

Southeast Asia and Buddhist Studies. This book is an important and innovative theoretical contribution to a growing body of work on critical studies of care by anthropologists and feminist STS scholars. Aulino's work clearly demonstrates that there is no universal orientation for a moral calculus of care, but instead that care has the potential to be the locus for radical societal change through the 'transformation of mundane habituated practices of providing for others' (p. 5).

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## Thailand

*A sandy path near the lake: In search of the illusory Khemananda*

By KOVIT KHEMANANDA, Edited and Translated by GRANT OLSON and CHALERMSEE OLSON

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This autobiography of Kovit Khemananda has travelled through a number of hands to make it to English readers. The Thai version was dictated to its Thai interviewers, and that account has been carefully translated and interpreted by the editing team of Grant and Chalermsee Olson. The subtitle of the book is therefore fitting in ways even beyond those intended by the editors, as the idea that this autobiography is an account of Kovit Khemananda's life 'in his own words' is itself an illusion. This additional illusory aspect of the book, however, makes it all the more compelling, as the relationship between translator/editor and subject plays no small part in the story's appeal. *A sandy path near the lake: In search of the illusory Khemananda* may be of interest to a broad audience, from those interested in this unconventional thinker's contributions to Buddhist practice to those seeking an insiders' account of the role of prominent monks in the tumultuous era of 1970s Thailand.

The first chapters provide an account of Kovit's childhood in Songkhla, in which we get glimpses into some of the characteristics that would stay with him throughout life, such as an inclination toward following his own mental preoccupations and a tendency toward loneliness. These early pages offer a grounded account of everyday life in southern Thailand in the pre-Second World War era, punctuated by the occasional insight or retrospective realisation, such as when he reflects upon how his own childhood perceptions of the natural abundance of his surroundings conflict with academic accounts he would later read about the region's poor soil (p. 21).

Subsequent chapters recount Kovit's early years in Bangkok, first as an architecture student at Chulalongkorn University and then as a decorative arts major and student leader at Silpakorn. His account of his experiences leading the student body at Silpakorn during the politically tumultuous 1960s foreshadows an ongoing reluctance to engage directly in politics. When sent a letter of solicitation by the Red Guard, he presented it to the deputy rector of the school, fearing association

with such movements. Instead, he emphasised building up the ‘spirit’ of the student body.

It would not be the last time Kovit was caught up in the politics of the day. Once ordained, this artist-turned-monk faced accusations of communism due to his perceived non-traditional practices and associations with other progressive monks of the era at Suan Mokkh and beyond. These accusations would lead to a long period of residence abroad in Europe, which was the beginning of many international sojourns and engagements with a diverse array of Buddhist approaches. Through his interactions, he would come to incorporate aspects of both Zen and Theravada styles into his meditation practices, as well as his art.

Always more dedicated to the teachings of the Buddha than to the Thai Sangha, Kovit left the order after over a decade of monkhood, but he did not cease to practice and teach. The later chapters of the autobiography are heavier on his philosophical thoughts than the earlier chapters. It is in these chapters that we glimpse the inner life of a person who has spent a great deal of time contemplating his own thoughts and extraordinary existence, in which he has followed his inclinations and never had to work for someone else. It is an existence that is at once lonesome and made possible through the generosity of a large number of friends. This is just one of many tensions that arise in Kovit’s autobiography. Throughout the pages we follow him as he navigates the relative values of tradition and experimentation, meditation and book learning, solitude and community. However, these themes are rarely made explicit in the text, which is why the able guidance of the editors is so vital.

The translator’s Introduction to this volume is not to be skipped over. In it, we get the fascinating account of Grant Olson’s many missed opportunities to meet Kovit in their youths, causing Olson to see Kovit as ‘elusive’ as well as ‘illusive’. It then offers an account of the two men’s relationship when their paths finally intersected. This personal history serves as an explanation of the translator’s investment in this long-term project, endearing the reader to both the book and its subject. The translators’ Introduction also offers a much-needed summary and interpretation of key themes of the book, which include Kovit’s meditations on *dukkha*, loneliness, love, and the search for “ashrama” — a fleeting notion of a spiritual community’ (p. xiii). This preface orients the reader to what is often a meandering tale. However, this initial orientation is sometimes insufficient to contextualise aspects of Kovit’s life story as he recounts it. While the occasional footnote clarifies a translation or gives background into foreign people in Kovit’s life, a heavier hand is needed in this regard. Footnotes providing background on the various Buddhist teachers, as well as more citations of related work, would allow a broader audience to make connections between this autobiography and other bodies of Thai studies literature.

The style in which the story of Kovit’s life is told reflects several important aspects of the autobiography. First is the fact that it was originally relayed orally. Second is the wandering style of personal narration that the translators explain has already been ‘streamlined’. They humorously suggest readers ‘might consider relaxing and reveling in cultural style’ (p. xxvi). Finally, the subject of the autobiography, who admits to, at times, being a ‘wandering holy man’ (p. 177), has followed a winding life path, and any account of such a life must follow the attendant twists and turns. For

those willing to follow along, this volume holds no shortage of valuable nuggets of insights into Buddhist thought, Thai history, and the enigmatic figure that is Kovit Khemananda.

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