

A Sandy Path near the Lake

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*In Search of the Illusory
Khemananda*

By

Kovit Khemananda

Edited and Translated by

Grant Olson and Chalermsee Olson

Cambridge
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TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTIONS

Sketching the Life of Kovit Khemananda

In 2007, Kovit Khemananda (also publishing under the pen names of Chaphong and Rungarun Na Sonthaya) was awarded the title of National Artist by the Thai Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture, for his body of written work. His painting and other artwork have also been significant. More recently, however, his steady hands have been disrupted by the onset of Parkinson's disease. He is no longer able to put pen to paper; he is no longer adept at stroking a brush on canvas—even conversation unfolds with a new cadence. As of this writing, at age 75, the autobiography before us is very likely the definitive story of this man's life.

Kovit Aneckachai was born in the small village of Tha Khura in Southern Thailand on the shores of a unique inland lake known as Songkhla Lake or, more colloquially, Three Flavors Lake. The lake has its own regions and even “seasons” of relative brackishness. The lake constitutes a special kind of ecosystem, and its surrounding area, especially for Kovit, has its own remarkable atmosphere. It is in this environment, along the sandy shore of the lake, that Kovit grew up and developed an appreciation for nature and Thai village life—this is where Kovit's path begins.

Early on, as a young boy with wanderlust, Kovit developed a keen sense of observation. He was free to play and roam, gravitating towards things he preferred. Even as a child he seemed to live the life of a seeker. A doting aunt introduced him to Buddhism and Buddhist lore, and he bonded with her much more than his own parents. In the course of his reflections, Kovit offers up an amazing array of Southern Thai flora and fauna, wildlife and food choices. In this way, his autobiography is very ethnographic. His recollections of fireflies and homemade torches are almost magical; through his descriptions we can sense the beauty of changing light as well as the nasty soot wafting on the night breeze. Vivid memories of slower times, of gradual forms of transportation, such as sailboat rides up and down the coastline, eventually become fodder for his own art.

Kovit's awareness is transformed into an aesthetic sense. His appreciation of key features in the Thai landscape is converted into symbols and touchstones for his poetry and paintings. He is able to perceive cooperation in the architecture of a small dike in between rice fields, for example, and then wax about its communal relevance.

Like many children raised in more remote villages, Kovit eventually gravitates to an urban center in order to take advantage of educational opportunities. Kovit along with his family settles in Songkhla in search of a better life. There he encounters prejudices towards village kids and learns to stand his ground. Also, not unlike the biography of Lord Buddha, his father has wishes and designs for his son's future. His father would like his son to be a politician or at least a government official; meanwhile, Kovit, caught up in his own reveries, unsure of what he wants to do, is not ready to commit to such a mundane lifestyle.

Longing for friendship, yet preferring to daydream, Kovit keeps one foot in Thai tradition while his other is always ready to walk off into the unknown. Studying was not that difficult for him, but he makes it clear his heart was not always in it. Eventually, he travels to Bangkok in search of further educational opportunities. After failing the entrance exam for the more prestigious prep school Triam Udom, he opts for the next best thing, a private school named Amnuaisin. At this time, he has a passing encounter on a train with a woman whose demeanor makes a deep impression on him. While Kovit has often played this incident down, the memories of this encounter have stayed with him his whole life—his ability or inability to act, a sense of ephemeral beauty lost. His memory of this encounter recurs and frames other reflections. While never consummating this relationship, Kovit continued to stay in touch with this woman; and such memories continue to be a source of wonder and melancholy. It is clear she remains an important muse.

Unsure as to why he chose his next course of study, Kovit took up architecture at Chulalongkorn University. Perhaps, he relates, it was because he was able to pass the exams necessary to enter the program. And, in the end he grew disappointed with the cliques and elite aspects of this university. Ultimately, his failure to interpret a revision of the curriculum resulted in his dismissal and more disappointment. He returned home to Songkhla to teach English at a local school and to school himself at the local library.

Uncertain about his future, he cannot imagine himself as an architect, or anything else for that matter. He notes, “If we cannot apply our creativity to the things we have learned and imagine a goal for these studies, then it is difficult to progress.” He explores and languishes.

As a slightly more mature student of 23, Kovit finally decides to enter Silpakorn University—the smallest of the five major universities at that time. His description of his own decision-making process is almost slapstick. He vacillates between courses of study—ascending and descending the stairs separating him from the university registration office and his advisor—until, under the influence of the advisor, he chooses decorative arts. Impressed by the “spirit” of this school for the arts—which was influenced by Italian-born Corrado Feroci (who took the Thai name Silpa Bhirasri)—he finally finds his feet and a calling. Kovit is moved by the good will of teachers, as well as the dedication and camaraderie of the students, and he blossoms. Kovit even finds himself involved as a student leader caught up in educational politics. This sense of togetherness gave him one of the first tastes of what he would come to call “ashrama”—a fleeting notion of a spiritual community.

Spirit becomes spiritual. Kovit senses a new kind of authenticity. He begins to focus his aesthetic sense on the serene beauty of Buddhist iconography. In Bangkok, close enough to old temples and fine museums, he often makes excursions to sketch Buddha images and relics housed at such places. Kovit mentions a ritual at Silpakorn in which the student and teacher draw the eyes of classic Thai figures in tandem: “After drawing these eyes, the student is accepted under the wing of the teacher.” Clearly, Kovit is moved by such influence and connections; he continues to appreciate collective life at the university in new ways.

