

V ASCETICISM, CAPITALISM AND SOCIAL VALUES

Biography of Sikkhamat Rinpha, Pathom Asoke

"I was born on the 26th of September in 1946, 48 years ago in the Suphanburi province of Central Thailand. I was the eldest child of seven. My father was a public prosecutor and my mother was a housewife. My mother sometimes bought and sold diamonds to other ladies, she always loved diamonds very much.

My family is a Thai family, my father originates from Nakhon Nayok in Central Thailand and my mother's family comes from Ayutthaya, the former capital of Thailand.

I have two sisters and four brothers. I studied medical technology. My brother, the second eldest of us children, studied business administration. The third child in our family, a girl, is an accountant; she graduated from the Ramkhamhaeng University. The second boy in our family studied mathematics at the Silpakorn University and is now working in a computer company. The third boy studied law at Ramkhamhaeng and was working in the court dealing with drug addicts. He gave up his career seven years ago to become a monk. He is now staying in a monastery in Chiang Mai. My other sister studied education at Chulalongkorn University. The youngest boy in our family also studied law at Ramkhamhaeng University to Bachelor's degree level. He followed his elder brother and also joined a monastery. He is now living as a monk in Wat Asokaram in Samut Prakarn.

The elder of my two brothers, who is a monk, was also originally interested in the Asoke group and he kept the eight precepts but, when he then finally joined the monkhood, he decided to join the mainstream because - as he told me - he did not want to work, only practice in order to achieve enlightenment.

I studied medical technology at Mahidol University in Bangkok for three years. After that I decided to continue my studies abroad since I had the opportunity to go to the United States for two years. I studied medical technology in New Jersey for one and half a years from 1969 to 1970, after which I worked in Mountainside hospital for six months.

After the six months, I and my Thai friend, decided to return to Thailand as she felt very homesick. Actually, she was worried what was going on in her boyfriend's life as she had not received any letters from him for a long time. We decided not to return directly from the United States, but take the other route and make a stopover in Europe. In 30 days we visited nine European countries - England, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Monaco and France.

We returned to Thailand on a different flight than the one we originally planned so, when we arrived in Thailand, nobody was waiting for us. When land-

ing at Don Muang airport, which was then under construction, I looked through the window and started to think for the first time in my life: Is this Thailand? Is this the world? Is this all that there is in the world? From the aeroplane I could see the landscape and the sea, and everything looked just the same as in Europe. The mountains of Thailand looked like Switzerland, the sea was blue like the Mediterranean sea. Is this all the world can offer - the same kinds of seas and mountains everywhere?

Since nobody was waiting for us, we had to take a taxi. My parents lived in Samut Prakarn then, and when I arrived at home I told my father that I had a strong feeling of thirst, a thirst for *dhamma*. I asked my father whether he had any books on dhamma, and he gave me some books. After finishing those books I asked my father to give me more books on dhamma, because I still had this strong feeling of thirst for dhamma. Then he gave me some more books written by Phra Phutthathat²⁹³, which were so good that I felt better and happier to stay in this world.

I was not interested in finding a job, I was only interested in reading dhamma books. A friend of mine found me a job in Rama Thibodi Hospital on the Sri Ayutthaya Road in Bangkok. I was still living in Samut Prakarn in my parents house. I worked for half a year or a year in that hospital. I felt that I wanted to work for the government to help Thailand. I worked in the Emergency room in the Rama Thibodi hospital.

Then I moved to work in the SEATO laboratory on drug screening research. They were trying to find new drugs against malaria. I thought this was the way to help the Thai people, as many people in Thailand still suffer from malaria. We were experimenting with monkeys. It was my duty to examine the blood which was taken from their ears every day, and I got quite fond of these monkeys and was shocked when the same monkeys were later killed for research. I was not at all happy with this work.

It was during these years in the early 1970s that I met Phra Pothirak²⁹⁴ for the first time. He was then still a monk in the mainstream monastery, Wat Asokaram, in Samut Prakarn. My mother wanted to offer food to the monks in that temple. Wat Asokaram was a big monastery in those days, there were even about 100 *mae chis*. I did not know anything about Phra Pothirak then, as I had been abroad for almost two years, and I had missed the news that the famous Rak Rakpong had become a Buddhist monk. My brother knew him, and was excited by this. Of course I also knew Rak Rakpong and loved his songs.

I met Phra Pothirak for the second time in 1974 when my mother had invited him and nine other monks to our house in Samut Prakarn to offer food to them. Phra Pothirak was wearing a brown robe already then, as he was in conflict with the big group - *mahatherasamkhom*.

In May 1973, I had married my second cousin who was an accountant in the Bangkok Commercial Bank, and who had studied business administration and banking in Maryland in the United States. My cousin - our grandparents were sister and brother in Ayutthaya - was always attracted to me, but I was not at all interested in him as a boyfriend. He was five years older and I always felt that he was more like a brother to me. Besides I really wanted to graduate before thinking of love. He used to come to our house just to talk to me. I was so annoyed with him that sometimes I told our maid to tell him that I was busy reading and studying and I did not want to talk to him.

Once, I remember, he asked me whether second cousins can marry. I sensed what was behind this question and I answered him quite rudely: 'No, you will get idiot children!' But he just kept coming to our house. I was afraid of love, of unreal love. I wanted to know whether his love was real love or unreal love. I was also afraid of the suffering caused by love, like Buddha says - being apart from the one you love is suffering.

For three years I refused to talk to him at all, but then the grandmother in Ayutthaya died and we both attended her funeral. I was forced to talk to him again in order to avoid embarrassing him in front of our other relatives. After that he went to the United States. He wanted to get engaged to me before leaving, but I told him to wait and see. If he really loved me, we could get married when he came back from the States, but really I wanted him to test his love for me. If he met another girl in America - an American girl or another Thai girl - he was free to marry anyone.

Besides, my mother did not like him in the beginning, because he was not rich. When we finally got married, my mother did not want to pay a penny for the wedding. My husband had to pay everything himself. We were married in May 1973.

The first morning after we were married, my husband told me that he had had a dream in which I had become a nun. I just laughed. We had one big problem in our marriage: I did not want to have a baby. I told him that I didn't want to have a baby for at least two years. I wanted to test his love. If he still loved me - if it is real love - I would give him a baby after two years. I started to eat the pill, but I did not like that either, because I felt that I was getting fat because of the pill. I was afraid of giving birth. Somehow, I found it unappealing when I even saw pregnant women. I did not want to get pregnant. I was thinking - what will people say if they see me with a big stomach. They would say - what have you done to get like that?

After we both had met Phra Pothirak in 1974 we became vegetarians. That day, when we met him, we drove him back to Bangkok from Samut Prakarn in our car. I had the opportunity to talk to him in the car. My husband was driving, I was sitting next to him and Phra Pothirak was sitting in the back-seat. I remember that I asked him: How can I have a peaceful mind and stable emotions? I did not like

having such strong emotions, going up and down all the time. Phra Pothirak replied to me: 'Practice dhamma'. I was impressed by his answer and started to go to Santi Asoke every weekend.

