

BUDDHISM
WITH OPEN EYES

Belief and Practice of
Santi Asoke

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On Thai Orthography

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 June 1997

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I INTRODUCTION

1. 1. WHAT IS SANTI ASOKE?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. 2. WHY IS SANTI ASOKE SIGNIFICANT?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. 3. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT IN THAILAND

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

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

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

1. 3. 1. Religion and politics

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

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

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

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

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

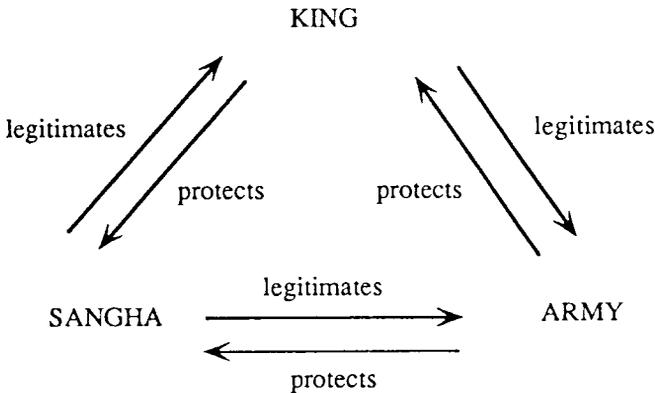
The sangha is the guardian of morality *par excellence*. The sangha legitimises the power of the ruler by accepting his donations and his "protection" against imaginary or real enemies. The king is

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

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

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

FIGURE 1: State - sangha relations



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

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

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

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

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

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

1. 3. 2. Buddhist state hierarchy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. 4. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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

1. 4. 1. Sectarian traditions in Buddhism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LAUKIKA

LITTLE TRADITION

FOLK BUDDHISM

LOKUTTARA

GREAT TRADITION

SOPHISTICATED BUDDHISM

MAGICO-ANIMISM
KAMMATIC BUDDHISM

BUDDHISM
NIBBANIC BUDDHISM

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

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

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

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

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

1. 4. 2. Earlier research on Santi Asoke

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jackson sees many parallels between the reformist Buddhism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. 5. METHOD AND DATA

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

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

1. 5. 1. My position as a fieldworker

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. 5. 2. The questionnaire

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. 5. 3. Other data

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. 5. 4. Source critical considerations

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

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

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

II THE EMERGENCE OF THE ASOKE

In this chapter, I shall examine the origins of the Asoke by presenting its founder, Bodhiraksa, and by discussing the people who live in the Asoke temples and/or who attend sermons regularly in order to provide a rough estimate of the number of the Asoke members. I shall also give a short description of each centre and its main activities. Using this information, I shall attempt to create a picture of the organisational structure of the Asoke and the hierarchical relations within the Asoke movement.⁹⁸ I shall also discuss the court case and review the state reactions to the Asoke movement.

2. 1. A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF BODHIRAKSA

Mongkol Rakpong, who was later to become Bodhiraksa, was born on the 5th of June 1934 to a large family which barely could make ends meet. From the age of 10, he had to take on odd jobs in order to help support his family. After his mother died, he became the head of the family and was responsible for supporting and educating his six brothers and sisters. He managed to enter a college of arts and crafts and soon became popular as a TV entertainer, composer and song writer. Under the name of Rak Rakpong, he enjoyed both wealth and fame. At the height of his career in the entertainment business, he became interested in hypnotism and black magic. He became a spirit medium and faith healer for a number of years before his interest shifted towards Buddhism.

“My career as a song composer was at its height. I, like Lord Buddha, did not succumb to wealth, fame and comfort”, Bodhiraksa says.⁹⁹

To the astonishment of his colleagues and fans, he shaved his head, walked barefoot and became a vegetarian. He finally resigned from his work in 1970, and, a few months later on 7th November 1970, he was ordained as a Buddhist monk at the Thammayut monastery¹⁰⁰, Wat Asokaram in Samut Prakarn.

“People just would not listen, because I was not a monk. So I became a monk, although the saffron robe did not really matter to me”.¹⁰¹

Three years later he resigned from the Thammayutnikai monastery, because the abbot would not allow him to organise joint meetings for members from Thammayutnikai and Mahanikai. He was reordained at the Mahanikai monastery Wat Nongkrathum in Nakhon Pathom province on the 2nd of April 1973.

