

BUDDHISM
WITH OPEN EYES

Belief and Practice of
Santi Asoke

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On Thai Orthography

Theravada Buddhist concepts are usually in Pali, but the more familiar concepts such as *karma*, *nirvana*, *bodhisattva* and *samsara* are in their Sanskrit form as it is widely accepted in the English-language literature. Diacritical marks have been omitted .

Thai Buddhist concepts such as *mahatherasamakhom*, *sangharaja* and *thammayutnikai* have been transliterated in accordance with the practice used in the general literature dealing with Thai Buddhism. Thai proper names have been transliterated according to the person's own preference, geographic names according to the most common form in maps and the literature. The transliteration of Asoke terms attempts to be phonetically as accurate as possible.

This book is an abridged version of my doctoral dissertation “Santi Asoke Buddhism and Thai State Response” written at the Abo Akademi University, Department of Comparative Religions, in Turku, Finland. The thesis was published by Abo Akademi University Press in 1996 with the same title.

This reprint was updated and edited in order to make it more readable. Parts of the theoretical discussion were omitted and some of the footnotes were left out. Chapter III dealing with Thai Buddhism in general has been shortened with reference to the abundant literature on the topic.

The Santi Asoke group has been generally regarded as an extremely controversial group, and no monographs in English have been published on the group. The few academic articles concerning Santi Asoke are not based on first-hand knowledge, and seem to rely on information supplied by the critics of the Santi Asoke group.

The purpose of this book is to try to present an objective outsider’s view of the Asoke group. The material for this study was collected during my stay in Santi Asoke in Bangkok from October 1994 to March 1995. Many small details have changed after I left, albeit not drastically. Yet, all the dates and figures given in this study should be regarded as valid only for the above-mentioned period. However, the main topic of this study, the beliefs and practices of the Santi Asoke group, and the opposition of the Buddhist authorities to this group, still retains its validity.

I wish to express my gratitude to many colleagues and friends at various universities for their encouraging comments on the earlier versions of the manuscript. Most crucial for my work has been the positive attitude of Phra Bodhiraksa, Samana Wasa Wattiko, Samana Tissawaro, Sikkhamat Thipdevi and *Acharn* Aporn Poompanna at the initial stage. I would also like to extend my warmest thanks to my informants Sikkhamat Chinda, Sikkhamat Rinpha, Krak Phrae Fan and the monks, Sikkhamats and lay members of the Asoke group, particularly in Santi Asoke during my fieldwork in 1994-1995.

1 June 1997

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I INTRODUCTION

1. 1. WHAT IS SANTI ASOKE?

“Police yesterday arrested 106 clerical followers, including 20 nuns, of the controversial Santi Asoke religious centre for illegally adorning traditional Buddhist robes.”¹

Santi Asoke is a Buddhist centre in Bangkok where Buddhist monks, nuns, novices and lay people holding a particular set of beliefs gather. The centre in Bangkok is called Santi Asoke, but the group has four other Buddhist centres in Thailand using the name of the region where they are situated - Pathom Asoke in the province of Nakhon Pathom, Sisa Asoke in Sisaket, Sali Asoke in Nakhon Sawan, Sima Asoke in Nakhon Ratchasima. However, the group is popularly known as Santi Asoke both in the press and in earlier research.

The group was founded by a Buddhist monk called Bodhiraksa, who in 1975 officially resigned from the state monastic hierarchy after criticising its behaviour and beliefs. His disciples established their first independent centre, Daen Asoke, in the province of Nakhon Pathom. The centre in Bangkok was established some years later. The group preached actively in public parks, schools and universities all over Thailand until 1989 when the sect leader, monks and nuns were detained and accused of pretending to be Buddhists. The sect was subsequently banned and a trial attempting to pronounce the group illegal was initiated. At present, the group consists of some 90 monks, 20 nuns, 20 novices and aspirants, and approximately 1000 laypeople living permanently in the Asoke temples. In addition, there are tens of thousands of active lay supporters throughout the country. The group has five temples with lay followers running affiliated schools, vegetarian restaurants, supermarkets and publishing houses.

The Santi Asoke Buddhist sect is in Thailand perceived as a very controversial group and is dealt with accordingly by the Thai

public. The press in Thailand usually refers to Santi Asoke as “the controversial Buddhist sect”² or “the unorthodox Buddhist sect”³. The purpose of this study is to investigate into the following questions: Why was this group banned? Why is it controversial? Does it represent heretical Buddhism? Is it too unorthodox to be tolerated in Thailand? What kind of Buddhism is orthodox Buddhism in Thailand in general?

For this purpose I will examine the Buddhist environment in Thailand. What is the general state of Thai Buddhism? What are its basic concepts and practices, and how do they differ from the Asoke group? I shall also explore the possible reasons for the emergence of the Asoke group.

The advent of the Asoke group coincides with the anti-military movements of the 1970s in Thailand. After the bloody suppression of the student movement in October 1976, the military re-established its power and many students and academics disappeared to the jungle in Northern Thailand and joined the armed forces of the illegal Communist Party of Thailand. Rebellious left-wing monks were forced to disrobe. In the early 1980s, the king granted amnesty to most of the rebels, who then returned to the cities to continue their studies. New religious movements started to emerge in the mid-1970s and gained wider support in the 1980s. I would like to argue that there is a clear connection between the crushing of the student movement of the early 1970s, the disrobment of the dissident monks, and the emergence of alternative Buddhist groups, including Santi Asoke.

The era of Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond (1980-1988) was fairly stable with a strong economic upswing. His governments were regarded as democratic ones, even though Prem himself was a General who was appointed by the king. The two attempted *coups d'état* against him in 1981 and 1985 failed because in both cases Prem was protected by the king. The king *de facto* has the authority to decide which faction of the army gains power after a *coup d'état*.

Many non-governmental organisations started to work openly for rural development in the 1980s. Former student leaders and Buddhist monks often joined together to work for the good of the country.

Two new Buddhist sects started to gain a large following in the 1980s: Dhammakaya⁴ and Santi Asoke. Both were already officially established in the 1970s, but became more attractive to young students and academics after the October 1976 massacre, after which all alternative ideologies were suppressed by the military. Both sects even managed to gather followers from the ranks of the military, although a significant section of the supporters were urban, upper middle-class professionals, who often were of Chinese origin.

The Dhammakaya movement emphasises meditation. They teach their own "Dhammakaya meditation system" in which people should concentrate their minds on imagining a crystal ball in the centre of their abdomen. Later, they should be able to visualise a Buddha image inside their body.

The Dhammakaya temple annually organises large ceremonies on Buddhist holy days, particularly for *kathin* - a ceremony after the Buddhist Lent - and for *maghabucha*, to celebrate Buddha's birthday and enlightenment. Several notables have often attended these ceremonies, including Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn as well as such well-known military leaders as General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh and General Arthit Kamlang-ek.

The Santi Asoke movement emphasises simple life, modesty and hard work. Their centres have no decorated temples, no images of Buddha, and they have reduced all the Buddhist ceremonies to the basics. At their centres they cultivate the land and sell its products: vegetables and mushrooms. They are strict vegetarians who also sell vegetarian food at their restaurants. They have centres in Bangkok, Nakhon Pathom and in three other cities in the North and Northeast.

Now, why is Santi Asoke perceived as unacceptable by the state organisation, while the Dhammakaya movement is not? The meditation method of the Dhammakaya is often criticised by ordinary Thai lay people, just as they criticise the strictness of the Asoke group. Yet, it is only the Asoke group that is perceived as deviating and controversial by the authorities. What makes the Asoke group a threat to the Thai state and to the state religious authorities? The present constitution from November 1993 grants freedom of religion to the

Thai people, and the Thai state does tolerate the activities of both Vietnamese and Chinese Mahayana Buddhists, as well as various Hindu and Taoist groups, not to mention the rich flora of different Christian churches and sects working in Thailand. It is my contention that the reasons for banning the Asoke group and using the legislation to outlaw it have more to do with Thai politics than with Buddhist concerns.

