

## **IV SECTARIANISM AND THE ASOKE**

### **Biography of Samana Cittasanto, Sima Asoke**

“I was born in Bangkok 46 years ago. When I was about two years old, we moved to Nonthaburi where I spent my childhood. Even though I was born in Bangkok I do not like city life. In Nonthaburi we had gardens and fields - just like the countryside, and that is the kind of surroundings I enjoy.

My father was a civil servant working for the government factory in Nonthaburi, a factory which produced jute sacks. Later, my father joined the Ministry of the Interior. He is a fairly well-educated man. My mother was a housewife. I have four brothers, but no sisters. I am the second child of my parents. My mother passed away 11 years ago, after which our family split, and my brothers left home and got married and started their own families. My father is still alive, he is now 70 years old.

After high school, I attended an English language college called Assumption Commercial College or ACC in Bangrak in Bangkok, Saint Louis Soi 2. It was not my own idea to attend that school, but my parents wanted me to study there, even though it was very expensive. They wanted to give their children a good education. All the Assumption colleges in different cities in Thailand, and the university in Bangkok are run by Catholic brothers. The schools stick very strictly to using English. We had brothers from many different countries, such as India and Italy, but they all taught in English. I was the only one in our family who was sent to an English school, my other brothers studied in engineering colleges, and are now all working in Bangkok.

As a young man, I was never interested in Buddhism. I did not even ordain for a short time as the tradition requires in Thailand. My other brothers have all been ordained in the mainstream for short periods.

I had worked for eight years in many different places before joining the Asoke group. First I worked in an American military camp, but only for about two months. After that I became a salesman selling detergents for two years. Then I became a typist in the Foremost Dairy company for about one year. My last job was as an accounting clerk in the Bangkok Bank of Commerce, in the head office in Bangkok.

One reason why I became interested in Buddhism was that in those days I could not stop drinking. When I was a salesman I had a friend and we drank a lot together. I found it very difficult to stop drinking.

Whilst I was working in the bank, a friend of mine gave me a book and later a cassette tape from Santi Asoke. My friend even became a monk in Santi Asoke before me, but he disrobed after five years.

After I had read the books and listened to the tapes from the Asoke group I

started to practise myself. I stopped drinking and I became vegetarian. I found it very difficult to be vegetarian at first, I was vegetarian one year before I joined the Santi Asoke. After one year of practising on my own I decided to resign from my job in the bank and become a monk. I was then 29 years old and I had never been married. I left all my property to my mother - there was not actually very much to leave, because I had not been working for many years. I had been living in my parents' house.

At first my parents could not accept that I had joined this group. They were sure I could not be a monk for the whole of my life. Most parents feel like that. My family seldom comes to visit me, but they do come sometimes. When my mother was still alive, she used to come to visit me more often. She also tried to practice for about five years before she died. She became a vegetarian and had three meals a day. My brothers very seldom come to visit me. They do understand that this is a good way of life, but they cannot practice themselves. They cannot become vegetarians even if they do agree with the practice. It took me 15 months to become fully ordained, first I stayed as a *pa*, then as *nak* and then as a *samanutthet*.<sup>205</sup>

It is my aim to be a monk for the rest of my life although it is a very hard life. The most difficult thing is that our aim is so high, and we cannot be sure whether we can reach it. We can only imagine our goal, we cannot touch it. It is very hard to live the Asoke lifestyle, but I shall try to - step by step. There are four levels to reaching the goal. The first level is *Sodaban*<sup>206</sup>, the second level is *Sakitakhami*<sup>207</sup>, the third level is *Anakhami*<sup>208</sup> and the fourth level is *Arahan*<sup>209</sup>, which is our goal. I do not think we can reach the highest level in this life, but we have to try. I think I have reached the first level, the *Sodaban*-level. That requires that one can keep the five precepts. For the *Sakitakhami* level one would have to be able to keep the eight precepts and reduce the three *kilet*<sup>210</sup> - *moha*, *thosa* and *loba*.<sup>211</sup> On that level they should only be reduced, but on the third level, on the *Anakhami* level, they should be beaten and finished. *Arahan* is then the highest level, where one is enlightened with full mind.

I do believe that Phra Pothirak<sup>212</sup> has reached this level and is an *Arahan*. I am not sure if anyone else in Thailand has reached it. Phra Phutthathat<sup>213</sup> for instance did not understand the importance of eating vegetarian food. Eating vegetarian food is necessary if one is to keep the first precept, which means not killing by any means, or even allowing other people to kill for you.

I have been a monk for 17 years, and I have stayed in many different Asoke temples, in Santi, in Pathom, in Sali and in Sisa. For the last year and a month I have stayed in Sima Asoke. I like it here, the air is clean and fresh and I like the agricultural work we are doing here. There is still lots of work to do as this is a fairly new centre.

The most important thing in the Asoke group for me are my friends. We are

like one big family, I have many brothers and sisters here.

The negative view of the Asoke group comes from the government which refuses to recognise us. This is perhaps because of mainstream Buddhists who do not accept us because we have different practices. Each government tries to act according to the majority of the people, who are mainstream followers. Most of the Thai people are not well-educated. The more educated people understand the Asoke group better.

The government is trying to discredit Santi Asoke in order to please the mainstream Buddhists. Asoke is a small group in this country and we have no power to influence the government.

People do not believe that we are honest. They believe our group wants to get power to govern the mainstream, to take over the administration of the Buddhist hierarchy of the *mahatherasamakhom*<sup>214</sup>. The monks of the *mahatherasamakhom* do not want to lose their throne.

The pending court case is not our biggest problem. The court does not insist that we have to attend each time, only Phra Pothirak with a lawyer has to attend the trial every time it is on the agenda. The last time I was in the court was about 10 months ago. The court is situated in Wat Mahatahat in Bangkok. It is called a Buddhist court, but actually all the lawyers and even the judges are laymen. Only the premises are Buddhist.

The more important problem is how to increase the number of the group. I believe that Phra Pothirak is capable of expanding the group. He has power in himself. It is very hard to find a man like him.

It is not only important that the group should include many people; it is more important that people would understand us, they do not have to join us. People should understand our good intentions, but nowadays the people cannot be detached, they depend on the material world, which changes them. This world is a world of fear, and the people cannot trust each other very easily.

I do not look too far. I do not mind about the future, because there are many factors in the modern life. Jesus was crucified, and that was also a political problem.”

#### **4. 1. DOCTRINE, IDEOLOGY AND WORLDVIEW OF THE ASOKE**

In the last chapter, I examined some of the most important and famous Thai monks and analysed their teachings and their relationship to the state Buddhist hierarchy. In this chapter, I shall outline the teachings and practices of the Asoke group. How does the Asoke

differ from the mainstream, can it be regarded as “heretical” and “un-orthodox”?

I shall also examine the relationship between theory and practice, as I have noted that this has been a major problem with some Thai Buddhist monks and groups.

I shall begin by going through some of the printed materials published by the Asoke group which was made available to me. According to one of the first Asoke publications, “The New Trend of Buddhism in Thai Society”, religion should be regarded as the “structure of society” or the “structural pillar of society”. The Asoke thus indicate a greater emphasis on society than the metaphysical or theoretical tenets of Buddhism:

“A religious institution should help the society in solving its problems, otherwise the existence of the religious institution becomes meaningless, which has happened to the mainstream Buddhist institutions in Thailand. When the principles of any religion start to decline, then a religious leader will emerge trying to find new ways to restore the glory of religion and to revive its role in helping society.”<sup>215</sup> This seems to be an open declaration of a programme by the Asoke.

