (Keown 2003: 221). Buddhists identify two levels of truth: relative (conventional) and absolute (ultimate). The relative “I” appears to the unenlightened mind as “independent and self-existing” (Lama Yeshe *et al.* 1976: 116). Intellectual knowledge of śunyatā is insufficient to bring about liberation so one must purify karmic obstacles to a deeper, more experiential understanding.

According to several of my Buddhist informants, then, words are mere labels for something beyond words and this has particular ramifications for the notion of self. For instance, Ven. Jinpa, a novice monk who is Polish by birth, tried to explain śunyatā to me by pulling a pen apart and asking questions like “Is there an inherently existing pen? Which of these parts is actually the pen?” to demonstrate the argument that the self is made up of aggregates and, if you separate them out, nowhere will you find an inherently-existing “self.” Like others attempting to teach this, he prefaced words like “I” and “self” with the qualifier “merely labelled” – so that he referred to the “merely-labelled I” in an attempt to overcome the reifying effect of labels. In daily life people unconsciously or consciously consider this provisional “self” to be “inherently existent,” but to Buddhists the self is composed of “aggregates” such as the physical substances of the body and the psychological tendencies of the mind. In none of these aggregates can a true, inherently existing “I” be located.
For anthropologists as well as śunyatā students, creating succinct labels to describe complex sociological situations is a minefield and I wish to qualify my own use of several ambiguous terms. The merely-labelled “Tibetan Buddhism” refers to the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism with Indo-Tibetan origins that can now be found in many countries around the world. I do not use the term “Tibetan Buddhist” as an ethnic label; rather, just as Rome is the source of Roman Catholics’ religious orientation, Tibet serves a similar purpose for Tibetan Buddhists (where necessary I add qualifiers such as “ethnically Tibetan” or “non-Tibetan” and so on). Although some scholars of Buddhism in places like the USA and Europe use the terms Vajrayanist (e.g., Lavine 1998 uses the expression “American Vajrayāna”) it is not one that I heard FPMT members use and, further, not all followers of Tibetan Buddhism practise tantra (Vajrayāna). I use the term “Buddhism” for brevity rather than to imply that Buddhism can ever be a unitary entity and not a multiplicity of “Buddhisms.” Where I wish to be specific about the approach to Buddhism taught in the Foundation, I refer to “FPMT Buddhism.”

FPMT Buddhists refer to “Westerners” and “Tibetans” or “Asians” evoking the imagined dichotomy of Occident/Orient that Said (1978) has criticised. Because this divide saturates contemporary discourse, “West” in my usage denotes the sociocultural domain of people with Euro-American and Judeo-Christian religio-cultural heritage. FPMT people sometimes use the same word to make a contrast between themselves and so-called “Eastern” or “Asian” Buddhists. “Anglo-Australian” includes people of British descent who are the dominant and hegemonic ethnic group in Australia and who are the principal beneficiaries of European colonisation there while recognising that people of other ancestry also participate in Tibetan Buddhism. I refer to the people who were dispossessed during the colonisation of Australia as “Aboriginal” and “indigenous.”

I occasionally use the term “FPMT member” when referring to someone from the FPMT milieu, whether or not that person has formal membership. FPMT Buddhists often talk about “Dharma students” and I follow suit to emphasise the importance of the teacher-disciple relationship, while “Dharma centre” covers FPMT centres whether they are located in rural or urban settings, since their main function in either setting is to

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15 Paid-up members do not necessarily participate in everyday FPMT events: they may focus on pursuing their personal practice and visiting the resident teacher for spiritual guidance. Others might not pay any membership fees but be involved as volunteers and Dharma students who contribute financially through facility fees.
provide a place for people to hear Dharma teachings, whether or not they offer residential retreats.

My work explores the strategies and methods of cross-cultural translation as a form of dialogue between the stupa “proponents” and its “recipients.” The proponents are those who are involved in planning, fundraising, promotion and construction of the stupa, and by recipients I mean those in the locale and further afield who are in some way affected by the stupa project and respond to it (I do not use the word “respondents” as this implies participants in a formal survey). These categories are relative, since in some circumstances a lay supporter of the stupa project may be both a proponent and a recipient (cf. Gell’s [1998] use of the terms “agent” and “patient”). The mayor of Bendigo, when talking with other Bendigonians about the council’s support for the stupa project acts as a proponent, but also is a recipient in being a non-Buddhist local who has an interest in how the stupa might benefit the region.

**Landscapes of contact, power and otherness**

On my many bicycle trips from Bendigo to Atisha Centre I often looked across the fields as I rode from the final junction, picturing a scene like that described at the start of this chapter. After drafting that introductory paragraph, I realised I had echoed Malinowski (1953 [1922]: 4), who famously wrote: “Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight.” Malinowski was depicting himself as a castaway by way of opening a discussion of ethnographic method, but my purpose was somewhat different – I sought to convey how a hypothetical visitor in the future might regard the newly-completed structure as a strange intrusion upon what for Australians is an otherwise familiar rural scene.

Barbara Bender (1993: 3) notes that the landscapes we inhabit are “polysemic,” interpreted in myriad ways and tied to identities. My intention in this thesis is to explore the juxtapositions in a landscape of encounter created through the intersection of innumerable understandings about place, religion, monumentalism and identity. I thus use “contact zone” to accentuate the intended role that the stupa has in bringing visitors into initial contact with the Dharma as expressed through the vehicle of the FPMT. Pratt’s approach emphasises the intercultural spaces of imperialism as sites of encounter, with
their unequal power relations and any struggling and conflict that arises as a result. While she uses it in a broad geographical sense, as in “tropical zone,” my own usage is focused on a particular locality, but with the awareness that it represents a kind of “contact” between much wider phenomena.

The stupa-as-heterotopia underlines the utopian aspirations of the stupa builders, highlighting the structure’s role in an attempted re-ordering of the world and emphasises the sense of disjunction and strangeness described in my opening vignette. As a relational category, heterotopia captures a key outside perspective on the stupa, a counter-site established “through a relationship of difference with other sites” (Hetherington 1997: 8). Martin Baumann’s modes and strategies of transplantation provide lenses through which I can look at selected issues arising in this heterotopic contact zone.

While the Buddhists consider the stupa to proclaim values of “universal compassion” and world peace, like all symbols it is ambiguous. The Great Stupa serves as a rallying point for individuals who find inspiration in the FPMT’s exposition of the Dharma. However, because of the complex dynamics and friction of the contact zone that I explore in this thesis, the physicality of the material object itself effects outcomes well beyond the religious intentions of the projects’ proponents. The transplantation of FPMT Buddhism is affected by and effected through the stupa, but it is also complicated by the “zones of awkward engagement” around it.
Atisha Centre is located in a rural area called Myers Flat, 14km from Bendigo’s town centre. Consisting of a bushland property with a few buildings, the retreat provides a venue for teaching the FPMT approach to Buddhism. I first arrived there in early March, 2003. Cycling through Bendigo and along dusty rural roads, I came to the entrance to the property where a sign announced the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, Thubten Shedrup Ling monastery and Atisha Centre. Sun-bleached prayer flags strung over the farm gate fluttered in the wind. I rode up the long dirt driveway and, at a second gate, a sign displaying the Aboriginal sovereignty flag announced, “We are proud to acknowledge the Dja Dja Wrung people as the traditional owners of this land.”

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1 An alternative spelling is “Djadja Wurrung.” The sign also provides contact details for the Victoria office of the national reconciliation group, Australians for Native Title & Reconciliation (ANTaR) that distributes these plaques, naming the various traditional owners of the state, to those who wish to purchase and display them.
The tiled pathway from the unsealed car park to the courtyard led me past a small stupa, raised to head-height on a concrete pillar (Fig. 2.1). The stupa, courtyard and prefabricated buildings on two sides of it were already familiar from photographs I had viewed on the Centre’s website. Walking through the empty courtyard, I leant my luggage-laden bicycle against a bench and paused, looking and listening for signs of life.

“Hello? Are you Sally?” said a voice. I turned around to see Yien, a young Chinese-Malaysian woman, who was the newly-appointed director of Atisha Centre, emerging from the office with her two-year-old son. She showed me the kitchen and dining area, then whisked me down the path to show me the accommodation area. In the main gompa, a large hall with rammed earth walls, polished wooden floors and an elaborate set of shrines, she performed three full-length prostrations and assigned me one of several jobs I was to take on in exchange for my accommodation, that of making water-bowl offerings at the shrines (Chapter Three).

Other people I met that day were all European or Anglo-Australian Buddhists. I met a visiting nun from Switzerland and two monks: Ven. Dennis, who lived up at the monastery and did various maintenance jobs around Atisha Centre and Ven. Jinpa, from Poland, who stayed at the monastery for several months. Laypeople included Carl, a local who did the Centre’s accounts, Ken, the gardener and a woman who had recently become involved with Atisha Centre. Ken, Yien and the new woman discussed plans for a revegetation project at Atisha Centre. With the office telephone ringing at regular intervals, chores, visitors and volunteers coming and going, my first impression of the Centre was that it was short of volunteers and money. I was, for the first two months of my stay, the sole resident in the accommodation there, other than during retreat weekends.

After everyone had gone home I savoured the still evening, but a niggling question disturbed me. If everyone involved with the Centre was as busy as those I had just met, would they be able to spare me some time for interviews? I walked through the grounds and up a dirt track to a circular area made of gritty clay and stone, a hill whose top had been flattened, exposing a wide circle of raw rock. The empty site radiated the heat it had

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2 Yien served as director for around one year. Earlier directors included Ian and Judy Green, and John Wright.

3 I follow FPMT usage to refer to the large shrine rooms where teachings, meditations and devotional activities such as pujas are conducted, although in Tibetan, gompa is used to refer to the religious community (for instance in a specific monastery or hermitage).
absorbed during the day, offering it up to the stars in the clear night sky. I could hear trucks whooshing along the length of Allies Road, a kilometre away across the paddocks. “So. I’ve arrived and I’m going to live here for six months. This is the place where they’re going to build their Great Stupa of Universal Compassion,” I thought. I turned to walk back to my room and, hearing a noise, caught sight of the dark form of a wallaby hopping away into the scrub at the edge of the site. In the night, I awoke and stood outside breathing in the still, eucalypt-infused darkness. Only an occasional truck or train in the distance and, sometimes, small sounds that punctuated the silence: a twig falling; a dry crackling sound; a possum in the trees.

Despite its peaceful bushland location, I was to become, like the volunteers who ran the place, frenetically busy carrying out both regular chores and preparation and clean-up for three major events over the next few months, when two Tibetan Buddhist lamas and one Sydney-based Vietnamese Buddhist leader visited to bless the stupa site. This participant-observation allowed insight into the place (Atisha Centre) and its membership, the organisation (the FPMT) and the project (the Great Stupa), all of which I discuss in this chapter. A small management committee oversees the running of the Centre and volunteers help with maintenance of the facilities and grounds and management of the kitchen. Others take care of tasks such as managing the Centre’s finances and organising the calendar of teachings, retreats and other activities. Thubten Shedrup Ling monastery, which is further back from the road and at the top of a hill, is run separately.

**Orientation**

The countryside around Atisha Centre is an undulating plain with a mixture of pastoral farming and bushland, but the region was in the grip of a several-year-long drought and farming activities were in decline. The land on which the Centre stands consists mostly of re-growth bush (whipstick mallee with little undergrowth), since the trees were cleared in the past and regrowth harvested for eucalyptus oil. Walking from the car park to the main buildings (Fig. 2.2), the community area consists of one building constructed on-site (a kitchen and dining room) and two small prefabricated buildings serving as an office, library and book- and gift-shop. Another path leads down to the ablutions block and wooden railway carriages that provided accommodation for retreatants and residents until they were removed in 2006. A network of unsealed paths runs between the buildings and trees fill the spaces between.
During my stay in 2003, one area near the courtyard was landscaped as a garden and water feature; a life-sized bronze statue of the female deity Tara is planned as the focal point. Further up the path stands the big gompa (Fig. 2.3) and, nearby, a smaller gompa that was built in Atisha Centre’s early days. To one side of this is a self-contained flat that was used for a resident teacher before the construction of the monastery, but in more recent years has provided a base for nuns staying at the Centre.

On the south side of the driveway is the property and home of Joyce Green, Ed Green’s widow. In 2004, Lieu and Bien Vo, a Vietnamese Buddhist couple from Melbourne purchased eighteen hectares from Joyce to set up a place they called “Harmony Village,” a retirement home for elderly Vietnamese people and a hostel for “under-privileged students from Vietnam” who would study at Bendigo’s tertiary institutions (Great Stupa of Universal Compassion [GSUC] n.d.-p, n.p.). They also donated a portion of the land to the Quang Minh Vietnamese temple in Melbourne to develop as a monastery. However their plans required a change to zoning regulations (from Rural to Comprehensive Development Zone) and in November 2005 councillors of the City of Greater Bendigo rejected the proposal because, according to the council’s minutes, it was inconsistent with guidelines on density of residential development beyond the city’s urban growth boundary (Greater Bendigo City Council [GBCC] 2005).

A short walk from the main buildings of Atisha Centre and east from the stupa site are the remains of Sandhurst Town, a former open-air museum set up as a replica pioneer village commemorating two moments in Australian history, an 1850s gold miners’ encampment and a replica of a rural 1920s-30s township. Ian’s parents, Ed and Joyce Green, established the village in 1974 as a hobby and tourist business intended to provide “an insight into the life of our forebears,” according to an old information board still stored on the property. The model town included a restaurant, steam-train circuit through nearby bush, main street of a town complete with sweet shop, blacksmith, church, eucalyptus oil still and a gold-miners’ camp. Outside of opening hours the village – especially the white weatherboard church and the restaurant’s cooking facilities – were sometimes used as an extension of Atisha Centre in the 1980s; indeed, Lama Yeshe gave teachings in the church. The Greens closed the business in 1995 after two decades because of increasing competition from a larger tourist village called Sovereign Hill, near Ballarat.
Figure 2.2. Map showing layout of Atisha Centre, stupa site, monastery and Sandhurst Town in 2003
Recently, the defunct theme park has been undergoing a major transformation, with plans underway to establish housing for lay Buddhists.¹ At the time of my 2003 visit its dusty main street was derelict, strewn with rusting vintage car and railway parts that were later removed. From May 2003, a cottage that served as home to the caretaker of Sandhurst Town and then to several Atisha residents over the years became the home of the geshe’s interpreter, Noel Maddock. A Bendigonian bought two other buildings: the church, in which he planned to live after substantial renovation and refitting and the former cheese factory, which he made into a studio/workshop. By the time I returned in 2006, three further households were established there, with other renovations planned. The biggest development for the stupa project, however, was the conversion in 2004 of the old Sandhurst Town restaurant into the information centre for the relics that will one day be housed inside the stupa.

A five-minute walk up a hill to the west of Atisha Centre’s main facilities stands the monastery, which is established under the legal umbrella of the International Mahayana Institute (IMI), the monastic section of the FPMT. From here one can see across the plain to Mt Franklin in the south and one or two other distant peaks in other directions. The first

¹ The community, since 2005, is named Lama Yeshe Ling’ka. The translation Ian supplied was “Lama Yeshe Park.”
monastery buildings were constructed in 1996 and consist of several rammed-earth structures around a courtyard with its own elaborately decorated stupa (see Fig. 4.1). The monastery plans to build its own gompa, library and further residential quarters. The number of resident monks varies, but four lived there during most of 2003. Sometimes these monks teach meditation sessions or evening classes at the Centre or in town and one monk serves as a Buddhist chaplain to several regional prisons. While the major FPMT nunnery in Australia is at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, another future project is to construct several self-contained units for retired nuns in the bush on the hillside below the monastery.

From the main gompa a small path leads northwards up a rise to the construction site of the Great Stupa. The aerial photograph in the frontispiece, taken after the completion of the earthworks\(^5\) and concrete footings but before the erection of the first parts of the steel framework in 2006, depicts a large circular area cleared of bush, a somewhat incongruous sight / site which, someone once joked, resembled an alien landing pad. By late 2007, the ground-floor steel frame and concrete shear walls\(^6\) had been erected (Fig. 2.4). One can

![Aerial photo of stupa site in March 2008. Courtesy of David Field.](image)

\(\text{Figure 2.4. Aerial photo of stupa site in March 2008. Courtesy of David Field.}\)

\(^5\) In 2000, large diggers and rock-cutting machinery carved out three massive concentric circumambulation paths; the concrete foundations were laid in 2004.

\(^6\) These are the walls designed to bear the load of the upper storeys.
now comprehend the scale of the completed building, which will be almost as tall as it is wide. The Buddhist context for the Great Stupa is the FPMT’s aspiration to construct many holy objects to benefit all sentient beings, so I now introduce the FPMT organisation, its approach to Buddhist practice and the people who are involved with Atisha Centre.

**The Foundation and its origins**

The international organisation behind the stupa project consists of a network of around 140 Dharma centres which usually have a resident teacher and smaller study groups. The majority of Buddhists involved with the FPMT in Australia are of European descent and are first-generation converts, although increasingly people from the Chinese diaspora are attracted to Tibetan Buddhist teachings, evidenced by their participation in the FPMT. According to an FPMT mission statement (FPMT Inc. 2004: 12), the organisation is devoted to making Tibetan Buddhist teachings available worldwide. The FPMT’s education curriculum stresses the value of both an intellectual grasp of the scriptures and experiential understanding through meditation practice.

Among the FPMT’s key objectives is the aim to “build many holy objects everywhere” (FPMT Inc. 2004: 13). The planned Maitreya statue\(^7\) is the FPMT’s most ambitious project aimed at meeting that objective and the Great Stupa in Australia also sits within its scope. The religious purpose of such holy objects is to create positive karma, which Lama Zopa and other Dharma teachers say is necessary for spiritual enlightenment and world peace. It is worth mentioning that the founding narratives about the establishment of Buddhism in the Tibet feature stupas. Buddhism arrived and became established in Himalayan areas in the time of two kings of central Tibet, Songtsen Gampo (7th century AD) and, a century later, Trisong Detsen (742-c. 797). The *Mani Kabum*, a 14th century Tibetan text, says that the spirit forces opposing the establishment of the Dharma in Tibet were subdued by the construction of twelve temples placed at

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\(^7\) According to the Maitreya Project Press pack (Gatter n.d.), the planned bronze statue is 152.4 metres high. It will be seated upon a throne amidst 300 hectares of parkland. The park and statue will accommodate temples, exhibition halls, a museum, library, an audiovisual theatre and hospitality services. Lama Zopa’s students also plan to construct a large stupa at the Land of Medicine Buddha, a centre in Santa Cruz, California. This well-established centre already has a *gompa*, a memorial shrine for cremation ashes and holy objects such as a large prayer wheel. The Peace Stupa will consist of a structure of 99,999 stupas placed along the tiered walkways running around a “crown stupa” (Land of Medicine Buddha 2006).
geomantically-determined locations across the land (Stein 1972: 38-9, cited in Mills 2003: 13). Another story tells how Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) converted local spirits to become protectors of the Dharma. In a psychological interpretation that many Western Buddhists favour, it is the human mind that needs subduing and training (cf. McAra 2007b: 92-100, J. Gyatso 1989, cf. Huber 1999: 220). The FPMT’s stupa-building instructions (FPMT Inc. and Lama Zopa 2006: 260) emphasise the importance of requesting permission of and propitiating the local spirits and the Earth Goddess when taking possession of the site. Stupas serve other purposes too, such as enshrining holy relics and creating a focal point for merit-making and devotional practices.

Lama Aññā (982-1054 CE), after whom Atisha Centre is named, was an Indian Buddhist and reformer who lived the last thirteen years of his life in Tibet. His work, known as the Bodhipathapradīpa (Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment), presented the Dharma as a path entailing the cultivation of wisdom and compassion, perfected through tantric practice (Williams 1989: 191), a description that also corresponds to the aims of the FPMT curriculum. Lama Tsong Khapa (1357–1419) is revered as the founder of the Gelug order. Another reformer, he sought a return to Indian sources and founded the first Gelug monastery near Lhasa in 1409, the Gelug order having been politically dominant in central Tibet from the 17th century until the Chinese invasion in 1959 (Samuel 1993: 271-272). The three main Gelug monasteries (Ganden, Drepung and Sera) have been re-established in India and the construction of the Great Stupa, a re-creation of the Gyantse stupa in exile, is another facet to the religion’s shift outwards from Tibet.

Lama Tsong Khapa’s Lam Rim Chenmo, part of a class of a graded series of teachings derived from the Bodhipathapradīpa and of central importance to all Tibetan Buddhist orders, is the founding Lam-Rim text for the Gelugpa order (Keown 2003: 154) including the FPMT. The text is arranged as a “step-by-step guide for an individual’s spiritual development, from confused suffering to an enlightened being” (McDonald 1987: 11). Lam-Rim meditations include reflection on the preciousness of being reborn as a

8 In presenting this notion to Western readers, Sogyal Rinpoche (1992: 58) writes, “‘Training’ the mind does not in any way mean forcibly subjugating or brainwashing the mind.” Instead it means that the practitioner gains an understanding of how the mind works and uses this to master and develop its potential “to its fullest and most beneficial end.”

9 Four main orders (also referred to as schools or sects) are recognised in Tibetan Buddhism: Nyingmapa, Sakyapa, Kagyupa and Gelugpa. The religious order of Bön resembles Tibetan Buddhism in many respects (Samuel 1993: 11).
human and the opportunities such a rebirth provides for transcending ordinary suffering to gain enlightenment.

The FPMT is one of many international religious networks formed during the 1960s and 1970s countercultural exploration of Asian religions and in the first decade of the 21st century it continues to grow, fed by the current fame of the Dalai Lama in particular. While the number of international Tibetan Buddhist networks (e.g. Rigpa, Vajradhatu) that have built up around individual lamas with a non-Tibetan following is increasing, the FPMT is among the largest and longest-established.

The Western counter-culture’s meeting with Tibetan Buddhist lamas became possible because of the flood of Tibetan refugees into India after 1959. Like other international Buddhist networks, the FPMT began with a small group gathering around a founder-teacher, in this case Lama Yeshe who, while still in Tibet, was recognised as the reincarnation of an abbess of Ci-me Lung Gompa (Maitreya Project website, n.d.). According to FPMT accounts, he was ordained at age eight and joined Sera Je college where he stayed until 1959 when, as Lama Yeshe said, “China kindly told us that it was time to leave Tibet and to meet the outside world” (ibid.). Lama Yeshe’s successor as spiritual director of the FPMT is Lama Zopa, who was born in 1945 in the Solu Khumbu valley, Nepal and identified as the reincarnation of the “Lawudo Lama” Kunzang Lama Yeshe (1865-1946), a Sherpa Nyingma practitioner. Like Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa was strongly drawn to Dharma practice and his uncle took him to Tibet where he entered a Gelug monastery, leaving with other monks during the Chinese occupation.

Both monks continued their monastic training in exile and met in the refugee camp for Tibetan monks at Buxa Duar in north-east India before moving to Nepal in 1967. Lama Yeshe began gathering a following of students after Zina Rachevsky, a wealthy

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10 Lawudo, the cave that served as his hermitage is now a pilgrimage site for FPMT students. Wangmo (2004: 7) explains that although Lama Zopa was born two and a half months before Kunzang Lama Yeshe died, “highly realised bodhisattvas have the power to do almost anything they wish, and that their actions can be beyond the comprehension of ordinary beings.” She adds that some great lamas manifest “more than one emanation simultaneously.”

Russian-American, met him in 1967.\textsuperscript{12} According to FPMT accounts, Western interest in Buddhism initially astonished Tibetan monks, but Lama Yeshe had a strong curiosity about people who had never heard the Dharma and he had always “prayed that he would be able to teach, in his lifetime and for future lifetimes, the most ignorant people in the world” (Lama Zopa 1992: 9).

A number of the FPMT’s “old students”\textsuperscript{13} first encountered Buddhist teachings when travelling in Nepal or India in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1969, along with his disciple Lama Zopa and with funds from Rachevsky, Lama Yeshe established Kopan Monastery on a hill near the famous Great Stupa of Bodhanath on the outskirts of Kathmandu, an area that has since become a “Buddhist boomtown” (Moran 2004: 36). Tibetan refugees settled there and several other monasteries have since been built in the vicinity. Participating in diverse ways around this now very busy district is a complex mix of people, including the local Tamangs and Newars, Western and Chinese travellers and expatriates and the Tibetan refugees.

The Lamas taught their first month-long course in 1971, the majority of students being hippies (MacKenzie 1996: 7; see also Feldmann 2005). Croucher (1989: 89) suggests that by 1969, around 82,000 Australians had travelled in Asia. Since then the FPMT has run an annual November Lam-Rim retreat, with student intake capped at two hundred and Kopan remains a key site for Westerners to make contact with FPMT teachings today. Returning to their home countries, the early Western converts established new contact zones for Tibetan Buddhism by establishing places for teaching Buddhism. At their students’ invitation, the Lamas toured North America, Australia and New Zealand in 1974, giving teachings and gaining further followers. To manage the growing numbers, Lama Yeshe founded the FPMT in 1975. In the same decade around 25 Western monks and nuns were ordained and in 1973 Lama Yeshe founded the organisation known as the IMI to be the formal body representing the ordained sangha of the FPMT (McDonald

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Rachevsky is referred to in the FPMT literature as a “Russian princess” although the monarchy ended with the Russian revolution. Rachevsky died while on retreat and reincarnated as Edouard, who was ordained as a Tibetan monk (Lama Zopa 1992).
\item \textsuperscript{13} Many of the long-term students of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa are known as “old students” or “senior students,” and when I use this term I mean those who have been involved for years and now play influential roles in the FPMT.
\end{itemize}
1987: 7). The IMI represents over 240 FPMT monks and nuns from diverse backgrounds and nationalities.

According to FPMT accounts, the Lamas taught in complementary styles: Lama Zopa gave most lectures, drawing on both scriptures and his own meditative experience to present the “undeniable, and sometimes painful truth of Buddha’s wisdom” (McDonald 1987: 6). Lama Yeshe was “an ebullient showman” (Croucher 1989: 92) whose talks reportedly helped people to “glimpse … their buddha nature” (McDonald 1987: 7). Both spoke English with strong accents that could be difficult to understand. Lama Yeshe’s English, which he learnt mainly from hippies, had a particularly “anarchistic grammar” and colourful vocabulary. Despite this, Lama Yeshe in particular had an amazing ability to communicate with his students using body language and sometimes coined new English words to express himself (Ven. Gyälten, pers. comm). Although some more conservative Tibetan monks were disturbed by his sometimes unorthodox behaviour (Croucher 1989: 93), his personality gave him strong rapport with the audiences he found in Australia and elsewhere.

In classic Weberian style (Weber 1968), as numbers of followers increased, the network adopted institutional frameworks and general organisational procedures to manage the growing number of affiliated centres. Direct contact with the spiritual founders became more difficult as numbers increased and some senior students were unhappy with the new institutional structures, which they viewed as constraining. In talking to an annual council meeting of FPMT directors in 1983, Lama Yeshe explained that they needed an institution to manage administration, focus people’s energies and generally co-ordinate the running of the centres associated with his teaching:

Let’s say, for example, that one of the older students and I have started a center. We are impermanent; we are going to die. What happens when we are dead? We established the center; it’s never been organized properly; it should die too? No, of course not. Even though our very bones have disappeared, the center should continue to function. But for people to be able to carry on in its work there should be clean clear directions as to what it was established for. If things are set up right, religious philosophies can carry on for generations and generations. We know this to be an historical fact (FPMT Inc, 2004: 58).

Lama Yeshe died in 1984, aged 49. After his death, Lama Zopa (his students now call him “Rinpoche” and use the formal title Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche) became the movement’s spiritual leader. Lama Yeshe’s young reincarnation, Ösel Hita Torres, was
born to a Spanish couple (disciples of Lama Yeshe) in 1985. He has received elements of a Tibetan monastic training and, more recently, a Western academic education, which FPMT students say will be beneficial in helping him to communicate with his Western students, since they expect Lama Ösel to take on spiritual directorship sometime in the future.¹⁴

Today the organisation, having built up its educational resources and institutional structures, is in a strong position to cater to the international upsurge of interest in Tibetan Buddhism. Its centres first flourished in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, but they are now growing in countries with Chinese Buddhist traditions such as Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Many overseas Chinese followers who have emigrated to the West also attend FPMT centres. The Foundation’s administrative headquarters are in Portland Oregon and it also has important institutes in India (the Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh and the Root Institute at Bodhgaya in Bihar) and Nepal (Kopan monastery). Because it is the base of the Dalai Lama, Dharamsala is of key symbolic importance, while Kopan is central to the founding of the FPMT because it was the organisation’s first monastery. The FPMT is also participating in the revival of Buddhism in post-communist Mongolia.

An international Board of Directors and the FPMT Board Executive committee oversee the international movement, which includes representatives from umbrella groups from countries with multiple local centres. The International Office (known as Central Office until 1996) is the FPMT’s headquarters, coordinating communication between Lama Zopa, the Board of Directors and regional/local levels. Beneath these structures are the FPMT centres, each of which is run by its own elected or appointed office-bearers. Lama Zopa appoints directors and resident teachers and locally. At the local level, committees govern the mundane aspects of FPMT centres, such as fundraising and management of the facilities. These are typically elected during a centre’s annual general meeting. Each centre with sufficient resources runs a spiritual programme of teachings and retreats based on the standard FPMT curriculum.

Besides being engaged in constructing holy objects, other FPMT objectives include teaching and practising Dharma, offering social services (e.g., schools and health clinics in

¹⁴ The April/June 2009 issue of Mandala reported that Osel is now completing a Masters in cinematography.
India), educating people about Buddhism and supporting ordained sangha, which in this case includes the major Tibetan monasteries and FPMT monks and nuns. Other projects include prison chaplaincy and hospice services. A typical FPMT centre also runs regular pujas and engages in practices such as sūtra recitation, animal liberation and light offerings.

The Foundation recruits ethnically Tibetan geshes to teach in their Dharma centres, subject to a contract of service to the FPMT, many of whom require interpreters. Several Western monks and nuns such as the Venerables Robina Courtin, Antonio Satta and Rita Riniker also work as “touring teachers,” travelling internationally to give teachings in public venues and at FPMT centres and often leading residential retreats. Beginners who attend FPMT centres are likely to learn introductory teachings from Western teachers (monastic and lay) and occasionally from a visiting teacher or a resident geshe at one of the larger centres. Some students engage in more advanced practices such as tantra, which requires prior lam-rim study and practice and entails initiation (and, ideally, ongoing guidance) from a qualified lama.

**Buddhism and the Foundation in Australia**

Michelle Spuler (2000: 34-38) identifies six key periods in the development of Buddhism in Australia. The first was that of “immigrant origins,” with the first Buddhists being Chinese immigrant labourers and goldfield workers. In Queensland, Sinhalese Buddhists worked in sugar-cane plantations from 1870 until the turn of the century, peaking at around 500 people (Croucher 1989: 4). Both groups were subject to xenophobia and anti-Asian immigration policies and individuals often did not remain in Australia more than a few years, meaning that their presence in Australia had little influence.

These days, however, Bendigo celebrates Chinese contributions to the city’s development. Bendigo is home to descendants of Chinese gold diggers and market gardeners, although generations of intermarriage with European families have reduced their visibility. Represented through the Golden Dragon Chinese Museum, the Joss House museum and the annual Easter parade of a Chinese dragon, the city’s Chinese history
provides, alongside other aspects of the city’s gold mining history, the main tourist drawcard and a source of multicultural capital (Chapter Six).

In Anglo-Australian urban middle-class circles, the late 19th century saw a new fascination with Asian religions in tandem with the then-fashionable Transcendentalism, Spiritualism and Theosophy (Croucher 1989: 6). This set the scene for the establishment of the first Buddhist convert organisations, marking the second period in the development of Buddhism in Australia (Spuler 2000: 34-35). The third period was marked by the first visits by teachers, such as that of American-born Theravādin nun, Sister Dhammadina in 1952, inspiring the establishment of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales (p. 35). The fourth period entailed the arrival of the first residential teachers and establishment of monasteries, two of which were established by Theravādin monks in New South Wales in the 1970s (pp. 35-36). It was during this time that the Lamas first visited Australia. The fifth period involved rapid Asian immigration and increasing diversification of traditions in Australia, beginning with the influx of refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the 1970s (p. 36). Finally, we see the emergence of state- and national-level Buddhist networks which have thus far been low profile (pp. 36-37).

Drawing from Census statistics and other surveys, Roger Thompson’s (2002: 161) history of religion in Australia notes that, despite the nation’s religious diversity, people with a non-Christian religious affiliation remain a small minority of the population. Continuing increases in Buddhist numbers in the latter third of the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first are in part attributable to changes in immigration policy rather than high numbers of formal conversions. Numerically, then, the majority of Buddhists in Australia today are of Asian origins (Spuler 2000: 33). Spuler catalogues over three hundred Buddhist groups in the country, identified by tradition or lineage and state or

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15 Despite being the reason for the city’s establishment, many Bendigonians are aware that this mining had its downside. Atisha Centre’s gardener attributed the lack of topsoil in part to the widespread damage caused by over a century of gold-mining across the region.

16 The first two organisations were in Melbourne and established in 1925 and 1938 respectively (ibid.).

17 Other explanations have been posited. Gary Bouma (1997: 31) speculates that the large increase might be because the 1996 census was the first in which a tick box was provided with the term “Buddhist” but cautions that the same was true for the term “Muslim” and the increase was less than for Buddhists. Another possible contributing factor was the well-publicised visit of the Dalai Lama to Australia in the months before the census was taken.
territory and demonstrates the rich diversity of these groups.\textsuperscript{18} Shiva Vasi (2006: 12-15) notes that the 2001 Australian census showed that only 1.9% of the population (up from 1.1% in 1996) ticked the Buddhist box. In Victoria the same year the Buddhist population constituted 2.4% of the state’s population. In the 2006 Australian census, 2% of respondents identified themselves as Buddhists.

Comprising only a small proportion of Buddhists, then, Anglo-Australian Buddhist converts are a minority within a minority, but their preferred interpretations of Buddhism receive considerable media exposure through books, newspaper articles and suchlike. Thompson (2002: 146) remarks that a 1998 survey indicated that among the Australian adults surveyed, 11.5% had engaged in a form of “Asian meditation” \textit{(sic)} in the past year. A survey conducted in the USA during 2002-03 (Wuthnow and Cadge 2004: 363) showed one in eight reporting that Buddhist ideas and practices substantially influenced their religious or spiritual lives. Further, Buddhist-derived meditation techniques have influenced liberal forms of Christianity, psychotherapy and secular humanism (Klassen 2005). So, the influence of Buddhism goes far beyond those who profess the religion (see also Tweed 1999).

Like other Westerners, many Anglo-Australians regard Buddhism as a secular and rational philosophy that also offers methods for cultivating peace and serenity. Those who explored it often also had concerns about their own society, for instance with regard to social justice, Aboriginal land rights and war (Croucher 1989: 76). Resembling trends in Europe (Baumann 2002a), before the 1960s, Theravāda Buddhism in Australia was of greatest interest for two reasons. First, because people considered it to be closer than Mahāyāna Buddhism to the “original” teachings of the Buddha. Second, British colonial interests in Ceylon and Burma, both Theravādin countries, led to more direct connections with these regions (p. 217). The teachings had undergone a great deal of reform and modernisation in their source countries and in this reformed shape, Theravāda Buddhism was interpreted as “an essentially atheistic doctrine of self-help.” The attraction to Zen and

\textsuperscript{18} Spuler notes a major increase in the number of groups, but no major changes in proportions of types of groups since Adam and Hughes’ 1996 findings. Vajrayāna were 25%, Mahāyana 34%.
Tibetan Buddhism came after the mid-1960s and Lama Yeshe was among the most influential of Buddhist teachers in Australia from the 1970s (Croucher 1989: 90).\textsuperscript{19}

In 1974, Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa visited and taught a course at Diamond Valley, inland from the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, which around 200 people attended. Sharon Gray (1996: 14), a Melburnian journalist with a long association with the FPMT claimed that Diamond Valley was a defining moment for Tibetan Buddhism in Australia, and I heard many senior FPMT students refer to Diamond Valley in this way. At that stage no Buddhist centre had been established and the teachings took place in a marquee in the countryside while participants stayed in a tent city. On the wave of inspiration following that event, students Nick Ribush and Marie Obst (ordained as Yeshe Khadro in 1974) donated a 64-hectare section of nearby land for the development of what became the first FPMT centre in the West, Chenrezig Institute (pp. 8-9). Since then, FPMT students have established a number of centres in urban and rural settings including Tara Institute in Melbourne and Vajrayana Institute in Sydney (see Appendix II). Besides the Dharma centres that primarily serve laypeople, two monasteries operate, one of which now adjoins Atisha Centre; the other community, with separate quarters for monks and nuns, is at Chenrezig. Small study groups, such as Dromtompa (based in Daylesford, not far from Atisha Centre and named after a disciple of Lama Atīśa), have also been established; five such groups in Australia were listed on the FPMT website in early 2007.

At the major FPMT centres, holy objects of one kind or another have been built or are planned. Lama Yeshe urged his students to “think big” and this meant that they should not hesitate to undertake all kinds of projects that initially seemed far beyond their abilities and means, if they would be beneficial to a great number of beings. Ven. Yeshe Khadro recalled, “I once asked [Lama Yeshe] what aspect of Chenrezig we should focus on developing first. ‘Ridiculous small mind, small mind,’ Lama said. ‘The centre is for everyone. You can’t limit. You have to do everything!’” (Khadro 1995: 120). She continues that she did not understand what he meant, but accepted it and in the years since,

\begin{quote}
his words have kept me looking at how our limitations come from our own concepts, the concepts we have of our limited self, and the concept we have of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19}Along with Phra Khantipalo, an English Theravādin monk, and Robert Aitken, a Zen teacher who founded the Diamond Sangha centre in Hawaiʻi.
the task being too great. I sometimes wonder what I would be doing with my life now if I had always tried to trim things down to fit my mind. It seems the more we can let go of limiting concepts, the more space there is in the mind to think about how to get things done (pp. 120-21).

Among other things, Lama Yeshe urged them to build holy objects wherever they could. Completed projects at Chenrezig include a prayer wheel\(^\text{20}\) and two stupas. One of these stupas, built in 1984 to house some of Lama Yeshe’s relics, is located on a landing of a staircase leading up to the institute and, following the Tibetan custom, visitors and residents often circumambulate the stupa three times when they pass it. In a meadow a few minutes’ walk away stand the remains of an earlier stupa, built in the 1970s by amateurs, whose design is derived from the Bodhanath structure – a precursor of the far larger and more thoroughly-planned stupa project in Victoria. Nearby, Garrey Foulkes is building a large structure called the Garden of Enlightenment that includes eight stupas over a large base that will eventually hold memorial urns, a \textit{mandala} house and 108 prayer wheels. Thus the stupa project is not the only FPMT “think big” project in Australia. Ven. Yeshe Khadro’s description of letting go of “limiting concepts” can be understood in the context Tibetan Buddhist mind-training techniques.

\textit{Mind training, meditative and other practices}

A key characteristic of Western Buddhism is the degree of emphasis that monastics and laity alike place on meditation (e.g., Sharf 1995), although lay meditation movements also exist in Asian Buddhist countries (e.g., Jordt 2007). The FPMT teaches meditation of two kinds, as one FPMT teacher (McDonald 1984: 19-22) explains: stabilizing/calming meditation (\textit{śamatha}), which entails developing single-pointed concentration, and analytical meditation that can awaken a direct, intuitive understanding (\textit{vipaśyanā}) of the nature of existence (p. 17). These primarily non-conceptual approaches to meditation are common in most Westernised Buddhist traditions such as Zen and Vipassanā, although, as B. Allan Wallace (2002: 45) notes, Tibetan Buddhist meditation elaborates \textit{śamatha} through concentration on specifically sacred images (visualising tantric deities) and \textit{vipaśyanā} through the contemplation of detailed and structured topics derived from Madhyamaka philosophy.

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\(^{20}\) Lama Zopa (1994) says that “[t]urning a prayer wheel containing 100 million \textit{om mani padme hung} mantras accumulates the same merit as having recited 100 million \textit{om mani padme hungs}.”
While the FPMT’s interpretation of Tibetan Buddhist practice entails much more than I can cover here, some key characteristics can be identified. FPMT Dharma students are encouraged to put the Lam-Rim teachings into practice, maintain bodhicitta motivation – the wish to become enlightened to liberate “all mother sentient beings”\textsuperscript{21} from suffering – and “be better people so we can offer better service to others” (FPMT Inc. 2004: 13). The attitudes of renunciation, bodhicitta and “wisdom-realising-emptiness” (Chapter Four) are considered vital to spiritual maturation. Renunciation does not necessarily entail taking monastic vows but emphasises a shift in outlook: a true renunciant ceases to see the world as a source of gratification and can distinguish fleeting sense-pleasures from ultimate happiness. Lama Yeshe taught his students that they should develop “big love,” using the term to refer to a universal love for all beings. Out of this love arises bodhicitta, the determination to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings, a radical message amidst the onslaught of the “me-first” messages of consumerism. The most effective way to help others, the teachers say, is to become enlightened ourselves.

Many FPMT students see personal change as the goal of Dharma practice (Eddy 2007) but acknowledge that the most important dimension of practice is to establish the correct motivation of bodhicitta. In a book called Making Life Meaningful\textsuperscript{22} (2001), Lama Zopa talks about how “[e]very single action can become a cause of either enlightenment, liberation or happiness in future lives, or rebirth in the suffering lower realms.\textsuperscript{23} It all depends on our motivation.” (p. 52). As he exhorts, one should perform all one’s daily activities, whether working, walking, eating, going to the toilet, or even sleeping and all religious activities such as meditative and ritual practices, with bodhicitta motivation: “If you, one living being, develop compassion in your heart, you […] stop harming others.

\textsuperscript{21} This expression emphasises that all sentient beings are interconnected and equally deserve happiness: at some time in a previous life, perhaps in another universe, every single being has been one’s mother and should thus be treated with the same respect one accord one’s mother of the present lifetime.

\textsuperscript{22} This is one of several FPMT books that the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive publishes for free distribution (paid for by sponsors).

\textsuperscript{23} In Buddhist cosmology, there are six realms (gati) of rebirth (Keown 2003). The lower realms are animal, hell being and preta, and such rebirths are caused by the ripening of bad karma accrued from non-virtuous deeds in previous lives. The other three realms are inhabited by humans, asuras (titans) and gods. Good karma must be accumulated if one is to be reborn in these realms, and it must be replenished through virtuous actions to secure favourable conditions in future lives. Only in a “precious human rebirth” (where one is fortunate enough not only to be born human but also to experience suitable conditions to hear about and practice the Dharma) is it possible to escape the otherwise-endless, karmically-driven rounds of rebirth. It is the mental continuum or mindstream that passes from one rebirth to the next.
Therefore, twenty-four hours a day, you should put all your effort into generating the thought of universal responsibility” (pp. 18-19). This means performing all activities “with the motivation of achieving enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings” (p. 51). What might appear to some as worldly activities because they nourish one’s physical body are, when performed with bodhicitta, helping to further this goal. After all, as the book says, “it all depends on motivation.”

Another key practice is lojong or “mind-training,” whereby one uses one’s imaginative powers to change one’s attitude towards one’s problems. In practising lojong, life’s vicissitudes become the cause of enlightenment. For example an article in Mandala (Graves 2007) on Buddhist parenting stresses that mothers need not feel frustrated that they cannot attend teachings when they have children, because mind-training can be applied to the task of childrearing: even the most unsavoury and frustrating experiences can become fruitful causes of mind-training and merit-making. Lojong helps one to evolve from an ordinary self-centred being into a more spiritually mature and compassionate state (Wallace 2002: 46).

In my experience of FPMT meditation taught in introductory classes, a typical guided session involves about five minutes of śamatha followed by around half an hour of a guided vipaśyanā-oriented analytical meditation derived from the Lam-Rim, during which the teacher draws on a standard topic of contemplation, such as the negative effects of anger and the virtue of patience, or the preciousness of our human rebirth and how to make best use of it. One guided visualisation often taught at FPMT meditation sessions open to the public entails building up a detailed visual image of Śākyamuni Buddha on a lotus throne. Meditators are instructed to take refuge in the Buddha and request his blessings to help them become free of negative karma and misconceptions and receive all the insights that bring one to enlightenment (McDonald 1984: 130). In answer to this prayer, white light streams out of the Buddha’s heart and enters the meditator’s body through the crown of his or her head, purifying negativities. After this follow further prayers, mantra recitation, visualisation and dedication of merit.

The guru or lama (both the Tibetan and Sanskrit terms are used in the FPMT) is the guide who shows the Dharma student the path. Venerable Gyälten at Dorje Chang Institute (pers. comm.) told me that the guru must be properly qualified: “best of course is one who is already enlightened, or has some realizations of the path to enlightenment.
Without an accurate guide, how can the student, who has been reborn countless times and still has yet to achieve enlightenment, have much hope of achieving enlightenment?” The guru’s guidance is especially important if one wishes to practice *tantra*, the esoteric dimension of Mahāyāna, said to be the fastest path to becoming enlightened and thus being able to help others. *Tantra* consists of four progressively esoteric classes, all of which require strong commitment to practice and initiation by a qualified teacher. The initiated practitioner engages in meditative visualisation of a tantric deity who is considered to be a personification of perfected states of mind (Stoddard 2002: 438). The practitioner familiarises his or her mind with the deity, developing a new outlook on the world. They cultivate and come to regard all external phenomena and all states of mind as “displays of embodiments of enlightened awareness, all sounds as enlightened speech, and all mental events as displays of one’s own Buddha-mind” (Wallace 2002: 46). Lama Yeshe (1987: 109-10) says:

> What we have to learn is that the experiences we have through our imagination and those we have through our senses are actually the same! Both exist only for the particular mind experiencing them; they have no ultimate reality from their own side. A major difference, however, is that our ordinary sensory experiences keep us bound to the circle of continually recurring dissatisfaction and suffering while our visualizations of conscious bodies of light, and practices such as the absorption of the guru, introduce us to the very subtle, fundamental level of our being.

This imaginative engagement helps us to develop a “subtle mind of clear light” that helps us to “break out of the prison of our ordinary gross conceptions and experience the unceasing happiness of full enlightenment.”

Meetings between guru and disciple ideally take place on a one-to-one basis, but the FPMT aims to disseminate teachings to a far bigger audience. Teachings are promulgated through public talks, night classes, weekend teachings and retreats and an ever-increasing amount of online material, from archives of teachings and advice to students to an FPMT online gift- and bookstore. The Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive (www.lamayeshe.com), for example, provides access to transcripts of the Lamas’ teachings. Most of the FPMT’s

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24 Action, Performance, Yoga and Highest Yoga Tantra. The study of *sutras* and the basic mental attitudes and training from the *Lam-Rim* are a prerequisite, and aspiring practitioners should be familiar with the concepts of renunciation, *bodhicitta* and *śunyatā*. As one commentator on the worldwide popularity of Tibetan Buddhism writes, “[s]uch are the destructive forces now at work on this planet, […] that only the powerful antidotes found in tantra could counter them” (Paine 2004: 71).
educational publications are based on edited transcripts of teachings that themselves were commentaries on sūtras or expositions of aspects of the Lam-Rim. At Atisha Centre, people leading guided meditations often use a compilation of Lam-Rim outlines (Valham 2001). A hefty textbook based on Lam-Rim teachings by Pabongka Rinpoche is used widely in Gelugpa-affiliated international networks (Pabongka Rinpoche and Trijang Rinpoche 1993) including the FPMT.

Based on these sources, the FPMT has developed a curriculum, including beginner and more advanced levels of study (Cozort 2003). Discovering Buddhism is a two-year part-time programme following the Lam-Rim (see Appendix III), with resource kits to help with group classes at established Dharma centres, satellite study groups and private distance learning. One of the FPMT’s most famous Dharma students is Hollywood actor Richard Gere, who has narrated the first module of the course, “The Mind and its Potential,” available as a free download from the FPMT website. The remaining modules are provided for a fee. Beyond Discovering Buddhism, more advanced courses allow students to study topics from the geshe curriculum.

The mind-training and imaginative exercises that I have sketched here underlie the stupa proponents’ explanation of the purpose of the stupa that I explore in Chapter Four. Ven. Yeshe Khadro described learning to accept Lama Yeshe’s exhortation to think big. This entails not only individuals making an effort to transform their own minds, but also the much more collective effort involved in running a Dharma centre and creating its infrastructure and it is here I resume the story of Atisha Centre’s stupa project.

**From concept to construction**

Ian and Judy Green were instrumental in establishing and running Atisha Centre but have handed on those responsibilities to focus on the stupa in the last decade. The Great Stupa project is overseen by a board of directors, formed in 2003 and consisting of FPMT members who live around Australia and Ian is its CEO. His background in public relations, marketing and advertising has positioned him in influential social networks in the Bendigo community and this has helped him to win local support for the project. People I met through Atisha Centre generally admired Judy and Ian for their major part in

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25 The pair married in 1985 so I use her new surname retrospectively.
establishing and running the retreat (Chapter Five). One Dharma student in his thirties told me that he initially distrusted Ian because he associated the advertising world with deceit, but as he became acquainted with him he developed respect for his integrity.