The most prominent lay supporter of the Santi Asoke movement is Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, former governor of Bangkok who established a political party called *Palang Dharma* - the Force of Dharma. The name refers to Buddhist doctrine and to moral righteousness. In 1992, Chamlong resigned from his post as governor to contest the general elections in March. He was elected to the parliament with the strong support of the Bangkokians, and his party gained practically all the seats for Bangkok. When General Suchinda Krapayoon, who had staged a *coup d'état* a year earlier, was nominated for Prime Minister by the pro-military parties, Chamlong started a fierce campaign to oust Suchinda from power. The struggle between the two men led to the largest public demonstrations since 1976, and ended in a similar bloodbath in May 1992.

1. 2. WHY IS SANTI ASOKE SIGNIFICANT?

My interest in Santi Asoke started with two articles in academic journals⁵. I had studied the state-sangha relations⁶ in Theravada Buddhist countries for several years and was interested in finding a group which would question the apparent automatic submission to the state power. The two articles introduced a senior Thai Buddhist monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and the two more controversial new Buddhist movements: Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke. Buddhadasa had been active in the mainstream state-controlled sangha since the 1930s. While he had influenced many younger generations of monks, I did not envisage that he could become the leader of a "new religious movement". Thus I decided to focus on either Dhammakaya or Santi Asoke.

The material published in the aforementioned academic articles quite clearly was not based on extensive fieldwork among the Santi

Asoke group itself. In contrast, my study is based on primary sources collected during a fieldwork period. This gives for the first time an emic perspective on the Asoke group. The earlier academic articles on Santi Asoke also invariably linked the Santi Asoke and Dhammakaya together, thus implying that they were somehow similar. Since the two movements struck me as very different, I decided to study Santi Asoke as a group in its own right.

When I was living in Thailand in 1991-1992, I had the opportunity to visit the Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke groups. My first visit to the Dhammakaya temple in Pathum Thani, north of Bangkok, took place on the first Sunday of September, 1991. On the first Sunday of each month, there is a grand gathering of lay people on the Dhammakaya premises. In February 1992, I also attended the *maghabucha*⁷ ceremony at the Dhammakaya temple. I received their publications which were printed in English; many lay people were helpful and assisted my collecting material about the Dhammakaya group. I was not given the opportunity to interview the leading monks of the Dhammakaya group, and I believe that this was deliberate. The Dhammakaya activists made it clear that they do not sympathise with researchers whom they claim write “negatively about us”.⁸

My first visit to the Santi Asoke temple took place in October 1991. A Thai friend had arranged an appointment for me with a monk, Samana Wasa Wattiko. The first interview was sufficient to convince me that this group was more controversial - and therefore more interesting from my point of view - than the more mainstream Dhammakaya group. I interviewed another monk, Samana Tissawaro, later in October 1991, and got the impression that Santi Asoke people had no objections to my scholarly interest.

I was also introduced to Sunai Setboonsarng, a well-known Santi Asoke supporter, who wrote his Master's thesis on the group; the study was later published. Sunai was then working as a secretary to the governor of Bangkok, Major-General Chamlong Srimuang.

In November 1991, I visited the Pathom Asoke centre in the province of Nakhon Pathom. There I was guided by Sikkhamat Thipdevi, who speaks both French and English and often serves for-

eign researchers and journalists as a guide. I also had the opportunity to take my first photograph of the leader of the group: Bodhiraksa. During the same visit, Sikkhamat Thipdevi introduced me to Major-General Chamlong Srimuang. I travelled back to Bangkok in his van, and this trip gave me the opportunity to interview him and his wife.

In March 1992, I made an appointment with Aporn Poompanna, who is a former lecturer in French at the University of Chulalongkorn and the English translator of the two publications in the series "Insight into Santi Asoke". She informed me about the big national gathering in early April in the Nakhon Sawan province, which I consequently visited in April 4-5, 1992. There I for the first time interviewed Sikkhamat Chinda, who was later to become my key informant and interpreter. After a night spent outdoors on the bare ground under the stars of Thailand, and the long wait for the first and only meal of the day at 10.30 a.m., I seriously began to hesitate as to whether I really wanted to study this group.

I returned to Thailand for a short visit in July 1993, when I met Aporn again, and she gave me the unpublished manuscript of "Insight into Santi Asoke 3", which I found very useful as it contained interviews with the leader Bodhiraksa about various topics. I also met Sikkhamat Chinda again, who promised to assist me in my project and encouraged me to visit Pathom Asoke. I spent one night in Pathom Asoke - in the girls' school dormitory - and discussed with Sikkhamat Rinpha, who also offered her assistance as an interpreter and research assistant if I were to study the group. For me, it was the first opportunity to interview the leader Bodhiraksa. I asked him for permission to live in the group and to conduct research there; permission was granted without hesitation. This time I was given a ride to Bangkok by car with two active lay followers, Neungpha and Phakom, both of whom belong to the well-educated young intellectuals in the group and work closely with Major-General Chamlong.

The comments made by people outside the group further stimulated my scholarly interest in the Santi Asoke group. According to some present and former monks from the state monastic headquarters Wat Bovornnivet in Bangkok "Santi Asoke is not Buddhism".⁹

This speculation can be summarised in one basic question: Indeed, if Asoke is not Buddhist, what is it?

1. 3. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT IN THAILAND

The monastic order (*sangha*) in Thailand is divided into two sects; Mahanikai and Thammayutnikai. The split originates from the last century, when Prince Mongkut (later King Rama IV) was ordained as a monk and reformed the monastic order. The new group, Thammayutnikai, is generally regarded as the more orthodox of the two - the very name refers to those who "stay in Dhamma" i.e. in Buddhist doctrine. The main reform of Prince Mongkut was to increase the emphasis on the monastic rules of conduct (*vinaya*) in which the majority group, the Mahanikai, had become increasingly lax.

Since the main purpose of this study is to try to explain the reasons for the strong reactions of the state Buddhist hierarchy against the Asoke group, the general socio-political environment in which Thai Buddhism is practised will also be examined. Furthermore, the interaction between the state Buddhist hierarchy and the individual monks and the monastic order will be discussed in order to provide the necessary background.

In this section, I shall examine the basic conditions in which Buddhism exists in Thailand: the state involvement in the Buddhist organisations and the Buddhist opposition to the state.

1. 3. 1. Religion and politics

The cultural and ideological basis of the Thai state is constructed upon the traditional Hindu-Buddhist concepts which have been used by the rulers to consolidate their power over the resources as well as their production and distribution. However, there seems to be a slight ideological difference between the Hindu and Buddhist concepts of kingship.¹⁰ The Hindu literature - especially Manusmṛti and Arthashastra - emphasises the legal duties of the ruler, which means that his role is clearly limited by jurisdiction. The ruler's

position under the *brahmin* priests also limits his possibilities to dictate and manipulate the state. The ruler is expected to be a *kshatriya* - a warrior - a fact that automatically places him under the ideological leadership of the *brahmin* caste.

In Buddhism, on the other hand, the role of the ruler is not really limited by any laws, despite the fact that the Indian legal Dharmasastra literature is well known in the Southeast Asian Buddhist countries. The Buddhists trust their ruler to be a virtuous person, who follows the morally accepted Buddhist rules and precepts. A ruler or, in modern times a politician, is expected to be morally virtuous and this is manifested by his performance in merit-making and in his relationship to the moral guides in society: the sangha.