In their social orientation and social criticism, the group does not differ radically from the mainstream teachers Buddhadasa and Rajavaramuni. Bodhiraksa explained that he is interested in politics because politics is concerned with the life of the masses. One should therefore know it and understand it - or, as he puts it:<sup>216</sup> “Politics should be based on Buddhist principles”. Monks who are working with the people are already in a way involved in politics.<sup>217</sup>

The Asoke group divides Buddhist traditions into four categories depending on whether they decrease or increase people’s desires in life, and thus cause more human suffering. The first category is: “occult Buddhism”. Followers of occult Buddhism rely on mysterious powers, believe in superstition, lottery predictions, fortune-telling, sprinkling holy water, and the distribution of amulets. This way of teaching Buddhism increases people’s desires in life, but the ability to respond to these desires decreases. This is, according to the Asoke, represented by the mainstream monastic Buddhism.<sup>218</sup>

The second category is “capitalistic Buddhism”, which increases both the desires and the ability to satisfy the desires of the followers. This form of Buddhism encourages the practice of different kinds of meditation in order to calm the mind for a length of time. Once the mind becomes clear again they i.e. businessmen, executives and bankers who follow this form of Buddhism will engage themselves in competition with one other, and start to exploit society again.<sup>219</sup>

The third category is “hermetic Buddhism”, which decreases both the followers’ desires and their ability to satisfy these desires. This form emphasises isolation from society and encourages solitude in the forest. Although one may become an ascetic, who consumes very little, the Asoke group considers this type of Buddhism - as represented by the forest monks - a “selfish way out for oneself.”<sup>220</sup>

The fourth category is called “authentic Buddhism” or “fundamental Buddhism”, and the followers of this tradition can decrease their desires and simultaneously increase their productivity and creativity.<sup>221</sup> It helps people to decrease their selfishness, to become more industrious and hard-working, to consume less and share the rest of what they have with society.<sup>222</sup>

The Asoke sect views mainstream Buddhists as fitting into the three categories mentioned first; they classify the Dhammakaya and the forest monks as representatives of the mainstream.

According to the Asoke, mainstream sangha’s deviation from “authentic” Buddhism is the major cause of social and ethical deterioration in Thailand, and the basis for the emergence of the Asoke.<sup>223</sup>

The important role given to the lay people and Sikkhamats by the Asoke is an important characteristics of the movement. The mainstream only values monks. According to Bodhiraksa, however, the fact is that women can never be equal to men. He makes a comparison with nature where, regardless of species the “male protects female”, and subsequently female has to submit and be submissive to male.<sup>224</sup>

One criticism which is often made against the Asoke is their attitude towards meditation, a practice which is usually emphasised

in the other new Buddhist groups - even in the West. Bodhiraksa points out that meditation as such is not Buddhism, but only an aid.<sup>225</sup> Bodhiraksa claims that meditation is often misunderstood by the Buddhist groups. The Buddhist *samma samadhi* is not simply meditation, but the eighth step on the Noble Eightfold Path, the “right concentration”. The eighth level can be reached only by following the path, which includes “the set of four core constituents”:

- right thought
- right speech
- right action
- right livelihood.

Having oriented one’s path towards the four core constituents, one’s training will have to be completed by the next three core constituents:

- right view
- right effort
- right mindfulness,<sup>226</sup>

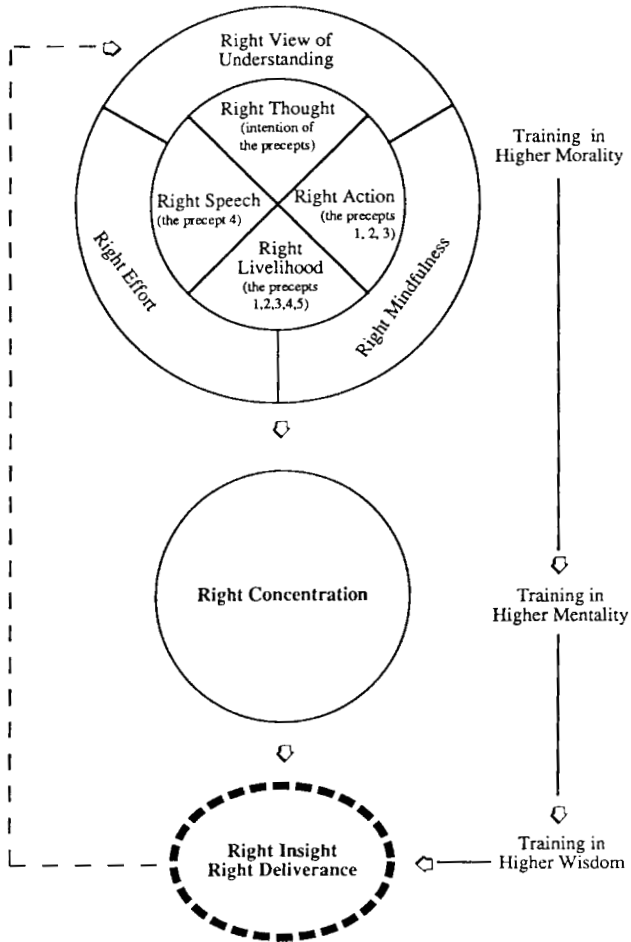
which will result in “right concentration” (*samma samadhi*). “Sitting doing nothing is not the whole Eightfold Path. Just control the mental activities is not the whole Eightfold Path.”<sup>227</sup>

The seven steps on the Noble Eightfold Path are regarded as the first phase of Asoke practices, called “training in higher morality”, which is a clear reference to the Buddhist precepts (*sila*). Following the precepts should reduce “lust, excessive desires, craving, clinging and attachment.” This method should purify the mind and free it from the five hindrances which are “sensual desires, ill-will, sloth and torpor, distraction, doubt and uncertainty.”<sup>228</sup> After this the person is capable of achieving “right concentration”, which is regarded as “training in higher mentality”, and which does not mean in the Asoke terminology meditation as such. The final result of this method is a kind of additional step on the Noble Eightfold Path “right insight and right deliverance”, which are results of “training in higher wisdom”:

“Higher wisdom, which is the ability to perceive reality as it is, will help raise the right views of right understanding. Higher

wisdom will in turn raise higher morality. Higher morality will raise higher mentality which in turn will elevate higher wisdom. Each supports and elevates the other. This is the dynamic effect of the Noble Eightfold Path. When one has successfully accomplished practising the Noble Eightfold Path, it is only natural that one will work harder, consume less and share the rest of what one has with society".<sup>229</sup>

**FIGURE 5:** Dynamics of the Noble Eightfold Path in Asoke <sup>230</sup>



Bodhiraksa emphasises that “Buddhism is a means and a tool to educating people to get detached from worldly desires and to have less suffering”. Buddhism should not be a means of helping people “to be educated, nor to get rich, nor to be in power”.<sup>231</sup>

Another dispute between the mainstream and the Asoke concerns their vegetarianism. The background for vegetarian practices is explained with a reference to Buddhist scriptures.<sup>232</sup> According to this, Buddha said that offering meat to the monks in order to increase their enjoyment of food is a demerit for the donor, whereas offering vegetarian food, is “immaculate merit”.

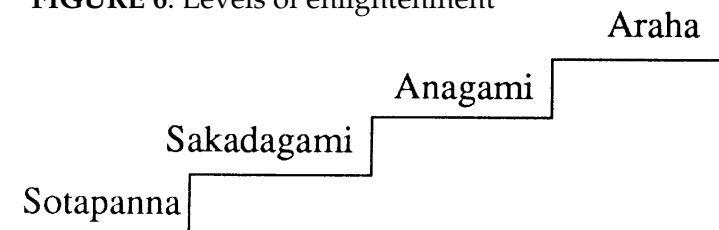
One of the most persistent accusations against Bodhiraksa has been directed at his declaration that he is a saint (*araha*) or a future Buddha (*bodhisattva*). According to the Theravada Buddhist tradition, a monk is not allowed to boast that he is enlightened. According to the Asoke interpretation, Bodhiraksa is not boasting that he is enlightened, he is merely stating the fact that he is enlightened.

Bodhiraksa’s concept of enlightenment or *nirvana*, distinctly differs from mainstream teachings.<sup>233</sup> Bodhiraksa has demystified the concept by dividing nirvana into present and future nirvana. The present nirvana is here and now and can be reached by getting rid of defilements (*kilet*). In the present life, nirvana is signified as a state of mind. The development into the state of nirvana goes through certain stages, which Buddhists can reach through their own struggle.

