

With this article in *Bodhi Leaf*, Phra Khantipalo looks back on his life as a Theravadin monk of some thirty years, explaining how he has come to see the Theravada as too limiting and turned to a new interest in Tibetan Dzogchen practice, believing that the Wat could become a non-sectarian centre. The change split the old supporter base and led to uncertainty about the future of the Wat.

## CONFESSIONS OF A RELUCTANT THERAVADIN

Phra Khantipalo

Although I was ordained as a Theravada novice about 30 years ago, when no other Buddhist tradition existed in England, and although this was followed by a higher ordination as a Theravadin monk (bhikkhu), from the very beginning I had doubts about the exclusive nature of Theravada. A year in England as a novice, reading all sorts of Buddhist books (though little was available then) was followed by three years in India. These years were - and are - very important to me, as they slowly revealed that one need not adhere to any sect to be considered as one practising Dhamma well.

In those years I had some interesting teachers. There was Ven. Buddhakkita, who dinned a little Pali into my thick skull. His view was indeed fundamentalist: all the words of the Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidhamma are the Buddha - word and unquestionably so. He became irate on more than one occasion when I objected, callow novice that I was, and so I was forced to toe the line of his 'orthodoxy'. I am grateful for his teachings, but I could never accept such literal truth as he proclaimed - Buddhist history is far more complex than such literalists will admit. Theravada just happens to have survived the holocaust of other Buddhist sects, but now some of its followers adopt rather triumphalist positions of 'the only way' and so on.

For me in India, this was counteracted with some months spent with Ven. Sangharakshita, who introduced me to the wider visions of ancient Indian Buddhism. This led on, too, to contact with Tibetan teachers, two from whom I received tantric empowerments. From Ven. Dardo Rinpoche of Kalimpong, I received the Green Tārā practice, while from the foremost Nyingma master, H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche, I had the White Tārā initiation. Although I did nothing much with either of these, the seeds of them, well planted in my mind, were sure to germinate some time in the future.

My three years in India also included contact with the 'new' Buddhists who had followed Dr. Babasahib Ambedkar out of their outcaste status. In those days, virtually the only Dhamma they received was during the annual winter campaigns of Ven. Sangharakshita among their crowded tenements and tin-can village slums. Although there were Theravada monks from various Buddhist countries in India then, they were unable, it seemed, to teach these people more than a few ceremonies and the way of supporting monks. All this made a deep impression on me.

In India, when Buddhism was a living tradition, Buddhists of all kinds could talk to each other, not necessarily agreeing, but they could discuss matters and find out from that the weak points in their understanding. Tolerance (the title also of my first book, composed in India) is the mark of such discussion, leading on to the view that there is no exclusive 'truth' possessed by this body or that.

Things are different in Thailand, where I spent the next eleven years. Only one type of Buddhism is there (Chinese Mahayana is very small), and it is associated nationalistically with being a Thai. Not very much difference is tolerated - Ven. Buddhadasa escapes censure by living far from Bangkok, whereas Phra Bodhiraks has recently and messily been disrobed, as much it seems, for political as for 'religious' reasons.

I opted to stay in a Wat of a strict Dhammayut sect, by name Bovoranives or Boworn for short. But I did not really fit there. I was not in the race to pass Pali examinations nor to gain titles from the King. And I saw that many of the intelligent monks disrobed just because of the archaic exam system in which one had no freedom to say anything original - just grind out of the textbook on your exam paper and pass! Not a system that will commend itself to the intelligent. But I loved some study and slowly accumulated quite a large library, consisting of the Pali Canon, in both Pali and English, as well as the more interesting Mahayana works as they became available.

Neither do I fit in the ascetic 'no books' situation of the forest monasteries. Practice there was hard, and some things I enjoyed - the silence, and when it was available, the solitude - but as they had studied nothing, the lack of basic understanding among many forest monks was unpleasant. Arrogance may be, perhaps surprisingly, as acute among those who have no studies as among those who have much knowledge.

When I was in Wat Boworn, some of my time was taken up with quite un-Theravadin activities. For instance, *The Wisdom Gone Beyond* is an anthology of Mahayana works which I helped to produce, together with my good friends Ven. Pāsādiko and Ven. Nāgasena and the Tibetan monk, Ven. Thubten Kalzang. The same quartet also produced a translation of H.H. the Dalai lama's book *The Opening of*

the Wisdom Eye - surprising activities for Bangkok! But even more surprising was the ceremony arranged through my friend John Blofeld, in which I undertook the Bodhisattva Precepts from the head of the Chinese Sangha in Thailand, Ven. Yen Boon. I told no one about this, as I would have been incomprehensible even to my revered teacher, who is now the Sangharāja of Thailand. How can one communicate the feeling of being smothered by the system to one who has grown up in that system all his life? My feeling for the bodhisattva practice, perhaps sparked off by contact with Ven. Sangharakshita, has always been strong. I saw no reason to change robes or sects when doing these things. As a farang monk in Thailand, at least I enjoyed some latitude not available to Thai monks - they either conformed and mostly died spiritually, or shrugged their shoulders and disrobed. Things have not changed much even now.