The most important source of moral force thus derives from the ruler's close relationship with the Buddhist sangha. An immoral ruler would not be supported by the sangha - at least not in theory. The activities of the ruler in showing his moral force usually involve well-publicised merit-making rituals with lavish donations. The relationship between the value of the donation and moral virtue is apparent, even though officially denied. An important aspect of merit-making is the merit transfer where the privileged few can transfer some of their wealth to the underprivileged masses in the name of merit-making. At the same time, those who feel that they receive a share of the merit of the privileged ones are appeased and integrated into society. By accepting the gift from the rich they also support them politically and give them the mandate to rule.¹¹

The sangha is of vital importance to the common people since it provides the people with a "field of merit": an avenue of climbing further up both in the social hierarchy and on the wheel of reincarnations and rebirths. Thus, even in a modern country like Thailand, which is striving to become an industrialised nation, public merit-making seems to be the main occupation of the royal family, leading politicians and business people, whose merit-making activities are carefully covered by the media.

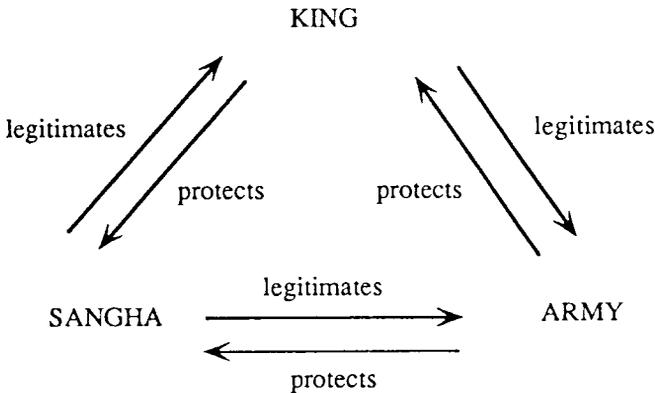
The sangha is the guardian of morality *par excellence*. The sangha legitimises the power of the ruler by accepting his donations and his "protection" against imaginary or real enemies. The king is

reciprocally expected to protect the sangha, and guarantee the moral conduct of the monks. Theoretically, the king is expected to protect the *dhamma* - Buddhist doctrine, which is manifested in the sangha. A corrupt and lax sangha shows the weakness and immorality of the ruler.

On the other hand, the sangha in Thailand is totally under state control, which means that it rarely shows its dissatisfaction with a ruler.

Another form of power is expected of the ideal ruler: military force. The ruler is supposed to protect his subjects against ill-willed spirits, as well as against the aggression of this-worldly neighbours or insurgents. There is a mutual dependence between the army and the ruler, and between the army and the sangha. It is the military's duty to protect the ruler and the sangha, and for this protection the ruler and the sangha legitimate the military authority.

FIGURE 1: State - sangha relations



It seems obvious that the military leaders can apply the same methods and myths used by the kings to consolidate their political power and to emphasise their legitimate right to seize the state power.¹²

Religious concepts and ideas of morality and virtue form the basis for state ideology in the Theravada Buddhist countries. Secular Western ideologies are fairly superficially understood, and

adopted by only a small elite educated in the West. For the great majority of the population the main question is whether the ruler - military or civilian, royal or bureaucratic - is morally good, virtuous and benevolent.

The relationship between the Theravada Buddhist sangha and the political administration in these states is a widely studied and discussed topic. The international discussion was initiated by Yoneo Ishii, who in 1968 published an article in the journal *Asian Survey* with the title "Church and State in Thailand". This article led to further research by many Western and Asian scholars. Ishii also published a more profound analysis, which was translated into English in 1984 as *Sangha, State, and Society*. Ishii convincingly shows how the Sangha Acts from 1902 onwards gave the Thai government an opportunity to control the activities of the sangha.

In 1967, Heinz Bechert had already published *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada Buddhismus* in German. In the first volume of his work he discusses the situation in Ceylon and in the second volume he goes through the political history of Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and, to some extent, Vietnam, by following the development of the sangha and state relations in these countries.

In 1976, Stanley J. Tambiah published his book *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* based on his studies in Thailand. Tambiah had the advantage of being well versed in Ceylonese Buddhism and in its Pali literature, in which he believes the basic inspiration for the concept of kingship, even in Thailand, can be found. He refers to different scriptures in the Hindu and Buddhist Indian tradition, emphasising the lines concerning the duties and obligations of the rulers and the emergence of the hierarchy in society.

1. 3. 2. Buddhist state hierarchy

The nation-building and state-building of Thailand were conscious and carefully-planned operations initiated by the Thai kings in the 19th century, King Mongkut and his son King Chulalongkorn, and was finalised by King Vajiravudh in the early 20th century. They

introduced the three pillars of the Thai state: the monarchy, the nation and Buddhist religion.¹³ One essential part of the nation-building and state-building of modern Thailand has been the monopolisation of religion to represent the Thai nation and the state. The survival of the Thai state is seen to depend directly on the survival of a unified sangha which must, consequently, be under royal or state patronage.

Buddhism in Thailand has been considered to be controlled by the state. Girling points out that the state-sponsored monastic hierarchy conforms to the administrative hierarchy and is, therefore, subordinate to it. The function of the Buddhist monks is to disseminate officially approved policies, e. g. supporting government development efforts or denouncing "atheist" doctrines. "Deviant" monks, who pay too much attention to their flock - like the "liberation" priests in Catholic theology - are subject to discipline or punishment.¹⁴

Girling regards the two leading hegemonies in Thailand as being the political and the economic: the political elite consists of the military and civilian bureaucracy, whereas the economic elite consists of Chinese businessmen. Since the 1960s, the Thai bureaucratic and military elite has been confronted with another massive challenge to its hegemony after the student-led left-wing uprising of 1973, namely a challenge presented by the forces of capitalist modernisation.¹⁵ According to Girling, capitalist modernisation took various forms - one of which was the emergence of new interest groups asserting themselves through political parties. Another form of social change in the process of capitalist modernisation resulted from the assimilation of ethnic Chinese into Thai society; as each succeeding generation married Thais and were educated in Thai schools and absorbed Thai values, they became to consider themselves as Thais.¹⁶ The Chinese - or more assimilated Sino-Thais - form the majority of the Thai business community.

Andrew Turton links the new religious movements with parts of a counter-hegemony movement, which has been especially strong among peasants in the Northeast. A political and ideological break with the past started with the reforms carried out by King Mongkut.

His reforms can be interpreted as the remaking of an ideology, consisting of religion, monarchy, administration, political ideas and institutions.

One consequence of these reforms was that criticism of the monarchy or the sangha is open to authoritative charges of being anti-Thai, anti-monarchy and anti-religion. Turton regards religion as one part of the ideological state apparatus. He draws a distinction between repressive state apparatuses - the military, paramilitary groups, the police - and ideological state apparatuses: education, religion, politics, culture and the media. The sangha is an ideological producer, but it can contain within its organisation personalities, differences, debates and even struggles, some of which transcend the purely factional or technical and have a tendency towards alternative, reformist, or unorthodox directions.¹⁷

Turton considers Buddhist merit-making to be a material incorporation of its ideological aspect, the necessity for the dominant classes to donate goods and to make economic sacrifices. By donating to the sangha, the economic elite exercises its hegemony over the less privileged classes. Turton sees this as a "commodification of religion", whereby some temples have become small capitalist enterprises in their own right, and some monks are individual entrepreneurs.¹⁸

As an anti-hegemonic trend, Turton describes the making of people's or peasants' own selective tradition: in new religious movements and ritual practices.¹⁹ Turton lists other "everyday forms of resistance" whereby people can refuse to produce, exchange and consume certain products, they can refuse to send their children to state schools and they can refuse to vote, or disobey the laws.²⁰