In mainstream Buddhism these stages are seen as steps on the long path of several rebirths (*samsara*). The first stage is a *sotapanna*<sup>234</sup>, a stream enterer who will become a saint (*araha*) within seven rebirths. The next stage is a *sakadagami*<sup>235</sup> a once-returned, who has destroyed the intermediate forms of sensual delight and ill-will. The next stage will be an *anagami*<sup>236</sup>, a non-returned, and the highest stage is finally an *araha*, who will enter nirvana at the time of his death.<sup>237</sup>



FIGURE 6: Levels of enlightenment



An *araha* is regarded as a *bodhisattva*. To be an *araha* is a state of mind, whereas to be a *bodhisattva* is the action to be taken by an *araha*. A *bodhisattva* is expected to help the other people in the world, since the *bodhisattva* has no self any longer and can therefore devote himself or herself entirely to the other people.<sup>238</sup>

The Asoke members are all encouraged to strive to become enlightened. According to the Asoke interpretation, these stages can be reached within this present life: the lowest stage *sotapanna* requires that the person is free of the following six vices: drinking, smoking, gambling, practising illicit sex, frequenting night entertainment, and laziness. In addition, the person should be able to follow the five precepts - abstain from killing, stealing, practising illicit sex, lying and becoming addicted. The person should also pay respect to the "Triple Gem", i.e. to be a good practising Buddhist respecting the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the sangha. According to the Asoke interpretation a *sotapanna* can even be married.

The next stage, *sakadagami*, can be reached by becoming free of passion and anger. The person should be able to follow the eight precepts. This requires that the person can, first of all, follow the five precepts, and furthermore this requires him or her to reduce the number of daily meals, refrain from singing, dancing and decorating him/herself, and to refrain from sleeping on elevated beds and sofas. The third precept in this case requires celibacy.<sup>239</sup>

The next step is *anagami*, when the person has become free from all worldly affairs, the person feels no temptation to worldly pleasures and worldly events do not have any effect on him or her. The person at this level still has some defilements within his or her mind, but they are not shown outside. The final stage is *araha*, when the

person is completely free from the idea of “self”, and can work for the benefit of others because he himself or she herself has no self. This stage is nirvana, which is a state of mind, in which the person has no self, and thus no selfishness, anger, greediness or delusion.

The concept of nirvana differs in the Asoke ideology from the general ideas of the Thai Buddhists. Nirvana is traditionally described as being something very distant, unimaginable and unreachable. Only monks might have a realistic chance of reaching nirvana. Ordinary lay people do not even orientate themselves towards nirvana, instead they concentrate on earning enough merit (*bun*) to be born in more favourable socio-economic conditions in the next life. Bodhiraksa, however, assures his followers that nirvana can be reached in this life since it is a state of mind. Nirvana is not something supernatural or otherworldly. To be enlightened means to be peaceful and calm.<sup>240</sup>

In a French book written by Sikkhamat Thipdevi and Aporn Poompanna, nirvana is described in Asoke terms as follows:

“C’est l’état neutre de l’âme des êtres vivants qui ont atteint leur équilibre parfait; aucun sentiment de contentement ni de mécontentement, aucun attachement ni repoussement, aucun sens d’égoïsme; état rempli de rien, état de calme, de tranquillité et de paix totale; état de conscience et de connaissance complete de tout. État de conscience de n’exister que pour être utile à tous les êtres vivants. C’est la fin totale du ‘moi.’”<sup>241</sup>

The idea of attainable nirvana brings Buddhism closer to the general public and encourages them to follow the ideals of Buddhist practices. It moves the sangha-centered practices down to a more individual and worldly level, such that even lay people can and should start to live according to the Buddhist precepts and Buddhist teachings. Losing the sangha-centeredness of mainstream Buddhism destroys the traditional interdependence between the sangha and the state. A sangha, no longer the focal point of all practice, can no longer legitimate the political authority of the state. Thus the idea of present nirvana is revolutionary and, indirectly, anti-state in the Theravada Buddhist context. The submissiveness of the underprivileged can also change if people are encouraged to struggle for nir-

vana through their own activities and their own way of life regardless of their position and status in the social, political and economic hierarchy.

Another significant deviation from the mainstream is that the temples of the Asoke group do not have any statues of Buddha. Therefore the group has been accused of not worshipping Buddha. Their own explanation is that only *dhamma* i.e. the doctrine can represent Buddha, not images or statues of him. *Dhamma* cannot be “moulded out of brick, stone, clay or cement into charms, locket, amulets or other adornments sold to the ignorant people.”<sup>242</sup>

One of the important differences between the practices of the mainstream temples and the Asoke is the issue of “holy water”. According to the Asoke group the sprinkling of the holy water does not free one from the law of karma or misfortune. It is better to get the “sprinkled words” and listen to sermons rather than getting one’s head wet for nothing, which can even cause the person to catch cold. People only waste their money on “holy water”.<sup>243</sup>

Bodhiraksa rejected both Mahanikai and Thammayutnikai. He claims that he is both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist. He sees no conflict between the two, contrary to the opinion of the Council of Elders (*mahatherasamakom*). He emphasises that he wants to bring unity in Buddhism. He claims that the Council has misunderstood Theravada Buddhism by claiming that the Asoke sect is not Theravada Buddhist. He still sees the Council as having “some parts of Buddhism” and does not wish to totally dissociate from them. On the other hand, Bodhiraksa accuses the mainstream Buddhists of becoming more and more secularised and, in that way, becoming more like the Japanese Mahayanist monks who can even get married.<sup>244</sup>

The Asoke group has a clear ecological message: they favour natural agricultural methods and recycle garbage. Bodhiraksa explains his emphasis on ecology with a reference to Buddha who also taught people to protect trees, preserve the forests and work for the conservation of an ecologically balanced environment. According to Bodhiraksa, the Asoke sect wants to teach urban people first, because rural people will then follow the example of the urban people.

He sees no great differences between Asoke and the “development”<sup>245</sup> monks in the Northeast.<sup>246</sup>

“Urban people who treasure money and power are more dangerous than people who believe in the ghosts”. Peasants can be superstitious, and believe in the spirits (*phi*), but they do not cause as much destruction to the nation and to the national security as city dwellers.<sup>247</sup>

Bodhiraksa sees the materialistic progress in the modern world as a dead end. It is only temporary, it will not last and it will not change anything in the world.<sup>248</sup> Bodhiraksa believes that the structure of society can be changed by causing a change in individuals. People solve problems at the wrong points when they try to change society without changing the individual. Individual change will result in the elimination of the human vices of craving, greed, anger and selfishness.<sup>249</sup>

Bodhiraksa criticises Buddhadasa’s methods of teaching for being “unrealistic”, since there is no real practice and no way to identify the results. The results of Buddhadasa are only words and, among his followers, there are no concrete examples of detachment, unlike the detachment which can be seen amongst the Asoke followers.<sup>250</sup> Bodhiraksa criticises the forest-dwelling meditation monks for being “too extreme”, being “beyond Buddhism”. Bodhiraksa emphasises that the Asoke group does not want to escape from the world in the way that the forest monks do.<sup>251</sup>

Bodhiraksa criticises the way of recruiting monks to the mainstream: “even if that person has a uniform, he is not a novice”. The Asoke requires the person to first show that he is able to follow the five precepts, then the eight precepts and then the ten precepts, after which he can be ordained as a novice.<sup>252</sup> Before being ordained the candidate faces a committee of monks. The committee has to be unanimous in its decision to accept the candidate. It is the jury of the monks which transforms a layman into a monk, and not the preceptor (*upachaya*). In the mainstream, the committee of monks has no real power according to Bodhiraksa.<sup>253</sup>