At first we both used to go to Santi Asoke every week. Phra Pothirak used to teach dhamma every Sunday afternoon in Santi Asoke. In the beginning of our marriage, we stayed in Samut Prakarn in my mother's house but, because we were both working in Bangkok, we moved to the house of my husband's sister in Bangkok.

I slowly started to change my style. In those days, I used to wear a lots of amulets because my father was so scared about the shootings in Bangkok²⁹⁵. My mother gave me amulets to protect me against the bullets. I asked Phra Pothirak about the amulets and he said: 'Buddha never distributed amulets, he only preached to his followers'. I took off all my amulets. At the same time I also stopped wearing jewellery, using cosmetics, wearing colourful clothes, and I cut my hair short.

I continued working near the Victory monument in the SEATO research laboratory. I started to keep the eight precepts and I had only two meals a day. I stopped doing like husband and wife with my husband. We lived like sister and brother. He slept in the bed and I slept on the floor in front of his bed.

I started to have more and more doubts about my work and finally announced that I would resign from the research laboratory. My boss told me that I could resign for one month in order to practice Dhamma, but that I could come back to my work after that. I refused his offer. I worked there for one more month and then resigned. It was fairly easy to resign from my work, but it was more difficult to resign from my marriage.

One weekend I told my husband that I wanted to go to Santi Asoke to listen to dhamma. My husband said: 'You can go there, and stay for one week. If you cannot stay there for one week, you cannot come back home'. He was only joking. I actually found it quite difficult to adjust to the life style in Santi Asoke in the beginning. I complained to myself: why do we have to wake up so early in the morning, at 3.30? It was very difficult for me.

When I was on the bus going from downtown Bangkok to Santi Asoke I looked at the people in the bus. I thought that they did not look happy at all. They just looked busy and stressed - either they had a low salary and not enough money or they had high salaries, but no time for themselves. I realised that I cannot help the people here, I should only try to help myself. One day Phra Pothirak was talking about enlightenment: When you reach it, it gets very bright, it is brighter than the sun. You can see the hell, you can see the troubled animals. You can stay in this world and you get nothing. To love each other is like killing with honey - you get drowned in the sticky honey like a fly and you die in it.

When I listened Phra Pothirak speak like this my eyes were opened for the second time. After seven days my husband came to pick me up. That day Phra

Pothirak preached: 'Butterflies go to the flower, but does the flower have a feeling. Sex is easy - even pigs and dogs can do it.'

Another monk said to my husband, why can you not sacrifice like Prince Vessadon. He was referring to the famous story about Prince Vessadon²⁹⁶ who sacrificed all his belongings and his wife to follow Lord Buddha. My husband then said: 'I will let her stay here', and to Phra Pothirak he said: 'I will give my wife to you forever'.

I said good-bye to my husband at his car that day. I stayed in Santi Asoke and my husband came to see me almost every weekend. I still went to work from Santi Asoke to the Victory monument every day, which was a long journey.

On the 6th of April in 1977, I went back home again with my husband. The Sikkhamats warned me: 'Be careful.' My husband picked me up from the research laboratory. He was very sad and did not speak much in the car. At home all our cousins were there and they were complaining to us: 'Why do you have to separate. You should stay together. Both of you have done good already. Why do you have to make your life so difficult, and uncomfortable like this?' My aunt, with her granddaughter in her arms, came to me and said: 'Please don't get yourself into trouble, it makes me feel so sad for you'. So I told her: 'This trouble I can take, but that trouble, having a baby, I cannot take'. My husband suddenly exploded and shouted to me: 'OK, let's get a divorce now!' All my cousins started to shout at me, but I was quiet and thoughtful and I said to them: 'I really do love him, but if I stay with him and have a baby we will only have more trouble. I want to follow the Lord Buddha's footsteps, even if it is difficult.'

My husband went upstairs to our room and I followed him. He sat there on a chair and cried violently. I went to console him and said: "Nothing can be unseparated in this world. I want to follow Lord Buddha's footsteps. This is real happiness. Love means you have to sacrifice. Why don't you do that?"

He smiled with tears in his eyes and said: 'You go first and I will follow you.' I stayed overnight there for the last time and the next morning my husband drove me to Samut Prakarn. I gave all my jewellery to my mother and all my clothes I distributed to my cousins. My husband drove me to Santi Asoke to the temple. It was the first of May 1977. My husband said to Phra Pothirak: 'Please, take good care of my wife'. Phra Pothirak only replied with a saying: 'One can pair with three, two can pair with four, and sometimes one, two, three and four can all be together.'

In October 1977, I became a *pa* in Santi Asoke. In December 1978 I became a *krak*, in 1979 we officially divorced and I went to sign my divorce documents with a shaven head. The Sikkhamats accompanied me to the registration office. My husband was quite sad and only said: 'We finished our movie already.' My husband had become a manager in the bank when I became *pa*. And when I became Sikkhamat in June 1980, my husband remarried. After our divorce, my husband used to visit

me very often in Santi Asoke, but then he moved to another city.”

5. 1. INNER-WORLDLY ASCETICISM AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM

Since both Peter Jackson and Jim Taylor²⁹⁷ have interpreted Asoke group in Weberian terms, I shall take a short look in the ideas of Max Weber (1864-1920) concerning asceticism and the spirit of capitalism.

Max Weber divided religious movements into two categories with reference to their attitudes towards the outside world: the world renouncing and the mundane oriented movements. By “world renouncing”, Weber meant that the individual retreats from the world, whereas “mundane orientation” refers to occasions when the person participates in worldly affairs. The latter orientation emphasises strict discipline and a minimum of sensual pleasures.

Weber distinguished two types of asceticism practised by persons who seek the path to salvation within any religious framework. Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the world, from social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods and from political, economic, artistic and sexual activities. One with such an attitude may regard any participation in these affairs as an acceptance of the world, leading to an alienation from god. Weber called this type of asceticism as “world-rejecting asceticism”.²⁹⁸ According to Weber, a Buddhist monk was an example *par excellence* of a “world-rejecting ascetic”. Weber made, however, a distinction between a “world-rejecting ascetic” who still wishes to act in the world, and a contemplative mystic who flees from the world.²⁹⁹

On the other hand, Weber pointed out that the “unique concentration of human behaviour on activities leading to salvation may require the participation within the world - or more precisely: within the institutions of the world but in opposition to them - of the religious individual’s idiosyncratically sacred religious mood and his qualifications as the elect instrument of god.” This type of asceticism Weber called “inner-worldly asceticism”. In this case, the world

is presented to the religious virtuoso as his responsibility. He or she may have the obligation to transform the world in accordance with his or her ascetic ideals, in which case the ascetic will become rational reformer or revolutionary on the basis of the theory of natural rights.³⁰⁰

As a result of the different levels of religious qualification, a group of ascetics tends to become an aristocratic exclusive organisation either within or outside the world of the average person who surrounds these ascetics. They operate on the principle of the social class system. Such a religiously specialised group might be able to master the world, but it still could not raise the religious endowment of the average person to its own level. According to Weber, any rational religious associations that ignore this obvious fact are bound to experience the consequences of differences in religious endowment in their own everyday existence sooner or later.³⁰¹

According to Weber, for the ascetic, any sensuous surrender to the world's goods could jeopardise concentration upon, and possession of, the ultimate good of salvation, and could be a symptom of unholiness of spirit and impossibility of rebirth. The world provides, however, the only medium through which a person's unique religious charisma may prove itself by means of rational ethical conduct. Although the enjoyment of wealth is forbidden to the ascetic, it becomes his vocation to engage in economic activity which is faithful to rationalised ethical requirements and which confirms to strict legality. If success supervenes upon such acquisitive activity, it is regarded as the manifestation of god's blessing upon the labour of the pious man and of god's pleasure with his economic pattern of life.

