

[Working title] Wat Buddha Dhamma: A Social History
Chapter Synopses

Chapter 1
Writing Wat history

The idea of a history of Wat Buddha Dhamma arose from the desire of those who had participated in its development to have their stories collected and to document how the Wat experience had affected and transformed their lives. The narrative would present the personal and communal meanings of those lived experiences, but its larger purpose was to situate these experiences in their social and cultural context. For this, the narrative would take an organisational perspective, recognising the Wat's development and adaptation to changing conditions. It would also have a focus on the transmission of doctrines and practices, exploring what was taught, learned, understood and practiced and reflecting the historic encounter with Buddhist ideas. In this way, the history sought to understand the significance of pioneering organisations like the Wat in the emergence of Australian Buddhism.

Chapter 2
A Jewel of a Place

In the early 1970s, social and political conditions in Australia encouraged a growing interest in Buddhism. The Buddhist Society of NSW led a concerted effort to have the Thai authorities establish a temple in inner Sydney. With high-level support and a generous donor, Wat Buddharangsee was established by senior Thai monks, Phra Parityatikavi and the English-born scholar monk, Phra Khantipalo. Where an earlier generation had espoused rational inquiry into Buddhism, a younger generation was seeking an experience of Buddhist teachings that meshed with counter-cultural ideas of 'new age consciousness'. Within weeks of the Aquarius Festival of May 1973, Phra Khantipalo was teaching his first retreats in Nimbin and forging connections with emerging North Coast Buddhist communities. When the noisy inner-city Thai temple proved ill-suited to teaching meditation, Ilse Ledermann (later Ayya Khema) financed the purchase of a secluded property at Ten Mile Hollow near Wiseman's Ferry and Wat Buddha Dhamma was founded in April 1978. While nominally a 'monastery and forest meditation centre' the Wat could not survive its isolation without a supportive community. Thus a threefold model of monastery, meditation centre and community evolved. With Phra Khantipalo as a strict teacher and spiritual guide, infrastructure was created, the teachers began an energetic program of teaching at home and abroad, and the Wat became a magnet for spiritual seekers willing to learn, build the community and live the Dhamma.

Chapter 3
Dhamma Devotees

It was soon apparent that the founders lacked a shared vision of the Wat. Phra Khantipalo imagined a Thai forest monastery in the *dhutanga* tradition, an abbot dwelling with his monks in the bush wilderness. Ayya Khema desired a 'place for Westerners to learn Dhamma' from respected monastic teachers and her own teaching of *vipassanā* meditation. The lay community soon became the dominant force in the threefold model reconciling the Wat's competing objectives. Early constitutions expanded the Trust, recognising community membership and creating an administrative committee to organise the Wat's development. Phra Khantipalo ordained novices, expecting that those who went for ordination in Asia would return as monks to live in the monastery, but these hopes were not realised. Ayya Khema soon directed her energies to her international projects, establishing centres for Buddhist women, becoming simply an annual visitor. Phra Khantipalo found he was presiding over a collective project to make a Buddhist community, one that wove together physical and organisational work with spiritual practice and ceremonial life. Though he was now a leading monastic figure in Australian Buddhism, renowned as a scholar and teacher at home and abroad, there were signs he was becoming isolated.

Chapter 4

The Centre Cannot Hold

By the mid-nineteen eighties, the Wat was achieving renown as a leading centre in the rapidly changing context of Australian Buddhism, a context that the Wat and its founders had helped to create. Phra Khantipalo appears as a scholar and teacher pre-eminent among his contemporaries in high demand across the country to give talks and teach as a result of the growth of all traditions. But a difficulty in attracting monks to the Wat and retaining them left him isolated and he addressed this by ordaining three nuns. A close relationship with the nun Susaṇṇā weakened monastic discipline and the harmony of the community. Founding residents left to be replaced by an infusion of newcomers, crisis was averted and the Wat entered an expansive phase reaching a peak with the completion of a magnificent new sala in time for the tenth anniversary celebrations. The expansion of effort required was accompanied by a decline in the teaching of meditation. Around the same time, Phra Khantipalo began a personal transformation with a turn to the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition that led to the disavowal of his Theravadan monkhood, bringing about a crisis of authority. Ayya Khema encouraged supporters to resist his plans to merge the Wat with the Dzogchen community and develop the Wat as an eclectic and non-sectarian Buddhist centre.