Bodhiraksa does not criticise monks who are “riding around in mercedes benz”. It is bad for a monk to possess such personal

riches but, if the owner offers his car as service to the monks, “there is nothing wrong with that”.<sup>254</sup> Yet it is not appropriate for a monk to live in a bigger house than lay people. The monks should not live better than ordinary people. Therefore, spending money on the luxuries or extravagances of the temples is unnecessary. The Thai people are not rich enough to afford the kind of beauty shown in many mainstream temples. There are already so many statues of Buddha in Thailand that, according to Bodhiraksa, there is no need to encourage the people to build more statues.<sup>255</sup> Bodhiraksa emphasises that he does not want to prevent the Thais from “worshiping the Buddha image”, but he would like to encourage the people to worship the ideas behind the image. It is, however, a misconception to believe that the Buddha images themselves have supernatural powers.<sup>256</sup>

Bodhiraksa is very confident that he represents “real Buddhism”. To his knowledge, “real Buddhism” exists only in Thailand, and only in the Asoke group.<sup>257</sup>

According to Bodhiraksa, the conflict with the mainstream concerns the concepts of *kamma*, *utaysa* and *sila*. *Kamma* includes three different things: behaviour, activities and ritual ceremonies. *Utaysa* refers to a way of explaining and interpreting, whereas *sila* refers to the precepts.<sup>258</sup> Bodhiraksa happily admits his lack of formal Pali language studies: “I have never studied Pali. But I can translate it with my own special intuition.”<sup>259</sup> Bodhiraksa claims he has found the “truth and wisdom” because of his *barami* - accumulated merit from previous lives.<sup>260</sup>

According to Bodhiraksa, he wants to teach people to work hard, to be honest and not be wasteful. The people should learn to work to their full capacity, so that they would have enough for themselves. Then there will be no need to steal, no need to take others’ share. When people can share their surplus with others, they could even afford to build something luxurious for the temple together.<sup>261</sup>

Bodhiraksa denies that he wants to change the world, he considers this to be “too ambitious” even to try. Instead, he believes that the world will change as a result of his work.<sup>262</sup> Bodhiraksa believes that he is supported by the “silent majority”.<sup>263</sup>

## 4.2. ASOKE ECONOMICS: MERITISM

In the field of economics Bodhiraksa propounds the ideology of merit-ism (*bun-niyom*). According to him the belief in *bun-niyom* encourages people to be good, to do good and to help others, so that people will gain more merit (*bun*). Following the path of *bun-niyom* will enable people to reach the ultimate goal of the Asoke group *Buddha-chaat-niyom* <sup>264</sup>. This refers to the birth of a "Buddha mind" which enables people to live according to the teachings of Buddha.

On reaching the state of *Buddha-chaat-niyom*, people live under ideal conditions where they "will be satisfied with their lives and with what they have. If they are satisfied with living in a small house, they will have a small house. If they need a big house, they will have a big house. There will be no jealousy between people who live in small houses and people who stay in big houses. If anybody needs a big car, he can have his big car. If they want a cart drawn by buffaloes, they can be satisfied with that and they will not be jealous of those who have a big car. It's only the mind and the heart that count in life, not those materialist things. The peace of mind and satisfaction can be equal for everybody".<sup>265</sup>

In capitalism (*thun-niyom*), people normally use the following four criteria to measure success in life: material riches, worldly position, fame and mundane pleasures. Capitalists want big houses and more money, whereas those who follow the *bun-niyom*-system will be satisfied with small houses, and they will not need much money in order to be happy. Capitalists demand more clothes and decorations, whereas followers of *bun-niyom* will be satisfied with simplicity and modesty. The capitalists prefer to work less for more money, whereas the *bun-niyom* group will work more and take less. The capitalists will use high technology for their construction and destroy the ecological system, whereas "we *bun-niyom*-ists are not interested in big buildings and high technology. We are conservationists of the environment. We plant trees and we do not cut them".<sup>266</sup>

In the practical terms, the *Bun Niyom* shops in all the Asoke centres try to follow the policy of meritism. One of its manifestations is that the goods have two prices labelled on them: the original price

for which it was purchased and the new price which the shop is selling the goods for. The difference between the prices is extremely low. There are officially four levels of *bun-niyom*: one can give the goods completely free of charge, one can sell for lower than the original price, one can sell for the same price, or one can take very little profit, which is the normal practice in the *Bun Niyom* shops. According to Bodhiraksa: "Our loss is our gain."<sup>267</sup>

FIGURE 7: *Bun-niyom* and *thun-niyom* in Asoke

	THUN-NIYOM	BUN-NIYOM
1. Characteristic	Endless economic growth	Economic growth in moderation based on religion
2. Objective	Material richness	Spiritual richness
3. Criteria of success	The four dreams - material riches - worldly position - fame - mundane pleasures	Free of personal desires of - material riches - worldly position - fame - mundane pleasures
4. Ultimate goal	Attachment to material richness	Detachment from material richness
5. Outlook	Big, more, luxurious competition, selfishness	Small, less, simple abundance generosity
6. Activities	Work less, take more administer, control	Work more, take less, manual, participation
7. Effect on the environment	Pollution, destruction of the balance of nature	Protection of the ecological system

One of the main ideologists of the Asoke group, Sunai Setboonsarng, has written a paper on Asoke economics analysing the relationship between demand and supply. According to Sunai,

in meritism the price of the product should be decided by the demand according to the following pattern: the first bowl of noodles should cost more than the second bowl since the demand - hunger - has decreased. The first bowl gives maximum satisfaction, whereas the second and the third bowl diminishes the satisfaction to zero and finally to the minus side.<sup>268</sup>

Sunai's other example deals with coats - owning one coat gives a full 10 units of satisfaction, because owning one coat is a necessity. Owning a second coat gives only 9 units in satisfaction, and thus the value diminishes the more coats one has. But if the person decides to give away his extra coats, and a person who really needs a coat buys one, then the value of the coat increases again to 10 units.<sup>269</sup>

According to Sunai, excessive productivity would be without value but, if properly allocated, the system would benefit the whole society. His ideas are close to the "Buddhist Economics" introduced by Ernst Schumacher who served as economic adviser to the Burmese Prime Minister U Nu from 1955-1962.<sup>270</sup> Schumacher claims that according to Buddhist economics, consumption only aims to fulfil people's basic needs. These basic needs should be satisfied by limited consumption. Buddhist economics therefore tries to "maximise human satisfaction by the optimal pattern of consumption, while modern economics tries to maximise consumption by the optimal pattern of productive effort".<sup>271</sup> According to Buddha the basic material needs were: food, clothes, shelter, and medicine. This is often quoted both by the Asoke members and the leading mainstream monks.

Buddhist economics, according to Schumacher, are based on simplicity and non-violence; "As physical resources are everywhere limited, people satisfying their needs by means of a modest use of resources are obviously less likely to be at each other's throats than the people depending upon a high rate of use. Equally, people who live in highly self-sufficient local communities are less likely to get involved in large-scale violence than people whose existence depends on world-wide systems of trade."<sup>272</sup>

In conclusion to this section, I would suggest that the ideology of the Asoke group does not radically differ from other trends that



there have been in Thai Buddhism. They share similar concerns with social affairs as Buddhadasa, Kittivuddho and Rajavaramuni. They have adopted the teachings of Buddhadasa concerning nirvana. Their economics are close to Buddhadasa's concepts of "social-ism". The difference between the mainstream and the Asoke does not seem to be so much ideological as practical. In the following sections, I shall explore Asoke practices in the form of rituals.

### **4. 3. PRACTICE IN THE ASOKE**

There is often a considerable difference between theory and practice in any religious or ideological group. In order to study Buddhist practice in the Asoke sect, I shall discuss the calendrical and the monthly ceremonies, the weekly and the daily schedules, and one special funeral ceremony. The Asoke sect has criticised the mainstream for holding too elaborate yet, empty ceremonies, and of lazy practices which makes a thorough investigation of Asoke practices necessary.