After graduation, Kovit somewhat reluctantly entered the government service and began teaching art appreciation at Bangkok Technical College. Upset over the meaning of grades, he offered to resign but was called back. During his time at this college, Kovit was given a copy of a book by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu but was initially unimpressed with its critical tone. His interest in Buddhist philosophy was, however, growing. He began to entertain the notion of being ordained and entering the order. His inclinations were strong enough that he felt as if he had been ordained before he was actually ordained. Friends noticed a change in his demeanor and language; and some of them referred to him in a deferential way using the title “Maha.”

Eventually, Kovit was ordained at a temple in Songkhla in 1967, choosing the month of April in accordance with the biography of Lord Buddha. His ultimate destination: Suan Mokkh, The Garden of Liberation in Chaiya established by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. Given the ordination name of Khemanando, Kovit, in consultation with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, modifies his name to Khemānanda, which, he tells us, was more meaningful and resonant to him.

Kovit refers to Buddhadasa (whose name means “Slave of the Buddha”) as Achan Suan Mokkh (The Teacher at the Garden of Liberation). Kovit, emphasizing this venerable monk’s liberation, often stated that Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was a slave to no one. Buddhadasa sees the artistic potential of his student. Working on a burgeoning project called the Spiritual Theater, Kovit helps (re)create Zen-style paintings with didactic purpose. He works with India ink, paint and mosaic tile to fashion various facades, such as an Egyptian-style “transmission of the eye,” and embellish the evolving theater with meaning. Ultimately, after a great deal of experimentation and struggle, Kovit—to the delight of Achan Suan Mokkh—creates one of his masterpieces: a bust of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara based on a sculpture found in Chaiya (now on display in the National Museum in Bangkok).

At Suan Mokkh, Kovit experiments with various forms of austerity, even making his own quill pen with swan feathers. He notes some of the phases and “fashions” advocated by Achan Suan Mokkh related to sweat equity in terms of Dhamma and duty or “low living, high thinking,” for example. He still vacillates, wondering about the relative value of book learning and meditation; and he finally concludes that watching your own mind is much more profound than reading any book.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s ecumenical approach to various forms of Buddhism has an effect on Kovit and influences his thinking in many ways. He reads works on Zen and experiments further with one-stroke painting. While Kovit notes that Suan Mokkh was not really a Zen center, in many ways he felt like a Zen monk in orange, Theravadin robes. The first book Kovit wrote was penned at Suan Mokkh: *Phleng pramot khong Zen* [The sweet music of Zen] (1970).

Using Suan Mokkh as a base, Kovit also spent considerable time experimenting with “wandering” (*thudong*). His early penchant for wandering as a young boy was still manifest in opportunities to wander as a monk. His strategies for dealing with villagers and other monks along

the way are insightful and humorous. Not having attained any Buddhist certificates of study or ranks, Kovit was often treated as an outcaste—and announcing that you were from non-traditional Suan Mokkh did not always result in a warm welcome on the road. Despite the persistence of superficial trappings of the Buddhist order, Kovit remained focused on the pursuit of wisdom. He stresses that he is Buddhist but not a Buddhist; he is interested in art but is not an artist. He is suspicious of clinging to any kind of status or views, hence he is leery of creating anything other than an illusory life story. To him, the goal of nirvana “exists,” but it is not “attained.” This is a key point.

After four years as a monk, Kovit traveled back to Songkhla taking up residence on a small mountain near Songkhla Teachers’ College, called Khao Hin Dam. While living alone on this mountain, he came to realize much more about the difference between superficial calm and deeper aspects of mindfulness as well as the dynamic aspects of thought—a realization that gave direction to his future meditation practices. In other words, he came to know much more about *samatha* and true *sati* as a result of vipassana. Encounters on the mountain made him realize the difference between having deceived himself into thinking he was calm and truly experiencing calm. During this time he also wrote a novel about a Buddhist monk encountering Christianity, entitled *Sut plai phaendin lok* [The far edge of the world] (1975). Towards the end of his stay on the top of the mountain, one day Kovit heard the clamor of students protesting down below related to the events of the 14th of October (1973). It occurred to him that living in isolation would be of little use to anyone—he descended the mountain shortly after these significant events took place.

For a time, Kovit resided at Wat Chonlaprathan just north of Bangkok, traveling back and forth between this temple and Suan Mokkh. Wat Chonlaprathan was the residence of another well-known monk named Phra Panyananda, who was a good friend of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. While in Bangkok, Kovit learned more about the political situation; returning to Suan Mokkh he shared what he had learned with monks living in relative isolation. It did not take long for the progressive approach of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu to be labeled “communist.” And a member of the royal family, Kukrit Pramoj, went so far as to publically criticize Buddhadasa’s liberal approach to teaching Buddhism.

