

Chao Khun Keng Khemako Bhikkhu

Theravada - Thai

Phra Ajaan Keng Khemako Bhikkhu (lay name: Ong Kah Keng) was ordained on 29 July 2530 (1987), at Wat Asokaram, Samut Prakaan Province, Thailand. Phrakhru Sunthorn Dhammarangsee (Abbot of Wat Phayaprap, Phra Padaeng), was his Preceptor, Phrakhru Suvanna Dhammajoti (late Abbot of Wat Asokaram) was his Kammavācācariya, and Phrakhru Nanda Dhammakhun (Deputy Abbot of Wat Asokaram), his Anusāsanācariya.

Immediately after his ordination, he headed to Wat Dhammasathit, Rayong, Thailand to begin his monastic training under Phra Ajaan Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

After the first three years of monastic and meditation training, he felt that he had gained enough spiritual strength and grounding in Dhamma-Vinaya and was ready to undertake the dhutanga practices (tudong) and to go on pilgrimage in the deep forests for even more intensive training in meditation. As he had often heard of the beauty and tranquility of the forests in the Kanchanaburi province from Phra Ajaan Ṭhānissaro, he decided to head to that location for his first tudong pilgrimage. He spent a very fulfilling and eventful period of intensive meditation, living in the open forest alongside Phra Ajaan Sathien Samācāro. This first tudong experience gave him the confidence and conviction that newly ordained monks should live in forested areas to develop their meditative skills.

As a result, he decided to spend time in the deep forests and mountains of Thailand, preferring the forest contemplative lifestyle of the forest monk to that of living in urban centers.

The intention to live the forest contemplative life saw him spending the next five years (from 1989) in the deep forests of Mae Sot and Chieng Mai, living on the kindness and support of the hill tribes. While he was residing in Mae Sot, he was under the tutelage of Phra Ajaan Den Nandiyo, another disciple of Than Phor Fuang and Luang Poo Jiak. Phra Ajaan Keng began studying under the tutelage of Luang Poo Jiak in 1988 – he first met Luang Poo Jiak on the occasion of the transfer of Than Phor Fuang's body back to Wat Dhammasathit.

Phra Ajaan Keng was also trained to recite the Bhikkhu Pāṭimokkha (the Theravada monks' 227 rules of conduct) by Luang Poo Oonla Ṭhitadhammo, Abbot of Wat Paa Kaew Chumpol, located in Tambon Kho Tai, Amphur Sawang Daen Din, Sakhon Nakhon Province. Luang Poo Oonla is considered a specialist in the Pāṭimokkha recitation by his peers in the Forest Meditation Tradition. Pāṭimokkha recitation is an important monastic skill, as the reciter of the Pāṭimokkha has to be able to remember all 227 rules by heart and to adhere strictly to the procedures for doing so.

Phra Ajaan Keng subsequently went to live at Metta Forest Monastery, San Diego county, USA, on the invitation of Phra Ajaan Ṭhānissaro.

Wat Metta is located in the hills outside of San Diego county and was founded by Phra Ajaan Suwat Suvaco in 2533 (1990). Phra Ajaan Keng spent three Rains retreats in Wat Metta, assisting Phra Ajaan Ṭhānissaro in teaching the members of the growing Sangha and lay community.

Upon returning from the USA, Phra Ajaan Keng spent time in Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. With a growing following of monastic and lay supporters, he founded Santi Forest Monastery in the Ulu Tiram area of the State of Johor, Malaysia. While working on the project to set up Wat Santi, he continued to look for secluded forests in Thailand to continue his practice. This took him to a tribal village in Omkoi, in Chiang Mai Province. After four years in this area, he decided to help the villagers by setting up a monastery there. He named this monastery Wat Paa Doi Charoentam.

His intention in setting up a monastery in this primitive village was twofold: 1) to create a conducive environment for the training of monks in the forest contemplative tradition, and 2) to show gratitude and compassion for the villagers, giving them the opportunity to make merit for a better life here and hereafter. He considered the younger generation of monks not mentally tough enough, and because most of them used to live in city areas, as he had, they were not prepared for the harsh conditions of living in impoverished conditions. The villagers were mainly surviving on sticky rice and salt/chillies, so that was all that they could offer to the monks during their alms round. However, Phra Ajaan Keng felt very strongly, through his own experience, that practising under such conditions would create a strong foundation for the monks. The founding of the monastery in Omkoi helped not only the monks. The lay community from Singapore and Malaysia also benefitted from the exposure to the harsh conditions that the hill tribesmen had to live in. A member of the Management Committee of Wat Santi once visited Omkoi and commented that he realised how 'rich' he was, when compared to the poor the villagers. To Phra Ajaan Keng, such harsh conditions were the perfect places for developing the quality of khanti (patience/ endurance).