The Asoke sect has also criticised the mainstream for being materialistic and dealing with money - here I shall also examine the Asoke economics on a practical level.

#### **4. 3. 1. A calendrical ceremony: *plukse***

Several times a year, the Asoke sect organises larger national gatherings for all the monks, Sikkhamats and lay people, where the participants are required to follow quite ascetic and strict rules for about one week. One example of these ceremonies is *plukse*, which will be closely analysed here.

The *plukse* ceremony is organised in Sisa Asoke every year around the *maghabucha* day. The *maghabucha* day is observed by all Thai Buddhists as one of the most important religious days, and is even a public holiday in Thailand. The *maghabucha* ceremonies in the mainstream temples involve *tien wien* rituals, in which lay people circumambulate the main stupa three times with candles and lotus flowers in their hands.<sup>273</sup>

The Asoke group has celebrated *maghabucha* in Sisa Asoke since 1976 and the 1995 *plukse*, which I attended, was thus the 19th *plukse* of the Asoke group.<sup>274</sup> The name of the ceremony refers to the magic rites that the mainstream monks perform in order to sacralise or consecrate amulets or other religious objects. The idea of the Asoke group is to “sacralise” the people (*plukse khon*) by preaching to them continuously for seven days.<sup>275</sup>

In 1995, there were some 80 Asoke monks attending the *plukse* and about 15 Sikkhamats. In addition to the Asoke monastics there were some 50 monks and novices from the mainstream sangha. The mainstream monks, however, are prohibited from having any contacts with the Asoke group, they can be disrobed, if the Council of Elders (*mahatherasamakhom*) learned about their association with the Asoke. Of the 50 mainstream monks, there were about 10 very young novices, aged between 10 to 15. Most of these monks originated from temples in the Northeast. All these monks stayed in Sisa Asoke for the whole ceremony, i.e. for seven days. They were placed among the Asoke monks according to the number of years they had been ordained. The young novices even came before the oldest Sikkhamats according to the hierarchical order of the Asoke.<sup>276</sup>

#### Daily schedule during *plukse*

3.15	wake up
3.30	chanting
4.00	preaching
6.00	almsround
8.30	gathering in the temple
9.00	preaching
10.30	eating
12.00	free programme
14.00	discussions
16.00	free
18.00	discussions
21.00	silence

The lay people are expected to live like the Asoke monks during the *plukse* ceremony - they have to sleep in the open air under a mosquito net, or under an umbrella with a mosquito net, wake up around 3 a.m., attend the preaching in the temple starting with chanting at 3.30 a.m., follow the monks to their almsround barefoot, and eat only one meal a day before noon.<sup>277</sup>

The early morning session starts with chanting<sup>278</sup> at 3.30 a.m., which lasts for about half an hour. Everyone who registers in the *plukse* receives a leaflet with the prayers for the morning sessions, so that they can follow the chanting. While chanting, all the monks and the lay people face in the same direction, as if there was a statue of Buddha in front. After the chanting session the monks turn around to face the lay people and Bodhiraksa starts to preach around 4 a.m. He preaches every morning for nearly two hours. After preaching the monks, the Sikkhamats and the lay people prepare themselves to go out for the almsround.

Several small groups of monastics and lay people are formed for the almsround. Two groups walk around the temple compound and visit the neighbouring villages. Three other groups are transported by cars and trucks to the nearest town Kantharalekh, where they walk for more than one hour for an almsround and visit the big morning market.

At the end of the procession, the lay people walk barefoot, which usually causes great suffering. Most of the people manage to walk only once or twice with the monks, as their feet became tender after the long walk. The lay people walk about one meter behind the last monk, and they are not allowed to say anything to each other or to the outsiders; they must behave in the same manner as the monastics on their almsround.

During the almsround, the truck sometimes stops to offer the monastics the possibility of emptying their almsbowls so that they are able to receive more from the merit-makers. My observation in 1995 was that very little food was donated to the Asoke monks, usually only a handful of sticky rice and a couple of fruits, due to the poverty of the Northeast and to the fact that Thais are not used to preparing vegetarian food for the monks.<sup>279</sup>

After the almsround in Kantharalekh, the cars and trucks take the monastics and the lay people back to Sisa Asoke. On the street in front of the Sisa Asoke temple there is a group of vendors who sell fruits and vegetarian food to the lay people who want to donate to the monastics. Some of the sellers are Asoke members, but most of them originate from the surrounding villages. Many of the sellers belong to the *suay* ethnic group. One of the nearest villages to the Sisa Asoke temple compound is a *suay* village, where some Asoke monks go regularly for an almsround every morning. The monastics climb out of the cars in front of the temple compound and once more give the opportunity to the lay people to donate food to them i.e. to make merit. Often the lay people who have been walking with them on the almsround use the opportunity to donate to the monastics on this occasion. The monastics return to the temple around 8 o'clock, and the people then slowly start to move to the temple again.

The next preaching session starts around 8.30 a.m. when Bodhiraksa reads newspapers aloud for about half an hour.<sup>280</sup> At 9 a.m. two monks preach until 10 o'clock when the food is distributed. It takes about half an hour to distribute the food to the 2000 participants and thus at 10.30 the people can start to eat after a short prayer. The people eat for approximately one hour, but by twelve o'clock at the latest one should finish one's meal. A few minutes past noon is, however, not regarded as any kind of breaking of the rules.

After the meal there is a free programme. In 1995, there were demonstrations of natural agriculture and natural fertilizers each day, encouraging the peasants to change their agricultural methods. The peasants were also strongly encouraged to form co-operatives in order to gain government support for their projects. In the afternoon, there were often meetings for different interest groups, many people went to consult the monastics, or donated blood to the nurses who had arrived there from the closest hospital or had their hair cut or rested outdoors.

The next programme began at 2 p.m. It can be a light discussion on a specific topic. As the *maghabucha* day in 1995 happened to fall on St. Valentine's Day, which is widely observed in Thailand, the afternoon discussion dealt with the topic of love. Two monks

and one Sikkhamat jokingly spoke of their experiences of love, and how they finally managed to escape the suffering caused by the feeling. The Asoke group repeatedly emphasises the benefits of staying single, and views love and sex only as causes of suffering.

For two afternoons, Bodhiraksa answered questions posed by the public. The questions had been given to him by the public in written form. The questions concerned various topics such as evil spirits, the predictions of Nostradamus, other religious groups in Thailand, possibilities for homosexuals to practise Dhamma, Buddhist concepts in Pali and specific problems concerning practising Asoke Buddhism.

Bodhiraksa's answers were often very short; he referred to the publications of the Asoke group concerning conceptual matters, in response to all the questions on supernatural phenomena, he denied their existence very strongly and shortly. The public continued insisting that there must be some unpredictable spirits - "at least in the banana trees". The female spirit of the banana tree is regarded as one of the most powerful ones and, thus, it appears to be difficult for ordinary peasants to stop propitiating her.

Between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. there was free time, during which people usually rushed to take a bath, to wash their clothes and prepare their mosquito net before the falling of the darkness.

The evening programme started at six o'clock. On the *maghabucha* day Bodhiraksa preached in the yard of Sisa Asoke compound under spotlights. His monks and Sikkhamats gathered at his feet. The lay people were further behind on the field fighting with the local notoriously aggressive mosquitos. The topic of the evening preaching was once again love, because the day coincided with St. Valentine's Day. Bodhiraksa explained the Buddhist concepts of the "ten dimensions of love"; love for Buddha being the highest level, and sexual love the lowest level.

The other evening programmes gave an opportunity for the lay people to describe their experiences of practising Buddhism. Usually there was one monk on the stage with three or four laypersons. The monk then questioned the lay persons and let them tell their stories. The stories were strikingly similar; everyone admitted

to having been a very bad and hot-tempered person, killing animals, eating meat, drinking alcohol, using drugs, indulging in sensual pleasures and fighting with the other people. After meeting the Asoke group and Bodhiraksa they had become much better human beings, according to their own statements. In addition the lay people often described their dreams which they analysed as predictions to the future. They explained their earlier bad actions as causing bad *karma*, which then caused accidents or other serious difficulties in their life. One good example of this was a woman, who had lost her left arm in a bus accident; she interpreted this by claiming that she has lost her arm because she used to kill fish with her left hand.