According to Weber, the person who lives as a worldly ascetic is a rationalist, not only in the sense that he (or she) rationally systematises his own personal patterning of life, but also in his rejection of everything that is ethically irrational, aesthetic, or dependent upon his own emotional reactions to the world and its institutions. The distinctive goal always remains the alert, methodical control of his own patterning of life and behaviour. This type of inner-worldly asceticism teaches the principle of loyal fulfilment of obligations

within the framework of the world as the sole method of proving religious merit.³⁰³

For the ascetic, “the divine imperative may require of human creatures an unconditional subjection of the world to the norms of religious virtue, and indeed a revolutionary transformation of the world for this purpose. In that event the ascetic will emerge from his remote and cloistered cell to take his place in the world as a prophet in opposition to the world. But he will always demand of the world an ethically rational order and discipline, corresponding to his own methodological self-discipline.”³⁰⁴

According to Weber, inner-worldly asceticism demanded of the believer, “not celibacy, except in the case of the monk, but the avoidance of all erotic pleasure; not poverty, but the elimination of all idle and exploitative enjoyment of unearned wealth and income, and the avoidance of all feudalistic, sensuous display of wealth; not the ascetic death-in-life of the cloister, but an alert, rationally controlled patterning of life, and the avoidance of all surrender to the beauty of the world, to art, or to one’s own moods and emotions. The clear and uniform goal of inner-worldly asceticism is the disciplining and methodical organisation and institutionalisation of the whole pattern of life.”³⁰⁵

There are many characteristics in Weber’s “inner-worldly asceticism” which would seem to apply to the Asoke group and help to understand their way of life. One can also talk about “methodological self-discipline” in the group, and of the “disciplining and methodological organisation and institutionalisation of the whole pattern of life”. This can easily be seen in the Asoke group’s daily “patterning of life” with a strict time schedule. Their daily schedule, their life style and their activities are based on the moral values propagated by Bodhiraksa and the other monastics. Thus, in this chapter, I shall study the moral and social values of the group in order to see whether the asceticism practised by the Asoke monastics and lay people should be regarded as “world-rejecting asceticism” or “inner-worldly asceticism”.

Ultimately, I shall also keep in mind the question as to whether Asoke asceticism promotes capital accumulation and hence fosters

the “spirit of capitalism” as Jackson suggested with a reference to Weber.

5. 2. THE SOCIAL VALUES OF THE ASOKE

Emphasis on following the precepts is clearly indicated in the replies of the Asoke group concerning merit-making. Asoke values are also demonstrated in replies to the question of what is specifically appreciated by the Asoke group, and in the group’s leader Bodhiraksa. In contrast to this, the question concerning what the respondents disliked about mainstream Buddhism presents values which oppose those of the Asoke group. The question “what was your first impression of the group and of Bodhiraksa” measures the perceived characteristics of the group, which originally impressed the respondents.

The first impression of the Asoke group which the monks themselves usually recall is that the Asoke group leads “simple life” and “follows Buddha’s teachings”,³⁰⁶ and that the group members are diligent and devoted to their cause. The Asoke group teaches “us to abstain from eating meat”, from gambling and from other vices. Their observance of the precepts is appreciated on the first encounter. Already before they joined the Asoke group, the monks appreciated the appearance of the Asoke monks on their alms rounds. The high morals of the Asoke, their refusal to deal with money and their strict following of the *vinaya* rules are also appreciated. Their way of working in the group and their devotion to helping human beings are mentioned as the first impressions.

The Sikkhamats emphasise the teaching of Bodhiraksa, the eating of vegetarian food and the strict observance of the precepts. The Sikkhamats also appreciated the group’s diligence, simple life style, friendliness and their strictness in not accepting money as donations.

In answer to the question “what was your first impression of Bodhiraksa?”, the monks emphasised his teaching and sermons. His activeness and brightness, his intelligence and his personality were admired. Bodhiraksa’s leadership and his courage to “think against

the society” were appreciated. His sincerity, and courage to say things clearly were also mentioned. “What he speaks, he does” was the way some monks expressed their admiration for him. One monk expressed having faith in that “he leads the group not to consume meat”. His vegetarian lifestyle, his way of speaking “straight” and pointing out “black and white” and “right and wrong” were mentioned. According to one monk it is easy to be familiar with Bodhiraksa, as he does not hold to the “class” (*varna*).

The novices’ first impressions of the Asoke group were that they were a highly moral group and they appreciated the group’s refusal to deal with money. The novices were impressed by Bodhiraksa’s sermons and by his strict morals.

The Sikkhamats appreciated the following things in Bodhiraksa: “his teaching, appearance and *dhamma* performance”. He is seen to “work for religion”. He is intelligent and his teaching of Dhamma is clear and easy to understand. One Sikkhamat believes in “his character and teaching”.

A clearer understanding of what it is that the Asoke people oppose can be found in the respondents answers to the question: “what is it that you don’t like in the mainstream?”

Several monks mentioned their dislike of particular mainstream activities such as sprinkling of holy water, receiving money and valuable things, predicting lottery numbers, chanting in rhythm, performing magic acts, distributing charm amulets, fortune telling, blessing cars and shops, worshipping with flowers, incense and candles.

One monk complains about their “foolish” belief in ceremonies. The following criticisms were also presented: their breaking of the *vinaya* discipline and getting richer after ordination, that their teaching is not clear enough, that eating meat breaks the first precept by causing the death of animals. They place more value on material things than the spiritual. According to one monk, the mainstream “should not have boxes to receive money”.

One monk suggested that the mainstream monks encourage people to be superstitious and to believe in the sacred power (*saksit*). This teaching was described as “nonsense”, which cannot lead people out of suffering.

As a negative statement on the mainstream sangha, the Asoke novices mentioned that the routine duties of the mainstream monks are “against Buddha’s teachings” and that they are “very loose” in *vinaya*.

The Sikkhamats were somewhat more reluctant to criticise the mainstream openly. According to the Sikkhamats, the mainstream monks do not strictly observe the precepts: they still use money, they can own property and they do not live a simple life. They spend lots of money, they are not at all economical and they are “crazy about nonsense”. The mainstream does not teach how to decrease greediness, instead they support individual pride and they try to force people to donate.

The male aspirants recollect being impressed by the austere and modest life style of the Asoke group when first meeting them. Their first impressions of Bodhiraksa are recounted as “cheerful and easy to get along with” and “he practises what he teaches”. The male aspirants criticise the mainstream sangha for performing magic rites and for using money.