According to Shigeharu Tanabe, the hegemonic Buddhism as a "state religion" controlled by the sangha is able to "manipulate popular consent to the karmic order of the world through a highly organized system at all social levels."²¹ This type of state Buddhism has succeeded in encouraging the popular belief that salvation will come in the other world in accordance with the individual accumulation of merit in this world. The "manipulation of consent is continually activated by ritual communication between the monks and

the laymen centring on the Buddhist temple,” which should be seen as an “ideological power station.” Contrary to this cultural and moral control by the sangha, oppositional ideological practice is founded in millenarian movements visualising immediate salvation.²²

Chatthip Nartsupha shows how most of the millenarian so-called holy men revolts in Northeastern Thailand during the first half of this century, were triggered by expectations of this-worldly material wealth.²³ The leaders of the revolts were regarded as *phu mi bun* - men with merit - and they taught the peasants *dhamma* and professed to have supernatural powers. Chatthip summarises the ideology of these revolts in two main points: the negation of the state and a belief in imminent catastrophes to be followed by a new society of material abundance. The peasants wanted the village to be the centre of the new society. The peasants were urged to defy the state by appealing to their consciousness of religious as well as ethnic history. Another method was to induce the peasants to observe the moral precepts strictly, to meditate and to chant Buddhist texts. The holy men taught the egalitarian distribution of money and goods and collective cultivation. This new society would be based on righteousness - *dharma* ²⁴- peace, an absence of exploitation and theft, and respect for parents.²⁵

Tanabe introduces the word “state Buddhism”, which I find very accurate in describing the Buddhist situation in the Thai state. The Thai state has always had a great interest in controlling the sangha in order to promote its own political and economic power. The sangha legitimates the political and economical power of the leading elite by accepting its protection and donations. On the other hand, there is also a tradition of Buddhist opposition to the state, although that tradition is much weaker. This opposition has mainly occurred in a more animistic context, even when the leading figure was a Buddhist monk. What, then, is the place of the Asoke movement in this context? Should it be regarded as an anti-hegemonic movement, comparable with a nativistic *phu mi bun* movement? On what is the opposition to Asoke based? Does Asoke promise an immediate, this-worldly salvation contrary to the state Buddhist order, which promises salvation only in the next world?

1. 4. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My theoretical framework in approaching the Santi Asoke is mainly historical and sociological. I shall analyse the group in the context of Thai Buddhist traditions, socio-economic and political development, and the state control of Buddhist organisations in Thailand. As my starting point I have the hypotheses presented in the earlier research on Santi Asoke. In this study, I shall both test these hypotheses by using my empirical data and try to develop the ideas further by defining the character of the Santi Asoke group.

1. 4. 1. Sectarian traditions in Buddhism

In order to understand what Asoke is - a sect, a new religious movement or something new and sensational in Buddhism in general, I shall explore the sectarian tradition in Buddhism and the different definitions used by researchers when describing Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

There is, in fact, a long tradition of sectarianism in Buddhism. The first disagreement leading to a split occurred only about a hundred years after the founder Siddharta Gautama Buddha's death. This split led to the formation of the Northern Mahayana Buddhist school and the Southern Theravada Buddhist school.

When various anthropologists started to conduct fieldwork in Theravada Buddhist countries, they soon realised that the rituals and beliefs of the local Buddhists were quite different from the theoretical and philosophical texts that had been studied in the West since translations were made available by Max Müller under the auspices of the Pali Text Society.

Since then researchers have tried to categorise Theravada Buddhist traditions according to the elements with which philosophical Buddhism is mixed. Michael Ames, Melford Spiro and Thomas Kirsch²⁶ suggested some definitions which will be discussed here. Ames divided the traditions into different dichotomous concepts. The concepts, *laukika* and *lokuttara*, refer to the goal-orientation of the Sinhalese Buddhists, meaning this-worldly or other-worldly

goals. Ames based his dichotomy on the definitions by Redfield, who originally introduced the concepts of “little tradition” and “great tradition” in his book *Peasant Society* in 1956. The “little tradition” in Theravada Buddhism came to refer to the popular, less philosophical version of religion, whereas the “great tradition” was the philosophical or normative form as stated in the Buddhist scriptures.

Ames sees merit-making as the basis of the little tradition, which he calls Folk Buddhism, and meditation as the basis of more “sophisticated” Buddhism, which belongs to the great tradition. On the other hand, he hesitates to use the dichotomy of little tradition and great tradition, and sees the relationship between magico-animism and Buddhism as a complicated series of different stations from human life to *nirvana* through magic rituals, merit-making and meditation on different levels of rebirths. Ames concludes that the Buddhist tradition is divided into two: the written and the popular.²⁷

Melford Spiro divided the religious field in another Theravada Buddhist country, Burma, into three different categories: kammatic, nibbanic and apotropaic. Kammatic Buddhism aims to enhance one’s status within the cycle of births (*samsara*) through active merit-making. The ideal of nibbanic Buddhism is the world-renouncing monk striving for nirvana. Apotropaic Buddhism involves a different kind of magical means of protection against illness, drought, floods and other calamities.²⁸

Kirsch divided Thai Buddhism into three traditions: Buddhism, Animism and Brahmanism, of which Brahmanism can be divided into two different sectors: Court Brahmanism and Folk Brahmanism. Folk Brahman rituals are not meritorious, and thus they are closer to Animism than Buddhism, even though they can invoke benevolent Buddhist spirits (*deva*) or Buddha.²⁹

In summary, the following dichotomies can be seen in the study of Buddhist traditions - the scope of Buddhism ranges from the written, scholarly forms to being fairly close to animist practices and beliefs:

LAUKIKA

LITTLE TRADITION

FOLK BUDDHISM

LOKUTTARA

GREAT TRADITION

SOPHISTICATED BUDDHISM

MAGICO-ANIMISM
KAMMATIC BUDDHISM

BUDDHISM
NIBBANIC BUDDHISM

Theravada Buddhism has been characterised by heterodox doctrines and practices. This has not bothered the Buddhist practitioners, but it apparently has disturbed researchers who have tried to classify different types of Buddhisms for more than 30 years. Yet they have not been able to come out with one solid system of terminology. One terminological solution has been found: references include the social and cultural settings. Thus researchers talk about Sinhalese Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism and Thai Buddhism.

In this study, I too shall use the term Thai Buddhism to describe the mainstream Buddhism in Thailand. There have been different trends, movements and groups within Thai Buddhism throughout its history. This study gives special emphasis to the modern period in Thai Buddhism which is regarded as having started in 1932, which was an important watershed in the political establishment. In Chapter III, I shall discuss the Dhammakaya movement as well as some important individual monks - Buddhadasa, Prayudh Payutto, Kittivuddho and Yantra - all of whom have become famous teachers.

We should remember that hardly any religion has persisted throughout centuries as a monolithic entity. Bryan Wilson emphasises that no society is "sect-less", yet studies of sects have been pursued randomly by sociologists, historians and anthropologists.³⁰ The sources concerning sects, as studied by historians, are often both fragmentary and, in large part, derived from the sect's opponents or persecutors.³¹ To give a macrocosmic view of sectarianism requires the study of the probabilities for sect development and of the circumstances that condition them. A microcosmic study contributes to the stock of basic information on which the generalisations rest.³²

Wilson emphasises that a thorough examination of the sect as a total social entity should include the study of its teachings, provenance, the movement's origins as a separated body, course of development, character and transmission of leadership, source of its appeal, methods of recruitment, nature of conversion, social compo-

sition of its constituency, maintenance of social control, economic structure, ideology to organisation, social ethos, and its relation to the wider society.³³ In this study, I will try to cover some of these aspects with reference to the Asoke movement.

1. 4. 2. Earlier research on Santi Asoke

The Asoke movement has attracted rather little scholarly interest in the West. No major studies have been published about it in English. Some authors have dedicated one chapter of their books to Asoke, and a couple of articles have been published by a handful of scholars. The earlier studies confusingly link the two new movements, Santi Asoke and Dhammakaya, together.

