

## What Phra Khantipalo taught

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

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There is a lasting love and regard for Phra Khantipalo, now advanced in age and living in care in Melbourne as Laurence Khantipalo Mills, as the founder of Wat Buddha Dhamma; many who were associated with the Wat would acknowledge him as their first teacher. This esteem for Khantipalo and for Ayya Khema as donor and co-founder has been one motivation for producing a thirty-year history of the Wat as a pioneering site of western Buddhism. There is a desire to recall and develop an appreciation of Phra Khantipalo's teaching, since he was in those early years the leading authority on Buddhism as it was emerging in Australia.

Phra Khantipalo came to Australia to set up a Thai temple in Sydney in 1973 under the auspices of the Mahāmakut Foundation. The English-born monk was already an esteemed Pali scholar and a leading exponent of Buddhism to those westerners eager to know more of the teachings. Khantipalo had written several books intended for this western audience including *Buddhism Explained* (first edition 1968, 7th edition 1989) and *Calm and Insight* (1981, 1994) both of which have remained in print. The first offers a comprehensive account of 'what Buddhists believe and what Buddhists practise' in the Theravadan tradition. The second book is later but in a similar style, an exposition of the tradition's main teachings about meditation and intended as 'a manual for meditators'.

As a Pali scholar, Phra Khantipalo stands in the front rank with the earlier generation of western translators such as Nyanamoli Bhikkhu and Nyanaponika Thera. At one stage it was thought that he would become the head of the Buddhist Publication Society in Sri Lanka. Bhikkhu Bodhi in preparing a new edition of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, acknowledged that Phra Khantipalo's earlier translations of some 90 suttas of the 152 were not to be surpassed. Laurence Mills' gift for translation found late expression in poetic version of the *Sutta Nipata* as his health failed; the work was then completed by Bhante Sujato (see [budaedu.org/ebooks/pdf/EN391.pdf](http://budaedu.org/ebooks/pdf/EN391.pdf)).

Phra Khantipalo's authority as teacher in the first place rested upon his knowledge of Pali but equally he had a great ability to communicate the Dhamma to western minds. In the early years of the Wat he was one of very few western monastic teachers available to those seeking wanting to know about interested Buddhism. The spirit of the times encouraged an interest in new-age consciousness and eastern philosophy and Khantipalo was drawn to the alternative communities forming on the NSW North Coast in the wake of the Aquarius festival of 1973. He began teaching in Nimbin only a month or two after his arrival in Australia, and he freely admitted that at the time he had 'never taught meditation in his life' (*Bodhi Leaf*, October 1988). This encounter with the northern NSW Buddhist communities shaped his and Ayya Khema's ideas about the Wat, especially the idea of a 'forest meditation centre'.

The first newsletters framed the purpose of the Wat as a place to learn 'Dhamma and meditation'. The phrase is significant, for Phra Khantipalo did not favour the teaching of meditation as a technique in isolation from *Dhamma* and the breadth and depth of Buddhist doctrine, its understanding and its practice in living a Buddhist life. His many talks printed in *Bodhi Leaf* bear out this emphasis in his teaching. In one of talks called 'Misunderstandings' he emphasises that meditation without the acceptance of teachings will not bring about

insight, nor can meditation be divorced from everyday life. All aspects of Dhamma need to be practised and this should be done flexibly and without rigidity. Technique without a complementary understanding of *Dhamma* would not lead to a transformative practice that would open the heart. In an April 1988 talk on ‘The Three Refuges’ (at the time of the tenth anniversary of the Wat) he criticises those who would do without one or more of the three pillars of Buddhist faith. There are those who would have ‘Dhamma without Buddha or Sangha’. As he relaxed his view of the monkhood, the theme of ‘our ordinary life’ as the place for practice gained a new importance.

Thus Khantipalo’s teaching in the first decade was very much directed to the Wat as a ‘Dhamma community’, those who together were discovering the meaning of a Buddhist way of life as they lived it on a daily basis. That communal life and its support by Khantipalo as teacher is vividly recalled.

