

Women in Buddhism and the role of Wat Buddha Dhamma

John McIntyre

Prepared for the Sakyadhita International newsletter

May 2022

The foundation of a pioneering Buddhist organisation in a national park north of Sydney was instrumental in nurturing women who became significant teachers; yet after promising developments the situation for women declined.

[*Dhamma Pioneers*](#), a recently published history of Wat Buddha Dhamma, has much to say about the participation of women in the emergence of western Buddhism and will hold much of interest to members of Sakyadhita.

Nominally a Thai monastery, ‘the Wat’ was envisaged by its founders, Phra Khantipalo and Ayya Khema, as ‘a place for westerners to learn Dhamma and meditation’. It was a cultural experiment that combined different elements—monastic tradition in the person of Khantipalo and his ideal of the Thai forest monastery and the distinctly ‘modern’ element promoted by Ayya Khema of a meditation centre offering intensive *vipassana* retreats for lay practitioners. A third element was the development of an alternative spiritual community, the Wat as a collective and communal project.

The cultural experiment was ambitious and unorthodox and it remained to be seen how its disparate functions could be made to harmonise. The Wat’s communal character seemed to offer women a good deal more than traditional Asian Buddhism and from the outset women were attracted to the Wat and played a key role in its evolution. Khantipalo’s leading students included Ilse Ledermann (Ayya Khema), Debbie Caine (Chi Kwang Sunim) and Cynthia Rees (Thubden Paldron). Of course there were many more ordained and lay women who played a significant part at different stages of the Wat’s evolution.

Ayya Khema’s time at the Wat established her career as an outstanding teacher and pioneering organiser and she was an early force in establishing Sakyadhita. *Dhamma Pioneers* regards her as the Wat’s co-founder, not just Phra Khantipalo’s leading student and the donor of the property. She had different ideas about the Wat and at key moments she was to contest Phra Khantipalo’s leadership and direction.

As a cultural experiment the Wat tried to create opportunities for women’s participation in an emerging western Buddhism and Ayya Khema certainly worked for this. It was quickly recognised that traditional Thai monasticism limited women to minor roles as lay helpers. Some who had travelled to Thailand with expectations about access to training returned ill and disappointed, according to Chi Kwang Sunim whose own ordination in a Korean tradition afforded independence and a rigorous training to nuns. Khantipalo himself became openly critical of the limitations of the Theravada (expounded in a *Buddhist Studies Review* article of 1990) and he believed it had to change to accommodate the aspirations of women. This belief was to lead to fateful changes at the Wat.

A key development was the ordination of three nuns in April 1984. It was obvious that the vision of the Wat as a Thai forest monastery had become a fading ideal; a few

young men ordained as novices before going to Thailand, fewer returned to settle at the Wat and without this support Khantipalo became somewhat disconnected from his monastic roots. The idea of ordaining three women—Ayya Susanna, Ayya Candima and Ayya Santi—as novices offered a new direction. For some it was a revival of the full *bhikkhuni* ordination of ancestral tradition, though in reality it was not.

The novice ordination of women was regarded at the time as challenging the male exclusivity of the Thai monkhood and it was not well received in the Sydney Thai temple network since it set up problems with male novices.

The presence of nuns became disruptive to communal life when a close relationship developed between the nun Susanna and Phra Khantipalo who was moving in a new direction, encouraged by Susanna to explore the path of Dzogchen with Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. In early 1991 the pages of the *Bodhi Leaf* newsletter were giving full expression to a feminist challenge to Theravadan monasticism and promoting an orientation to Tibetan tradition.

This amounted to a major crisis of authority and it brought Ayya Khema back from Europe to intervene and restore stability. She now stamped her own authority on the future of the Wat through a new constitution that reaffirmed the Theravadan heritage, created a more participatory structure through a form of Wat membership and established the authority of the management committee. Khantipalo's switch to Dzogchen was rejected by a majority of followers, few of whom shared his progressive vision for a non-sectarian Buddhist centre and sadly, few wished him to continue as a lay teacher and he disrobed and departed the Wat.

The effect of these changes was to make the retreat centre the centre of Wat life. The 1992 retreat schedule announced the new regime and included senior forest monks as well as several women who Ayya Khema promoted as lay teachers while encouraging nuns to teach. These changes marked the end of Khantipalo's unique 'Dhamma authority' as scholar, teacher and spiritual leader. There would be no obvious successor with comparable authority and this opened the way to the appointment, supported by Ayya Khema, of Anja Tactor as the Wat's first resident lay teacher.

Later women's participation in ordained life became a focus when the Wat invited nuns from different traditions to take up residence, enjoy the support of monastic life and in turn support the spiritual practice of the small resident community. Nuns in residence included Ayya Vayama, Ayya Thanasanti and Myong Gyong. Though it was successful for a few years, the small resident community proved difficult to sustain and the Wat slipped into decline and a looming crisis of viability.

Amid deepening conflict over the Wat's secular direction, there were attempts to find a workable model that would maintain monastic authority but this could only be at the expense of those who had worked for a lay-controlled retreat centre. The idea of making over the Wat as a hermitage for nuns was offered as a 'monastic solution' that would accommodate women. Chi Kwang Sunim was invited to develop a proposal to make the Wat a multi-tradition nunnery but this failed for lack of realism and the trust and goodwill needed to realise its ambitious vision.

The failure of the nunnery proposal had an important effect in paving the way for a complete handover to monks in the Thai forest tradition in 2008, an outcome that was received with ambivalence by those who had participated in the Wat's evolution over

a period of thirty years, a cultural experiment that had sought to accommodate the needs of western women alongside traditional monasticism. The Wat had adopted a template that was limited and orthodox.

The history of Wat Buddha Dhamma recounted in *Dhamma Pioneers* draws on documentary evidence, interviews and memoirs to create a detailed narrative. The book provides an important account of a pioneering Buddhist organisation developing and evolving as it helped to shape the emergence of Buddhism in the west. The book concludes with an assessment of the significance of the Wat that has many implications for understanding the contemporary challenges faced by Buddhist women.

Dhamma Pioneers is 300 pages with 25 pages of plates, \$39 plus postage. The book is independently published and can be ordered from the author, John McIntyre. Contact John at jamc46@gmail.com. Further information can be found at jamc.com.au, including a synopsis of the history and several essays on Phra Khantipalo.