One of the first Western researchers who studied the Asoke group was the American Grant Olson who, in 1983, devoted a chapter to the Asoke group in his unpublished M.A. thesis.³⁴ The chapter is called "The people of Asoke: Purity Through Strict Discipline and Vegetables". He based his information on the interviews with Bodhiraksa which he refers to in his text. Olson recognises the legacy of Buddhadasa in the Asoke group.³⁵

Olson saw a contradiction between their propagated asceticism and their high-tech accessories: "Despite their interest in asceticism, they also have audiorecording equipment and an extensive tape lending library of the speeches and lectures of their leader". Olson is also critical of the publishing work carried out by the Asoke group: "the scope of this work has been another source of criticism".³⁶ At the same time, he saw a contradiction in their refusal to accept money donations on the one hand but, on the other hand, accepting other donations: "Santi Asoke is not averse to accepting large gifts of paper and ink".³⁷

The only reason for the continued existence of the Asoke group, claims Olson, is its good contacts with education officials and civil servants. Olson regards General Prem as one of their supporters.³⁸

Olson sees the Asoke group representing the middle-class by stating that the Asoke group has invited people, who "have shoes to take off".³⁹

In conclusion, Olson criticises Santi Asoke for merely creating new opposition within the monastic order without reforming it. Santi Asoke has become one more excuse for the mainstream monks not to improve.⁴⁰

The next contribution in English was by Peter Jackson in 1989 with a book on urban Thai Buddhism.⁴¹ He regarded both Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke as phenomena of the new growing middle class, who choose a new group or an individual teacher instead of the state sponsored sangha. The state sponsored sangha represents the elite and is controlled by the elite, whereas the community Buddhist sangha - i.e. Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke - are supported by the politically weak, but economically wealthy.⁴²

Jackson recognises the legacy of Buddhadasa in Bodhiraksa's teachings, and regards Bodhiraksa's critical book on Buddhadasa as an effort to convert Buddhadasa's supporters to join his own group. According to Jackson, Bodhiraksa followed the teachings of Buddhadasa by criticising the Council of Elders (*mahatherasamakhom*). In Thai Buddhism, spiritual authority originates from strict morals and ascetic practice more than from the books and the holy scriptures. Therefore, according to Jackson, Bodhiraksa wanted to demonstrate the validity of his rejection of the sangha hierarchy by following a stricter ascetic practice than the mainstream monks.⁴³

The central thesis in Jackson's study is "that the recent history of urban Thai Buddhism reflects the historical development and differentiation of the Thai élite, and that conflicts within urban Buddhism reflect conflicts between competing factions of the élite." According to Jackson the concept of the elite includes the following groups: the aristocracy, ethnic Thai military and civilian bureaucrats, who can be regarded as the traditional elite. The new growing elite consists of the economically dominant Sino-Thai commercial business groups and the newly developed middle-class and professional groups.⁴⁴

Both of these two different stratas of the elite support their section within Thai Buddhism; the traditional elite supports the state sponsored administrative system, whereas the new elite adheres to individually sponsored movements. The state sponsored adminis-

tration refers to the state sangha under the leadership of the Council of Elders, whereas the individually sponsored movements include Dhammakaya, Santi Asoke and the supporters of Buddhadasa.⁴⁵

Jackson sees 1973 as the watershed year in Thai history. This was the year when urban professionals and the middle class came into conflict and competition with the traditional aristo-bureaucratic commercial establishment.⁴⁶ The major political conflicts in Thailand in the 1980s have been between the military, bureaucratic, and commercial factions that make up the establishment and those groups aligned with the middle-class. A soldiers' organisation within the army, called the "Young Turks", aligned themselves with the democratic ideals of the middle-class in opposition to the establishment, reflecting middle-class frustration at the entrenched position of the establishment. Chamlong was a prominent member of the Young Turks.⁴⁷

According to Jackson, religious reformist movements emphasise the notions of rational orderliness and logical consistency. Reformists maintain that individual ethical practice should be in strict accordance with the moral instructions given by Buddha in order to lead the adherents to the ultimate spiritual goal of salvation. Reformists demand that social and political structures should be founded on Buddhist ethical principles, based on equity and justice. Reformists extol the virtues of self discipline, systematicity and rational orderliness.⁴⁸ Critical intellectuals in Thai society are particularly interested in breaking the establishment's monopoly of control over the system of teaching and practising Buddhism. Rationalist reformist reinterpretations call for the decentralisation of the decision-making power of the sangha.⁴⁹

According to Jackson, the Asoke movement "tends to appeal more to the less highly educated strata of the middle-class who perceive Buddhism primarily in terms of personal practice". This middle-class consists of "merchants, tradesmen, and small businessmen, often, like Bodhiraksa⁵⁰ himself, of Chinese or Sino-Thai extraction". In conclusion, Jackson states that the Santi Asoke's following is mainly from "the lesser educated sections of the *petite bourgeoisie*".⁵¹

Jackson sees many parallels between the reformist Buddhism

of the nascent middle-class and Protestantism during the Industrial Revolution in Europe.⁵² Jackson regards the emphasis on work and frugality as providing a justification for the accumulation of wealth that is required for capitalist investment by middle-class entrepreneurs. The doctrine of this-worldly asceticism and religiously inspired work adhered to by reformist sections of the Thai Buddhist middle class provides a religious justification for the commercial activities of the new business groups who must forgo immediate consumption in order to accumulate the capital required for investment in their enterprises.⁵³

For the middle-class capitalists, Bodhiraksa and Chamlong provide a religious interpretation of the frugality and self-sacrifice that they impose on themselves by reinvesting rather than consuming their business profits. On the other hand, Bodhiraksa's and Chamlong's teachings also provide a religious justification for the continuing poverty and low wages of the working class in the face of rapid economic development.⁵⁴

Jackson does not refer to any visits or interviews with the Asoke people. His main source on Bodhiraksa seems to have been Anan Senakhan's book in Thai called "Bodhiraksa - the highly dangerous prophet".⁵⁵

Jackson traces the links between the banning of the Asoke group and the general elections of 1988.⁵⁶

An Australian, Jim Taylor, published an article on the "New Buddhist Movements in Thailand" in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* in March 1990.⁵⁷ According to Taylor, both Santi Asoke and Dhammakaya present a "radical critique of the Thai social order", and both of them are "the creation of the new urban middle-class" with a consequently large following from this strata.⁵⁸ Santi Asoke is an expression of the need to mend the "fission between past and present and hark back to primordial Buddhist social values, individualistic religious communalism". The Asoke movement sees itself as a model for future society.⁵⁹

Taylor also interprets the new religious movements, which he calls "cults", from the Weberian point of view. He views inner-worldly asceticism as providing the "catalyst for bringing about evolution-

ary social change". Santi Asoke's "inner-worldly ethic" legitimates structural changes in the traditional social and political order.⁶⁰

Taylor sees the new movements as "individualistic reflexive responses to normative institutional paradigms"; the results of middle-class individualistic values, as "upward mobile bourgeoisie largely make up the members of these movements".⁶¹ The attraction of the movements lies in the fact that they are very demanding, and expect a high level of personal commitment. Taylor regards this as a remedy "needed by an insecure and disillusioned middle-class", frustrated by the inactivity of the mainstream sangha and its inability to respond to contemporary problems.⁶²

Taylor refers to Sikkhamat Thipdevi, whom he had obviously interviewed. As a further source, Taylor uses the book Anan wrote to attack Chamlong Srimuang and Bodhiraksa.⁶³ Another source is a recorded tape of an interview with Bodhiraksa which was made in 1975 and published 13 years later in the Thai language newspaper, "Siam Rath". Furthermore, Taylor refers to an interview conducted with Bodhiraksa in 1982 for TV, but later censored by the authorities.⁶⁴

The next English language contribution was an article by Suwanna Satha-anand, a philosophy teacher from the Chulalongkorn university, in *Asian Survey* in 1990. In her article, she discussed three "religious movements in contemporary Thailand": Buddhadasa's following, the Dhammakaya movement and Santi Asoke. She based her article on two Thai language surveys, one by Prawet Wasi and the other one by Sombat Chantornwong. She also repeats the ideas presented in those articles.⁶⁵

Suwanna points out that the Santi Asoke group emphasises the good society, instead of simply emphasising the good ruler, as is the tradition in mainstream Thai Buddhism.⁶⁶

Suwanna sees a difference between supporters and followers of the Asoke group: Santi Asoke has attracted a large group of supporters, although not so many serious followers.⁶⁷

Suwanna also regards Santi Asoke as a middle-class movement: the middle-class supports the group's anti-establishment ideas, but cannot live in poverty in a Buddhist community. Suwanna sees Santi Asoke as being a middle-class counter-movement to consumerism.