The female aspirants’ recollection of their first impression of the group was friendliness. One aspirant was impressed that she was invited to eat together with them during her first visit. Another aspirant also emphasises eating; “everybody at the Asoke has their meal together. All are equal”. This clearly refers to the role of the mainstream *mae chis*, who first serve the food to the monks and then eat separately in the kitchen among themselves. According to one aspirant, Bodhiraksa showed respect to women, which can be seen as a conclusion of her impression of the role given to women in the Asoke group.

Interestingly, one aspirant admits that “I was not so impressed by him in the first time, but I had faith in his sermon”. Another aspirant was also impressed by Bodhiraksa’s sermons; “He gives sermons 3-4 times a day”, each sermon lasts “a few hours”. “The sermons are very useful for our daily lives and he still insists on giving the same teaching like he used to do when he stayed at Daen Asoke”.

The female aspirants criticise the mainstream for killing animals, for building huge temples, for being richer than the lay people, and for adhering only to the religious ceremonies which do not help

to cease the human suffering.

The values that were appreciated in the Asoke group by the lay people range from being “tranquil, ascetic and peaceful”, “calm and aware” to being “simple and natural”. They were described in similar terms by the other lay people as well. One layman appreciates the Asoke people for being “brave to go against the stream of the society”.

According to the respondents, the Asoke people can clearly distinguish between right and wrong and they are “brave to be poor”. Laywomen appreciated the preaching and practice of the group. The monks were praised for being “sincere, polite, simple and honest”.

In response to the question concerning what they appreciated about Bodhiraksa, the laymen gave following answers: “He is a great monk who loves simple life” and “his wisdom goes deeper into the spirit”. He is “preaching *dhamma* clearly” and he is “not scared”. He is preaching “straight” and he trusts himself.

One laywoman mentioned Bodhiraksa’s “goodness and *metta karuna*”. He is regarded as being “diligent and patient”. His preaching and practising were, for the laywomen, the most appreciated characteristics. His ability to answer questions clearly is also mentioned. One laywoman appreciated Bodhiraksa’s preaching on Buddhist economics.

The criticism of the mainstream shows what attributes are perceived negatively by the lay people. The mainstream monks are criticised for not observing even the five precepts. “They do not practise the precepts, they only memorise them”. The mainstream is good in preaching, but cannot practise what they preach.

The mainstream is overly concerned with money, with distributing amulets, with sprinkling holy water and other magic practices. The mainstream monks teach magic to the villagers which is “not relevant for their daily life”.

The monks of the mainstream sangha are perceived as “greedy” and “not modest”. One laywoman also refers to the frequent sex scandals that the mainstream monks have been involved in. Their desire for rank was seen as a defilement (*kilet*).

5. 2. 1. Translating social values into practice

The values presented above by both the monastics and the lay people, clearly indicate that the most important precept emphasised by the Asoke group is the one abstaining from killing which, according to the Asoke ideology, should automatically result in a vegetarian diet. Having animals killed by others for food is seen to be clearly against the first precept. Some members refuse milk products and eggs in order not to “bother the animals” by milking them or taking away their eggs.

Another value which is emphasised is anti-materialism. An ordained person should not possess anything except the minimum necessities such as a knife for shaving, a sewing set, an umbrella with a mosquito net, some clothes and eating utensils. The monks should not encourage the lay people to possess property by blessing their private cars, shops or lottery coupons.

The monks and Sikkhamats in the Asoke group carry with them small booklets called property diaries (*banthuk attaborikhaan*), where they should carefully note down everything they have received from toothbrushes to calendars or clothes. Only medicine does not have to be mentioned. The booklet should be shown to the abbot of the centre regularly, preferably once a month. The value of the gift should be mentioned, or at least estimated, if the monastic does not dare to ask the donor.

The third negative value seen in the mainstream reflects the Asoke group’s emphasis on simplicity even in the ceremonies and rituals. The elaborated mainstream Buddhist rituals are seen as a negative phenomenon. The rhythmic Pali chanting and the glittering statues of Buddha and the other decorations are regarded as hiding the essence of Buddhist doctrine.

Furthermore, the Folk Brahmanistic or magico-animistic³⁰⁷ practices of the mainstream are rejected. The Asoke group emphasises the literary tradition of Buddhist teaching and has reduced the rituals to the minimum. Belief in magic is discouraged. Propitiating and pondering over the influence of the spirits (*phi*), which occupies a dominant part of the lives of ordinary, particularly rural, Thai, are excluded from Buddhism in the Asoke group. Anyone who is afraid

of a ghost, is encouraged to try to find the spirit inside his or her own mind, and fight against it there. The defilement (*kilet*) appears in the form of a spirit (*phi*), the spirits consequently do not exist in nature in the outside world, but only in the human mind. Therefore they cannot be conquered by magic rituals but by Buddhist practices, aimed at reducing defilement.

The third precept, to abstain from illicit sex, is vigorously emphasised by the Asoke group. Sexual passion (*kama rakha*) is seen one of the basic defilements in the Asoke ideology. For the Asoke group, all sexual activities seem to be classified as "illicit". The monks and the Sikkhamats are expected to live in celibacy, as is also required of the mainstream monks and *mae chis*. The lay followers are encouraged to follow the same practices. They are encouraged to stay in the ascetic segregated dormitories, where ten to twenty persons share the room. Even married couples are encouraged to abstain from sexual practices.³⁰⁸ The stray dogs who copulate in public are often regarded as the symbol of human sexuality, and the Asoke people are not expected to follow their example.

These puritanical views originate alongside the Asoke group's strict interpretation of Buddhist teachings as well as characteristics from the surrounding society. All big cities, and even minor urban centres, are filled with different types of enterprises, ranging from barber shops to snooker halls and karaoke bars offering sexual services to men. In that sense the whole country seems to be obsessed with sex, albeit in its purely commercial form. Prostitutes in the Thai society are seen as "a cheap source of entertainment".³⁰⁹ Yet, the general attitudes to sex are characterised by double standards and, even if a wide range of sexual practices are tolerated by the society, they are far from being accepted.³¹⁰

Another reason for the moral strictness of the Asoke group relates to the widely publicised sex scandals that several mainstream monks have been involved in during the 1990s - Phra Nikorn and Yantra being the latest most notorious examples.

The other precepts are also taken seriously by the Asoke group, and thus the mainstream is criticised for not observing these precepts. The eighth precept discourages lay people from sleeping in

the soft elevated beds, and suggests that they sleep on mattresses on the floor. According to the seventh precept people should not decorate themselves with gold and jewellery. In the Asoke group, one of the first signs of accepting the group values is that people take off their Buddha amulets, their golden earrings, bracelets and rings. Alongside with their change into vegetarian diet, this could be interpreted as a sign of a “conversion experience” among the Asoke people.³¹¹

The seventh precept also encourages lay people to abstain from singing and dancing, and even from watching this type of entertainment. This precept is, however, often broken in the Asoke centres, especially during the national gatherings when noisy evening festivities are arranged. The children and adults sing, play, dance and act in small plays. The only restriction to this entertainment is that people in the age group from 14 to 45 years are not allowed to dance.³¹² The people within this age limit are regarded as being likely to fall into, or cause, sexual temptation when performing.