In 1981 Ian’s father, Ed Green, although not a Buddhist himself, donated fifty hectares of bushland to the FPMT. The same year Ian and Judy and Ken Hawter moved onto the property. Lama Yeshe visited in August and suggested that a community be established there with residences, a school, health centre, hospice, monastery/ nunnery, retreat facilities and food crops. He envisaged it evolving into a place where Buddhists could live peaceful and harmonious lives that would inspire others. At the centre of this community would stand a large stupa that would also house a gompa and library, emphasising the role the Buddhist centre would have in educating people about Mahāyāna Buddhism. The first issue of Atisha Centre’s newsletter, *Chorten*26 (Atisha Centre 1982:8-9), featured a two-page illustration (Fig. 2.5) envisaging how this “total society,” as Lama Yeshe called it, might look. Ven. Gyatso (see Chapter Five) told me that Lama Yeshe wanted the stupa have an educational role about other religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, because the source of all misery and conflict was ignorance and narrow-mindedness.

This vision of a Buddhist community was reminiscent of the utopian intentional communities of the hippie era but when I lived there in 2003 I did not hear these communitarian ideals discussed, only discovering that it was part of the original idea from the 1982 issue of *Chorten*. Nonetheless, the aspiration to create a retreat, teaching centre and residential area retained support and in the 1990s volunteers constructed the rammed earth buildings – the monastery buildings on the higher hill and near the stupa site, the gompa. More than two decades after Lama Yeshe’s 1981 visit, Atisha Centre is home to a few lay residents (numbers fluctuate) and its main purpose is to educate people about Tibetan Buddhist concepts and practice. The stupa, too, is intended to help fulfil this educational role.

The first concept drawings (figures 2.5 and 2.6) for the proposed stupa take Bodhanath in Kathmandu as a model. Subsequent newsletters made little mention of the project, however, and a decade later, *Chorten* presented a new concept drawing (Fig. 2.7)

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26 Tibetan for stupa; the name for the newsletter was Lama Yeshe’s suggestion.
On August 14, 1981, Lama Yeshe's vision was working on a grand scale. He was walking over the 850 acres of Atisha Centre and describing the future he saw for it.

"Looking over the panorama he would exclaim with delight and repeat over and over again: "Wow... it's so big... it's so big!"

A vision, as big as the land that lay before him, was obviously being created. He began to talk about a "total society".

At Atisha Centre, Lama saw the opportunity we have on this vast, undulated land to design a society based on values of avoiding harm to all beings and working for the benefit of others.

The foundations of this society would include a monastery housing monks and nuns from around the world. It would be located on the highest hill, when we reached the summit of this hill, Lama began pacing out an enormous rectangle to set the overall dimensions of the monastery. The rooms for the monks and nuns, he said, would surround a courtyard with a temple and beautiful gardens.

At the geographic and symbolic centre of Atisha Centre there will be built the main temple or "Gompa". Squatting on the hilltop site, Lama began the temple foundation.

"The temple will be built in the shape of a Stupa or Chorten (symbol of Buddha's immortal mind); the building will house a temple capable of seating over 200 people, a library on the second floor, and Buddhist relics and texts in the spire. The innermost of the hall is essential to the development of the Centre and Lama was very keen that modern comfortable housing be designed for them. The Shrine of Marpa has given its blessing to the design of 25 family homes on the property. Building is well under way on the facilities for students attending courses at Atisha Centre. A kitchen and shower block has been constructed, and a kitchen/dining room and hall are under construction. The vision of a total society encompasses more than just these buildings. It includes being self-sufficient in food production, setting up our own schools and community health centres and so on. In short it means living our lives in such a way as to create an example for other societies who wish to live in peace and harmony."
Figure 2.6 (left) Concept drawing for stupa (Atisha Centre 1982: cover), by Garrey Foulkes

Figure 2.7 (right). Australian-style stupa design (Atisha Centre 1992: 1) by Melbourne architects Ron Riddle and Neil Radcliff
for an Australian-style stupa (Atisha Centre 1992: 1). Lama Zopa’s response to the 1992
design, the article reports, was “enthusiastic,” the concept was “fantastic,” and he
“congratulated the architects for their creativity.” However, two years later, Lama Zopa
suggested that the Australian stupa be based on the Great Stupa of Gyantse in southern
Tibet (Fig. 2.8).\textsuperscript{27}

The Gyantse stupa is the sole surviving \textit{kumbum}\textsuperscript{28} in Chinese-occupied Tibet, others
being destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (Snellgrove 1993: 9). Its shape, consisting
of an elaborate terraced structure housing seventy-five shrine rooms dedicated to a wide
range of tantric deities, evokes the \textit{mandala}-style design of the Pure Lands,\textsuperscript{29} which are
the abodes of various Buddhas, but not to be confused with the heavens in which
unenlightened gods dwell. \textit{Mandalas} provide a model of the cosmos (Ricca and Lo Bue
1993: 33-34) and, as Mus (1998) notes with regard to Borobudur, many larger stupas take
the form of a three-dimensional \textit{mandala}, with the surrounding terraces of great stupas
having four gateways consistent with two-dimensional \textit{mandalas}. The Gyantse \textit{Kumbum}
and the design for the Great Stupa take a similar form in plan and elevation views (Figs.
2.9 and 2.10).

Rabten Kunzang (1389-1442) was a Gyantse prince who, besides his political and
military exploits (Ricca and Lo Bue 1993: 18), was a patron of religious arts and
literature.\textsuperscript{30} He commissioned the Gyantse stupa after having built a monastery and temple
in the same city during the early 1400s. Begun in 1427 and consecrated in 1474, the
\textit{kumbum} is a monument both to the power of the Gyantse dynasty and the religious
devotion of the people who built it (p. 31). In his study of the relationship between
authority and architecture in Japan, William Coaldrake (1996: 283) suggests that the

\textsuperscript{27} Ian told me that Lama Zopa sent him pictures of possible designs for some years after his visit to Atisha
Centre in 1989. The image of the Gyantse stupa that Lama Zopa sent to Ian was in a coffee-table style book
on Tibet whose title I do not have. The book is now housed in the relic exhibition collection, open at the
page showing the same image and Lama Zopa’s handwritten message recommending the design.

\textsuperscript{28} The Tibetan word \textit{kumbum} (sku-\textit{bum}) means “one hundred thousand images” and is applied to great
stupas (the large, tiered style of stupa).

\textsuperscript{29} In tantric Buddhism, the Pure Lands are represented as \textit{mandalas}, diagrams representing the cosmos based
on a circle with gateways in each of the four cardinal directions leading into its centre. The universe consists
of four continents with Mount Meru at its centre; rising above this are several levels of heavens and below it,
several hells (Mus 1998, Snodgrass 1985). Stupa symbolism references this cosmology, which includes a
central pole or life-tree that acts as the axis of the world.

\textsuperscript{30} The following history comes from Ricca and Lo Bue’s (1993) book extensively documenting the Gyantse \textit{Kumbum}, which transcribes the prince’s name as Rab-brtan-kun-bzang.
Figure 2.8. Gyantse stupa image in brochure promoting the Great Stupa project
actual process of construction provides insight into the relationship between architecture and authority in that the activity of building becomes “an attribute of authority” because of the scale on which people and resources must be organised. The Gyantse *Kumbum* was built at a time when the Tibetan aristocracy was powerful enough to provide a check on the political power of monasteries (Ricca and Lo Bue 1993: 38). Such a resource- and labour-intensive structure could not be built without political control of the region and a good relationship with the local monastic order because of the need to mobilise labour through the corvée system, access materials and execute the art and religious rituals that sacralised the edifice (ibid.).

The height of Gyantse stupa is approximately 35 metres (p. 39), with the finial at the top of the spire bringing it to 43.2 metres in height, while the base is fifty metres wide on each side. Most *chortens* and stupas are built so that any hollow interior spaces are filled up with ritual offerings and relics (Bentor 2003), but this *kumbum* is built around a solid core, using rocks, mud and wood. It has eight storeys and 75 chapels, decorated with 2500 square metres of murals. Each successive storey is smaller, resulting in a terraced pyramid topped with a spire. It is designed as a teaching device (Ricca and Lo Bue 1993: 35) showing the path from *samsāra* to *nirvāṇa* and the tantric pantheon and lineages of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism up to the fifteenth century (pp. 39, 47-51).

While the exterior of the Great Stupa is closely modelled on the Gyantse stupa, the interior (Fig. 2.10) is an innovation, turning it into a hybrid temple and stupa, with some spaces filled with holy objects and other spaces open for religious gatherings. The replica will be made of concrete and steel, making it possible to incorporate within it a large central hall housing a three-storey high Buddha statue, a 3.9 metre high statue of Padmasambhava (Chapters Five and Seven) and seating for 500 people. As Ian said in an interview on Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio (Green and Crittenden 2007), on the outside the stupa is “a direct copy” of the Gyantse stupa but “internally it will be completely different, because inside it will have a very large Gompa or temple.” He added that this style of stupa is also known as [a] *Gomang Chorten*, or a stupa of many doors, symbolising the many doors, or many paths to enlightenment. […] [These doors] open into little shrine rooms, and so as you ascend the stupa, you go from one level to another, rising to higher and higher levels of realisation, if you like.
In one of the upper rooms, the collection of relics (Chapters Four and Eight) will be exhibited in a permanent display and another high room will house sacred texts. Back at ground level, the tiered circumambulation paths through gardens around the stupa will be lined with 100,000 smaller stupas and planted with trees, while beneath the surface, four “treasure vases” provide the necessary offering to the local spirits.

The idea of building a holy object to last a millennium is a recurring theme in recent Tibetan Buddhist projects. Industrially-produced materials such as concrete and steel replace stone, mud and wood. As the different building materials demonstrate, the setting and technologies are very different in the contemporary developed world. The industrial materials allow the building to incorporate more internal rooms while maintaining structural strength. In order to ensure that this complex structure was sound and that it could last a millennium, the stupa developers sought professional support. Structural engineering, final architectural plans and quantity surveying were completed in late 2003. The engineers and architects adapted the internal design to meet contemporary building regulations, providing for fire safety, wheelchair access and toilets. In an article on the project, Peter Weiss (1999), an FPMT-affiliated Buddhist architect who has helped develop plans for the stupa, identified several logistical challenges in his work on the plans: the need for adequate waterproofing considering the structure needs to last a millennium, the incorporation of elevators and stairs without affecting either the external shape or the internal spaces and the provision of natural light and ventilation for the main shrine hall. Peter told me that the design lifespan of one millennium is far longer than many contemporary buildings, which range from around fifty years for some buildings to around two centuries for structures with longer-term value, for instance, Parliament House in Canberra.

In July 1995, Ian Green, Garrey Foulkes and Peter Stripes, all long-term Dharma students, visited the Gyantse stupa in Tibet and took measurements, photographs and video footage. When they told the Gyantse abbot about their plan to build a replica of the

\[\text{31} \text{ It was also part of the brief for the 33-metre high Great Stupa of Dharmakaya in Colorado (Schmidt 2001).}\]

\[\text{32} \text{ With regard to geomantic and astrological properties of the building and site, Lillian Too, a Singaporean feng shui expert and student of Lama Zopa, donated her services. She advised that the south-facing entrance was excellent but recommended that the offices, women’s toilets and plant room be re-located (GSUC n.d.-e).}\]
stupa, he was pleased and gave them several objects to put inside their stupa. These included a carved slate depicting Rabten Kunzang and a terracotta votive tablet representing Śākyamuni Buddha, which are now part of the relic collection for the stupa. A cast was taken of the votive tablet to produce copies which are covered with gold leaf and given to benefactors of the stupa.

Fundraising for the Great Stupa

Quantity surveyors’ estimates in 2003 put the cost of the stupa structure at AUD$15 million, an amount far greater than could be raised in the Bendigo region. Generally, the FPMT’s funding derives at the local level from donations, course facility fees and the proceeds of Dharma centre shops selling books and gifts. For the running of the international organisation and its many projects, funds are raised internationally, such as through the Merit Box donation scheme, Wisdom Publications and the online Foundation Store. Fundraising for the Great Stupa is also aimed at an international Buddhist audience, including non-FPMT Buddhists. Fundraising for Dharma objects is kept separate from more mundane fundraising, such as to upgrade retreat facilities (Chapter Four).

Ian has applied his marketing experience to raising the public image of the stupa. It has a recognisable logo and promotional materials, including the website and brochures (e.g., Fig. 2.8 above), all display the logo and follow an identifiable brand style. For prospective donors, such marketing increases the sense that the project is in capable hands and is one reason why an important source of funding comes from corporations. These provide financial donations, discounts on materials or services, or the materials themselves. There have also been several fundraising gala-style vegetarian banquets in Melbourne and Sydney with auctions of items such as a jade mālā (rosary) blessed by Lama Zopa.

A particularly ambitious attempt to attract donations for the stupa was the Jade Buddha statue. It was launched in 2003 as an investment scheme that required the purchase of a large jade boulder for USD$750,000, to be carved into a seated Buddha figure. A promotional flyer printed to attract investors ran the headline: “Invest in the

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33 His name, according to the relics brochure, is Kushap Loten La (Pende Chuze La).

34 The 18 metric tonne, nephrite jade boulder was discovered in 2000 during Jade West/Polar Gemstones’ mining operations in British Columbia, Canada, and is the largest single piece of AAA (gem-quality) jade ever to be found (Jade Buddha for Universal Peace, n.d.). Other expenditure included shipping to the carving...
world’s largest jade buddha and double your money in five years.” The investors would provide money for the purchase and carving and their return would come from profits from the sale of an estimated 220,000 items (small Buddha statues, pendants, prayer beads etc) to be made from the many offcuts produced during the carving process and sold around the world. After five years, the plan said, the investors’ capital would double to USD$2 million. The flyer estimated that the gross income from selling the small items would total USD$8.2 million. The projected net profit was USD$2.3 million, which would contribute to the construction of the Great Stupa. However, the following year the investment scheme idea was dropped, on Lama Zopa’s advice and the statue was paid for with loans and donations and completed in 2008. The offcuts have been fashioned into jade mālās, small Buddha statues, pendants and various other items, all of which are available for suggested donations in a system I discuss below. The carvers also presented a scaled-down replica of the statue to Thailand’s King Bhumibol (GSUC n.d.-h). The full-sized statue, which Lama Zopa named the “Jade Buddha for Universal Peace,” was completed in 2008 and in 2009 began a tour of several countries with its first stop in Vietnam. International sources of donations are vital to the success of the stupa project and Ian and Judy Green tell me that when they take relic exhibitions to Singapore and Malaysia during annual Vesak celebrations, they raise far more money for the stupa than at local exhibitions. The Jade Buddha may also attract generous donations while it is on tour.

The “Benefactor application form” (Appendix IV) lists various levels of donation to the stupa project, in return for which benefactors receive an “acknowledgement” such as a badge depicting the Great Stupa, a gold-leafed votive tablet or a consecrated miniature replica of the Great Stupa (Chapter Eight). After providing their details, new benefactors choose one of nine levels of benefaction; ranging from AUD $50 to $88,000. As the listed donation increases at each level, a correspondingly bigger acknowledgment is given in return. Another option that stupa benefactors can select is a memorial stupa. Many FPMT centres bless and house portions of cremation ashes in or near to holy objects and the circumambulation paths around the Great Stupa will be lined with these smaller memorial stupas. Ian told me that in terms of price these are comparable with non-factory in Thailand, costs for carving the Buddha and the offcuts, shipping to Australia, insurance, marketing, commissions for marketing, travel and returns to investors (investment plus interest).
Buddhist options for interring cremation ashes. Grander memorials are also available: for instance, two large prayer wheels will be placed on either side of the main entrance to the stupa, sponsored at $50,000 each. All benefactors receive a subscription to *Chorten Stupa Edition*, which not only keeps people informed about developments around the project but also invites them to give further support to the project. In this benefactor-acknowledgement system, then, benefactors do not “purchase” a commodity so much as receive gifts in acknowledgement of their donations. A donation box provided an opportunity for those who wanted to drop money in the box rather than sign up as benefactors and while most who donated this way gave small donations I saw a few people making substantial donations (over $100).

*Chorten* frequently announces new ways that benefactors can contribute, for example to help to build another stage in the stupa project. For instance when the concrete footings were poured, a “Buddha Base” benefactor was sought for the slab of concrete which will one day serve as the base for the three-storey high Buddha statue in the main shrine room of the stupa. A woman named Beng Choo Green donated $2000 to make handprints in the slab of concrete (GSUC n.d.-g). Recent issues advertise a number of packages in units of $10,800 each. For instance *Chorten 20* called for twelve “Foundation Father/Mother” benefactors (GSUC n.d.-b) who would have their names inscribed on the twelve main pillars of the stupa and the next issue announced all twelve had been found (GSUC n.d.-l); those who took up this offer included several who shared one $10,800 unit between them.

Some aspects of the stupa project are eligible for community grants and corporate donations. For example, they applied for and received $8000 from the Victorian Multicultural Commission to remodel the kitchen in the Exhibition Centre to the required standard for the cafeteria or restaurant they hope to establish. A state government funding body, the Regional Investment Development Fund, granted $5400 toward the cost of soil testing at the stupa site (GSUC n.d.-k). The special loan from Bendigo Bank that was granted in 2006 towards the erection of the first level of the stupa and partly underwritten by the council (Chapter Six) provides another component of fundraising, to be repaid through donations.
Khensur Kangur Lobsang Thubten Rinpoche, an Adelaide-based lama, conducted the consecration ritual that preceded the removal of trees on the stupa site in November 1994. Lama Zopa instructed Ian to write to various lineage leaders to request relics for the stupa and those who responded by providing relics helped to widen the connections across Buddhist lineages (Chapter Eight). In 2003 several high-ranking Buddhist teachers conducted further blessing ceremonies: Sakya Trizin (head of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism), Thich Phuoc Hue (patriarch of a Vietnamese Buddhist organisation in Australia and New Zealand) and Khensur Rinpoche. Lama Zopa has also visited the site several times and in June 2007, the Dalai Lama visited to bless the Padmasambhava statue.

The planning application and public consultation took place in 1999. In 2000 earthmoving machines removed vegetation and levelled the top of the low hill, cutting into the sides to make three concentric terraces, the uppermost tier being a large circular area. At each of the cardinal points, a ramp provides access connecting the lower and uppermost levels. The southern ramp leads from the stupa site to the main gompa, the western ramp to the monastery and the eastern one to the remains of Sandhurst Town and the new relics exhibition centre. Apart from adding drainage after runoff from heavy rain caused flooding, the site remained this way for several years. Over two hundred holes were drilled around the three levels of circumambulation paths in the rocky ground and filled with compost in preparation for planting trees, although as of 2007 no trees had been planted.

In mid-2004 a contractor laid the first stage, involving concrete footings, costing around AUD$150,000. In 2006-07, the second stage (the ground floor steel frame and shear walls) were erected, with the help of a bank loan. The promotional brochure, produced in 2001, estimated completion by 2010. This was an optimistic estimate since by early 2009 the third stage of construction had not yet begun. The delay has been the result not only of the complex structural engineering and architectural details, but also the need to raise funds for each new stage of the project. Meanwhile, other projects associated

The choice of trees for the landscaping has been a point of debate. Ian talked about planting claret ash trees around the circumambulation paths but others said it would be better to have native trees: not only could these better survive long periods of drought but also this was more consistent with the increasing value Australians place on native plants.
Figure 2.9. Plan of exterior of Great Stupa, adapted from plans by Lines, MacFarlane and Marshall Pty Ltd (LMM), Architects and Urban Planners
Figure 2.10. Section of Great Stupa, adapted from plans by LMM
with the stupa project are under way. In late 2004, the former Sandhurst Town restaurant near the stupa site was renovated and converted into what is now called the Great Stupa Exhibition Centre. Tenzin Phuntsok Atisha, the Dalai Lama’s representative in Australia, conducted the opening in January 2005. The building houses an exhibition of the collection of relics that is to remain until the stupa is ready, creating an attraction for visitors well before the opening of the actual stupa. A glass-topped desk displays items including objects made from jade and in one corner, Dharma books are available for a donation. The exhibition centre also has a shrine housing a two-metre-high marble Kwan Yin statue, provided by the Quang Minh temple. Two other large statues, the jade Buddha and brass Padmasambhava, are also part of the stupa project.

**Arising in-site/sight**

Although the stupa ended up being based on a traditional Tibetan design, the idea persisted that this stupa would be something Australian. A brochure produced in the mid-1990s announced the planned structure as “The Great Stupa of Australia.” The name that the Dalai Lama supplied during his 1996 visit to Sydney was “Tse-chen Cho-khor Ling,” which translates as “Dharma Wheel of Great Compassion” (Sanskrit “Mahakaruna Dharmachakra”). The stupa developers adapted this to “Great Stupa of Universal Compassion.”

Peter Weiss referred to the design as “pure unadulterated stupa” and indeed the stupa replicates the Gyantse design in terms of plan and elevation. However it is very much a contemporary structure in that it meets local building and safety regulations (toilets, sprinkler systems, disabled access and so forth) and includes large interior spaces that were not possible in the stone and mud original. This idea of an external structure inspired and shaped by both the desire to preserve a tradition and the need to accommodate contemporary conditions is what Baumann calls a strategy of assimilation, wherein the imported religion absorbs elements of the host culture to fit its requirements, a topic I return to in Chapter Three.

Another FPMT member, writing about the Gyantse original and its replica says, “This temple … has inspired countless pilgrims, and will one day do the same on the edge of Australia’s vast inland” (Lafitte 1999: 22), expressing the hope that the structure will

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36 The multi-tiered style stupa is known as a “Great Stupa” and “Great Stupa of Great Compassion” would be too repetitive.
become a major site of Buddhist pilgrimage. What is taking place at the stupa site itself is only part of the story, however, since the project has a global context. The physical site of the stupa acts as a focal point for a transcultural nexus, a useful place to consider the ambiguities that arise in the contact zone in which Buddhism establishes a physical presence in a new context. Through my brief outline above of the three styles of stupa that were considered for Atisha Centre, I have already hinted at a core paradox in the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism to Australia: whether or not the new structure would be visibly Tibetan or adapted to local conditions. This evokes the theme of transculturality and tradition, to which I now turn.
CHAPTER THREE

TRADITIONAL AND TRANSCULTURAL

Figure 3.1. The central shrine of Atisha centre’s main gompa in 2007. The Dalai Lama’s photograph (obscured) sits on the throne directly in front of the Buddha statue.

A frosty Wednesday night, 11 June 2003

In Atisha Centre’s main gompa over twenty Dharma students are assembled for the second in a new series of weekly classes. The majority appear to be Anglo-Australians, but a few are of East Asian descent. Almost everyone is middle-aged or older. While the gathering waits for the teacher to arrive from the monastery on the nearby hill, most people sit on the purpose-made maroon cushions and mats arranged in rows facing the front. A few stand around in groups, talking about business related to running the Centre. Several plastic chairs have been placed at the back for those who are uncomfortable sitting on cushions. Before each seat is a low table with a folder of photocopied prayers and other texts used during formal gatherings in the gompa since it is disrespectful to place sacred texts or objects on the floor. Tealight candles burn at each of the shrines, a row of seven water-bowls lines each of the three main shrines and Tibetan herbal incense perfumes the air.
Soon, someone hears the latch of the external door to the small side room at the front of the hall and shushes the others: “Gen-la is here!” People fall silent and rise to their feet. The centre’s newly-arrived resident geshe, a maroon-clad Tibetan monk in his forties, enters the room, accompanied by his Irish interpreter, Noel. The students become attentive and place their palms together in prayer position, leaning forward a little to lower their heads below the level of the geshe’s head, a Tibetan convention demonstrating respect. The geshe’s manner is modest, as if embarrassed by the students’ smiles and deference, and after briefly acknowledging them he rearranges his robes, wrapping his yellow teaching robe over his maroon ones. He performs three full prostrations before the shrine and the high throne, a box-like structure on which sits a large, framed photograph of the Dalai Lama (Fig. 3.1). Then he seats himself on the lower throne, facing the audience. Noel sits at a low table angled to allow him eye contact with both geshe and audience. Microphones near the geshe and interpreter amplify their voices and feed into an audiotape recorder.

The monk’s monastic name is Geshe Konchok Tsering, but people refer to him as “Gen-la,” a variant of Geshe-la. Both terms refer to Dharma teachers, with the -la affix implying affection and respect. As Gen-la settles, most of the students prostrate themselves three times, stretching out face down on the floor in an enactment of their orientation towards and respect for the “Guru Triple Gem” (the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and the teacher who embodies these). They settle onto their cushions and chairs, some wrapping themselves in blankets. Following the lead of one of the monks sitting in the front row, everyone sings the Tibetan lines of the Refuge and Bodhicitta prayers and recites the English translation, both versions of which are provided in the prayer book. Gen-la points out that refuge prayer appears in two versions in the book – one is to be

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1 Geshe Konchok Tsering (b. 1963) is Atisha Centre’s resident teacher and came to live at the monastery in May 2003. He trained as a geshe over a seventeen-year period, primarily at Sera Je monastery in South India.

2 The emphasis that the FPMT places on serving the Dalai Lama positions the organisation on one side of a long-running history of rivalries between and within the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders. The current Dalai Lama takes an inclusive approach by stressing what the orders have in common and the FPMT follows suit. In contrast, the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) discourages its students from reading Dharma books other than those by their founder-teacher, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (Kay 2004). The NKT separated from the FPMT in 1991 because the NKT rejects the authority of the Dalai Lama as head of the Gelugpa lineage. This dispute arose because the Dalai Lama requested his followers to desist from venerating the spirit/deity Dorje Shugden, whom he determined was inimical to harmony within and between the orders. The NKT considers Shugden to be a protector-deity of central importance.
recited before Taking Refuge\(^3\) and the other prior to listening to teachings; he wants to make sure that people know which one to use.

Over the next two hours the gathering listens to Noel’s interpretation of Gen-la’s detailed commentary on a section of a text called “The Bodhisattva’s Way of Life”, a discourse on the path of selfless compassion. A few people, including a Western nun, take notes. A question-and-answer session follows. Later, a volunteer brings out a big pot of hot chai masala (sweetened spicy tea) and serves everyone at their seats; the students wait for Gen-la to bless the tea and take a sip before they pick up their cups. At the end of the evening, they chant further prayers in Tibetan and after Gen-la has left the room, they tidy up and bustle off, driving back to Bendigo or further afield.

As the name “Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition” and the choice of a 15\(^{th}\) century model for the Great Stupa illustrate, preserving tradition is central to the FPMT’s self-representation. The kinds of teachings and the formal manner in which they were delivered; the use of Tibetan and Sanskrit; and the shrine room imagery and protocol perpetuating the hierarchical and male-dominated\(^4\) monastic institution that I have just described reflect this dedication to preservation. On the one hand the organisation stresses its continuity with the Tibetan tradition that gave rise to it. The idea of a cohesive international organisation with an “authentic” lineage is clearly displayed in the gompa: the founder of the Gelug lineage, Lama Tsong Khapa and two of his disciples are represented by statues on the shrine. Additionally, all FPMT centre shrines display the Dalai Lama’s portrait above pictures of Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa and Ösel (Lama Yeshe’s reincarnation or tulku), demonstrating the FPMT’s connections with the Dalai Lama and his high international standing. On the other hand, the night-class I describe exemplifies

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\(^3\) This refers to taking refuge in the Guru Triple Gem and it is recited during the formal ceremony through which one becomes a Buddhist or reaffirms one’s commitment to that path. Other short texts often recited prior to teachings include the Heart Sutra (in English) and a “Mandala offering” prayer. At the end of the teachings, the merit-dedication prayer dedicates positive karma (created by the occasion) to the welfare of all beings and in particular to FPMT projects, and a series of prayers are made for the long life of the Dalai Lama, Lama Zopa and Lama Ösel.

\(^4\) The high-ranking teachers in the Gelugpa order are ordained men. In Tibetan societies and indeed in existing monastic codes, nuns are assigned a lower status than monks. This is represented in seating arrangements at formal gatherings, where monks and nuns sit in the front rows, but nuns sit in lower-ranked positions than monks. Full ordination and geshe training are unavailable to women in the Tibetan tradition, although many people advocate changing this. Several nuns who teach in the FPMT have obtained full ordination through other traditions, for example via the Taiwanese sect, Fokuangshan.
the intercultural character of Tibetan Buddhism today. Chanted prayers in Tibetan by people not proficient in that language; an Irish-accented English interpretation of a Tibetan commentary on an eighth-century Sanskrit text; a Tibetan monk born in Sikkim to refugee parents and trained in an exile monastery in southern India; Western monastics in Tibetan robes; the cushions and the mass-produced plastic chairs; Indian *chai masala* rather than the salty butter tea unpalatable to most non-Tibetans – these are just a few markers of the transculturality of Tibetan Buddhism in Australia.

In this contact zone, Atisha Centre’s *gompa*, I observe the juxtaposition of the FPMT’s mission to preserve the teachings of the Gelugpa order of Tibetan Buddhism, while also rendering them intelligible interculturally. Kenneth Tanaka (1998: 294-95) claims that the tension between tradition and adaptation is particularly pronounced in the USA because of a competitive religious field in which people expect teachings that serve them as individual consumers. Tanaka’s generalisation applies to this Australian context, too. A key question for those importing Buddhism into this competitive religious field is: to what extent should a group remain faithful to the practices of the established lineage or lineages to which it affiliates, and how much should it attempt to re-style practices to local tastes and circumstances? This dilemma echoes a key concern in translation theory: how much should translators “domesticate” the text (Venuti 1995), placing more emphasis on making it locally intelligible at the risk of losing the source’s intended meanings and how much should they “foreignise” the text (ibid.), remaining true to the original at the risk of failing to make the text intelligible to the target audience?

The FPMT treads both paths at different moments, but places more explicit emphasis, as its name suggests, on preserving tradition. The organisation’s objectives must be considered in the context of the same circumstances, outlined in Chapter Two, that have brought about this intercultural setting. The urge to Westernise or even Australianise is held in check by the practice of guru devotion with its emphasis on a tradition transmitted from the Buddha via a lineage of enlightened teachers. But when converts seek to preserve tradition, it is an intercultural activity that creates an evolving form descended from interaction between the imported tradition to which they subscribe and the contemporary local and global cultural context.

The validation that the converts seek is found in the organisation’s representation of an authentic, unbroken lineage that its founders have undertaken to preserve. To
contextualise my discussion of the combination of traditionalist discourse and transcultural practice in the FPMT, I show how two pairs of oppositions (traditionalism and modernism, and rationalism and devotionalism) feature in discourses of the international and intercultural landscape of global Buddhism. But first, I describe Atisha Centre attendees and discuss the combination of Western and Buddhist idealism that led to Western engagement with Tibetan Buddhism.

**The people**

The *geshe’s* evening teaching in Atisha Centre is an example of teachings that are aimed at people who have already acquired some prior knowledge of Tibetan Buddhist teachings, for instance through the Discovering Buddhism programme or their own reading. The regular students in this class, whose presence indicates their commitment, are among the primary pool of actual or potential stupa supporters. So, who are the people involved with the FPMT, and what is it about Tibetan Buddhism that attracts them?

According to the retrospective accounts of Western Buddhists who came of age in the 1960s and ’70s, they had lived in unprecedented material comfort but found that this did not deliver happiness. They were aimless and hedonistic in their rebellion against their own society, experimenting with psychedelic drugs and free love. Some of the more visionary and idealistic among this generation tried to establish alternative communities, spurred by spiritual and political ideas, which influenced the founding of Atisha Centre (see below and Chapter Five). Others explored lands that jet-travel had made accessible. In Asia, some travellers investigated mystical forms of Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism, empowered by the assumption that the world was theirs to explore and to borrow from wherever they saw fit. For some of these spiritual explorers, Tibetan Buddhism provided an attractive alternative to what they considered to be the heartless materialism of Western modernity (Moran 2004: 108). In a discussion of Buddhism in the USA, Coleman (2001: 54) suggests that it appealed to radicals and reformers who already questioned the establishment – through their interpretation of Buddhism they challenged accepted norms and practices in their society (much as Tang Dynasty Ch’an masters or Indian *siddhas* did in the past). In a form of romantic Orientalism, Buddhism provided a means of thinking about and offering an alternative to the perceived failings of the West.
Fast-forwarding to the first decade of the new millennium, the majority of individuals who attend Atisha Centre are of Anglo-Australian or European cultural origins, as is the case elsewhere in the Australian FPMT. Broadly speaking, these people share many characteristics with many other educated, white middle-class urbanites searching for a cure for their existential unease and a sense of meaning and purpose (cf. Danforth 1989: 254). Western expressions of Tibetan Buddhism thus sit alongside several interrelated “alternative” spiritual paths that Westerners have explored since the 1960s, including various interpretations of several Eastern religions, Neopaganism and the New Age (e.g., Pike 2001, York 1995). By alternative, I mean these are alternative options to more widely-professed religions such as Christianity and Judaism. The contemporary approach of alternative spiritual seekers, in a individualistic and consumer-oriented society, is to consider all of these as options from which they can choose, tailoring a personalised practice to suit individual tastes.

Among the senior students who have been involved in the FPMT since its early days are several who travelled the hippie trail through Asia during the 1960s and ’70s. A more diverse demographic profile exists in the larger urban centres, where, for example, a substantial number of ethnic Chinese students attend. Newcomers attend teachings and classes on offer for a time, perhaps buy a few books at the bookshop and melt away again; a few become more involved. Those who are inspired by their experience of the Centre may go on to become more involved, with the option of taking out various levels of financial membership to support the costs of running the Centre with the incentive of course discounts. Many, however, prefer to subscribe to the newsletter at a cost of $20 a year and pay either the suggested donation or a lesser amount for individual teachings and courses.

A sociological study of Atisha Centre (Aarons and Phillips 1997, Phillips and Aarons 2004, 2005) was conducted six years before my first visit. Since I did not conduct a questionnaire-based survey of mailing-list members, I report their published findings, which closely match my own impressionistic observations. The researchers sent questionnaires to all people on Atisha Centre’s mailing list (N=333) and received 169 responses back (a rate of 50.8%). In 2003 I noted around three hundred addresses on the

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5 The authors collected “standardized individual-level data about spiritual practice and belief, … social identifications … and social background factors” (Phillips and Aarons 2004: 8). Their findings on practice
mailing list, although only 58 were financial supporters and the remainder subscribed to the newsletter. Among those who responded to the 1997 study, baby boomers predominated. Phillips and Aarons’ respondents were more female (63%) than male (34%, 3% missing data), and people of middle-class and professional, clerical and managerial backgrounds outnumbered other categories such as trades, labouring and unemployed. About two thirds indicated they had a professional or managerial occupation; nearly 40% held university qualifications. In keeping with my impression that people who go to Atisha Centre tend toward the political centre or left, only six percent of survey respondents professed a right-wing political commitment. Phillips and Aarons equate the social characteristics of this profile with Roof’s (1999) wider-ranging research on spiritual seekers of the baby-boomer generation. The respondents exhibit a high level of formal qualifications and professions and are in general part of the liberal middle-class of regional Victoria, representing a relatively privileged sector of society.

Phillips and Aarons’ respondents came into contact with Buddhism in a variety of ways. Around thirty percent reported that the way they were first introduced to Buddhism was through “personal study, general reading” (Phillips and Aarons 2005: 221), another 28% through friends or family, while 21% were first introduced to Buddhism through a public lecture, television programme or advertisement. Ten percent had their first introduction to Buddhism through travel. Whatever their manner of introduction to Buddhism, the fact that they subscribed to Atisha Centre’s mailing list shows that each of these respondents developed their familiarity with Buddhism at least in part through involvement with the Centre’s programme of activities and teachings.

In my own research, I explored what attracted these people to Buddhism and found they were to various extents motivated by concerns about personal and social problems, moved by Buddhism’s beauty and its emphasis on compassion, and impressed by its logical consistency. Their approach, despite a rhetorical emphasis on “tradition,” evokes

and belief do not concern me here, although in passing I note that the questions they asked in the questionnaire appear be composed with a Theravādin understanding of Buddhism, focussing on participants’ understandings of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path. In Tibetan Buddhism, these do not receive the same degree of emphasis as Māhāyana teachings, on bodhicitta for instance.

To the above observations I would add that the “old students,” the people who encountered Tibetan Buddhism while travelling in Asia during the 1960s and ’70s played a pioneering role in the establishment of places like Atisha Centre at a time when Buddhism had far less representation in their home countries.
what some scholars refer to as “modern Buddhism” or “Buddhist modernism,” which I situate within a wider consideration of the complexities of contemporary Buddhism.

**Buddhist orientations**

Scholars have described and categorised the multitude of expressions of contemporary Buddhism in a variety of ways. Among these, two frequently-used paired categories include immigrant and convert, and traditional and modern. While both pairs have their limitations, they provide a valuable touchstone for thinking about the FPMT as an organisation that uses discourses and a material culture of traditionalism but is, nonetheless, a hybrid modern organisation in keeping with what Martin Baumann calls “Global Buddhism.”

**Immigrant and convert**

Much of the literature on Buddhism in Western contexts identifies an ethnic divide between Asian immigrants and Western converts. For example, writing about Buddhism in the USA, Charles Prebish (1993) distinguishes Asian-American immigrants and North Americans of European ancestry. Baumann (2002b: 53) traces how Prebish’s distinction based on ethnicity came to be known as “immigrant” and “convert” Buddhism, a pair that has become known as the “two Buddhisms.” The immigrant category has proven useful for considering how temples with minority ethnic affiliations maintain connections with home-country identities through conducting temple affairs in their own language rather than the local language. The convert category generally consists of people from the majority culture, even if their adopted religion is considered a minority one in their country. Australia is similar to the USA, since groups of different lineages and ethnic origins seldom interact (Bucknell 1992: 218), although ecumenical societies such as the Buddhist councils of Victoria and New South Wales operate in part to increase understanding and interaction between the diverse groups.

A shortcoming of this paired category is that it glosses over particularities. For instance, “immigrant” is inadequate when referring to the grandchildren of immigrants who may identify more with their country of birth than that of their grandparents and “convert” is equally problematic when referring to the Buddhist offspring of converts (Baumann 2002b: 53). Further, some scholars identify more commonalities across the two
categories (e.g., Cadge 2005) while others observe diversity within either category (e.g., Croucher 1989: 113-4). And what should one call the Chinese-diaspora benefactors of Tibetan Buddhist projects (see Zablocki 2005)?

Most Tibetan Buddhist centres in the West are led by ethnically Tibetan lamas with an entirely or almost entirely non-Tibetan congregation. Noting this, Eva Mullen (2001, 2006) identifies “two Tibetan Buddhisms” in the USA, that of the converts from the host culture who enjoy privileged access to the ethnically Tibetan *sangha* and that of Tibetan laypeople who have only rare contact. She details how teachings and retreats are structured in ways that suit prosperous Westerners rather than lay Tibetans who as new immigrants are often too busy making a living to attend. Certainly, other than on the occasion of the Dalai Lama’s visit when lay and ordained Tibetans came from Melbourne and further afield, the only ethnic Tibetans present at Atisha Centre were ordained religious specialists such as the FPMT-appointed *geshe*.

The Great Stupa project encourages the blurring of immigrant/convert boundaries because, first, it is the initiative of a convert group with strong connections to ethnic Tibetan Buddhism and, secondly, it involves members of other Buddhist communities through its internationally-targeted network of benefactors and the variety of Buddhist lineages that have provided relics for the stupa. This illustrates its role as a contact zone between immigrants and converts: not just a meeting ground, but a place which, through its distinctive history and characteristics, helps to constitute new relationships. The project’s ecumenical orientation has encouraged increased engagement with a range of non-FPMT Buddhist groups sympathetic to the project, hence the relic tours to Vietnamese Buddhist centres in Australia that I discuss in Chapter Eight.

**Buddhist traditionalism and modernism**

In an article titled “Protective amulets and awareness techniques,” Martin Baumann (2002b) looks beyond the immigrant/convert typology to note another twofold distinction, which he labels “modernist” and “traditionalist.” The term “Buddhist modernism” is also called “modern Buddhism” (see below), reformist Buddhism (e.g. Kuah-Pearce 2003:10) or “Protestant Buddhism” (Obeyesekere 1970). Baumann uses the term modernist drawing

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7 Baumann distinguishes canonical Buddhism, the scriptures recording what are claimed to be the original Buddhist teachings, from traditional Buddhism, the cultural practices associated with Buddhist cultures.

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on literature about Theravāda Buddhist responses to colonisation and missionary Christianity in South Asia (e.g. Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988) and adapts it for his analyses of European adaptations of Buddhism. Buddhist modernism arose from twentieth-century Asian reform movements that were themselves shaped by religious developments in the West.

Modernist expressions of Buddhism prevail among upper- and middle-class Asian and non-Asian Buddhist practitioners and sympathisers today. The approach emphasises understanding scriptures while also de-mythologising and psychologising traditional cosmology. It advocates social reform, egalitarian values and universalism and represents Buddhism as congruent with and complementary to scientific rationalism (Baumann 2002b: 60-61). Donald Lopez (2002) considers modern Buddhism to be distinctive enough, despite various local manifestations and histories, to constitute a separate sect or school of thought with its own distinctive lineages, literature and practices (pp. xxxi-xxxix). Its adherents, whether Chinese, Sinhalese or Anglo-Australian, consider true Buddhism to be “a system of rational and ethical philosophy” while dismissing practices such as relic-veneration that are commonplace in traditionally-Buddhist cultures as superstitious (p. xvii).

The “rhetoric of meditative experience” (Sharf 1995) is central to Buddhist modernism, hence Baumann’s article title’s reference to “awareness techniques.” In contrast, traditionalist lay Buddhists do not meditate and they consider enlightenment to be attainable only after many lifetimes and often consider it an option exclusively available to monks. Instead, these lay Buddhists try to accumulate merit for rebirth in a heavenly realm, for instance by providing material support to the monastic community. They may also seek the help of charms and spells for the success of crops, warding off evil spirits and other concerns (hence “amulets” in Baumann’s title). Baumann thus uses “tradition” to describe cultural and religious practices that have evolved in various countries and become established over generations. Traditionalist and modernist Buddhism coexist in tension, with reformists critiquing traditionalist approaches (2002b: 55-56).

8 Organisations that further secularise their approach by removing Buddhist language, symbolism and ritual include the Insight Meditation Society and Shambhala training and these Baumann considers “post-modernist” (p. 60).
Geoffrey Samuel’s (1993) discussion of three different orientations (“pragmatic,” “karma” and “bodhi”) in Buddhist practice adds another dimension to these modern/traditional distinctions. From an FPMT perspective, rather than seeking to divert the power of the Dharma into magical protection in this life (the pragmatic orientation) or happiness and prosperity in future rebirths (the karma orientation), FPMT teachers emphasise the pursuit of enlightenment (bodhi) for the benefit of all sentient beings as the primary reason to practice, an approach that is consonant with Buddhist modernism’s message of enlightenment for all. The first two orientations are associated with “traditional” Buddhism while bodhi is the primary orientation for modernist Buddhists. However the FPMT also places a strong emphasis on the role of karma in spiritual practice: one must create good karma to assist one’s pursuit of bodhi. Practices associated with the karma and pragmatic orientations are often turned to the purpose of bodhi, for example in the spirit-propitiation rituals performed in preparing the ground for the stupa (Chapter Seven). These bodhi-oriented modernist interpretations of Buddhism are more popular in the West than the pragmatic and karma orientations.

To return to Baumann (2002b: 59), Tibetan Buddhism complicates his model because of the apparently incompatible juxtaposition of modernist and traditionalist modes of practice and orientation. Tibetan Buddhism encountered modernity later than the countries that Europe colonised but the Dalai Lama is usually cited as one of the major modern Buddhist thinkers of Asian origins (e.g. McMahan 2008:6). Certainly in the FPMT practices that appear traditionalist are common, for instance, the emphasis on preserving identifiably Tibetan Buddhist doctrines and karma-oriented practices. Yet in the end, Baumann stresses that Western Tibetan Buddhism is not so exceptional after all, since students participate in apparently traditionalist practices (e.g., guru devotion, prostrations and liturgical practice) in pursuit of enlightenment by means of meditation and scriptural study. The Tibetan Buddhist “enchantment” with holy objects, which emerges as a theme in my exploration of FPMT motivations for building stupas is an extension of these practices and thus remains consistent with Baumann’s explanation.

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9 Samuel adapts Spiro’s (1970) model, developed for Theravādin Buddhists in Southeast Asia to the Tibetan context. Samuel uses Sanskrit terms in place of Spiro’s Pali terms and “pragmatic” in place of apotropaic, but both terms stand for the use of Buddhist ritual to influence one’s environment for non-bodhi-oriented outcomes, for instance to ensure the weather is right for one’s crops to flourish.

10 The Buddhist theory of karma posits that virtuous actions generate positive results or merit (Sanskrit: punya, Tibetan: sonam) and non-virtuous actions lead to negative results.
In Australia, Croucher (1989: 16) notes that Euro-Australians liked Buddhism’s rationalism, accordance with science, pacifism and emphasis on interrelatedness. Tibetan Buddhism, for example, because of its emphasis on traditionalist elements such as devotional practices (p. 59), appears to depart from characterisations based on Theravādin cases. Also making links between Buddhist modernism and contemporary expressions of Tibetan Buddhism, Abraham Zablocki suggests (2005: 364) that the notion of Buddhist modernism needs considerable modification when discussing Tibetan Buddhism. He suggests (p. 367) that Tibetan Buddhism’s appeal in the West can be understood through investigating “the history of Western representations of Tibet as a sacred repository of mystical insight and magical power” (367). He considers what emerges to be a hybrid of traditional and modern elements. I suggest, however, that the FPMT, although portraying itself as the curator of an endangered tradition and thus appearing traditionalist, exhibits modernist Buddhist tendencies in taking this very role.

Handler and Linnekin’s (1984) distinction between the commonsense and scientific meanings of tradition is useful here. The commonsense meaning is “an inherited body of customs and beliefs” (p. 273) that “posits a false dichotomy” entailing two mutually exclusive, reified states. Social scientists, however, consider tradition to be an interpretive process best understood as a symbolic construct (ibid.) that entails selection of particular elements of the inherited (or adopted) “tradition” rather than wholesale preservation (279-80). What people think of as tradition is, rather, a model of the past that cannot be separated from current interpretations of the past (p. 276).

The discourses of Buddhist modernism are oriented towards a return to what its proponents consider the “core” or essence of the Buddha’s teachings while jettisoning two and a half millennia of adventitious cultural “accretions”\(^{11}\) (McMahan 2008: 65). Buddhist organisations engaging in these detraditionalising strategies present their own developments as dynamic innovations that return to the original spirit of the Buddha’s teachings that show the path to enlightenment. They reject practices and beliefs that they consider to be unnecessary accretions (such as gods, image worship, and magical

\(^{11}\) This evokes the parallels with Protestant rejection of Catholic image veneration and the prohibition of “idolatry” in the Abrahamic religions, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis. See, however, Gellner’s (1990) discussion of where the Protestant/Catholic parallels between Theravādin and Māhāyana Buddhism fall short.
practices) or a hindrance to spiritual progress (such as dogmatic thinking and blind obedience to authority) (p. 5).

David McMahan (2008: 13) identifies three elements that shape modern Buddhist discourses: scientific rationalism, romantic expressivism and Western monotheism (especially the Protestant Reformation, missionisation and more recent interreligious dialogue). Western representations of Tibetan Buddhism have been strongly influenced by romantic and Orientalist fantasies depicting Tibet as “an isolated pocket of ancient wisdom untainted by modernity,” (McMahan 2008: 247, citing Lopez 1998). This enchanted Tibet represents “both the typical modernist hope for a rational religion and, conversely, the longing for ‘magic and mystery’” from an idealised land that is being destroyed by foreign forces. McMahan (2008: 246) situates Western engagement with Tibetan Buddhism within discourses of modernism by showing how what appear to be “returns” to tradition are in themselves modern responses to contemporary themes.

The FPMT’s emphasis on preserving tradition and venerating holy objects might seem anti-modern. However, the organisation espouses modernist Buddhist discourses in that it is strongly focused, like reformist Buddhist groups around the world, on the possibility that any serious practitioner can attain enlightenment. The organisation deploys traditionalist discourses, for example, through its emphasis on preserving the lineage and its interpretations of karma and rebirth. Further, rituals such as the ground-blessing ceremonies associated with the construction of new buildings like the stupa are conducted by high-ranking Tibetan Buddhist monks who seek to propitiate local spirits (Chapter Seven). Such rituals have an apotropaic dimension because according to their rationale, if the spirits are displeased, crops will fail, affecting the prosperity of the region.

Tibetan Buddhist institutions such as the Gelugpa sect that have attempted to re-establish themselves in exile derive their sense of legitimacy from their claim to continuity with the past (Dreyfus 2003: 322). The FPMT represents itself as contiguous with an established and authoritative tradition, far more so than self-consciously “Western” Buddhist movements. Ian explains that Buddhism is “attractive because of the living lineage: one can trace people who’ve experienced the teaching right back to the Buddha, people who can say ‘this came to me from so and so and that came to them from so and so’” (quoted in Susskind 1999: 57). In general FPMT teachings adhere closely to traditional Tibetan interpretations of doctrines such as karma. As an institution and
international network with local centres, however, the FPMT is a contemporary phenomenon in a world of global travel and transcultural communications. It is an organisation whose membership mostly consists of converts, who carry particular culturally-constituted religious assumptions and distinctive kinds of self-consciousness that shape how and why they practise Buddhism. In portraying itself as a “living lineage” and the conservator of a tradition, the FPMT implicitly distances itself from modernist Buddhist movements that explicitly emphasise innovation (such as the FWBO). The tradition that the FPMT seeks to preserve is, however, created out of a dynamic interaction between the needs of its adherents for something established and authoritative on the one hand and on the other, something that is accessible and relevant to their own experience as members of an individualistic Western society, hence removed from the context in which it arose and significantly reinterpreted and reinvented (cf. Handler and Linnekin 1984, Hobsbawm 1983). While the FPMT stresses “preservation of tradition,” in their usage “tradition” is grounded in an authentic and reliable lineage, in contrast to contemporary rootless innovations. The FPMT is, through its very emphasis on preserving tradition, a participant in Buddhist modernism.

