

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 document how the Wat experience had affected their lives. The narrative would relate the personal and communal meanings of those experiences to the larger social and cultural context and it would include an organisational perspective, recognising that the Wat was a cultural experiment in the adaptation of Buddhism to western conditions. The narrative would also examine the transmission of doctrines and practices and explore the historic encounter with Buddhist ideas. In this way, the history aimed to understand the Wat's unique character and its significance as a pioneering organisation in the 'westernising' of Buddhism.

Chapter 2

Such a Jewel of a Place 1978 - 1981

In the early 1970s, social and political conditions in Australia and globally favoured an interest in Buddhism. The Buddhist Society of NSW led a concerted effort to persuade Thai authorities to establish a temple in inner Sydney and with high-level support and a generous donor, Wat Buddharangsee was established by two senior Thai monks, Phra Parityatikavi and the English-born scholar monk, Phra Khantipalo. This mission would lead to the foundation of Wat Buddha Dhamma.

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. Soon after the Aquarius Festival of May 1973 announced the dawn of 'new age consciousness', Phra Khantipalo was teaching his first retreats on the North Coast and forging connections with emerging Buddhist communities there. Wat Buddharangsee had proved ill-suited to teaching meditation, and a student, Ilse Ledermann (later Ayya Khema) financed the purchase of a secluded property 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, and there evolved a threefold model of monastery, meditation centre and community. With Phra Khantipalo as a spiritual guide, infrastructure was created, the teachers began an energetic teaching program 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 1982 - 1983

It appeared that the founders had different ideas about the Wat's purposes. Phra Khantipalo imagined a Thai forest monastery in the *dhutanga* tradition, an abbot dwelling with his monks in the wilderness. Ayya Khema desired a 'place for Westerners to learn Dhamma' from respected monastic teachers, influenced by her own experience of *vipassana* meditation. The Wat's threefold model thus accommodated competing objectives and offered different experiences of Buddhist life—monastic, communal and lay practice. Phra Khantipalo ordained novices, expecting that some who ordained in Asia would return to reside in the monastery. The community grew strong and the organisational structure was formalised to recognise its role, creating an administrative committee. Ayya Khema soon directed her energies to 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 authority in western Buddhism, renowned as a scholar and teacher at home and abroad, there were signs he was becoming isolated.

Chapter 4

The Centre Cannot Hold 1984 - 1991

By the mid-nineteen eighties, the Wat was achieving renown as a leading centre in the rapidly changing context of a multi-traditional Australian Buddhism, a cultural shift that the Wat founders had helped to create. Phra Khantipalo was a scholar and teacher pre-eminent among his contemporaries and in high demand across the country to teach. His difficulty in retaining monks at the Wat left him isolated. He addressed this by ordaining three nuns, in sympathy with their aspirations for equality, but a close relationship with one nun weakened monastic discipline and the harmony of the community, causing some founding residents to leave. An infusion of newcomers saw the Wat enter an expansive phase, reaching a high point symbolised by the completion of a magnificent new sala in time for the tenth anniversary celebrations, with the promise of an expanded ability to run courses. Soon after Phra Khantipalo began a personal journey exploring the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition that led to his disavowal of 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 remake the Wat as an eclectic and non-sectarian Buddhist centre.

Chapter 5

A Restoration of Sorts 1992 - 1998

For a time, Phra Khantipalo was 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. Phra Khantipalo's *Dhamma* authority had been the integrating factor in the threefold model of monastery, meditation centre and community; with his departure, there needed to be a recasting of the model that had depended upon it. The Wat would be less a religious community as the meditation centre replaced the teacher as the centre of Wat activity. The monastery ideal faded when it became apparent that no resident monk could be found to succeed Phra Khantipalo. The crisis was resolved by new constitutional arrangements recognising the need for broader participation, expanding the trust to include lay trustees and reaffirming the functions of the management committee. A new definition of membership was introduced, though this weakened the communal ideal of *Dhamma* service. In the long run, there would be 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 signs of division regarding its purpose and direction were appearing.