He continued criticising the split between the Mahanikai and the Thammayutnikai and finally set up a centre called Daen Asoke¹⁰² in Nakhon Pathom. There his monks and nuns wore brown robes, instead of the light orange ones and, according to Sanitsuda, “strictly followed the monks’ disciplines as in ancient times”.¹⁰³

This conduct - establishing a separate centre, criticising the mainstream sangha for lax behaviour, adopting a vegetarian diet, not shaving their eyebrows, and wearing brown robes - provoked criticism from the sangha authorities. On the 6 August 1975, Bodhiraksa announced his intention not to submit to the authority of the Council of Elders (*mahatherasamakom*). He established an independent group and all the monks and nuns ordained before August the 6th in 1975, were re-registered, and new monastic identity cards were issued. Bodhiraksa ordained monks and nuns himself, even though it is normally required that a man should have been a monk for ten years before he may ordain others.

Bodhiraksa had returned his monk’s certificate to the authorities when he left the Thammayutnikai, but he did not submit his certificate after he had left the Mahanikai and established his own group.¹⁰⁴ Bodhiraksa himself emphasises that he never left the monkhood, because he never performed the ceremony of disrobing, as he says: “My heart has never left”.¹⁰⁵

Bodhiraksa has been criticised by Thai Buddhist mainstream followers for being too aggressive in his way of preaching, while at the same time his admirers praise him for telling the truth. Bodhiraksa strongly defends himself against the accusations of the sangha for being “illegal, ignorant, aggressive and divisive”. He emphasises that he was not trying to cause a rift but only attempting to join the positive aspects of both Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism “by going back to the fundamental teachings and practices of ancient times”.¹⁰⁶

However, Bodhiraksa suggests the sangha's top hierarchy are of "no use": "They have not achieved spiritual salvation and they even misunderstand Buddhist teachings".¹⁰⁷

Bodhiraksa divides his time between two Asoke centres: Santi Asoke and Pathom Asoke. At both centres he occupies the same kind of small *kuti*, which measures only 2,5 by 1,5 metres, as the other Asoke monks. He usually preaches every morning at 4 a.m. at the centre where he is staying. He eats together with the other monastics and lay people in the temple and he travels in a small van like the other Asoke monastics. Bodhiraksa lives as modestly as the other Asoke people. This is quite unlike many of the leading mainstream monks, who live in concrete buildings, travel by private luxury cars and have their meals served to them in their own houses.

2. 2. THE ASOKE PEOPLE

In January 1995 the Asoke group had 92 monks, 23 Sikkhamats or nuns¹⁰⁸ and four novices, although the figures change as some monks and Sikkhamats disrobe and others are ordained. The number of the monks does not, however, change as frequently as is the case in the mainstream temples. This is because, theoretically, the Asoke monks strive for a lifetime ordination (unlike mainstream Buddhism, where one can become a monk or a novice for only one or two weeks). Yet the intended lifetime ordination can be broken and the person can still easily disrobe. In January 1995 a monk called Tassawaro, in Santi Asoke, disrobed. His disrobement came as a surprise both to the Sikkhamats and the lay people in Santi Asoke, even though the monk had lived in the same temple compound. The reasons for his disrobement were said to be "personal". No special rumours circulated as to whether he had broken the *vinaya* rules. He simply announced to Bodhiraksa and the monks' assembly that he wanted to disrobe. Two days later the monks gathered for a meeting, where they decided to promote one novice to the status of a monk, which then brought the number of the monks in the group back to the earlier figure.

There has been considerable mobility amongst the monks dur-

ing the 20 years that the Asoke group has existed. Dozens of monks have disrobed, some for health reasons and some for other personal reasons, and some for breaking the *vinaya* rules. Many of those monks who have disrobed stay in close contact with the Asoke group, living in the vicinity of a centre and practising the Asoke lifestyle as laymen.

There is the same kind of mobility amongst the Sikkhamats even though there are more restrictions as to who may become a Sikkhamat. Theoretically it takes one year for a layman to become a monk, and two years for a laywoman to become a Sikkhamat. In practice, however, it takes several years to become a Sikkhamat since the number of Sikkhamats is restricted to correspond with the number of the monks. There should be four monks to one Sikkhamat. The present situation of 92 monks to 23 Sikkhamats follows this ratio. Reasons for this proportional restriction are not publicly stated, but it would seem likely that the leaders of the group do not want the number of the female monastics to exceed the number of the monks. If all the Asoke laywomen were ordained, this would most certainly be the case. The status and position of the Sikkhamats is unique in the Thai Buddhist world, and allowing the numbers of Sikkhamats to expand might further infuriate the mainstream monks who do not promote the position of “ordained” women.¹⁰⁹