Although he kept to the forest contemplative lifestyle, preferring to dwell in forests and caves, Phra Ajaan Keng was still active in propagating the teachings and practice of Buddhism to the peoples of Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. He has acted as a mentor and guide to other monks from Singapore and Malaysia. Over the years, he has helped more than 150 men obtain ordination in the Thai Buddhist Sangha and is continuing to do so.

To give more Singaporeans and Malaysians the opportunity to obtain ordination and to enable the Sangha of Wat Santi to conduct their official duties in accordance with the DhammaVinaya,

Phra Ajaan Keng established the ordination hall in Wat Santi, the first ordination hall of a Dhammayut monastery in both Singapore and Malaysia. The consecration of the hall was attended by 135 monks from both the Dhammayut and MahaNikaya sects of the Thai Buddhist tradition, along with more than 1,000 lay people from all three countries. Immediately after the consecration, 68 men were ordained as monks in the ordination hall. This is testimony of Phra Ajaan Keng's sphere of influence and is indeed a first on all counts, in the history of Malaysia and Singapore.

In 2015, in order to celebrate Singapore's 50th Anniversary of Independence, Phra Ajaan Keng organised a mass ordination of 58 men in Singapore. As there was no appropriate *sīmā* hall to ordain these individuals, a 'water *sīmā*' was used to conduct the ordination, with a rented yacht dedicated to the purpose. This was followed by nine days of monastic training for the newly ordained bhikkhus. Together with the lay community, the new monks participated in an overnight chanting of protective discourses on the eve (8th August 2015) of Singapore's National Day. Phra Ajaan Keng also arranged for the minting and consecration of a special-edition amulet of the Buddha blessing the island of Singapore to commemorate this special occasion.

Somdet Phra Wanarat of Wat Bovornnives Vihāra, in Bangkok, commented to one of his lay supporters that Phra Ajaan Keng impressed him by the fact that he came from an urban and materially rich society yet was able to undertake severe ascetic practice, keeping strictly to the tradition of the forest masters. This is something that a majority of modern day monks find so challenging that many of them never even attempt it. The Somdet was also present at the ordination hall consecration ceremony and had confirmed for himself the extent to which Phra Ajaan Keng had motivated and aroused the faith of the laity.

In recognition of his contributions to the Sangha, the lay community, and his missionary work for the promotion of Buddhism, Phra Ajaan Keng was appointed a Thananukrom (Assistant) to Somdet Phra Wanarat of Wat Bovornnives, with the title of Phrakhru Phalad Samphiphathanasudhajaan Yanakosol Vimonseelajaan Mahakhanatikan Nayok Bidoethammarakkhit, on 17 September 2556 (2013), at Wat Bovornnives Vihara.

On 5 December 2014, Phra Ajaan Keng received the ecclesiastical title of "Chao Khun" from the King of Thailand and was given the name, "Vinayadhamma Vidhes." This was further recognition of his deep devotion to the practice of the Buddhist path, his leadership of both ordained and lay members of the Buddhist community, expressed in his mentorship and support to his fellow monks and his propagation of Buddhism to the lay community as a whole.

Just over a year later, in 2558 (2015), Phra Ajaan Keng attended a training course for Preceptors (Upajjhāya), to gain the necessary skills and certification to conduct Bhikkhu

ordinations. With this certification, Phra Ajaan has the authorisation of the Thai Sangha to ordain monks in the Southeast Asia region outside of Thailand.

In recent years, he has also been invited to many parts of Malaysia, China (Fujian Province), India (Andhra Pradesh and various cities in Indonesia (Jakarta, Medan, Pekan Baru) to teach the lay and ordained communities. There is a growing interest in the teachings of the Forest meditation tradition in these countries, and Phra Ajaan has been very motivated by their keen interest to study and practice the Dhamma.

Phra Ajaan has indeed been living for the welfare and benefit of devas and human beings, and it is our sincere wish that he enjoys good health and strength to carry on his Dhamma work for many more years to come.

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