The travellers who “met the Dharma”12 in Asia sought Buddhist solutions for their own and the world’s problems. In explaining how they became convinced that this spiritual path is valid, FPMT students told me that the teachings offer explanations about how the mind works, why we suffer and how we can liberate not only ourselves but all sentient beings from suffering. They consider Tibetan Buddhism to be an indisputably logical philosophy and this emphasis on Buddhism’s rationality is a key theme in Westerners’ engagement with various schools of Buddhism and is also characteristic of various modern reformist Buddhasisms in Asia. Lama Yeshe used a common phrase that has become widespread for describing Buddhist practice when he said that it is not a philosophy or religion but “a study of your own mind […] a science of the mind” (Paine 2004: 60-61) and he taught that enlightenment can be attained through training the mind. The reference to a science of the mind is characteristic of Buddhist modernism and is a key refrain in the increasing engagement between Buddhism and science in recent decades (McMahan 2008: 113-14). The field of neuroscience, for example, has reported observing

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12 This term is in widespread use among Tibetan Buddhist converts, and has origins in a Tibetan phrase that Moran (2004: 112-13, quote on 113) translates as “to meet or be introduced to the Dharma / to enter into (or follow) the Dharma.”
beneficial results from Buddhist practice (e.g., Carter et al. 2005), while scientists and Buddhists are engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue (e.g., Dalai Lama et al., 1991). Buddhist teachings are also considered to complement clinical psychology and psychotherapy. For example, Lorne Ladner (2004), a clinical psychologist and student of Lama Zopa, advocates combining insights from Tibetan Buddhist mind-training techniques with the growing field of positive psychology.

A “sensible philosophy”

The FPMT’s emphasis on preserving tradition is closely tied to Lama Zopa’s choice of a traditional prototype for the Australian stupa, but it is when we consider who becomes involved with FPMT Buddhism and how, that we see the extent of its transcultural recontextualisation. Garrey, the stupa board member who lives in Queensland, is building a set of stupas at Chenrezig Institute, where I visited him and spent a couple of days shifting concrete blocks for him at the construction site. He told me that before encountering the Dharma, he did not think “the world’s problems” could be solved by religion, but in the 1970s both his partner and other Australian friends participated in Lam-Rim courses at Kopan and, to Garrey’s disgust, “they all came back, like, mightily impressed.” He continued:

I thought I’d better go and check that out just so that I could get the necessary information to convince my partner and my friends that the whole thing was basically nonsense. And to cut a very long story short I got shot down in flames, you know? At the end of the month course I just had nowhere left to turn, because everything the Lamas had been saying was, as far as I was concerned, 99 percent irrefutable and I had a gut feeling that the remaining one percent was only due to my inability to clearly understand what the question was. […] It was more of a sensible philosophy than a kind of religion based on concepts and things that couldn’t possibly be proved. It was completely logical, there was an answer to everything, if you wanted to look long enough and hard enough for it.

Ven. Tony Beaumont was well known at Atisha Centre because he had lived at the monastery for some time and had taught numerous classes on Buddhism. I first met him during my second visit to Atisha Centre in 2004 when he had returned from a sojourn at Chenrezig and a pilgrimage with one of his benefactors to India, Nepal and Tibet. At that time he had begun serving as director for the International Mahayana Institute, the monastic wing of the FPMT. He told me that in his earlier life he had been restless and
rebellious, was angry about the Vietnam War and for various “internal” reasons, could not
stay with one job. He travelled a lot, leading to his encounter with Buddhism in Nepal in
1976, which he said, rather than being “just a blind faith,” explained the internal and
external problems that concerned him:

So Buddhism explained it, […] I was listening to the teachings and they
sounded so very logical to me and […] it seemed to … [accord with] personal
experience. And it also had the Lamas, who are these great wise,
compassionate beings, people like I hadn’t met before, so it gave me some
kind of confidence in the methods.

In a similar vein, Ian explains the growing interest in Buddhism “because it’s not based on
blind faith. Rather it involves logic, and requires each person to examine and analyse its
teachings” (quoted in Susskind 1999: 57).

“Alexa,” an FPMT student based in Bendigo, had been involved with Buddhism
since the early 1990s. Her family was involved in a progressive Presbyterian church and
she had attended its youth group, but gave up on Christianity in her late teens because it
had not filled her needs: “it didn’t matter how much I prayed, it just had no impact on how
I felt at all.” She studied psychology and sociology and later worked in nursing. Her sister
introduced her to teachings at the FPMT’s Tara Institute in Melbourne at a time when she
was suffering from depression, and she said “I felt as though somebody had handed me a
key.” She told me that she found Buddhist teachings “logical” and “comfortable,” and said
that they nurtured what she characterised as the “different parts of us,” (i.e., of the person):
physical, mental / emotional, and spiritual. She also liked the way that the Lam-Rim
provided a systematic and “graded out” path that leaves “not a stone unturned.”

While the above accounts testify to the importance FPMT members place on what
they consider to be Buddhism’s logicality and rationality, another vital dimension
addresses emotional needs. Many of the older students speak of an overwhelming feeling
of “connection” with a lama which seems to resonate very deeply with some hitherto
unarticulated need. This emotional disposition provides the foundation for the guru-
disciple relationship that is so crucial to Tibetan Buddhism and is often explained in terms
of karmic bonds formed in previous-life encounters. Such connections are manifested in
dreams, visions, or an overwhelming emotion when first meeting the “right” lama. For
example many FPMT students talk about a particular lama as emanating a powerful sense
of unconditional love, wisdom or peacefulness.
Enchantment

Daniel Capper (2002) analyses the central role that this practice of guru devotion plays in Tibetan Buddhism. In particular he focuses on the enchantment experience (p. 209) that comes from the practice, a state of intense “spiritual potency” (p. 10) which disciples experience in relationship to their guru and that is central to serious vajrayāna practice (p. 11). While Capper focuses on this experience from the perspective of theories about psychoanalytical transference, my interest is in the broader contextual experience in relation to holy objects and religious practices. Capper describes enchantment as a “powerful cognitive and emotional state” that practitioners believe transcends lifetimes and is key to the disciple’s spiritual development (p. 10).

One of Capper’s interviewees regarded the relationship between guru and student as an exchange: the guru gives the disciple blessings and profound spiritual guidance and the disciple responds by offering service and engaging in the practice with faith and determination (p. 164). Capper’s interviewees variously report feeling awe, respect, joy or gratitude towards their gurus. In their accounts, the lama embodied such qualities of kindness and wisdom to a degree the interviewees had not seen before. For instance Bob (p. 156) describes feeling “lit up” at first sight of the lama who was to become his guru and Maria (p. 152) said that meeting hers was a profoundly transformative experience that continues to shape her life in highly beneficial ways. Some people claim that this special feeling comes from karmic connections made in previous lives; for instance Capper tells how Shannon (p. 165) saw a poster in a shop window advertising the visit of a lama whom she “instantly recognized’ […] as her teacher from past lives and felt ‘happy to see his face.’” What Capper’s interviewees most admired about the Lamas was their “unstinting desire and capacity to help others” (p. 168).

While I did not focus on studying guru devotion, occasionally people reported or appeared to have strong emotional responses to the presence of a lama. On the occasion of Lama Zopa’s arrival at Auckland airport in 2004 I saw a young woman in tears. She had just received a brief blessing from him and seemed to have found it deeply moving, in contrast to my own experience: I received a similar blessing without feeling anything profound. People explained the difference in terms of the presence or absence of prior

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13 Capper (ibid.) refers to the blessing energy that the lamas emanate as chinlab (byin brlabs), that is, “‘blessing,’ ‘grace,’ or ‘engulfment in splendor,’ of the lama.”
karmic connections with the lama in question. As an example of a typical account of how people responded on meeting “their” lama, Jon Landaw, who met Lama Yeshe in the early days, recalled:

As soon as he walked into the room, smiling that wonderful smile of his, I experienced something I had never felt before. It was as if iron filings filled my heart and Lama was a powerful electro-magnet that brought them to life, causing them to churn about and rearrange themselves. He was different from anyone I had ever met before, and I liked him immediately. Although he appeared to be someone who had transcended the ordinary, he wasn’t at all otherworldly; instead, he was very human and I felt I could trust him completely. To say that his English was poor would be generous; in fact, it was very “broken,” as he himself said, but I had never met anyone who could communicate so wonderfully. When he spoke about developing a “warm peeling” I did not understand his words at first. However, I soon realized he was talking about the “warm feeling” that was growing within me at that very moment. Besides being so warm and clear, Lama was also very humorous. This endeared him to me immediately (quoted in Hulse, forthcoming, n.p.).

Similarly, describing Lama Yeshe’s 1977 visit to Spain, author and Dharma student Vicki Mackenzie (n.d.), says that when he entered the room where he was to teach, he was “smiling at everyone, looking so kind. Then he started to laugh. He kept on laughing, laughing.” She reports that Maria Torres (who later gave birth to Lama Ösel) said of her impression of Lama Yeshe:

I’d never seen anyone like him. His energy, the power coming out of him, was incredible. He was transmitting with his face, his hands, his whole body – every way he could to make us understand. I didn’t understand a word that he said, but something happened inside me. I can’t describe the feeling, but it was very strong. Spontaneously, I put my hands together. I knew this was a man I could dedicate my life to (Mackenzie n.d., n.p.).

This idea of the guru as embodying kindness is characteristic of guru-devotion stories. Another story shows the emotional comfort people sometimes derive from thinking about the guru. A Sydneysider visiting Atisha Centre for a teaching told me that before she became a Buddhist she worked in a bank that was held up in an armed robbery. While hiding in a back room she felt overwhelmed by her terror and tried to think of something to calm herself. She visualised the Dalai Lama’s face and felt much calmer; out of gratitude she later investigated and became involved with Buddhism.

14 She is referring to the prayer position that Tibetan Buddhists adopt in front of holy beings and holy objects.
Peter Moran, a Buddhist and anthropologist, discusses this kind of resonance (2004: 115). After relating how his Western Buddhist interviewees spoke about their reasons for going to Nepal (often in search of a guru) he recounts how his own teacher “joked with me, shook his head with exaggerated sadness and said ‘No choice, you know? You are my student and I am your teacher, even we don’t want it that way – past connection.’”

Another aspect of the encounter with the Lamas is found in stories of the formative days of the FPMT, when people attending their teachings talked about the extraordinary qualities of their Dharma teachers:

Rumors circulated about the lamas […]. They were clairvoyant, had extraordinary psychic powers, didn’t need sleep or food, some could fly, others could materialize and dematerialize their bodies at will. The very high ones, it was whispered, could “die” in the lotus position, and remain like that for weeks on end, their bodies not decaying but sending forth sweet smells. It was all rich, mystical stuff (MacKenzie 1996: 11).

The Dharma students considered their teachers’ powers to be far superior to their own, which reinforced their confidence in them, enhancing the students’ admiration for what they considered to be the comprehensiveness and rationality of the Lamas’ teachings. The sense of enchantment extends beyond the relationship with the guru into associated ritual practices and embodied experiences of holy places and holy objects (see also Chapters Four and Eight).

Although I never experienced this emotional connection with Tibetan Buddhism, my own hands-on experience of an offering ritual allowed me an insight into the affective and multi-sensory dimension that many Dharma students find inspires the more cognitive aspects of their practice. On my first day at Atisha Centre, Yien charged me with the daily task of making water-bowl offerings in the two *gompas*, showing me the instruction sheet and the bucket, tea towel and jug that were the main tools of the ritual. I tended five shrines, each with seven bowls, a total of thirty-five bowls: twenty-one on the main *gompa’s* shrines and fourteen in the smaller *gompa*. Following the instructions the next morning, first I lit incense and candles and as I poured water into the bowls murmuring the holy syllables “*Om Ah Hung, Om Ah Hung, Om Ah Hung*…” to bless the water. These sound are said to purify body, speech and mind; this and longer *mantras* are used for blessing food or drink. The instructions told me not to place an empty bowl on the shrine because this was like offering “nothing” to the Buddha (at night the empty bowls are
placed upside down). To avoid this, one holds the stack of empty bowls in one hand, tipping a little water into the topmost bowl before placing it on the shrine. The instructions recommended visualising that I was not offering water but rather precious nectar to a very special guest, the Buddha himself.

As I learned the correct way to perform the offerings, I noticed that many prescriptions and proscriptions were involved. The ritual requires precision, so that each bowl is positioned a rice-grain-width from the previous one and filled to a rice-grain-width from its top. The actions generate analogous karmic imprints in a form of “sympathetic magic,” so that, for example, spilling water and making a mess leads to messy mental states, while a focused and sincere practice develops a correspondingly positive mind. The performance took half an hour in the morning and another half-hour in the evening to empty and wipe them. As with other devotional practices, correct performance of the rite purifies negative karma and creates positive karma. As an instance of participant-observation, it brought me into daily contact with holy objects and underlined for me the relationship between how we perform activities and our states of mind. While I could never enact the ritual as fully as someone with strong faith in its efficacy, the experience allowed me insight into how devotional activities such as this can engage all of the senses (e.g., the aesthetics of the shrine, the sound of chanting and the smell of incense), one’s body (careful enactment of precise actions), speech (mantra and prayer recitation) and mind (visualisation). Such activity requires full engagement through what Buddhists refer to as “body, speech and mind.” The contexts in which one views relics and circumambulates stupas, among other devotional activities, similarly engage the whole person. While my Protestant-shaped feeling about holy objects and associated rituals was that they seemed unnecessary for the cultivation of wisdom and compassion, I came to see how such a practice involves the development of mindful action and engages the senses, to have an effect beyond words that has considerable appeal in a disenchanted world.

This engagement through the senses has consequences for how people experience Buddhist places. Several people told me that their interest in Buddhism was triggered by contact with an element of Buddhist material culture or a specific Buddhist place. The sumptuous and colourful shrines such as the ones where I made water-offerings provide an aesthetic experience. The beauty of Buddhist statues in particular provides a source of attraction for many. For example, Alexa told me that she was first attracted to Tibetan
Buddhism because she liked the melodic chanting when *pujas* were conducted in the Tibetan language.\(^\text{15}\) Like many other Buddhist converts, she expressed her appreciation for the beauty of Tibetan Buddhist culture, including the sounds (chanting, bells, etc) and sights (e.g., the ritual objects used in the *puja*, and the traditional stupa designs). Similarly, an Australian monk named Lhundrup said that before he became interested in Buddhism, he saw a photograph in the newspaper of a monk in the maroon and gold Tibetan robes and something in him “clicked” because of karmic connections made in previous lifetimes and he felt the urge to find out more; several years later he was wearing the robes himself.

Tibetan Buddhists consider that holy places are infused with the blessings of the holy beings who have practised there and people report that the feeling of peace they experienced there led them to find out more about Buddhism. Further to this, the stories and practices that evolve around such places add to their aura. Ian told me that in the 1970s, before he had become a Buddhist, he was travelling in India and visited the stupa at Sarnath:

I walked into this place and it was like any, like nowhere else I’d seen; it was just some something was just completely — … Well, on the one hand, it was like, completely peaceful and like, ‘Wow!’ […] Y’know like an oasis, in this sort of, this incredibly busy, noisy, garish country. I mean India’s lots of positive things as well […] I saw this incredibly imposing — [pauses] I didn’t know what it was but there was something about it that it was just like a big [hesitates] *monolith* – um, just there in front of me. Incredibly ancient, you could tell that and somehow incredibly powerful. [Pause] And anyway I didn’t know then, I didn’t find out ‘til quite a bit later that it was a stupa. It was I guess the first stupa I had seen. I didn’t think at that point that I would spend most of the rest of my life building a stupa, but it definitely had some sort of impact on me, that’s for sure.

This experience of a stone monument as incredibly powerful, Ian is implying, had some influence on his future involvement in a stupa project. As something that an Anglo-Australian traveller in India experienced as powerful, the stupa\(^\text{16}\) in that moment of intercultural encounter did a kind of contact work, perhaps awakening or deepening his interest in Buddhism.

\(^{15}\) On some occasions pujas are conducted in English, and some people prefer this because they can then understand the words. However, others found the English version less inspirational because the words were spoken rather than sung, thus having far less aesthetic appeal.

\(^{16}\) Presumably the Dhammekh or Dharmarājika stupa. Buddhists revere Sarnath as the place where the Buddha first taught after his enlightenment.
Other Western Buddhists who had travelled in Asia also reported that the presence of many holy objects, including stupas and temples, made a particular kind of impression on them. Such impressions may stimulate changes of perspective in people who are already Buddhist and this is particularly relevant for understanding how people come to support the stupa project. Writing for *Chorten*, Di Gee (1998: 2) expressed changing views about the value of religious monuments such as wats (temples) during her first trip to a Buddhist country, Thailand. She remarks how different the Thai landscape was from the Australian landscape she was accustomed to:

> The ornateness of many of them [wats] was quite dazzling and in stark contrast to the humble dwellings of the villagers. I did wonder about this contrast. It was very easy to make judgments about the seeming incongruence of the relative economic poverty of the villagers to the wealth of the Wats.

She then described daily life as she had seen it, noting that it “was subtly permeated with Buddhism.” For her this included the frequent sight of wats and stupas, the orange-robed monks and the sight of the offerings made at Buddha statues and spirit houses, all of which she interpreted as a sign of “deep respect and devotion to the spiritual.” She was impressed that Thai people displayed respect for children and were patient in “difficult situations” such as the heat, traffic and crowds, and she attributed this to the way that Buddhist ethics were “intrinsic to the culture, not separate from it. […] This contributed to a more harmonious, stress-free society. The stresses were there, but they dealt with them in more skilful ways.” She concluded:

> In the past I’ve often questioned the practice of building huge “monuments” at enormous cost when there are so many people leading impoverished lives. After my seven weeks in Thailand I’ve come to appreciate how effective such statues of Buddhas, and stupas, can be on the mind. The ornate richness of the Wats seem only fitting when one understands that people see them as tangible expressions of their aspirations to a higher condition.

Thus Di expresses a change of heart about the value of religious monuments, which I also read as the development of a more favourable attitude towards the Great Stupa project. Other FPMT Buddhists I spoke with developed a supportive view of the stupa either in a similar manner, telling me that they initially found the notion too extravagant but, in time, whether or not they visited a Buddhist country, came to consider the ideals they represented as so important and visionary that immediate concerns about cost paled into insignificance. This change in view developed alongside a growing conviction as to the
benefits of guru devotion and veneration of spiritually powerful objects (Chapter Four). Through experiencing sacred Buddhist places in Asia, then, Ian and Di, along with others, came into contact with something that attracted them to the Dharma. By building a stupa in their own home country, the stupa proponents seek to bring that ineffable experience to their compatriots.

Tibetan Buddhism appeals to Alexa and other FPMT students because of its “totality.” Not only does it make logical sense, but its emotional and aesthetic qualities provide for the need for a heartfelt engagement. For people like Alexa, Di and Ian, the sense of Tibetan Buddhism as a coherent and logically consistent set of teachings is complemented by experiences of enchantment. The emphasis on holy objects, as manifested in the elaborate gompa shrines and the stupa project, confounds stereotypes that portray Buddhism as a philosophy of logic and path of simplicity. FPMT members explain their attraction to Buddhism in terms of disenchantment with a materially-rich but spiritually-malnourished Western context and the re-enchantment with a materially poor but spiritually-rich East (cf. Paine 2004). With the stupa project and the creation of Dharma centres, they seek to transplant some of that aura of spiritual wealth to aid the disenchanted, de-spiritualised West. Yet the question of how to translate as well as transplant the imported Tibetan tradition is a recurring theme in the FPMT as it is in other international Buddhist organisations.

Preserving and / or adapting tradition

I have had many conversations over the years with Western Buddhists about whether and how much Buddhist teachings, practice, architecture and arts can be translated and adapted to their familiar cultural ground, and how much that ground itself needs transformation. Most FPMT members tend toward the view that “legitimate” adaptation takes hundreds of years and that the first people in a society to adopt Buddhism should follow the established conventions rather than innovating, in order to preserve the valuable knowledge of past experts. This emerges as a tension that situates the FPMT towards the “inflexible” end of the spectrum of transplanted religions (Baumann 1994: 36). This tension evokes the FPMT’s tendency to return, again and again, to this preservationist mode. An intriguing aspect of the cultural translation of Tibetan Buddhism into Australian settler society is that activities of ritual significance are often carried out by ritual
specialists who are ethnically Tibetan monks, using a language few of the converts understand.

Yet Lama Yeshe is recorded as having instructed his students to adapt the Dharma to their own circumstances:

What you should do is take the practical points of dharma and shape them according to your own culture. Now, the way to bring dharma to the Western world is to bring the nuclear, essential aspect of dharma. Of course, you can’t separate the essence from the Eastern cultural trappings immediately: “This is culture; this isn’t.” However, what you should do is take the practical points of dharma and shape them according to your own culture. In my opinion you should be making a new kind of dharma dependent upon each different place and its social customs. Since we are Mahayanists we have a broad view and don’t mind if dharma takes different shapes. To bring dharma to the West we should have a broad view (FPMT 1984: 46).

He appears to be encouraging innovation here, but note that he says it cannot be done immediately. This question surfaced in the decision-making process of what style of stupa should be built at Atisha Centre. Discussing the concept drawings that proposed a style of stupa compatible with its locale, Chorten (Atisha Centre 1992: 1) described the design task as:

a very challenging one. On the one hand the building had to reflect the traditional elements of a stupa and yet it was also felt to be important to be in harmony with its location in the Australian bush. To simply transplant a traditional Tibetan or Eastern building into a very Australian situation (and climate) would be incongruous (my emphases).

This attempt to create a locally-appropriate design was likely carried out bearing in mind Lama Yeshe’s view that Buddhist practice should take “different shapes” while still conveying the “nuclear, essential aspect” of the Dharma. Yet, as mentioned earlier, Lama Zopa later recommended that the stupa be built in the style of the Gyantse stupa in Tibet.

A second example of this ongoing adaptation/recoupment dynamic illustrates the particular ways in which people seek to bring identifiably local elements, in this case, an emblematic Australian animal, into play. The day I arrived at Atisha Centre, Carl, a member of Atisha Centre, arrived with Ven. Rita Riniker, a Swiss nun whom I had already met a few weeks earlier at the Dorje Chang Institute in Auckland. She was on a teaching tour of FPMT centres and was about to give teachings on the coming weekend in the main gompa. As we walked towards it, Carl pointed to the roof above the gompa’s main entrance and said that before Lama Zopa’s visit in March 2000, he and another member
made an image of two kangaroos, one on either side of a Dharma wheel and painted gold. The image referenced the classical image of two deer beside a Dharma Wheel that sit above the entrance of many Tibetan gompas. As Rita commented, the Dharma wheel represents the Buddha and his teachings, while the deer listening to him evoke the deer park where he first taught. By substituting the two deer with kangaroos, however, the image evoked the Australian coat of arms, which is flanked by a kangaroo and emu. This adoption of an emblematic image from the host culture evokes the strategy that Baumann (1994: 54) calls assimilation, referring here to the incorporation of elements of the host culture into the imported religious system. Venuti’s translation theory would call this deliberate mixing of Australian and Tibetan Buddhist imagery a domesticating strategy.

This image was discussed in the issue of *Chorten Stupa Edition* (GSUC n.d.-i) documenting Lama Zopa’s visit in 2000. In a meeting between Lama Zopa and a group of artists connected with Atisha Centre, someone (the transcript in *Chorten* does not provide the questioners’ names) asked him about the translation from Sanskrit and Tibetan into English and whether it was a good idea to “translate” unfamiliar Tibetan imagery into more familiar “Western imagery” (p. 8). In reply, Lama Zopa joked that he “wouldn’t recommend Buddha be shown with ties and business suits and in America with cigars and suitcase” (p. 9). He added that he had not seen any Westernised depictions of the Buddha, but cautioned that

> whatever you do it must be inspiring. [...] The main purpose of making holy objects is for generating devotion … to create good karma for oneself and others. … It can be kind of discouraging if it is not properly done.

Someone asked him what he thought “about the […] two Kangaroos holding up the Dharma Wheel on this Gompa. We present it to you as our teacher to see whether we are on the right track.” In reply, Lama Zopa laughed and said “I would not regard it as a big mistake. When I saw it I was thinking in my mind I don’t think it is a mistake to have a Kangaroo there.” He went on to speculate that the reason deer are depicted is “that the deer is very alert and not sleepy.” For him this signified the “people in the monastery, the Sangha who have to do listening and attracting meditation practice.” Finally he said that “using the kangaroo, I think that might be OK as long as they do not use those very sleepy animals” (by which he meant the koala). The kangaroo sculpture was later removed, in part because it had not been made with permanent materials, but also because people interpreted Lama Zopa’s response as hinting that it was inappropriate.
The reappearance of the same imagery painted on a banner at a special retreat at which Lama Zopa taught in Adelaide in 2004 (Fig. 3.2) demonstrates the continuing urge to domesticate Tibetan Buddhist imagery by combining it with Australian imagery. Indeed, “Russell,” a shop assistant in his forties who helped out around Atisha Centre expressed this in an interview. Conscious that he was interested in local flora and fauna, I had asked him about plans to plant non-native trees in the stupa grounds. He stressed that it was not for him to say, but if it was, he would prefer to see “some form of native [vegetation] which is indigenous to the area” because it would require less water and better survive drought. He also wanted to see Buddhism’s imagery adapted to Australian conditions:

I’ve always seen a Buddha, you know – if I could do it myself I would, but it’s, a very Aus-, an Australian Buddha, right, under a gum tree, on a water lily, with – you know how they have the snow lions and everything like that? Kangaroos, echidnas, wombats…

The kangaroo/Dharma wheel image, Russell’s Australian Buddha and the change in stupa design evoke the question of what constituted Dharma imagery, how much it could be adapted to the local culture, and whether the more novel representations carried the same authority (cf. Baumann 1994). What people reiterated in defence of the prescribed art and architectural forms among the Australian followers of Tibetan Buddhism was that Dharma art (e.g., statues, stupas, and thangka or religious paintings) arises from enlightened minds and when reproduced according to strict prescriptions has spiritually transformative powers. When ordinary (unenlightened) people attempt to adapt that art, its
powers are lost. This tradition-preserving stance is something that Paul Croucher (1989: 122) also notes, quoting a Tara Institute newsletter as saying that Australians wanting to adapt and change Buddhist tradition should be “realised meditators,” or leave it alone.

FPMT traditionalists value inherited architectural forms because, in keeping with Tibetan Buddhist attitudes towards sacred art, they consider them to have arisen from enlightened minds. Thus they do not consider originality necessary or even useful. I raised the question of originality versus traditionalism in Buddhist art with Garrey, who told me he had struggled for many years as an artist seeking to come up with new and creative ideas. However once he learnt about thangka painting, which is more like painting by numbers, you know, there’s an extraordinary feeling of relief there, that the idea of creating something becomes much more like a meditation rather than a struggle with having to come up with something else that’s even better and more interesting than the last thing that you did. […] We’re not trying to do anything other than give people the opportunity to look at their own mind, rather than to be constantly distracted by new and bigger and brighter and better things.

Garrey also stressed his belief in the authority of old designs, which he considered to be a direct embodiment of enlightenment. Thus he was not concerned that the stupa design is not an original or distinctively Australian piece of architecture. This view places consistency with tradition higher than originality, not for its own sake but because of what the Dharma students consider its proven value in helping to change hearts and minds for the better.

The quote from Lama Yeshe above suggests that he favoured a creative but careful re-expression of Buddhism in Western cultures. However, he was unspecific and this leaves innovations such as the kangaroo and Dharma wheel image very much open to interpretation and debate. When I discussed the kangaroo image with several old students from Atisha Centre, they told me that eventually Westerners would become enlightened and produce enlightened art and this would look different from Tibetan art, but that this

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17 The Melbourne-based FPMT group, established in 1976.
18 Practitioners who have attained advanced “spiritual realisations” through extensive Dharma practice.
19 This issue surfaces in the relationship between the tradition-preserving efforts of the Dharamsala-based Tibetan government in exile and those who want to explore identity in new ways. Clare Harris (1997) discusses the struggles of Gonkar Gyatso, a Chinese-trained Tibetan-born artist, who found his work criticised by the exile community for its departure from these standards.
would take generations. Until this happens, they must rely on advanced Tibetan practitioners. Reflecting on the kangaroo incident, Ruby, who had been actively involved with Atisha Centre since 1996, told me that the important thing was not how Buddhism was packaged, but the principles (e.g., keeping vows) behind it. She also said she felt it was better “if it can come through our teachers. You know, like allowing them to support us in making that change rather than individually saying that this is what we want to do.” Alexa told me that she preferred the Gyantse design to any attempt “to create an original look.” This was because the Gyantse stupa was “very famous and traditional” and a “sacred object that comes from ancient tradition” with such karmically powerful symbolism that “when you look at a stupa, you’re getting an imprint of the whole [Buddhist] path.” Garrey, Alexa and Ruby, as committed, long-term Dharma students, had come to value the authority of the Tibetan lamas. Their valuation of what they consider to be traditional demonstrates how committed Dharma students talk about the FPMT’s emphasis on “preserving tradition.”

In these Dharma students’ engagement with Tibetan Buddhism, there are echoes of the discourses of Buddhist modernism that McMahan outlines: scientific rationalism and romantic expressivism. These complement one another in the intersection of a systematic and structured philosophy of the mind with practices of a multi-sensory, aesthetic and devotional nature. In combining Dharma study with guru devotion and the veneration of holy objects, the FPMT’s approach to practising the Dharma consists of a blend of rational philosophy for living, in combination with a sense of emotional enchantment that shares some elements with what McMahan calls romantic expressivism. Despite the FPMT’s emphasis on preserving tradition, then, the organisation does express a form of Buddhist modernism.

**Inner peace, world peace**

Atisha Centre is a contemporary, transcultural contact zone for Australian converts to Tibetan Buddhism who adopt a distinctively Tibetan religious architecture and tradition.

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20 Underlying this is the question of who, if anyone, is actually fully enlightened, or who has attained profound realisations, a topic that is difficult to discuss because of a proscription against declaring one’s own realisations to others. For example, when one Western teacher, Geshe Michael Roach, declared he had “realised Emptiness,” his claim was met with widespread suspicion in the Buddhist world. Conventionally, while disciples may refer to various lamas as being highly realised, the same lamas would not discuss this themselves.
The Centre is a zone of intercultural engagement in that people of one cultural background adopt and identify with the religious traditions of another, bringing an unusual transformation to the Australian countryside. The gompa in particular illustrates this combination of transculturality and tradition. Pictures of the lineage founders and current teachers are displayed. Water-bowl offering rituals performed at the shrines exemplify the degree of adherence to prescribed activities that one would expect, given FPMT emphasis on preserving tradition. The proposal for a locally-adapted stupa and the eventual selection of the Gyantse design exemplifies the friction resulting from the urge to explore new adaptations on the one hand and the pressure to return to authorised, established forms on the other. As Tibetan Buddhism has flourished in new contexts, notions of valid tradition must be “invented, rearranged and reorchestrated” (Wolf 2001: 354) as they are transferred not only from one generation to another but also in the cross-cultural transmission through contact zones such as Atisha Centre where the recipients are converts.

FPMT traditionalism exists in tension with but also in dependence upon modernist and global elements and also, to some extent, the wish to create recognisably local expressions. It is this combination of traditional and transcultural that produces new “hybrid” permutations of Tibetan Buddhism (Zablocki 2005). Karma- and pragmatic-oriented practices like merit-making combine with modern Buddhism’s bodhi-oriented “awareness techniques” which are presented as one of Tibetan Buddhism’s valuable contributions towards healing the modern world’s malaise.

The dissent about the extent to which Buddhist imagery and architecture can be domesticated in new locations illustrates the ambiguity involved in trying to find ways to create a visibly Buddhist identity in Australia. A further ambiguity arising from this situation is that many people are attracted to Tibetan Buddhism precisely for its exotic feel, resulting in an internal contradiction between attraction to the exotic and the sense that some might find familiar imagery more culturally accessible. The above examples of attempts to Australianise, soon followed by a return to established and legitimised form, exemplify the interaction between what Baumann refers to as strategies of adaptation and recoupment.
Long-term FPMT members value the preservation of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition because from it they derive a connection with an authoritative and authentic path to effect inner and world peace. Change and innovation are given a lower priority and considered things that must emerge naturally over many generations rather than being self-consciously planned by first-generation converts. The decisions that are made at Atisha Centre with regard to the stupa design and elements of the Centre’s visual culture provide a particularly salient example of this approach. Nonetheless, the FPMT in Australia is in a different position vis-à-vis the Tibetan tradition than is the exile Tibetan community. As converts, these Western Buddhists engage in a transcultural exercise, adopting religious ideas and practices with elements quite foreign to them.

The scene I described in Atisha Centre’s gompa highlights some of those elements. The Great Stupa, while maintaining most of the overall structure and concepts of the Gyantse stupa from which it is derived, also embodies the transculturality of the exercise. This is not so much because of the adaptations involving the use of concrete, glass and steel as through the ways that the stupa is a contact zone in the Australian context. I explore some of the interactions of this contact zone in later chapters, but now I turn to the religious concepts underlying the project, explaining how Tibetan Buddhists argue for the spiritual efficacy of holy objects and how the bodhicitta motivation is presented as a core reason for building the stupa.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE “POWER OF THE OBJECT”

Figure 4.1. Animal liberation at stupa at Thubten Shedrup Ling monastery

Not long after I arrived at Atisha Centre, I participated in an activity at the monastery’s courtyard stupa that illustrates how FPMT members interact with holy objects. The occasion was an “animal liberation,” a practice whereby animals (especially those destined for the abattoir or other unpleasant ends) are purchased, blessed and set free. The participants were Lozang Tenzin (an Anglo-Australian nun ordained in 1999), the monk Jinpa, two non-Buddhist Bendigonian women who attended Tenzin’s meditation class, a Brisbane woman who has since been ordained and myself. The animals included six pet dogs, three jars containing scorpions found in the monastery gardens and a bucket of bait worms. For nearly an hour, the humans carried the containers or led dogs on their leashes around and around the stupa (Fig. 4.1).

The reason that FPMT people give for engaging in this practice is that the potency of the stupa helps beings that come into its vicinity to accumulate positive karma (merit, Tib. sonam). They explain this in terms of the “power of the object.” The holy object
makes karmic imprints that are like seeds planted in the mindstream that, given time and suitable conditions, will ripen as enlightenment. The stupa that we circumambulated contained relics that provide its sacred power. To supplement them, Jinpa brought two small crystal reliquaries from an indoor shrine and placed them on a ledge on the stupa. He explained to us that animals cannot understand the Dharma until they are reborn as human. Having circumambulated the stupa and relics, even a maggot receives this imprint in its mindstream, guaranteeing what Tibetan Buddhists refer to as a “precious human rebirth,” that is, a future rebirth as a human born into fortunate circumstances with access to the Dharma and hence the opportunity for enlightenment. \(^1\) The term “liberation” thus refers both to the animals’ present-lifetime release into a suitable environment and their future spiritual emancipation. The timing of the event was also important, since it was performed on a holy day in the Tibetan Buddhist calendar, which, the lamas say, causes the merit that participants accumulate to be multiplied many thousands of times.

In this chapter I begin to explore the intersection between the religious and social efficacy of the stupa as a vehicle of social agency, which serves as a zone of engagement in which convert Buddhists interact and sometimes struggle with facets of their adopted religion, including its very emphasis on holy objects. I link this struggle to two contrasting but not mutually exclusive trends in Buddhist history, which Donald Swearer (2003) calls iconism and aniconism. My purpose here is to explore the idealism underlying the stupa project so I explain the links between holy objects, bodhicitta and merit, paying attention here to the explanations of those who are well-schooled in FPMT discourse. Buddhists may have different orientations to the Dharma (Samuel 1993), which influence how they engage in practices with holy objects. I pay particular attention to how they explain stupas and relics.

Broadly, the explicit purpose of constructing the stupa is to benefit others through the power of the holy object. Explaining the stupa’s value for the Bendigo public, Ian wrote in *The Advertiser* that it “will … be a refuge of peace for everyone regardless of their religion, race or creed. Indeed the building of this Stupa is an offering for world peace” (Green 2006b: n.p.), aligning the stupa with the popular and widespread discourse

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\(^1\) He also touched a reliquary to the crown of my head and said that this purified negative karma and planted the seeds of enlightenment in my mindstream. When receiving this blessing, people are often instructed to visualise light flooding through them and purifying all negativities. Some report experiencing this as blissful.
that Buddhism is a peaceful philosophy. An academic and Dharma student named Al Gabay (2006), using the same forum to express support for the stupa, maintains that the structure will be a “zone of peace” and that this is what is needed both “here in Bendigo and throughout our troubled world.” But beneath this relatively simple explanation for the stupa lie more complicated notions associated with Tibetan Buddhist sacred objects.

**Discourses of iconism and aniconism**

Dharma practice in the context of the FPMT involves not only mind-training, meditation and visualisation, but more devotional and interactive activities, such as prayer and chanting, water-bowl offerings, prostrating to Buddha images and circumambulating stupas. The extent of the FPMT’s emphasis on the latter activities stems from their emphasis on the power of holy objects to purify karma. The fact that not all Western Buddhists agree with the FPMT’s approach derives in large part from the fact that it departs from Buddhist modernism.

Where the difference between modernist and traditionalist forms of Buddhism relates to holy objects, Donald Swearer (2003, 2004) calls this long-term tension the iconism/ aniconism debate and although he focuses on Thai examples, it is relevant to Tibetan Buddhism and its adoption into non-Asian cultural contexts. “Iconist” Buddhists consider sacred objects (also referred to here as sacra) to be a source of blessings that benefit the devotee (Swearer 2003:10). They revere holy objects as an objectification of charisma (Tambiah 1984: 335-47), treating them as contact zones for making merit and for bringing the Dharma to others. “Aniconic dissenters,” on the other hand, take a position that can be considered characteristic of Buddhist modernism. They maintain that Buddhist practice entails personal effort to transform one’s mind; all that a statue or stupa

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2 While the Buddhist precepts advocate non-violence, some Buddhist clergy have endorsed violence, for instance during Japan’s invasion of China as documented in Brian Victoria’s *Zen at War* (1997).

3 From the 1950s onwards, the “cult of amulets” (Tambiah 1984) flourished in Thailand as people sought supernatural help with uncertainties stemming from rapid economic change (Swearer 2003: 16-17). Swearer’s (2004) ethnography about the iconist practice of consecrating statues in Thailand shows how the statue is ritually transformed from an inert object to a surrogate for the Buddha himself. Further, amulets blessed by renowned monks are consecrated and sold to fundraise for projects (e.g. a new hospital or temple) and the donors not only receive miraculous benefits channelled through the amulet but also make merit by helping a charitable project.

4 Relics and amulets are closely related categories of sacra. Amulets are more readily available for laypeople to own than relics, but both kinds of sacra are objects purportedly infused with the charisma of the saint with whom they are associated.
can do is provide a focal point for devotional practice (Swearer 2004: 235-48). Aniconists are often critical of practices such as amulet-collection and statue-worship, arguing that it detracts from the religion’s core principles. Aniconists are also concerned about the motivation of those who trade in such amulets, which are mass-produced for commercial profit (pp. 18-19) rather than to support monasteries. One aniconic dissenter, Phra Prayudh, even argues that the cult promotes the Three Poisons (Pali: *kilesa*, Skt: *kleśa*) of greed, hatred and ignorance (p. 19).

While the terms “iconist” and “aniconist” would be unfamiliar to most Western Buddhists, I use them for the purpose of considering differences in how they talk about and interact with holy objects. The FPMT attributes spiritual agency to holy objects, which is an iconist perspective. Buddhists with a more aniconist leaning do not make this attribution, maintaining that it would be inconsistent with their view of Buddhism as a system of ethics and not a religion. Having said that, FPMT teachers emphasise that icon veneration and accessing holy objects’ powers should be done with the ethical motivation of altruism. This is a conscious departure from the amulet-trade approach that Swearer discusses, in that it moves from a pragmatic and self-interested orientation to a more altruistic one. FPMT understandings of the power of the object can be considered as “iconist” while the “aniconist” approach inflects the FPMT emphasis on the importance of mind-training over and above mere seeking of good karma and more deeply underscores critical questions about the stupa (Chapters Five and Eight) and other similar projects.

The Bendigo stupa, then, provides a site for exploring how people engage with the debate in this Australian location. Two qualifications are necessary. First, iconism and aniconism are ideal types and their praxis entails a spectrum of varying, sometimes overlapping practices. Second, since most of my own previous contact with Buddhism was of a kind that placed far less emphasis on holy objects, my personal approach to Buddhism is closer to the aniconic position. Because of this, I have long been perplexed about the iconist idea that what appeared to me to be inanimate objects could exercise spiritually transformative power. This perplexity could hint at an unexamined bias among anthropologists. Do we expect more apparently “rational” practice in our own society?

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5 My previous research into the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (McAra 2007b) investigated, among other things, the relationship between the New Zealand group’s stupa project and Mellor’s (1991) contention that this English-based organisation exhibited Protestant tendencies, which, he mistakenly argued, included an aversion to ritual.
(e.g., educated Westerners) than we do, for instance, for peasants in Tibet or Burma? And, conversely, do we expect “irrational” beliefs in societies other than our own?

The “unimaginable purification” of holy objects

Positive karma or merit, according to one FPMT teacher (McDonald 1984: 215), is the “insight, power or energy” that facilitates spiritual awakening. To explain karma, Buddhists often use metaphors of cultivation to explain how people can make great merit from holy beings and objects associated with them. Monastics, saints and holy objects are all “fields of merit” in which ordinary people can sow positive karmic “seeds” and “harvest” merit that, Lama Zopa (1991: 9) says, purifies the mind and ultimately ripens as enlightenment.⁶

Broadly speaking, Tibetan Buddhists consider it prudent to make merit in order to counter the negative karma that one inevitably accumulates in the course of daily activities (Samuel 1993: 208). They do this through reciting mantras, spinning prayer wheels, copying or reciting sūtras, offering dāna to the ordained sangha, prostrating to or circumambulating stupas, or going on pilgrimage. Those with greater resources also sponsor Buddhist art and architecture. Holy objects provide an opportunity for anyone who interacts with them to accumulate merit (“anyone” includes not only those who consciously seek this interaction but any being, even an insect, that comes into the object’s vicinity). Kim Gutschow (2004: 89) says that for Himalayan Buddhists, offerings to the monastic order, including sponsorship and construction of stupas and temples, generates merit that lasts for many lifetimes while an instant of anger can negate the merit accumulated through performing good deeds and cultivating positive mind-states.

According to the FPMT, one’s motivation for practising Dharma is either for avoiding an unfortunate rebirth (the “lower scope”), for escaping samsāra (the middle scope) or seeking enlightenment for all (the great scope), the highest possible motivation. FPMT teachers tell their students that they must “realize emptiness” (śunyatā) before they can become fully enlightened. In order to prepare themselves for hearing teachings on śunyatā, students need to do two things: “accumulate positive energy and wisdom and

⁶ Similarly, Tambiah (1970: 45) explains that for Thai Buddhists, paying homage and giving gifts to the Buddha causes “goodness” to arise in the giver, who has cultivated merit in a “field” through ethical deeds and will subsequently enjoy its harvest.
purify our deluded, negative states of mind” (Geshe Tsultim Gyeltsen 2000: 36). The accumulation of merit and wisdom requires practising the six perfections of generosity, ethics, patience, energy or perseverance, meditative concentration and wisdom (p. 37).

The most meritorious acts of generosity are those that help to bring beings into contact with the Dharma. Thus one obvious way to do this is to sponsor the printing of Dharma books for free distribution. But sponsoring holy objects is deemed a particularly good way to help all sentient beings including those without the capacity to understand Dharma teachings because through purifying karmic defilements, they bring peace not just to individuals, but to the wider world, because “wars, disease, desire are pacified by the change of attitude. Disease arising out of negative mind will be stopped and previous negative karmas will be purified” (Lama Zopa, n.d.-a). As Lama Zopa (2002b: 4) says,

[e]very time you look at holy objects – pictures of the Buddha, statues, scriptures, stupas […] they purify your mind. […] How? When you look at them they plant a seed or positive imprint on your mental continuum so that later when you meet Buddhadharma, either in this life or in future lives, you are able to understand the words and the meaning of the teachings. From that, you are able to practise the meaning of the Dharma you have understood, which causes you to cease the gross and subtle defilements by actualizing the path and then your mental continuum becomes omniscient mind.

When I asked FPMT Buddhists how relics and stupas could benefit even beings with no consciousness of their significance, they told me about the “power of the object,” articulating the iconist discourse given by those with the most training and experience in Tibetan Buddhism.

In Tibetan Buddhism, all of the senses can provide a channel for liberation (Tokarska-Bakir 2000). As a further example of how Tibetan Buddhists set out to liberate animals, an FPMT collection of anecdotes about Lama Zopa includes a story about a car journey on which, despite the snowy weather, he had the windows open and a recording of a recitation of the Sanghata Sūtra playing at full volume so that animals and insects outside could, upon hearing it, receive good imprints. As they drove, “two deer ran across the road and Rinpoche was extremely pleased as they may have heard four words of the sutra” (Langri Tangpa Centre Inc 2006, lightly edited). Following his example, FPMT

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7 A number of stories on this site feature animal liberation, for instance another story says that his house in California “has many, many insects such as hornets and beetles that we all collect in jars and Rinpoche jogs (for exercise) around the relic table 8-10 times before releasing them outside.”
students say *mantras* to animals. Once I was at Dorje Chang Institute in Auckland, standing outside with several attendees. A woman turned towards the gardens where some pukekos were walking about, pecking the lawn, and repeatedly called to them the *mantra* of compassion: “OM MANI PADME HUM!” Both of these stories again illustrate other instances of animal liberation wherein the “object,” whether a physical thing or the sound of a *mantra*, creates beneficial karmic imprints.

The reason FPMT people consider holy objects to be so beneficial is that they not only purify the minds of committed Dharma practitioners (speeding their progress towards enlightenment) but they also help beings that are unable to hear or comprehend the teachings. Thus holy objects can benefit more beings:

> Even if you teach Dharma to sentient beings, not everyone comes to listen; some are not interested, some are children and some are old people and so cannot come. If you make holy objects, not only inside but especially outside in public places then everyone can see, believers and non-believers, everybody gets so much benefit […]. Because of the power of the holy object it doesn’t require deep devotion or faith to gain all these benefits (Lama Zopa 2004b: 5).

Further, people who build or sponsor holy objects receive merit not only in their present lifetime but in future rebirths for as long as the object exists.

> If you build stupas or statues to inspire people, without even teaching Dharma, for however many hundreds and billions of years the holy object lasts, it continues to liberate many sentient beings every day, freeing them from the lower realms, causing them to actualize the path liberating them from samsara and bringing them to enlightenment. Even if after you die you are in another universe, in the hell realms or a pure land, wherever you are the stupa or statue that you built is continually benefiting sentient beings. It is incredible how you can continually benefit sentient beings by having built a stupa (Lama Zopa 2004b: 13).

Once I told a senior FPMT member at Atisha Centre that I did not really understand merit-making and by way of explanation he likened it to taking out insurance for future rebirths. The purpose that Lama Zopa emphasises, however, is altruism: the organisation’s activities should be motivated by *bodhicitta* rather than self-interest (FPMT Inc. 2004: 13). Indeed, Lama Zopa teaches that the construction of such a gigantic holy object as the Great Stupa in Australia or the Maitreya Statue in India, rather than being the ultimate goal, is “the method for achieving the goal. The goal is to benefit as many people as possible for as long as possible” (Maitreya Project website n.d.-b) in keeping with the *bodhicitta* motivation he extols because “[j]ust seeing the statue becomes an unimaginable
purification for sentient beings’ minds” (Mandala 2000: 43). Further, Lama Zopa (2003: 28) stresses that size is important because “[t]he larger it is the more people will come to see it, so the more benefit.” So, for example, in attracting tourists, the opportunity to benefit others is extended, since the visitors receive karmic imprints. Promotional material (Great Stupa brochure n.d., citing the Guhyasamāja Tantra) also maintains that bigger holy objects make more merit: “[t]he benefit you receive from building a stupa is equal to the number of atoms in the stupa and these benefits exist as long as the stupa exists.”

The power of a stupa, big or small, to bring karmic benefit is sometimes illustrated through stories. One that I encountered several times explains karmic imprinting. Ian, repeating a story that Lama Zopa had recounted during a visit to the stupa site (GSUC n.d.-i: 2-5), told me that in the Buddha’s lifetime an old man wanted to become a monk and went to the monastery to apply. The monks used their clairvoyance to look at his previous lives to see if he had the karmic cause to be ordained and decided he did not, telling him, “There’s nothing you’ve done; you haven’t done pilgrimage, you’ve never prostrated, or done anything [to make merit] in your life, not only in this life, but you know, there’s no sign you’ve done anything in your previous lives either.”