Approximately ten Sikkhamats have disrobed during the history of the Asoke group. The latest case was Sikkhamat Thipdevi from Pathom Asoke. She had been in the group for about 20 years and was one of the best known Sikkhamats of the group amongst researchers and journalists due to her high-society background and her language skills.¹¹⁰

Another former Sikkhamat, who disrobed about 15 years ago, is still staying in the neighbourhood of the Santi Asoke centre and visits the temple daily to talk to the Sikkhamats, eat vegetarian food and watch videos in the evening. There are two Sikkhamats in Santi Asoke who have disrobed, lived outside the centre, and later rejoined the group and been reordained.

There are four novices (*samanutthet*), two in Santi Asoke and two in Pathom Asoke waiting to be ordained as monks in due course.

There are 15 aspirants¹¹¹ in different positions in Santi Asoke and in Pathom Asoke. There are ten male aspirants: one who is on the first step, *pa*, and nine who are on the second step: *nak*. The female aspirants are respectively called *pa* and *krak*. The ratio of the female aspirants is restricted according to the number of the Sikkhamats. There should be six Sikkhamats to one *krak* and to two *pa*. Presently, that allows for there to be three *krak* and six *pa*.

The number of the lay followers can only be roughly estimated as no valid statistics exist about the group. In January 1995, the monks in the central office in Santi Asoke estimated that there were about 100 male temple residents (*aramik*), male and female temporary guests (*akhantuka chon*) and permanent guests (*akhantuka pracaam*).¹¹²

The female temple residents (*aramika*) were registered separately by the Sikkhamats from the year 1985 to 1993. 135 persons were registered on this computer list. Of those, 20 had resigned, one of them in order to become an aspirant *pa*. Some of the *aramikas* register, resign and register again, which makes even these statistics somewhat unreliable.

The number of the lay people staying in the temples or their vicinity, in addition to the people who work in the schools, shops and offices or those who perform other duties in the centres for free (or for a minimal salary) can be estimated to exceed 200.

Amongst the laywomen there is a group of temple residents who have had their heads shaved and are dressed in white shirts and black sarongs. They are called *upasika*, which simply means 'laywoman'. There are about 10 *upasikas* in Santi Asoke and five in Pathom Asoke. Any woman may dress this way, but it does not give her any special status over those of an ordinary temple resident. If the woman wants to become an aspirant, she will have to let her hair grow for 12 months before she can become a *pa*.

A woman who wishes to become an *upasika* needs the permission of Bodhiraksa to dress herself as an *upasika*. The only requirement is that the person wears that uniform for at least 12 months. After that she is free to do anything. There is also great mobility amongst the *upasikas*: some have become ordinary laywomen, and sometimes aspirants resign and become *upasikas*. Some *upasikas* have

been in their position for several years already. An *upasika* has no special duties. In Santi Asoke they usually work in the school, in the printing house or in the kitchen. In Pathom Asoke they can also work in the workshops, for example, the tofu factory and on the farms.

2. 3. THE ASOKE CENTRES

The Asoke group presently has five Buddhist centres in Thailand: Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke, Sisa Asoke, Sali Asoke and Sima Asoke. The monks can reside permanently in any of these centres. The Sikkhamats are allowed to reside only in Santi Asoke and in Pathom Asoke. The same applies to the novices and aspirants. The laypeople, temple residents, permanent or temporary guests and villagers are free to reside in any of the centres. The character of each centre is different due to the setting, which usually dictates the activities of each centre as well.

In this section, I shall examine in detail the similarities and differences between the five Asoke centres.

2. 3. 1. Santi Asoke

Santi Asoke is the intellectual centre of the Asoke group. It is also the centre for information and communication between the other centres. Santi Asoke receives and dispatches trucks transporting people and goods to and from the other centres nearly every day. Santi Asoke is, however, not the administrative centre for the whole group, as each centre is independent. Santi Asoke functions as the co-ordinator between the different centres and there are offices to distribute books, tapes and videos to the other centres and to the lay people. Santi Asoke can not be regarded as a typical Asoke centre as it is the only purely urban centre of the Asoke group.

There is an office in Santi Asoke which sends books and publications to people who have ordered them. Another office, *Thammasot* regularly sends tapes and videos to lay people. All Bodhiraksa's sermons are recorded, copied and distributed to the other centres. Some of his sermons are edited together with music, copied in their thousands and sent to lay people by the *Thammasot* or sold to the public in the different Asoke centres and shops. Tapes are usually not dis-

tributed free of charge except during the alms rounds at New Year or other special occasions. The tape selection mainly consists of Bodhiraksa's sermons, but some other monks' sermons have also been tape-recorded. In addition, some sermons by Sikkhamats, both in Thai and in Chinese *Teochew* dialect, have been recorded.