In the mid-1970s, Kovit, at the invitation of a professor at Srinakharinwirot University (Bangkhen), developed a lecture series on “Dhamma and Life,” which eventually was published in a six-volume set

[*Phratham kap chiwit*]. Kovit took this opportunity very seriously; it was a chance for him to address a younger audience and apply the Dhamma in new ways. Like his teacher Buddhadasa, Kovit had a fairly unorthodox way of relating Buddhist teachings and aspects of practice. His method tends to meet people where they are (or where he has been). In the process, he shuns the aloof demeanor often taken by other monks. In the lecture on “Life and Love”—a key part of this lecture series—he begins by saying he would like to lecture on love that does not involve sex, something that may seem strange to modern people. Furthermore, it might strike people as strange for a monk to be addressing this topic at all. But if we are willing to examine this subject, we will find that many people who are ordained in the Buddhist religion are also in search of true love. Most human beings, he notes, experience a sense of loneliness and uncertainty. Even though we may dance, we may sing, laugh and look like we are having fun, if we look a bit deeper we can see that most of us are lonely. While we are not sure what we are waiting for, we are looking for something that might constitute a kind of fulfillment. Loneliness, he tells his audience, exists in the midst of waiting, and it can eat away at us. Ultimately, however, love does not involve waiting for something to fulfill you, rather it involves becoming full of feeling to the point that it overflows and is transferred to other people—love, therefore, really involves giving rather than waiting for things to come your way. And the bottom line is that if we can be free of stress, anxiety and worry, we can experience love that is very close to the Buddhist teachings. In this way, Kovit starts with a fundamental experience and leads people to a Dhammic understanding of emotions—this is yet another aspect of his art. (In another talk, Kovit went so far as to say, “If love and wisdom are two sides of the same coin, then I’ll take the love side.”)

Similarly, one of his talks in Singapore to a Zen group started with the following: “I want to say that I am impressed when all of you turn to face the wall, to confront the wall...” and at this point he pauses and we almost expect him to say “...in search of the truth.” Instead, he addresses what more people are probably feeling and finishes by saying “...to confront your own doubt.” In this open space—room enough for a deep breath—the possibilities of this doubt are much more engaging than any dogma or lofty platitudes. This method is part of what constitutes Kovit’s fresh approach to teaching; and his life story helps to explain the basis of his own doubt and empathy for others. It is this honesty and freshness that made Kovit an increasingly popular lecturer. In this way, Kovit is similar to Phra Phayom and Prayudh Payutto, who helped to find new ways to convey the Dhamma to a more modern audience. Many of his followers

said that when they first encountered Kovit as a teacher and lecturer they felt as if they had met a friend.

In 1975, while waiting at Wat Chonlaprathan for a visa that would allow him to travel to India and the birthplace of Lord Buddha, Kovit had one of the most important encounters in his life. He met a “simple,” uneducated monk named Luang Pho Thian Cittasubho (1911-1988) who came from a small village in Loei. Luang Pho’s direct, rustic approach to wisdom struck him as authentic. At the time of this meeting, Kovit had been practicing the mindfulness via breathing advocated at Suan Mokkh. Many times when he went out to lecture, however, he felt as if the concepts he was explaining were not a result of his own realizations—he was merely offering intellectual ideas, the results of thinking and reading. Because of his lack of confidence, he was taken aback by his first conversation with Luang Pho. After listening to Kovit respectfully, Luang Pho approached Kovit inquiring, “That was a very nice talk, but where did your ideas come from?” Fumbling for words, the usually eloquent Kovit was left speechless and profoundly embarrassed.

According to Kovit, it took him at least six years to drop some of the illusions about himself—his pride in being able to explain the Dhamma, of being “A Monk from Suan Mokkh” and so on—and finally appreciate the “ordinariness” of Luang Pho, to see the value of having nothing.

After spending about three months in India visiting the Buddhist holy sites, Kovit returned to Thailand to assist in establishing two places in pursuit of his notion of ashrama: the Ariyabha Foundation, near Phra Pinklao Bridge in Bangkok and Hat Sai Kaeo near Songkhla on the coast of the Gulf of Siam. He wanted to apply the values of Suan Mokkh and try to find a relevant role for Buddhism in the modern world. Kovit advocated the practice of meditation, and some money was donated to his foundation to help support traditional shadow puppet masters in the South, one of Kovit’s loves since childhood. Eventually, student activists, hearing of Kovit’s idealism, sought to use the Southern spiritual refuge as a base of operations. Kovit’s quietude in response to their urgency bred misunderstanding. Once again it did not take long for these ashrama centers to be labeled subversive or “communist.” Meanwhile, Kovit maintained that “there was something about wearing a monk’s robe and engaging in such conflicts that did not go together.”

Steeped in tradition, the practices advocated by Kovit tended to be viewed as non-traditional—or even anti-tradition. Many people could not take

what Kovit offered at face value. The practice of tai chi, for example, was interpreted as a form of self-defense or military-style training that would somehow be turned against the Thai nation. When asked if meditation involved controlling the mind, Kovit often responded by asking people why they would want to control their minds: "Everyone is trying to control your mind, parents, teachers, the government and so on. So, why would you want to control your own mind?" While emphasizing understanding and wisdom, his profound point about control was easily taken the wrong way and twisted to other purposes.

Kovit's name was ascending, but partially for the wrong reasons. Luang Pho Thian sent a warning to him at Hat Sai Kaeo, and eventually Kovit moved and established another ashrama on some donated land in Nakhon Nayok. This project became known as Ban Dong Ashrama. All of this activity was taking place following the hair-raising events of the 6th of October (1976); it was a time when some conservative monks declared it was not a sin to kill a communist. To Kovit, ashrama meant living close to nature and letting go of rank and status. While many local villagers understood the intentions of the ashrama, the authorities did not. While staying at Ban Dong, Kovit kept a journal in which he recorded his reflections at sunrise and sundown. Many people first came to know of him via the publication of this journal in 1979: *Than namphu* [The flowing spring]. In the preamble to this volume, Kovit states, "This world is full of superficiality, lacking in substance; but in this very superficiality substance is found.... Furthermore, this world is disturbing and full of *dukkha*; but calm is freedom from struggle, freedom from trying to escape *dukkha*."