Lama Zopa’s account says that the eighty-year-old man sought ordination because children teased him and he thought a monastery would be a peaceful place to retire; when the abbot Śāriputra rejected him he “was completely upset and he lay his head on the front doorstep of the monastery and he cried. Later he went into a park and still he cried and cried” (2000: 2-5). Ian’s version continues:

And so the Buddha came along and said “Well what’s happening here?” and they said “This chap here wants to become ordained but he just has no, there’s just no cause for him to be ordained here.” And so the Buddha then through his clairvoyance8 looked back through his [the applicant’s] previous lifetimes and eventually, like, many, many, many, many lifetimes before, encountered this experience, where this sentient being was a fly. And this fly, he’s following the smell of cow dung […] on the shoe of someone who’s circumambulating a stupa and he’s following, like, each footstep around; around and around and around until he eventually completes this circumambulation of this stupa. And so because of that […] he acquired the merit to be able to become ordained and through the merit of becoming

8 In this account, the Buddha’s clairvoyance, due to the depth of his Enlightenment, is greater than that of his disciples. A related version appears in a story where the fly is on a dropping that gets washed around a stupa by water from a drain (Pabongka Rinpoche and Trijang Rinpoche 1993: 440).
ordained, [...] he then was] able to practise [Dharma] and then eventually to attain nirvāṇa.

FPMT people told me this story of the fly, the dung and the stupa in reply to my questions about the benefits of stupas. Lama Zopa stresses that even though the karmic imprint was received with a mind “clinging to … the sense pleasures, the smell of cow dung,” the same mindstream took a human rebirth and attained enlightenment because of that subtle imprint (2000: 4). The story humorously illustrates the immense purifying power accessible through holy objects: even the mind of an insect that is filled only with a desire for dung can receive highly beneficial imprints from holy objects.

Contact with holy objects creates good karma, but criticising holy objects creates negative karma (alongside the good karma), as Khensur Rinpoche told me via his interpreter Tenzin. By way of illustration he told me a story, a version of which I later found in Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand, a book much used in the Gelugpa lineage (Pabongka Rinpoche and Trijang Rinpoche 1993: 433-34). It explains why the monk Priyabhadra is ugly and disfigured but has a beautiful voice. In his previous life he worked as a coolie and saw a large stupa being built. He questioned why they were building such a big stupa and speculated that it would never be finished. When it had been completed he sought to atone for his criticism by offering a bell to the stupa, which had such a powerful positive karmic result that he not only had a human rebirth but was able to take ordination. Further, he had a beautiful voice, caused by his offering a bell to the stupa in his previous life. However, the karmic consequence of his criticism of the stupa was his disfigurement.

Such stories illustrate the high value that FPMT teachers and senior students place on creating virtuous karma from holy objects and the convention that interaction with stupas has major karmic consequences. But they may also suppress other kinds of engagement and could reflect an awareness of critique or ambivalence. Perhaps, for example, Khensur Rinpoche meant to warn me that because I was undertaking research about the stupa project I should be careful not to be critical of it.

A technology of spiritual transformation

The enshrinement of relics is integral to the consecration of stupas and statues and empowers these objects as fields of merit (see Bentor 1994a). Relics and Buddhist saints or even ordinary monastics are all considered to be fields of merit; thus guru-devotion
(whether making offerings to a living guru or his or her relics) is a practice of merit-making.

In Tibetan Buddhism, relics are the miniscule and portable holy objects that empower stupas and statues (Bentor 1994a). Yael Bentor (1994b) writes that Buddhists identify three kinds of relics: Dharma relics (e.g., verses or whole texts of teachings), “contact” objects (in the sense of objects the saint has used or touched, e.g., remains of possessions such as robes and also fingernail and hair clippings) and, finally, cremated remains. The category of bodily remains includes gdung or ringsel (ring bsrel). The former look like ordinary bone and the latter are tiny globules (around 2-5 millimetres in diameter) that are either opaque white or translucent. Ringsel either come from cremation pyres or are miraculously emanated by other relics or holy objects and are taken as tangible evidence of spiritual attainments. Relics are thus the concentrated essence of the absent saints’ virtues.

These relics are placed inside stupas, which then become relics themselves (Bentor 2003), providing a concrete replacement for the deceased human body. To this end a stupa is a vehicle for “recycling” charisma (Kolig 1997), that is, extending a saint’s spiritual powers and charisma beyond his or her lifetime. As Ian (Green 2006a: n.p.) explained, the essence of a great Dharma teacher’s spiritual realisations become distilled into the relics that remain in the funeral pyre after cremation and “give immense power to a stupa because the essence of the teacher’s wisdom is distilled into their relics.”

A hybrid of person and non-person (Geary 1986: 168), bodily relics unsettle the Protestant-influenced dichotomies that many Westerners make between animate subjects and inanimate objects. Bone fragments and spherical relics bear little resemblance to the human body and show no sign of life. Yet those who venerate them maintain that they can convey the Buddha’s blessings (or the saint/teacher’s blessings) to devotees just as the living Buddha did. Because these things stand in for (or are) deceased saints, they blur the boundaries between persons and things, as Geary suggests, and make it possible to benefit from a saint’s virtues beyond his or her biological lifetime.

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9 In recent years, a collection of around 1000 relics intended to be enshrined inside the Maitreya statue having been travelling around the world. The publicity says that the relics are “responding” to the faith and devotion that visitors to the exhibition are showing by “spontaneously multiplying […] as a result of the devotion being shown” (Chang 2002, n.p.).
A story from *Chorten* (Wright 1984: 3-4) illustrates this intention that the relics be regarded as the teacher. After Lama Yeshe’s death, a portion of his relics was given to Atisha Centre and the article announcing their arrival instructs students to wear “very clean and good clothes rather than the usual Atisha bush gear” and greet the relics as if they were “Lama in his previous manifestation coming […] students lined up, holding incense, everything clean […]” (ibid.). The article also cautioned that people should not regard the relics as “something ordinary or just bits and pieces of ash.” Osorio (2004: 448-50) tells of a somewhat similar effect achieved through the use of simulacra, in this case representing the Spanish King in Peru. The living king never visited the dominion but his ceremonial presence as a “hyperreal king” attested to and reinforced his legitimacy.

Lama Yeshe’s students are instructed to regard the relics as an extension of his personhood, thus his relics serve as simulacra that allow those in possession of them to strengthen their connection with the organisation’s founder, demonstrating their role as a legitimate centre for the FPMT in Australia. Lama Yeshe’s status as spiritual leader was reinforced through the ceremonial welcome of his relics just as when he was alive. A statue made in his likeness from a combination of plaster and his cremation ashes later further reinforced his spiritual leadership, as will the future installation of these relics inside the Great Stupa. Through transplanting the teacher’s objectified charisma into a large monument, then, the Buddhists help to maintain a sense of their lama’s importance and ongoing relevance in their lives and in the establishment of the Dharma in a new place.

**It’s about motivation**

The Tibetan Buddhist explanation for valuing holy objects is a typical discourse of iconism. However, this interplays with a strong thread of aniconism that characterises Western engagements with Buddhism. Indeed, Swearer (2003: 9) found that upon learning about the consecration rituals he was documenting, many Westerners expressed surprise because they generally understood Buddhism to be a practice of meditative concentration. Swearer summarises their collective question: “Did not the Buddha teach his disciples to be ‘lamps unto themselves’; to pursue their own inner journey to enlightenment without relying on external rituals?” During the years I have been involved in this research I have had several conversations with friends and academic colleagues who are sympathetic to Buddhism as they understand it, but when I tell them about the stupa project, they respond
with perplexity similar to my own initial reaction: “But that’s not what I thought Buddhism was about.”

One Bendigonian woman who expressed such a view was “Grace,” an Anglo-Australian in her seventies who was not religious but had had some involvement with Atisha Centre through her participation in a prominent community organisation. She told me that the Buddhist emphasis on “harmony and understanding […] is what the world needs at this particular moment” but added:

The only thing I don’t like and I must say, being an honest person, is I’m always very, very worried when money takes over religion – because I believe that when they lose sight of what they really started to do and the main object for them is money, I believe that’s not what Buddhism is about. And I have to say that. It’s not what Buddhism is about as far as I’m concerned.

This statement expresses a facet of aniconism critical of the entangling of fundraising and spiritual idealism. For such anti-materialists, the need to raise money for expensive and elaborate architecture and statuary contradicts Buddhism’s “middle path,” a key concept urging Dharma students to avoid the extremes of luxury and asceticism. The irony of the anti-materialist view of Buddhism is that part of the reason Westerners become enchanted with Buddhism in the first place is through experiencing its sacred places and its attractive art forms, such as serenely meditating Buddhas.

So how do FPMT people address the suspicion that anti-materialists express about the pitfalls of mixing of money and holy objects? In 2005 the FPMT International Office issued a document of guidelines (Lama Zopa 2002a) stressing the importance of separating profits made from the sale of holy objects from other profits. These guidelines urge FPMT shop managers to keep a separate account for income from the sale of holy objects, the profit from which should only be spent on Dharma activities. Buildings, food and other secular objects that are made with money from holy objects, to quote the guidelines: “will have a subtle negative effect (a form of pollution), which holy beings would be aware of immediately. Normal people will not be aware of this pollution, but will incur a negative result.” An element of danger is involved in violating this taboo. For instance, a holy being can fall ill from eating food that was paid for with money raised through selling holy objects. Lama Zopa’s biography (Wangmo 2004: 271, 273) recounts how a Sherpa sold his copy of the sacred Tengyur text to the new monastery at Lawudo. When the Sherpa’s wife later brought biscuits to the monastery as an offering, Lama Zopa
ensured that they were removed “to some spot high up in the mountains where no one could ever eat them” (p. 273) because he believed that she had bought the food using money obtained by selling the text, which “carries a very heavy pollution because it has been obtained by wrong livelihood.” By way of explanation, he recounts a story in which Chenrezig practitioner experienced severe pain after eating food offered to him after a sūtra recitation in a household (p. 274). He went into meditation to discover the cause and in a vision Chenrezig revealed to him that the family had used money from the sale of a sacred text to purchase the food and that while he experienced the karmic result immediately because he had “only thin mental obscurations,” the other three monks in his party (who were unaffected for the moment) now had the karma to be reborn in the hell realms after they died. Like Khensur Rinpoche’s story about Priyabhadra, this story and the FPMT guidelines illustrate the dangers associated with improper attitudes towards holy objects.

The Foundation Store sells Dharma items including prayer wheels, photos of gurus and deities. The website reminds potential buyers of the FPMT guidelines with a note advising them how to establish bodhicitta motivation and thus avoid accruing negative karma when making their purchase. Rather than thinking of these objects as commodities for purchase, practitioners are urged thus:

think that you are making a donation to a Dharma organization with an attitude of devotion and the thought to benefit sentient beings; and think that the Buddhas in the aspect of this Sacred Art object are now coming to you in thanksgiving and to support your practice. This is the most skillful way to ‘acquire’ holy objects and avoids the downfall of thinking of holy objects in an ordinary way (Foundation Store 2005).

In this way, a serious practitioner makes an ordinary act of buying and selling extraordinary by engaging in a bodhicitta-motivated exercise of the imagination much like the “tantric understanding” that “Robert” describes to me below.

The FPMT guidelines go on to suggest that in order to cover the costs of creating holy objects, the suggested price should include a contribution towards the artist’s living costs, labour and production while another portion is designated as a donation for producing more Dharma items. If one must use profits from the sale of holy objects for secular purposes, it must be done with bodhicitta motivation and one must take the negative karma upon oneself, thus purifying negativities that might arise. These guidelines
remind practitioners that holy objects constitute a separate category from ordinary things, evoking Durkheim’s (2001) distinction between profane and sacred domains, while acknowledging the entanglement of contemporary Buddhist activities in the capitalist economy upon which it is dependent. The anti-materialist critique makes the same distinction, expressing a fear that Buddhism’s good (sacred) points could be profaned through too much emphasis on money. Both perspectives espouse emphasise the importance of having bodhicitta motivation and both share a sense of danger around the profanation of the sacred dimension.

**A source of empowerment or a mere support to practice?**

I interpret the varying explanations for holy objects as context-dependent, ranging in emphasis between aniconism and iconism. When the stupa proponents represent the project to locals outside the FPMT, they highlight some of those meanings and de-emphasise others, a sometimes conscious and sometimes less conscious act of translation. Where the iconist and aniconist views diverge is in the extent to which and the manner in which holy objects benefit others. At the aniconic end of this spectrum, people consider holy objects to support the practitioner through providing inspiration (the Tibetan word rten, meaning support, is the equivalent term for holy object). Indeed, Ven. Gyatso (Chapter Five) told me, holy objects “support our practice”:

> It’s not enough just to teach [spiritual evolution], we have to give people the support, um, encouragement to continually train their mind, particularly in the highest scope: the attitudes of universal responsibility. So this is where the whole so-called Buddhist […] iconography comes in, that if we have a population of Buddhists, in order to support our practice, we need buildings and icons to inspire the mind, to remind us and to really focus our activities. So that’s why we have statues and stupas and temples and so on.

> Thus Buddhist iconography (including images, objects and monastic robes) serves as a source of inspiration, reminding people to train their minds and cultivate an attitude of “universal responsibility.”

If by use of the word “support” the Buddhists mean that relics provide inspiration and a reminder of enlightenment, then relics are not inherently powerful; the power is in the ideas and feelings they evoke. In the last chapter I reported

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10 This is an FPMT expression for bodhicitta, the will to enlightenment in order to help all other sentient beings and reach what Lama Zopa (1998:n.p.) calls the “unsurpassed happiness of full enlightenment.”
that converts liked the way Tibetan Buddhism offered both a meaningful conceptual framework and emotional inspiration; relics, then, provide the latter.

Geshe Konchok Tsering, translated by Noel, told me that if we can consider being in the presence of the Buddha’s relics as like being in the presence of the Buddha himself, we can make our Dharma practice more powerful. Nevertheless, the most “precious sacred relic” is the Buddha’s teachings, which can lead us to full enlightenment. I asked him another question about bodily relics, and Gen-la, perhaps concerned that I had not understood him, reiterated that the most important relic was the Dharma. In Noel’s words, Gen-la was stressing that it is the Buddha’s teachings that are the actual real precious relic. So whether it’s the Buddha’s tooth or the Buddha’s robe or the Buddha’s hair, it is possible for some doubt to arise. But as far as the teachings are concerned, there is no way you could have any doubt as to those teachings. So that is a good one, a good relic.

Therefore a serious Dharma student seeks more than just a few positive imprints. Indeed, when Khensur Rinpoche taught the “Three Principals [sic] of the Path” at Atisha Centre, he said that while if we “rattle off” prayers without understanding them we receive some beneficial imprints, far greater spiritual benefit is possible if one makes the effort to understand and internalise their meaning. The stupa proponents stress their bodhicitta motivation: holy objects may be a route for attaining holy objectives, but ultimately the latter is more important than the former.

The approach of internalising meaning fits more closely with aniconic Buddhist modernism rather than iconism. But FPMT and other Tibetan Buddhists frequently also emphasise the iconic approach, for example in talking about the power of holy objects as spiritually efficacious channels through which enlightened beings’ spiritual attainments pass benefits to ordinary beings. In the words of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (quoted in Green 2006a: n.p.), “[a] stupa creates a lightning rod for the blessings of your guru, and for the blessings of the Buddhas.” Lama Zopa repeatedly stresses that relics and other holy objects are themselves an incredibly powerful tool for spiritual practice, both because of their role in accumulating positive karma for beings unable to understand the Dharma and in purifying the minds of Dharma students so they become able to understand it.

In an edited volume on the experiences of various intentional communities in Australia, Ven. Yeshe Khadro offers a chapter on the FPMT’s Chenrezig Institute in
Queensland. In explaining why they built stupas and prayer wheels there, she unites both iconist and aniconist stances when she says that on the one hand, holy objects’ power comes from consecrations by ritual specialists who “invoke the enlightened beings to come and abide in the objects. From that time, a powerful positive energy is present that affects the surrounding people and environment” (Khadro 1995: 123) and helps to “pacify disturbed and negative minds.” Since she is writing for an audience without inside knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism she explains that the objects serve as supports in that they “remind community members of their spiritual practice” (ibid.).

The aniconist idea that a holy object might inspire someone to practice Dharma seemed very different from the iconist idea that the object itself could make karmic imprints that would affect one’s present and future rebirths, whether or not one was conscious of the object’s purported powers. I asked “Robert,” a senior Dharma student in his forties, about what I perceived as parallels between the imaginative effort that tantric practice requires and the concept of the power of the object. He told me that it is intended to transform one’s whole perception through the use of imagination to overcome the perception of things appearing “ordinary” and to transform reality into an “extra-ordinary” or enlightened reality. This entails the imaginative transformation of four aspects of one’s life: body, possessions, abode and companions. First, with regard to one’s body, one comes through imagination and visualisation to see one’s own body as that of an enlightened deity. Secondly, one imagines that one’s possessions belong to an enlightened being and their essence is transformed; thirdly, one’s abode becomes the palace of the enlightened deity; and fourth, one’s companions are enlightened beings in an enlightened realm, and their speech is mantra.

Robert said that although this imaginative mode of thinking is hard to sustain, over time and with practice it increasingly permeates one’s life and is the fastest way to attain enlightenment. He reinforced his point by saying that we exercise our imagination in everyday life by imbuing things or persons with extraordinary qualities. For instance when we fall in love, our attachment and the power of our imagination that feeds this attachment focuses our minds on the positive qualities of the beloved. Tantra turns these imaginative powers to spiritually beneficial ends: recall that Lama Zopa urges his students to perform every single activity in their lives with bodhicitta. Extrapolating from what Robert told me, Dharma students come to engage imaginatively with objects infused with the
Buddha’s enlightened essence. While some people may find themselves spontaneously developing this attitude, for others it requires conscious effort. Either way, in exercising this power of imagination they use holy objects as inspirational supports to their practice.

In the FPMT discourse of the power of the object, then, sacra provide a method for benefiting others by making merit that ultimately brings sentient beings in contact with the liberating influence of the **Buddhadharma**. Accordingly, the proponents of the Great Stupa argue that it will benefit all (even opponents) who have any contact with it whatsoever. In the zone of engagement created by the FPMT’s stupa project, the Dharma student can view holy objects aniconically as providing inspiration for one’s practice and iconically as providing powerful karmic transformation. In Chapter Three I outlined how Tibetan Buddhism is simultaneously philosophical and enchanting. Dharma students’ relationship with holy objects follow this pattern. Holy objects provide a source of aesthetic beauty and support, but they also allow people to engage imaginatively with them as a channel for spiritual merit and blessings.

**Holy object(ive)s**

Before the Cultural Revolution in Tibet, religious buildings and monuments were (and sometimes still are) the most conspicuous buildings in the landscape. Samuel (1993: 158-9) refers to temples, *gompas*, stone cairns (*laptse*), rock carvings, *mani* walls, *ch’orten*, etc (p. 158-9) as devices that sacralised the landscape. These objects, Samuel suggests, “constantly recreated the structure of Tibetan religious meanings,” literally grounding the Tibetan religion in the landscape (p. 159). As they fled Tibet, Buddhist refugees took with them sacred objects which they placed in their translocated monasteries, temples and stupas, transferring portions of their sacred geography to their new homes (Bentor 2003: 30), reversing the centuries-earlier transference from India to Tibet. In their new host countries, then, Tibetan Buddhists engage in physical construction projects that attempt to reproduce sacred landscapes (e.g., Van Dyke 1997).

The Great Stupa, based as it is on the Gyantse stupa, is a curious example of the transference of this sacred geography by converts, that is, non-Tibetan students of Tibetan Buddhism. Just as the major monasteries of pre-modern Tibet have now been re-established in India by refugee communities and their benefactors, the Gyantse stupa now has a replica-in-exile. Placing saintly relics inside stupas in new locations, such as the
Australian stupa site, harnesses the charisma and spiritual authority of Dharma ancestors for the purpose of establishing the new founders’ lineage and anchoring it into the new territory. But according to the FPMT teachings I have outlined, the express purpose of a stupa is to materialise bodhicitta, using the material world as a medium with which to proclaim the transcendence of mere materialism.

There is an intriguing convergence between the Buddhists’ theory of the power of the object and material culture theory about how objects can have complex “social lives” (Kopytoff 1986) that act back upon the people that make and use them. Enlivened by relics, the Great Stupa is intended to serve as a powerhouse of positive karma for the benefit of all sentient beings. Besides its spiritual functions, the project’s proponents also hope that the stupa will serve as a new pilgrimage site for Buddhism in the Southern Hemisphere. But the act of materialising a complex religious worldview from one cultural context to another is fraught. The new zone of intercultural engagement requires new approaches. In creating this stupa, the FPMT seeks to evoke a stable and universal ideal (“Universal Compassion”), yet because of the diverse social positions from which people interpret and interact with it and the friction that the intersection of diverse perspectives generates, it is difficult for a Tibetan Buddhist design in Australia to elicit the kinds of responses that the designers intend. To Baumann’s strategies of cross-cultural transplantation I suggest we add a strategy of cross-cultural materialisation to account for the social effects of constructing a very large, meaningful and “concrete” object in a contact zone, a site in which people of different backgrounds and indeed different social positions grapple with the meaning and materiality of the stupa.
In 2007 the Dalai Lama visited the Bendigo stupa site which, for FPMT members and many other Buddhists, added further holiness to a site already blessed by several other esteemed Buddhist leaders (Chapters Seven and Eight). The formal purpose of the Tibetan spiritual leader’s visit was to bless the newly filled Padmasambhava statue (Figs. 5.1 and 5.2). This 3.9-metre-high statue sat on a concrete slab\(^1\) among steel girders that gave a sense of the stupa’s grand scale. The elaborate preparations “buddhified” as well as beautified the grounds in anticipation of the event.

In the weeks leading up to the visit, volunteers worked hard to prepare the retreat centre, relics exhibition centre, stupa site and monastery. What struck me about the

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\(^1\) Such big statues must either be put in place and the building constructed around them, or else they must be assembled inside the building. Because of their weight, they require a large concrete pad as a structural base.
preparations was that, in addition to the effort involved in the event’s logistics, an enormous amount of time, money and effort went into the beautification and ritual elements.

A monk and ritual master named Thupten Khidup, employed by the stupa project to oversee ritual preparations for the stupa, sketched the outlines of the eight auspicious symbols on the path leading from the specially-constructed helipad beside the stupa site (Fig. 5.3) and on paving stones at the monastery. He directed volunteers, including myself, to finish the paintwork. On other pathways around the Centre he drew the same symbols in chalk dust. Rain had hampered earlier efforts and the coloured design had to be repainted three times. He had also been busy for months with other preparations, making coloured butter sculptures including some for the Padmasambhava shrine (Fig. 5.4) and a model of the Great Stupa. While Khidup had expertise in the ritual and decorative preparation for such an occasion, he had to instruct volunteers unfamiliar with procedures, sometimes struggling to make himself clear in English, which was not his mother tongue.\(^3\)

The partly completed ground floor structure was transformed into a temporary, open-air gompa. The Padmasambhava figure had now been put into place and expert gold-leafers from Taiwan worked through the nights before the visit to gild the statue. To the left of Padmasambhava is the main slab where an even larger statue of Śākyamuni Buddha will sit. This had been converted into a temporary stage for the Dalai Lama and decorated with fabrics, a thangka backdrop, a butter model of the stupa and floral arrangements. Further left again, the third slab became a shrine with the three statues borrowed from the gompa, along with flowers and water-bowl offerings. A canvas roof protected the shrines, while tarpaulins covered several gaps between the concrete slabs, forming the outer walls. Inside this area, the volunteers arranged hired plastic chairs to seat around a thousand people.\(^4\) Around the circumference of the stupa site the Australian, Tibetan, Aboriginal and Buddhist flags were raised on poles. A temporary ceremonial gate marked the

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\(^2\) Such as organising high-level security, seating, car-parking for well over a thousand vehicles, event production, audio/lights/power, sangha hosting, VIP hospitality, ushering, donation collection and volunteer coordination.

\(^3\) Most of the volunteers did not understand Tibetan, with the exception of Gen-la’s interpreter and a group of visiting monks doing a sand mandala tour of Australia.

\(^4\) The audience consisted of invited dignitaries and sangha, volunteer helpers and those who purchased tickets at $50 each.
northern entrance to the stupa site (Fig. 5.3) and, as the gateway through which the Dalai Lama was to enter the site, it was adorned with decorative fabrics and printed with words welcoming him in Tibetan and English.

These efforts to create a more visibly Tibetan Buddhist site for such an occasion provide an opportunity to think about how these Buddhists attempt to symbolise their ideals through ritual and beautification as much as through the development of the facilities themselves. The combination of ideals underlying this work is what interests me here. In the contact zone of the stupa site, two utopian visions intersect, which in the attempt to enact them produces a heterotopia. One is the aspiration of Western hippies spiritual seekers from the 1960s to the present to find solutions for their own (and often also the world’s) problems. The other is the ideal of bodhicitta that the Dalai Lama and

Figure 5.2. Padmasambhava statue with butter sculptures representing the eight auspicious symbols
Figure 5.3. Ceremonial gateway to stupa site welcoming the Dalai Lama

Figure 5.4 (right, below) Eight auspicious symbols painted on path
other Tibetan Buddhist teachers attempt to embody. The stupa-as-holy-object in Australia represents a marriage of these two visions. Although it is closely modelled on its Tibetan prototype and is explained in Buddhist terms, the impetus to establish a Dharma centre in this locale in the first place is an outcome of certain countercultural Westerners’ dissatisfaction with the society they inherited (see below). The combination of these is two interrelated visions is Lama Yeshe’s “total Buddhist society,” which in its enactment is evolving into a heterotopia. The Dalai Lama’s recent visit and his recommendations for the stupa’s role as a place for interfaith dialogue hint at the new emphases in what is increasingly becoming a global Buddhist utopian vision for the stupa.

As I have noted, heterotopias are relational, emerging from a combination of their creators’ utopian aspirations, the on-the-ground reality of enacting them (for instance the struggle Khidup had to coordinate his volunteers) and the interaction with the society surrounding them. In this and the remaining chapters I attempt to show how this is so. The countercultural seekers of the 1960s who brought Tibetan Buddhism back to Australia are now among those involved in running various FPMT projects and giving teachings. Adrian Feldmann (b. 1943, ordained as Thubten Gyatso) is one such person, a long term Australian Dharma student and monk of considerable influence who now teaches in the FPMT. His autobiographical account (Feldmann 2005) of his initial contact with Tibetan Buddhism illustrates the intersection of Buddhist and hippy utopianisms that underlies this chapter.

**Realising the vision**

The son of a rabbinically-trained Jewish father and Christian mother, Adrian had a secular upbringing in Melbourne. As a medical student he took LSD and his experience challenged his faith in the scientific worldview. In the 1960s he worked in London and in 1972 travelled the hippy trail in Asia with friends, including Garrey. Adrian distrusted established religions and maintained that the solution to the world’s problems lay in creating new kinds of living arrangements. With friends he considered buying land on Australia’s east coast and establishing an alternative lifestyle community but, meanwhile, another friend, Nick Ribush, wrote to Adrian about the Kopan courses in Nepal. Learning of the plans to buy land, Nick advised them, “It’s peace of mind you want, not piece of land [sic]” (Feldmann 2005: 126). Later Adrian attended a Kopan course and became
increasingly convinced of the validity of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy (p.174). But since he felt that if the Lamas were right, the only logical path to take was to become a monk, which he could not imagine doing, he sought flaws in the teachings. Returning to London, he noticed his own views changing. He observed how his left-wing activist friends considered the world’s problems to be external, while he increasingly found himself arguing the Buddhist position that

the real problem was in the minds of individuals, not the political system. I pointed out that the capitalists exploited the workers through selfishness, greed and hatred and, as the communists also suffered from these shortcomings, their own system would also result in the exploitation of the weak by the strong. From my point of view, the only valid political motivation was altruism (pp. 198-99).  

After further exploration of Buddhism, in 1975 he returned to Kopan to take ordination as Thubten Gyatso (p.236). Since then, Ven. Gyatso has become well known as a Dharma teacher and helped to establish several monasteries (Nalanda in France, Thubten Shedrup Ling at Atisha Centre) and FPMT centres (in Nepal, Taiwan and Mongolia). FPMT members consider him an inspirational figure who gives clear and accessible explanations of the Dharma when he teaches and leads retreats. He published the memoir I quoted above, and in 2008 completed a three-year retreat on Kangaroo Island, South Australia.

Ven. Gyatso has become one of the central FPMT figures and increasingly plays the role of an elder in the organisation. He, like many other long-term FPMT students, found Tibetan Buddhist philosophy attractive because it seemed on the one hand, compatible with his need for something logically consistent while on the other, it detailed a methodical solution to both internal, psychological problems and those of the wider world. Gyatso’s story exemplifies how senior Dharma students present their adopted religion as providing the key to creating a better world that begins with inner transformation. His story also shows the mutual influence of both Buddhist and hippy idealism in the organisation’s formative years. Ven. Yeshe Khadro, whom I quoted in Chapter Two, recalled that Lama Yeshe chastised her for wanting to select projects to focus on rather than “thinking big” and doing them all. Gyatso provides an example of someone who has

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5 This position, which places responsibility on the individual to change, is summed up by a slogan of Western Buddhism, “Inner Peace, World Peace.” The slogan is used variously, for instance as titles for Dharma talks and a book on Buddhism and non-violence (Kraft 1992).
taken this approach to heart in his involvement in helping to establish so many FPMT centres and monasteries.

**Stupa building as Dharma practice**

Almost all FPMT members I met are positive about the stupa being built at Atisha Centre and they all expressed optimism that it would bring benefit in one form or another. A few wondered why the stupa was being built when things like the *gompa* mortgage and development of accommodation facilities seemed more urgent. For the purpose of discussing how FPMT members talked about these issues I have divided them into two approximate categories. First, those who are most deeply involved with Buddhist practice explained the stupa in terms of its spiritual benefits (consistent with the discourse of the holy object) and several also spoke in terms of its benefits to Bendigo’s cultural diversity and/or regional economy. Among these stupa proponents are the board members and benefactors, who live in Bendigo and further afield. To highlight the nature of the debate between iconists and aniconists, I incorporate the voice of a non-FPMT Buddhist dissenter and the proponents’ responses to the points he raises. The second category consists of people who actually use the Atisha facilities and live locally, including members of the management committee and other volunteers expressly concerned with helping at the Centre. These are people who consider themselves Buddhist but they have less commitment to the stupa project and where they explain their feelings, including their movement between scepticism and support, the influence of the aniconist/antimaterialist debate can again be discerned.

Jon Breukel is one of the board-members, taking the role of fundraising director for the stupa in 2003. A Melbourne resident, he is a European-Australian, married to a Chinese Buddhist. He first heard Buddhist teachings while at University and was involved with the Australia Tibet Council for around a decade, which led him to a voluntary role overseeing fundraising for the Dalai Lama’s 1992 and 1996 visits to Australia, among other things producing a video about Tibet for sale through mail order and organising gala dinners and the production of a CD titled *Mantra Mix* (Various artists 1996), for which various famous Australian and international artists donated their songs. On the success of this he later organised an international release of a similar CD with different artists, the profits from which went to Tibetan refugee aid projects. He considered all of this work to be training for the task of fundraising for the stupa. For paid employment he works in the
Victorian Parliament House library, which, he considers, gives him connections to important and potentially helpful people. He became involved in the stupa project because

I’ve known Ian for twenty years, and I’ve said to myself, “I’m so inspired by Ian, you know – here’s this great bodhisattva who has done so many fantastic things and built this, um, you know – this Atisha Centre and established the monastery.” And it’s all come from Ian Green. … [He] is this fantastic person who inspires me enormously. [It] makes me feel that the contributions I’ve made have just been so small, compared to [his].

Like other FPMT members who put in long hours of service to the organisation’s projects, Jon regarded the hours he put into this kind of work as

part of my Dharma practice, you know. [If] I can’t achieve high meditation realisations in this life, at least I could maybe help build a stupa. And you know, such a fantastic stupa as the one being built in Bendigo, to me is an inspiration for my life. […]

He felt that his role would provide satisfaction because he thought he would see the stupa completed in his own lifetime.

When you come to the end of your life and you think, “Well what are the important things you’ve achieved?,” some of them might be through your Dharma practices […]. And then if you have offered this wonderful stupa to last a thousand years for the benefit of all beings […]. Generations and generations of people will come and benefit from that stupa. Having been planted in Australia, having been established in Australia, to be a symbol of the flourishing of Buddhism here, a beautiful symbol – to me that is a fantastic contribution for me to make in my lifetime.

Other stupa proponents placed less explicit emphasis on their personal wishes, emphasising the multifaceted nature of its benefits. In answering my questions about the cost of the stupa, Tony and Garrey, for example, not only echoed the discourse of holy objects, but also said that it would bring both peace and prosperity. Tony stressed that whatever “cultivates a good heart, a good mind in people, […] leads to more generosity, more capacity to give, to serve, to provide benefit to others.”

In interviewing Garrey, I observed that when I talked with some Buddhists and non-Buddhists about the Great Stupa, they say things like, “I didn’t think Buddhists were into building such big things, I thought they were into simplicity and not being materialistic.” Garrey responded that people from his generation were, in the 1960s and ’70s, influenced by books on Zen Buddhism, which placed more emphasis on simplicity.
And that’s not to say that that’s not valid in Tibetan Buddhism, but, it’s not about what you have and what you don’t have, it’s entirely about how you view it. You can’t eliminate the attachment to objects by simply not having the objects.

He also argued for the stupa’s benefits to the regional and even perhaps national economy and sense of identity. Recalling the furore over the Sydney Opera House, he said that in the 35 or so years since its construction, it had become “one of the modern wonders of the world, […] and how many billions and billions of dollars have been generated as a result of that building being put there?” He observed that people often object to some big building project at the beginning, before becoming proud of it as a local when it is complete and it was clear to him that the benefits of the famous Sydney icon more than compensated for its cost overruns. Tony remarked that during its construction “people were saying ‘waste of money.’ [But …] you can sort of see the benefit that it’s brought; that’s just in worldly terms, the money that it’s brought to Sydney.” In turn, Garrey, Tony, Ian and Jon all maintain that the costs involved in building the stupa, would be far outweighed by the long-term benefits.

Yet some Buddhists remain undecided or unconvinced that holy objects could serve as an effective means of benefiting all sentient beings. Neither its power as a holy object nor its value to the regional economy was of interest to Zachary Casper, a white North American also known by the Sanskrit title and name Acharya (teacher) Taijasa. His opposition to the stupa epitomises an extreme expression of the aniconist and anti-materialist Buddhist discourses discussed in Chapter Four and here I attend to his criticism in order to interweave the stupa proponents’ responses to these discourses.

Born in the USA in 1948, he served in the army in Vietnam but went AWOL and moved to Canada. He came to Australia in 1990 and is an astrologer, a member of the Theosophical Fellowship and founded the Buddhist Society of Daylesford. He has experimented with numerous alternative worldviews. He became involved in Buddhism at 21 and had studied with a Tibetan monk, Kalu Rinpoche, in Ontario and with Goenka, a

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6 The origins of the Theosophical Fellowship stem back to the mid 1970s and has roots in the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, but the two organisations are no longer associated. A Google search on “Zachary Casper” and “Daylesford” in 2009 showed that he is still active in the Theosophical Society and astrology but the only reference to his Buddhist society was in association with his self-published books.
Vipassanā meditation teacher with a big following in the West. He had also been ordained as a Theravādin monk for a number of years.

Zachary bluntly asserted that he had had “enough contact with Tibetan Buddhism to know my way around […] I know who I personally consider to be valid teachers and who I think are the fakes and charlatans.” His three reasons for opposing the Great Stupa were the scale and cost of the project, the fact that it was a copy rather than an original design and the presence of “unworthy” relics in the collection. He maintained that it was “a sign of extreme materialism” as well as “decay and decadence” when multi-million-dollar religious buildings were being constructed and that when this happens, “the original message of the founder has been lost.” In early 1997 he faxed Ian a two-page letter in protest and showed me this, along with Ian’s same-day reply. Zachary’s letter began by praising Lama Zopa’s role as a Dharma teacher and the quality of Wisdom Publications books. However, he said, he was disappointed to read in *Chorten Stupa Edition* about the stupa project. While he did not oppose stupas, he did oppose the construction of any stupa that costs such a huge amount of money. Such a project, I believe, is not really what the spirit of the Buddha Dhamma is all about. Bigger DOES NOT necessarily equal better, in my opinion. […] Lama Zopa has got it very wrong in this instance. […] If we lived in a world in which everyone had enough food and clothes and education and shelter, then perhaps I could see the wisdom of building [it].

He suggested that if they must build it, they could scale it down by two-thirds. He wished Ian luck in the running of Atisha Centre and the monastery but added that he could not wish him success in the stupa project, instead predicting “that you will not get the required funds to start or complete the project.”

Ian’s brief, measured reply began, “I appreciate the sincerity of your letter and understand the view you present,” and admitted that he too used to think that the stupa “should not reflect another culture.” Stating that he now believed that “Lama Zopa’s recommendation to build the stupa based on the Gyantse model is entirely correct,” Ian asserted that it was of immense value to the world, finishing the letter with, “I am sorry to

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7 I discuss the first concern here and leave the second to Chapter Six and the third to Chapter Eight.

8 He told me that when he heard about the plans for the stupa he co-owned a bookstore in Daylesford called “Books and Buddhas” that was on Chorten’s mailing list.
read of your prediction that the stupa will not be built. I intend to devote most of my life to
the building of the stupa so obviously I disagree with you. Only time will tell.”

The “anti-materialistic” discourse in Zachary’s criticism decries the stupa as
something that diverts money from other causes.9 He was not alone in his views. Moran
(2004) mentions that some Western Buddhists visiting Kathmandu are upset by the wealth
of some Tibetan lamas and their monasteries in contrast to the poverty in that city’s streets
(pp. 77-78), which they deem incongruous in a tradition they imagine should be devoid of
materialism. This dichotomisation of economics and religion, Moran adds, is not one that
Tibetans make (p.78). Zachary, however, voices his disagreement far more forcefully than
anyone else I met. Others proposed similar criticisms in a more equable manner, while
also being open enough to the promises of its benefits to donate money or time to it.

“Patrick,” for example (see below), donated $10,000 to the stupa but still expressed a
caution about the risks that such a project entailed.

I asked Garrey what he thought about the argument that money spent on holy objects
might be better spent on addressing immediate forms of poverty.10 In the case of the
Maitreya project, he said, social welfare programmes accompany the religious motive. For
instance, they have established a school, leper colony and hospices,

a whole infrastructure that goes with these projects, which brings
immeasurable benefit to the people that live in the community. The actual
building of the project doesn’t solve the immediate poverty problems, […] but
over a period of time, over hundreds of years, even ten years, […] it brings
such enormous benefit, but […] the longer it lasts the more benefit it brings.

But, he says, if you were to take the money raised for either the stupa or Maitreya projects
and gave it to everyone in Uttar Pradesh,

like everybody in the state’s got five bucks, so they’re really rich, for maybe a
month and then what happens? They’re back to exactly where they were. But
by putting that $200 million into something which is ongoing, then maybe the
people who are destitute at the moment – because there’s been a big school

9 My Google search also located his name in lists of significant sponsors for, among other things, a Lama
Yeshe Wisdom Archive book, the Australian branch of Care International and a men’s health group.
10 The question of how people prioritised donations to the stupa as against other causes remains unanswered.
At Atisha Centre requests for donations for monasteries and nunneries in Tibet and India abounded. I
occasionally heard someone talking about sponsoring a nun’s or monk’s education. Others were involved in
the Free Tibet movement. I did not explore whether and how much the stupa benefactors contribute to non-
Buddhist charitable organisations and what kinds of charities they favour so I cannot say how those who
sponsor the stupa would spend their money in other circumstances.
attached to that project [...] and it would be a non-profit thing – and maybe one of those people’s children get to go to school and maybe they get enough education to open a small shop […] or maybe they’ll become a nurse or a doctor or someone that is really beneficial instead of just a beggar.\textsuperscript{11}

Returning to the stupa, Garrey combines the language of economic rationalism with a Buddhist contemplation of interconnectedness in proposing that benefits will flow on to the region:

\[\text{[W]hat’s going to happen with that $15 million, who’s going to get it? Like, architects, engineers, concrete companies, truck drivers, steel manufacturers, paint manufacturers, brick manufacturers and all of the people that they employ, plus all of the people that they employ have got children who are going to school, so their children go to school and learn. If there was no children to go to school and learn, the school teachers wouldn’t have a job; if the school teachers didn’t have a job, the janitors wouldn’t have a job.}\]

A long-standing quandary of development work is that immediate needs must be balanced against long-term solutions. The stupa’s benefits would continue throughout the lifespan of the stupa, which, he said, “if it should last 500 or 1000 years” will bring “hundreds, if not tens of, if not hundreds of millions of people […] to Bendigo to see that stupa.” These future visitors too would “create work and jobs and bring money into the […] community.” The case that Garrey, Tony and others make for the stupa echoes discourses that Zablocki (2005: 287-89) identifies in his analysis of literature promoting the Maitreya statue: a religious case, phrased in terms of creating merit and a development case, phrased in terms of economic arguments that tourism can bring economic development.

The moral argument for the stupa emphasised that it is dedicated to world peace, in comparison to armaments that cost billions and destroy so many lives. Stupa supporters like Garrey and Tony agree that money should be spent on social services and charitable activities, but not to the exclusion of holy objects. They argue that in comparison with fighter jets, abandoned jumbo-jets and sports stadia, the stupa and Maitreya projects are a sound investment in social good and relatively cheap by comparison. When I asked Tony, he told me that the money being spent on the stupa was only a tiny fraction of military and state budgets: “It’s peanuts, the amount of money it’s going to cost. […] What’s […] the cost for an F18 fighter plane? They don’t even think twice about making, don’t even think

\textsuperscript{11} Jessica Falcone (2007), a critic of the Maitreya Project, alleges that it takes a top-down approach to aid, instead of a more grassroots approach that finds out what the locals want and addresses disempowering political inequalities.
twice, it gets destroyed in an instant [clicks fingers], you know?” Likewise, Garrey compared the money spent on warfare to that spent on holy objects:

[It] hurts me, you know, it’s taken me, or taken us nine years to raise a little bit over $100,000 towards this project that I’m working on here [the stupa garden at Chenrezig in Queensland]. And when I hear that one missile that’s fired out of an aeroplane costs five times that much, that really hurts, it makes me quite depressed in a way. […] Nobody seems to care too much about that, or not so many people.

Tony’s and Garrey’s paired opposites, stupas as agents of compassion and military hardware as agents of hatred, are noteworthy. The contrast with powerful weapons of destruction attributes an equally powerful force to stupas, but it is a force for peace rather than violence. In essence, the stupa proponents imagine the stupa as instrumental in the creation of a more peaceful world, empowered by holy objects. This utopian vision combines elements of Tibetan Buddhist and Western countercultural ideas about what makes a better society. Other FPMT Buddhists, less deeply committed to the stupa project, also bring their own understandings to it.

“Deepening Australian spiritual culture”

While Atisha Centre members recognise that completing the stupa in tandem with so many other things is difficult, they feel that it will give Buddhism a major boost. Alexa, who had been involved in Buddhism for over fifteen years, anticipated that the stupa would draw people to it and “deepen the whole spiritual culture of Bendigo and Australia, […] which] is an aspect […] that has been very undernourished.” It is often not until people are in distress, or when they are dying, that they start “to look beyond their body […] for something else, and what is that something else? It’s spirituality. So, you know, and I think that that stupa, because of its size, just in itself, will be very powerful.”

Many FPMT Buddhists with whom I discussed the meaning of the stupa went through a phase of feeling critical about the project before, upon learning more, becoming supporters. Alexa said she had initially had doubts about spending millions on the stupa when Atisha Centre and the Karuna hospice group were struggling. She also found what she called the “corporatisation” of the stupa project off-putting – the glossy brochures, the
benefactor system, the branding, gala dinners and other efforts to promote and fundraise.\textsuperscript{12} This approach seemed to be applying methods of the commercial world to market a charitable project (although many large charitable organisations, such as World Vision do so). The corporatisation, I suggest, disrupted her sense that the sacred and profane realms should be separate. She admitted that

it took me quite a while to be able to understand the potency of a stupa […] There was the Three Scopes\textsuperscript{13} and the lowest scope is just to escape \textit{samsāra} in this life. […] That’s why you build a hospice, because it’s just about this life, isn’t it? While, you know, building a stupa is like a higher scope view, it’s something that will […] become a source of strength for so many people. And you don’t even have to be a Buddhist, you know. I just love the symbolism of the, behind the stupa that, you know, you can give, that the way that a stupa is built is symbolic of the whole [Buddhist] path, so that when you look at a stupa, you’re getting an imprint of the whole path.

She had heard others at Atisha Centre questioning the stupa. Besides the amount of fundraising it required, a key sticking point was the idea that someone could donate $88,000 and become an “enlightenment benefactor” (referring to the benefactor list that I reproduce in Appendix IV). She herself had donated around $600 to the stupa, which she considered a small amount but all she could afford. While the benefactor list made it all sound like an “exclusive club” for rich people, she now believed that this approach was just a method to encourage people to donate to a worthy cause:

it’s just two words that they’ve popped together, that’s all that they’ve done. I mean it’s just “merely labelled,” and […] it ultimately comes down to motivation. […] But […] if you do have the money, then it just gets you to “think big,” doesn’t it?

Ruby, a New Zealander, and her Australian husband have been actively involved in the FPMT since 1994, after previously exploring Vipassanā. Both have had key managerial roles at Atisha Centre, for instance Ruby has served as spiritual programme coordinator (organising courses and retreats) and her husband as director. She described Bodhgaya, which she has visited, as a place with a “real concentration of energy” but stressed that ultimately it is people’s Buddhist practice (of meditation, precepts etc.) that is the actual cause of enlightenment, not holy objects themselves. The principles are more

\textsuperscript{12} I use “branding” as a shorthand for the advertising strategy of promoting a commodity through the development of a consistent and easily recognisable product identity.

\textsuperscript{13} Explained in Chapter Four.
important than packaging, she says, by which I understand her to mean that the Dharma is more important than holy objects. In her view the stupa is worthwhile because it brings people together and because it helps focus their energy on why they are there.

“Hugh,” a local who was relatively new to Buddhism, had already aligned himself with the view that the stupa addressed the root causes of suffering, rather than its symptoms. At first it had seemed incongruous to him, being so near Eaglehawk, which he told me was a “lower socio-economic area” with high unemployment and drug problems. Further, he was initially suspicious about Ian’s motives, in part because of his advertising background, which Hugh associated with egotism and unscrupulousness. Having become better acquainted with Ian, he now felt reassured that his “motive is to help sentient beings.” Ian, Hugh explained, is an expert on “big things,” he’s a “go-getter, doer-type person” for whom things have to be “the biggest and the best.”

Hugh mentioned his disgust about the “obscene” amounts of wealth that the Catholic Church had accumulated. This influenced his decision to volunteer at Atisha Centre for the purpose of “keeping an eye on things,” advocating a balance between the financial needs of Atisha Centre and helping others. In common with other Dharma students, he moved from doubts about the value of a stupa and the money it required to a feeling that Lama Yeshe had clairvoyantly known that a stupa was beneficial for Atisha Centre and it was only our “limited mind” that made it hard to understand how it would benefit the region and the wider world. Reflecting on its benefits, Hugh said that the stupa will help to preserve the Buddhist teachings, citing the prophecy that the Dharma eventually will be forgotten before a new Buddha rediscovers it. The stupa’s physical presence in a future time will serve as a reminder of the Dharma, thus doing contact work far into the future.

“Patrick,” a Melburnian health worker in his forties, considers himself on the fringes of the FPMT because he mistrusts its institutional framework. He donated $10,000 to the stupa. While he was happy to do this, he expressed caution about the potential for the stupa project to become bogged down. He disliked the word “preservation” in the FPMT name, and suggested that we always question the purpose of what we are doing, including building the stupa. “Is it a replica, a museum piece, or is it a ‘Great deed of compassion’?” Having expensive things is fine, but they come with a risk. “The problem is that if you have them, then you will become attached to them.” Echoing the Mahāyāna exhortation to “skilful means,” he suggested that it is better to give a small amount with a motivation to
benefit than to give hundreds of thousands with an unskilful motivation. He stressed that he did not give the money because as a Tibetan Buddhist he wanted Tibetan things all around him, or for ego gratification. Nor should we enter into an attitude of “My stupa’s bigger than your stupa.” Rather, he gave the money because “the stupa manifests the purified mind. […] The body in meditation is the stupa and we become the stupa in meditation,” and through its powers the energy of a place is purified.

In talking about why we need the purification of a stupa, he cited the television programme Big Brother. “How do you win that prize? It’s by ripping off the other person, it’s by cheating and lying to the other person. You get a reward from doing that. It’s just the way society unfortunately seems to be going in many areas.” The stupa, by contrast, “raises the energy in society” and it should be regarded as “a great deed of compassion, a great manifestation of mind.” Also, it will inspire people and lead them “down a better path.”

In Patrick’s explanation, the stupa operates as a force for counteracting the degeneration of society, much like Ian’s explanation that it worked like an antidote. This evokes the notion of the heterotopia as a “counter-site” that remedies society’s ills by evoking a state of mind that is free from such ills. But for others it was more about presenting the Dharma to the world in order to attract those who need the benefits it offers. Bob, who was 59 in 2007, had fifteen years of involvement in Buddhism. Just after the Dalai Lama’s visit, I visited him in his house bus, which he had parked in old Sandhurst Town, where he was converting one of the old buildings into a workshop with a loft to live in.