In the same office that the tapes are copied, edited and labelled, the monks edit films which have been recorded from Thai television. The office has a wide selection of films which have been "censored" by the monks, usually by cutting away the commercials. The films are then shown in different centres as an evening program. Some of Bodhiraksa's sermons are videoed and these tapes are also edited and copied in the same office.

The Asoke group has always been active in publishing books on Buddhism, just as many of the mainstream temples are.¹¹³ Today the printing house is technically separate from Santi Asoke. The *Fah Apai* printing house is a private enterprise which also accepts work from outside. The printing house has been printing Buddhist literature from other monasteries, material for the Palang Dharma Party (PDP) and even textbooks in the Chinese language. When the printing house began to print material for the Palang Dharma Party, the company still belonged to Santi Asoke. This provided the evidence for the accusations of political involvement which the Asoke group was charged with in the late 1980s.

There is a public library consisting of several thousand volumes of mainly Buddhist literature. The library stocks a wide selection of Thai language daily and weekly newspapers and magazines. During the weekends, many outsiders spend a few hours in the library studying the various collections. The library is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The whole Santi Asoke compound is connected to an internal communications network, and the telephone operator can page people through loudspeakers to come and receive their call. Anyone can use the loudspeakers call others to come to a meeting. The loudspeakers relay the morning sermons from the temple and, in the afternoon, music is played until 6 p.m. All this makes the Santi Asoke centre quite a cacophonous place!

One of the main undertakings of the Santi Asoke centre is its boarding school. There are 54 students in the school¹¹⁴ and 39 teachers. The large number of teachers is due to the fact that many teachers come from outside to work for only a few hours. All the teachers work free of charge. There are two types of teachers: those who are responsible for the students' behaviour and well-being and those who are responsible for teaching the various different subjects.

The school was originally an adult education institute (*kaan suksaa nouk rongrien*, abbreviated as *kor sor nor*) that belonged to a larger project of the Thai Ministry of Education. It was intended to supply adults with some basic education and is financially supported by the students themselves. Most of the students in the adult education centre in Santi Asoke are either temple residents or temple guests who study in the school in the afternoon and early evening after work.

Later, the Asoke schools started also to accept children as their students, although the school is still known by the name *kor sor nor*. The school does not charge a tuition fee, and is financially supported by the production and selling of shampoo, which is produced by the school children. The children also work in the vegetarian restaurants, shops and offices, in return for the free food, clothing and accommodation that they receive. On Sundays, the children often sell food outside the centre compound to earn money for the school. All school books are available free of charge, but they have to be returned at the end of the course.

The children are chosen from a large group of candidates on the basis of various different tests. Academic knowledge and good marks from their previous school are not decisive in the selection. Their willingness to co-operate and to undertake manual labour are valued more highly. Most of the children come from the Northeast and speak Lao among themselves. Many of the schoolchildren have some family members who are monks or lay followers in the Asoke group. Theoretically, however, anyone can apply to be a student in the school.

All the Asoke boarding schools are gradually being transformed into ordinary state schools (*samma sikha*).¹¹⁵ The starting of

the Santi Asoke *samma sikha* school in 1995 will mean an increase in the syllabus. The present syllabus consists of: Thai, social sciences, mathematics, science and English. Social sciences cover: the geography of Thailand, culture in different parts of Thailand and environmental studies. Science covers biology, chemistry, physics and agriculture. There are also lessons in Buddhist morals.

The children study for three hours a day from Tuesday to Saturday; Sundays and Mondays are free. On Mondays, the children often go to work in a garden not far from the centre. In general the children seem to enjoy their outings to the garden, which also provides a change from their daily routine. The syllabus of the Asoke schools does not permit any sports, and thus the work in the garden compensates for the lack of physical exercise. Reasons for not including sport in the curriculum are frequently discussed by the Asoke teachers. According to Bodhiraksa,¹¹⁶ for instance, football cannot be accepted since it involves kicking and the use of lowest and dirtiest parts of the human body. Volleyball and *takraw* - a traditional Thai ball game - are, in theory, permitted by Bodhiraksa, but nothing has so far been done to include sports in the syllabus, even though lessons will be increased to five hours a day in the new school system.