Kovit traveled to Europe for the first time, seeking asylum with friends. He spent time in Germany, Italy, England and parts of Scandinavia. While in Germany he had a rather intense, cleansing experience after having his fill of an intellectual approach to Buddhism he encountered there. In Scandinavia, he considered leaving the Buddhist robes behind and seeking refuge as a layperson, but he resisted the temptation. After one year in Europe, he returned to Thailand just before his air ticket was about to expire.

Eventually, Kovit returned to the South to a place in Sathingphra not far from his natal village. There, in about 1979, he established the austere Nawachiwan Ashrama. At Nawachiwan, Kovit blended the atmosphere of Suan Mokkh with the teachings of Luang Pho Thian. Monks at Nawachiwan advocated a form of dynamic meditation, spending a good

deal of time walking to and fro wearing small paths in the sand near their huts. Kovit would begin his life at this ashrama in Buddhist robes, and later return to teach once again as a lay teacher.

In the meantime, due to his experience in India and the liberation he experienced with Luang Pho Thian, Kovit increasingly questioned the value of remaining in the Buddhist robes. Steeped in Zen and Zen-influenced art, he thought of studying Zen in Japan, perhaps even being ordained in that tradition. He mentions how his melancholic outlook and persistent sense of restless was akin to the Japanese notion of *wabi-sabi*, an aesthetic notion of seeing perfection in what is imperfect or incomplete.

Kovit continued on his path of restlessness. He lectured for a while in Singapore and then was suddenly invited by a British Buddhist teacher, Christopher Titmuss, to spend some time at a commune in Australia known as the Bodhi Farm. At this farm, Kovit observed the experimental lifestyle of the idealistic people residing there. Kovit noted how certain people experienced a kind of culture shock within their own culture and sought answers with alternative lifestyles, a tendency that certainly struck home with him. His eclectic experiences at the Bodhi Farm only brought him closer to feeling that monk's robes were unnecessary. Eventually, he made an agreement with a Sri Lankan monk in Sydney to perform the ritual of leaving the Buddhist order.

After returning to lay life, Kovit initially feels the somewhat claustrophobic "confines of pants"; Kovit, however, continues to focus on the spiritual message of Buddhism rather than the traditional accoutrements and habits of the order. He states that his reason for leaving the order was really the same as his reason for entering. While he was not immune from the gossip of those who speculated about his decision, he redirected his attention and set about other activities: He took the opportunity to teach Thai culture and Buddhism at a university in Singapore for four months; he invited Luang Pho Thian to visit and teach meditation; and reapplied himself to his earlier interest in one-stroke painting. Many of the one-stroke paintings from this era survive; earlier a clueless janitor at a printing press had thrown many of his rustic works in the trash before they were published. He describes this period as one of freedom, as if he were a fish that had finally found its way out into the expanse of an open lake.

To distinguish between what he perceived as career clerics and monks truly dedicated to the spirit of Buddhism, Kovit applied the Thai term *nakbuat* to the former and *phra* to the latter. While Thai people typically

refer to ordained monks as *phra*, Kovit uses this term to emphasize the quality of an internal condition or state. Kovit increasingly dedicated himself to the dynamic meditation of Luang Pho Thian, which he saw as embodying the essence of Buddhism. During Luang Pho Thian's last trip to Singapore, doctors discovered he had cancer. Kovit's desire to travel more, to return to Australia, was interrupted, and, to a certain degree, the focus of his life shifted. Towards the end of Luang Pho Thian's life, Luang Pho assisted Kovit as Kovit helped to explain Luang Pho's meditation methods to others.

Luang Pho's method begins with the more traditional establishment of peace and calm (*samatha*) and then moves beyond this state. After the meditator establishes calm, thoughts are once again stirred up or allowed to flow. The aim is not to impede thought, rather to understand the thought process (*vipassana*). Kovit often mentioned how observing thought can teach us to "know ourselves" better. The meditator begins to see thought, to see thought arising, to see thought lingering for a time and then passing away; furthermore, the meditator begins to realize that there is a momentum to the thought process. And this process is more akin to a psychological interpretation of the Four Noble Truths. When we can see our thoughts, we can begin to know our own habits, understand our own clinging. The habits of this clinging appear as persistent reruns—and after a time, reruns lead to boredom and letting go.

Luang Pho Thian's method also employs dynamic hand movements while sitting; at its most subtle, however, it can involve simply rubbing two fingers together. In fact, I often heard Kovit relate the tale of Culapanthaka (a commentary based on *Dhammapada*, *Appamāda Vagga* 25). Fond of this story due to its affinity with Luang Pho's method, Kovit liked to say that if Culapanthaka can do it, anyone can. According to the tale, the monk Culapanthaka was not intellectually adept. He could not remember any of the suttas and chants, and so he felt he was a failure. Feeling unworthy, as if he should leave the order, Culapanthaka sought the Buddha's advice. Lord Buddha prescribed one thing: Sit facing the sun and rub a white cloth. Following this dynamic practice, he came to a realization: The stains of impurity (greed, hatred and delusion) rub off—they are perceptible and can be eliminated. While some other monks in Thailand, such as Achan Dhammadharo, Wat Sai Ngam, Suphanburi, have stressed similar dynamic methods, Kovit often praised the simplicity, freshness and directness of Luang Pho Thian's methods. In many ways, in Luang Pho Thian Kovit found the Zen monk in Theravadin robes he had been longing for.