We talked about his involvement in Buddhism and why he had returned after an absence of a few years to assist with jobs around the place and make his home in the fledgling lay community. He has an aircraft engineering background and experience in several trades such as carpentry and welding, skills which are useful around Atisha Centre and for the stupa. He oversaw the technical task of manoeuvring the large Padmasambhava statue into place at the stupa site. He told me, “I’m here for two reasons.

\[14\] Also referred to as “expedient means,” this term refers to actions, speech and thought that lead to spiritual liberation, even if the precepts or social norms must be broken (Keown 2003: 318). Unskilful actions do the opposite.
One, it’s cheap, and two, to be part of this [Atisha and stupa projects], [which is] something much greater than yourself that you can see growing month by month.”

Because “we live in a consumer-oriented society” we have to make the Centre look attractive so that people will want to visit. Gesturing around his house bus, he said “People like you and me don’t mind simplicity, but to attract others to come and check out the teachings you need to have decent facilities.” Although “we’re out of the cycle of having to display your wealth, the Centre itself cannot be out of this cycle.” The religious organisations “hauling people in” are those with good facilities, such as Hillsong (the well-known Christian megachurch in Sydney). For twenty years Atisha Centre had “idled,” meaning that not much changed. While it did run valuable courses the place itself looked untidy and unattractive, which he thinks put many people off. He considered the stupa and all the beautification of the grounds that had just taken place as part of rendering the place more attractive. He thinks the presence of the geshe and the stupa project have together brought about this change. While as a former engineer he often felt that people around Atisha Centre carried out tasks “in a half-baked way,” he was pleased to recount to me that during and after the Dalai Lama’s visit, “people said we were professional, … it was the most professional lama visit they’d ever been to. And this place has always been known for being a bit daggy.”

With few exceptions, increasing commitment to Dharma practice in the context of the FPMT was accompanied by intensifying alignment of their explanations with the discourse of the holy object. But these FPMT members also had their own thoughts about the stupa’s benefits. The lamas have encouraged the construction of the stupa and Maitreya statues as something of vital importance to the world but on the condition that, as Lama Zopa puts it, people understand that they are “the method for achieving the goal … to benefit as many people as possible for as long as possible” rather than the goal itself. This underscores that holy objects are a method of accessing the Dharma, not the Dharma itself. Unsurprisingly given Lama Zopa’s leadership role, most if not all of the stupa supporters agreed, but they also had their own motivations. Most of the FPMT members seemed to think that the stupa could make a positive impression on people’s minds and show them a path away from greed. Simultaneously they were aware of potential pitfalls,

15 This Australian expression can express distaste (Thorne 1990: 122) but Bob seems to be emphasising the Centre’s past messiness and disorganisation in contrast to its newfound professionalism.
for example that its scale and cost detracted from other ways of helping relieve suffering. Some emphasised wanting to be involved in something that made visible change for the better and to counter the ills of the world. Jon was excited at being involved in something that would make a mark on the world, while Bob saw this mark-making as a way to make Buddhism more attractive to a consumer-oriented society. In one way or another, all considered the stupa to be a way to ground their adopted religion in the landscape, making it much more visible.

A “comfortable place” in a “conducive environment”

People like Alexa, Hugh and Ruby all wanted to see Atisha Centre flourish and they are inspired by Lama Yeshe’s think-big message. Yet the Centre faced considerable financial struggles in maintaining the facilities to standards required by local government regulations. Until 2006, Atisha Centre’s retreat accommodation consisted of antique railway carriages that members had refitted to provide simple compartments that slept one to six people. However, when the council deemed them sub-standard and ordered their closure, retreats scheduled for the coming year were cancelled. The task of constructing buildings that meet planning regulations became urgent and Chorten (Atisha Centre’s newsletter) carried an open letter from their resident teacher (Geshe Konchok Tsering 2006: 1). Noting that closing the carriages meant that the Centre could not provide residential Dharma retreats, he requested that readers consider offering their “every support” because

a comfortable place to stay in a conducive environment is essential. … For the scriptural teachings of the Buddha to stay for a long time here, and for so many people to study and practice these teachings in order to benefit others, I believe a new accommodation building would be greatly beneficial.

The same newsletter announced that during his 2006 visit, Lama Zopa had said that Atisha Centre should have another stupa, smaller than the Great Stupa and a different style (Kadampa) to the Nangyalma style stupa beside the monastery. This adds more fundraising tasks to an already daunting list of expenses, not least the repayment of a substantial mortgage for their main gompa, financial support for the resident teacher and his interpreter and public liability insurance fees.

During my 2003 stay, Atisha Centre faced a shortage of skilled volunteers and struggled to meet day-to-day expenses. Communication between active members,
especially between old hands and newcomers, was sometimes good, other times poor. A successful Dharma centre needs experienced leadership and Ian and Judy, whom most people regarded as the father and mother of Atisha Centre, had now turned most of their attention to the stupa. Frequent changes of personnel can hinder the running of an organisation and inevitably the volunteers who ran the organisation had to balance their role with outside commitments. This leads to a shortage of skilled volunteers to run the facilities (the newsletters frequently carry pleas for volunteers to take up formal positions such as kitchen manager and finance manager). Despite all this, the Centre has been in operation since 1981 and has, piece by piece, established infrastructure including a monastery, gompa and other facilities. It offers teaching programmes for beginners (including occasional public talks in town) and more advanced students and when its new accommodation block is completed in 2009 it will once again offer residential retreats.

Money is a key source of anxiety. A few people who attended or used to attend Atisha Centre said that they thought that Dharma activities should be provided without charge. At the same time, those involved in running the Centre agonise about the expense of maintaining the facilities; they were aware that charging fees put some people off but simultaneously worried that donations fell short of the Centre’s running costs. Like most Western Buddhist centres, FPMT centres depend on a mixture of donations and facility fees for courses, retreats and other events. Atisha Centre derives most of the income for its facilities through suggested donations, “facility fees” (a variation that differentiates the charge for the facilities from the donation to support the teacher because non-specific donations often fall short of what is needed) and financial membership.¹⁶

Lack of resources is a common problem for Buddhist centres, as a search of newsgroups about Buddhism shows. One post (buddhas_friend, 2001) expressed disillusionment after an experience at a large Tibetan Buddhist retreat centre in Britain. “Their internet site gave me the idea I was going to a place of great therapeutic value,” but accommodation was expensive and once there, the poster was unable to find anyone willing to provide instruction on Buddhism and was directed to the bookshop. This person

¹⁶ Businesses also play a role: through Tara Institute, Croucher notes that from 1981, a cleaning business and a software business helped finance the purchase of the mansion they now use as their centre (1989: 112-113), while at Chenrezig, the Big Love Café provides a steady income. A couple affiliated to Atisha Centre established a vegetarian café in Bendigo in 2004. It was later converted into a gift shop and bookshop that doubled as a venue for Buddhist teachings and meditation sessions to provide an urban venue for introductory classes. Sandhurst Town contributed to Atisha Centre’s expenses when it was profitable.
concluded that their hosts were more concerned about money than helping people. I heard similarly-themed comments from a few individuals who came to stay at Atisha Centre. A young Melburnian who had come in search of quiet because of personal problems back home complained to me about the number of signs, notices and newsletter items around the Centre that requested donations or volunteer time. In contrast to the complaint about the British retreat, however, books on Buddhism are available in Atisha Centre’s library rather than exclusively for purchase and I have often seen FPMT people sit down to explain some concept of Buddhism or provide informal counselling to visitors. As a volunteer I was instructed to refer people who turned up or telephoned the Centre with psychological problems to the monks, who had more experience than the lay volunteers in providing assistance.

The travelling FPMT teacher-nun Ven. Robina Courtin is Australian-born and was ordained in 1978 at Kopan. Earlier she was, by her own account, an angry feminist who had a black belt in karate. She has taught at FPMT centres around the world since 1987, and directs the Liberation Prison project in the USA, a Buddhist chaplaincy. She also leads an annual pilgrimage tour to Buddhist sites in India to raise funds for the prison project. She visited Atisha Centre in 2003 and, after giving formal teachings, met with the management committee members to hear about the challenges they faced and provide advice. The finances manager said that it costs around AUD$5000 per month to run the Centre, including the cost of paying the geshe and interpreter, the mortgage on the large gompa and other costs like electricity and the photocopier lease. Someone speculated that the reluctance to give donations may be a “Western cultural thing,” and Robina agreed. She explained that the Liberation Prison project in the USA, which she heads, pays

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17 By way of example of the omnipresent solicitations, in the April-May 2005 edition of Chorten (Atisha Centre 2005) such notices constituted the majority of the newsletter. One notice called for donations for shelving newly-purchased sacred texts in the gompa and another sought support for the living costs of monks at the monastery and Atisha Centre. One-off fundraising activities included a planned pilgrimage to Borobudur in Indonesia (later cancelled) and a “Family Bush Dance.” On the final double-sided page of this issue were two forms. One was titled “Practicing Generosity” and sought donations for various categories including the building fund, puja offering and geshe/translator support. The second form was the generic Atisha Centre membership form (annual membership for a single wage-earner was AUD$220; concession is $165 and newsletter-only membership was $20 per year).

18 Some visitors present psychiatric problems that require more specialised or professional help than people at the Centre can offer.

19 She was the subject of a documentary called Chasing Buddha (Courtin-Wilson II 2000) which has increased her circle of admirers.
someone US$40,000 per year to manage the programme and find grants. This is a big
commitment that they are often unsure they can meet, but the attitude had borne results
and she urged the committee, “Don’t just sit and wait for it to come in. You’ve got to
think proactively. It’s not mystical, I mean, I just learned it by doing it.” She also
suggested that Atisha Centre create the karmic cause to receive money by practising
generosity, for instance by sponsoring pujas at Kopan so that the accumulated merit could
clear karmic obstacles\textsuperscript{20} while also providing financial support for the monks and nuns
that perform it.

Despite Robina saying “it’s not mystical,” her approach takes a considerable amount
of faith in the workings of karma, since one would need to spend before seeing any
returns. She urged committee members never to lose sight of the FPMT vision, “the big
goal.” They should also consult Ian and Judy, as former directors, so as not to “keep
reinventing the wheel.” To the group in general she said, “the more you articulate the
vision, the more likely you are to move towards it. This is obvious. I can’t stress this
enough.” Robina was advocating a shift in thinking from bewailing people’s reluctance to
donate money to a view that accords with the operation of karma, consistent with Tibetan
Buddhist teachings on how to generate the karmic conditions for financial prosperity. But
those making financial decisions about Atisha Centre find this leap of faith difficult, an
indication of the difficulties in bringing together two very different approaches to earning
and spending money.

The approach that the Atisha committee brings is cautious, in contrast to Robina’s
bolder strategy and, indeed, to the think-big attitude behind the stupa project. Atisha
Centre members, even while struggling with the practicalities of running the retreat centre,
anticipate that the stupa will attract the energy and skills of international FPMT members,
as well as attracting other visitors, donations and favourable karmic conditions that will
make their task easier. In Chorten, the abbot Ven. David Lungtok (2005: n.p.), reflecting
on the recent opening of the Relics Exhibition Centre, says that “it has become clear to us
that the Great Stupa is the engine that will drive the future development of the Monastery

\textsuperscript{20} The merit made through reciting pujas, mantras and sutras (a practice that is found in many forms of
Buddhism from Tibet to Japan) is dedicated to specific purposes – for example to the long life of the Lamas,
or to the success of the Maitreya and Great Stupa projects. Sometimes, FPMT members are requested to do
such recitations and send their tally to a coordinator. In early 2004, Lama Zopa requested FPMT centres do
150 recitations of the Sanghata Sutra (which takes two hours to read rapidly) for the success of the Great
Stupa.
and Atisha Centre.” Although the stupa and Dharma Centre are organised and funded as separate entities, then, they are mutually dependent. The Great Stupa project would not be at this site without context that the adjoining Centre provides, while the stupa will provide an attraction and “conducive environment” (as Gen-la’s letter put it) that they expect will improve the fortunes of the Centre. The maintenance and development of the physical grounds must be balanced with their ambitious goal of creating a monument that not only represents enlightenment but also helps to engender it.

**The stupa as utopia**

In the foreword to a coffee-table book on stupas, Robert Thurmann (2001: 6), an academic and Tibetan Buddhist, demonstrates his own enchantment with stupas as objects that have beneficial effects on the world, arguing that “[a] landscape full of stupas becomes more peaceful, the people more gentle.” The idea that a monument could have such profound effects is one of the things that makes Tibetan Buddhism enchanting for Westerners. The idea that people could build something not for their own advancement but with the pure intention to benefit others also has a special appeal that helps to motivate stupa proponents.

Underlying the sense of mission behind the stupa are the FPMT origins in the 1960s encounter between Tibetan Buddhist monks and Western spiritual seekers. Lama Yeshe’s suggestion in 1981 that Atisha Centre become a “total Buddhist society” and Chorten’s portrayal of what this society might look like drew as much on 1970s Western countercultural intentional communities as it did on Tibetan Buddhism.\(^{21}\) Rosabeth Moss Kanter, who studied the utopian communes of the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) and twentieth centuries, suggests that a utopia is an imaginary society that strives to fulfil humanity’s highest aspirations (1972: 1), with utopians working collectively and creating their own social order with reference to a higher social or spiritual order (ibid.). But they only ever exist in imagination because of the impossibility of putting perfection into practice.

Consistent with Kanter’s definition, Lama Yeshe’s utopian-style community was envisaged as a “refuge from the troubles of this world as well as a hope for a better one” (ibid.). The idea of a “total Buddhist society” has receded, but that of living according to

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\(^{21}\) This meeting of utopianisms also occurred at Chenrezig Institute. See Lama Yeshe Khadro’s (1995) account of her involvement there.
the Dharma and offering relief for spiritual distress continues to shape how the FPMT is organised locally and internationally. The vision of including housing on land adjoining Atisha Centre continues, although in the form of private residential leases rather than on a communal ownership model. Atisha Centre, then, did not re-order social and economic structures that the founders of many intentional communities have attempted. Rather, they sought to reform society from within individual hearts and minds, viewing the source of society’s problems as internal. This vision has shaped the FPMT’s Dharma centres, which seek to offer this refuge and hope. Lama Zopa, in giving advice on the role of the FPMT’s Dharma centres, transposes the Buddhist “refuge” metaphor for another that evokes both the technology of First World modernity and its sense of urgency:

The Dharma centre is an emergency rescue operation, like when police go in with all that noise – sirens blaring, red and blue lights flashing, helicopters whirling – to rescue people in distress! Like that, the meditation centre plays a very important role in the emergency rescue of people, human beings, using the seat belt and life-jacket of the lam-rim (Lama Zopa 2004a: 2).

The Dharma centre, then, is a utopian-inspired contact zone that is intended to help people to learn about and experiment with the internal transformation that gives rise to social transformation.

The stupa project, as a technology of spiritual transformation, is grounded in this hybrid utopianism of which Gyatso spoke. In addition to stressing how it inspires people, Ian represents the stupa as an antidote to society’s ills, echoing Kanter’s (1972: 1) suggestion that a utopia is an idealistic representation of goodness, contrasted with “the evils and ills of existing societies.” Utopian communities challenge the established social order and seek to improve it (p. 2). The stupa, as a heterotopia, is the spatial praxis of a utopian philosophy, a counter-site intended to bring peace. In constructing monumental holy objects, Ian told me, Buddhists are “actually changing […] the whole psyche of people,” which in turn changes the world. The stupa “is such a powerful statement for mankind, which is completely contrary to all those normal reasons that people build things. It’s […] like a statement of enlightenment, that enlightenment is possible” (8 April 2003).

Ian states often that “the West needs more holy objects” (e.g., Green 2006a: n.p.). He told me, as we drove between Bendigo and Melbourne, that on this route we would see almost no holy objects; other than a few churches, we would see nothing to remind us of
the importance of anything beyond our materially-oriented lifestyle. Instead, our
landscape is dominated by “symbols of power and competition” (Green 2007: 40) that
deliver subliminal messages about what we value as individuals or as a society. “Whether
it’s the opulent house we build, or the big sports stadiums we build, or the flashy office
blocks, or whatever it is, they’re statements of y’ know, ‘This company is important’ or
‘This man’s wealthy’ or ‘Sports are really important in this country’ or whatever” (Green
2003a). He contrasts this with traditional Western culture, in which “the most imposing
architectural statement in any city was the cathedral or church perched on a hill.”

Our surroundings affect our minds because

we’re influenced by the world, we are our environment really. We create our
environment [and] the environment creates us as well. And […] the
environment that we are surrounded by is like, you know, individual
ownership of little houses with little fences around them, commerce, you
know, the skyscrapers and shopping malls and pubs and gambling places and
sporting places […] This is our world, external and internal (2003b).

In influencing us in this way, these objects reinforce the Three Poisons of greed, hatred
and delusion. Stupas, Ian suggests, counteract these negative influences.

Greater size thus not only gives the stupa more spiritual merit, then, but also greater
visibility and thus greater power to counteract these negative influences. The most
effective way that Buddhists can counteract the subliminal messages of grandiose
architecture dedicated to worldly power, Ian suggests, is to match bigness with bigness to
convey their counteracting message.

But changing the world in line with the utopian vision of the FPMT’s bodhi
orientation is not the only intended effect of the stupa-as-heterotopia. Put differently, the
stupa does contact work by providing evidence of Tibetan Buddhism’s proposed
alternative to mainstream society with its negative influences. In this zone of influence,
however, people who do not share the view that the FPMT’s exposition of Tibetan
Buddhism holds the answer for the world’s problems may regard the expensive and
prominent structure quite differently.

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22 He does not mention the palaces and castles of past kingdoms, portraying the church at the centre of the
town in an almost nostalgic light, as if to say that the presence of a Buddhist stupa compensates for the
present decline in Christianity’s centrality, just as, in Chapter Seven, the newsletter Chorten suggests that
the stupa’s presence somehow regenerates “decimated” Aboriginal songlines.
**Interreligious contact work**

For James Clifford (1997: 213), contact work entails communication between diverse communities in ways that are sometimes beyond the control of those engaged in intergroup negotiations. He coined this expression with reference to museums as contact zones that work between the institution, its visitors and those whose culture is exhibited. Museums, he argues, should strive to serve as places though which peoples could work through their struggles and entanglements and improve communication (p. 213). “By thinking of their mission as ‘contact work’ […] museums may begin to grapple with the real difficulties of dialogue, alliance, inequality, and translation” (ibid.). Although it is very different from Clifford’s museum, the stupa’s mission also entails contact work, especially in its role as a site for giving karmic imprints of the Dharma to visitors (its spiritual contact work), for providing a place to learn about Buddhism and for inter-group and inter-cultural engagement and contestation, the subject of the next three chapters. The Dalai Lama’s recommendations encourage the stupa proponents to take Lama Yeshe’s vision further in the form of active inter-group contact work.

When the Dalai Lama addressed the audience at the stupa site, he spoke about the role he envisaged for the stupa, a role which reiterates both Buddhist and universalist utopianism. He acknowledged that people from various religions were present and emphasised that all religious traditions “promote basic human values […] such as] love, compassion, forgiveness.” If people united in a sense of spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood to overcome divisions and promote interreligious harmony the world would become a safer and more peaceful place. He saw a role for the Great Stupa in this, remarking that

> traditionally Buddhism [was] mainly in Asia. Whether we should consider Australia as Asia or West [audience laughs], I think geographically [you] belong [to] Asia, but the people are [mostly] Westerners, [perhaps] you are a bridge between East and West? (laughs)

While these traditions were in the past isolated, he said, today they mix. Expressing bemusement that European-looking Bendigonians had just performed a Chinese dragon dance, he observed that the world is becoming more “multiracial, multicultural, multireligious,” in contrast to Tibetans, who before their exile were closed-minded about other religions because they had kept themselves for so long in isolation. He had become interested in other religions and the value of dialogue between them, especially after
meeting people such as Thomas Merton and Mother Theresa. His suggestion that Australia could serve as a bridge between Asian and European cultures. The stupa, I suggest, has the potential to do contact work in just this way.

He expressed concern about violence in the world and how the twentieth century had seen so much warfare and bloodshed. People were getting “fed up” with this, he said, and peace movements were growing. The 21st century, he suggested,

should be a century of peace, a century of dialogue. That I think is very important [applause]. So I think at least among believers, it is really worthwhile to make the effort to promote religious harmony, closer understanding among the different traditions.

For this, he said, “I think […] the construction of this stupa could be useful.” He suggests creating a hall and seminar rooms for

not only Buddhist study but also comparative study about all different traditions. […] [Also, seminars or discussions] between modern scientists and Buddhist scholars. […] Of course, this is just a mere suggestion [laughter] and it is ultimately up to those people concerned.

After this he stressed that our “trouble” comes from “self-centred attitudes.” While we do need to “take fullest care” of ourselves, it should not be at others’ expense. He asserted that our actions are based on mistaken understandings about reality. The solution for this, he said, was for people to learn to study and analyse reality “[i]n every field, whether in economy, whether in technology, or science, […]], including I think the Buddhist tradition, it’s very important.” The stupa should become “a centre of learning. A place to make a contribution regarding the promotion of warm-heartedness and the promotion of human knowledge.”

This, then, is the Dalai Lama’s ideal contact zone, one that is not so much a site of struggle as of positive interreligious engagement and mutual respect. The mission for the stupa as a hybrid global Buddhist utopia is nothing less than to engender harmony in the world.

“Piece of land” and “peace of mind”

The idealism of the FPMT’s bodhi orientation is filtered through members’ actual understandings about the stupa. Members must balance their Dharma teachers’

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23 He is using general language to refer to the two key aspects of Buddhist practice, the cultivation of wisdom (understanding reality) and compassion (warm-heartedness).
exhortations to take a bold approach with the challenges of running a Buddhist centre. Further, the FPMT arose out of contact between its founding teachers and Western spiritual seekers who were critical of the society into which they had been born, even while they were inevitably shaped by it. The Atisha Centre/Great Stupa project arose from, among other things, a combination of Tibetan Buddhist and hippie idealism, but it is also literally grounded in the locale and its physical presence is consequential to non-Buddhists. The experimental intentional communities of the 1960s-70s, founded by people with diverse utopian ideals, had strongly influenced what they imagined this place would become. Although the communitarian dimension of the project diminished, the motivation to create a place for “peace of mind” and thereby a happier world, expressed in terms of bodhicitta, continues to permeate FPMT projects, and Atisha Centre and the Great Stupa provide the contact zone in which the Buddhists attempt to realise their ideals. But, despite Nick’s advice to Gyatso, a “piece of land” was needed to create a place to develop “peace of mind” and on this land, buildings were necessary. And the Lamas advocated “thinking big” by encouraging the construction of specialised buildings with elaborate shrines, all of which required fundraising.

In buddhifying Australia by constructing the stupa and in beautifying the stupa site by adding distinctively Tibetan decoration and ritual, the stupa proponents create a visible manifestation of their chosen spiritual path. Rather than becoming a utopia, though, the stupa site becomes a laboratory in which people experiment with alternate ways of ordering society (Hetherington 1997: 12-13). The project provides them with a way to explore the significance of Tibetan Buddhism and its relationship to the wider society of which they are members, involving people in ways that study and meditation do not.

The stupa does contact work by providing the ground upon which people can experience the FPMT’s interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism. On a smaller scale, this is what Khidup and the event volunteers engaged in as they layered Buddhist symbols onto the very ground of Atisha Centre. While Lama Zopa’s followers talk about the power of the object, as if to suggest that just by the power of the relics inside, it will make the world a more peaceful place, the Dalai Lama urges them to engage in real intercultural, interreligious and interdisciplinary engagement right there at the stupa site. He suggests it become a place for generating world peace not through the power of the object so much as
developing mutual understanding; the stupa has the potential, then, to become an interreligious contact zone.

However, even before the stupa is finished, it is also an expression of the power and worldviews of those who build it and give it meaning. The stupa, then, is both more than an arrangement of concrete and steel and at the same time less than an exact manifestation of the utopian ideals its proponents expound. Its mission becomes entangled in the contact zone between the stupa and (among others) civic leaders and other non-Buddhist locals, an Aboriginal land rights activist, and immigrant Buddhists, on whom I focus in the next three chapters.

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I did not have the opportunity to conduct follow-up interviews with FPMT members to ask them to reflect on what the Dalai Lama’s suggestions means to them, but given the belief some express in the power of the object, I would not be surprised if they think that the stupa, empowered by peaceful emanations of these relics, is an ideal place for conducting interfaith dialogue.
CHAPTER SIX

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Figure 6.1. Cr Julie Rivendell, Mayor of the City of Greater Bendigo, greets His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the stupa site (Ian Green in middle), 7 June 2007.

When the Mayor of Bendigo, Julie Rivendell, gave a speech welcoming the Dalai Lama to the stupa and to Bendigo, she represented her city as a place that celebrated diversity and creativity (Fig. 6.1). In doing so, she focussed on the city’s Community Plan (City of Greater Bendigo [COGB] n.d.), an aspirational document developed in 2005 to create a vision for the city’s future. She said:

Two years ago the citizens of Greater Bendigo developed a vision for the Bendigo we aspire to in the future. As a welcoming and inclusive place

- enriched by the multicultural diversity of our city

- that acknowledges and celebrates creativity

- where all residents are valued and can participate in community life

Our Community Plan reflects the human values that we share. The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion will stand here, as a symbol in the Southern Hemisphere, that embodies these values (Rivendell 2007).
In representing the Buddhists as contributors to her city’s multicultural diversity, Rivendell reiterated the discourse of governmental multiculturalism that Ghassan Hage (1998) analyses, which implicitly situates White Australians\(^1\) as the gatekeepers of the culturally diverse society of post-war Australia. This discourse, alongside several other related ones, helps to explain the generally positive public response to the stupa.

In 2003 I asked an earlier Mayor of Bendigo, Rod Fyffe, what responses he had heard, if any, to the stupa project in his interactions with the general public.\(^2\) The former high school teacher and archaeologist told me that most people were positive about it, saying it would be “terrific” or “a great idea.” He added that while “a few people are sceptical […] because it is A, so big and B, so expensive, […] the vast block of people […] wants it to happen.” While it is possible that people who disagreed with the stupa might not have told him so, the project has indeed received little adverse comment in public. This stands in contrast with many other efforts by minority religious groups to establish a visible presence in Australia and elsewhere (see, especially, Dunn 1999).

In this chapter I explore reasons for the stupa’s relatively uncontroversial passage through the planning application process. The relationship between the stupa project, Bendigo’s local government and its general public is negotiated through discourses of multiculturalism. This discourse represents the stupa as something that will culturally enrich the growing regional city, potentially raising its national and international profile. Bearing this in mind, the project is attractive to city elites for four main reasons. First and perhaps foremost is that the stupa, both during construction and as a future tourist and pilgrimage attraction, will bring money to Bendigo. Secondly, because the city councillors and others in leadership roles would like their city to be more multicultural; thirdly, because Buddhism has a positive public image among the educated middle and upper classes in Western countries; and finally, because the stupa proponents themselves know how to promote the stupa in a way that renders it attractive in line with the first three reasons just listed. Having a Tibetan Buddhist stupa helps to transform the city’s image.

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1 Hage uses the term “White” instead of “Anglo” because he argues that the former is the dominant, albeit primarily unconscious, mode of self-perception and because it encompasses people of non-Anglo descent who also perceive themselves in this way (1998: 19). He adds that “Whiteness” is “a fantasy position of cultural dominance” arising from Europe’s history of expansion (p. 20).

2 In Bendigo the mayoralty is selected annually from a pool of city councillors.
But not everyone welcomes the stupa’s exoticism. For some it is a disruption to their sense of place, a sign of the decline of Anglo-Celtic Australian culture or of Christianity, or a waste of money in the face of other more pressing social or environmental issues. Thus I also investigate opposition to the stupa project and what it says about Australian attitudes towards cultural and religious diversity.

**Multicultural enrichment**

When I talk with tertiary-educated, urban Australians about the stupa project, they often exclaim in astonishment, “Why Bendigo?” For instance at one anthropology conference, I described the stupa’s scale and cost to “William,” the school-teacher husband of an academic colleague from Melbourne. Noting that his incredulous response was an echo of numerous others from urban Australians, I asked him, “What is it about Bendigo that makes you say that?” He explained that Bendigo is a very Anglo-Australian, conservative and monocultural place and to build a stupa there rather than in Melbourne seemed outlandish, as if to say that Tibetan Buddhism was too cosmopolitan for Bendigo.

White multiculturalism, Hage maintains, entails the view that enables urban White Australians to retain their “governmental position … through a process of incorporating Australia’s multicultural reality by constructing it into a reality of tamed ethnicities structured around a primary White culture.” (1998: 209). Hage identifies two distinct managerial stances that White Australians take vis-à-vis immigrants. The first is that of White “cosmo-multiculturalis[ts]” (p. 201), who, like Rivendell, welcome cultural and religious diversity as something that enriches themselves and their nation according to their own cosmopolitan, multicultural ethos (pp. 117-18). The enriched culture is that of the White Australians and the enriching ones are the minorities that bring new kinds of food, colourful clothing and sometimes alternative religious options such as Buddhism. White cosmo-multiculturalists consider monocultural cities or suburbs to be deficient. The Bendigonians who engage in Tibetan Buddhist practice or are sympathetically disposed towards it tend to fall into this category, aspiring to see their city become more culturally diverse, perhaps in part as a reaction to attitudes of people like William.

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3 The combined Australian, New Zealand and British anthropological associations’ conference in 2008 in Auckland.
The second stance is the position that the cosmo-multiculturalists refer to as racist, provincial, monocultural and intolerant. People taking this position resent the visible changes that immigrants bring and lament the erosion of their familiar life speak in terms of what Hage calls a “discourse of Anglo decline”\(^4\) (p. 20). This is an Anglo-Australian reaction against the perceived attack on the core British values of traditional White Australia and where the figure of the ordinary “mainstream” Australian, the “traditional Aussie battler,” is perceived as a victim of a conspiracy to change the very nature of the country.

Non-Buddhist locals who oppose the stupa tend to exhibit at least some of these tendencies. Both the multiculturalists and the back lashers position themselves at the centre as the ultimate managers of the nation’s cultural diversity and both positions, as I show below, can be discerned in public responses to the stupa project.

Hage suggests that White cosmo-multiculturalists constitute a hitherto-unrecognised “national type” that represents the multicultural era (p. 200) in contrast with those that literature on Australian nationalism identifies in relation to earlier periods. He calls this new type the “White cosmopolite” (p. 201), which is implicit in discourses of White multiculturalism. White cosmopolites are urban, detached from their roots but with British or European origins and a middle or upper class habitus that disposes them towards “appreciating and consuming ‘high-quality’ commodities and cultures, including ‘ethnic’ culture.” Some of these people bring this same sensibility to certain expressions of Buddhism, for instance appreciating the aesthetic qualities of Buddhist art, or becoming what Tweed (1999) calls “Buddhist sympathisers” who read books on Buddhist teachings without contact with Dharma teachers or organisations.

Cristina Rocha (2006) analyses how urban, intellectual middle and upper-class Brazilians draw on the cultural capital of a particular imaginary of Zen. She argues that Zen can serve as a source of social distinction and sign of the cosmopolitan modernity to which these privileged Brazilians aspire (pp. 195-96). Their understanding of Zen is mediated through their European-Orientalist imaginings (p. 63) that imbue Zen with prestige and cosmopolitan capital, providing a source of class distinction (p. 74, citing

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\(^4\) In this discourse, ethnocentrism refers to closed-minded people who are unwilling to consider the possibility that people from “other” (i.e. non-Anglo-Australian) cultural origins can make a valuable contribution to society.
Bourdieu). Following Hannerz, Rocha defines cosmopolitanism in terms of a privileged intellectual class that is able to travel around the world, engaging interculturally (p. 75). However, rather than thinking in terms of a single form of cosmopolitanism that stands in opposition to “locals,” she maintains that we should think of them as multifarious and emerging out of situations of intercultural contact (ibid., citing Robbins 1993). Bendigonians with cosmopolitan aspirations may, like Rocha’s Brazilian Zen students, find some kind of cultural capital and distinction in associating with Tibetan Buddhism. In view of William’s comments about Bendigo, perhaps “some traditional and provincial middle and upper classes … would not rate highly as possessors of cosmopolitan capital” (Hage 1998: 201). However, an awareness of Melburnian views of Bendigo inspires middle-class, liberal-educated Bendigonians to aspire towards attaining more cosmopolitan cultural capital.

Elsewhere, Hage (2002: 429) characterises the shift from the conservative Liberal government of Malcolm Fraser (1975-1982) to the Labor government of Bob Hawke (1982-1992) as a shift between two approaches to multiculturalism. He identifies the former as being an adjunct to a White Australia that did not compete with it, while the latter entailed something different. While it was still Anglo-Celtic, immigration had transformed its identity into what was represented as “a higher type of Anglo-Celtic civilization” (ibid) that appealed to the growing category of middle-class, well-travelled Australians who, in seeking to be cosmopolitan, wished to distance themselves from their country’s image as a “racist colonial backwater” (ibid). While these views are associated with metropolitan Australia, elites5 in regional centres like Bendigo have similar aspirations. The planning application process and other public discussion about the stupa serve to illustrate this point.

**Gaining approval**

The planning application for the stupa was filed on 28 April 1999, under the council’s categories of “place of assembly/worship” and “tourist establishment” with associated car parking. It was announced in public notices in the Bendigo Advertiser, informing people that they could view the documentation at the council’s planning department. A model of

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5 By elites I mean the people in leadership roles whose position empowers them to make crucial decisions about society (Shore 2002:4). Their cultural capital enables them to gain such positioning.
the stupa was displayed for a time in a Bendigo shopping centre and later in the city council chambers. The application passed with two submissions against it and one in favour. The council minutes (GBCC 1999) for the meeting that discussed the stupa application note that approval was granted and conclude that while the Great Stupa will have “some local visual impact” and generate traffic, it will be of major economic importance to the Municipality, as it will attract visitors and tourists to Bendigo from around Australia and the world. The proposal will not be detrimental to agricultural pursuits in the area and the Council’s MSS [Municipal Strategic Statement] supports developments of the type proposed.

In 2003, Ross Douglas, the manager of the council’s planning department, told me that he was surprised that they had not received more objections, considering the stupa’s potential visual impact, which he had expected to be controversial. The low-level opposition to the stupa project is significant because Anglo-Celtic Australian opposition to immigrants’ alterations of the built environment (for instance through the construction of temples and mosques) has often been strident (Dunn et al. 2001) and provoked much public debate.6 One on-the-ground advantage the project had was that the land had already been in Ian Green’s family and was in a location where it would be visible from no more than a few private residences. But other factors may have helped to smooth the stupa’s passage through public consultation processes.

In countries with a sizeable immigrant population, minority groups often encounter hostility and associated obstacles when they attempt to establish their religious facilities such as mosques or temples (e.g., Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Lin 1999, McLellan and White 2005). When the proponents of a project come from particular minority ethnic backgrounds, opposition may become vehement.7 In Australia, immigrant groups have often had to shift premises or modify construction plans and congregational activities because of opposition. Indeed, in New South Wales in the 1980s, town planning

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6 I have restricted my literature search to Islam and Buddhism. Other religious groups whose membership belongs to the dominant ethnic group are also sometimes “othered,” e.g. ISKCON in the case discussed by Nye (2001) and the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Olsen and Guelke 2004). A broader review could investigate public responses to the construction of other religious architecture (for example megachurches and the distinctive Orthodox Christian style church).

7 The correlation of ethnicity and planning application refusals seems to be close in many cases. In the English city of Leicester in the 1980s, a city reputedly conscious of the need to reduce institutional discrimination, refusal rates for South Asian planning applications were double those of white applications (Naylor and Ryan 2002: 55-56 citing Gale 1999).
restrictions to immigrant projects were so extensive that an investigation was held (Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales 1991, cited in Waitt 2003: 228).

John Skennar (n.d., n.p.), a cultural planner, writes about obstacles to the establishment of Buddhist temples in Western Sydney. A major factor is that council zoning regulations, developed in a particular cultural and historical context, restrict new kinds of mixed-use facilities that, for example, serve as both a residence for monks and/or nuns and a place of assembly for temple congregations. A second factor is that neighbourhood residents object to the new facilities, especially large-scale ones, with the main grounds of objections pertaining to traffic, parking and noise (ibid.). I consider these factors as possible proxies for other forms of opposition and I discuss this further below in the context of the two objections to the stupa.

Both immigrant and Western convert Buddhist groups struggle to establish facilities within Australian cities. The remote location of the Great Stupa reduced the likelihood of “not-in-my-backyard” objections, whereas projects in Melbourne have found council regulations and neighbourhood objections difficult to negotiate. Prevailing attitudes towards a religious minority affect the extent of opposition. Mosques, even when they do not use identifiably Islamic forms, appear to attract greater opposition than Buddhist temples and Dunn (1999: 422, citing Cleland 1993: 110) links this to negative perceptions of Islam among Anglo-Australians. In New South Wales there has been considerable resistance to the construction of Islamic architecture (pp. 30-31)\(^8\) and successful opposition results in “a concretisation of monoculturalism.”

Nahid Kabir (2005: 198) argues that in Australia, opposition to mosques is greater than opposition to Buddhist temples. Citing examples from the 1988 Ethnic Affairs Report, she writes that various Indochinese communities (e.g. Khmer and Lao) in New South Wales successfully secured suitable sites for their temples with varying degrees of support from municipal councils. This difference, I suggest, comes from Buddhism’s

\(^8\) For example, in 1985, the Auburn Municipal Council granted permission for the construction of the Ottoman-style Auburn Gallipoli Mosque (with distinctive dome and minarets). Some residents vigorously opposed this application because they considered it inconsistent with the cityscape around it (Dunn 1999: 481), because traffic volumes increased every Friday, and because, according to a letter to the local newspaper, the “customs and conventions of Islam have no place in Australia” (quoted in Auburn Library Heritage information sheet, 2000). And in 1996, after complaints from locals, Bankstown city council attempted to close a mosque established in a former Presbyterian church. It took an application to New South Wales’ supreme court’s court of appeal to win the right to continue to operate as a mosque (Kabir 2005: 278-85).
positive image in the popular media, contrasted with negative representations of Muslims in Australia (Dunn 2001, Tweed 1999, 2008). For example, news stories about the Dalai Lama portray him as a messenger of peace, in contrast with demonization of Muslims. Citing the example of Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, Tweed (2008: 91) suggests that in North American literature and media, Buddhists are represented in ways that “celebrate the value and authority of the individual” in ways that resonate for mainstream Americans, while Islam is represented as communal and violent and thus in opposition to these values.

But Buddhist groups, too, have had to negotiate zoning restrictions and religious prejudice. The Vietnamese Buddhist Phuoc Hue temple was built in an industrial estate in Wetherill Park because zoning regulations made other sites impossible (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1991: 3). The Taiwanese-based Fokuangshan sect has built large temples using traditional Chinese architectural principles in many countries, including the USA, South Africa, and New Zealand. In 1991 it applied for permits to build a massive temple with accommodation for 60 residents and up to 570 motel-style units, plus a large statue and tall pagoda, in Logan City near Brisbane in Queensland. Over 550 objections were lodged against the project, many on religious grounds (McCarthy 1991: 11) and the plans were scaled down. Since they still wished to build a large temple, they entered into negotiations in Wollongong and in 1995 completed the Nan Tien temple, which has become a well-known landmark visible from the freeway passing by the city.

Just as the Bendigo stupa is promoted as “the largest stupa in the Western world,” Fokuangshan promote Nan Tien as “the largest Buddhist temple in the southern hemisphere” (*Rala International* 1995). From both Buddhist groups’ perspective it is important to attract people to come and see building, which may awaken their interest in the Dharma. Fokuangshan and FPMT, like most Buddhist organisations, do not actively proselytise (cf. Chandler 2002), but an impressive building does “contact work” in attracting attention. But it was not only the attention of sympathisers and potential converts that it attracted. During public consultation prior to construction, a group of local Christian ministries opposed it on the grounds that it was spiritually out of place (Waitt

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9 This representation of Buddhism derives from images of Western converts than Asian immigrants.
The Anglican Bishop of Wollongong, Rev. Reg Piper, argued on ABC radio that a predominantly Christian society had no place for such a building.

Despite this opposition, the temple plans won favour with the Wollongong city council because, as Gordon Waitt (2003: 230-31) suggests, local government already wished to re-brand their city as culturally diverse and vital. The council considered it would enhance the city’s image as multicultural and help to attract visitors and their money to the region. At the time, the council was attempting to reinvent the city as “Sydney’s playground” (p. 232), distancing itself from its older negative image as a polluted Steel City and then, after closures, a place of high unemployment and crime. The Illawarra region, in which Wollongong is located, was also identified as a predominantly Anglo-Celtic region that was intolerant of ethnic diversity (Dunn and McDonald 2001, cited in Waitt 2003: 226). As an exercise in re-branding the city, then, the council used the “rhetoric of multiculturalism” and “tourist attraction” to explain their support for the project. The Fokuangshan and FPMT projects alike benefit from the fact that their city councils now regard increased cultural diversity as enriching in both cultural and economic terms.

A further question is whether ethnic Buddhist groups encounter more prejudice and other obstacles than do converts. Croucher (1989: 104) writes that from the early 1980s ethnic Buddhist organisations in Australia have been prosecuted for contravention of zoning regulations (such as using residential premises as a temple) or have encountered strong opposition from neighbourhoods where they sought to establish temples.10 In Sydney, the municipality of Bankstown opposed a Vietnamese Buddhist temple (Marsh 1999); at Homebush in the Strathfield municipality, residents furiously opposed plans for a Chinese Buddhist Monastery. In Victoria, the Buddhist Council of Victoria was established as an umbrella group for Buddhist organisations in part to help address such problems. Shiva Vasi (2006) documents examples where several Victorian Buddhist groups of various ethnicities had difficulty winning local acceptance. The Melbourne Seon Centre, led by an Anglo-Australian nun, had to relocate three times after encountering problems with local council requirements and regulations. It moved to the second property with the local council’s approval for their plans, but again became snagged in council

10 Spuler (2000: 33) also cites several instances of opposition.
regulations. The third property is 65 kilometres from Melbourne (p. 40). If the reasons for opposition stem from ethnocentrism, as the literature outlined here suggests, then I would expect that opposition would be present but less pronounced when a subset of the ethnic majority seeks to construct “foreign” religious buildings, as in the case of the FPMT’s stupa project. The contrast of advantaged Anglo-Australian convert Buddhists and disadvantaged immigrant Buddhists has some weight, but this is not the whole story.

The Bendigo councillors recognise that the stupa has potential to become a source of tourist income and a notable landmark for the city, especially since, other than its tourist designation as part of the Goldfields heritage region (which also incorporates Ballarat to the southwest), Bendigo has little to distinguish it from other regional Victorian cities. Like the Nan Tien temple for Wollongong, the Great Stupa could one day serve as a tourist attraction that not only attracts visitors and their money but also creates a more multicultural image that increases the status of the host city. But on what grounds did the two formal objections oppose the stupa project?

*Loss of ground*

Ethnic and religious minorities that establish their own distinctive structures are, intentionally or not, visibly asserting their presence via the built environment of the dominant cultural group. This is perhaps why opponents often claim that a project is incompatible with the locale. In New Zealand, when the Dhargyey Buddhist Centre applied for a permit to build a stupa on a prominent hill near Dunedin, the local authorities required the group to plant native vegetation so that it would not be visible from afar because locals said it appeared “alien and non-rooted” (Kolig 1997: 216). The two objections to the Bendigo stupa, as I now discuss, made similar claims.

The countryside around Atisha Centre is primarily pastoral farmland with a few areas of state forest. Apart from a few low hills such as those on which the monastery and stupa site are situated, the near-flat landscape and tall trees allow no wide vistas, meaning that the stupa will generally not be visible from afar. Allies Road, which connects the two small settlements of Myers Flat and Marong, passes nearby and from points along this road the upper part of the stupa will be visible above the treetops. Both objections came
from couples who lived on blocks of land within a few kilometres of the proposed stupa and although I did not visit either property, their addresses suggest that the uppermost levels of the stupa would be visible from their properties. The first objectors noted that the stupa would be visible above the treetops. By the picture it also appears to be very vivid in its colors, this would be detrimental to the natural surroundings of this area. We are required by the council to paint our zincalume sheds a muted color and screen with trees. A building such as this stupa being so high would be impossible to screen from the neighbours in such a way (received by the council on 15 June 1999).

The comment about the council requirement to blend buildings into the “natural surroundings” hints at resentment at bureaucratic control over their lives and that another group is exempt from this, as if to ask, “Why is it that these ‘colourful’ newcomers do not also have to do what we have to do?”

The second objection (received by the council on 19 June 1999) provides further clues about this. They said that the stupa would be “out of character with the area,” becoming the “dominant visual feature” in the neighbourhood and that “[a] building based on a design from 15th century Tibet hardly fits appropriately into a 20th century semi rural Victorian setting.” This objection also expresses concern about traffic, security (they worried about unspecified undesirable people who might come to the Buddhist centre and then intrude on neighbouring properties) and the need to remove “native flora.” This last point, they maintain, “flies in the face of the general thrust of education towards conservation of natural environments.”

I spoke to one of the objectors by telephone, who told me that she and her husband did not want to see the stupa over the treetops from their house and asked, “Why don’t they put it in town near the Chinese Museum?” Her views are representative of wider views in the area towards difference: perhaps it has value as a tourist attraction, “but not in my back yard.” She was unwilling to discuss the matter further, but it is possible that she associated the project with immigrants from Asia. I say this because in discussing the

11 A third response to the planning application in the city council files is a statement of support that commends the project, again from a couple living in the immediate neighbourhood. This letter says that “[y]our dedication is inspirational” and adds that they had enjoyed visiting Atisha Centre on open days.
stupa project with Bendigonians who knew nothing about it, some people (like Peter, quoted below) assumed that its builders must be Asian immigrants.

The minutes from the council meeting that approved the stupa project summarised the formal objectors’ concerns into four main points: (1) increased traffic volumes; (2) “loss of security” (the objectors worried that the stupa might attract strange people to the area who would threaten neighbourhood security) (3) “tree removal”; (4) “[t]he height and colour of the structure and visual impact.” As I will show, points 2 and 4 could be interpreted as expressing a fear of unknown religious Others, while points 1 and 3 could be strategically chosen points of opposition that are more discursively acceptable to the council. Points 1, 2 and 4 all repeat similar grounds for opposition given in the cases outlined earlier.

In response to the first point, the council intended to consider altering the T-junction near the Atisha Centre (where Sandhurst Town road meets Allies road) to better handle increased traffic volumes and once the stupa is complete, “[t]he applicant should provide Tourist Directional and position signs” on two major roads in the area. The matter of traffic raises the question of whether local roads can safely carry so many vehicles, a factor that any facility designed for large visitor numbers must account for.

The objectors may have deployed the traffic argument because it is more acceptable in a multicultural society than an expression of ethnocentrism. If this is the case, it backfired, because the council’s response to this “legitimate” discourse about traffic suppressed the underlying complaint about unwelcome others. The reasons people gave for their objections (e.g., it is out of character for the region, it will increase traffic) may have served as proxies for less acceptable reasons for opposition, such as an ethnocentric distrust of the “Other” and a fear of disruption of prior senses of place.

Indeed, in a more telling portrayal of fears about the unknown religious group, in the second point, the objectors worried that the stupa would threaten neighbourhood security. The council dismissed this point because prior planning appeals “have shown that it is

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12 Ian told me that he hopes for over 30,000 visitors a year when the stupa is built. The Dalai Lama’s visit attracted over two thousand people in a single day.

13 When a news article (Creagh 2008) reported that a south-western Sydney Buddhist temple wanted to expand its monastery, a resident on its access street opposed it on the basis of effects of increased traffic on the narrow road. On the comments page of the Sydney Morning Herald website, the majority of comments did not engage with the traffic argument, instead accusing her of racism and intolerance.
difficult to prove that one particular development will cause an increased loss of security and this is not a valid planning reason to refuse the application.” It also noted that “the sort of people the development will attract are less likely to be interested in other peoples’ property than the religious experience to be found at the temple.” The third point of objection was that the stupa would contribute to environmental degradation because of the area of land being cleared of native vegetation. Noting this, a memorandum in the file said “substantial tree replanting will be required as part of any permit to issue,” to address concerns about the many trees that were removed during site preparation.14

On the fourth point, the council concluded that the stupa “will have some local visual impact and will generate additional traffic to and from the site” but imposed conditions “to limit these effects.” Here, the objectors’ concern that the stupa would be “out of character” with the local countryside, was, the council suggested, unnecessary since the trees and the lie of the land would screen the stupa from most neighbours’ view. At the same time, the council file says: “[t]he intent of the development is for it to be seen as an icon and a statement. The height, colour and design of the building are intrinsic to the development for what it represents as a Place of Worship.” As to its compatibility with the locale, the file says that “it is a subjective assessment as to the visual intrusiveness of the development.” This statement seems to acknowledge that while the convention with stupas is that they should be spectacular, existing conditions such as the height of surrounding trees mean that it will not be visible from afar, dismissing objectors’ concerns in that instance.