The school building in Santi Asoke was finished in 1993. Before that children studied in many different places inside the compound. The school building consists of four floors. Some lessons are held on the first floor, which is more like an entrance hall without proper walls. The second floor accommodates two monks who work on the layout of the Asoke publications. On the third floor there is the teachers' room, some classrooms and a library for students. On the fourth floor there is an office for a Sikkhamat who keeps record of all the publications of the Asoke group. On the same floor there is another teachers' room and a photo archive. The boy students sleep on the fourth floor. The girls stay in another building together with the female temple residents and permanent guests.

The school starts at 5 a.m. with about half an hour of preaching performed by the monks. On Thursdays a Sikkhamat preaches to the school children. On Wednesdays there is no preaching; on this

day the children have to show all their property to those teachers who are responsible for the children.

The children study from 5.50 a.m. for two hours, after which they eat breakfast, which is actually their lunch. They resume study around 9 a.m. and carry on for two more hours. After school the children are expected to work in the kitchen, in the offices, or with shampoo production. On Wednesday afternoons, there are special lessons called "home room" where the teachers concentrate on teaching the children to work in group. The teachers give them different assignments, which they should accomplish in a group. Dinner is served around 5 p.m. Around 6 p.m. the children gather in front of the TV to watch videos in the temple.

Santi Asoke also runs a "Sunday school" for younger children. The Sunday school is held on every Sunday during the school terms. The Sunday school starts around 8 a.m. and finishes around 2 p.m. Younger Sikkhamats and some laypeople take care of the Sunday school children and lead their activities.

There is also a small health care centre (*sala sukhaphaap*) in Santi Asoke, where people first go in case of illness. From there, more serious cases are then sent to private or government hospitals. There is also a dentist in Santi Asoke who treats patients free of charge.

Outside the temple compound there are several shops belonging to the Asoke group. The biggest shop is the *Palang Bun* (force of merit) supermarket which sells clothes, shampoo, rice, food and medicine. The clothes are of the type the Asoke members usually wear: blue *mohom* shirts and cotton trousers and sarongs in traditional Thai patterns. The shampoo produced by the Asoke centres is made of different herbs. The toothpastes are, however, made by international companies, as are the toothbrushes.¹¹⁷ Another shop called *Bun Niyom* (merit-ism)¹¹⁸ sells buckets, bowls and cups made of plastic, eating utensils made of stainless steel, snacks and some stationary. There is a third shop which sells a variety of Thai newspapers and magazines. They also sell the publications of the Asoke group. A large selection of books written by another widely respected Buddhist monk, Buddhadasa, can also be found in this small bookshop. They sell tapes, video-cassettes, calendars with pictures of the Asoke

group and stickers.

There is a vegetarian restaurant run by the Vegetarian Society of Thailand. The restaurant used to be owned by Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, when it was still situated in Chatuchak in the northern parts of Bangkok, but now it is smaller, and Chamlong is no longer in charge of the restaurant. The restaurant is frequented by hundreds of people each day. They are usually outsiders, ordinary Thais of all ages, Chinese business people with their mobile telephones, old Chinese ladies in their Chinese pyjamas, Indian Sikhs and other Indians and also, fairly often, Westerners. The restaurant is open from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. and is run by volunteers. On Mondays the restaurant is closed. There is also a vegetable market run by the Asoke group and on Mondays the shop sells food since the vegetarian restaurant is closed.

In addition to the above, there is also a barber's shop, although approximately once a month on a Monday one can get a free haircut in the temple compound. In addition there is: a small mushroom farm which is situated inside the temple area, several workshops producing tools and a tailor's shop which provide for the Asoke community.

Another time-consuming activity during 1994-1995 has been the building of a large new main temple from concrete. There, Asoke monks and lay people work along side skilled labourers from the outside for many hours each day.

The present publications produced by the Santi Asoke centre include five magazines. The oldest of these is a monthly magazine called *Saan Asoke* (A letter from Asoke), which is read by both Asoke monastics and lay people. The magazine deals with the activities of the different Asoke centres and foundations in Thailand, and thus has little value for an outsider. In December 1994, 7000 copies of this magazine were printed. *Saeng Soon* (The light of emptiness) is written for the general public. It used to appear four times a year, but nowadays it is published only once a year in 6000 copies. Another publication for the general public is called *Dook Yaa* (Grass flower). This is printed in 15 000 copies and appears every second month. The magazine for children is called *Dook Bua Nooi* (Little lotus) and

also appears six times a year, in 5000 copies.

