



THE PICK OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

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The Early Days of Wat Buddha Dhamma at Ten Mile Hollow Rob Cunneen

Wat Buddha Dhamma is a Buddhist retreat centre within the Dharug National Park at Ten Mile Hollow on the Great North Road. It was founded in 1978 by a Buddhist monk Phra Khantipalo and by Ilse Ledermann his student and supporter. It was at first a community of permanent settlers who supported monastics living in a hermitage area on the property. But over the years its character has changed and the long-term settlers have moved on, and now the centre is staffed by volunteers who stay for shorter periods.

Ilse Ledermann was born in a Jewish family in Berlin. She was fourteen years old when her parent's put her on the last childrens boat to Scotland in order to flee Nazi Germany. Two years later she was reunited with her parents in China, but there the family was interned in a Japanese camp where her father died. Ilse met her husband in the camp. They migrated to the United States and she was always grateful to the Americans for granting her family US citizenship. The family started to travel in South America, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. It was in Pondicherry, India where Ilse first learned about meditation. The family migrated to Australia in the early sixties and bought a farm near Brisbane.

Phra Khantipalo was born 'Laurence Mills' in the UK and after serving in the British army (in the Suez Canal) he ordained as a novice in London. He travelled and studied in India and then in Thailand where he took full ordination as a monk and stayed and studied the Buddhist scriptures and meditation under various great teachers for eleven years. He came to Sydney to help a senior Thai monk set up a temple in Stanmore – Wat Buddharangsee.





Phra Khantipalo and Ilse Ledermann

He began teaching in Australia and met Ilse in 1974 when she attended his insight meditation retreat at Nimbin. She quickly became a committed Buddhist herself and by 1978 she moved to Stanmore in Sydney to be near the monks at Wat Buddharangsee. Though this was a conveniently central location it was not a place conducive to meditation with the flight path overhead and the traffic to Stanmore Road. So Ilse approached Khantipalo and suggested they try to find a suitable country place. They drew up a list of desirable features: not more than two hours from Sydney; surrounded or adjacent to National Park or State Forest; preferably with a house upon it already; and bushland of little value agriculturally. They advertised in papers, contacted estate agents and went to see five or six properties. This is how Phra Khantipalo remembers it:

“The estate agent drove us out in his car to Wisemans Ferry (exclamations from Ilse of “how beautiful”) and then in through two locked gates of the National Park. Finally, we arrived at Ten Mile Hollow and drove in where the old house was. “That’s not the house, only a shack”, said the agent hastily. After inspecting this termite-attacked shack (it subsequently served us for five years) we went to look at the ‘top’ house, full, as I remember, of plastic flowers! After that we climb the hill and so reached the property’s boundary. Both of us were impressed by its beauty and seclusion but he had doubts: will anyone actually come here? Talking it over next day we decided that we must take a chance. This was the beginning of Wat Buddha Dhamma.”

The land provided many spectacular features conducive to a spiritual, meditative environment. Two creeks, one of which flowed all year, rock-pools, vast rock formations containing many caves for solitary seclusion, a pine forest of 3000 trees ready for use, cleared land for vegetable gardens and acres of virgin bush. At that time Ilse received a legacy of about \$35,000 and was happy to devote this money to the purchase of the property. As it turned out, 220 acres of land with two houses upon it came to only \$32,500 a bargain in 1978.

Ilse invited ‘friends’ to join in establishing this Buddhist community either to stay at the Wat permanently or to come as temporary visitors and volunteers. Eventually they would invite teachers out from Thailand and elsewhere to run retreats.



'Early settlers' at the Wat at first lived in tents and caravans and went without conventional comforts. Efforts were made at self-sufficiency. The community cultivated a large and productive vegetable garden completely enclosed with wire netting which was buried deep into the ground in efforts to keep out persistent tunnelling wombats. They also built a candle factory to generate income.

Young people began to marry and have families. At one stage there were enough children for a school house and teacher. But nonetheless these young couples often had to seek work outside the Wat to save for the materials they needed to build their homes. In the outside world the Watties were seen as 'hippies and drop-outs' and the Wat as just another alternative lifestyle commune. But in fact most were hard working and dedicated to the spiritual life. Kyle Field who came to stay when he was sixty years old (and retired) defended them (in 1983) by describing how hard they worked:

Maintenance and servicing of the tractor, truck, car, tools. Workshop and various implements as well as three private cars. Looking after and teaching the Wat children. Building houses, future dormitory block, workshop, sheds. Laundry and showers; carting water, making bushfire breaks, repairing roads, cooking meals, preparing for, organising and cooking for meditation courses, hosting, cooking for and spending time with visitors. Keeping books of account, shopping, emptying toilets, writing letters, answering the phone and general office work. And a myriad of essential but unnoticeable little tasks. All of these things we gladly do for the privilege of living in this Wat Buddha Dhamma environment. Some people may think we have dropped out of life but we firmly believe we have dropped into life. All the community members have shown in their various ways to be independent resourceful people capable of making their own way anywhere in the world.

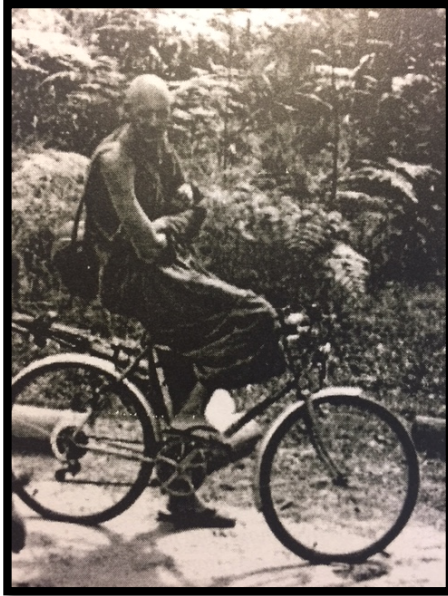
By the late 80s most of these early families had moved back to civilization to provide further schooling for their children and for various other reasons. The Wat's character changed from stable community to become more of a retreat centre with personnel turning over constantly. But the family houses from those early days are still there as a reminder. The candle factory has been demolished and now the magnificent meditation hall stands on the site. And the vegetable garden is now a grassy field.

Phra Khantipalo became interested in Tibetan Buddhism and after dissociating himself from the Thai forest tradition, he disrobed and left Wat Buddha Dhamma to become a lay teacher at Bodhi Citta Buddhist Centre in Cairns, where he still resides.

Ilse wanted to become a nun and for this purpose went to Sri Lanka in 1979 and there was ordained as 'Ayya Khema'. For some years she was only at the Wat briefly to teach an annual retreat. She became a prolific author of Buddhist books (publishing more than twenty) and founded three other Buddhist centres in different countries. She dies in Germany in 1997.

And so the Wat has changed and now provides peace and tranquillity to stressed out city dwellers for a weekend or even for en days. But 'alternative commune' is an experiment of the past.





Phra Khantipalo on his bicycle.