With Luang Pho Thian's teachings as inspiration, Kovit returns as a lay teacher to places he had resided as a monk, often experiencing a different kind of reception after stepping out of the robes. In many respects, for the remainder of his life Kovit is caught between the spirit of monasticism and the potential monastic spirit of an austere lay life. He considers settling in a couple of remote idyllic areas, but eventually turns away from them, returning to the outskirts of Bangkok. While Kovit tells us he may have entered the Buddhist order for possibly incorrect, overly personal reasons, one of his perennial inquiries was related to the possibilities of "ashrama"—what could a spiritual community potentially be or mean? At the same time, had he curbed his penchant for wandering at various junctures, he could have helped others define this idea more clearly—more often than not, Kovit left others to ponder or define ashrama without him. Part of his legacy, therefore, involves a certain amount of fulfillment as well as frustration. His tendency to let go of "illusory goals" made him elusive.

In many ways Kovit's life is exemplary, yet, in pondering his own legacy, he suggests we should not use him as an example for anything—he was mainly able to get by based on the good will of friends. And he had mixed feelings about this dependence. The persistence of traditions related to Buddhist *dāna* and gift-giving allowed Kovit to live an ascetic lay life. By his own account, Kovit suggests that when it came to mundane work, he was unable, uninterested or unwilling. Kovit preferred the vocation of contemplation and teaching; and Thai society still recognizes and rewards such endeavors. Due to the devotion and good will of others, he was able to receive housing and land in various places—reciprocity for the teachings, counsel and wisdom he was able to offer others. The land for Nawachiwan in Sathingphra, for example, was offered as long as this idyllic piece of property was used for the spread of the Dhamma.

Even though Kovit acknowledges the support of friends, there is a strong element of loneliness and a consistent sense of incompleteness in his life story, which suggests that while we are alive there is really no end to our search. We must explore *dukkha*, the space between what we hope for and the way things are; we must understand *dukkha*, this incompleteness, and bloom in its midst. *Dukkha* does not go away: We meet it and come to understand it, even appreciate it. The basis of a good deal of art is, after all, *dukkha*.

After reading his autobiography, some Thai readers felt that a second volume was in order. They wanted to learn more details about the various

spiritual practices Kovit engaged in; they wondered about his travels to America in the early 1990s—a dimension that Kovit felt was outside the scope of the current edition. Kovit has also mentioned that some aspects of the story will have to go with him to his grave. With Kovit's current health challenges, it seems this edition will have to do. In line with Kovit's more general perspective, perhaps we could say that this is the most complete incomplete life story we may ever have.

While Kovit was willing to offer us his illusory story, in a true Buddhist fashion he remained detached from it. After the group of devoted people had written the lengthy proposal nominating him for the award of National Artist, they were eventually informed he had won. They called Kovit to offer him the good news. In his own self-effacing way, Kovit proclaimed he was pleased they had finally “received their award.”

The Elusive & Illusive Khemananda

Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.

—Abraham Lincoln

The Elusive Khemananda

Something was missing in my life, and from all the reading and research I had done it appeared as if Thailand just might hold some answers. It was the middle of 1978, and when I arrived at my government-provided house on stilts at Songkhla Teachers' College, I was told that a Buddhist monk had been living in a cave at the top of the small mountain separating me from the Gulf of Siam. An interest in Asian philosophy had been a major reason why I chose a Peace Corps assignment in Thailand, and so I was keen on visiting this monk. One of my first Thai outings (*thiao*), therefore, was scaling this little mountain. The excursion involved a Muslim geography teacher, who knew something about the landscape and poisonous snakes. When we finally got to the top of Khao Hin Dam, we discovered that the monk was gone—only a fire scar and a small, tell-tale patch of orange cloth left in a chink in the rocks indicated where he might have stayed. The monk's name, it turned out, was Kovit Khemananda, a local fellow who had made a name for himself as a self-styled spiritual teacher and artist.

Word had it that Kovit had often been invited down from the mountain to give talks at the homes of teachers at the Teachers' College. It had been a

great reason for people to gather, listen to the Dhamma and then ask questions. In the wake of Kovit's departure, these gatherings often shifted into *sanuk* parties. People partook of the peace and tranquility of a monk's presence, and then they relaxed even further, sipping and laughing into the night. After Kovit had moved on, I asked one or two teachers about these gatherings. Later a couple of very proper (*riap-roi*) female teachers much older than I (I was 24 when I first arrived in Thailand) suggested that we gather on my porch not far from the foot of Khao Hin Dam. Our Peace Corps cultural training had not prepared us for such things. We said that we would provide some smooth, duty-free whiskey and a guitar, and they agreed to bring some desserts (*khanom*). These types of gatherings were an occasion to joke, tell stories, challenge our understanding of the Thai language and share songs. Once the party got on a bit, one of these teachers said that she wanted everyone to relax—most people appeared pretty relaxed already. She had brought a small packet of 'herbal medicine' wrapped in old newspaper, and she insisted we prepare some of it for everyone—she proclaimed that she wanted to see our 'sweet eyes' emerge. Thais are very good at creating an amenable atmosphere, and this atmosphere—as incongruent as it might be to Western logic—appeared as an extension of the Dhamma. For those with mainly book learning, first encounters with Thai Buddhist syncretism can be quite disconcerting. We, like Kovit, sat and experienced the moon coming up over Khao Hin Dam in a meaningful way. I sensed there was something different about this landscape, and somehow Kovit remained a part of it—on the ground, things certainly were not as straightforward as the Peace Corps cultural trainers in Bangkok had presented them to us.

