

Phra Khantipalo and the crisis of authority

An essay based on research for the history of Wat Buddha Dhamma

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December 2020

An outstanding feature of the history of Wat Buddha Dhamma is the extent to which crisis marked its development. The Wat had its share of dramas in the thirty years of its existence up until it became a forest monastery in the Ajahn Chah tradition in 2008. While most organisations undergo some stresses and strains, the Wat's troubles seemed to occur on a regular basis.

The Oxford dictionary defines 'crisis' as 'a vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning point where decisive change for better or worse is imminent'. The idea is useful one; it focuses attention on those critical events in the life of an organisation that changed it in some significant way.

A crisis has participants. There will be onlookers who feel they have no influence over events while others may be agents of change and through their actions have brought about the crisis in the hope of resolving some underlying issue. Any crisis has a meaning dimension, with a potential to cast doubt on accepted understandings and disrupt them. When these meanings represent strongly held beliefs their loss can be traumatic and can lead to attempts to recover the situation or forge new understandings.

The recently completed history of the Wat identifies four main crises. The first was the most significant because it had profound effects. This was a 'crisis of authority' that occurred when Phra Khantipalo began to follow Tibetan Dzogchen teachings and eventually disavowed his Theravadin monkhood. He wished to bring Dzogchen followers into the community and turn the Wat into a non-sectarian and multi-tradition centre. This change of direction was confusing to those many followers he had schooled in the Theravadin teachings, who had absorbed these teachings through immersion in the life of the community. Many had arrived at the Wat searching for existential truth and had found in Khantipalo a teacher who could provide answers and they were greatly affected by the crisis. Only a few close to Khantipalo really understood his new direction and their teacher's need to pursue his *Dhamma* journey. To many, his changes were arbitrary and puzzling, and at a general meeting in October 1991 a large majority of followers rejected the changes. Some time later Khantipalo disrobed and departed, virtually ending his association with the Wat, returning on only a few occasions to teach.

The crisis was profound, and it was definitive. It threatened the collapse of the Wat as a loose structure of forest monastery, meditation centre and lay community, a structure that was basically held together by Phra Khantipalo's spiritual authority. The Wat operated on a principle of mutual dependence where the teacher provides spiritual direction and leadership to the *Dhamma* community who support the teacher and his teaching mission. That principle worked so long as there was respect for the teacher's authority based on his unique knowledge of Buddhism, a gift for interpreting its teachings, his personal qualities and his observance of monastic discipline. When he broke with the Theravadin tradition, followers experienced a profound loss of meaning that was not to be easily recovered.

The crisis had several causes. The early hopes for a monastery were not realised. Khantipalo had found little success in training novices and attracting monks to return from Thailand and take up residence and this contributed to his increasing isolation from the Thai tradition. A growing impatience with the limitations of orthodox Thai Buddhism led him to consider a novice ordination of nuns in April 1984, a move that presented a feminist challenge to the limited monastic participation of women in Thai Buddhism and it upset the *status quo*. Some saw the ordination to be a refreshing change that would ‘strengthen the *sangha*’ but when Khantipalo formed a close relationship with one nun, it weakened his relationship with the community as a whole and alienated some key supporters who then left. It was a kind of minor crisis and it portended later trouble, but in a year or two the experiment was over and crisis was averted. The community recruited new and enthusiastic newcomers and energies were poured into the major project of building the great *sala*.

But the ‘crisis of authority’ that came with Khantipalo’s turn to Dzogchen was a complete breakdown and there could be no return to the status quo. Ayya Khema returned from overseas and intervened; judging that the Wat’s future was at stake she acted swiftly to rally supporters to oppose Khantipalo’s plans. Her first objective was to reaffirm the Theravadan tradition that had established the Wat with a view to preventing any future arbitrary exercise of power like that which had brought about the crisis.

She saw the need for a participatory organisation and she commissioned a new constitution that expanded the trust beyond the two founders and placed authority in the hands of five trustees, lay and monastic. The constitution also defined a broader idea of ‘membership’ of the Wat that dispensed with the old idea of residence, though the effect of this was to weaken the influence of the old ‘Dhamma community’. Importantly the constitution outlined a legal basis for an administrative committee exercising authority to manage the Wat. This constitution replaced earlier and clumsier efforts to balance the different functions of the Wat especially the relationship of abbot and spiritual director and the resident community. It seems, from evidence in his ‘Confessions’ article, that Khantipalo himself accepted these changes, hoping that they would lead to the representation of different Buddhist traditions on the trust.