Chapter 6

Faction, Reform and Reaction 1992 - 1998

A weakening of monastic influence brought about a growing polarisation of values between 'traditionalists' who wished to preserve the association with Theravadan Buddhism and 'modernists' who pursued an agenda of Buddhist modernism, promoting rationalist inquiry in areas such as psychotherapy and meditation, sexual ethics and feminism, an agenda encouraged by a close relationship with the inner-city Buddhist Library, a hub of non-sectarian and secular activity. The Wat's traditional trust governance structure came under scrutiny with the management committee's six-point proposal for a more participatory organisation. This was vetoed by the traditionalist trustees, who then independently incorporated the trust as a limited company; there was a breakdown of the cooperation of trustees and committee and the social harmony on which it rested. The changes precipitated a crisis of legitimacy that was only temporarily resolved when the new board of directors conceded a quasi-legal 'charter' delegating full authority to the management committee. At its twentieth anniversary, the Wat appeared to be operating effectively as a lay-controlled retreat centre. However, within a few years there were signs that the Wat had passed its peak, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of the Wat's operations.

Chapter 7

A Fateful Loss of Meaning 1999 - 2008

Despite the Wat's failing fortunes, a large 'Dhamma gathering' in late 2003 was successful, pointing the way forward for those identifying as 'insight teachers' and students of Christopher Titmuss. In the coming year these teachers dominated the retreat schedule. To conservative directors on the board, this trend demonstrated how far the modernist project of secularisation had advanced. A takeover seemed possible and the loss of monastic authority in the eyes of the traditionalists amounted to a crisis of secularity. Yet there was some optimism that the conflict between board of directors and committee could be resolved and community-building workshops attempted to bridge the value-positions. Then in early 2005, the board without notice acted suddenly to replace its lay directors with monks and announced a restoration of monastic control. The committee regarded this unilateral action as a *coup d'état* that breached the terms of its management 'charter' and its members collectively resigned. The insight teachers withdrew from the Wat and formed a new association.

The attempt to impose monastic authority had failed. An interim committee took control, arranged a new retreat schedule and dealt with financial issues, while the board continued to seek some form of 'monastic solution'. It invited a senior nun, Chi Kwang Sunim, to propose a multi-tradition nunnery, but the proposal foundered on its own impracticality and poor decision-making. There was an effort to maintain community consultation on teaching, curriculum and governance issues, but this came to nothing and the 2006 AGM was bedevilled by misunderstandings of the Wat's legal structure. An advisory committee of the board was formed, faced by the challenge of 'saving the Wat' from terminal decline. In 2008, a senior monk in the Ajahn Chah tradition submitted a proposal to remake the Wat as a Thai forest monastery, and over the next few years firmly established monastic authority, bringing the Wat's thirty-year cultural experiment into a new era.

Chapter 8

Interpreting Wat history

This 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, a change that has proved to be enduring. The historical significance of the Wat is then assessed, exploring the 'cultural experiment' and the rise and fall of the Wat's unique threefold model. An interpretation of the Wat history is advanced that examines the Wat history as a series of four crises that reflect fundamental conflicts about authority in the organisation; the history is also understood in terms of a struggle for the meaning of the Wat between traditionalist and modernist ideologies. It is then argued that a full account of the historical significance of the Wat must include a 'transmission perspective'. This analyses how organisations structure the encounter with Buddhist teachings and regulate access to their cultural meanings through forms of social interaction. Transmission is seen as active engagement and can involve conflict especially around the process of secularisation evident in the struggle for control of the Wat. The orthodox view of secularisation theory that monasticism must decline with modernity is challenged. Finally, some conclusions are drawn from the Wat history as a case study of the emergence of western Buddhism, notably the necessity of going beyond an emphasis on biography to close studies of Buddhist organisations and their transmission as a socio-cultural process.