As I came to discover later, Kovit was not a Bangkok-blueprint monk either. He did not follow an established path of monastic education; his years in the Buddhist order did not inevitably lead to rank. Rather, Kovit was known for his eloquence and his ability to express the Buddhist teachings in modern terms. Later, he moved to Hat Sai Kaeo, a beautiful beach area just outside of Songkhla. I was told that a few teachers at our college took students out to this scenic spot to supplement the standard curriculum with spiritual guidance. Especially since the advent of the 1960s "development era" in Thailand, religion had gradually lost its place in education, an ironic turn of events for a system that had started within temple compounds. When traveling with another group of teachers to Ko Yo, an island near Songkhla, I asked to stop and visit Kovit at Hat Sai Kaeo; but, once again, by then Kovit had already moved on.

Eventually, I heard that this monk had built a new ashrama, called Nawachiwan, up the coast near Sathingphra. (The name of the ashrama could be translated as '9 Lives' or 'New Life'.) Getting to this area, however, was inconvenient. Before the Prem Thinsulanonda Bridge was built, you had to cross the ferry at Hua Khao Daeng and then make your way up the coast. Many of the villages in this area were named after temples and local, prominent fresh water wells, such as Bo Dan, Bo Daeng and Bo Tru. Nawachiwan was located near Wat Chamae and the village of Di Luang on the Gulf of Siam, across from the Tha Khura area where Kovit had grown up. This area was also the birthplace of the legendary Luang Pho Thuat, a 16th-century monk well known for changing salty sea water into fresh water in order to save the lives of some wayward, dehydrated sailors.

Time passed. I had made up my mind to be ordained in the Buddhist monkhood after my Peace Corps contract was fulfilled. I rode my motorcycle up the coast intending to meet Achan Kovit and ask his permission to stay at Nawachiwan. Since the ashrama was not a full-fledged temple, I planned to be ordained at Wat Laem Sai in Songkhla and then go live at the ashrama, which focused on meditation practice. When I arrived, Kovit had already left—I was told he was probably traveling abroad.

Kovit's assistant, Praphrut Phoonsuk, gave me permission to stay at Nawachiwan and said he would arrange a hut (*kuti*) for me. After my ordination at Wat Laem Sai, I rode up to Nawachiwan in a van with my preceptor, Than In, and a few other people. The *kuti* was not ready, and Than In looked around the place to make sure his new *luksit* would have a place to stay. In the process, he reminded Than Praphrut to help me bless (*pluk sek*) the items I would be using as a monk, such as my alms bowl. I waited to see if I would receive this guidance, and it did not happen. Later on, one of the monks said, "We do not really bother with such things here. You have been provided several items in the course of the ordination process; please make good use of them, OK?" I agreed, and the pragmatic "blessing" was accomplished.

At Nawachiwan, each hut-dwelling had what appeared to be a small, sandy landing strip next to it. These ten-foot paths were worn in the grass as a result of regular walking meditation, an important aspect of the dynamic, vipassana meditation practices at Nawachiwan. Kovit, based on his encounters with Luang Pho Thian, advocated this kind of practical meditation practice. The idea was to practice some sitting meditation to

become focused, rise up and perform walking meditation, and then walk right out into daily activities—activities that should become more natural extensions of meditation. When I first heard the title of Kovit's autobiography, it was these sandy meditation paths that initially came to mind.

I stayed at Nawachiwan a bit over a month, and while I was there I received the good news I had been offered an all-expenses-paid East-West Center fellowship. I filled out the final papers while still in robes. Then, remarkably, ironically, Achan Kovit appeared just in time to assist with the ritual of my leaving the monkhood—I had a chance to talk with him for a mere couple of days.

After leaving the order, I took the long way to Hawaii, traveling to Pagan, back to Minnesota and then eventually landing on Oahu to do research at the East-West Center and study religion at the University of Hawaii across the street—this opportunity seemed like nirvana at the time.

Eventually, I was offered an East-West Center travel grant to study new religious trends in Thailand. I had intended to write a Master's thesis on the austere practices advocated by the Santi Asoke movement and the new meditation techniques being taught by Achan Kovit. In the summer of 1982, I set off to do six weeks of research in Thailand. When I got there, Kovit was once again traveling abroad. Most of my research about him, therefore, was based on his books, taped lectures and interviews with his followers, who were then based at the Ariyabha Foundation near Pinklao Bridge in Bangkok.