Music is constantly played in Santi Asoke through the loudspeakers. The other centres are somewhat less noisy. Usually the music played is composed by Bodhiraksa and the lyrics have a Buddhist or moral message, but also many songs from outside are accepted, after the monks have controlled them to secure that they do not carry an offensive message. At the childrens’ parties held on the last Sunday of each month in Santi Asoke, the children individually perform rock, pop and folk songs, dance folk dances and tell anecdotes in Thai or Lao.

Another break with the seventh precept is the nearly daily practice of watching videos in all the Asoke centres. As previously mentioned, before the popular Thai or Chinese dramas recorded from Thai television are shown, the monks have censored them. The films then circulate from centre to centre. But, from my observations, only the commercials are censored; all the violence of the kung-fu movies and the indicative sex scenes of the Thai dramas are shown openly. Films like the “Sound of Music”, “Little Buddha” and Chaplin’s movies are regular favourites. The monks comment on the movies while watching, and others are expected to discuss the moral mes-

sage of the films after the show or the next morning.

5. 3. A SUMMARY OF THE KEY VALUES OF THE ASOKE PEOPLE

On the basis of the responses to the questionnaire, one can summarise the positively perceived values of the Asoke group as following:

- nature and the natural (*thammachaart*)
- being modest and modesty (*maknoy sandot*)
- devotion and sacrifice (*siasala*)
- concentration (*sati*)
- unity (*samakkhi*)
- mercy, loving kindness and compassion (*metta*)³¹³

The respondents also gave a clear notion of the negatively perceived values of the Asoke group:

- luxury (*fum fuey*)
- wastefulness (*sia*)
- laziness (*kii khiat*)

Eating vegetarian food was mentioned by the respondents as increasing their *metta*-feeling, i.e. they have shown mercy to the animals by not killing them or having them killed for their food. The concept of *metta* can also be interpreted in a wider perspective as loving kindness or compassion (*metta karuna*). This feeling should be shown to all living creatures.

The idea of “natural” is essential for the Asoke people. The group is involved in natural agriculture, they strive to eat natural food, and wear clothes made of natural materials, use eating utensils made of natural material i.e. coconut shells, live in houses build from natural material etc.³¹⁴

They try to artificially construct surroundings in their centres which should, according to their own concept, look natural. In Pathom Asoke there is a natural swimming pool, which in fact is a man made pond. There are artificial waterfalls, streams and hills in Pathom Asoke. The other centres have similar plans to create different artificial monuments to give an impression of natural surroundings.

Modesty (*maknøy sandot*) is one of the keywords the respondents mentioned as being one of the most important characteristics of Bodhiraksa, the Asoke monks and Sikkhamats and Asoke followers in general. Modesty should be manifested by eating little, by wearing simple³¹⁵ clothes, by walking barefoot and by living in modest houses, in a small hut or dormitory.

The opposite of modesty is luxury (*fum fuey*), which is clearly negatively perceived in the Asoke group. Eating several meals a day is regarded as luxury as is wearing fashionable clothes and living in material comfort. All luxury is regarded as being superfluous and un-Buddhist in the sense that Buddha only emphasised the four basic necessities; clothes, shelter, food and medicine. Everything beyond these basic necessities is perceived as a luxury, and a waste (*sia*). Luxury is interpreted as a defilement (*kilet*).

The third important concept is devotion,³¹⁶ meaning as an Asoke concept devotion to the society, devotion to work and devotion to the Asoke group. One should leave the material world and one's well-paid job behind in order to devote one's work-force and energy to the work and ideals promoted by the Asoke group.

All the teachers in the Asoke schools, most of the workers in the vegetarian restaurants, shops, offices, kitchens, gardens, factories and workshops work without pay.³¹⁷

Many lay people come to the Santi Asoke centre in the evening after working hours in order to devote a few hours of work to the Asoke group. One popular place of showing devotion is the printing house where the computer room becomes busy after 4 p.m., when secretaries and office workers come to devote their professional skills to the Asoke group. Some other lay people come to the Santi Asoke centre to teach the school children on Saturdays³¹⁶ or they come on Sunday to teach in the Sunday school in order to devote their labour to the centre. Chinese language teachers come to teach the people in Santi Asoke regularly without charge.

Meditation in its traditional form is not popular among the Asoke people. For the Asoke people working is meditation. Working is often contrasted with the activities of the "ascetics": people who sit in the caves or forests and close their eyes to society and the

world. In response to the question concerning the differences between Dhammakaya and Asoke groups, nearly all respondents saw the greatest difference as being that the Dhammakaya group meditates “with closed eyes”, whereas Asoke group meditates “with open eyes” i.e. by working.

In the Asoke group, every moment of the day should be meditation in the form of concentration (*sati*), consciousness and awareness of the surrounding world. Diligence is highly praised and laziness severely criticised.³¹⁸

The respondents also emphasised the feeling of unity (*khwaam samakkhi*) within the Asoke group. Unity has also been required by Bodhiraksa amongst the teachers whom he has requested to work together in unity and apply similar principles in every school and in every topic.

5. 4. SOCIALISATION INTO THE VALUES IN THE ASOKE

The Asoke sect emphasises an ascetic life style and promotes the values of merit-making and in other contexts, which differ from the mainstream Buddhist practices. One way of measuring the level of “indoctrination” among the members is to let them explain the purpose of their practice.

Asoke ideology emphasises the eating of vegetarian food and living a simple ascetic life - waking up early in the morning, preferably eating only one meal a day and working diligently the whole day. All the respondents were asked to explain why they think “it is good to” live the kind of life promoted by the group.

The differences between the responses of the monastics including the novices, and the lay people including the aspirants, will be observed and discussed. I shall also keep in mind the question as to whether these ascetic values would promote capital accumulation, and whether this is the purpose of the Asoke members.

5. 4. 1. The monastics

In response to the question “why is it good to eat vegetarian food?”, most of the monks and Sikkhamats gave the following rea-

son: eating vegetarian food is economical, it does not waste money. Another common reason given for eating vegetarian food was that it is good for both mental and physical health. Often, the respondent feels healthier than before and has “body strength”. A third common explanation for the benefits of vegetarian food was that it saves animals from getting killed. Some mentioned the five precepts of which refraining from killing is the foremost one. Thus, eating vegetarian food is living according to the precepts. The fourth common explanation was that eating vegetarian food has made their mind lighter and their spirit cleaner. It also has increased their compassion or feeling of mercy towards all living beings (*metta*).

One monk pointed out that vegetarian food follows the “correct scientific diet”. Some monks even mentioned that vegetarian food is not only healthy, but can be seen as medicine to cure the diseases. Eating vegetarian food reduces the feeling for good taste and reduces the addiction to good food, which was also seen as an important point.

The 16 Sikkhamats who responded to the questionnaire emphasised the first precept more strongly than the monks. For them, eating vegetarian food was a means of refraining from killing. It was also seen as merit (*bun*). Refraining from killing animals was regarded as not committing dismerit (*baap*).

