

BMIMC consecration ceremony – talk by Graham Wheeler

9 am Sunday 5 February 2023

Acknowledgement of country & welcome

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge that we are now on the traditional land of the Gundungurra and Darug people.

I invite you to pause and reflect on the following time scale

- In 1988 this property was purchased and work began to create this Centre - about 35 years ago.
- In 1813 the first non-indigenous people passed through this area as explorers - about 110 years ago.
- the Gundungurra and Darug people started to occupy the land around us - about 40,000 years ago.

In this context, it makes our tenure here seem very recent and very fragile.

However, as one of the current (*& temporary*) custodians of this small piece of land, I wish to pay my respects to first nation elders, past, present and emerging and also welcome all indigenous people who are here today.

In fact, everyone who is here today is most welcome. In particular, I would like to thank Sayadaw U Pannathami for making the trip up here. Sayadaw was the Centre's first resident teacher (for 10 years from 1991 to 2000) and we are very pleased he accepted our invitation to conduct a consecration ceremony for the new Buddha image.

A day of celebration & reflection

I think of today as a day for both celebration and reflection.

Reflection on the history of this land and the factors that led the Centre being here today.

Celebration that we are free to come together peacefully in support of the work of the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre.

With that in mind, I'd like to offer a few stories about what's happened on these 2 acres (7,300 sq m) of land over time.

Early history of this property

As I mentioned before, there's a history of around 40,000 years of indigenous occupation of the lands around us. As we all know, this long period of custodianship rapidly changed when the first non-indigenous people started coming here around 1813. The non-indigenous people quickly claimed the land as their own and significant areas were then cleared and subdivided. According to this property's title deeds the land we are standing on was transferred to William Eyre on 14 January 1891 under a Crown grant. Since then, the property was sold four more times before BMIMC purchased it on 10 August 1988 for \$60,000.

Back in 1988, it consisted of the original old house and a remnant orchard which overgrown with blackberries, holly & other weeds. It took a small group of dedicated volunteers over 3 years to improve the house and grounds to make them *just* adequate enough to accommodate our first resident teacher, Sayadaw U Pannathami & his kappier Ko Ko Latt.

Despite all this work, the facilities were still very basic (as I'm sure Sayadaw will remember) - there was no central heating, it wasn't connected to the sewer and all visitors stayed in dormitories with two shared bathrooms. The kitchen was also very rudimentary.

Back in the 1990s, attitudes to Buddhism and meditation were also very different. Meditation was generally regarded as a fringe activity, and the idea of "mindfulness" was virtually unknown outside of Buddhism.

In this environment, it came as no surprise that some residents of Medlow Bath were concerned about the plans to convert what they knew as “old Ward’s Farm” into a Buddhist meditation Centre. Our neighbours fears were not reduced when they started seeing people walking around the grounds *very slowly* and heard strange gongs ringing throughout the day! Fortunately, times have changed and the Centre is now an accepted part of the local Blue Mountains community.

Some of the people who I’d like to acknowledge as being instrumental in those pioneering days were, Grahame White, Lynne Bousfield, Tara Frances, Elizabeth Gorski (now Ayya Nirodha), Patrick Kearney, John Hale, Sheila Hale, Chris MacLachlan, Gavin Cusack and Gabrielle Cusack, Ian Baird, Kim Fisch & Malcolm McClintock.

What led to the development of the Centre?

The short answer is that enough people wanted it to happen and were committed enough to make it happen. My own recollection of those early days is that it was often like pushing a boulder up a hill. If you didn’t keep making an effort, the boulder would roll backwards. Fortunately, these days it feels more like the boulder has reached a plateau of mostly level ground and it just needs steering and a push from time to time!

But going back to the history, it was around 1981 that the events leading up to the development of BMIMC started. A small group of people who had discovered vipassana meditation while travelling through Asia got together and decided to organise some retreats here. Fortunately, some had met Joseph Goldstein in their travels and so he was invited to teach the first vipassana retreats in 1982 and 1984. They were held at Wat Buddha Dhamma and Bodhi Farm near Lismore and up to 50 people attended a single retreat.

The type of meditation taught by Joseph was vipassana, or insight meditation, in the tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw. Mahasi was renown Burmese monk who played a major role in bringing vipassana (insight) meditation to lay people in both Asia and the West.

After Mahasi’s death in 1982, Sayadaw U Pandita became his successor and he wanted to continue Mahasi’s efforts to help bring the Buddha dhamma to the West.

We were fortunate enough to have Sayadaw U Pandita accept our invitations to come to Australia to teach and he travelled here four times between 1985 – 1991. These retreats were held in rented premises and his words of encouragement created the impetus to establish a permanent retreat centre.

To quote from the Centre's first newsletter in January 1986

“The purpose of the Sayadaw's visits to the West is, in his own words, ‘.. to sow seeds in the desert and make them bloom. Western countries are well developed in science and technology and have achieved very comfortable living standards, but still some Westerners have the feeling that something is missing – there is a gap that needs to be filled. Sayadaw wants to help those people who are seeking mental peace.

... However, as the Burmese saying goes, ‘pork cooks best in its own fat’. That is, people in the West will receive the full benefit of the Dhamma only when it is taught to them by Western teachers who have understood for themselves the actual practice and its result.”

It is interesting to look back at the words of Sayadaw U Pandita especially in the context of how BMIMC has developed over the years. The Centre's early survival was heavily reliant on the presence of a resident Burmese monk, (Sayadaw U Pannathami), a Burmese kappier (Ko Ko Latt).

Also vital at that time was the support of a dedicated band of local meditators plus members of the Burmese community in Sydney.

Some of the main supporters from the Burmese community at that time included Sayadaw U Zaggara, Daw Pyone, Dr Rosie Hoe, Alfred & Brenda Myatt, Dr & Nang Malia, Henry Chan, U Aung Kyi, Roger & Khin Khin Myint, Dr Kay Wain, Adrian Wain and Dr & Mrs Ong.

Without support from the local Burmese community (& Sayadaw U Pandita, U Pannathami & Ko Ko Latt), I doubt that this Centre would have been able to develop into what it has become today.

While the Centre's Burmese connections are still very important, over time, it has gradually moved away from its reliance on traditional Burmese supports, and started to "cook in its own fat".

This has not been an easy journey, and it is still a work in progress as we try to find ways to develop and grow as part of an emerging local Australian Buddhist tradition.

The support and commitment of people such as yourselves is essential for the Centre to continue as a place of practice and learning.

Final reflections

I'd like to mention the names of some people who, although they have died, are still part of the fabric of the Centre:

Teachers: Sayadaws U Zaggara, U Pandita, U Kundala & U Lakkhana. All very senior Burmese Sayadaws who have taught at BMIMC.

Lay supporters: John Hale, Joan King, Riet Little, Alfred Myatt, Dr Ong, Maggie Lane, Megan Llewellyn & Leon Prollius,

Finally, I'd like to end with a quote from Don Elliot, our dedicated groundsman who has looked after the Centre's gardens for many years. When I complimented him recently on how beautiful the gardens were looking he replied "I'm standing on the shoulders of others."

Both comments are true – the gardens do look beautiful and we are all standing on the shoulders of others in the work we do here at the Centre.

Thank you for your attention & please accept my apologies if I have caused any offence by not mentioning a particular supporter of the Centre by name. There have been so many people who have supported the Centre over the past 35 years and my memory has its limitations!