The evening programme formed a clear contradiction to the day programme which tried to deny all the magic and supernatural beliefs of the Thais, and played down the popular speculations on short term karmic consequences. The way in which new members boasted about their goodness of character contradicted the idea of decreasing the ego, which is one of the purported aims of Buddhism.

This can be interpreted as a way of teaching people since the following morning the exciting ideas of instant karmic results were again denied in the sermons, and the official Asoke doctrines were emphasised. The evening programme is, however, very popular among the lay people, as it allows a peep into the private lives of other people. It is very cathartic for an Asoke lay person who confesses his or her former bad deeds. It also provides useful information for the monastics and reminds them of the variety of problems ordinary lay people face in their worldly lives.

*Plukse* is a typical example of a traditional Thai Buddhist ritual which the Asoke has revitalised and reinterpreted to suit their own teachings.

#### **4. 3. 2. Other calendrical ceremonies**

The Asoke group observes all the Buddhist holy days of the year, although Asoke may change the character of the ritual, as was shown in my discussion of their version of the *plukse* ceremony during the *maghabucha* time. The observation of Buddhist rituals fol-

lows the lunar calendar, thus changing every year. The following list of annual ceremonies gives the period of the rituals in 1995.

Calendrical ceremonies:

FEBRUARY	<i>Plukse</i> in <i>maghabucha</i> in Sisa Asoke
APRIL	<i>Phuttha phisek</i> in <i>songkhran</i> in Sali Asoke
MAY	<i>Asoke rumluke</i> in <i>visakhabucha</i>
JUNE	Bodhiraksa's birthday in Rajathani Asoke
JULY	<i>Rambucha</i> in <i>asalhabucha</i> , Ramkhamhaeng University
OCTOBER	<i>Ok phansa</i> in all centres at the end of the Buddhist Lent
OCTOBER-NOVEMBER	<i>Mahapawarana</i> in Pathom Asoke
DECEMBER	<i>Rongbun</i> on the king's birthday
DECEMBER	<i>Thammachaart Asoke</i> in Chumphon
DECEMBER-JANUARY	<i>Pimai</i> in the New Year in Pathom Asoke

*Phuttha phisek* is celebrated for one week in Sali Asoke during the Buddhist new year (*songkhran*) in April, and shares many of the characteristics of *plukse*.

The *mahapawarana* after the Buddhist Lent in October, also lasts for about a week and is held in Pathom Asoke. The high point for the lay people is the election of the new abbots to each Asoke centre, whereas for the monastics the most important thing is the national gathering, where the monastics are encouraged to criticise each other. The monks and the Sikkhamats have their day-long *mahapawarana* meetings on different days. No lay people are allowed to attend the meeting, and the discussions are never reported to the lay followers.

Another, nearly week-long, ceremony is *Thammachaart Asoke* which is spent outdoors in a forest outside the city of Chumphon. The ceremony is like a carnival, and many of the Asoke rules can be broken there. The people are allowed to eat, drink, sing, dance and sleep whenever they wish. The children particularly enjoy this week, whereas some elder Asoke members find the whole occasion unnecessary.

Other ceremonies last only for one or two days. On the king's birthday, the Asoke members distribute vegetarian food free of charge all over in Thailand. The names of the donors, the budget, and the number of the volunteers are carefully documented in the Asoke publication *Saan Asoke*, as well as the number of the persons receiving food.

New Year (*pimai*) is celebrated for a few days in Pathom Asoke, the main attraction is a New Year's market, where the Asoke people sell different goods at very low prices in the spirit of "meritism" (*bun-niyom*).

### 4. 3. 3. Monthly ceremonies

The Asoke group has also developed some monthly ceremonies observed by members in the different centres. These days are chosen according to the lunar calendar and they are also followed by the mainstream. The full moon day is traditionally observed by all Buddhists, and one of the Asoke monks' fortnightly conferences falls on the full moon day, which is also always celebrated as monks' day (*wan phra*) in the mainstream. The other monks' conference falls on the empty moon day, whereas the fortnightly conferences of the Sikkhamats are held on the half-moon days.

During the monks' and Sikkhamats' conferences, the building where they convene is strictly secluded from the lay people, and the ceremony appears to be conducted in great secrecy. The ceremony starts with Buddhist chanting after which everyone should confess their breaking of the precepts or *vinaya* rules, if this has occurred. In Santi Asoke, for instance, some Sikkhamats are allowed to eat or sleep in the afternoon for health reasons. These kinds of breaks to the *vinaya* rules will then be confessed to the others.<sup>281</sup>

There is one monthly ceremony in Santi Asoke and another one in Pathom Asoke organised by the school children - called respectively eating in the room (*kin khao hong*) and eating at the shore (*kin khao haat*). Both parties are extremely noisy and the older people find these childrens' parties somewhat annoying, but the children love them.



The children wake up around 4 a.m., as usual, and start to prepare food which they then sell to the Asoke lay people. Around 8 o'clock some of the monks and the Sikkhamats go for an almsround in the area, where the party is being organised, offering the opportunity for both children and adults to donate food in order to make merit. After the almsround, the monastics eat the food on a stage elevated for them in the area where the party will be arranged. In Santi Asoke, this area is a small lawn field inside the Sikkhamats' compound, and in Pathom Asoke the day is celebrated at the artificial pond. Practically the whole morning is spent eating.

After the meal, the children climb onto the stage to sing, dance and tell jokes in Thai and Lao. The loudspeakers prevent anyone in the Sikkhamats' compound in Santi Asoke from escaping the merry-making. In Pathom Asoke the area is bigger and the noise is concentrated at the corner of the Pathom Asoke compound, where the clinic and the rest home "*Baan Aromdii*" are situated.

Monthly ceremonies:

Santi Asoke	Last Sunday of the month	kin khao hong
Santi Asoke	One day a month	kin khao suan
Pathom Asoke	Last Monday of the month	kin khao haat

The third party, eating in the garden (*kin khao suan*), organised by the children of Santi Asoke, takes them to a garden outside the centre. Once a month, the children of Santi Asoke travel in trucks to a garden, Suan Samwa, where they work and eat with each other. There is no fixed day when the children go to the garden to eat, often the day falls on a Sunday or Monday, which is their holiday from school anyway.

The purpose of these parties is to collect money for the schools and to offer a day of recreation to the members of the Asoke group.

#### 4. 3. 4. Weekly and daily schedules

According to tradition, Wednesday is the “silent day” in Santi Asoke. In the past, the group members refused to talk to anyone on Wednesdays, but nowadays with the schools, shops and other activities, this rule cannot be followed as strictly as earlier. Instead, on Wednesdays there is no preaching, but people still wake up at 3.30 a.m. and are encouraged to study their own mind by meditating or by working. Very often, however, Wednesday mornings are used for holding meetings such as the teachers’ meetings which are held on the first Wednesday of the month at 4 a.m. Although there is no sermon, there can still be reading of the newspapers before the meal. No videos are shown in the evening, instead there can be some other meetings for the volunteers working in Santi Asoke.

Daily schedule in Santi Asoke for the monastics:

3.00	waking up
3.30	gathering in the temple
3.45	chanting
4.00	preaching
5.30-6.00	preparing for the almsround ( <i>pintabaat</i> )
6.00-8.00	almsround
9.00	preaching
10.00-12.00	meal
12.00	silent minute for world peace
18.00	videos
21.00	silence

There can be many exceptions to the schedule depending on the individual duties of each person. Monks and Sikkhamats eat when they have free time. The only rule strictly observed is that the meal should be consumed before noon. There can, however, even be exceptions to this, especially for health reasons. On Saturdays and Sundays, especially if Bodhiraksa is in Santi Asoke, the sermon lasts

longer, and the meal will be started later, thus the people cannot finish their meal before 12 o'clock. Then they just continue eating.