She defines the middle-class as “professional people, owners of small private businesses and lower-ranking civil servants”. I see it as a contradictory statement when “owners of small private businesses” are characterised as a “counter-movement to consumerism”. According to Suwanna, however, the supporters of all the three movements originate from this same class.⁶⁸

Donald K. Swearer dedicates several pages to Santi Asoke in his review of fundamentalism in 1991.⁶⁹ Swearer regards both Santi Asoke and Dhammakaya as examples of Buddhist fundamentalism. Fundamentalistic religious groups share three major elements: a commitment to the authority of the scriptures, a concern for orthodox beliefs and a history of involvement with the state.⁷⁰

Swearer sees Santi Asoke as a transformation of the forest monk revival as represented by the *Acharn* Man tradition and, more particularly, by Buddhadasa’s centre.⁷¹ Santi Asoke has proposed a radical moral critique of Thai society, and offered an exemplary utopian community, where status, gender, and social distinctions between monks and laity have been eliminated. The sect has developed its own hierarchy which depends on a distinctive moral or disciplinary calculus. This makes Santi Asoke an exclusivistic movement, where “through militant rhetoric of persecution” boundaries are set between insiders and outsiders.⁷²

The Santi Asoke movement is both a product of, and a reaction against, the secular, materialistic culture of modern Thailand. The movement represents a radical rejection of modern Thai culture, including its mainstream religious institutions and Thai Buddhist traditions. Instead, Santi Asoke presents a “one-dimensional utopian remedy to the ills of Thai society”. The movement harbours a “dualistic and absolutistic worldview, that lacks both the subtleties of the traditional Buddhist cosmology and the transcendental grounding, which relativizes all socio-political views”.⁷³

Swearer interprets Santi Asoke as being a fundamentalistic group by describing the characteristics of all fundamentalistic movements; he concludes that they are led by “strong, often militantly aggressive, charismatic leaders”. Their followers originate from the “center or periphery of the cultural and socio-political mainstream”

and they perceive themselves to be threatened as “individuals, communally, or as a nation”. Swearer sees fundamentalistic movements as being ideologically “simplistic, dualistic” and as harbouring an “absolutistic worldview”. They are also “anti-rationalist, anti-intellectual and anti-ritualistic”.⁷⁴

Swearer seems to reject the idea, suggested by Jackson and Taylor, of a new growing middle-class who wants to rationalise the religion to serve their economic and political ambitions. Yet even Swearer sees Santi Asoke as a middle-class movement.⁷⁵ According to Swearer, Santi Asoke is a middle-class movement⁷⁶ which attacks violence and consumerism by developing a counter-ideology to Western capitalism.⁷⁷ Santi Asoke tries to transform the Thai faith and practice radically, which makes the opponents of the group fear that this would lead to extinction of the historical tradition⁷⁸. Swearer sees the Asoke group as a “communalistic” movement,⁷⁹ which has tried to create a religious *communitas* .

Swearer bases his contribution on his visit to Pathom Asoke on September 4th, 1985, and on Bodhiraksa’s autobiography from 1982 and another book written by Bodhiraksa in 1985.⁸⁰

A Thai scholar, Apinya Fuengfusakul, published an article in *Sojourn* on the two new Buddhist movements - Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke - in 1993.⁸¹ According to Apinya, Santi Asoke’s “rituals, practices, merit activities, and model communities”, “manifest the combination of a post-modernist and anti-capitalist social outlook with what it perceives as characteristics of a rural community”⁸².

Apinya is the first researcher who does not view the Asoke as being a predominantly middle-class movement. On the contrary, according to Apinya, the “toughness of Asoke practice” explains why a “large number of its lay personnel and clerical members come from rural areas”.⁸³ Apinya also refers to the economic conditions in which the Thai peasants often live: “Given the circle of indebtedness and dependence that plagues Thai peasant life, Asoke’s agricultural approaches seem promising. With its underlying alternative social and religious ideals, one cannot overlook its growth potential in the rural areas”.⁸⁴ Apinya concludes, however, that the the urban middle-class will continue to support movements like Dhammakaya and

Santi Asoke, as long as the mainstream sangha “fails to respond to their concerns, expectations and needs”.⁸⁵

Apinya bases her article on her observations in the Asoke centres, where she has obviously stayed somewhat longer than the other researchers. She presents a detailed picture of the organisational structure of the Asoke group, and refers to some books dealing with the Asoke case.⁸⁶

Jim Taylor returns to the topic in the same issue of *Sojourn*⁸⁷ where he argues that modern urban Thai society has become increasingly differentiated, and has started to question the totalising and instrumental politico-religious and moral dimensions of national civic religion. Taylor lists several new movements active in Thailand from the Japanese Soka Gakkai to the local Chinese Kuan Im-cult, and sees the new urban reformist movements as an attempt at “reformulating the cultural gestalt through a reinterpretation of traditional symbols and meaning systems”.⁸⁸

Taylor attempts to classify the followers of the Dhammakaya and Asoke movements according to their class origin; the supporters of the Dhammakaya movement originate predominantly from the Sino-Thai merchants and professionals whereas the Santi Asoke supporters consist of “Bangkok educated middle-ranking Siamese-Thai public servants.”⁸⁹

Taylor follows Jackson by stating that the “new religious movements” from the 1960s and 1970s correspond to the rise of the urban middle-class. This “expanding and autonomous urban middle-class” poses a direct threat to the political order and the ideological, as well as universal, bases of Thai civic religion.⁹⁰ The “socially and economically autonomous and influential Sino-Thai, politically muted by tradition, constitute the backbone of the new urban religious reforms connected with a simultaneous call for a devolution of power and political democracy”.⁹¹

The earlier research deals with placing the Asoke group in the Thai social context. The class question has dominated and most researchers link Santi Asoke with the growth of the middle classes. The researchers also look for supporters of the Dhammakaya movement from within the middle classes. Only the most recent articles

by Apinya and Taylor attempt to question the concept of middle-class.

Earlier research is mainly based on short visits to the Asoke centres or on the publications produced by the Asoke or even by the most ardent opponents of Bodhiraksa, and on the Thai language press reports on the Asoke case. No data has been collected from the Asoke centres and presented in the above mentioned articles. It is also interesting to note that all the Western scholars who have studied Santi Asoke have written their doctoral dissertations on major mainstream Buddhist teachers and leaders: Peter Jackson on Buddhadasa, Grant Olson on Prayudh Payutto and Jim Taylor on the forest monks. It is through the eyes of these teachers that they seem to interpret the Asoke group.