Beneath the various points the objectors made lies another concern arising out of resistance to the dominant discourse of multiculturalism. In a review of *White Nation*, Friedman (2000: 269) suggests that Hage could have given more consideration to class relations between cosmopolitans, who identify with multiculturalism, and downwardly-mobile and working classes, who do not. He suggests that “the xenophobia of the powerless,” rather than being about losing control of the nation, is concerned with losing “control over local sociality, a feeling of homelessness.” Those opposing the stupa in

14 In 2007 Ian told me that the landscaping around the stupa continued to concern some people, who told him that native, not exotic vegetation would be more environmentally appropriate and better adapted to the climate (early plans proposed planting claret ash, an exotic deciduous tree, along the circumambulation paths). He also suggested that although the stupa would look “Tibetan,” the landscaping would “ground it in the locale.”
terms of its alleged cultural incongruity seem to echo the discourse of Anglo decline, in an expression of fear that they have lost control of the nation and are being increasingly displaced by migrants and Aboriginal people (Hage 1998: 22). These objectors considered a Tibetan-style stupa to be inconsistent with the character of rural Victoria. For them, the Great Stupa is foreign, a kind of heterotopia in the sense of something incompatible with the Australian countryside. It brings unwelcome social re-ordering, providing very visible evidence of a loss of a familiar, local sense of place, a loss of ground to something foreign. What I wish to highlight among the various reasons for the formal objections is the purported foreignness or incompatibility of the proposed structure. This sense of foreignness relates to a fear about the loss of familiar senses of place. But these reasons were insufficient to block planning approval. Certain factors, including the fact that they already owned the property and had useful connections in Bendigo and the broadly positive public image of Buddhism helped the project proposal pass this hurdle.

A “great drawcard for our great city”

Despite belonging to a minority religion, most Australian FPMT members are part of the ethnic majority and professional/managerial class which gave them a particular advantage in the form of an accumulation of social capital in negotiations with the wider society during the planning application phase. At the same time, Tibetan Buddhism has a positive public image that gives it cultural capital in the context of public negotiations.

In Bourdieu’s (1986: 248) usage, social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition.” That is, those who possess social capital have access to social networks, dispositions and knowledge that open up access to resources (pp. 248-52). An agent or group of agents can mobilise concentrations of capital through participation in networks of friends and acquaintances (p. 249), through membership in a religious organisation and so forth.

*Chorten Stupa Edition* regularly documents its connections with local and international elites, for instance when officials or sometimes high-ranking dignitaries visited the stupa site or made supportive speeches (examples include various Bendigo mayors, state and federal government representatives, Tibetan Buddhist leaders, and so forth). In building and showcasing connections with elites, the stupa proponents draw on
and continually re-constitute their significant store of social, cultural and symbolic capital. Ian told me that the fact he was well known in the city because of his business background had been helpful for advancing the project. This serves as a form of social capital that works as a support network for the project. For example, he had regular communication with the mayor and other sympathetic city councillors as well as the city's Chief Executive Officer. On one occasion when I was with Ian, he was concerned about a matter relating to the stupa and phoned the Bendigo CEO directly.

Ian’s *Advertiser* letter (Green 2006b) quotes messages of support from Steve Bracks, Premier of Victoria; George Lekakis, chairman of the Victorian Multicultural Commission and the member for Bendigo West, Bob Cameron. All three make statements about the large number of visitors that they anticipate the stupa will attract to the region; an implicit corollary of this, of course, is the economic growth that increased visitor numbers promise. On this, Cr. Maurice Sharkey (Mayor of Bendigo in 1998-99) had earlier said that the stupa was “not only breathtaking in terms of its size and dimension but in terms of what it can do for our region – not only from a spiritual point of view but also in terms of our economy” (GSUC n.d-c). Further evidence of the stupa’s social capital is noted in *Chorten Stupa Edition*. For instance the second issue of the newsletter (GSUC:n.d.-n) quotes a statement of support from the Bendigo CEO, who writes that the council supports the stupa, which will be of interest to locals and to visitors and “an attraction of international significance.” They note Bendigo’s “close links with Asia” and consider that the stupa “will undoubtedly provide the opportunity for Bendigo to strengthen links with Asian neighbours.” The seventh issue (GSUC: n.d.-o) reports that in March 1998, Louise Asher, the then-Victorian Minister for Tourism and Small Business visited Atisha Centre and saw a model of the stupa. Issue 22 (GSUC n.d.-d) reports on a meeting between a delegation representing the stupa’s Jade Buddha project and Jack Yu-Tai Cheng, Director General of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Melbourne.

Many Bendigonians, including people associated with Atisha Centre and several people associated with the city council, told me that Ian is a person of standing in Bendigo. I interviewed city mayors in 2003 and 2007 (Crs Rod Fyffe and Julie Rivendell respectively). Both gave me the impression that they respected Ian’s standing in the business community and his abilities not only in terms of getting the stupa plan approved but also in winning public support for the idea of a stupa as a drawcard for Bendigo. Cr
Rivendell also mentioned that Ian’s wife Judy is respected in the city for her work with Karuna Hospice Group, a Buddhist-initiated palliative care project. Conversations with others in the city supported the idea that both were widely respected. In 2003, Nadia, a city council employee who produced a newsletter promoting Bendigo’s arts scene, told me that Ian is “a great champion for the stupa…,” knows the “movers and shakers” of the city because he’s been a businessman. Because people tended to regard the Greens in this way I consider them part of Bendigo’s elite, people with influence in how the city identifies itself and is managed. As Ian suggested, this status has helped to advance the stupa project. One needs a great deal of cultural and social capital to negotiate the logistics of planning applications, communications with locals, fundraising, and so forth.

Bendigo, Nadia said, is “a conservative community and people look up to the leaders, and in current society that’s the businessmen, the business people of the town.” She was not originally from Bendigo and so had a somewhat external perspective, leading her to characterise Bendigonians as generally conservative. Judy told me that Lama Yeshe sensed Bendigo’s conservatism and encouraged all his students to dress respectably and the women to dress in a feminine way (make-up, earrings etc.), even though many Buddhists interpret the Buddhist message of renunciation to mean that such things are superfluous. His advice made sense to her because some Bendigonians considered Atisha Centre to be a strange, countercultural community. The advice to blend in can be contrasted to their more recent attempts to create a structure that will stand out and attract attention in a time where Buddhism’s exoticism is not only more acceptable, but a source of cultural capital.

Ian’s advertising career has also given him valuable experience in the field of public relations, thus providing him with cultural capital – the know-how that he needed to foster support for the project in Bendigo. Bourdieu (1986: 245, cf. Swartz 1997: 43) says that cultural capital is usually acquired unknowingly as socialisation but is often marked in ways that others can detect, such as mannerisms, articulate speech, educational

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15 The idea that Bendigo is conservative is widespread among Australians with progressive or alternative-lifestyles. For instance, a woman in her forties from Castlemaine, a town with a distinctly arty and countercultural flavour, told me she was surprised that a conservative city like Bendigo would accept the stupa project.
credentials, aesthetic preferences and so forth.\textsuperscript{16} Thus people involved with the stupa project present themselves in such a way that facilitates communication with those whose support they require. For instance, Ian’s cultural capital enables him to communicate effectively with Bendigo elites, to align the aspirations of the stupa project with issues of concern to local business and government, especially through highlighting the cultural and economic benefits of the stupa project to Bendigo as a city. His cultural capital has assisted him to navigate the council regulations, organise high-profile events and inspire large donations.

Bourdieu suggests that social and cultural capital can be converted in certain situations to economic capital. Both, like economic capital, are resources that people can individually or collectively draw upon to “maintain and enhance their positions in the social order” (Swartz 1997: 73). An important advantage the Greens and others in leadership roles at Atisha Centre have over most immigrant Buddhists, then, is that they participate as “natives” in long-established social networks and as Anglo-Australians, find that they can draw on Buddhism’s cultural capital in ways that immigrant Buddhists cannot.

This brings me to a further form of cultural capital involved in the stupa project. Tibetan Buddhism’s attractiveness among certain sectors of upper- and middle-class Anglo-Australian society works in favour of the stupa. In Australia, the same people who advocate multiculturalism also speak about Buddhism in positive terms. Their discourse stresses religious and intercultural tolerance, varying from “Buddhism is welcome because it is a peaceful religion,” to “Buddhism is less threatening than Islam.”

By way of example, in May 2003 I attended the Buddhist society of Victoria’s 50\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary celebration at the Box Hill Town Hall in Melbourne, an occasion that illustrated how people link the concepts of multiculturalism, tolerance and Buddhism as a peaceful religion. The state Premier’s representative, Labor MP Jenny Lindell, said that Victoria’s “record of religious tolerance has been remarkable,” the result of work by religious and other leaders to establish a “culture of respect and understanding.” A state

\textsuperscript{16} Bourdieu subdivides cultural capital into three distinct states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised. The embodied state is found in “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (p. 243), the objectified state in the competent employment of cultural goods such as books, instruments and machines, and the institutionalized state, which includes educational qualifications.
opposition MP, Christopher Strong, said that new immigrants in Victoria have “enriched our lives,” using the classic discourse of enrichment – “our lives” refers, as Hage would say, to the White Australians at the centre. Strong characterised Buddhism as “not aggressive, exclusive, and intolerant of other faiths, and we can’t afford faiths that are intolerant of others.” At the same event, Ajahn Brahmavamso, an English monk ordained in the Thai Forest Sangha tradition and abbot of a monastery near Perth, said that there “has never been a war fought in the name of Buddhism,” a key refrain that Buddhists and Buddhist sympathisers use often. He noted the Taliban destruction of the Bamiyan statues in 2001 and said that you can destroy icons but not Buddhist values. Similarly, in Bendigo, Rod Fyffe told me that the stupa represented peace and compassion, and this was more important to him personally than the economic benefits. Underlying such representations are the aforementioned implicit comparisons with the currently widespread representation of Islamic fundamentalism’s violence. The discourse that says “Buddhism is peaceful” thus helps to give the stupa project more symbolic capital than a mosque, because it represents Buddhism as more compatible with “Australian” values of tolerance than the purportedly fanatical Islam. These ways of thinking and talking about the stupa project as being of benefit to Bendigo are effective in circles where the Tibetan Buddhist discourses of the power of the object are not.

“What a coup for Bendigo!”

As Rivendell’s speech shows, official positions on the stupa reiterate the dominant governmental discourses of Australia as a tolerant, multicultural society, occasionally expressing strong pride in Bendigo as a city with a distinct identity. For the city’s elites, the stupa’s exoticism is an important contribution to Bendigo’s cultural capital. For the objectors, it indicates, as Friedman suggests, a loss of control over their sense of local sociality. But what of the wider Bendigo public?

As I met people in the course of living in Bendigo back in 2003, I asked what they thought about the stupa.17 On one train trip to Melbourne, a woman exclaimed, “What a

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17 I did not take a comprehensive sample of opinions across the spectrum of Bendigo society so cannot estimate the proportion of people who were in favour of, impartial to, or against the stupa project. I draw my discussion from interviews and informal conversations with people I met either through Atisha centre, through other intentional contacts that I mention as necessary, or circumstantially, e.g. when using public transport or running errands. Letters to The Advertiser provide the main source of publicly-expressed opinion.
coup for Bendigo!” The majority of people I encountered in such situations had little or no knowledge of the planned stupa, despite the occasional appearance of articles about the stupa project or Atisha Centre in the Advertiser and the public coverage during the permit application process in 1999. When I explained what the stupa would look like usually by showing them the project’s brochure, the most common response was mild incredulity.18

The formal objectors were not alone in their opinion that the stupa was incongruous, or “out of place.” Some people said that they felt that a stupa would be incongruous or incompatible with what they understood to be the character of the region, while others felt that it would be of benefit in providing a tourist attraction. For instance, “Mavis,” an elderly Methodist woman I met while waiting at the Bendigo railway station, had heard of Atisha Centre because her god-daughter Maggie attended the Sunday meditations. She was nonetheless politely surprised when I showed her a picture of the Gyantse stupa and explained the plans. She exclaimed: “Goodness, it’ll look a bit funny sticking out of the bush!” Mavis’s and others’ sense that the stupa was strange had an echo in the view of the Australian Buddhists themselves when they first considered possible stupa designs (Chapter Three). That they had been sufficiently worried about the stupa as an “incongruous” Eastern transplant into “a very Australian situation” (Atisha Centre 1992: 1) to commission a design that was “in harmony with its location in the Australian bush” (ibid.) highlights the dominance of the notion that stupas are not part of an identifiably Australian landscape. To return to the Nan Tien temple, Waitt (2003: 226, citing Creswell 1996) notes that built structures reproduce spatial hegemony through strategies of belonging and exclusion. The temple, as an apparent disruption of normative senses of place for non-Buddhist locals, transgresses taken-for-granted spatial practices. This leads to people determining that it is either in place or “out of place” (p. 227, citing Creswell 1996).

The fact that some critics consider the stupa inconsistent with Australian society, or with Christian values, resembles the anti-mosque discourses in Sydney that Dunn (1999) discusses. For these critics, the stupa is not part of the society around it, evoking the idea of the heterotopia. However, the majority of people I met in Bendigo and elsewhere in

18 Occasionally, for example making a purchase in a shop, I would mention the stupa in the hope of starting a conversation and seeking people’s opinions. In these brief interactions, most people expressed a positive view while a few did not engage in the conversation. None expressed an overtly negative opinion.
Australia and New Zealand who voiced reservations about the stupa project nonetheless saw no reason to oppose it. Even those who thought that the money might be better spent on charitable work for the poor were prepared to allow that the stupa would bring something interesting and new.

A few people disagreed with the stupa because of what they considered to be its non-Australianness or non-Christian-ness. Part of the stupa publicity appears to be written with the intention of countering the argument that the structure is out of character with the region. It does this by linking the Tibetan stupa to the region’s Chinese history, noting that “Buddhism is no recent visitor to Bendigo. It first came in the 1850s with the Chinese gold diggers” (GSUC brochure n.d., n.p.). The stupa project thus aligns itself with Bendigo’s Chinese heritage, despite the very different path that Tibetan Buddhism has taken to Australia and the very different religious practices and sociocultural status of the Chinese gold diggers. The alignment makes sense in terms of the city’s economic development because one of the primary tourist attractions in Bendigo today is its goldmining heritage, of which the Chinese connection is one important part.

The city’s Golden Dragon Museum and Joss House provide year-round attractions, while the highlight of Bendigo’s annual Easter festival is Chinese dragon- and lion-dancing, performed by local troupes. The Golden Dragon Museum plans to build a 50-metre high (nine storey) pagoda, an East Asian style tower that constitutes a variant form of stupa. The museum website (accessed in 2007) omits any discussion of the pagoda’s religious significance, instead portraying it as an enhancement of the museum-as-tourist-attraction that will house displays on the arts and crafts of the various Chinese dynasties with a revolving restaurant at the top, but it is significant that Bendigo could be home to not one but two Buddhist monuments that are justified in terms of their potential as tourist attractions and linked with the region’s history of Chinese connections. The Advertiser, from 2003-2008, shows a positive public response to this plan because of the perceived benefits in terms of tourism to the city, despite setbacks relating to the need to decontaminate the former Mobil fuel station site. A letter to the editor (McKenzie, 2008)

19 Some non-Buddhists also linked the stupa with the region’s gold-mining history: a young bicycle mechanic in Eaglehawk said that people had no reason to protest about a stupa since several prominent structures already stuck out of the bush in the form of rusting poppet-heads (implying that it will become another prominent landmark). Maggie, a Sai-Baba devotee who often attended Atisha Centre, linked the region’s gold-mining history of the region in another way, comparing it with the “spiritual gold” that the Dharma offered.
expresses a strong preference for the pagoda and stupa projects over a proposal to spend $500,000 on a sculpture in the city’s mall. He suggests the pagoda and stupa will be a better way to “put Bendigo on the world map” and “leave a legacy for future generations” by attracting international tourists.

The complaints of the Buddhist stupa’s non-Christian-ness echo the aforementioned claim that the Nan Tien temple was spiritually out of place (Waitt 2003). Once I was fixing a bicycle puncture outside a country store, when I had a brief conversation with a man whom I soon learned was a Pentecostal Christian. I asked his opinion about the stupa project and he told me he was unhappy about it. When I asked him why he had not registered an objection to the council, he told me it was not worth his time because it was only one of many similar instances where people had been led astray.

Letters to the Advertiser’s editor provide a further glimpse into Christian-themed anti-stupa views. For example, Jodie Bailey of Eaglehawk writes against the stupa and since her argument is somewhat unfocussed, I quote her letter in full in order to convey her tone:

I am horrified at how much money is being spent on a structure that is against what our Lord wants for us. We have been given a beautiful city and when this Buddhist temple is built we will have people from all walks of life thinking we are no longer a Christian society. Even though many of us don’t attend church regularly, surely you can see what detriment this structure will have in our city? Yes, we have different religions and cater for all cultures, but our money should be going to more constructive services. We have people on the streets, we have drug and alcohol problems, financial problems for the young (mobile phone bills), and pensioners just getting by. Yes, it will bring in more spirituality – but to what fallout? All Christians pray for Bendigo and her people. Get out there and show them the love they need. Is our government and our council playing with the devil? By the way – has anyone noticed all the rain we have had since the National Day of Thanksgiving?20 Interesting, isn’t it? (Bailey, 2004: 10)

What she means by “fallout” is unclear, but a few sentences later she mentions “playing with the devil” suggesting that she considers people adopting or sympathising with Buddhism to be making a dire religious error. In support of Bailey’s letter, another writer charges that the drought and social ills in Australia are a result of people neglecting “our

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20 I can only guess that she means to assert that the rain is a divine response to Christian prayers of thanksgiving and thus evidence that Christianity is the right path. The National Day of Thanksgiving is an explicitly Christian annual event celebrating “our God given heritage as a nation” (www.thanksgiving.org.au, accessed 25 February 2009).
Christian heritage and foundations” (Kidd 2004: 10) and dismisses “our cushy Western, permissive anything goes viewpoint.” This author also warns readers that “[w]e really do need to know what it is we truly stand for in Australia, because unless we do, we could fall for anything.”

While Bailey and Kidd express worries about the decline of Christianity, others are quick to warn them against intolerance or “fear-based bigotry” (Gannaway 2004: 10). For instance, Deacey (2004: 10) writes that

Buddhism promotes nothing but peace and tolerance. … Whatever name given God, we are all one people. It is intolerance of the kind your letter expressed that will bring the greatest ill. … I pray your views are not indicative of broader Christian society.

Christianity is indeed the dominant religion in Bendigo, according to Australian Bureau of Statistics census data (quoted in COGB 2008), which list the city’s religions as Christian 64.5%, No Religion 22.8%, and Non-Christian 1.8%. Thus it is not surprising that religions other than Christianity have few established centres in Bendigo; for instance there is no mosque. Father Joe Taylor told me that Catholicism is the dominant church in Bendigo. The Catholic church owns a lot of land because gold diggers passed their claims to the church, revenue from which helped to build the city’s prominent Catholic cathedral. Other major Christian sects in the city include Anglican and Uniting Church (which combines Congregation, Presbyterian and Methodist churches). Bendigo’s telephone directory also lists numerous evangelical and Pentecostal-style churches. I also interviewed Barbara Hickingbotham, a pastor from The Assembly of God and Margie Dahl, a minister from a Uniting Church who was also involved in a local interfaith group. None of these three interviewees expressed strong opposition to the stupa project, although Margie said, “if a Christian group wanted to spend $10 million on building I would be horrified really,” tempering this opinion by acknowledging “a human need for sacred space.” Father Joe said he thought the idea “fantastic,” adding that “what Buddhism offers is very healthy, and I encourage it.” He also expressed disillusionment with his country’s attitudes to war (by joining with the US-led invasion of Iraq) and to Islam.

Some Bendigo residents seemed to be in two minds about the stupa. For instance, “Cecily,” a pensioner who has had intermittent association with Atisha Centre, commented that “[it] looks like a blimmin’ wedding cake or something… [laughs]. That’s what it reminds me of. […] It’s very foreign […] It doesn’t fit into the landscape at all!”
She was also critical that the money spent on the stupa could be better spent on helping to alleviate poverty. Yet she expressed anticipation to see it completed and compared it to Sacred Heart Cathedral, a prominent city landmark. The stupa would bring a new point of interest to Bendigo, which she considered “very Anglo-Saxon” in contrast to Melbourne, where she loves to see “the diversity of faces, clothes, yeah I love it.” By way of example, she said that where she used to live in North Melbourne “there was a Chinese family over the road, there was a Maltese family, and there was a couple of other nationalities there in that little street.”

Some Bendigonians seemed to use the stupa project to counter perceptions like those of William who portrayed it as a monocultural, provincial backwater. Bendigonians who had previously lived in larger cities like Sydney or Melbourne expressed similar perplexity. For instance, when arranging my first visit to Bendigo, I emailed Peter Heggie, a representative of the Bendigo Bicycle Users’ Group (BBUG), to enquire about the town from a cyclist’s perspective. Peter and his wife (also a Christian) had not heard about the stupa project at that point. He asked why I would consider conducting an anthropological study in Bendigo because, he said, “[i]t has one of the lowest concentrations of ethnic people in Australia” (pers. comm., 3 March 2002), making the common assumption that anthropologists only study ethnic minorities. Sometime after I had shown him around Atisha Centre, Peter told me that he thought that the stupa was being built in the wrong part of the country, telling me that when he and his wife first came to live in Bendigo from Sydney, they saw “almost no one African, Asian.” This prompted him to look up some statistics and he found that the city had a very low ethnic diversity. Since most Buddhists “are not of classic Anglo Australian origin,” he concluded that building a stupa in Bendigo “is kind of like building a shop in the wrong market place.” To him Anglo-Australians are not the right “market” for a Buddhist stupa, while for the Buddhists of course, the stupa was part of a strategy to bring their religion to a place that needed it.

In trying to explore people’s opinions further I occasionally asked them if they would have objected if the stupa was to be built in a prominent place within Bendigo itself, but no-one ever said they would oppose it. For example, Peter did not condemn the stupa: as he said, all religions should be able to live side by side. Indeed, he brought his wife and three sons to Atisha Centre’s Open Day so they could learn about Buddhism. Like the formal objector I spoke to by telephone, Peter said that they would have been
better off building it in the town centre, so that it would be more visible and more accessible for tourists and locals wanting to learn about Buddhism. When I asked him if he would have put in a submission in response to the planning application for the stupa if he had known about it, he said:

I would probably comment but not an objection because we have freedom of religion in Australia […] and if I did that and I wanted to build a church in the next suburb then I could rightly expect the Buddhists in the next suburb to say “Sorry, but we don’t want your church to go up.” You […] avoid division by generosity I guess.

Some people made an unspoken comparison with religions that they associated with violence. Once, when I was discussing the project with several people I had met on the train, all expressed bemused interest and the woman sitting beside me remarked, “At least they’re not terrorists,” making an implicit contrast to stereotypical Islamic terrorism that was so much in public focus since 2001. Others on the train responded blithely to my questions, saying such things as “It’s all fine by me, they can do what they like” and “at least they aren’t doing any harm.”

“So many things to so many people”

More important than the stupa’s physical location beyond the city outskirts is the stupa proponents’ social location, which helps them to cultivate support. The main reason that the stupa project has won governmental support and avoided major opposition is, I suggest, Ian and other stupa proponents’ skills in presenting the project to the council and wider public. One way that they do this is through aligning their project with dominant discourses: those of cosmo-multiculturalism and economic development. The economic discourse argues that “the stupa will bring economic development to our city,” primarily by providing a new tourist attraction. As I have already noted, the council considered the stupa project to be of major economic importance and this was a major factor in their support.

A later occasion entailing debate about the council’s financial support provides further evidence of the project’s positive status with city elites and the suspicion with which a few critics viewed this. In 2006, the Great Stupa negotiated a $500,000 loan from Bendigo Bank for the second stage of the project. The City of Greater Bendigo agreed to
The city council’s minutes report Ian’s presentation to the councillors, which underlined the stupa’s multifunctionality as a religious and tourist destination, a place for arts and education incorporating a library and museum (by which Ian meant the relic exhibition centre that I discuss in Chapter Eight), and “a symbol of world peace” (Niemann 2006: 49). The council investigated the project’s capacity to repay the loan via its main source of income (donations) and reported that it receives donations of up to $100,000 per annum, with further sources being explored. For instance, an Asian benefactor had recently promised around US$200,000 – $250,000 per annum (p. 50). Reporting on the council’s decision to underwrite the loan, the Advertiser (2006) reports Cr Rivendell as saying that the council “looked at it in the light of the one critical question that it needs to have a clear benefit to the community. There is a really positive asset in terms of attracting overseas visitors.” The economic consequences of increasing Bendigo’s status as a tourist or pilgrimage destination was the primary criterion for council support.

The Advertiser (2006) quotes Cr Kevin Gibbons, who opposed the decision, as asking if Buddhism was a religion and if so, would the council support other religions equally? The news of the council’s support for the loan provoked several letters to the editor. Helen Annand (2006), for instance, argued that the council should not support a religious organisation:

Every time the stupa is mentioned it is about how big it will be and how many tourists it will bring to Bendigo. A stupa stands as a “spiritual monument” containing, at the very least, “a life tree and holy relics,” according to The Stupa Information Page on the Internet. It most certainly is meant to be a holy place, not primarily a tourist attraction.

In expressing her preference for secular projects rather than religious ones, Annand goes on to suggest, perhaps sarcastically, that “[i]f Bendigo ratepayers want a big tourist attraction they might consider something in line with the big pineapple or big banana. Or perhaps a big nugget or a giant poppet head?” (ibid.). Another letter (Brown, 2006) expressed concern that the council agreed to guarantee the loan even though the basis of it was somewhat unconventional, arguing that “[a] council guarantee for a loan of this size,

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21 The other half was guaranteed by a couple who used their own home as a guarantee.
based largely on verbal funding ‘pledges’ from both local and overseas foreign nationals, is not sound business practice.”

In the range of letters disagreeing with the stupa and the council’s decision, I identify something like Hage’s discourse of Anglo decline, that the old, familiar White Australian, Christian way of life is being swamped by foreign religions that seem to receive an unfair degree of support. These people also express concern either that one religion seems to be able to gain more favours than others, or that any religion at all has been favoured. One letter appeared to be at least partly motivated by religious concerns. A representative of the Bendigo branch of a religious organisation called the Tabernacle of David (Webb 2006) charges that the stupa “will be used for the advancement of the beliefs and rituals of the adherents of Buddhism.”

In response to the Advertiser letters, Ian (Green 2006b) wrote to explain the stupa’s benefit to Bendigo. His letter is titled “Stupendous Attraction Deserves Support” and in it he notes that the stupa will be “so many things to so many people,” arguing that it could be both “a sacred religious shrine” and a tourist attraction. It is of particular interest that Ian positions the stupa project as part of Bendigo, in direct contrast to the “othering” language of the project’s critics: “The Great Stupa will be a great drawcard for our great city.” This inclusive and “great”-full language, with its emphasis on our city, portrays an idealised, inclusive Bendigo, the city that he and others would like it to be, one where all citizens celebrate diversity, in line with the Community Plan’s vision of Bendigo as “a welcoming and inclusive place.”

Writing to the Advertiser in support of the council’s loan decision, Atisha Centre member Al Gabay (2006) writes that the stupa is “a startlingly innovative idea that will benefit all Bendigonians.” In reply to concerns about the council supporting “a Buddhist venture,” Gabay delved into Australian history to argue “there is a long history of supporting religious establishments in Australia, beginning with the Church Acts in 1836 and 1837, which gave matching funds support to communities that wished to build a church and engage a minister.” Gabay is suggesting that these acts should now extend to other religions. Besides being a supporter of the stupa project, Gabay is an academic historian who published a biography of Alfred Deakin, one of Australia’s Prime Ministers, lending the cultural capital of his scholarly authority to the cause by signing his name “Dr Al Gabay, La Trobe University Bendigo.”
The stupa in multicultural Australia

Bendigo aspires to develop its image as a diverse and lively place. In a speech quoted in *Chorten Stupa Edition* (GSUC n.d.-c), another Mayor of Bendigo, Maurice Sharkey, spoke about the project as something that bolsters “a community like Bendigo”:

> there is concern that the immensity of the building proposed could lead some people to think that this is beyond a community like Bendigo. The same thing could have been said about the Chinese Museum, Discovery Science and Technology Centre, […] and so on. This sort of project is not beyond Bendigo. We do ourselves no favours by thinking small… We can achieve big things. … We must aim to persuade others that this is a credible and worthwhile project deserving of support from the highest levels of Government and community.

His speech takes ownership of this project as a show of strength for the city of Bendigo, to foster a sense of pride in the city and the capacities of the community (as mayors are expected to do), while its reproduction in the newsletter sent to benefactors highlights the project’s endorsement from city elites. His speech talks about the stupa as something ambitious that “we Bendigonians” are capable of realising. Bendigo’s elites attempt, through supporting the stupa, to foster a sense of their city’s own local distinctiveness in part to attract tourist visits and revenue and in part to bolster their own sense of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

The stupa helps to create the image of Bendigo as a more multicultural city, appealing to the city’s middle classes. The stupa proponents’ cultural and social capital served as a valuable resource in winning widespread acceptance. The stupa proponents, especially Ian Green, are accomplished at building connections locally and benefit from identifying with two distinct social locations. Constituting a religious but not an ethnic minority, the Bendigo Buddhists are relatively privileged members of Anglo-Australian society, which becomes most evident when the stupa’s progress in gaining public support is compared with parallel efforts by ethno-religious minorities in Australia. The second is as a religious minority that benefits from positioning itself as a model of the multicultural enrichment that non-hegemonic cultures or religions can bring to a regional city that was seeking to grow away from its reputation as a small, monocultural, provincial place. They also had a major advantage in gaining public acceptance in that they already owned land and had become well-known over the years. By contrast, a group wanting to build a temple that is compelled to start from finding and purchasing a new property must
negotiate with neighbours who know little about them, making it easier for them to make objections to construction plans. This inevitably renders the planning application process more difficult.

The stupa project is entangled in the invisible architecture of power of the dominant classes in the Australian nation and the complex power relations that underlie the Westernisation of Tibetan Buddhism. The language that stupa supporters used illustrates the extent to which this apparently foreign project was actually very much associated with and supported by the “movers and shakers” of Bendigo. The proponents’ alignment with dominant discourses and deployment of various forms of capital help the imported religion to render itself intelligible to the wider society, winning it public support for the project. On the basis of all of these factors, it has become possible to commence, stage by stage, the transplantation of a 15th-century Tibetan stupa into the 21st-century Australian landscape. The stupa project’s success in avoiding major opposition lies in the conjuncture of several favourable factors in the contact zone of the stupa site. The project also benefited from and actively cultivated local receptiveness to cultural diversity and to Buddhism.22

But perhaps most importantly, Bendigo elites were persuaded by the stupa proponents’ argument that the edifice had potential as a tourist attraction and contribution to the city’s identity. The stupa proponents’ social and cultural capital has enabled them to represent the stupa in a way that fitted, despite its radically “other” appearance, with the aspirations outlined by participants in the Community Plan and by city elites seeking to put Bendigo on the world map. The discourse of cultural enrichment represents the stupa as something that will help the city to become more multicultural and cosmopolitan, without actually having to accommodate unknown outsiders. In the light of this, the tamed exoticism of the stupa is itself a factor in winning support because it enriches Bendigo with the peaceful exoticism of Tibetan Buddhism without de-centering existing power relations. Nowhere is the maintenance of existing power relations more evident than in a meeting with a somewhat marginal Aboriginal activist and her supporters, which I now discuss.

22 However, this acceptance does not translate into donations, which primarily come from Buddhists who support the idea of the stupa (local Buddhists are only a small proportion of the patrons – many major donors come from further afield, many being of Chinese diasporic origins).
CHAPTER SEVEN

THE STUPA ON THE SONGLINE

Figure 7.1. Guru Rinpoche, 2001. Courtesy of Karma Phuntsok.

This painting depicts Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) on a lotus throne and cloud above the Australian outback, made recognisable by the presence of the famous Uluru (Ayers Rock) (Fig. 7.1). As the mythical founder-hero of Tibetan Buddhism, Padmasambhava succeeded in establishing the Dharma in Tibet when predecessors had failed. He did this by using his tantric powers to identify, vanquish and convert obstructive spirit forces (Kapstein 2000: 155-57), turning them into Dharma protectors. The image references the traditional thangka art of Tibet to depict the founder-hero’s arrival in Australia. But how do Buddhist strategies of domesticating the Dharma through controlling local spirits,

1 It is one of a series of greeting card reproductions of paintings by Karma Phuntsok and sold under the name “Karma Art” in a number of Buddhist centres. Phuntsok (b. 1952 in Lhasa) is a Tibetan refugee now living in Australia (Lafitte 1999a: 23).

2 Indeed, while Padmasambhava is most often associated with the Nyingmapa sect, the FPMT and other similarly international Buddhist organisations draw on his powers as they seek to establish the Dharma in new places. I discuss one example elsewhere (McAra 2007b: 94ff, 147).
imported by a group of Anglo-Australian converts to Tibetan Buddhism, interact with Aboriginal understandings of their own role as custodians of a land created and inhabited by ancestral Dreaming beings?

I have already shown how the stupa project’s relatively easy passage through the planning application process, when compared with the struggles of some ethnic minorities to win acceptance of their religious structures, illustrates how the contact zone is a place of differential privilege and empowerment. These unevenly-weighted intercultural engagements coalesce in critical moments that dramatise the differences in power relations between cultures or between different cultural domains. I refer to such moments as conjunctures (McAra 2007b, citing Sahlins 1981), incidents in which sets of circumstances combine synergistically, producing transformation. But sometimes what is most evident in intercultural conjunctures is what Tsing (2005: 4) calls friction, “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference.”

This chapter pivots around one such conjuncture. In August 2003 an unusual set of circumstances combined to create a moment of intercultural friction between the missionising trajectory of a newly-imported religion and an activist attempting to highlight the destructive consequences of colonial dispossession for indigenous peoples.  

An indigenous rights activist of Jaara descent in her late forties whom I call Aunty “Paula” voiced an informal objection to the siting of the stupa. This was well after the formal public consultation period had passed and earthworks had radically re-shaped the site. Paula’s contention was that if the stupa were to be built on this site, it would block a songline (invisible pathway created by ancestral beings) running through the area.

The one-off meeting was a relatively minor incident in the development of the stupa because no other Aboriginal group had expressed any objection to the stupa’s construction or location. Nonetheless I consider her complaint significant because it highlighted the unforeseeable consequences of “grounding” a universalising religion in a new land, marking a critical conjuncture in which the mismatch between several worldviews and ways of relating to land (Aboriginal, Tibetan Buddhist and Anglo-Australian settler) became apparent. The occasion also provides an opportunity to consider the gap between utopian idealism and heterotopian praxis: that is, how the Buddhists attempt to practice

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3 The events recounted here took place six years before the Australian government’s “Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples” (Rudd 2008) which I discuss in this chapter’s epilogue.
their ideal of benefiting all beings in a situation where intentions and contingencies never match perfectly. Lest I be misunderstood about my position on the intercultural relations under consideration, I must emphasise at the outset that I do not intend to favour either party in this analysis, or to oversimplify a complex situation. In tying it to the concept of the contact zone, my intention is to highlight the complexities of an encounter between various ways of thinking about land and sacredness, and differing understandings about what is beneficial.

**Planting Buddhism and propitiating spirits**

Stories of chthonic spirits pervade Tibetan Buddhist narrative and ritual practice (Samuel 1993: 220). In conventional Tibetan founding narratives such as the Padmasambhava story, the conversion of local deities and spirits precedes that of the people and the newly imported religion adopts pre-existing local deities (Samuel 2001). Tibet is portrayed as an ogress that resisted the arrival of Buddhism by disrupting early efforts to construct Buddhist temples. The obstacles only abated when her body was pinned down with strategically-located stupas and temples (Mills 2007). Metaphors relating to attempts to influence spirit beings vary from this image of forcible subjugation to more harmonious and reciprocal ones. In any case, these stories emphasise that when local spirits become supportive of the Dharma, the locale becomes peaceful and prosperous. This sets the scene for a host of ceremonial practices around the construction of new temples and stupas. In one teaching on this matter, a ritual expert warns:

> If one does not vigorously apply oneself to the examination, testing, appropriation and taming of the land, no matter how one proceeds there will be the danger of obstacles and obscurations. Hence, bearing in mind the many histories of temples built in the past, it is right to devote great attention to the ways by which shrines come into being (Gyatsho 1979: 30-33, quoted in Powers 1995).

The histories to which Gyatsho⁴ refers are those of the founding narratives I have just discussed.

In line with this approach, the FPMT has produced a two-volume manual on the traditional ritual requirements for stupa construction, including instructions on how to request permission from resident spirits (FPMT Inc. and Lama Zopa 2003, 2006). Thus in

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⁴ Not to be confused with Ven. Thubten Gyatso (Adrian Feldmann), who appears later in the chapter.
the past few years, ritual experts have conducted several ceremonies for the stupa site that in one way or another addressed the land’s spirit-guardians and ocean-dwelling nāgas. The ceremony that I attended entailed the burial of four treasure vases (Fig. 7.2) in the four quarters of the stupa site as an offering to these invisible guardians. A treasure vase is a sealed vessel decorated with auspicious symbols, and containing offerings to local spirits and deities. Khensur Rinpoche, the high-ranking lama who had blessed the ground in 1994, told me via his interpreter that this offering creates an alliance with the local spirits whose permission is needed to proceed with construction.

Before the event, a contractor drilled a two-metre deep hole at each of the “gates” at the four cardinal points. Khensur Rinpoche determined the most auspicious date and came from Adelaide in August 2003 to give a Dharma teaching over a weekend, conducting the treasure vase rite the next day. The public ceremony began with a long prayer session in the gompa, reading from Tibetan-language texts. A film crew took footage of the event for a documentary called Tiers of Tibet.

Like most of the Westerners present, I understood little of the details, but a senior Dharma student told me that at the start of the rite, the Rinpoche “generates the deity” and it is the deity rather than the monk who gives the blessing. A procession took the vases to the stupa site and they were buried with further ceremony (Fig. 7.3). Ian explained to onlookers that the vases “enrich the earth,” meaning that because the nature spirits had been propitiated, rain would fall when needed and the region would prosper. Rinpoche, he said, had summoned the nāgas from the Southern Ocean to partake of the treasures and asked them to become protector-guardians of the stupa and its land. Several

5 Khensur Kangur Lobsang Thubten Rinpoche (his full name and title) was born around 1925 in Eastern Tibet and was ordained in 1945. He served for a number of years at the FPMT’s Buddha House in Adelaide, and conducted the first site blessing for the stupa in 1994, long before the land was cleared.

6 Tiers of Tibet will document the stupa from its early days to completion.

7 The key actors in the ceremony were the Tibetan monks, two Western monks and lay people. The ceremonial words chanted were entirely in Tibetan. Four people who had key roles either in Atisha Centre, monastery or stupa project carried the vases in a procession to the site, while around thirty or forty people watched.

8 I did not learn which tantric deity he became, but I understand that it is the deity that performs the rite; also, I know that he has conferred Vajrayogini initiations and this is the empowerment he is most well-known for.
Figure 7.2. The four treasure vases at the stupa site

Figure 7.3. A treasure vase is buried in the stupa site
people said that the vases would be a blessing for the whole area and considered the showers that followed the weekend as a blessing, evidence of the success of the ritual (drought has prevailed in Victoria throughout the 2000s).

Besides the ritual’s main purpose, it symbolically planted Buddhism in the soil. But I wondered how this attempt to influence the chthonic forces would appear to Aborigines. Would they and the Tibetan ritual experts build empathetic relationships with other colonised peoples, as happened when Tibetan Buddhists consecrated ground for a stupa on private land in New Zealand in collaboration with local Māori elders (Kolig 1997)? And could they collaborate in rituals addressing local spirits or would this be a case of competing expert knowledges about local spirits? At that time I was aware of Paula’s complaint about the stupa but the meeting had not taken place.

**Welcome to Jaara Country**

At this point, a little regional history and cultural context is necessary. Bendigo and Atisha Centre are towards the eastern end of Jaara country. The Jaara Jaara people, associated with the Djadja Wurrung language group, are part of the Kulin nation that extends south to the bayside land that Melbourne now occupies. Before European arrival in the region in 1836, Jaara country was around 2500 square kilometres (Attwood 1999: 1-3). The combination of European-style pastoral farming and the influx of immigrants with the gold rush, beginning in 1851, brought the profoundly destructive colonial trio of disease, environmental damage and dispossession. The colonists’ belief in their own superiority and that “Aborigines had no rights to the land on the mistaken basis that they had not ‘worked’ it” exacerbated the violence of interactions between the two peoples (pp. 13-15, quote on p. 11). By 1863 the population consisted of 31 adults and seven children (p 41), most of whom had been shifted into reserves.9 I do not have a comprehensive picture of contemporary Djadja Wurrung or Aboriginal organizations in the vicinity of Bendigo, but about 2500 people claim descent from the Djadja Wurrung. Other Aboriginal groups also live in the region, including Wotjobaluk.10 The Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-

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9 The reserve of Franklinford was run by Edward Parker, Assistant Aboriginal Protector for the Port Phillip District during the 1840s. Coranderrk was established in 1863.

10 A regional re-grouping composed of descendants of several related central and western Victorian peoples (ATNS website n.d.).
operative (BADAC) is intended to be inclusive of all such groups and was established after factional problems in a previous organization.

In places like Australia and New Zealand, descendants of European settler-colonists have sought to develop their sense of belonging by claiming emotional and spiritual ties to the land. But this kind of discourse of spiritual custodianship can undermine indigenous efforts to use their status as spiritual custodians of the land in their efforts to seek redress for their dispossession under colonisation (Ellemor 2003: 246; Griffiths 1996: 5; see also McAra 2007b: 69-72). Cerwonka suggests that non-indigenous Australian efforts to “reterritorialise” using discourses of spiritual stewardship and “white indigeneity” to distance themselves from British colonialism, although this is not their conscious intention, further undermine Aboriginal claims (Cerwonka 1997: 148). Discussing Anglo-Australians who consciously plant gardens with native vegetation, Cerwonka (1997: 150) suggests that the gardeners’ narratives and practices as members of the dominant group can allow them to feel more entitled “to a disproportional amount of land and power in Australia, without interrogating that history that allowed them that privilege.” At the same time, scholars talk about a mindset of “amnesia” (De Lorenzo 2005) that has enabled most White Australians to avoid acknowledging the differential privilege and the ongoing effects of colonial dispossession on Aboriginal people.

Some Australians participate in the reconciliation movement in recognition that much needs changing. Atisha Centre indexes an awareness of the need for reconciliation with a sign at the gate that acknowledges Djadja Wurrung as “the traditional owners of the land.” Owen Martin, a senior Dharma student who trained in Aboriginal health and belongs to a reconciliation group, told me that he had put the sign up. It was produced by a group called Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation.

In this spirit, Ian has often invited Aboriginal elders to the stupa’s public ceremonial occasions. For instance, he contracted Aunty Lyn, an elder of Yorta Yorta ancestry who

11 There are several organisations established for settler-indigenous reconciliation in Australia, e.g., Reconciliation Australia (http://www.reconciliation.org.au/i-cms.isp, accessed 7 April 2007) and Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) (http://www.antar.org.au/about).

12 Some other Buddhist organisations also make a conscious effort to acknowledge the land’s traditional owners. For example, Shiva Vasi (2006: 48) notes that the Cambodian Buddhist Association of Victoria established a relationship with local Aboriginal people and added a ritual element that drew on their own custom of acknowledging their own ancestors in the form of a shrine in one corner of their temple land where they make offerings to the land’s traditional owners, conceptualised as ancestors.
works for BADAC, to give a welcome speech when Sakya Trizin, head of the Sakya sect, visited to perform a site blessing in May 2003. This occasion provides a glimpse of the cordial relationship that some official Aboriginal representatives in Bendigo have with the stupa project. The gathering of approximately two hundred people consisted of stupa supporters, including FPMT members and the Vietnamese Melburnians I discuss in Chapter Eight. Lyn gave a brief speech naming Bunjil as the Dreamtime ancestor who created the country and the Djadjawurrung as the people of that country.

She then played a recording of a ballad by Aboriginal singer Anne Conway, whose lyrics tell of the dispossession: Bunjil, “the Creator of Earth and Sky… Gave us laws and said we must / look after our land for all time …” But the white people came and “strange fellas these gubbas were/ they preached a religion that seemed so cruel/ took our children, land and food.” The song tells how the people were moved to the reserves of Franklinford and later Coranderrk and laments that they were unable to follow Bunjil’s law because “sheep and cattle, and lust for gold / soon put an end to the ways of old / the creeks were poisoned, we had nowhere to hide / guns and disease – it was genocide.” The final verse ends with:

…the old people now gone / but their spirits still live on / in the stories and the people who now walk this land / they won’t forget the Dja Dja Wrung 13 … We must never forget our Dja Dja Wrung.

As this sad song played through the PA system, Lyn stood firmly on the stage, looking across the audience into the distance and after the song finished she said that, on behalf of BADAC, “I would like to extend a very warm welcome to His Holiness.” As I understood it, her choice of this ballad was intended to highlight the unaddressed wrongs of colonisation.14

**Songlines, totems and country**

While Lyn had delivered an official indigenous welcome that alluded to the harmful consequences of the general colonisation of Australia, Paula was an Aboriginal activist who considered the stupa to be an alien intrusion that she felt was harming the ancestral

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13 I use the spelling “Wurrung” but this is a common alternative spelling.

14 While people such as Owen must have understood this, at least one audience member had a quite different interpretation that still puzzles me, for as the participants walked off the site after the event, I heard a woman say to Lyn, “Thank you for handing the land over to us.”
energy of the land. I first heard mention of Paula’s views about the stupa from Hugh, who had met her when she had visited the Centre in June 2003. This and the meeting that followed in August that year prompted me to ask several Buddhists and a local Aboriginal elder what they knew about her. I later conducted internet searches and learned that she was an indigenous activist whose activism was focused around highlighting what she called the “illegal European invasion” and its persisting injustices. Two Aboriginal elders in Bendigo discounted Paula’s authority when I asked them about her, saying that she had no business making claims about songlines. One elder reinforced his distance from her by saying that she was not from Victoria (contrary to her claim) and that she was acting independently from the elders and BADAC. It was clear, then, that her objection to the stupa did not represent the views of all locally-based Aborigines.

By way of qualifying what follows, during most of my fieldwork I was preoccupied with learning about the Buddhists’ perspective and motivations and I had not established a research relationship with Aborigines living in Bendigo. Further, I needed to keep some details around the meeting confidential. Thus my representation of her and her supporters’ perspectives and of other Aborigines with Bendigo connections is shallower than if I had undertaken a different research project. I base my analysis on notes from the meeting and from conversations I had with Atisha Centre members and Aboriginal elders about Paula’s visit. A more developed understanding of Aboriginal interest groups in Bendigo, how they related to each other and how they worked within and outside of state and federal government would have given valuable extra contextual background but I was not in a position to undertake such research at the time.

Paula arrived to meet with Ian and Yien and brought around ten supporters, including a white barrister and several young white adults, one of whom was operating a videocamera to record the meeting. We all sat around a table and Fred, a man from a regional Aboriginal organisation of which I had not previously heard, facilitated the first part of the meeting. He explained that this was not a Native Title claim, since the site was

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15 While I cannot verify any participant’s ethnic identity, Paula’s supporters resemble the young, white Australian radicals that engage in activism over issues such as preservation of old-growth forest and Aboriginal-settler reconciliation. Graham St John (2000: 211) writes about these people as “ferals” (a term that the activists have appropriated) who proclaim an “eco-radical awareness of prior Aboriginal occupation.” He says that ferals value an “indigenised landscape” that is “a primary object of valorisation and defence” rather than defending “pristine” nature. Aboriginal sacred sites in particular have “become sources of enchantment and targets of protection” which explains why they rallied around Paula.
not Crown land and acknowledged that Atisha Centre was a place of peace, a concept that
the Djadja Wurrung should embrace – providing there was dialogue. Fred played the role
of a level-headed, articulate facilitator and Aboriginal advocate, while Paula was voluble,
presenting question after question throughout the visit.

Ian explained that the FPMT was dedicated to teaching Buddhism and that the land
was given to the FPMT by his family. He outlined Lama Yeshe’s vision for creating a
harmonious Buddhist community there. Although he seemed concerned about the
possibility that the protest might develop into a substantial obstacle to realising his dream,
he treated the occasion, following Ven. Gyatso’s advice, as a time to listen to and try to
understand what Paula and her supporters were saying.

Throughout the meeting and walking tour of the property, Paula expressed anger
about the injustices of colonisation. She said that the whole system in Australia is “illegal
because we’ve been through 200 years of undeclared war and there is no peace treaty.”
She said that when she first visited the stupa site she felt devastated because of the way the
earth had been cut up and re-shaped. The site, she felt, was a powerful one, she could feel
the energy there; she felt a songline ran through it. But it had been “desecrated” by the
massive earthworks in preparing the ground for the building. She added that the
Freemasons are “into ley lines,” and “try to block the energy” of the songlines. She was
concerned that relative newcomers to the land are taking control not only of the physical
ground but also its spiritual qualities, usurping Aboriginal custodianship.

She also asked who the original people of Tibet were and mentioned “the Böns,”
asking, “Were they there before the Tibetans?” A white barrister accompanying the group
who was mostly silent asked Ian, “Do you represent groups building stupas on indigenous
land around the world?” Later, as we walked from the monastery back to Atisha centre,
Paula asked me the same question about New Zealand: “If the Māoris weren’t the first
people there, was it the Morioris?” From Paula and the barrister’s questions on this I can
only speculate that they were trying to establish if Buddhists had a history of colonising
indigenous people. Ian said that Bön did precede Buddhism, but that the Dalai Lama

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16 Today scholars of Tibet agree that the Bön religion, which claims to be indigenous to Tibet, is very similar
to Tibetan Buddhism and likely bears little resemblance to religious practices that existed in Tibet before
Buddhism arrived. The idea that Morioris inhabited the mainland of New Zealand before the Māori has now
been discredited; rather, they were the first inhabitants of the Chatham Islands, 800km to the east (King
recognises Bön and added that Bön people had shown their support for the project by giving a sacred text to be housed with the relics.