Khantipalo appears to have disliked the intensive practice of meditation and more than once he referred disparagingly to ‘vipassana marathons’. Some followers saw that teaching meditation was not his strong point and they looked to other teachers for the guidance to be found in the *vipassana* traditions. Ilse Ledermann had quite a different attitude to intensive practice as a result of her experiences of the U Ba Khin methodology. This was reinforced by ‘Dhamma travellers’ returning from India or Sri Lanka where they had encountered *vipassana* teaching; they gravitated to the Wat intent on continuing their practice. In the first few years, the co-founders taught together on many ten-day retreats as they established the Wat as a leading meditation centre. There was not a lot of clarity about the Wat’s purposes but there was optimism that something special was being created and there was energy for the task.

Part of that energy was the driving commitment of the founders. It is hard to appreciate the scope and intensity of their teaching in those early years, that ranged far beyond the regular monthly retreats at the Wat. Phra Khantipalo was continually travelling to Sydney and interstate to give talks, participate in celebrations and teach retreats. Judging by those reported in newsletters, these activities must number in the hundreds. The *Bodhi Leaf* published transcribed talks as a regular feature. Ayya Khema was, until her international work took over, regularly offering ten-day retreats.

In his book ‘Calm and Insight’ Phra Khantipalo set out at length his understanding of meditation practice; its pages bear an almost overwhelming amount of detail and it is indeed a ‘manual’ in the traditional Theravadan style. This contrasts with the world of practice as it was experienced by many who came first to Buddhism through the strict methodologies of ‘modern *vipassana*’ in the Goenka and Mahasi schools. The beginner is instructed not to engage in intellectual inquiry but to trust the experiential process and regard book learning as a hindrance to progress. Khantipalo refrains from answering questions about experience and typically refers to conceptual understandings. In an interesting twist, in concluding the ‘Calm and Insight’ chapter, he says that he will not describe the ‘stages of insight’ because they are not original teaching but a classification of scholasticism and an encouragement to conceit about one’s progress.

Consistent with his attitude to the methodologies of modern *vipassana*, Phra Khantipalo did not emphasise the *Satipatthana Sutta* as a core text of mindfulness meditation though his experience of Dzogchen would later lead him to do so.

Khantipalo's concept for the Wat was the Thai forest Monastery, and he expected it would be an avenue for monastic training and residence in which meditation has its place but this was not realised despite several novice ordinations in the early 1980s. Khantipalo's teaching gradually changed over the first decade of the Wat's existence as a result and he became less orthodox in his observance as a Thai monk. After 1988 he became increasingly more liberal and unorthodox in his views until there came to a point when his interest in the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition led to a break with his mainly Theravadan supporters and with Ayya Khema who mobilised followers to oppose his plans, taking steps to reaffirm the Theravada as the root tradition.

For many followers, Phra Khantipalo lost authority as a teacher once he abandoned his monkhood and left the Wat to pursue his own learning journey. His change of heart asked his followers to set aside the teachings that provided a coherent basis for the Wat, but the change broke down the mutual dependence of teacher and community. For Ayya Khema, there had to be a reorganisation, a rationalisation of the Wat along new lines, for the break with Phra Khantipalo was complete.

Abandoning the monastery idea and its allegiance to Thai tradition, Khantipalo hoped the Wat could become a non-sectarian Buddhist centre giving access to all traditions. These ideas are set out in his 'Confessions' article reviewing his monastic life and his attitude to Buddhist teachings. This eclectic and liberal approach was rejected at the time but it re-emerged in a later movement to secularise the Wat and make it more like other 'insight meditation' centres, bringing increasing conflict with the conservative followers of the Theravadan tradition.

Yet Phra Khantipalo's influence would remain strong in several ways: his unmatched grasp of Buddhist teachings and their application to Buddhist life; the authority that Pali scholarship brought to his teaching; his attitude that meditation should form part of a well-balanced Buddhist life; and later, his conviction and perhaps his vision that the Wat could evolve from its exotic counter-cultural beginnings into a non-sectarian and pan-Buddhist centre that welcomed inquiry into all traditions that were participating in the emergence of western Buddhism.

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October 2020

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