CHAPTER TWO
THEMES AND ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF NORTH AMERICAN BUDDHISTS AND BUDDHISM
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Since the mid-1960s, social and immigration changes in North America have rapidly expanded the presence and practices of non-Christian religious minorities from numerous ethnic, racial, linguistic, and national backgrounds. Many North American cities are now home to a diverse array of ashrams, temples, mosques, and gurdwaras, representing Asian religions and Islam from East and Southeast Asia, Africa, the West Indies, the Middle East, India and Pakistan (Warner and Wittner 1998; McLellan 1999; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Eck 2001; Smith 2002; Bramadat and Seljak 2005). As an integral part of modern global population movements to multiple nation-states, these religions in diaspora manifest new social forms, types of consciousness, and innovative modes of cultural production (Vertovec 1997, 2003; Chandler 2002; Leonard et al. 2005). Generational complexities and the involvement of individuals who have developed relatively new associations with these religions significantly contribute to their diverse and shifting configurations within the North American context. The rapid growth of Buddhism within the last 40 years highlights this extensive multi-religious phenomenon, particularly in regard to its nuanced social intersections and sometimes contradictory dynamics.

Much of the literature concerned with Buddhism and Buddhists in North America reflects a humanities-based religious studies approach that emphasizes American encounters with Buddhism (texts and religious representatives), the transmission and modification of teachings and lineages, gender dynamics, interfaith dialogue, social engagement, and the Buddhist impact on popular and elite cultures (Fields 1986; Kraft 1988; Boucher 1993; Tsomo 1995; Prebish and Tanaka 1998; Seager 1999; Tweed and Prothero 1999; Queen 2000; Coleman 2001; Mullen 2001; Prebish and Baumann 2002). Although smaller numbers of ethnographic studies have provided significant data on Buddhist immigrants and refugees, as well as those who have different kinds of

The thematic explorations presented in this chapter rely to some extent on descriptive and ethnographic research involving Buddhists in Toronto, a major part of my research into Canadian Buddhism and related topics in which I have been engaged since 1985. The city of Toronto has changed dramatically within the last 40 years and now represents one of the most diverse Buddhist presences in North America. Toronto’s immigrant Buddhist diversity is detailed both through class and status distinctions arising from pre-migration characteristics and experiences and through the impact that migration processes have had on a group or community’s ability to re-establish or redefine Buddhist identities and traditions. Buddhists who utilize religious beliefs, practices, and institutions to enhance ethnic, national, and linguistic identities are differentiated from those, who in the literature, are commonly identified as converts, although the validity of the criteria supporting conversion is questioned. This chapter examines the extent to which different groups or communities work toward public presence and social inclusion that, in turn, reflects the role that social capital plays in enabling them to engage in the politics of recognition and representation (ranging from local social service involvement to that of transnational networks and linkages). The concluding analysis of generational continuities and conflicts highlights ongoing changes and challenges to Buddhism within the larger North American context, complicating existing conceptual frameworks for the analysis and identification of Buddhists.

**Census Numbers and Identification of Buddhists in North America**

Although thousands of Buddhist temples, meditation centers, and Buddhist associations can be identified in North America (Numrich 1996, 1999; Morreale 1998; Prebish and Tanaka 1998; McLellan 1999; Matthews 2006), there is no adequate means to determine an accurate count of Buddhists. Wuthnow and Cadge (2004: 364) note that “credible estimates of the number of Buddhists in the United States at the