In this study, I have the opportunity to test the hypotheses presented by Jackson, Swearer and Taylor concerning the class base of the Asoke members and supporters, using material collected on two different occasions in 1994-1995 from 187 Asoke members in Nakhon Pathom and from 2181 Asoke members in Sisaket. The socio-economic background of the Asoke members will be examined in Chapter VI. The earlier research has alternatively defined the Santi Asoke movement as a "cult", a "new religious movement", or a "sect". From sociological perspective these definitions are quite exact and distinct, their application to the Asoke will be discussed in Chapter IV.

Another approach follows the hypothesis that there is a connection between Weberian inner-worldly asceticism and economic growth as Jackson suggested. The social values of the Asoke members concerning saving, frugality and economic transactions will be examined in Chapter V, in which I also discuss the type of asceticism favoured by the group. The economic ideology and its practical implementations will be discussed in both Chapters IV and V.

In Chapter VII, I will summarise the problems discussed in this study, and seek to explain the reasons why the sect has been banned in Thailand by asking: how does it challenge the Thai state? And, should the sect be seen more as an anti-hegemonistic movement, or a middle-class movement encouraging capital accumulation and economic growth through inner-worldly asceticism?

1. 5. METHOD AND DATA

In this section, I shall briefly examine my research methodology and the material I have used for this study. Contrary to the earlier research, which is mainly based on very short visits to a few Asoke centres, my study is based on extensive fieldwork which was carried out in the form of participant observation in the Asoke group and collecting material by interviews and by a specific questionnaire (Appendix 1) created for the purpose.

The fieldwork was conducted between October 1994 and April 1995. My permanent base was in Santi Asoke in Bangkok. However, I also visited the other centres several times. I visited Pathom Asoke in October during the national gathering for *mahapawarana*⁹², and in early November I travelled with two nuns and an aspirant to Chiang Mai to visit the Lanna Asoke group. In December, I visited the other centres, Sisa Asoke and Sima Asoke, and the newly established Ratchathani Asoke. One of the most important yearly ceremonies apart from the *mahapawarana*, is the *plukse*⁹³ ceremony, which I attended in February 1995 in Sisa Asoke. In March, I also attended a funeral ceremony in Pathom Asoke. Another great national gathering which I attended was also the reopening of the court case in Bangkok in March. Approximately 2000 people came to Santi Asoke to accompany the accused monks and nuns to the court.

1. 5. 1. My position as a fieldworker

I had established my contacts with some of the group members gradually since 1991, and had interviewed them and observed their life style, which made it easier for me to adjust to the Asoke way of life. Yet, very few of the Asoke people knew me and, at first, I felt somewhat irritated by the open curiosity shown towards me. Approaches were always accompanied with the three standard English questions - "Excuse me, what is your name? Excuse me, where do you come from?" and "Excuse me, how old are you?" - questions which seldom led to more interesting topics.

I had informed both Sikkhamat Chinda in Santi Asoke and Sikkhamat Rinpha in Pathom Asoke that I was looking for a room "with some privacy" for about six months. Both nuns were able to

arrange a place for me to stay, my final decision fell on Santi Asoke, as I felt it easier to stay in a big city, where I already had many contacts with people at the universities and other friends.

I had also sent my preliminary questionnaire to both nuns for comments. Sikkhamat Chinda commented that some of the choices were not “clear enough”, but “we will talk about this when you are here” in a letter she wrote to me prior my arrival.⁹⁴

I stayed in Santi Asoke, but outside the temple compound in a private house belonging to an Asoke practitioner. Thus my position was marginal inside-outside, which gave me the privacy I was looking for and the vicinity I needed for my research. I could hear the temple bells every morning at 3.30 a.m. and I could walk to the temple in less than five minutes. My private room also attracted visitors from Santi Asoke, who used to marvel at my four pairs of shoes - they themselves walked barefoot.

I did not wear “Asoke clothes” i.e. a blue collarless Northeastern peasant shirt, *mohom*, and the blue sarong of the lay women, but instead I wore long cotton trousers and a t-shirt, which fitted in with the Asoke colours of black, grey and brown.

My marginal position as an insider-outsider was quite interesting; I was both praised and expected to become more and more “Asoke” as the time went by and, at the same time, it was difficult for some people to understand that I was neither seeking to join the group, nor planning to convert into Buddhism. It was also difficult for my friends outside the Asoke group to understand my position as a researcher, who was only scholarly and intellectually interested in the group.

The dubious reputation of the Asoke group in the Thai public, was reflected by many of my friends, who insisted on feeding me generously whenever I was outside the centre, as they imagined that I was starving on the vegetarian one-meal-a-day diet. Only one Thai friend was brave enough to enter the Santi Asoke centre and was surprised that the temple area looked so clean and neat and proper.

My daily routine in Santi Asoke was to wake up before 6 a.m., eat breakfast - instant coffee and Chinese *patongko*-doughnuts, which was seen extremely unhealthy by the Asoke members - and then to

go to the temple, where I occupied a table inside the area where the nuns and female aspirants resided. This table, under a bamboo tree, became known as my “natural office” where people could easily find me. I sat there practically the whole day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., sometimes even later, if I had interesting company. A couple of times a week I assisted Sikkhamat Chinda in giving English lessons, which gave me the opportunity to get acquainted with some of the school children. For a couple of months, I participated in the *tai-chi* practice every evening, which gave me the opportunity to observe the gender relations in Santi Asoke.

I did not usually eat in the temple but in order to observe the visitors there, I ate in the vegetarian restaurant belonging to the Asoke group which was outside the temple compound. For dinner I used to eat *somtām* - raw papaya salad - in a shop, which was also run by the Asoke people. My appreciation of the Northeastern *cuisine*, was a permanent sensation in the Asoke temple. Food was one of the main topics of conversation in Asoke just as in Thai society in general. For the Asoke people, the most important thing concerning food is whether it is vegetarian or not, and I felt very strongly that I should be vegetarian when staying in the temple or in its neighbourhood. The number of the meals varied even among the Asoke adherents for various reasons, and I felt no pressure to consume only one meal a day.

Most of the foreign visitors were brought to Sikkhamat Chinda, as she was the only monastic in Santi Asoke who could speak English. Most of the Chinese guests were also brought to her, as she could speak one Chinese dialect, *Teochew*, fluently, and even some Mandarin. I had the opportunity to meet these visitors as well, and listen to their discussions with Sikkhamat Chinda. Among the visitors there were Western and East Asian travellers, journalists, local expatriates, Malaysian and Taiwanese Buddhist monks and nuns.

One of the duties of the nuns in the Asoke group is to counsel people during their life crises, which often happen to be matrimonial problems. Once a week, some younger lay women came to Sikkhamat Chinda to ask her to give her signed permission for them to stay in the temple. At the same time, she would ensure that they

had adhered to Asoke practices - eating only one meal a day, waking up before 4 a.m., walking barefoot and other Asoke practices. On this occasion they were also encouraged to analyse their own feelings and problems in complying with the Asoke life style. I could often attend these occasions as well and, at the end of my fieldwork period, I was even able to understand what the discussion concerned. It gave me a valuable insight into the ordained-lay relations and into the life of many individual Thais.

I wanted to share some of my ideas and impressions with the Asoke people, but I did not come across anyone who had been interested in the articles and chapters that I had written before the fieldwork period or during my stay there in the publishing company's computer room. I showed one article to Sikkhamat Chinda, which she politely struggled through, and gave some comments on, but it was my impression that she did not wish to get too involved in that side of the project.

1. 5. 2. The questionnaire

The questionnaire was prepared in Finland and was based on my earlier observations of the Asoke centres. The theoretical starting points were to study the social background and social values of the Asoke members, the life style practised by them and their socialisation into the group values and practices. An important point was also to compare their preferences in merit-making activities with earlier studies of the mainstream Buddhists; merit-making being the most visible way of practising Buddhism in Thailand.