Coming to Australia with the encouragement of my teacher was a salutary shock to the system I was used to. Thai formalities no longer applied in Aussie society, particularly, of course, among those who were interested in meditation, the 'hippies' around Nimbin and Mullumbimby - a different society indeed! But it was one that I enjoyed, perhaps because it was more frank and open. In Thailand, if one is a well respected person in lay life, or if one is a monk, no emotions are to be shown. These are supposed to be 'under control' and an impassive face is the preferred reaction. What a recipe for violence this is! By contrast, my alternative friends up north did not try to disguise their emotions, and if they disagreed with a monk, then they said so. This was, as I said, a salutary experience. I prefer people who say to my face what is on their minds, rather than whispering something to others behind my back. Honesty, of course, is not always comfortable.

My roving life around Australia led me to experience a lot of things which could never happen to monks safely bounded by the walls of their monasteries. On the whole, this has been a good thing, for it has shown me that in order to live the life of a 'good monk' (as defined by the Asian and vinaya standards), one must necessarily lead a very archaic lifestyle, remote from the main concerns of the twentieth century. After all, Vinaya has stayed still, while the world has not. Those who are interested in this problem may like to read my Moss on the Stones, dealing with monastic discipline for the present day, to be published next year. No doubt copies will be available from the Wat.

In between invitations to go here and there, I helped to found Wat Buddharingsee, the Thai monastery in Stanmore, Sydney, and stayed there for months at a time with the one or two Thai monks then resident. We were among the first Buddhist teachers in this country - the Wat was founded in 1973 - and at the time no variety of Buddhism was known here other than Theravada. When Chenrezig Institute was founded in Queensland, I was invited to participate in the opening ceremony and felt happy that another part of the great Buddhist picture was moving into Oz.

I could not help noticing how Aussies flocked to the teachings of Lamas Yeshe and Zopa at Chenrezig; but the Thai monks, worthy as they were, attracted no such crowds. In fact, Wat Buddharingsee became very much the Thai scene, with an occasional Australian trying to participate - they had to try very hard, and usually gave up after a time, to find something with which they could connect more easily.

Therefore, when the opportunity arose and Ilse Lederman, now Ven. Ayya Khema said to me, 'Let's try to find some land in a quiet place for practice,' I was overjoyed. We agreed that the place should not be Thai, even though it has the word Wat in its name - it would be an effort to present the Dhamma in an Australian way to Aussies. So in 1978 Wat Buddha Dhamma began, with Ilse and I as teachers. She left after a while, having suffered with me the pains of pioneers, to become a nun in Sri Lanka, where eventually she established a beautiful retreat centre for women near Dodanduwa. With the collapse of peace there, she left the island, was ordained as a bhikkhuni in the Chinese tradition in California, and now runs the very successful Buddha-Haus in Southern Germany. She continues to visit us and has taught here most years - as she will in 1992.

When I was teaching here, at first I sent a number of aspirants to the monkhood in Thailand, where most of them became disciples of Ven. Acharn Chah. Later, I had some ordained as novices here, and among them too, most ended up as the above Archarn's pupils. As this is a different ordination lineage (Mahanikai, not Dhammayut), this meant that none would return here to help me. Rather dispirited by this, about seven or eight years ago I asked some disciples of Ven. Acharn Chah if they had any monks who could come and help share the responsibility of this Wat. As the reply was negative, I struggled on.

Always sympathetic to the plight of women faced with discrimination against them - very marked in Thai Buddhism - I decided to ordain some nuns. Three women were ordained, one of whom, Susanya, stayed with me as a nun and helped me very much. Perhaps she has been the sister I never had; but at any rate, I softened under her influence and became a lot more human than I had been before. I cannot express adequately my gratitude to her for being around for such a long time.

Eventually she went to a course given by a Tibetan master of whom we have heard, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. When she returned, significant changes had taken place in her and I was impressed. Still I did not think then of doing anything like that myself. She decided to disrobe and leave the Wat, living her own life up north in NSW, but after a year or two she returned here as my attendant, bookshop manager and recently editor of Bodhi Leaf. Now she intends to go north for a few years to undertake rebirthing training.

It is, of course, unusual for a monk in Theravada to have a female attendant. It seems that people have what they consider to be a strict moral attitude cannot but suspect

that if there is a monk and a woman, that must spell out sex. I could, of course, say in my own defence that it is my kamma, meaning the result thereof, to have women around me, but such an explanation is likely to be viewed as an excuse! Whether it makes me a 'good' monk or a 'bad' monk I must leave others to judge.