These constitutional changes effectively rationalised the old Wat structure. The supreme authority enjoyed by Phra Khantipalo was now vested in a formal organisation in a more limited way. This meant that there could not be the same kind of religious meaning that had so attracted people to join the Wat, the possibility of immersion in a Buddhist community with the teacher as its devotional focus. The organisational changes gave new importance to the meditation centre and its regular schedule of courses taught by monastics and lay teachers, both men and women. Eager to see women teachers, Ayya Khema promoted a number of her students. The effect of the changes was to introduce secular influences not seen before.

The old supporter base was left with a deep respect for their former teacher and nostalgia for the unique experience of the early Wat that was now past. The major building program had been completed with the achievement of the *sala* and this was regarded as laying the basis for an expanded teaching effort. But there was now a question about whether the Wat would have the same spiritual authority, especially as other centres were springing up and offering other teaching traditions. Would it be possible to find a replacement for Khantipalo who could engender the same level of respect? Could the community weather the loss of its spiritual teacher and recover the coherence and spiritual direction of the early years?

The increased importance of the meditation centre and the lack of a spiritual director of Khantipalo's stature meant that it might be more difficult to maintain the monastic connection. The 'restoration' of Theravadan tradition certainly revived the connection to the Sydney Thai monasteries and their ethnic communities; it might also have helped to repair the Wat's somewhat unfavourable reputation in the eyes of senior forest monks who now returned to teach on the schedule and reside there for a time.

This original crisis of authority was resolved in a way that had important effects on the subsequent developments. Ayya Khema intended that the new organisation would prevent any future 'takeover' by another Buddhist tradition. She clearly wished to strengthen the teaching of the Theravada, but the effect was restrictive—the expanded group of trustees, effectively custodians of the tradition, were naturally defensive of their role after the trauma of change. Her rationalisation of the Wat offered a new direction and an empowered management committee soon had questions about the way the organisation might evolve.

Over time there was a growing polarisation of traditionalist and modernist values and it appeared that the question of authority, spiritual and lay, had not been resolved. Those who exercised authority as trustees felt they were rightly defending Theravadan monastic authority against attempts to weaken it. To those attracted by a more secular and modernist position (a majority of the committee), it appeared that the Wat was evolving as a lay-controlled meditation centre and monastic influence was weakening; as it did so, traditionalists attempted to maintain it. The organisational structure became the target for reform by modernists who wished for a transition to a typical 'membership organisation' reflecting liberal humanistic ideals of inclusiveness and democratic participation.

One consequence of the crisis was to define monastic authority as a problem; Buddhist monasticism was portrayed as an archaic institution that was alien to western culture and unlikely to be successfully transplanted. Eventually Khantipalo himself thought of monasticism this way, and his whole experience of the Wat was one of the changing circumstances for his monkhood; his own judgement was that the monastic rules needed to be rewritten for Australian conditions.

Some six years after the Dzogchen crisis of authority there followed another turn of events that the Wat history terms a 'crisis of legitimacy'. This new crisis was essentially a continuation of the earlier in that it reflected the failure to resolve questions of authority—the failure to find a suitable monastic to provide spiritual direction after Khantipalo and the more general issue of the role that monastic authority should play in the governance of the Wat. The crisis came about in the wake of further changes in the formal organisation to incorporate it as a limited company and create a single corporate trustee, making it easier to change and appoint trustees. The trust was a body that answered only to itself and the incorporation did not contemplate any change to that.

The crisis came about because the incorporation change appeared to fly in the face of those who wished for a more democratic organisation, one where the trustees were accountable to the membership and open to its participation in decision-making. The trustees had vetoed reforms proposed by a year-long strategic planning process that would have strengthened the authority of the management committee and its effective control. The reformers exposed the conflict between trust and committee, bringing into doubt the legitimacy of existing governance, at least in their eyes. A gulf had opened up between those who had the ultimate

say and those who are administered the centre. There was no question that the trust (now board of directors) had ultimate authority but this was criticised as authoritarian.

The management committee could argue the case for reform but in reality it only exercised an authority delegated to it by the trustees; it pressed for recognition of the reform principles, but had to settle for a so-called 'charter' that gave the administrative committee a free hand in running the Wat. This was depicted as a victory for the would-be reformers but in reality it simply conceded the delegated authority the committee had long exercised. It obscured the fact that the reformers had failed to secure any constitutional shift of power from the trust to the committee. The charter was no more than a memorandum of understanding that papered over the underlying conflict and set the scene for conflict to occur again given the right circumstances.

The result was a working compromise not a resolution of the underlying conflict of monastic and secular influence. It did not seem that the protagonists were able to appreciate that this conflict was quite typical of religious organisations that operate with complementary spiritual and secular structures and their respective 'spheres of influence'. There needed to be an accommodation of conflicting values.

The crisis of authority has perhaps a tragic aspect in that a will to compromise could not be found. The casualty of conflict was the loss of a reserve of trust and goodwill that was necessary to underwrite compromise and its effect was to eventually undermine the viability of the Wat in its later years.

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