There is a possibility to meditate in a group in the afternoon at 4 p.m. There is also a group of monastics and lay people who practise *tai-chi* for half an hour every day under the leadership of a monk in Santi Asoke.

At 6 p.m. a large number of monastics, lay people and children gather in front of the video-sets, either in the main temple or in the backroom of the Palang Bun-shop, in the Thammasot-office or in the entrance hall of the building, where the laywomen, permanent and temporary guests, live. Some movies are so popular that almost everyone tries to find a seat in front of the TV, but sometimes there are only a few persons watching TV. The biggest hit in 1995 was the historical Chinese drama series, "Judge Pao", which was shown every evening on Thai TV. On Wednesday nights, no movies are shown to follow the old tradition of a "silent day". It is also possible to continue working, particularly in the computer room of the publishing house, Fah Apai, the typing continues until 9 p.m., sometimes even until 9.30 p.m. The gates to the temple compound are locked at 9 p.m., but all the monastics and aspirants have keys. The school boys staying in the school building sometimes arrive at the temple compound too late and have to stay overnight wherever they can find shelter in the other buildings.<sup>282</sup>

#### **4. 3. 5. Special ceremonies in Asoke: funerals**

The Asoke monks and Sikkhamats often attend funeral rites in the other temples. When a family member of an Asoke person dies, the family usually wants to hold a traditional funeral in one of the mainstream temples. In those cases some Asoke monks or Sikkhamats are invited to attend the rituals performed by the mainstream monks. Theoretically, the mainstream is not allowed to invite the Asoke monks, or to have any contacts with them, but it is always up to the decision of the individual mainstream abbot.

The traditional funeral rituals involve a couple of days of vigil chanting, where the mainstream monks chant Pali texts to alleviate

the path of the deceased one to the next life. In some cases, the Asoke monks have also been invited to speak after the mainstream chanting. The Asoke monks do not perform any chanting neither in Pali nor in Thai, instead they direct their words to console the family members and not the deceased one.

In some cases, when all those who belong to a family are members of the Asoke group, the whole ritual can be held in the Asoke temples. In that case, evening gatherings are organised for two or three evenings, depending on the wishes of the family. The coffin is placed in the temple, covered with flowers and wreaths, in front of the coffin there is a big picture of the deceased person. Candles are lit on both sides of the picture. In that respect the Asoke ceremony does not differ radically from the mainstream.

The family members and friends gather in the Asoke temple for several evenings and the monks preach for about two hours, after which some food can be served to the guests who are not Asoke adherents, and who thus have no restrictions concerning the number of meals.

The final part of the funeral rituals, the burning of the corpse, can only be performed in Pathom Asoke or in Sisa Asoke. The coffin will be transported to one of these places early in the morning. The coffin will be placed in the temple during the morning sermon once more. The preaching may touch on the question of death or discuss more widely the impermanence of the world, but as the funeral rituals have already been performed, this preaching does not have to concern death.

The final rituals are performed in the afternoon. The coffin will be carried from the temple to the pyre in a long procession. The procession is headed by Bodhiraksa or by the abbot of that temple, and followed by the monks, novices and the Sikkhamats. After the monastics a family member carries the picture of the deceased, after whom the men carrying the coffin follow. After the coffin the lay people walk in a procession. Everybody in the procession carries a piece of wood in his or her hand. When the procession arrives in the field where the pyre is waiting the procession walks three times around the pyre in smaller and smaller circles. Finally the proces-

sion stops and the corpse is placed on the pyre in the coffin or without the coffin. Then the monks and the Sikkhamats go to place their pieces of wood to cover the corpse, after which all the lay people can go to place their pieces of wood too. This is conducted fairly unceremoniously causing quite a chaotic rush. After the pyre has been constructed petrol is poured on it. Bodhiraksa or the abbot of the temple says a few final words about human life and death after which he sets the pyre on fire. The lay people start leaving the scene as soon as the pyre is burning, whereas the monks and the Sikkhamats stay longer. The family members can then serve some cold drinks and distribute some religious books or tapes free of charge, as an act of merit making for the deceased.<sup>283</sup>

The Asoke rituals are generally very simple lacking all the rhythmic chanting and burning of candles and joss sticks of the mainstream ceremonies.

#### 4. 4. ASOKE ECONOMICS: FOUNDATIONS

Santi Asoke, as a co-ordinating centre, takes care of the financial side of the Asoke movement. The Santi Asoke offices deal with four separate sections. Two of these are in the form of associations: the Dhamma Practitioner Association (*samakhom phu patibat tham*) and *Thammathaat Samakhom*, the latter selling religious tapes and books. The two other sections are foundations: The Thamma Santi foundation (*Muniti Thamma Santi*) and Dhamma Army foundation (*Muniti Gongthub Dharm*).<sup>284</sup>

The Dhamma Practitioner Association used to be led by Chamlong Srimuang, but is currently chaired by the former police officer Rungrong Ruangrit. The association runs the two ricemills (*rongsii*) in Khon Kaen and in Pathom Asoke, the four vegetarian restaurants belonging to the Vegetarian Society of Thailand in Bangkok, Nakhon Pathom, Nakhon Ratchasima and Chiang Mai, and the public library in Santi Asoke. The Dhamma Practitioner Association holds a meeting once a month where they decide about the financing and development of these activities among other things.

The other association, *Thammathaat Samakhom*, is lead by Sawat

Wongnaraa, and is responsible for the offices, “Phanaek Thammathaat” and Thammasot, which sell and send tapes to the practitioners.

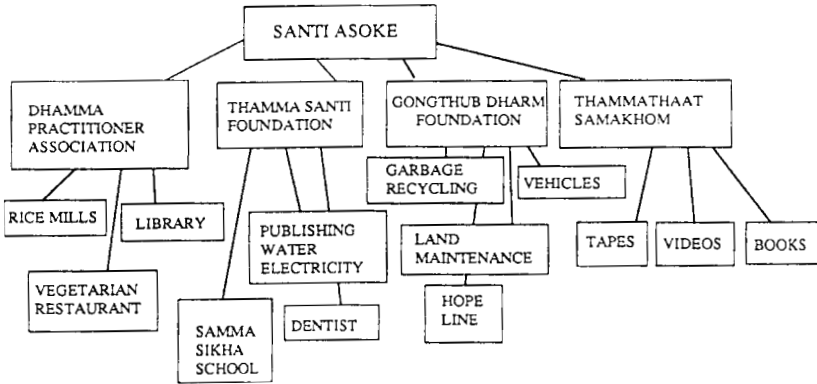
The Thamma Santi foundation (*Muniti Thamma Santi*) is chaired by Mrs. Kittiya Viraphon, who is the owner of the land on which the Santi Asoke Buddhist centre is built.

The Dhamma Army foundation (*Gongthub Dharm*) is chaired by Chamlong Srimuang. This foundation owns and provides all the vehicles the Asoke group uses. The Asoke have about a dozen modern air-conditioned vans, each of them accommodating approximately ten passengers. Usually the monks and Sikkhamats, and sometimes even the elderly lay people, travel in these vehicles. There are more than 20 pick-up trucks transporting both people and goods between the centres and other places. Usually, the lay people and school children are transported in these vehicles, they take some 20 persons on board. Sometimes the monks and Sikkhamats also travel in trucks.

The Dhamma Army foundation (*Gongthub Dharm*) deals with the land that the Asoke group uses either for buildings or agriculture and gardening. The foundation is also responsible for garbage disposal, where recycling is favoured.

One further activity of the Dhamma Army foundation is a telephone line called “Hopeline”, where three laypersons from the Asoke group counsel people in their life crises from noon to 8 p.m. “Hopeline” was opened in 1989 and receives approximately 12 phone calls a day. The Dhamma Army foundation also runs the smaller printing house in Pathom Asoke.

**FIGURE 8:** The structure of Santi Asoke foundations



All the people working in these associations or foundations work on a voluntary basis.