When I arrived in Santi Asoke in early October 1994 to carry out the fieldwork, Sikkhamat Chinda had already translated my questionnaire from English into Thai, as I had sent her a preliminary version for comments. I made some changes to it according to her suggestions, one more alternative was added to the merit-making activities. As my own Thai was not good enough to verify the translations profoundly, I showed the questionnaire to Professor Chalongsorntravanich at the Chulalongkorn university, who made some slight changes in phrasing. After this, the questionnaire was given to Bodhiraksa's assistant, who promised to show it to Bodhiraksa.

Thus the questionnaire was even approved by the leader of the group, which I imagined would make the whole procedure easier. After Bodhiraksa's official approval, the questionnaire was printed in 200 copies in the Fah Apai printing house, which prints all the Asoke publications.

I intended to distribute the questionnaires at the national *mahapawarana* gathering, where all the monks and nuns gather for their annual meeting accompanied by some 2000 laypeople. Sikkhamat Rinpha, however, had a better idea. We went to meet Bodhiraksa to ask his help in distributing the questionnaires. During the Saturday sermon in the temple, when some 2000 people attended the ceremony, Bodhiraksa introduced my research project to the people, advised them to fill in the questionnaires honestly, carefully and quickly, and discouraged illiterate and semi-illiterate people from picking up the questionnaire. This, in fact, led to somewhat biased results concerning the laypeople but, fortunately, I received more material later. By Saturday evening, I had received back about half of the questionnaires. My role in the whole process was to idle outside the *kuti* of Sikkhamat Rinpha, whilst she ran around distributing and collecting my questionnaires. At one point, the questionnaires ran out, and some 40 new questionnaires were quickly photocopied for Sikkhamat Rinpha to distribute.

With the material in a heavy bag, I returned to Santi Asoke whereupon I started to classify them, and gradually collect the data I could read; i.e. the two first pages on social background, and the last page on merit-making. The final result was 187 questionnaires. The most disappointing part was that only 16 of the 23 nuns had replied, but neither Sikkhamat Rinpha nor Sikkhamat Chinda managed to persuade the others to fill in the forms. I also found the collection of 38 laywomen and 30 laymen somewhat meagre, at least for a survey concerning their social background. The most complete series were the monks; 84 of the 92 and all 19 novices and aspirants.

In November, I started to translate the questionnaires together with Sikkhamat Chinda - I gradually learned to understand most of the phrases, as soon as she had read the Thai handwriting. We translated the questionnaires for nearly 6 weeks. I started to feel that it

was too much extra work for her, and I also wanted to see how other people would translate the replies. Therefore, some of the questionnaires were given to Upasika Rin Tham, who just took them with her to the Chulalongkorn University where she studied. The bundles were returned to me after some 2-3 weeks neatly translated into English. I never saw the translators, and realised only later that there were actually two of them. I did meet the sister of one of the translators, the Spanish lecturer Rassamee Krisanamis of the Chulalongkorn University, who confirmed that her sister in Songkhla had, indeed, translated those papers for me. Some other people also tried to help translate, but the texts proved to be too difficult for them.

As I was not quite happy with the number of the questionnaires returned by the lay people in my sample, I decided to collect some more material in the rural centres, albeit only on the social background of the lay people. I did conduct some successful interviews in Sima Asoke with elderly women in December 1994, but I still felt that I needed more information, especially about the laymen. The problem was solved at the national *plukse* gathering⁹⁵ which was held in February 1995 in Sisa Asoke. At the *plukse* every participant was asked at the registration about their age, sex, home province and social background, statistics which gave me valuable information concerning more than 2000 persons (Appendix 2).

1. 5. 3. Other data

My other material, apart from the questionnaire, consists of interviews with different members of the group, translations of Bodhiraksa's and Sikkhamat Chinda's tape-recorded preachings, translations of some publications of the Asoke group, translations of rules and regulations, songs, slogans and aphorisms.

I studied the book on the history of the nuns, which was produced about the nuns who had been in the group for 10 years in 2528 B.E. (AD 1985). A good introduction to Asoke ideas and values is the book *Ce que le Bouddha nous enseigne. Introduction au Bouddhisme pour les débutants* by Sikkhamat Thipdevi and Aporn Poompanna from 1978. An important book to study Bodhiraksa's interpretation of Buddhism is *Khon kue arai* (What is a human being); a classical

work for Asoke adherents which was originally written by Bodhiraksa before he became ordained, but which has been revised and reedited several times. Another important book consulted for this study is *Panha sangkhom thii kae mai daai phro kaan suksa phutta sasana phit plaat* (Social problems that cannot be solved, because of the wrong way of studying Buddhism) by Bodhiraksa, in which he criticises Buddhadasa.⁹⁶

I conducted deep-interviews in English with some of the monastics, with the questions roughly following the pattern of the questionnaire. These interviews are published here in the form of life histories. They are placed in the beginning of chapters III -VI and are fairly loosely connected with the more theoretical problems raised in those chapters. The purpose of presenting the biographies here is to give some internal perspectives to the process of joining the Asoke group. The first biography describes the course of action while choosing between the two new Buddhist groups: Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke. The second biography in Chapter IV discusses a monk's personal problems which he solved by joining the Asoke group, known for its asceticism and strict practices. Chapter V deals with social values and socialisation, the biography describes a long process of changing values and breaking family ties. The biography in Chapter VI outlines the social pressure the person felt, and her long hesitation before joining the group.

I also viewed some video tapes concerning the "crisis" in 1989 and its aftermath. I was given a copy of the English version of the video "The Santi Asoke case" on the detention of Bodhiraksa and the events precipitating it. I also have on the same tape pictures taken outside the court in Bangkok on the 20th of March 1995, when the court case was reopened in Bangkok. It was strictly forbidden to film inside. I have seen old black-and-white pictures of the early beginnings of the group, some of which are published in this book⁹⁷.

I attended some morning sermons and lunch sermons in all the temples. I also attended the teachers' meetings on the first Wednesday of January and March, 1995 in Santi Asoke at 4 a.m., chaired by Bodhiraksa. I observed some monthly meetings for the lay people belonging to the Thamma Practitioner Association, also

chaired by Bodhiraksa, which prompted some ideas about the hierarchy and patterns of behaviour within the Asoke group. I visited a hospital together with the monks and nuns in Nakhon Pathom province, and I visited some lay people in their homes together with the nuns in Chiang Mai province. I also attended the final funeral rituals of an Asoke adherent in Pathom Asoke.

1. 5. 4. Source critical considerations

I was, to a great extent, dependent on the translations and cooperation provided by Sikkhamat Chinda in Santi Asoke. She acted as my interpreter when I interviewed Bodhiraksa and some other Asoke members in Santi Asoke. At the end of my fieldwork period, I started to understand Thai somewhat better: I could understand most of the Thai that Sikkhamat Chinda used when translating my questions or comments in the discussions. Consequently, I could to some extent verify that the translations were correct.

Outside the Santi Asoke centre I had several other interpreters and informants: Sikkhamat Rinpha in Pathom Asoke and English-speaking monks and lay people in the other Asoke centres. In the *plukse* ceremony in Sisa Asoke in February 1995 I had several interpreters during the morning and afternoon preachings and evening programs. The other interpreters gave me valuable insights into the discussions I had had with Sikkhamat Chinda, which also convinced me that the ideas of Sikkhamat Chinda were not only her own, but followed the general pattern of the Asoke group. Sometimes it was, however, difficult to interview other Asoke people, as they presumed that Sikkhamat Chinda alone should explain everything to me in her superior English.

I consistently took notes during meetings and especially when visiting other Asoke centres and ceremonies. In Santi Asoke I was mainly occupied by writing the translations and did not keep a diary about my daily activities. Some of my daily activities are, however, recorded in my letters to friends and family, and are preserved on a computer disk.