Ian showed the party around the stupa site, Atisha Centre and the monastery. At the stupa site, he indicated where the treasure vases had been buried and explained that they enriched the land. Paula asked “Why did the lama choose this site?” Ian explained how when Lama Yeshe visited in 1981, Ian and a friend walked about the land with him and Lama Yeshe expounded his vision for how the property could become a Buddhist community.

Fred asked whether environmental impact reports and archaeological surveys had been conducted at the site. Ian said he had checked all this with the Council, government, BADAC and a few local Aboriginal elders and was told that nothing of cultural or historical significance existed in the area. I found no record in the city council archives of any formal Aboriginal objection to the planning application process for the stupa, although it remains a possibility that some Aboriginal people disagreed with the stupa but did not make their views public.

When the group went to the monastery, Ven. Gyatso, who had been instrumental in constructing the rammed earth buildings a few years prior, talked about the building and explained that the large statue of the Thousand-Armed Chenrezig represented universal compassion. One of Paula’s supporters, “Jane,” interrupted him in an emotional tone, as if verging on tears of anger: “How do you justify the desecration of sacred, sacred land?” Gyatso was taken aback and replied: “Desecration is a big word. We see it as an offering. The stupa is an extremely powerful form of compassion.”

Jane persisted: “It’s in the land, how can you imprison it with buildings?”

Gyatso replied, “Spirituality is in the mind [not in the land]. The idea is to benefit all sentient beings.”

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2003: 44-45, 55-58). It seems Paula had heard both of these ideas, which are still very much in circulation, and considered them to be examples of other forms of colonisation.

17 Brien Nelson, who worked for Parks Victoria and is an elder of the Jaara people, conducted a cultural inspection and archaeological survey and spent the whole day looking around the site, but he found no material of Aboriginal significance on the property (Nelson, pers. comm., 2003).

18 All the conversation reported in this section is reconstructed from quick notes taken at the time and written up in detail later; it may not always be verbatim. The part of the meeting where speech was translated was easier to transcribe since I had time to write the English words when Tibetan was being spoken.
“But you’re destroying Jaara land!”

The non-Buddhists at this meeting viewed the stupa and other Buddhist buildings with suspicion for an array of reasons. For Jane, they were yet another instance of colonial destruction. From the anguish she expressed about the situation, I infer various possibilities. Was she attempting to distance herself from what she perceived as white exploitation of Aborigines? Certainly she expressed what I call an “ecospiritual indigenous” discourse that situates indigenous peoples as connected with the land in contrast to Western alienation from it. Perhaps she was also expressing a Western countercultural criticism of instrumentalist concepts of land as an inert and alienable possession. Ironically, Jane’s critical view of Western culture and her romanticisation of the West’s “others” has much in common with how Western converts to Buddhism distance themselves from the ills of modernity, but in this case, the Buddhists are accused of perpetrating the injustice. While Buddhists like Gyatso came from an earlier generation of countercultural seekers who questioned society’s norms just as Jane was now doing, owning property and constructing buildings on it changes the group’s relationship to society and how newer countercultural generations regard them.

Like Jane, Paula associated the project with colonisation, exploitation and insensitivity to the land, but her concern was more explicitly with indigenous empowerment. Twice she stressed that the Buddhists seemed to have no trouble getting government permission to build all these structures. She looked around the monastery shrine room and exclaimed at how beautiful it was, adding “You have a great support network here; hopefully we can all do this one day; I really like what you have done; I can’t even get permission to build a maimai or a humpie.”¹⁹ Her expression of a sense of differential empowerment between White and Aboriginal Australians echoes the comparison between the immigrant Buddhists and the converts that I discussed earlier. Yet she seemed torn. While she seemed to view the Buddhists’ plans to create a peaceful retreat centre positively, she was suspicious of the amount of money that the stupa project required. At least twice she quoted, “Money is the root of all evil,”²⁰ and blamed greed for the damage that gold mining had done to the region.

¹⁹ Makeshift shelters.
²⁰ This widely-quoted expression is a misquotation from a Biblical verse, “The love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Timothy, 6:10). People use it to condemn greed.
In response, Gyatso tried to sympathize: “In Tibet, gold was seen as belonging to the local spirits, and now the Chinese are coming in and removing it.” He then added, “We haven’t gone into this without thinking. We’ve done invocations of the spirits – ”

Although it was not his intention, his claim to have influence over the spirits presented a challenge to Aboriginal claims about the spirits and Paula interrupted, “You don’t know our ancestors!”

At this point, Geshe Konchok Tsering arrived with Noel to participate in the meeting. Translating, Noel said that “Gen-la apologizes for not speaking English” and that he was happy to meet them; it was the first time he had met the indigenous people of this area. Gen-la said:

I’m just a Buddhist monk, so I can just talk to you from that angle. Normally I’d be speaking to people who want to practise the Mahayana Vehicle – the things that they try to do are of maximum benefit to every living being. So possibly due to the fact that the building of the stupa, you see it as quite strange perhaps, you aren’t aware of the motivation; perhaps there are some doubts in your mind about it.

Noel added that Gen-la was aware that around the world, indigenous people have suffered because of colonisation, adding that “[t]here’s no fault whatsoever in doubt arising in this way due to the fact that you’ve had to experience trauma for so long.” Tibetan Buddhists consider criticizing a stupa to be a karmically negative activity because it is equivalent to criticizing the mind of the Buddha, but as I understand it, Gen-la was assuring them that their criticism was understandable and he sympathised with their “trauma,” i.e., their experience of colonisation and dispossession. He continued:

And so the reason for building a stupa goes back to Buddha Śākyamuni himself. The stupa represents the mind, the heart centre, of the Buddha himself. A great deal of work goes on before anything is built. One must collect positive energy…. Relics from Buddhas who are very highly realized will be placed inside the stupa. This empowers it. A building like this is so sacred and has the ability to benefit beings, not only humans, that inhabit the area. Necessary rain will fall when it’s needed. It is good for the overall health of the area and diseases will not befall people living around the area. In the beginning of the process a precious Lama [Khensur Rinpoche] came to this land in 1994 and performed the ground breaking ceremony to bless the land and invoke the spirits, the resident spirits, to ask for their help.

Here Paula again expressed her concern at the mention of spirits, asking: “Who are those resident spirits?”
Gen-la replied, “In the Tibetan tradition they refer to the gods and a class of being called a nāga – they reside in the animal realm. They are the non-visible (at least to us) residents of anywhere.” But the lama who performs the ceremonies addressed to the spirits is qualified to do so, Gen-la maintained, through his lineage of the Buddha’s teachings. He continued:

This particular area has been abused for quite some time; the people with gold digging have disturbed the land, degenerating it. This [ceremony] is also to regenerate the energy of the land. To try to establish a structure like this: it’s to avoid any kind of problems and trouble and harms coming to the area in the future. Implicit in this is the wish to bring benefit to beings in the area. This is the crux of why we do this. When you weigh up the points, please consider this. Ask if it is going to be harmful or beneficial.

At this Paula replied:

We want to support this, but there’s such a conflict between our spiritual beliefs and those of the temple. When I walked up there [to the stupa site] I felt my guts being ripped out. This land is connected to my mother and her mother and her mother before that.

Noel stopped her so he could translate. Gen-la’s reply was that “I don’t think our two spiritual traditions are in conflict here. Because whatever Buddhists undertake it has to proceed with a motivation to be of benefit to everybody else.”

Paula replied, “We don’t think it [the stupa] is harmful, we just don’t want it built on that particular area.” At some point she also said, in response to the mention of the spiritual authority of the lamas, “We are oracles ourselves, very spiritual, we can feel the damage that’s been done to our mother earth. If the Tibetan lamas are clairvoyants, can they say what are the Dreaming totems, the Dreaming animals there?”

Gen-la had lived in Australia for less than four months at the time of this meeting and as yet had limited English. Since his education had been almost entirely in a Tibetan monastery in India, I doubt he had had much opportunity to learn about either the Aboriginal Dreaming or the particularities of colonisation in Australia. While Gen-la and Gyatso spoke about healing the land after the abuses of the Gold Rush, Paula emphasised the destruction wrought by the newer earthworks, but she could do little more than complain given that she had no control over those who own the property under Australian law.
As I noted above, Paula maintained that money was “the root of all evil,” implying that the stupa project would not be able to stay in touch with the ideals its proponents espoused. Gen-la assured her that Buddhists who wished to make positive energy donated the money (i.e., it was given willingly). Paula elaborated, but spoke too fast for Noel to translate and, in any case, he and Gen-la were about to leave for an appointment, so Gen-la wrapped up his part in the meeting by reiterating: “Please, there is no way that building a stupa can be of harm to anything. Please try to analyze more. It’s not going to harm … please offer your support.” In reply, Paula sounded conciliatory: “We need to both support each other’s spiritual beliefs.” Gen-la responded,

Of course, one hundred percent! There’s no way that one spiritual tradition can satisfy everyone on the planet, which is the reason we have so many religions. This is to satisfy different kinds of people so all spiritual traditions should back each other up.

Some of the Buddhists later expressed puzzlement at Paula’s criticism, since they regarded their project as entirely benevolent and well-intentioned, “for the benefit of all sentient beings.” They had also had the idea of repairing or healing the decimated songlines (see below). And the name of their stupa, “the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion” – surely this expressed their good intentions? The two parties did not explicate these differing understandings about land and the meaning of spirits and songlines to one another and I now attempt to do this.

This meeting entailed an odd and tragic juxtaposition of worldviews in which people misunderstood each other on several counts. It demonstrated the kind of friction that can emerge from intercultural grappling in the contact zone, friction created not just by the single encounter but by layers and layers of history. In attempting to transplant the Dharma into a new land, the Lamas, the geshe and the Dharma students all believe that they are acting in the best possible interest of all beings. Meanwhile, on the basis of her interpretation of Australia’s past, Paula reads the stupa project as the imposition of yet another form of colonisation, for which the clearance of bush and disturbance of the earth itself is gut-wrenching evidence. Her supporters, in their desire to engage in reconciliation and environmental causes, espouse an eco-spiritual belief in indigenous peoples’ one-ness with the land. The founding narratives of the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet, when transplanted into Australia, implied a form of control or conquest of local spirits. Aboriginal activists like Paula and her supporters may well, under these circumstances,
interpret this as a conquest of their own Dreamtime ancestors, whether or not Paula or others had heard the stories about Tibetan spirit pacification.

**The spiritual is political**

The concept of songlines, otherwise known as ancestral Dreaming tracks, needs to be understood here both in the context of Aboriginal Dreamtime cosmologies\(^\text{21}\) and New Age interpretations of them. In the Dreamtime, ancestral beings emerged from the earth and moved about the land, leaving their essences in certain places, for instance prominent topographic features such as rock outcrops and lakes (Rose 2003: 166). One’s ancestral land is a “‘nourishing terrain,’ a place that gives and receives life” (ibid.). Recollection of these ancestral journeys through one’s country, for instance through chants, painting and dance, delineates territory and reinforces a descent group’s rights to the land.

When Anglo-Australians participate in alternative spiritualities such as New Age thinking that attempt to value indigenous knowledge positively, they tend to do so without understanding the historical context. They often equate Songlines with ley lines as sources of spiritual power for anyone who is sufficiently clairvoyant to be able to detect and “tap into.” Samuel (2001:412-13) discusses New Age views that draw on a range of religious systems including Chinese geomancy (feng shui) and Native American ideas filtered, for instance, through Carlos Castaneda’s popular “neo-shamanic” books (e.g., Castaneda 1968). In this neo-shamanic and New Age literature, certain places on the Earth are sites where supernatural power can be accessed. Some of this literature portrays the world as being encompassed by a magnetic grid of spiritual energy (Marcus 1988: 266).\(^\text{22}\) New Agers in Australia regard Uluru as a power place on a network of songlines that criss-cross the continent and Julie Marcus is concerned about the New Age appropriations of Aboriginal cosmologies into their own notions of a “transcendent unity” that decontextualizes and depoliticises specific Aboriginal social structures. These New Age interpretations often attempt to draw on indigenous knowledge to advance ecological or spiritual concerns. Discussing non-indigenous Australians’ claims to have a special

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\(^{21}\) I follow the general assumption that the Dreamtime concepts sketched here are pan-Aboriginal, although there are major linguistic and cultural variations in Aboriginal societies and the concept undoubtedly has significant variations historically and cross-culturally.

\(^{22}\) Marcus uses the term “Aquarian,” but I use “New Age” to refer to an eclectic individualist spirituality that draws on the contemporary self-psychology, world religions and indigenous traditions, often romanticizing indigenous spirituality.
spiritual relationship with the land, scholars such as Peter Read (2000, 2003) have suggested that the underlying motivation is their wish to develop a stronger sense of belonging. Another motivation is a critical rejection of some aspects of contemporary consumer-oriented living and more broadly, contemporary instrumentalist uses of land, with their environmentally-destructive consequences.

Many Anglo-Australian Buddhists share common features with these other liberal forms of alternative spirituality. People at Atisha centre were influenced by New Age understandings of songlines as equivalent to ley lines that they unwittingly distanced from their political role in connecting a specific descent group to a specific place. The idea that the land had sites with powerful spiritual energy was further influenced by stories about spiritual experiences in Buddhist and other sacred sites and through stories about the power places of Tibet (Dowman 1988). A man nicknamed “Dreamtime Ross” occasionally visited Atisha centre. He engaged as an advocate for Aboriginal causes, was friends with several Aboriginal elders and played something of an intermediary role with the Buddhists, acting as a go-between and explaining Aboriginal concepts to them. Ross told me in mid-2003 that the stupa was on an intersection of songlines, but he regarded the Tibetan Buddhist rituals conducted at the nearby monastery and retreat centre as beneficial in helping to keep the songlines alive, just as Aboriginal elders had done with their own songs in the past. Drawing on his extensive reading on Freemasonry, theology and Tibetan Buddhism, Ross also expounded at length about his vision for the construction of a structure inspired by Solomon’s temple, supported and engaged with by Aborigines.

A few years before Paula’s visit *Chorten Stupa Edition* (GSUC n.d.-m: n.p.) cites him in an article about the songlines running through the stupa site. The article stresses their importance in Aboriginal culture and then asserts that

it is only through a subtle perception and deep intuitive knowing that a Songline becomes alive. Songlines are heard by the mind not the ear. They are created by what might be called an “ethereal wake.” Aborigines believe that anyone walking over land leaves a trail of a sort. Indeed it is said, if you walk the same path, singing the same song or chant with a concentrated mind for many years, you will create your own Songline.

The Buddhists’ presence on the land, then, because of their chanting and their concentrated minds, will affect the place and even potentially create new songlines. The article then goes on to point out that songlines indicate specific tribal custodianship:
Traditionally, Songlines are created by chants of the local custodians of the tribal land. As each tribe had different chants, each Songline has a different song or chant to it. By recognizing these songs you are able to know which tribal land you are walking through. …

This might be taken as recognition of a dimension of boundary-marking in songlines. The article then announces that a songline is “pathing” through the stupa site. Ross said that markings on an old River Red Gum tree on the Loddon River were evidence for this songline. The article continues, “The Songline traveller places his back against this scar and looking ahead sees the way along the Songline (in this case, through the Stupa site)” (ibid.). It concludes that

[the Aborigines have created these Songlines over thousands of years, but since the coming of the white man the Songlines have been decimated and are in need of repair. Perhaps a role of the Stupa will be to repair the fragile existence of a Songline.

The idea that the stupa could play a role in repairing a songline is intriguing, suggesting that the Buddhists believed they could maintain it. Ross told me that a stupa is beneficial to a songline in comparison to the harmful effects of such things as roads and factories. He said, “So the good thing about the monastery being there, it’s their singing chants that’s keeping the songlines powerful.” The monks were doing this unknowingly: “I don’t think they really know what they’re doing, to be honest, on a magical level.” Ross’s idea that the Buddhists were healing the damaged songlines was unusual in that he proposed that people with no ancestral connection could heal them with chants from an imported religion, but because it was recounted in *Chorten*, at least one other person, the article’s editor, felt his discussion had something of value in promoting the stupa project.

Despite Ross’s suggestion that the stupa could repair the songline, he was sometimes strongly critical about how Tibetan Buddhists were establishing themselves in Australia. He said that the Aborigines had been the custodians of this land for over 40,000 years and

the Tibetans are guests like we [white people] are. … The Aborigines have enough trouble with the whitefellas building all their crap on their land. I don’t think they really need Tibetans to start to build their crap on their land unless they … ask the Aboriginals first, ‘cos that’s just another form of invasion.
Ross was not dismissing the stupa as inappropriate since he had said that it could benefit the songline, but rather suggesting that the conditions under which it was being built were inappropriate because of insufficient collaboration with local Aborigines.

A refrain I heard often from Atisha Centre Buddhists was that the site that Lama Yeshe had chosen for the stupa was a suitable spot because of the spiritual energy in the land. They believed he was clairvoyant and thus knew what would be most beneficial for the land and all beings on it. Influenced by New Age ideas, they liked the idea that the stupa would benefit spiritual energies in the land.

Earlier I noted that Gen-la referred to nāgas (the spirits to whom the treasure vases were offered) and Paula referred to Dreaming totems: were these two different kinds of spirits, or the same, but with different names? Gyatso told me that he thought that they were they were the same universal spirits with different names. The Buddhists used a Mahayanist discourse of “benefit for all,” in which the spirits were guardians of places that could be persuaded to support the establishment of the Dharma, resulting in benefits to the whole region. Ross directly equated the Rainbow serpent and the “snake dreaming” to nāgas. But in Aboriginal traditions the Dreaming beings and totems tend to be understood as particular to the descendants of those beings that are bound up with country, which is a “conscious entity” that nourishes its own people (Rose 2004: 163). I did not have the opportunity to ask Paula what she thought – did she consider the ancestral Dreaming beings to be different entities to those the Tibetans talked about? Was it a case of newcomer spirits displacing the indigenous ones? Or were they the same entities, just named differently and with different parties claiming control over them? Paula seemed to be posing a challenge: if the Lamas were truly clairvoyant, they would have recognized particular totems and it would become clear that they were talking about the same spirits. Then it would remain for her to reassert Aboriginal rights to being the true custodians of these spirits. If the Lamas did not recognise these totems, then either they were not clairvoyant or they were talking about different kinds of spirits; her claim that Aboriginal people should be the ones to interact with the first spirits would remain. Further, Paula’s reference to the oracles among her own female ancestors, emphasizing spiritual perceptiveness and connection with land, contrasts with the masculinist imagery of the stories about the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet that I outlined in Chapter Two.
A new kind of engagement?

After returning to Atisha Centre courtyard and reassembling around the table, Fred said that the meeting was about agreeing to a “process” and that they would love to bring some Djadja Wurrung elders here. He also announced that “we are satisfied as to your integrity.” Ian said, “From my side, it has been an enlightening experience, I think I’m more aware of the issues involved, it’s not going to be sorted out in one meeting. I see it as an ongoing thing.” The group left, promising to be in contact. Soon afterwards, Ian told me that during the walking tour, he and Fred had discussed two options for acknowledging the Aboriginal owners of the land: one involved planting a “Jaara garden” of local flora and the other was to put a hole through the sides of the stupa, once built, to allow the songline to travel through. He was enthusiastic about this idea, saying that “It’s got potential for quite an amazing sort of meeting of ideas and sharing cooperative thing.” A month later Ian again expressed hope for some kind of collaboration with Aboriginal elders, saying that he would be “proud to be involved” in doing something that recognizes the indigenous people and their spiritual beliefs “for as long as the stupa exists.” He also expressed sympathy for Paula and Jane’s anger. He respected Jane’s concerns, he said, because he could see that she was seeking a path “that was based on some sort of spiritual understanding of what’s a natural environment and spirituality within that environment, and yeah, which definitely has some connection with the Aboriginal people.” He suggested that their approach was misguided because most of their energy came from anger but that their intentions were better than those of “a lot of other people who couldn’t care less what happened, a lot better. […] I think their intentions are mightily honourable, really.”

In focussing on this one-off meeting with an arguably marginal Aboriginal activist and her supporters, I have attempted to show how “friction” is generated in the overlaps, disjunctures and contestations of the contact zone. The occasion illustrates the incommensurability of apparently similar ideas about local spirits and of differing notions of how to benefit those who are suffering. It also reinforces how political the realm of spirits and spirituality can be in a zone of intercultural engagement.

Occasionally I asked people at Atisha Centre about their feelings on the issue of reconciliation between Aborigines and other Australians. They considered the harm of colonisation to be shameful but irreversible, placing the moral wrongs in the past (see
These Buddhists were concerned with issues of social justice and condemned violence – for instance, they joined public protest prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 (which included Australian troops). Some people wanted to ensure their concern for reconciliation was demonstrated through symbolic means at Atisha centre, for instance through the sign at the gate and, in preparation for the Dalai Lama’s visit in 2007, through the inclusion of the Aboriginal sovereignty flag when a number of flagpoles were raised to fly Australian, Tibetan and Buddhist flags around the circumference of the stupa site.

A few weeks after Paula’s visit, Gyatso told me that he had been taken aback by the “onslaught” of Paula and her supporters. He said that he understood their anger and regretted that he had “over-reacted … by saying ‘that’s not fair, don’t blame me for Captain Cook.’” While he felt that the English colonisation of Australia was wrong, he said, “History is history and we’ve got to go into the future, and make the future as positive as possible. … I said [to them] ‘Look, this is not up to us, this is for Canberra, you take this to Canberra. We’re with you, I said, we’re born here like you were born here.’” I said to him, “But people have to influence Canberra I suppose,” to which Gyatso replied, “Oh sure, I have no objection to lobbying Canberra, especially the Prime Minister to make an official apology, which he [John Howard] refuses to do. Yes, by all means we would give our support on a political basis in that way.”

While Ian considered unreasonable Paula’s stipulation that the stupa should not be built on this site, he nonetheless engaged with her complaint and seemed to have a genuine desire to understand her perspective. Reflecting on the meeting with Ian afterwards, I told him that Pākehā New Zealanders face similar issues of needing to acknowledge the wrongs of colonisation while also dealing with a lurking feeling of either denial or guilt and that I felt it was important for people from the settler society to learn more about indigenous issues. The following year, perhaps recalling this, Ian told me, “you would have been proud of me” after he prefaced a speech at an FPMT fundraising dinner with an acknowledgment of the traditional owners of the land, a common practice of public speakers who wish to acknowledge the need for Aboriginal-state reconciliation. Ian also said that he had repeatedly attempted to contact Paula to establish a “memorandum of understanding” (an intriguingly legalistic choice of words) about how they could incorporate the songline into the stupa site, to no avail. It is possible she had
dropped the issue after becoming involved in other activism; Ian had heard that she was involved with a protest involving a sacred hill that was threatened by development.

While much could be discussed about this meeting, the main point I wish to draw from it is that the Buddhists, to repeat Gyatso, saw their stupa “as an offering [and] … an extremely powerful form of compassion.” This intention to make the powerfully positive karmic imprints of the Dharma available to all, motivated by the wish to relieve the root causes of suffering, is a form of idealism that cannot help but become entangled in the complexities of the intercultural contact zone. This also illustrates the difference between the utopian ideal and the heterotopia that it becomes in its enactment. The strange juxtapositions that Hetherington identifies as characteristic of heterotopias are evidence that the Buddhists’ high ideals can never quite overcome the difficulties of local contingencies, especially historically-constituted inequalities. Further, while both groups felt that there was some kind of spiritual presence in the land, their relationship to it and sense of who could best control it differed.

A few months after Paula’s visit to the stupa site, Chorten Stupa Edition (GSUC n.d.-j: 3) announced Lama Zopa’s advice that the stupa should have a large statue of Padmasambhava. When the 3.9 metre (12 ft) high brass statue arrived in July 2005, a message to the email list for benefactors of the Great Stupa and members of Atisha Centre quoted Lama Zopa as saying that it would be “extremely important for overcoming obstacles to the speedy construction of the Great Stupa, the Maitreya Project and all FPMT projects.” The message continued with the explanation that Padmasambhava “established the wisdom of Buddhism in the Himalayas by creating harmony with the pre-Buddhist beliefs that were part of the Tibetan world at that time.” Later the same month, the Bendigo Advertiser (2005) ran an article that suggested that the statue has the “power to bring peace and goodwill.” While I do not know if Lama Zopa’s advice had specific connection to Paula’s visit, the choice of a Padmasambhava statue seems to me a distinctively Tibetan Buddhist response to the need to find some way for the imported religion to acknowledge and interact with pre-existing beliefs.

The stupa as a vehicle of reterritorialisation

It is inevitable that construction entails destruction (cf. Appadurai 1995) and from this it follows that the stupa, as an alien form of architecture on a grand scale, has unintended
effects even before it is finished and is responded to in ways that its original visionaries could not have anticipated. The meeting I have discussed illustrates the friction generated in the contact zone when utopian ideals for creating a better world, based on imported Buddhist teachings, clashed with an Australian Aboriginal activist’s attempt to assert the primacy of her ancestral tradition against forces that she felt were a threat to it. Although the Buddhists aspired to bring benefit to all beings, their wish to control energies in the land, through Padmasambhava’s powers and by “repairing” the songlines, sat uneasily with an indigenous activist’s assertion that Aborigines were the land’s unjustly-dispossessed spiritual guardians. The conjuncture that this meeting created illustrates how Australia’s multi-layered power relations, grounded in acts of colonisation that remain largely unacknowledged and typically beyond the radar of European and immigrant Australians as they go about their daily lives, form an often invisible backdrop to the stupa project. In this contact zone, the consequences of Australia’s European settlement on Aborigines have the potential to alter the course of Tibetan Buddhism’s establishment in that land. Three factors about the stupa project increased the potential for an Aboriginal complaint against the stupa.

First, the stupa required major earthworks in a rural area of regenerating bush, making the claim to the land very materially evident. Secondly, in addition to making such visible alterations to the landscape, the portable Tibetan Buddhist tradition emphasizes the propitiation of local deities and spirits when building new religious structures in ways that can be interpreted as competing with Aboriginal spiritual practices because of their on-going struggle to recover rights to land that they lost under colonisation. A third, closely related point is that the Buddhists building the stupa are members of the hegemonic society from which Aboriginal activists seek redress.

The contestation between Paula and the Buddhists sits somewhere inside the invisible architecture of power in the Australian state and its failure to officially acknowledge its contribution to present-day Aboriginal problems. But as Anglo-

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23 In a paper discussing Paula’s meeting with Ian (McAra 2007a), I questioned Buddhist studies scholars’ use of the phrase “indigenisation” (e.g., Baumann 1997: 205, Spuler 2003: 99) to refer to any attempt to localise Buddhism in new cultural contexts. Given the power relations of a settler-colonial society, I suggested that the term indigenisation with reference to the domestication of a religion only be used when discussing how indigenous (as opposed to settler) people adapt an imported religion. Other words, such as adaptation, domestication, localisation or vernacularisation can be used when discussing settler attempts to adapt an imported practice.
Australians, these Buddhist converts are entangled in wider situations from which they have difficulty distancing themselves. Paula’s complaint against the stupa brought what the white Buddhists had regarded as a tragic but distant and irredeemable past into the present and highlighted the colonising nature of most if not all major building projects in settler-colonial contexts.

As a large structure in a landscape without other buildings of a similar scale, the stupa not only expresses the power of the group that gives it meaning but also, despite good intentions, “obscures competing claims for authority and meaning” (Nelson and Olin 2003:7). While, from the Anglo-Australian Buddhists’ perspective, linking the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion with colonisation seriously misreads their intentions, Australian colonial relationships continue to empower Anglo-Australians vis-à-vis Aborigines regardless of their intentions or religious orientations. Aborigines lost their land to the new settlers and they continue to embody and live with the consequences in ways that non-Aboriginal Australians rarely understand. Despite the Buddhists’ emphasis on peace and compassion and their status as a religious minority, then, as white Australians they enjoy privileges that are far less accessible to marginalised people.

Paula contested non-indigenous appropriations of local spirits because these are so deeply connected with indigenous identification with the land. While the stupa proponents were successful in aligning themselves with national discourses of multiculturalism discussed in Chapter Six, finding a way to acknowledge the connections their project had to the legacy of the land’s British colonisation was more difficult, especially because of the enormous and international commitment of resources and efforts to their vision. The conjuncture I have discussed was a manifestation of deep tensions that underlie not just Australian society but all places that have undergone colonisation.

The touring exhibition of relics that one day will empower the stupa itself creates another instance of intercultural contact, but with quite different participants and another whole set of complexities. I turn to this travelling contact zone in the next chapter.
Epilogue to Chapter Seven

The conjuncture I have just described was a pre-Apology encounter. Gyasto remarked on the then-Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard’s refusal to apologise. Howard’s government, a coalition of the conservative Liberal and National Parties, was in power in Australia from March 1996 to November 2007, when the centre-left Australian Labor Party (ALP) won the federal election. During that time a campaign had gained momentum for a governmental apology to Australia’s indigenous peoples. The government resisted, in part because of their denial of the gravity of this history and in part because of fears that some Australians expressed about the potential for an apology to lead on to expensive claims for compensation.

On 13 February 2008, the new ALP government’s first move was to issue a formal apology (Rudd 2008) to the Indigenous peoples of Australia for a specific aspect of this troubled past, namely the legacy of previous government policies that from 1910 until 1970 led to the forcible removal of between ten and thirty percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children from their mothers. This apology, which stopped short of offering financial compensation, was marked all over the country and Aunty Lyn, as a prominent member of the Stolen Generation, was one of those invited to attend the formal event in Canberra. Like many city councils around Australia, the City of Greater Bendigo made efforts to recognise the apology through public statements and hosting a special event on the day. The city council had already shown sympathy for Aboriginal issues over previous years through symbolic efforts such as flying the Aboriginal flag over the Town Hall and running NAIDOC week events. Whether or not the new government can effect real change for Australia’s indigenous peoples remains to be seen, but it certainly marks a new era in the public acknowledgement of past injustices.

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24 National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (which since the acronym was devised has been extended to a week). With the help of government grants NAIDOC coordinates celebrations of Indigenous achievements.
For all the emphasis on the Great Stupa’s monumental scale, it is the collection of tiny relics that will one day be placed inside it that give it its spiritual power. Over the last few years, the Great Stupa relic collection has been compiled into an exhibition that has travelled north as far as Malaysia and east as far as Tahiti. The exhibition consists of numerous relics displayed in perspex cases arranged atop a cuboid base that acts as a temporary, portable stupa (Fig. 8.1). Visitors can circumambulate this display just as they would a reliquary-stupa made of more durable materials.

Arguably the holiest objects in Buddhism, relics are key to the sacralisation of other religious objects, such as stupas and statues, through their interment within. But in the context of “tradition transition” (Rambo 1993: 14), entailing conversion between distinct religious traditions and worldviews, relics themselves undergo reinterpretation upon
reinterpretation. In this chapter I draw on observations from several touring exhibitions of items from the collection to consider the predicaments of intercultural engagement between its hosts and visitors, primarily Anglo-Australian FPMT Buddhists and the members of a Vietnamese immigrant Buddhist temple in Melbourne.

In discussing and comparing the different venues, my aim is to explore the interaction of multiple Buddhisms in the travelling contact zone created by the relic exhibitions. This exhibition does contact work for the stupa project in several ways. It provides opportunities for Buddhists of various traditions to come into contact with one another. The connection with Melbourne’s Vietnamese Buddhist community shows how the stupa encourages intercultural engagement between Buddhist groups. From the perspective of the FPMT theory of the power of the object, the relic exhibition attracts existing devotees to view them and receive their blessings and it potentially awakens curiosity about the Dharma in as-yet non-Buddhist visitors. The exhibition also provides an opportunity for people to donate towards the stupa, creating a stronger karmic connection. Thus relics, like the stupas that normally contain them, serve as a form of spiritual contact zone.

Further, because the stupa proponents acquire the relics from sources that they and many other Buddhists deem authentic and legitimate (for example, objects connected with the current and earlier Dalai Lamas) to possess relics is to acquire further legitimacy and create a tangible link with Dharma ancestors and their heartlands. This increases the symbolic capital of the stupa project, winning further support in the Buddhist world for the stupa project. Besides having all of these effects, the relic exhibition also serves to highlight the difference between iconic and aniconic approaches to Buddhism. Before discussing the relic displays, however, I begin with an account of another Buddhist-themed exhibition that operated as a site of intercultural engagement but entailed a “predicament of diversity” (Ang 2005) that overlaps with the predicaments of the stupa relic exhibitions.

**Exhibiting Buddhism**

In an article on an exhibition of Buddhist art in Australia, Ien Ang (2005) recounts how curators at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) faced a predicament when they attempted to do contact work with Sydney’s diversity by engaging with people who were
underrepresented in gallery visitors, such as young people and Asian immigrants (p. 306). The gallery’s motivation was the inclusionary and egalitarian ideal that all communities should be involved with and feel represented by its activities (p. 307). One outcome of this was an exhibition titled *Buddha: Radiant Awakening*, which went on show in late 2001. Differences between immigrant and convert Buddhists became apparent throughout the process of organising and running the exhibition. The show’s curators told Ang that Western Buddhists readily responded to invitations to provide activities at the art museum over the duration of the exhibition, while immigrant Buddhist groups, who often inhabit more marginal positions in Australian society, were reticent (p. 313).

Ironically, through this exhibition the museum had hoped to involve Asian immigrant communities in an attempt to better represent Sydney’s cultural diversity. Yet communication was difficult, because the curators experienced the immigrant Buddhist groups as “less assertive than the western Buddhist groups” (ibid.) and, further, they needed much more assistance and support. Often, an extensive process of induction and familiarization needed to be carried out: for many of the groups the AGNSW was simply an alien institution. They didn’t know what it was, where it was, and how one was supposed to behave once one was in it (ibid.).

The exhibition’s curators, visitors and participants deemed one element in particular a great success (p. 314). This was the “Wisdom Room,” a space in which different NSW Buddhist groups took over a room to present aspects of their Buddhist practice to gallery visitors on a weekly rota. But the terms of intercultural engagement were set, albeit unconsciously, by the gallery with its institutionalised bias towards Western ideas of art and aesthetics. This limited the extent to which minority communities could participate (p. 317). Thus the “predicament” of which Ang writes is that the power of a state-funded art museum confounds and overrides its own egalitarian idealism, meaning that AGNSW remains defined and constrained by bourgeois society’s notions of art as a source of cultural distinction (p. 319). This relationship to art continues to circumscribe the function of these institutions, meaning that AGNSW’s effort at contact work did little to change relations between museum curators and minority communities. Ang also recounts how the art museum attempts to negotiate the boundaries of multicultural engagement (p. 305), but also observes that attracting cultural and religious minorities to their institution came second to the marketing-driven imperative to please its loyal bourgeois audience (p. 315).
Relic tour – low-key venues

In contrast to the AGNSW exhibition, the stupa relic exhibition is created by Buddhists for Buddhist purposes. Between 2003 and 2006 I assisted with the relic exhibition at five different venues, enabling me to see how people behave around and talk about the relics in a variety of contexts. Three of the exhibitions targeted the diverse Buddhist communities and general public of Melbourne and the surrounding region. The fourth was in a hired conference centre in Auckland, New Zealand, in early 2004. The fifth is a static display at the Great Stupa relic exhibition centre beside the stupa site, which opened in late 2004.

My first experience of the relic exhibition was in Easter weekend of 2003 in Daylesford Town Hall, 1 when I accompanied Ian, Kate (a Melburnian who retired to Bendigo to be near Atisha Centre) and Jinpa to assist with setting up and taking down the display. A raised area in the middle of the hall displayed a model of the Great Stupa. The relics were enclosed in display cases along with information labels that explained whose relics they were and, in some instances, who donated them. Special spotlights illuminated the display, while the rest of the room was less brightly lit.

Around the sides of the room stood a number of tables, one of which displayed information and gifts for benefactors and a donation box (Fig. 8.2 and 8.3). The stupa benefactor system (Chapter Two, Appendix IV), which forms on the table explained, provides an opportunity for donors to acquire their own holy objects in acknowledgement, the gift given to the donor increasing in keeping with the size of their donation. The gifts include an enamel benefactor’s badge, a gold-leafed cast of a tsatsa from Gyantse and a consecrated model of the Great Stupa containing a roll of paper inscribed with thousands of tiny mantras.

Volunteers from Atisha Centre set up another table with merchandise such as incense and prayer flags, and a range of leaflets and information sheets. Over the Easter weekend, people wandered in to cast a curious glance over the relics or, in a few cases, to circumambulate them, and a few purchased items from the Atisha stall or made donations.

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1 Daylesford, population 3000, is promoted as a historic town in the Macedon Ranges. It is known for its mineral springs, spas and holistic health treatments and is around 100km northwest of Melbourne. As already noted, it has an FPMT study group affiliated to Atisha Centre, which is why the relic tour went to this venue.
Figure 8.2. Ian Green with benefactors at information table during relic exhibition, Tara Institute, 2003

Figure 8.3. Close up of the benefactor forms, tsatsas and model stupas
to the Stupa project. The people who spent most time there were the volunteers from the local FPMT study group, as well as a few others with an interest in Buddhism.

Each day Ian gave a talk about the significance of relics and the planned stupa. He explained that the relics were the distillation of Buddhist teachers’ spiritual realisations and that they would go inside the stupa and give it its power for peace and healing in the world. This “unbelievably precious offering” of relics, he said, is “important for the well-being of the planet.” He also led a guided meditation involving ten or so people walking clockwise around the relic display. He guided them to visualise a pure, white light with the nature of the enlightened mind […] emanating from the relics. This light is like nectar with the power to purify all ills. It is a bright peaceful energy that washes through you, cleansing, purifying and healing you. Imagine it spreading wider, around the room, through the town and beyond, into the region, across Australia and radiating out around the world. The light completely purifies the suffering of each and every sentient being throughout the universe.\(^2\)

After the guided practice was over, a few people sat on cushions and meditated while others resumed their inspection of the display. During most of the weekend, recorded music of Buddhist chanting created a peaceful atmosphere.\(^3\) As in the animal liberation practice I described in Chapter Four, some people brought animals and circumambulated the relics with them.

In keeping with the project’s promotion as “A Great Stupa for All Buddhists,” relics in the collection represent all three main schools of Buddhism (Theravādin, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna), although Tibetan relics dominate. Non-Tibetan relics include Thai (e.g., Phra Sivali) and Chinese-Malaysian (e.g., Venerable Pai Sheng). Certain relics are likely to appeal across the spectrum of Buddhism, especially those attributed to Śākyamuni Buddha and his mythical predecessor, Kāśyapa Buddha. Other relics with a close connection to the stupa project include a few objects from the Gyantse stupa as a gift from its abbot and some of Lama Yeshe’s remains (Fig. 8.4).

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\(^2\) I have shortened and reconstructed the words of this guided practice from fieldnotes and an FPMT book describing similar guided visualizations (McDonald 1984). Such practices typically begin by renewing one’s aspiration to attain Buddhahood to benefit all beings and end by dedicating any merit accumulated for the benefit of all sentient beings.

\(^3\) For instance one album, *The Lama’s Chant: Songs of Awakening* (Lama Gyurme and Rykiel 1994), was based on mantras chanted by a Tibetan lama, accompanied by a synthesiser.
A special feature is a number of relics from the 2001 cremation of Geshe Lama Konchog, a monk who trained in Sera Monastery in Tibet from the age of 7 to 32 (1934-1959), spent over twenty years in retreat and later taught at Kopan monastery from 1985 until his death in 2001. An FPMT video screened at the exhibition tells the story of his life and shows monks sorting through the cremation pyre ashes with teaspoons, lifting out many relics (Fig. 8.5). Staff at Kopan monastery issued a set of postcard-sized photographs of these (Tenzin Zopa 2002). Other items in the collection include objects associated with the fifth, thirteenth and the fourteenth Dalai Lamas, Lama Atisha and Je Tsong Khapa. Teachers from the Kagyu, Nyingma, Sakya and Bön orders have also contributed to the collection. For instance, Tarthang Tulku, a Nyingma teacher whose retreat centre in California boasts a stupa and elaborate temples set in extensive and well-groomed grounds (Odiyan 2005), donated a copy of the *Eight Thousand-Line Prajñāpāramitā*. The followers of the Kagyu teacher Chogyam Trungpa (1939-1987) donated a portion of his cremated remains.

The fact that such a diverse range of teachers contributed relics demonstrates that the stupa has their support in the field of global Tibetan Buddhism. Given the Dalai Lama expressed wish that the stupa should also become a place of interfaith dialogue, it is worth noting that Ian is open to including relics from other religious traditions in the collection. As he said to me, “If a Catholic bishop or something wanted to offer a relic of St Francis to the stupa, well, I’d be delighted, I’d welcome it with open arms. And I’m sure that [Lama Zopa] Rinpoche would as well. So because, with St Francis or whatever, I mean, he’s certainly a holy being from anyone’s perspective.”

The stupa project entails not only the intercultural contact between the stupa proponents and non-Buddhist locals, but also between diverse Buddhist individuals, communities and organisations in and beyond Australia. As I noted in Chapter Three, comparing “ethnic” and “convert” Buddhists is problematic, yet these categories are part

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4 These photographs act as substitute relics. At Chenrezig, Ven.Ailsa gave me a set and asked me to treat them as such, keeping them in a high place. More recently, Ven Gyälten told me that ideally, even the paper bearing images of holy things in drafts of this thesis should be disposed of according to special protocols rather than just recycled.

5 FPMT Buddhists express a particular affinity for St Francis of Assisi. Given their practice of animal liberation (Chapter Four), it is not surprising that they look favourably on this patron saint of animals.
Figure 8.4. Statue and relics of Lama Yeshe

Figure 8.5. Relics of Geshe Lama Konchog, with saffron threads
Courtesy of Kopan monastery
of my own and FPMT members’ attempts to explain variations in responses to relic exhibitions at different venues.

To the organisers’ puzzlement, the Daylesford relic exhibition over Easter weekend in 2003 had only a low turnout. Easter weekend is a peak visitor time for the resort town, and the previous Easter weekend, the FPMT’s Daylesford study group had helped to run a Tibetan Buddhist event in the same venue, involving a touring group of monks who created a sand mandala. This had been well-attended, with around 150 people coming each morning for a meditation and many curious visitors, so organisers speculated about the reasons for the disparity. Was it because the weather this Easter was sunny and visitors were staying outside? Or had the former event simply been better promoted than the latter? Yet, promotion of the relic exhibition included emails, posters and a large banner on the main street of Daylesford. These factors were significant, but another dimension may have been the differential attractiveness of sand mandalas and relics. Maroon-and-saffron-robed Tibetan monks create the intricate and fragile mandala over a number of days and then perform a solemn ritual culminating in its destruction. They tip the now-mixed coloured sand into the nearest ocean, river or lake, providing a blessing to the area. This ritual, then, has a photogenic appeal and sense of drama. Relics, in contrast, appear inert and the word itself can mean a old, unwanted thing or an antique. Sharf (1999: 81) notes that a religious relic requires a “frame,” such as the bejewelled reliquaries in which they are displayed, to “signal its status as a sacred object.” Without this context, many of these bone fragments, hair clippings and fragments of cloth in the exhibition appears no different to detritus.

At Tara Institute in Melbourne in July the same year, the relic exhibition was a similarly low-key affair. Tara Institute is in East Brighton, an expensive suburb east of the CBD, in a mansion that was formerly a Catholic school and residence. The FPMT purchased the thirty-three bedroom house and school in 1987 for $1.2 million with money from donations, fundraising events and local FPMT-run businesses (Croucher 1989: 112-13). Income from hostel-style accommodation has helped with the mortgage and other running costs. It has a gompa (formerly a chapel) and another, larger hall, where the relics were displayed. The institute runs a Dharma programme with teachings and study groups most evenings.
Over the three days of the exhibition at Tara Institute, people came to look at and circumambulate the relics. The morning after the display had been set up, Geshe Doga (the Institute’s resident teacher) and a monk from Quang Minh temple (see below) blessed the exhibition. Over the rest of the weekend, visitors came to look at the relics; a few non-Buddhists, for example a curious neighbour, came to see what it was about. Ian later sent an email to stupa supporters that quoted an anonymous comment from a Buddhist visitor to the exhibit:

What can I say to describe fully the amazing experience of being in the presence of the precious relics. Truly no words can adequately convey the greatness of the Buddhadharma as simply and purely as the relics did. It certainly deepens faith in the power of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The aim of presenting the Dharma to people through the relics, then, was appreciated by those Dharma students who attended. But the tally of donations for the event did little more than cover costs.

The venue in Auckland was a hired convention centre in the suburb of Penrose. Benefactors of the FPMT’s Maitreya Statue (mainly Chinese) organized the relic exhibition, with assistance from an Auckland temple affiliated with UVBC. Lama Zopa’s teaching-tour visit to DCI, combined with the fact that the exhibition venue was not easily accessible\(^6\) may in part explain the low turnout there. When Lama Zopa himself came to the relic exhibition on a weekday, a crowd of around 40 or so mainly FPMT-affiliated, people came along, but apart from this, few of the people at the exhibition were of visibly Anglo origins, most coming from immigrant communities such as Chinese-Malaysian and Burmese. During his visit, Lama Zopa gave a talk and then presented Ian with relics of Nāgārjuna, Lama Tsong Khapa and Milarepa (all key figures for Tibetan Buddhists), after which people lined up and received a blessing by being touched on the head with a reliquary.

**A “precious offering” that is “like the core of a nuclear reactor”**

I could not carry out the kinds of in-depth interviews with exhibition visitors to find out what their responses were, and observing people coming and peering at the relics and walking out again told me nothing other than that their behaviour was similar to that of

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\(^6\) People who came commented that they had difficulty locating it. It was in an industrial area on a busy road around thirty minutes’ drive from DCI.
museum visitors. I held back from engaging them in conversation because it seemed
intrusive at the time, a reticence that I regret in retrospect. Thus the ethnographic
description in this chapter is limited by the brevity of the occasion and the lack of follow-
up interviews with non-Buddhist visitors.

What I was able to do, though, was compare the event at different venues and
question committed FPMT Buddhists about their experiences and thoughts on relics. One
recurring FPMT trope likens the relics’ tremendous power to nuclear energy, had me
intrigued. Lama Yeshe made this connection in various ways, for instance to describe the
role of ordained sangha. In a talk in 1982 he said to a meeting of newly ordained monks
and nuns “[y]ou are the nuclear energy of this movement” (Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa
2002: 48). Nearly three decades later, an email from DCI in Auckland promotes a talk in
which Murray Wright, a senior Dharma student was to present a talk that would
“introduce Lama Yeshe and his nuclear-energy-like Dharma teachings that are so well
suited to our western minds” (27 January 2009, emphasis added). Soon afterwards a
Foundation Store email (27 March 2009) promoted a DVD featuring Lama Zopa’s
teachings on selflessness, titled “An Atomic Bomb Against Ignorance.” And Ian often
says (e.g., Green 2006a: n.p.) that relics “are like the core of a nuclear reactor.” Jinpa
likened the power of a relic to plutonium, telling me, “If I put a piece of plutonium under
your pillow, you will get sick whether you believe it is there or not. The relics have a
similarly invisible power, but the effect is positive rather than harmful” (paraphrased from
notes). The power they are talking about is the power of the holy object to make merit, or
positive karma.

“Roy,” a senior Dharma student in his forties or fifties also made the nuclear
analogy. He told me that when he walked into the Daylesford town hall to see the relics,
within minutes his whole body was reacting, which he said was “like walking into a
nuclear reactor.” He said, “I could feel the waves just bombarding me” and this feeling
lasted for his hour-long visit, after which, he said, he bought a coffee
to just bring me down to earth again! I’d left an incredible powerful blissful
area and I had to go out to the street again and I thought I could easily step out
in front of a moving car and not be aware […] – I was vulnerable.

Recurring metaphors such as this mark matters of emotional or ideological significance
(Gusterson 1998: 122) and here the recurring reference to nuclear power indicates the
relationship between two kinds of invisible power, one harmful and the other beneficial. While for Western anti-nuclear activists, the danger associated with nuclear weaponry is a sign of society’s malaise (Solnit, letter reproduced in Gusterson 1998: 249), here these Buddhists, who tend to hold anti-war and anti-nuclear sentiments, stress the holy object’s potential role as an *antidote* to that malaise. The analogy evokes the comparison that Ian, Garrey and others made in Chapter Five between the armaments as powerful sources of violence and the stupa as a counteracting force for peace. The term is often used to convey a sense of the relics’ power.

Other people expressed their reactions in similar ways but without direct reference to this trope. “Nicole,” another student of Lama Zopa, told me that the first time she saw the relic collection she was looking at how they were presented, but later when she visited them again, she said, “I *felt* it – I was becoming more interested in them” (20 June 2007). The “it” she felt was a “body response […] that I feel *here*” she said, indicating her heart *chakra* with both hands. I mentioned to her that I had observed that the FPMT has a strong emphasis on holy objects and making merit, in contrast to other Buddhist organisations. She corrected me, “It’s Lama Zopa,” meaning not all FPMT people take up this emphasis, but it comes from him in particular. She elaborated, saying, “Maybe he’s trying to balance off against Western tendencies towards seeking intellectual understanding. We need to be more devotional, to have more faith, to be more in our bodies and hearts.”