The house in which I sit writing this contains one of the best Buddhist libraries in the Sydney area. About one third of the books - mostly from the Pali Text Society - concern the Theravada tradition, either in the original Pali or in English translation. The remaining two thirds are translations of Mahayana Sutras and Treatises, with a great many books dealing with the special aspects of Mahayana. When I had my Bangkok library sent here, I left behind Mahayana works, thinking that we would found a Theravada place. But my kamma thought otherwise and the Mahayana sections are now prominent.

Perhaps at this point it is a good idea to contrast Christian attitudes with Buddhist ones, for after all, many people carry around the relics of their Christian past. If you were formerly a Baptist and then you converted to Roman Catholicism, you could not be a Baptist and a Catholic. They are exclusive, and you must be either one or the other. Both of these bodies proclaim to some degree their exclusive possession of the saving truth. None of this is very Buddhist, as we may see in the peaceful co-existence of the many so-called Hinayana schools with Mahayana and Vajrayana in India. All Buddhists recognise that ultimately Truth cannot be put into words.

Even cherished formulations such as the Four Noble Truths or the Two Truths (relative and Transcendent) are only pointers in language to certain events in our lives. We all have to experience these things for ourselves. This is all relevant in my case for those who have seen me as a Theravadin - they have only seen a part in that case. Other things are there for which Theravada provides no answers - these must be sought elsewhere in the Buddhist spectrum.

Eventually I did go to see Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. It was last year, one of the turning points of my life, probably the best thing I have ever done. At Conway in Massachusetts, USA, I experienced a ten-day retreat with him, a most marvellous time. I did not think it appropriate to go looking like a monk, as this would have made me stand out too much from others. I am tired of being stared at - such a relief not to be! And pedestals, however exalted, cramp one's legs after a time! No stares, no pedestals, just ordinary - so I went and so I returned. In between times, I communicated with my master that the Wat would be a fine place for Dzogchen retreats, and perhaps the Dzogchen Community of Australia would be able to use it. As I am a trustee for the Wat, I cannot offer it or give it away, but I can invite participation. I intimated that in time the Dzogchen community might become trustees. Rinpoche indicated that this could work, 'slowly, slowly!' The tradition already here and Dzogchen should integrate gradually, with no sense of Theravada being pushed out.

After all, I am getting older, and some provision must be made for the future of the Wat in which so many people have invested so much time and money. There are various possibilities open to the present trustees, Ven. Ayya Khema and myself. One thing that appeals to some people is to return it to use as a Theravada forest monastery. No doubt then we would need some monks (as nuns don't particularly count for much in Theravada). But where are they to be found? Thai monks do not like the place, as it is too far away from Thai supporters. Western monks really only exist in numbers as disciples of Ven. Acharn Chah. However in the past, when I could have done with some support, there were no clear lines of collaboration, so why should these suddenly come to exist now? This more or less disposes of the Wat's future as a forest monastery.

During the last two years, we have developed the Wat as a Dharma centre open to the use of various Buddhist groups and teachers. Individual retreats have also been encouraged in the cabins which were built some years ago. We have hosted a month-long Theravada retreat and several shorter ones by various Tibetan Buddhist groups, both with and without teachers. The Dzogchen Community has now held three very successful retreats here; and it has done more than that, for it is now the owner of Cynthia Rees' house, a base for its retreats and eventually, we hope, a place for Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche to stay. Cynthia is now a Dzogchen practitioner in Italy. Shortly we are to have Fabio Andrico here teaching Yantra Yoga for ten days, we hope with many participants.

The present trustees can, of course continue as such for a while: Ven. Ayya Khema is certainly Theravada, and I must count as at least half Theravada - one cannot lightly brush off 30 years of being a monk. This should satisfy Theravada followers who may feel that they have been excluded from the scene here. Other trustees are needed, and it is my belief that the liberal attitudes of the Dzogchen Community provide an indication of where these should be drawn from. All should be able to enjoy the Wat!

This should be made easier by the departure of one whose lifestyle has been disapproved of - I'm going! Next year, I hope to roam Europe and the USA to do some practice here and there. I may not return here as a monk. Well, of course I may not return at all! Who knows? I am intent on being thoroughly irresponsible, with a burden off my shoulders. Thirteen years through frost and fire is enough as 'Abbot', Let others try.

What will happen here? Oh, we shall not shut up shop! There are always meditators who want a quiet place to practise. Private retreats as well as group practice will be booked through the office, just as they are now. The office will remain open, all visitors welcome and a skeleton staff maintained to look after the place. Do you want to work in a quiet place for a time? Why not let me know and so ensure the Wat's continuity.

Is there a future after Khantipalo? Sounds like a koan.