There are two private companies attached to the Asoke group: the Palang Bun-shops and the Fah Apai<sup>285</sup> publishing company. The Palang Bun together with the Bun Niyom-shops are showcases of the Asoke ideology of *bun niyom*. There are Bun Niyom-shops in every Asoke centre.<sup>286</sup>

The other private company is the Fah Apai publishing house,<sup>287</sup> which prints all the materials that the Asoke group orders to be printed free of charge. The company is supported by the Thamma Santi foundation who buy the paper and the ink and other materials needed for the printing work. The books and magazines are thus published by the foundation, but printed by the Fah Apai. The printing house also accepts orders from outside, although, with a certain exception: the material should not be against the morals and ethics of the Asoke group. The employees in Palang Bun and in Fah Apai receive monthly salaries.

The Asoke lay followers support the whole Asoke group financially. The group has established an institution similar to a bank, called Welfare Merit bank (*Gongbun sawaddikhaan*). Lay people regularly deposit money in this bank, but they do not receive any interest for their money. If they themselves need the money, they can with-

draw the money at any time. They are provided with a lightblue bankbook, which states the rules of the bank. The book must be shown on withdrawal. If they want to withdraw more than 50 000 *baht* they have to inform the accountants in advance. In case of damage to, or loss of the book, one has to inform the officials about it. The deposit is valid only after the official has stamped the book.<sup>288</sup>

The money in the Welfare Merit bank (*Gongbun sawaddikhaan*) can be used to help temple residents in case of illness, and can be lent to the other centres for construction projects or any other projects. The ricemills and the vegetarian restaurants can borrow money from this bank without interest. This bank regularly pays money to the Thamma Santi foundation 3000 *baht* a month, which is used to support the Fah Apai printing house. Lay people can donate money either directly to a healthcare department (*klum krong phai*) or to the Welfare Merit bank. The money from the healthcare department goes into the bank anyway. The Welfare Merit bank finally deposits the money in the Krung Thai Bank.

In January 1995, the Thamma Santi foundation received 217 938, 75 *baht* and spent 168 579, 75 *baht*. The Welfare Merit bank (*Gongbun Sawaddikhaan*) had collected 23 million *baht* in four years, about one million USD. In February 1995, only three million *baht* were left, since most of the money had been invested in the construction projects: temples for Santi Asoke and Sisa Asoke and a new school building for Pathom Asoke. The declared policy of the Thamma Santi foundation is not to collect money, but to use it to “benefit the society”.

According to the rules of the Thamma Santi, the foundation should not accept any donations from people who do not know the “essential activity” of the foundation. A person must have visited the Asoke centres at least seven times, or read at least seven Asoke-publications before he or she can donate i.e. make merit to the foundation.<sup>289</sup> This is not strictly controlled, but the rule does keep away the publicity-seeking wealthy business people, politicians and military leaders with political ambitions who frequently donate to the other temples as was described in Chapter III.



#### 4. 4. 1. The hierarchy of money use in the Asoke

A definitive division is drawn between the persons in the Asoke group who still deal with money and the persons who no longer are permitted to deal with money.

In Theravada Buddhism, monks are theoretically not allowed to deal with money, but in the Thai Buddhist mainstream this rule is very openly broken at every level. Monks can be seen buying newspapers, cigarettes, soft drinks and other commodities with money. They can be seen riding taxis and *trishwas* and paying with money. Lay people often donate money in form of money trees or in envelopes to monks during the *kathin* ceremony or in other calendrical or family ceremonies. At the same time, popular monks are known to possess millions of *bahts*; a popular monk in Nakhon Ratchasima donated 72 million *baht* (over 3 million USD) to the king for charity purposes to mark his own 72nd birthday.<sup>290</sup>

In the Asoke group, the monks and Sikkhamats are absolutely prohibited from dealing with money, which does not mean that they would not be allowed to touch money. They can touch money if it is placed in their hands, but they are not allowed to go to a shop to buy things with that money. All the needs and wants of the monastics are sponsored by the lay people. The lay people may “invite” (*pa warana*) the monks and Sikkhamats which means that they simply ask whether there is anything they can donate. This gives the monastic an opportunity to tell what is missing - it can be papers and pencils, medicine or other things.<sup>291</sup>

The hierarchy of money use also separates the aspirants from the novices. The aspirants are still allowed to use money and, therefore, often accompany the monks to hospitals or on journeys in order to pay for their expenses, even if the money itself is probably donated by a lay person.

Hierarchy of the money use in Asoke:

USING NO MONEY	USING MONEY
MONKS	ASPIRANTS
NOVICES	TEMPLE RESIDENTS AND GUESTS
NUNS	OUTSIDE LAY PEOPLE

Among the lay people there is also a certain hierarchy how money is handled. Several temple residents theoretically still receive a salary from their work in the shops, in the offices or in the printing house, but many of them donate their whole salary automatically to one of the foundations supporting the activities in the Asoke centres. Those who donate all their money to the foundations are proud to say that they have no money, whereas those who still keep their salaries, or at least the main part of it, comfort themselves with different explanations as to why they still keep the money. Supporting elderly parents with that money is a common explanation. Yet those still dealing with money are not regarded as being really serious practitioners in the eyes of those who no longer deal with money.

Surprisingly, many of the temple residents or other volunteers are also economically supported by their families. If they want to travel abroad or in Thailand, they are sponsored by their family members for their journey. This is seen as a more respectable alternative than using and collecting one's own money for the same purpose.

The lay people who still work outside the temple and earn salaries from these positions regularly donate a part of their salary to the foundations. These people mention having plans of resigning from their worldly positions and starting to work full-time for the Asoke group. Working outside is regarded by the practitioners themselves as somewhat embarrassing, and reasons for working outside need good excuses like supporting elderly parents and other family reasons. To work for free in the temple is the ultimate condition that all the Asoke practitioners have accepted and are struggling to attain.

#### **4. 5. SUMMARY**

From my examination of the theory and practice of the Asoke, it would seem that their ideas come very close to the teachings of the leading mainstream monk Buddhadasa - both reject the magic-animistic practices, the elaborated rituals and decorated temples and the worshipping of Buddha statues. In this sense it is rather difficult to conclude that the Asoke group is "heretical" or even "un-orthodox". It is clearly a sectarian Buddhist group, presenting its own interpretation of Buddhism which, both in theory and in practice,

differs from mainstream Buddhism.

According to Bryan Wilson<sup>292</sup>, the sects claim to have better access to salvation. This is quite obvious in the Asoke where the interpretation of enlightenment is very different from the mainstream. Bodhiraksa has considerably demystified the concept of enlightenment, thus present *nirvana* can be reached by following the moral precepts.

The Asoke also share Buddhadasa's social orientation and social criticism. Their criticism of consumerism, wasting money and resources while forgetting the ordinary Thai people does not differ radically from Prayudh Payutto's comments on modernisation, Westernisation and the Thai state. In that sense, they are not more "political" than some other leading monks.

It is also worth of noticing that the group does practise what they preach. They do live in very modest surroundings, eat very little, sleep very little and work very hard on their own projects. The Asoke has avoided major sex scandals in their temples - persons involved in anything close to a sex scandal have immediately been expelled. Nor has there been any embezzlement of the public funds.

As Wilson indicates, it is important for a sect to manifest a higher moral ethos than the mainstream, which also explains the emergence of the sect and legitimises the existence of the sect.

On the other hand, the group has a reputation for being extremely strict in its practices. But, as I demonstrated some breaking of the rules is accepted in the group for health reasons. For example, some monastics are allowed to wear slippers, some are allowed to eat in the afternoon, some are allowed to sleep in the afternoon and some are allowed to stay in a concrete building instead of a *kuti*. My impression is that the group does emphasise strict practice, but does not force anyone to follow these practices. It is up to the individual to struggle to follow the rules of the Asoke group. I will discuss the type of asceticism favoured by the Asoke group in the next chapter.