The stories that Roy and Nicole told me about their experience of relics epitomise the shift from engaging with the Dharma solely as an intellectual philosophy to a more enchanted and embodied religious experience. These kinds of responses resemble those that Capper’s interviewees describe in their accounts of becoming enchanted with their lamas, except that here, it is a post-mortem extension of that charisma.

“Clive,” a senior Dharma student in his fifties who has spent much time in Nepal and India, told me that three or four relics in the collection evoked a feeling which he expressed as “Ooohh yeah!” I asked him to elaborate and he said, “I can feel a presence, a purity, an emanation coming out of it [the relic collection], a clearness.” This came from the spiritual practice done by the people from whom they came. Clive’s description of a beneficial emanation is consistent with the notion that gurus (and consequently holy objects associated with them) emanate blessings. When I asked him why some people feel like this on seeing particular relics and others do not, he provided an explanation echoing
Ian’s: “Some people have a strong karmic connection […] because they might’ve been born as an Asian.” By this he meant that in a previous life, they had made a karmic connection, for example, with the person whose relics were now affecting them. Lama Yeshe’s students of previous incarnations, Clive suggested, “might have been reincarnated as you or me.” I asked Clive why many westerners find the practice of relic veneration uncomfortable, and he replied that “they think it’s a bit spooky” that people venerate bones of the dead because “we’re taught not to believe in ghosts.” Explaining the difference, he said, “Asians – it’s part of them. … We [westerners] feel alien. We don’t worship idolatry [sic], you know what I mean?” He suggested that Westerners reject religious ritual but feel that something is missing. They miss the sense of mystery that religious ritual had formerly provided, but at the same time, “they don’t know how to re-identify with it.”

Some FPMT Buddhists, at least, move from this disenchantment (the feeling that something is missing) to a form of Buddhist re-enchantment consisting of an affective response to relics based on devotional feelings. These feelings resemble enchantment with the guru, as discussed in Chapter Three. People’s reported experiences of sacred places, as with Ian’s experience at Sarnath, show that enchantment can occur in relation to places as well as people and relics. Indeed, Clive likened the feeling he said he experienced from these relics to his experience of visiting Bodhgaya, especially the Mahabodhi stupa. “You feel the sheer presence of it; it ripped right through you. So many people have worshipped there.” These experiences of enchantment, alongside those that Capper (2002) analyses, suggest that definitions of Buddhist modernism as entailing a form of “mind-science” based on a rational philosophy do not delve far enough into the affective dimension of practice.

Tibetan Buddhists often told me that one needs very good karma just to be able to see a holy relic and that seeing one bestows great blessings. Commenting on the fact that my research on the Great Stupa brought me into regular contact with holy objects but that I remained fascinated but sceptical about the miraculous stories people told about them, Clive commented to me: “You must have very strange karma.” I asked Ian why only a few

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7 Indeed, someone made a remark like that to me. I used to attend a small Buddhist group following Thich Nhat Hanh. A newcomer to the group, who had stayed for a few months at DCI, told me that their practice of relic veneration was “creepy.”
people experience the relics’ powers and he said that these people have a strong “karmic connection” with them. Later Ian wrote in Chorten that when he took the relics to exhibit them in Tahiti at the hotel Le Meridien de Punaauia and hosted by the FPMT’s Naropa Institute of Papeetee,

[m]any people of French and Chinese origin visited the relics and had very strong experiences with the relics. On one memorable night, the famous FPMT French monk known as “Bodhisattva Charles” circumambulated the relics all night. Some Tahitians also came to see the relics and two Tahitian women in particular had a very strong connection. One of these women came back every day to see and show her respect to the relics even though she had no knowledge of Buddhism. And another lady, after viewing the relics came to Ian and wept for several minutes. Neither of these women could speak English, so we don’t know any more than what we saw (GSUC n.d.-f)

For FPMT members, the fact that two women who apparently were not Buddhist had a visibly emotional experience in front of the relics reinforces the notion that the relics affect those with the right kind of karma. Ian told me that other visitors tend to “go through quite quickly and look at it sort of like one would just go and visit a museum that you’re vaguely interested in and just look through and then head off and not be that fascinated.” This was because they lacked the right karma, which also explained why, in some venues, so few visitors came.

Even some committed FPMT Buddhists told me that they did not feel anything for the relics other than, perhaps, that they were a reminder of the attainments of the Lamas, so the experience was not universal. Alexa said that she had “grappled” with the idea of relics, which she considered part of the “religion” and history of Buddhism, not part of its philosophy. But the tradition of relics has a long history,

which I have a lot of respect for. Which, you know, [...] inspires me and gives me strength, the fact that I know that it’s not just something that came up twenty years ago, it’s something that has been around for hundreds of years, [...] and that it’s still an actual connection. You know, like they [the stupa exhibition] have, what, Śākyamuni relics, don’t they?

Thus Alexa uses the relics as a way of connecting with the lineage and antiquity of Buddhist teachings. Should the student believe that the relics are authentic, they provide tangible evidence for named Dharma ancestors back to the Buddha himself. The fact that some of the relics are believed to come from Śākyamuni Buddha is of particular importance to the Vietnamese Buddhist temple-goers in Melbourne.
“Like having the Buddha visit” – the Vietnamese temple

The weekend after the exhibition was at Tara Institute, we took it to Quang Minh Vietnamese temple in Footscray, a mostly working-class suburb west of Melbourne’s CBD. There, the occasion was on a far larger scale and attendees donated far more money to the stupa than at either Tara Institute, Daylesford, or the New Zealand venue. The Quang Minh temple is one of several Vietnamese temples in Melbourne and it is part of the United Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation (UVBC) in Australia and New Zealand. While its founders belong to the Thien Thai lineage, they are ecumenical in practice because the congregation comes from diverse lineages and parts of Vietnam (Vasi 2006: 33, quoting Thich Phuoc Tan, the temple’s abbot). This Vietnamese community has a particular historical connection with the FPMT. When the newly-arrived refugees were settling in Melbourne, they contacted the FPMT’s Tara House and met Adrian Feldmann who, with the help of an uncle in Canberra, facilitated the immigration of the Buddhist master Thich Phuoc Hue from a refugee camp in Hong Kong in 1980. Thich Phuoc Hue is now the president of the UVBC in Australia and New Zealand and in 2003 he visited and blessed the stupa site. Quang Minh temple was established in 1986 and today has a mailing list of over 10,000 people (ibid.). In addition to a calendar of regular religious functions (daily chanting, weekend services, study classes, retreats and festivals), the temple organises a range of cultural activities and welfare projects (pp. 35-36) and fosters relationships with other Buddhist organizations, for example through their annual Bus Pilgrimage in which they visit several other Buddhist centres in the Melbourne region.

One Friday morning in July 2003, a motor-vehicle cavalcade brought the relics from Bendigo to the temple and when it reached the Footscray shopping strip, hundreds of Vietnamese people, mostly older people, lined the street, many holding small Buddhist flags. Arriving at the temple (Fig. 8.6), Ian and his friend Peter Stripes carried a carved wooden chest containing the relics as part of a procession that circled the temple before entering the main doors (Fig. 8.7). Several of us set up the display in the temple’s main shrine room. Meanwhile, in another hall, Gen-la delivered a lecture on relics, translated from Tibetan to English by Noel and then into Vietnamese by another interpreter.

Over the weekend, thousands of visitors came to see the exhibition and attend chanting services. Thich Phuoc Tan told me that among the visitors were some who had
Figure 8.6. Procession of relics arriving at Quang Minh temple

Figure 8.7. Trunk of relics taken in procession
not visited the temple for years. He also explained that having the relics there was like having the Buddha himself visit, and this “speeds up our practice,” a phrase that echoed Lama Zopa’s frequent assertion that holy objects help one’s spiritual practice. When Thich Phuoc Tan spoke at the relic exhibition, he recalled the events that brought first the FPMT and Vietnamese Buddhists together. An all-night chanting service ran during the exhibition, which was a contrast to Tara Institute, where the room was locked up for the night.

Accounts of later relic exhibitions in *Chorten Stupa Edition* (GSUC n.d.-a) show that the pattern of lower attendance at some venues (often FPMT-related) and higher attendance at others (e.g. Vietnamese temples) repeated elsewhere in Australia. When the relic tour spent two weeks at the UVBC’s Phuoc Hue temple in Western Sydney in October 2007, around four thousand people attended. Similarly, when the tour spent a week at the Linh Son Vietnamese temple in Darra, Brisbane, around two thousand people attended. Yet when the tour spent nine days at the FPMT’s Langri Tangpa Centre, a relatively small number of people came (the article estimates five hundred). A note reporting a three-day exhibition at the Labrador School Hall in the Gold Coast says “attended by several Tibetan lamas and students.” What Linh Son and Langri Tangpa had in common was that people used the occasion to make merit by reciting *sūtras* and *mantras* in the presence of the relics. Indeed, the Spiritual Program Coordinator of Langri Tangpa Centre writes, “What was so nice was being able to meditate and recite *sūtras*, rather than it being an exhibition or gallery” (Maxmillion 2008). I return to this museum comparison below, but first investigate how the relic exhibition highlighted the different merit-making and donation practices of the convert and natal Buddhist communities.

**Iconic and aniconic perspectives on relics**

The low attendance at FPMT exhibitions is surprising, given that the FPMT’s leaders and some senior students like to talk about how people can have profound experiences and deep spiritual purification in the presence of the relics. In a piece explaining the benefits of relics, Lama Zopa instructs his followers to rejoice when they see relics:

> We should pray, by thinking, “May we too achieve realizations of the grounds and paths as you holy beings have done. May we be able to benefit migratory beings as extensively as you holy beings have benefited them” (Lama Zopa n.d.-b).
He said the main reason for the relic tour is so that visitors will experience this kind of change in their minds and extrapolates from this to suggest that the relics benefit the whole world, so there are no more wars, poverty, and sickness. All of this can be eliminated and one can achieve perfect peace and happiness in this world, as well as perfect enjoyment, with everyone’s hearts filled with love, compassion, patience, and kindness.

Besides making these conscious aspirations in the presence of relics, FPMT teachers recount a range of stories of spontaneous spiritual experiences in the vicinity of relics. Lama Zopa (2005) said of the Maitreya relic tour, which has a similar collection that has been travelling the world for several years, that “[e]ven non-Buddhists have had such strong feelings and seen light coming out from the relics. They feel deep peace in their minds.” The tour publicity says that the relics are “responding” to the faith and devotion that exhibition attendees show by miraculously multiplying and their energy “can transform people’s lives” even when they are sceptical (Chang 2002).

The difference I observed between Vietnamese and Australian donors correlates with observations about the Maitreya project (Zablocki 2005) and temple projects in Bodhanath (Moran 2004), where the biggest donors tend to come from either Southeast Asia or Chinese diaspora. In his study of Buddhists in Kathmandu, Peter Moran (2004: 63) says that the temples that Tibetan refugees have established in the vicinity of Bodhanath stupa are frequented by visiting and expatriate Westerners and Chinese (Taiwanese, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia etc.), but the main patrons of these temples are the Chinese Buddhists. One Tibetan monk remarked to Moran that Westerners and Chinese Buddhists give money in different ways. The latter pay lamas to perform rituals for them and when business yields improve as a result, they give a portion of the profits to the lama, while Westerners sponsor Tibetan children to go to school (pp. 1-2, cf. Prost 2006). Generosity is also gendered – in an article about the Taiwanese Buddhist organisation Fokuangshan, Nagata (1999: 240-41) notes that men contribute to the temple through their chequebooks and women donate their time, doing most of the administration.

The exhibition creates an occasion suited to the kind of Buddhists who consider donating money to holy objects to be among the most meritorious of activities. The difference between venues was underlined in the difference in money raised. I was unable to investigate who donated money, how much, or what their cultural backgrounds were;
nor did I find out what proportion of people received a gift as acknowledgement. Nonetheless, after attending two different venues for the relic exhibitions in the space of a fortnight I was convinced that Anglo Buddhists do not attend relic exhibitions in large numbers or donate as much money.

At the Vietnamese temple, most visitors put money into red envelopes and placed them in the donation box. Adults gave small children money and held them up so they could reach the box. At the venues where most visitors were of European origins, few visitors did so and I did not see any children being encouraged to donate. The high visitor numbers to the relic exhibition at the Vietnamese temple was borne out in the tally of cash donations amounting to over $10,000, while the exhibitions at the other three venues barely covered the costs of staging the events. When I commented to a man at Quang Minh about this generosity, he explained to me that “we [Vietnamese] love giving” and that they were also keen to support the construction of a stupa by Australian Buddhists. According to Thich Phuoc Tan, his community’s ongoing generosity to Australian Buddhists arose from their gratitude towards the FPMT for helping them when they were refugees. The enthusiastic and generous response to a relic exhibition is not unique to the Vietnamese Buddhist community. Judy and Ian Green, who each year take the relics to exhibit in Singapore during the massive Vesak celebrations, told me that people come in droves and the donations they receive for the stupa run to tens of thousands of dollars.

FPMT members attribute the difference between the festive and subdued exhibitions to the fact that the Vietnamese hosts came from a culture with a long cultural tradition of Buddhist practices of devotion and generosity while Western Buddhists are just beginning to learn about this and are still constrained by different attitudes towards money. During and after the Quang Minh exhibition, Judy and Ian commented that, coming from a Buddhist culture, the Vietnamese were far more organised at running large events like this, more devotional and more generous with donations. This is a generalisation that I have often heard people make in the FPMT: Asian Buddhists are more generous and more accustomed to donating money than Western Buddhists. Besides the fact that Buddhist converts donate less money in general, the pool of potential convert donors in Australia is

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8 Western Buddhists elsewhere both disparage and over-idealise Asian Buddhists, for instance when Kevin, a British traveller in Kathmandu, said that Tibetans have more “naturalness” and “faithfulness” in their Dharma practice than Westerners ever could (Moran 2004: 176), while at the same time expressing “disillusionment” that they did not live up to his expectations (p. 169).
small and widely dispersed. All of the other FPMT centres have their own financial commitments, including the stupa projects at Chenrezig in Queensland and Kangaroo Island in South Australia. Further, some Buddhists prefer to donate to other kinds of causes, for instance to sponsor monks or nuns in studying in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India and Nepal.

These FPMT characterisations resonate with my own observations but I would like to add that the difference is also a result of different ideas about Buddhist practice. For instance the FPMT members seem to treat relic veneration as a devotional meditation practice while the Vietnamese treated it as a collective festival. The differences can also be seen as different ways of thinking about and enacting community.

In a first-generation immigrant setting, the temple can be a vital focal point and forum for that group’s distinctive practices and identities (cf. Padgett 2002: 202). Collective activities such as “public” religious festivals are highly valued. A special occasion like the visit of the Buddha’s relics attracts high numbers of people, who come as much to participate as to pay homage. Making positive karma (religious merit) is the focal point of Vietnamese and other many immigrant groups’ Buddhist practice (Nguyen and Barber 1998); for instance in a Thai temple in the USA, merit is the “glue that holds the community together” (Cadge 2005: 138). Besides its religious significance, the Quang Minh exhibition was a ritual of identity-renewal for the community of immigrants. Thus it differs from rituals with similar religious meanings back in the homeland.9 Meanwhile, at the FPMT venue the potential pool of exhibition visitors consists of a disparate population who are “checking out the Dharma” with varying degrees of intensity and commitment, that is, people for whom Buddhism was one of many options to explore as individuals rather than part of their identification with a distinct community.

The Western Buddhist setting is more explicitly shaped by the discourses and practices of Buddhist modernism, the emphasis is on individual personal development and inner spiritual work, such as “privatised” practices like meditation that are “a matter of

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9 Penny Van Esterik attended water-pouring rituals in Lao temples in Toronto and in Vientiane. This ritual of making merit and transferring it to the deceased “is a metaphor of loss and death” which, for North American-based Lao Buddhists, “helps bridge the distance between Laos and North America, past and present, old and new responsibilities” (1999: 63). She observes that the ritual “is particularly poignant for refugees who may have left their parents behind” in contrast to the same ritual in Vientiane, where, she notes, that “[t]here was not the emotional intensity and tension during the chanting.”
subjective personal development” (McMahan 2008: 191). Many FPMT Buddhists do, however, engage in some collective activities such as animal liberation, sūtra recitation and pujas. This is one of the fascinating permutations of a Tibetan Buddhist contact zone in Australia. Related to this, the difference between the FPMT venues and the Vietnamese one is also an outcome of a different attitude towards relics. European cultures have their own traditions of relic veneration, especially in Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity but also less explicitly through state activities such as art galleries and museums and through secular activities like antique-collecting and sports memorabilia. But a key feature of the Buddhist modernism that shapes primary attitudes towards Buddhist practice in the West (despite “traditionalist” practices advocated in the FPMT) is that it eschews relic veneration, treating it as a cultural accretion or even “superstition.” This is, I suggest, a major reason why the relic exhibitions did not attract large numbers of Western Buddhist sympathisers.

An outspoken critic

Something happened during the Daylesford weekend, recalling the iconism/aniconism debate discussed in Chapter Four and resonating with the qualms of Buddhist modernism as well as older controversies about the value and meaning of relic veneration, recorded in early Buddhist scriptures. The stupa’s most outspoken critic, Zachary Casper, epitomises this perspective. Recall that Zachary sent Ian a letter protesting against the stupa. When the relics were in Daylesford, Zachary produced and handed out photocopied brochures outside the Town Hall expressing his third objection to the stupa project. Its front page included a sub-heading asking whether the relic tour was a “Harmless Tibetan Fairy Tale” or a “Cynical Attempt at Exploitation […] on the part of Lama Thubten Zopa.” Inside the brochure, Zachary explained that while relic veneration has a long history in Buddhism, it was intended for the “uneducated masses” who “could not understand the Buddhist teachings proper, or did not wish to expend the considerable effort, energy and sacrifice that it takes to walk the spiritual path.” He maintained that exhibiting relics was harmless “as long as it is understood that this is really operating from the lowest levels of Buddhist practice.” He alleged that Tibetan Buddhism had a strongly “fantasy and fairy tale

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10 The Mahāparinibbānasutta, a canonical early Buddhist text which describes how the Buddha instructed people to cremate his body and build a stupa over the remains so that people could venerate them, appears to both proscribe and endorse relic and stupa veneration (Trainor 2004).
element,” for instance in its emphasis on “miraculous powers, as well as the intervention of celestial beings” and of course, relic veneration. This was objectionable because such practices “choke out or cover the underlying spiritual message.”

Like the stupa proponents, Zachary was a member of a generation of people deeply concerned about social justice, warfare and environmental matters. But he stressed that these issues were more pressing and that people should be devoting their energy to addressing them instead. When I interviewed him, he expressed his views against the stupa and relics with far more hostility than anyone else I had met. His opposition to relic veneration expresses a modernist, aniconist Buddhism shaped by elitism and Protestant Reformation-style aniconism. In Protestant-influenced Western European societies, the word “relic” itself can conjure up negative associations through its association with objects from a bygone era. The Theosopher-Buddhist H.S. Olcott imposed an unconsciously-Protestant structure on his reformed Buddhism, and among other things, opposed relic veneration (Prothero 1996). Further, many nineteenth century Orientalist scholars considered relic veneration to be a degeneration into superstition and, in some cases, fraudulence (Strong 2004). These “Protestant presuppositions” (Schopen 1991) have shaped the development of the field of Buddhist studies, which has privileged those texts that lend support to the idea of Buddhism as a rationalist philosophy compatible with European Enlightenment ideals and dismissed references to anything magical or miraculous as superstition.

The same presuppositions have shaped Western engagement with Buddhism at the level of personal practice, which explained my own perplexity when I learnt about the importance of relics in the FPMT and may also help to explain why attendance at the relic exhibitions at Daylesford and other FPMT-organised venues was low. My own liberal Protestant background predisposed me towards an “aniconic” engagement with Buddhism.

Another aspect of his complaint was less about aniconism and more about his disagreement with the holiness of one set of relics, some bone fragments from the famous but controversial Chogyam Trungpa, whom he considered unfit for the role of “holy man” because he had been “an alcoholic, a smoker, and a sex maniac.” This still enraged him when I interviewed him five months later. He exclaimed to me, “How you can possibly, through any stretch of the imagination, have the relics of this guy stuck up there in the holy stupa, is completely beyond me, completely beyond me.”

I doubt that his brochures explain the low attendance in Daylesford, since they might just as well make people curious to visit to see what he finds so objectionable.
as a method of personal transformation rather than religious devotion. Many other Buddhist converts find relic veneration similarly odd.

One reason why people adopt a new religion is that it appears to correspond with concepts and desires from an existing context (Norris 2003: 179). Intentionally or not, Western Buddhist converts filter their adopted ideology, concepts and practices through their own prior associations, accepting some and rejecting others. The fact that many of the forms of Buddhism exported to Western cultural contexts was stripped of practices like relic veneration evokes what Baumann (1994: 52) calls a strategy of reduction in which adherents de-emphasise or avoid ideas that the host culture would struggle to accept without extensive explanation. At the same time adherents emphasise elements that resemble host culture concepts in order to improve understanding.

What is found in translation?

Both AGNSW’s Buddha exhibition and the relic exhibitions engage people interculturally and provide an opportunity to investigate differing approaches to and understandings of Buddhist practice. Both exhibitions attempt to provide something for existing devotees (of “Art” or of “the Dharma” respectively) and at the same time make contact with the “unreached.” But the basis on which the respective exhibitions are conceptualised constrain the depth of engagement with those they wish to draw into their ambit. For devoted Dharma students such as Maxmillon from Langri Tangpa in Brisbane, the relic exhibition allows a religious engagement in ways that a museum setting does not. The secular museum disenchants and de-animates the objects and contains them within its authoritative gaze, while the relic exhibition re-animates and re-enchants them through the devotional context, enhancing their spiritual power by providing an appropriate “frame.” Something else affects engagement with the relics, meaning that some people, including myself, see them as little more than objects of curiosity. Whether this is karmic (the FPMT position) or the result of culturally-conditioned notions that separate inanimate objects and animate beings, the relics I have discussed here are miniscule, mobile contact zones that do contact work for the Dharma and more specifically for the stupa project.

Contemporary engagement with Buddhist teachings and practices in Australia, at least in the case of the relic exhibitions, complicates characterisations of Buddhism derived from its modernist manifestations. My comparison between the FPMT and
Vietnamese exhibitions shows that this travelling contact zone is contingent, changing, dependent, a site of grappling with meaning and ideas. The question of how people respond differently to the relics evokes translation in two senses. Translation is an act of rendering something intelligible across cultural and linguistic boundaries. But the word was also used in early-mediaeval Christianity to mean “the movement of relics to the people” (Ruppert 2004: 716, citing Brown 1981). Instead of the people travelling to see the holy objects or places, the holy objects are “translated” to the people.

In contrast to Alexa, Nicole found the relics helped her to become “more religious.” She explained to me that before her involvement with the stupa project, her approach to Buddhism had been more “philosophical” but her experience of relics had changed things. Previously, she had engaged with the teachings as ideas to transform mental states, but in becoming more “religious” she was developing a more embodied and emotional engagement. She said, “my contact with holy objects seems to increase my devotion.”

Veronica Strang writes about how a white cattle rancher and an Aborigine living in the same region can and do construct “entirely different relationships with their shared environment, seeing it, experiencing it and valuing it in wholly different ways” (1999: 206). Similarly, Buddhists of very different backgrounds may appear to inhabit the same world (drawing on many of the same texts and images, for example), but they bring different ways of valuing, thinking about and experiencing that world and combine these with different understandings of Buddhism. Relic veneration may have lost some of its relevance in translation, most especially for Buddhist modernists (like Zachary, to give the extreme example) who consider Buddhism to be a rational philosophy that should be kept unsullied by “superstitions” as miraculously-multiplying relics.

Yet some stupa proponents, like Nicole who express a heartfelt commitment to the Lamas, clearly find a powerful source of religious inspiration in the relics. As Clive said, people have lost something in rejecting religious ritual and, I suggest, FPMT students who feel enchanted by gurus and relics have “found” something that they had “lost in translation.”
CHAPTER NINE

ENTANGLED OBJECT(IVE)S

His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s presence at the stupa site in 2007 was of major significance for the stupa project and Bendigo and it brought into sharp focus all the work done so far on the stupa. The event ran well, with widespread media coverage that must have pleased both the stupa proponents and Bendigo’s city council. The day also brought into focus the stupa’s evolving role as a contact zone.

I arrived with other volunteers at the stupa site before dawn to find people working there who had not stopped for sleep. Early guests began arriving mid-morning and by the middle of the day, a long queue snaked its way from the Exhibition Centre all the way to the area prepared inside the stupa. The Dalai Lama and his entourage arrived by helicopter and received a welcome from three parties. Two Tibetan monks blew gyaling trumpets. Aboriginal representatives, including Uncle Brien Nelson, some of his relations and a Queenslander who lived in Bendigo, gave him an Aboriginal smoking ceremony. And some of the key people from Atisha Centre and the stupa project, lined up to present khatas to him. News media from around Australia occupied a high platform on the southeast quarter of the stupa.
While the Dalai Lama took lunch and a short break up the hill at the monastery, inside the stupa site, a procession of monks and nuns from an array of Buddhist traditions filed in. Then Uncle Brien, dressed in a possum-skin cloak, welcomed the audience to Jaara Jaara country and his group performed two dances. Two local Bendigo-Chinese performance troupes with their spectacular Lion and Dragon dances. A Tibetan singer, Ngodup Dolma, also entertained the audience.

Ian gave a brief speech and the Dalai Lama arrived onto the stage. Uncle Brien presented him with a small gift of a feather and a knapped stone and the Bendigo Mayor gave the speech from which I quoted in Chapter Six. In acknowledgement, the Dalai Lama praised the Mayor for her “true human warmth,” which she conveyed through her eyes as much as through her words. He thanked Brien for the gift – “this stone I think from stone age, is quite sharp!” – and praised the “genuine socialist system” of indigenous peoples in which “the sense of community seems I think, very strong.” He said that “we modern people” also tend to forget about the value of nature and become alienated from it. He then spoke at length about the importance of interfaith dialogue and, as quoted in Chapter Five, the role he thought the stupa could play in increasing understanding in the world. Before departing, he gave the Padmasambhava statue a brief blessing, reciting a prayer in Tibetan and casting three handfuls of petals towards it.

The event and the intensification of activity that the Dalai Lama’s visit brought to the stupa site illuminates several themes that I have followed throughout this thesis. The “buddhifying” preparations show how the site is set up as a heterotopia that stands apart from the rural landscape around it, but is intended to change it, and the wider world, by reminding people of the need for inter-group understanding and peace. The Dalai Lama’s recommendation that the stupa become an interreligious and interdisciplinary contact zone, a place of dialogue between discrepant groups, sets new tasks in the development of the project and already some of these have been incorporated into future plans for the stupa. His next visit to Australia is scheduled for December 2009, during which he will speak at an international interfaith conference called the Parliament of the World’s Religions. An email announcement (February 2009) from Atisha Centre included the news that the Stupa project was hoping to host an interfaith debate on the topic “Is War ever Justified?” to be held at the Great Stupa in December in association with the conference. Hoping to capitalise on the successes of the 2007 visit and in anticipation of the 2009 one,
in September 2008, the stupa project embarked on fundraising for the next level of the stupa with an email (September 2008) and other promotions soliciting donations that included an artist’s impression of the work involved (Fig. 9.1).

Whatever happens at the stupa site in the following years, the Dalai Lama’s visit to it has established it in the Buddhist landscape of Australia. While this dream, if realised, can never be exactly what its founders intend, it is already proclaiming the arrival and establishment of Tibetan Buddhism in Australia. If indeed the stupa is eventually completed, it will provide a contact zone for many generations. Will ritual still play such a key role and will the key ritual experts still be ethnically Tibetan, chanting in Tibetan, or will it have incorporated identifiably local elements, as Russell hopes? Or perhaps, something else that we cannot yet imagine. What will come to pass at this site over the millennium the stupa is intended to last cannot be guessed at; in Ian’s words, “only time will tell.”

**Juxtapositions**

Transported to another country and era, a replica of the Gyantse kumbum is being rebuilt in exile. But the replication is not its exact reproduction. Besides a few points of physical difference, it is changed by its context. The sense that some neighbours had expressed that it would be “out of place” in the Victorian countryside, for instance, places it in a different relationship to its environment than a stupa sponsored by a prince and built by his subjects in 15th-century Tibet.

Thinking of the Great Stupa project as a zone of intercultural engagement provides insight into how a world religion takes shape in new locales. Building a stupa in Australia proclaims Buddhism’s arrival and the responses from non-Buddhists bear out in relation to the interests they have in the land. While I have referred to the “transplantation” of Tibetan Buddhism in this thesis, as Neumaier-Dhargyey (1995) points out with regard to Buddhism in Germany, the metaphor has its limitations, implying that a particular species of “plant” has been taken from one country and “transplanted” into another. In the new contact zone, the plant becomes something different, a hybrid bred from ideas and practices selected from Gelugpa Buddhism (cf. Neumaier-Dhargyey 1995: 190) in interaction with the worldviews, ideals and practices of its Western or, more specifically, Anglo-Australian recipients. For its builders and supporters, it serves as a force for good, a
powerful antidote to the world’s problems, a concretisation of universal compassion. But it is also, as Ian himself says, “many things to many people.” For certain Bendigonians, including city councillors and other civic leaders, it is a tourist attraction, an exotic but potentially enriching addition to Bendigo’s diversity, something that will “put Bendigo on the world map.” Conversely, for critics like Zachary it is a folly in the face of global poverty. Paula and her supporters responded to it as yet another unwelcome settler-colonial imposition in an illegally-occupied land. And then again, some Anglo-Australians feel that their country is changing too fast and that the stupa will be out of place, further evidence of the changes they already find unsettling. Thus its “concrete effects” are not always those intended by its proponents.

In exploring responses to the stupa, I have tried to show how it is a social as well as religious object, entangled in the complex intercultural engagements of the contact zone (cf. Thomas 1991). It operates in a competitive religious field in which its size and exoticism help to attract curiosity. Having done so, it does contact work, putting visitors into a relationship with Tibetan Buddhism in a way that books and classes do not. The stupa is thus more than a mere lens through which other sociocultural themes can be viewed; as a heterotopia it is a vehicle for social change. Allaine Cerwonka (2004: 29), who examines Australian nation-building and territory-claiming through spatial practices such as gardens in Melbourne, says that:

[d]emarcated “national” spaces miniaturize the nation, so that it can be experienced as something tangible and concrete. … Monuments and other spaces demarcated as “national” […] mediate the gap between national spaces as an imagined or abstract idea and an individual life.

The stupa does something similar. But rather than being a “national” space, it is a locus in a transnational and intercultural Buddhist network and a bridge between the religion’s utopian idealism and local praxis. Even so, it influences areas of national interest, inflecting national discourses of multiculturalism (Chapter Six), settler-indigenous relations (Chapter Seven) and between Buddhists with different identities and priorities (Chapter Eight).

As a heterotopia, the stupa entails the negotiation of “unsettling juxtapositions” (to return to Hetherington). Those who find it strange to encounter a replica of a fifteenth-century Tibetan stupa in rural Victoria are expressing a subjective view – why should this stupa be any more improbable than a church? Nonetheless, the feeling of strangeness has
shaped my own engagement with the research and how many, especially non-FPMT members talk about it. Two vignettes, one on the importation of the treasure vases discussed and depicted in Chapter Seven and the other on the stupa’s potential “theme park” role, illustrate this.

When Ian imported the treasure vases from the Dalai Lama’s office in India for burial in the stupa foundations, Australian customs officials wanted to open them to inspect the contents. The office had advised him that the vases should not be opened, so Ian passed this message to customs, who replied that they if they could not open them they had to gamma-radiate them. Upon consultation, the Dalai Lama’s office assured him that this would do the vases no harm. In the Buddhist view, these four vases contained treasures to enrich and bless the locality. By contrast, the primary concern of the customs officials was that the vessels contained ingredients that were a potential biosecurity hazard. It is noteworthy that they accommodated the request not to open the vases and the Buddhists, in turn, accommodated the radiation treatment.

Ian requested Khensur Rinpoche, the ritual master from Adelaide, to conduct the necessary blessings. Coordinating dates was difficult because he needed to juggle the practicalities of booking a contractor to drill the holes and arrange for the Rinpoche’s visit while also waiting for him to determine the astrologically-appropriate time for the ritual. Eventually, on a grey winter day, a small group of Atisha Centre members and monks gathered for the event. In the main gompa, the Rinpoche and his assistants prepared plastic tubes in which they were to seal the vases before burial. They put a paper lotus, dried flower petals and then a vase into each tube. Dennis and Ian then sealed the lids of the plastic cylinders with a blue, industrial-smelling glue in a container marked “POISON.” While the vases and their contents served as offerings to the nāgas, the glue kept out damp and dirt. A procession then took the vases to the stupa site and, as mentioned in Chapter Seven, completed the ceremony that would “enrich the soil.”

Such are the complexities entailed in bringing Tibetan ritual across the borders of a very different nation-state. At least four juxtapositions occur within this story: spiritual efficacy and biosecurity contamination; gamma radiation and the radiation of blessings;

\footnote{During the weekend preceding the ritual, Khensur Rinpoche also gave teachings in the main gompa on the core concepts of Renunciation, Bodhicitta and Emptiness and gave a Medicine Buddha initiation.}
understandings of temporality (event management versus astrologically auspicious time); and the use of both pleasing agreeable and toxic substances in an offering to local deities.

The second vignette pertains to the stupa site’s future status as a tourist / pilgrimage destination. In June 2007 I mentioned an article to Ian that describes how the stupa at Swayambhū in Nepal was becoming what the author (Owens 2002) considered to be a Buddhist theme park because so many international Buddhist organisations were building displays, statues and decorative fountains and so on around the stupa. Ian replied that the Great Stupa project was itself a kind of museum or theme park and he stressed that “if its motivation is spiritual not commercial, that is good.” He asked, “Why do people like shopping malls? Because they find them comfortable, safe, practical, secure. People enjoy being there. But this theme park should be about developing kind-heartedness,” a place where people could learn about Buddhism. People would enjoy their visit while learning and, more importantly, absorbing a feeling of peace and harmony that would have a positive influence on their lives. I asked him how the park would pay for its own upkeep, since there would be big overheads. No admission fee would be charged, he said. Donations and volunteers would keep the place running. He added that Asian Buddhists tend to donate generously to such projects.

In this setting, “traditional” style teachings are presented in a venue that, coincidentally, replaced the earlier theme park of Sandhurst Town that Ian’s father founded. In this case the juxtapositions are between a secular, open-air museum for locals representing an idealised goldrush history and a religious theme park seeking to provide a spiritual experience. Further, rather than constructing a representation of the host nation’s colonial-era heritage, this theme park imagines itself as curator of the endangered heritage of another nation in the safety of exile. Another juxtaposition was that it would implicitly critique commercial enterprise: entry would be by donation, and the venue supported by benefactors, not investors. Dedicated to the Mahāyāna ideal of bodhicitta, it is not intended to generate financial profit. All of this sits within a larger Buddhist paradox, which entails, as Kieschnick (2003: 2-5) points out in his analysis of Buddhist material culture in China, on the one hand doctrines that refer to the material world as an “illusory distraction” (p. 4) and on the other, the development of an elaborate material culture of “objects in service to the Dharma” (p. 5), including often opulent sacred art and architecture.
As a heterotopia, then, the Great Stupa is a site of strange juxtapositions. As a place of intercultural contact it serves as a vehicle of spiritual and social transformation. Thus I have used “contact zone” as an orienting trope for thinking about the movement of an evolving contemporary global religious institution into Anglo-Australian settler society, where the power relations between the converts and their Tibetan Buddhist mentors are quite distinct from those of the colonial era. The trope encapsulates the idea that contact entails more than just the first meeting of two distinct worldviews but also an ongoing, multi-layered interrelationship.

The contact zone encompasses not only the social space of cross-cultural interactions but also its actualisation in a physical place. In contrast with non-spatialised metaphors of cultural mixing, then, this trope highlights materiality and locality. The Great Stupa is conceivable as a project because of its proponents’ ability to cultivate support and access resources. Support from the local authorities and general public must be cultivated and formal objections and other criticisms addressed or defused (Chapter Six). The fraught history of the colonisation of Australia, which dispossessed its Aboriginal peoples of land in this region as much as elsewhere on the continent, permeates the very soil upon which the stupa is being built, in ways that only become apparent to its Buddhist occupants when someone explicitly challenged their project. The Great Stupa, whether its proponents recognise it or not, is thus is part of what Zukin (1991: 16) calls “the landscape of the powerful” in which large and expensive buildings such as cathedrals, skyscrapers and so forth, indicate who has power and resources to engage in conspicuous construction.

Thus the stupa is a site of struggle, entailing assymetrical relations of domination and subordination. Like all monuments it reinforces certain kinds of power and obscures others. Even without the conscious intention of the liberal Australian Buddhists, who care deeply about issues of social justice, White privilege was reinforced and Aboriginal claims obscured until brought forcefully to their attention (Chapter Seven). The unexpected consequences of this very motivated monument is that this holy object and its holy objectives are entangled in negotiations of identity and power in the Australian nation and also, an area I touched on in Chapters Six and Eight, the power relations underlying the Westernisation of Tibetan Buddhism and the differences between converts and immigrants.
Further, as with all idealism, in their attempt to bring about beneficial results, the inevitable friction of lived interaction brings about unforeseeable results. The stupa serves a key role in the Buddhists’ wish to provide a solution to humanity’s core problems, which, from their perspective, stem from the mind. This monument to enlightened compassion plays a role in seeking to transform not only its own immediate social world but also the wider world around it. In utopianist fashion, the Buddhists seek to remedy the world’s problems and provide an alternate spatial and philosophical ordering. This interweaves what the proponents consider to be the best of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition with the best of the contemporary world. Yet at the same time, it is a product of the society around it and thus is shaped by it and must in various ways render itself intelligible to that society.

Tibetan Buddhism’s newness in Australia, evident through the ways people considered it exotic, seems to some to be incongruous. Some Anglo-Australian FPMT members would like to see its visual expressions adapted. One such local is Russell, who, as well as envisaging Buddhism’s Australianisation (Chapter Five), was optimistic about the stupa’s role in turning Atisha Centre into an international FPMT hub:

in a few years time they’re going to have quite a strong lay community there, and […] I just envision just a sea of robes, […] the monastery becoming quite large, becoming a real teaching centre for monks from all over the world, and nuns as well.

This monument to enlightenment can only be of benefit. I mean, to look around and see what state the world’s in with, you know, just at this present time [2003] with what’s happening in the Middle East with Iraq, and Afghanistan and all that. I mean the world can do with as much positive energy as it can have […] and I see the stupa as that, a collection of energy, yeah [laughs]. […] The stupa will […] be just such a positive, […] focal point, […] that people will be drawn to it. Yeah, […]

maybe that’s why I’m here, you know, drawn to it.

**For all sentient beings**

The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion embodies the blend of traditionalist doctrines expressed in contemporary materials and in compliance with contemporary building codes. The project could be considered to epitomise the whole of the FPMT, an institution
that seeks to preserve the Dharma, albeit in a fashion organised and expressed through modern media and mission statements (cf. Zablocki 2005: 276).

The advantage of owning property is that the Buddhists can, albeit within the constraints of local building regulations, engage in transplanting Buddhist material culture in ways they could not do in a rented space. The disadvantage is that a monumental, multi-tiered stupa requires on-going negotiation with the wider community and a large amount of time and resources. The project is vulnerable to changes in circumstances. Spiralling construction costs, the 2008/09 global financial crisis, thinning donations or the loss of key proponents, for example, could slow or cease its progress. Even with prompt completion of the structure, however, much skilled labour will be necessary to create the shrine rooms and elaborate interior decoration of Tibetan Buddhist temples. Thus far, with only the foundations and part of the framework for the first level in place in early 2009, completion by 2010, the target date in one promotional brochure, is unlikely. As Ian wrote in his reply to Zachary’s prediction (Chapter Five), “only time will tell” if and when it is completed.

On the other hand, as the stupa project gains exposure through successful, high-profile events such as the Dalai Lama’s 2007 visit and the completion of the Jade Buddha for Universal Peace statue in 2008, it may well attract increasing numbers of wealthy benefactors. Perhaps reflecting back on his experience in the 1970s of Sarnath as a sacred place, Ian believes the stupa will be a “happening, vibrant type thing where people will come and they will feel the spirituality of it, just as they do even now in Atisha Centre or the monastery.” Already much has been achieved, with the ground floor steel frame in place. He reiterates that their intention is for the stupa to be of universal benefit:

This is not just some, you know, whim that we’re doing for ourselves, we’re actually doing this for the wor-, for sentient beings, really […]. To change the Western world’s psyche, as much as anything and to create positive impressions on people’s minds so that ultimately they can become enlightened.
APPENDICES

Appendix I: Interview and participant-observation

I conducted 36 audiotaped interviews, ranging from twenty minutes to an hour and a half, with people associated with the FPMT (including people involved with the stupa project; monks and nuns; lay members etc); with people who were not Buddhist and expressed moderate views about the stupa project; and with people who were peripheral to the FPMT and either opposed or were moderately critical of the stupa project. I also obtained tape recordings of three public talks by monks and of a meeting between a visiting nun and several Atisha committee members. Except for identifiable figures and people who wanted their real names to be used, I use pseudonyms.

Real names used in more than one paragraph

Adrian (Ven. Gyatso), Bob Waterhouse, Di Gee, Garrey Foulkes, Ian Green, Ven. Jinpa, Jon, Judy Green, Lyn Warren, Noel Maddock, Peter Heggie, Peter Stripes, Peter Weiss, Ruby Karmay, Ven. Tony Beaumont, Yien Law. (Many other names were used once only and do not appear here).

Pseudonyms (indicated by quotation marks at first use)

Alexa; Cecily; Clive; Conny; Fred; Grace; Hugh; Jane; Mavis; Nicole; Patrick; Paula; Robert; Roy; Russell; William

Appendix II: FPMT Dharma Centres in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FPMT centres in Australia</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year established</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chenrezig Institute</td>
<td>Eudlo, Queensland</td>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara Institute (Tara House)</td>
<td>Melbourne, Vic</td>
<td>1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atisha Centre</td>
<td>Bendigo, Vic</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddha House</td>
<td>Adelaide, SA</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vajrayana Institute</td>
<td>Sydney, NSW</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayagriva</td>
<td>Perth, WA</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospice of Mother Tara</td>
<td>Bunbury, WA</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunsang Lama Yeshe Centre (Vajrasattva Mountain Centre )</td>
<td>Blue Mountains, NSW</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Tong Ling</td>
<td>Kangaroo Island, SA</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chagtong Chentong study group</td>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langri Tangpa Centre</td>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>1982</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A1. FPMT Dharma Centres in Australia
Appendix III: FPMT’s Discovering Buddhism course

The Discovering Buddhism programme is a two-year course for which students may receive a certificate of completion upon fulfilment of all requirements. It gives people a full introduction to Mahāyāna Buddhism, as interpreted by FPMT teachers. The programme is divided into fourteen subject areas (FPMT n.d.-b). Students are expected to attend lectures, meditate on the relevant topics, complete the readings and attend short retreats. The final module includes longer retreats. The curricula for the FPMT’s more advanced study programmes, the Basic Program and Masters Program, can be seen on the FPMT website (FPMT n.d.-a).

Mind and Its Potential

Examine what is “mind,” its nature and function, and how it affects our experience of happiness and suffering. Come explore the differentiation between mind and brain, mind as the creator of our experiences, and the implications of possessing a mind that has no beginning and no end. In addition, learn methods to transform destructive thoughts and attitudes and create a positive and joyous mind.

2. How to Meditate

Basic meditation techniques. Learn the definition and purpose of meditation, how to sit properly, how to set up a meditation session, the different types of meditation techniques one may employ, and how to recognize and deal with obstacles to meditation.

3. Presenting the Path

Get an overview of the entire Tibetan Buddhist path to awakening. Hear about the life story of the Buddha and study the basic teachings of Buddhism. Discover the unique system for putting Buddhist philosophy into practice contained in the lam-rim, or “graduated path to enlightenment.”

4. The Spiritual Teacher

Take the time to investigate the role of the teacher on the spiritual path: the need for a teacher, the qualities of a teacher, the qualities of a student, and how to relate to a teacher for greatest benefit in one’s spiritual life. Consider the challenges we face when thinking of entering into a “guru-disciple” relationship and learn how to overcome these skillfully.

5. Death and Rebirth

Explore the process of death and rebirth and its impact on how we live our lives. Be guided in skillful reflection on the meaning of death and what to expect at the death-time. In this way, fulfill your purpose in life, resolve conflicts, and develop the skills to help both yourself and others at the time of
death. Eventually, through Buddhist practice, one can overcome death altogether.

6. All About Karma

Learn the essential facts about the law of cause and effect and generate a clear understanding about how karma works. Discover effective tools to accumulate merit – the cause of happiness and success – and purify mistaken actions done in the past. In addition, explore ways to become adept at dealing with life most effectively and thereby take control of your future.

7. Refuge in the Three Jewels

Get informed about what it means to take refuge in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), and the essential practices of refuge. Find out more about the advantage of taking lay vows and their role in enhancing our spiritual growth.

8. Establishing a Daily Practice

Assemble the tools you need to develop a successful daily practice. Using Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s A DAILY MEDITATION PRACTICE as a guide, become familiar with the elements necessary to generate realizations in the mind. Also, receive some tips for making every action of the day meaningful.

9. Samsara and Nirvana

Investigate what “samsara” is and how we are stuck in it. Find out what “nirvana” is and how to achieve it. Develop the determination to be free from suffering and empower yourself with practical tools to deal with and eliminate disturbing emotions forever.

10. How to Develop Bodhichitta

Come discover the clear meditation instruction available in Tibetan Buddhism that enables us to develop our innate qualities of loving kindness and compassion. Become skilled at applying these techniques to generate the mind of bodhichitta, the wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others, known to be the heart of Buddha’s teachings.

11. Transforming Problems

Consider well the disadvantages of self-cherishing and the advantages of cherishing others more than ourselves. Get inspired to “exchange yourself with others,” and then be guided in how to employ the special techniques of mind training or “lo-jong” as a means to transform problems into happiness and learn to like problems as much as ice cream!
12. Wisdom of Emptiness

The realization of emptiness is crucial for the attainment of liberation and enlightenment. Take this opportunity to enhance your ability to bring about this realization. Learn how to develop calm abiding and different methods to use in meditation on emptiness. Practice accumulation of merit and purification of obstacles – indispensable for generating realizations within the mind.

13. Introduction to Tantra

Learn the definition of tantra, how tantra works and why it is a powerful form of practice. Get a broad overview of the four classes of tantra and learn how to practice simple Kriya tantric methods. In addition, find out how to integrate the practices of tantra with lam-rim meditation for optimal results.

14. Special Integration Experiences

By undertaking intensive practices of purification and a minimum two-week lam-rim residential retreat, prepare your mind in the best possible way to gain realizations on the path to enlightenment. Purification practices include: 100,000 prostrations, 3-month Vajrasattva retreat, and Nyung Ne. This is a great way to seal the blessings of this programme.

Appendix IV. Benefactor acknowledgments

The information here comes from a paper form provided to benefactors that is also available (updated) at www.stupa.org.au/donate.html.

Supporter USD$ 35 AUD$50

Enamel benefactors badge, free newsletter for life.

Donor USD$ 65 AUD$98

Gold-leafed Sa Tsa of centuries-old Buddha originally from Gyantse Stupa (Tibet), enamel benefactors badge, free newsletter for life.

Well-wisher USD$ 100 AUD$148

Consecrated Stupa model with special purifying mantra inside, enamel benefactors badge, free newsletter for life.

Life-long friend USD$1,000 AUD$1,500

Consecrated Stupa model with special purifying mantra inside, enamel benefactors badge, free newsletter for life. Your name is recorded within the
Great Stupa itself and your name is recalled at a puja for benefactors to be held each year for as long as the Great Stupa exists.

**Merit Benefactor USD$ 3,500 AUD$5,000**

[As per “Life-long Friend” plus] You will be offered one of the bronze Memorial Stupas that surround the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion. These stupas cover the ashes of family or friends.

**Foundation Father / Mother USD$ 7,200 AUD$10,800**

[As per “Life-long Friend” plus] Your name will be recorded on one of the 12 great pillars that hold up the Great Stupa.

**Karma Benefactor USD$10,000 AUD$15,000**

[As per “Life-long Friend” plus] You will be offered two of the special memorial stupas that surround the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion. These stupas cover the ashes of family or friends. Your name will be recorded in perpetuity as the benefactor of 100 small stupas and one of the 108 prayer wheels that surround the Great Stupa.

**Happiness Benefactor USD$ 26,000 AUD$38,000**

Consecrated blessed Stupa model with special purifying mantra inside, gold benefactors badge, free newsletter for life. Your name will be recorded within the Bum’pa of the Great Stupa (where the relics are kept) and your name will be recalled at a puja for benefactors to be held each year for as long as the Great Stupa exists.

You will be offered four of the special memorial stupas that surround the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion. These stupas cover the ashes of family or friends. Your name will be recorded in perpetuity as the benefactor of 100 small stupas and one of the 108 prayer wheels that surround the Great Stupa.

**Enlightenment Benefactor USD$58,800 AUD$88,000**
REFERENCES


COGB. See City of Greater Bendigo


FPMT. See Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition and FPMT Inc.


GBCC. See Greater Bendigo City Council


GSUC. See Great Stupa of Universal Compassion