In response to the question “why is it good to live simple ascetic life?”, the respondents were mainly concerned with the effects of individual lifestyles on the society by stating that when one lives a simple life one “can do more benefit to the society”. Living a simple life makes the individual more useful to society and does not waste or destroy so many resources.

Some regard the simple life as being comfortable, it burdens the individual less and causes fewer worries about worldly things. One should be satisfied with what one has, and be a “model to the next generation”. The simple life is seen to lead to a peaceful mind. It is the way to practise in order to reduce the attachment to worldly things. It is a way to balance against greediness and desire or lust for new things, which is one of the basic defilements (*kilet*). The simple life is considered to be a merit, because it is not luxurious (*fum fuey*).

A luxurious life-style and surroundings are seen as a dismerit (*baap*).

Some monks also refer to Buddha's teachings on the simple life. They refer to the four necessities that a human being has during his or her lifetime. The simple life is seen as the positive way of leading "natural life" (*chiwit thammachaart*).

The Sikkhamats emphasise that living a simple life means that there is neither a burden for oneself nor to the society. One has more time to work for the society and to help others. One Sikkhamat mentions that leading a simple life helps one to control one's mind.

The third question presented on the lifestyle dealt with meals and the replies were thus quite similar to the first question about vegetarian food. The third question - "why is it good to eat only one meal in a day" - was responded to as saving money and time. Eating several meals a day adds to the burden of the people who prepare the food. Some monks are also convinced that eating only one meal a day is good for the digestion and prevents people from catching diseases.

Some monks refer to the Buddha's teaching to seek reasons for eating only one meal a day. To eat only one meal a day is seen to reduce defilements (*kilet*).

Some respondents repeat their replies to the first question by mentioning that eating only one meal a day gives the feeling of "light body and light mind", good health, less sickness, "body strength" and it makes them active and happy. "When one has finished eating, one can start to work immediately".

It is somewhat amusing to note that, whilst the monks emphasise the lightening of the work burden on the ones who prepare the food, they emphasise the work that can be done instead of cooking food!

The replies of the Sikkhamats emphasise the health reasons and the lack of burden upon the ones who prepare the food and the ones who consume it when eating only one meal a day.

Replies to the fourth question, "why is it good not to drink alcohol?", were fairly predictable. All respondents emphasised that alcohol is dangerous for your health, it is a waste of money, and it causes many troubles in the human life. From the more Buddhist

point of view, alcohol does not belong to the four necessities promoted by Buddhist teachings and, furthermore, it makes one to lose the concentration (*sati*). Some also mentioned that it is a break with the precepts and it also easily leads to the breaking of the Buddhist recommendations of avoiding bad company.

In answer to the question, “why is it good to wake up so early?”, the respondents emphasised the fresh air of the early morning hours. Waking up early in the morning reduces the feeling of laziness. It also gives people time to work more, “to do useful things”.

One monk emphasises that they should be as examples to the other human beings by waking up early. Some also saw it being healthy to wake up early. Some see the early morning hours as especially suitable for studying *dhamma* and listening to the preaching, as the mind is still “fresh”.

The Sikkhamats emphasised the fresh air somewhat more, which they regarded as bringing good health. Another advantage to waking up early was reducing laziness.

The reasons for not wearing fashionable clothes were economic, it was simply seen as a waste of money. It is also seen as wasting time and being dangerous for health and soul. The monks regarded fashionable clothes as deceiving the world and causing desire in the opposite sex. It is not seen as a good example for the others. Monks also pointed out that fashionable clothes are not convenient for working and are a burden to wash.

The Sikkhamats see fashion as a waste of money and time. One Sikkhamat concludes that it is better to spend the time by being “useful for society”. Two of the 16 Sikkhamats saw fashionable clothes creating passion, causing dismerit (*baap*) and “deceiving yourself and others”. Following fashion also shows “greediness in your soul”.

The last question concerning the life style promoted by the Asoke group dealt with marriage. The Asoke group vigorously promotes staying single for their followers. For the monastics, celibacy is of course required both in the Asoke group and the mainstream. One of the Sikkhamats has been married before joining the group. Of the 84 responding monks some 20 % (17) have been married.

The question on marriage inspired some monks to provide long

explanations: "Marriage brings affection and suffering. The more we love, the more we suffer, when we have to separate from the ones we love". This is, of course, a quotation from the Buddhist teachings on the causes of suffering. Many respondents emphasised freedom and independence (*issara-seriphaap*). One can totally devote oneself to work and to the improvement of society. Some monks call a single person a *pundit*³¹⁹ which in the Thai Buddhist context refers to a clever and enlightened person.

Marriage is seen as "selfish"; wasting time on personal matters. A married person is a "natural human being," but the one who does not get married is "above the natural". According to one monk, "getting married is an investment for life with tears". Marriage is also seen as an obstacle in spreading religion.

The Sikkhamats also emphasised the freedom and independence to practise dhamma, to work for society and not only for the family.

The two additional questions concerning the Asoke lifestyle considered the respondents' understanding of the type of meditation promoted by the Asoke group. The question was: "how do you meditate while working?".

The replies emphasised that one must focus and concentrate on the work that one is doing at the time. The practitioners should be conscious of their activities and check their feelings all the time and follow the precepts even while working. One should control one's mind and body while working. If conflict occurs, one has to keep one's temper, know one's temper and have consciousness in order to avoid dismeriting one's (*akusala*) mind. One should control one's mind when facing temptations such as passion (*rakha*), anger (*thosa*) and delusion (*moha*). When working, Asoke followers should concentrate on their work and not let other desires to come into their thoughts.

The Sikkhamats emphasised being conscious while working, concentrating one's mind on the work. They also emphasised the importance of analysing one's own mind.

The final question requests a summary of the importance of the Asoke group for the individual respondent.

The replies varied from practising dhamma, observing Buddhist teachings, purifying one's mind to observing the precepts. The good atmosphere was also given as the most important thing in the Asoke group. One monk mentioned the Asoke slogan as the essential factor for the group: "freedom, peace, fraternity, efficiency and integrity".³²⁰

For some monks Bodhiraksa himself was regarded as the most important factor in the Asoke group. "If there is an enlightened one to teach us, it is more assuring than just to have one who teaches the language".³²¹ Bodhiraksa was seen as a *bodhisattva* by another monk as well.

The Sikkhamats mentioned the practice of dhamma, the spreading of dhamma, the feeling of unity (*khwaam samakkhi*) the work for society and the warm friendship.

The novices show a high level of indoctrination into the Asoke ideology, which can be expected from their position.³²² According to them, vegetarian food is healthy, suitable for human beings and it increases the feeling of loving kindness (*metta karuna*) towards other creatures.

The simple life gives time to work for the society, a peaceful mind and an opportunity to avoid materialism. One meal a day guarantees good health and is suitable for dhamma practitioners. Alcohol is dangerous and makes people "careless", whereas waking up early in the morning provides the opportunity to breathe fresh air. Fashionable clothes represent materialism and capitalism. Life as a single person is recommended because no other desire causes more suffering than sexual desire. Being single provides more time to help the society.