A third of my thesis ended up being about Achan Kovit and the dynamic meditation methods of Luang Pho Thian; and in the back of my mind, I planned to record aspects of Kovit's biography. My dissertation research at Cornell University on Phra Rajavaramuni (Prayudh Payutto) brought me back in touch with Kovit, who by then had left the Buddhist order, and Praphrut, who was still a monk. In the course of doing my dissertation work, I began to interview Kovit about his life story. His meandering approach to storytelling did not yield enough solid information to begin a project on his biography, but I remained intrigued by his candid approach to relating aspects of his own life story.

Later on, when I arrived to work at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University, I taught an independent study class on Thai Buddhism in Thai to a student named Ted Mayer. Ted was also interested

in Thai religion. At one point, Ted had the goal of writing a thesis on the life of Achan Kovit. He knew I had begun working on some of this material, and he asked permission to proceed with a project on Kovit. I agreed—but Ted never finished this project. Meanwhile, Achan Kovit's biography still begged to be completed. The story of Kovit continued to be as elusive as it was illusory.

Two decades later, I found myself in the field in Thailand on a sabbatical leave from Northern Illinois University. When I met with Phraphrut Phoonsuk once again, he handed me a book and asked, "Have you seen this?" I had not. It was the autobiography of Kovit Khemananda. In the early 1990s a tenacious and devoted reporter named Nipatporn Pengkhaw had started interviewing Achan Kovit in order to collect his life story. His oral tale ended up filling some thirty cassette tapes, and it was eventually published in 2007 under the title of *Thang sai klai thalesap* (Chünchai Publishing). Learning of this publication, I finally struck an agreement with Achan Kovit to translate his autobiography with my wife, Chalermsee, into English.

Kovit's life story is a fascinating tale that is rooted in and around the Southern territory of Luang Pho Thuat, near Wat Pho Kho, Sathingphra. Working with his autobiography brought me and Chalermsee back to some of our own roots in Southern Thailand—and it helped close a gap in my own life: I was able to understand more about Kovit's background, help clarify some of his interests and motives and finally offer his story to a wider audience. But, as Kovit would remind me, such accomplishments do not constitute closure. While we may meet certain goals in life, as long as we are alive, the door remains ajar.

One of the most significant facts about us may finally be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having lived only one.

—Clifford Geertz

The Illusive Khemananda

To say that Kovit Khemananda is multi-dimensional almost seems inadequate: He is well known as a sketch artist, painter, sculptor, poet, spiritual advisor, meditation teacher and even an architect. He played a key role in establishing the (pedagogical) art and atmosphere at one of Thailand's most famous temples, Suan Mokkh, The Garden of Liberation. His quest for alternative ways of thinking and experimental lifestyles

brought him to India, Australia, Singapore, Germany and other foreign destinations. His life and aspirations are difficult to encapsulate. Furthermore, if his life were a straightforward, simple matter, why make the effort to translate it?

For any person who has consciously practiced Buddhism, any attempt to create a life story or autobiography amounts to playing with your self. Still, the Buddhist tradition is full of biographies, hagiographies and autobiographies. The path to realization is often best conveyed through real lives, real efforts. Kovit is well aware of being a part of tradition and breaking with tradition in the course of his aesthetic and spiritual explorations. Walking a precarious line between realizing the principle of no-self and creating a contiguous self, he invites us to examine life with him: “I mean, just letting yourself go, allowing surrounding conditions to dictate your life is kind of scary, isn’t it?” And at one juncture Kovit tells us we must stand face to face with convention in order to find a way to “corner ourselves,” that is, force ourselves to confront the nature of the self we have created. And so, at an early age, he embarks on exploring a number of paths available to him in Thai society and beyond. With a spirit of inquiry and a foundation of good memories from his youth, a sandy path near a lake in Southern Thailand leads him abroad and back home again.

No Summary

In Thailand, it is a traditional courtesy to have a person introduce as well as summarize a public talk. One tale about Kovit relates to a public address he offered at a university. A student was charged with taking notes and summarizing Kovit’s talk. Those present observed this student listening carefully and taking copious notes; and when the talk was over, all eyes turned to this poor student who was left with his mouth agape: “I don’t know where to start; and I have no idea how to summarize this talk.” In the open space of general laughter a great discussion took place.

For a religion that is supposed to explore and understand discomfort, the teachings of Buddhism have traditionally offered a great deal of comfort. Monks and learned teachers find solace in expounding the Dhamma according to memorized lists; and lay listeners grow accustomed to hearing these same rote recitations. When a person such as Kovit, steeped in tradition, wanders outside the system (*nok rabop*), outside the usual curriculum (*nok tamra*), applying the Dhamma to confrontations with daily experience, these teachings can be difficult to summarize in

traditional ways. While using ordinary language to describe Pali Buddhist terminology can help link the teachings with the experience of more modern listeners, this method simultaneously disconnects its exposition from a comfortable past—such is the predicament of the life of Kovit. While I will not attempt to summarize his life here, there are some influences and Eriksonian turning points in Kovit's life worth mentioning; and his autobiography can be appended with a few related stories.