Chapter 5

A Restoration of Sorts

For a time, Phra Khantipalo clung to his monkhood, reluctant to abandon his ordained persona. He was asked to leave and subsequently disrobed. By early 1992, his largely Theravadan supporters had rallied in support of their heritage. A new constitution recognised the need for broader participation, expanded the Trust to include lay trustees, reaffirmed the functions of the management committee and defined Wat membership and its functions. Phra Khantipalo's Dhamma authority had been the foundation of the threefold model of monastery, meditation centre and community. With his departure, the Wat ceased to be a religious community supporting an authoritative teacher and became more of a lay meditation centre more reliant on lay teachers. The meditation centre replaced the teacher as the centre of Wat activity and the monastery ideal faded when it became apparent that no resident monk could be found to succeed Phra Khantipalo. A wider idea of Wat membership weakened the role of resident community and its support of retreats in Dhamma service. In the long run, there was a decline in monastic teaching, a greater reliance on lay teachers and fewer intensive courses. The Wat had survived a process of organisational transformation, but there were signs that the Trust governance structure displeased some supporters, and divisions regarding the Wat's future appeared.

Chapter 6

Faction, Reform and Reaction

The crisis of authority brought about by Phra Khantipalo's departure was resolved by new constitutional arrangements in 1992 and a recasting of the threefold structure that had depended on that authority. A weakening of monastic influence brought about a growing polarisation of values between 'traditionalists' who wished to preserve the association with Thai Buddhism and 'modernists' who pursued an agenda of Buddhist modernism, promoting inquiry in areas such as psychotherapy and meditation, sexual ethics and feminism. In 1998, the modernists' proposals for a more participatory organisation were vetoed by the traditionalist Trustees, who had incorporated the Trust as a limited company. This reaction precipitated a crisis of legitimacy only resolved when the new board of directors conceded a 'charter' delegating full authority to the management committee, although this was legally dubious. There were signs that the Wat had passed its peak and the viability of the Wat's operation began to be questioned when it was placed in caretaker mode for the first time.

Chapter 7

A Fateful Loss of Meaning

A large ‘Dhamma gathering’ in late 2003 was successful despite the Wat’s failing fortunes, and for some modernists pointed to the way forward; the next year ‘insight teachers’ taught most courses on the retreat schedule. For traditionalists on the board, this trend demonstrated that the committee’s project of secularisation was far advanced; the loss of monastic authority represented a crisis of secularity. Yet there was still optimism that conflict between board and committee could be resolved and community-building workshops attempted to bridge the value-positions. In early 2005, the board, fearing a takeover by the insight teachers, replaced its lay members with monks and announced a restoration of monastic control. The committee regarded this unilateral decision as a *coup d’état* that breached the terms of its management ‘charter’ and its members resigned *en bloc* and the insight teachers collectively withdrew from the Wat.

The attempt to impose monastic authority failed and an interim committee took control, arranged a new retreat schedule and dealt with financial issues. One ‘monastic solution’ was then followed by another when the board of directors invited a senior nun, Chi Kwang Sunim to propose a multi-tradition nunnery. The proposal foundered on its own impracticality and defective decision-making. Supporters were demoralised and only astute leadership found a way forward through continuing consultation with the community on teaching quality, a Dhamma curriculum and democratisation. But this effort came to nought and the Wat slipped back into caretaker mode. The 2006 AGM was paralysed by misunderstandings of the Wat’s legal structure. An improvised advisory committee of the board faced problems of morale, finance and direction, and the challenge of ‘saving the Wat’ from terminal decline. In 2008, a senior monk in the Ajahn Chah tradition was invited to take control, with a proposal to remake the Wat as a Thai forest monastery. This event firmly established monastic authority and brought a thirty year cultural experiment to an end.

Chapter 8

Interpreting Wat history

The final chapter reviews the conditions that permitted the adoption of the Ajahn Chah forest monastery as a solution to the organisation’s long-running problems, and considers how change was accomplished and why it has proven straightforward and enduring. The Wat’s threefold model is discussed as an unsustainable structure that combined contradictory or antagonistic elements that needed to be worked out to a point of exhaustion through the search for an alternative. The chapter then assesses the historical significance of the Wat in the emergence of Australian Buddhism, looks at the nature of the periodic crises that marked the Wat’s development as an organisation, and interprets that development as a process of secularisation that challenged monastic authority. Finally, building on three reference points of experience, organisation and transmission, a more robust analytical framework for investigating the processes of cultural adaptation in Australian Buddhism is suggested.