The most important thing for the novices was moral mind, the *vinaya* rules, the practice and the teaching of Buddha.

5. 4. 2. The lay people

The male aspirants responded to the first question, "why is it good to eat vegetarian food?", with the following explanations: eating vegetarian food saves the lives of animals, is healthy, observes the precepts, and increases the feeling of loving kindness (*metta*

karuna). The simple life is comfortable and saves environment from being destroyed. One meal a day is a way of cleansing oneself of defilement (*kilet*), is healthy, follows the Buddhist teachings as well as Buddha's footsteps.

Alcohol is condemned as harmful makes people careless and "even Lord Buddha said it is not a good thing". One aspirant confesses that "my father is heavy drinker, so I see a lot of disadvantage in alcohol. He wastes money, loses control and is looked down upon by others in the society".

Rising early is good because the early morning air is fresher and "we won't be lazy". "Everybody should make this as a habit".

Fashionable clothes have "no value" and are a "luxurious habit". According to one aspirant, however, "it is not always bad to wear beautiful fashion clothes, it depends on the occasion". According to two aspirants, beautiful clothes increase the "rape rate". One male aspirant and one female aspirant shared this opinion. The status of a single person gives independence and an opportunity to devote oneself to society.

The most important things for the male aspirants in the Asoke group were, according to their own information, the observing of the precepts, studying the teachings of nirvana, Bodhiraksa himself, the strength of the Asoke group and the values represented by the five slogans of the group - freedom, peace, fraternity, efficiency and integrity.

The female aspirants unanimously regarded as the main benefit of eating vegetarian food as being the fact that it saves the lives of animals. The simple life was seen to be useful for society and a means of conserving natural resources.

Eating one meal in a day is a means of decreasing the desire to eat, reducing responsibilities and saving time. The aspirants are usually responsible for preparing and serving the food to the monks and the Sikkhamats. In the afternoon, they still have to prepare the food for the schoolchildren who receive their second meal around five o'clock.

Alcohol destroys one's concentration (*sati*), health and it is a waste of money. "To wake up early in the morning, we must go to

bed early, and that is good for the health” Other aspirants praise the fresh air of the early morning hours. Fashionable clothes are a waste of time, money, and resources, whereas simple clothes are easy and comfortable. Staying single gives one the opportunity to help other people “totally” and to “devote ourselves to the society”.

The most important thing for the female aspirants in the group was that the group shows them the way to “reduce defilements”, Bodhiraksa himself was the most important thing for one aspirant, friendship and helping each other were the most important things for the majority. Following the *vinaya* rules was the most important thing for one female aspirant.

Laymen replied to the question “why is it good to eat vegetarian food” in a fairly similar manner to the monastics. Laymen emphasised the increased feeling of loving kindness (*metta karuna*) when eating vegetarian food. Also the first precept was mentioned as a reason for not eating meat. Matters of health were of secondary importance to the laymen. In contrast, the laywomen again emphasised health more strongly; they feel that their health has improved after starting to eat vegetarian food. The second reason for eating vegetarian food is seen as not “bothering the animals.” One laywoman mentioned the first precept, and the fact that killing can be seen as producing dismerit (*baap*). Several laywomen mentioned the *metta* mind which increases when one eats a vegetarian diet Vegetarian food was seen as a “natural” food, which can be received from plants, vegetables, fruits, beans and sesame.

In response to the question “why is it good to lead simple life?”, the laymen emphasised that it reduces the work load, saves money and leaves time for other more “valuable things”. The simple life is not a luxury, on the contrary, it reduces luxury and it does not destroy natural resources.

The laywomen emphasise that they have more time to do good things, to “benefit the society” or to be “devoted to the society”. Leading a simple life has the character of being neither luxurious nor greedy, but modest. The simple life reduces the destruction of nature, the environment and “world resources”.

One laywoman felt that society involves hard competition and

people take advantage of each other, but within the Asoke group this is not the case.

Concerning the question of eating only one meal a day, many laymen felt that it gave them strong health and time to work more. Eating one meal a day reduces selfishness. For the laywomen eating one meal a day has practical advantages, cooking only once a day saves time for other work. However, some of the laymen and laywomen confessed that they cannot yet follow this principle. One laywoman explains: "Eating two meals is better than eating three meals. Later, when I will be eating only one meal a day, then I can reply from my own experience".

Drinking alcohol was seen as breaking the fifth precept and losing self control and concentration (*sati*). Alcohol destroys health, and is a waste of time and money. It can also lead to "bad activities". One should be a good example for the young ones. Laywomen saw drinking mainly as wasting money and destroying one's body and mind.

Waking up early in the morning was perceived as creating more time for work. Lay people also praised the fresh air of the early morning hours. According to one of the laymen: "If one wants to progress as a human being, one should wake up early in the morning". One laywoman saw the benefit of waking up early in the morning in receiving more merit (*pun*) than the others. She refers to a proverb which states "the early bird catches the worm".

Attitudes to wearing fashionable clothes varied from seeing fashion as being "not suitable for the real dhamma practitioner", to creating garbage and wasting the world's resources. It is seen as a waste of money and energy "as we cannot follow the new fashion anyway". Not wearing fashionable clothes is seen as protecting oneself against the thieves, and a means of reducing defilements (*kilet*), lust and ego.

The last question concerning the Asoke lifestyle is a more interesting one for the lay people than for the monastics, since it concerns marriage. 21 of the 30 laymen and 8 of the 38 laywomen were married. Married lay people saw marriage as a form of suffering or as a burden. According to one married laywoman, "it is very good if

you can stay single". Another married laywoman explains: "Marriage makes you narrow-minded, selfish and family-centred". One married laywoman also sees marriage as a form of "selfishness". A single person is regarded as being able to devote more time to work for the society.

In response to the question "how do you meditate while working?" the laymen said that they "use the precepts to focus on the action" and they "control the mind while facing something". The rest emphasised that one should have one's consciousness focused on the work that one is doing. The lay people's replies were all similar, nearly identical, in their responses to this particular question. This can be compared to Weberian thinking on Protestant ethics which also glorified work. It is, however, worthwhile noticing that the Asoke members often seem to refer to "work for society" rather than work for personal or even family wealth.

In order to analyse the social values of the Asoke members, the final question was to ask the respondent to summarise the importance of the Asoke group to him or her. Some lay people emphasised the atmosphere in the group and amongst the lay people, the lifetime brotherhood and the unity. The group activities, devotion to the society and to the nature and "building a good society" were appreciated by the lay people. Some also mentioned reducing defilements (*kilet*) and keeping of the precepts as the main attractions of the Asoke group.

Two laywomen saw Bodhiraksa as the most important person for the group. Others referred to his preaching as being the most prominent characteristic of the Asoke group, but one person also mentioned the importance of the monks and the Sikkhamats for the whole group.

5. 5. SUMMARY

From the above findings, we can conclude that those who replied to the questionnaire distributed in the *mahapawarana* meeting in October 1994 were all well acquainted with Asoke values and ideas. Their replies are, in some cases, strikingly similar yet, in response to

other questions, their ideas differed from each other and emphasised different aspects of Asoke values.