Establishing a Foundation in Life

Much of Kovit's story is understated. We must read carefully as he infers a good deal of information. He is polite and considerate with most of the characters in his tale. From an early age, however, he makes it quite clear that he and his mother were not on very good terms. Kovit gravitated towards an aunt, named Auntie Ma. She provided a good deal of warmth in his early life, relating Buddhist tales and mythology, taking him to visit local temples and teaching him ethics. In discussions with Kovit, he has often stated that many young people currently lack this kind of foundation. Thai children are sent off to seek education at urban centers at an early age, often before they have had adequate exposure to life in the village. Many of the villages in rural Thailand are now populated by the very young and the elderly. The lack of foundation, says Kovit, is a major problem in our modern world. This lack reveals itself in an increasing inability to compromise for a common good; and it is evident in the current divisiveness related to the stark symbology of shirt colors in Thailand. At any rate, Kovit feels lucky to have gained an appreciation for beauty and Thai traditions from his unselfish aunt.

Kovit's aesthetic appreciation extends to the local landscape. He finds beauty in communal cooperation, even though he candidly tells us he would usually rather watch than participate. As Kovit wandered about, this unity was palpable. Kovit spends a good deal of time discussing his recollections of flora and fauna. The first time he smelled a rose made a deep impression on him. One of his pen names is also selected from the name of a local plant: Chaphong. While, again, his mention of such things is understated, his fascination with *chaphong* or *khwamtai-ngaipen* is very evident. The so-called life plant or miracle plant was fun to watch and fun to play with. Its alternate name in Thai almost carries a moral implication. *Khwamtai-ngaipen* suggests 'face down you die-on your back you thrive'. One characteristic of the plant is that if a leaf is separated and laid on the ground, there is a "right side" and a "wrong side." If that piece

of the plant, therefore, is not placed with its right side up, it will shrivel and die; if, on the other hand, it is placed with its proper side up, it will take root and flourish. Perspectives and life decisions are no different. This is only one example of how reading into various things mentioned by Kovit can be rewarding.

Many of Kovit's memories hark back to slower, more laid-back times. For example, one of his most cherished experiences occurred spontaneously while he was reclining on a sailboat heading down the coast towards Songkhla. This vivid memory is depicted in one of his finest paintings ("The Sail to Songkhla," 1987): "I sort of remember that the trip took a few nights; there was no hurry back then. The picture of that event shows us at sea near Pakro, where the Prem Tinsulanonda Bridge is now. The moon had come up full, and a white carp sprang out of the water and landed on the deck of our boat. This was a kind of sign that has stuck with me all of these years—and there are many such occurrences I still carry with me." Leaving oneself open to experience nature spontaneously is a dimension of Kovit's approach to teaching.

By Kovit's own admission, he was never very good at anything practical. He was fortunate enough to have had few demands placed on him and to be left to his own devices a good share of the time. He indulged in daydreaming and observation. Some of his most fond recollections involve watching shadow puppet theater at length, which would eventually take shape in one of his masterpieces entitled "The Play of Shadows" (1987). And the relaxed reciprocity between followers of Buddhism and Islam is evident when he recalls the mammoth fishing net belonging to Muslim headman Bang Li. The net was so huge that it required communal labor; and the catch was so bountiful that it was easy to pay people in kind—in those days, participants tended to return home happy. On another occasion, once again on his back, Kovit observes how we should relate with our environment: "It's like lying on your back resting in one of the simple sheds near a rice field and looking up at the thatched roof above you. The thatched roof not only shields us from the sun and blocks the rain, it can also be a source of knowledge. If you look closely, you can see the thatch has its own pattern that reveals a truth and beauty in itself."

How to Teach a Child

Kovit's teaching style tends to involve invitations. His own autobiography invites us to explore the mystery of life, an illusion or construction at best. Rather than directing attention to anything in particular, Kovit tends to

point to openness. He raises a topic and then explores it with us. Uncertain of the beginning, he has no set end. By his own admission, his approach is not systematic; in fact, many times it defies systemization (*rai rabop*)—but not by design.

Take, for example, his advice on how to teach a child, as told by one of his students: If we want a child to delight in the rising moon, we should not authoritatively state, “Sit here and soon you will see a beautiful moon rise.” Rather, Kovit suggests, say to the child, “This is a good place to sit. Be patient. Soon something worthy of your attention will take place.”

Don't Be Like This

Part of being open to possibilities involves a certain amount of uncertainty. Kovit demonstrates this time and again, especially when he first tried to find a path for his own studies and later when he sought a vocation.

Once, when Kovit was a monk, a young Sino-Thai came to Kovit to ask about his future. According to legend, the young man, who had just been graduated from college, wanted to know what to do with his life: “My father wants me to follow tradition and take over the family business, but I would like to be ordained for a while.” The student seemed to hope that Kovit would make up his mind for him. Kovit looked at him, smiled and said, “Do whatever you think is best. The family business can be good; entering the Buddhist order can teach you a lot—just don't be like this!”

Despite his advice to others, his own life story reveals how he has steadily vacillated between interests in art and aesthetics and Buddhism. According to people close to him, Kovit would often indulge in art and then, tiring of that topic and the artists who may have congregated around him, he would “clear” them out and devote himself once again to the Dhamma—such was the pendulum of his life.

It's Finished

There was much more to the ashrama Kovit established in Sathingphra than he leads us to believe in his autobiography. Life was very austere, but we did a lot with very little. While I was a monk there, his Aunt Loi and even Kovit's mother would often appear to put food in our bowls. Among my few belongings—a clay water jar, a wooden ladle, robes, an alms bowl and a sleeping mat—was a Greek candle lamp offered to me by my wife. It had panes that had been leaded into a frame. Being such a fragile item, I