As the replies were not, word for word, identical, one can draw the conclusion that the emphasis in the teachings is on the individual understanding of the Asoke values, and not on the fluent quotations of the doctrine and preaching of Bodhiraksa. The slogans and aphorisms coined by Bodhiraksa do, however, facilitate the understanding of Asoke ideas both among the monastics and the lay people and were, consequently, frequently quoted.

Differences in the level of indoctrination - or understanding the Asoke values - amongst the monastics and the lay people was not noticeable. The lay people were somewhat more practical and more conscious of the benefits of the frugal ascetic Asoke way of life to the environment compared with the monastics, who emphasised the Buddhist moral tenets more. The differences were more striking in terms of gender: the monks were clearly thinking more practically when commenting on the positive sides of the Asoke group, whereas the Sikkhamats were more impressed by the strict following of the theoretical ideals of Buddhism. The same applied to the laywomen as compared to laymen.

The novices tended to show a high level of indoctrination, since they were in a liminal stage struggling to be accepted as monks. Of the aspirants, the men are somewhat more indoctrinated than the women. The level of indoctrination can be expected to be very high amongst the aspirants, as advancement from *pa* to *nak* and respectively from *pa* to *krak* goes through a public interview and questioning in a meeting in front of the monastics.

The question I posed in the beginning of this chapter was whether the asceticism practised by the Asoke members could be interpreted as a Weberian style of "inner-worldly asceticism". The active and energetic Asoke life-style comes, indeed, close to the Weberian definition, especially among the Asoke lay people. On the other hand, the monastics were closer to the "world-rejecting asceticism", as Max Weber originally suggested when he described the Buddhist mendicants. Even the Asoke monastics withdraw from the world, some of them even withdraw from social and psychological

ties with their families. The Asoke monastics have, according to their own strict interpretation of the sangha *vinaya* rules, withdrawn from “political, economic, artistic and erotic activities”.

One could say that the inner circle of the group, i.e. the monastics, practice “world-rejecting asceticism” to some extent. In contrast, the lay people, even the core members - the temple residents and permanent guests - toil diligently each day. They have not necessarily cut off their family relations, they can even engage in erotic activities, if they have decided to follow only the five precepts. They are morally and ethically obliged to the ascetic values of the group, which means that they should not enjoy or manifest their accumulated wealth. Their lives are conducted by the strict rules set by the monastics, and they pattern their lives according to the methodological self-discipline which they report weekly to the monastics. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter VI.

I use the term “inner circle” to refer to the core members (the monastics and aspirants) and “outer circle” to describe the lay people of the Asoke group. Thus I conclude that the inner circle practises “world-rejecting asceticism”, whereas the outer circle practises “inner-worldly asceticism”. From my position as an outsider, what I see is inner-worldly asceticism, the activities and participation in the worldly life of politics and in economics. The inner circle acts as a collective adviser and moral guide to the outer circle without getting directly involved in the political and economic activities. The borderline between the world-rejecting asceticism and the inner-worldly asceticism is somewhat fluid. The monastics can also take part in heavy manual labour together with the laity but they still devote a considerable amount of time each day to spiritual activities such as: giving sermons, preaching, carrying out rituals, attending meetings and counselling.

Weber suggested that the “inner circle” of ascetics forms an “aristocratic exclusive organisation within or outside the world of the average people who surround these ascetics.” According to Weber, “such a religiously specialised group might be able to master the world, but it still could not raise the religious endowment of the average person to its own level of virtuosity”. The study of the val-

ues and the level of indoctrination in the Asoke group does suggest that there are no great differences between the religious “endowment” of the two groups - monastic and lay people - in the Asoke movement.

Another question Weber addressed was the level of “virtuosity” in a religious ascetic group. The Asoke group has its own hierarchy, which I will study in the next chapter. There is consequently little concern for the different levels of “virtuosity”. The Asoke interpretation of nirvana promotes the idea that people dwell on different levels on the way to enlightenment, each level depends on the deeds of the individual him/herself. Therefore, the monastics and the lay people are not expected to be on the same level of “virtuosity”. All the Asoke members are expected to perform their duties according to their individual skills and capabilities.

When Weber talked about the “divine imperative” which requires an ascetic to leave his “cloistered cell” to become a prophet “against the world”, one is tempted to see Bodhiraksa in this role. As Weber emphasised this prophet “will always demand of the world an ethically rational order and discipline, corresponding to his own methodological self-discipline.”

Both Bodhiraksa and his lay follower Chamlong have been accused by the other Thais of being too “strict”. As Suwanna puts it diplomatically:

“Santi Asoke has attracted quite a large number of supporters, though not so many serious followers”. The reason for this is, according to Suwanna, that the “Thai urban middle class” does support this group, but “finds it too demanding to lead a poor and simple life in a Buddhist community”.³²³ The wider Thai society clearly seems to be unable to follow Bodhiraksa’s and the Asoke members’ “methodological self-discipline”.

I also wanted to examine the hypothesis concerning the connection between Protestant ethics and the “spirit of capitalism”; if the Asoke group is generally regarded as practicing “inner-worldly asceticism”, does it also automatically lead to the conclusion that their asceticism strives towards economic growth and capital accumulation? Can a “spirit of capitalism” be seen in the Asoke group? It

seems quite obvious that in the case of this ascetic Buddhist group in Thailand in the 1990s the Weberian thesis cannot be applied in toto since it was created to explain the accumulation of wealth in Protestant sects, particularly in the United States, early this century.

The official economic programme of the Asoke group is in direct opposition to “capitalism” (*thun niyom*), as shown in Chapter IV when I discussed the Asoke concept of “meritism” (*bun niyom*). On the other hand, the fact remains that the group works very hard, produces agricultural products, handicrafts, books and magazines, which are all sold for profit. For food and many other basic necessities and services the group is self-sufficient. At the same time, more and more money is earned especially by the work of the volunteers, and the question arises of what will be done with this money?

In this chapter, I examined the Asoke values the most important of which were nature, modesty and compassion. The ideal values of “sacrifice” and “devotion” were usually connected with society. The Asoke members should sacrifice themselves and devote their labour to society. At the same time, an important value was the feeling of unity. All these values point to a group which emphasises group cohesion, unity and compassion within the group. Therefore, the money accumulated by the group is invested in projects which are seen to benefit the whole group.

During the last five years, large sums of money have been invested in the construction of new restaurants, libraries, shops, offices and school buildings. A gigantic new temple is also under construction in the Santi Asoke centre in Bangkok. The capital accumulated by the “inner-worldly asceticism” of the Asoke group is invested in modern technology, in printing houses, in audio-visual studios, in experimenting in agriculture and in public buildings.

The inner circle does not use the capital accumulated by the outer circle for individual enrichment, nor does the outer circle appropriate this money in order to enrich themselves individually from the wealth created by the group. As long as the Asoke monastics live in modesty, even the lay followers will feel satisfied to work for the “society” and accumulate wealth for the Asoke group collectively.