The latest publication which keeps the Asoke people busy, was started in October 1994. It is a co-publication of the Asoke group and Chamlong Srimuang called *Rau khit arai* (What do we think). The magazine is a fortnightly publication, printed in 8000 copies, and actively sold on the streets of Bangkok by the volunteers. This magazine is the brainchild of Bodhiraksa and Chamlong. In the beginning it also carried articles by Chamlong, and his picture was on the front page of the three first numbers, but it has slowly developed into a magazine on religious matters, containing long articles by Bodhiraksa.

2. 3. 2. Pathom Asoke

Pathom Asoke in the Nakhon Pathom province is, in a way, the centre of the Asoke group since Bodhiraksa officially resides there. The first centre of the group, Daen Asoke, was situated in the same province.

The Pathom Asoke site covers 100 *rai*,¹¹⁹ and thus enables more agricultural activities to take place than in the Santi Asoke centre. In Pathom Asoke there is a big garden which produces fruits and vegetables for the residents. There is also a large mushroom farm and, outside the temple compound, there is a small ricefield where the Asoke people practice "natural" agriculture. "Natural agriculture" in the Asoke group usually means rejecting the use of pesticides, fertilizers and all modern machines. Their reasons for farming this way are claimed to lie in the beliefs of Fukuoka, whose books can be bought in the Asoke shops. The results have, however, not been very good in Pathom Asoke because rats have destroyed the crops in recent years. The Asoke group follows the Buddhist precepts very strictly, and consequently refrains from all killing - even rats.

A large area of the Pathom Asoke compound is taken up by the village where there are some 50 houses. The houses are built by the lay people who want to stay close to Bodhiraksa and the other Asoke members. Some of the villagers live in their small wooden houses permanently and help with the daily work of Pathom Asoke. Many houses are unoccupied because their owners only come there

on weekends, or to attend the New Year celebrations or other bigger gatherings. Chamlong Srimuang has a house in the village and visits the centre nearly every weekend.

Pathom Asoke has a *samma sikha* boarding school with some 60 students. Most of the children there also come from the Northeast. Children sleep in large dormitories, boys are segregated from girls. Each child is assigned with a “substitute mother”, a laywoman, who takes care of them and helps them to solve their problems. The children refer to these women as “mothers”.

There is slight competition between the students of Santi Asoke and Pathom Asoke, and the latter are usually the winners due to their opportunities to learn a wider range of practical skills in the different activities of the centre.

Pathom Asoke has several special activities which cannot be found in other centres. One is the tofu factory which produces soya milk and tofu for all the Asoke centres and vegetarian restaurants. Work in the tofu factory is hot and humid, starting at 4 a.m. and finishing at noon, after which the people go elsewhere to work.

Another speciality in Pathom Asoke is the water distillery, which bottles water and distributes them to the other centres for sale. The bottle simply states “Drinking Water Pathom Asoke”, the English translation even says “produced by Patom Asoke Co-Housing”.

Pathom Asoke also has a small ricemill, a big mushroom farm and a house where the soya seeds and mushroom seeds are preserved.

In the Pathom Asoke centre, there are brand new white brick-houses which, according to Thai tradition, are called “*tau hau*” (town house). Some lay people have bought apartments in these houses and are staying there with their families. One section of the town houses is occupied by a rest home called *Baan Aromdii* (the house of good temper). There members of the Asoke group can go to rest and to recover from exhaustion or from illness. It is run by a nurse. The rest home serves good and healthy food twice a day. There is also a dentist residing and treating patients at Pathom Asoke.

There is a health care centre (*sala sukhaaphap*) in Pathom Asoke which has one room for male patients and another for female

patients. The health care centre is also run by a nurse. In the same building, there is a herbal bath which is sometimes heated. It offers a hot and humid room where people can go to breathe different herbs for a few minutes. Behind the building there is an artificial pond used as a swimming pool where children and monks bathe in the late afternoon. In the same building as the health care centre, there is a shop which sells herbal medicine produced by the members of the Asoke group.

In Pathom Asoke, there is a small printing house with a computer room and a library. There is a small office which sells tapes to the visitors. In front of the temple building there is a co-operative, *Bun Niyom*, supermarket which sells food and clothes and a gas station which sells unleaded petrol. Outside the temple compound, in the city of Nakhon Pathom, there is a vegetarian restaurant run by the Vegetarian Society of Thailand.

2. 3. 3. Sisa Asoke

Sisa Asoke is situated in the North-eastern province of Sisaket. It is one of the largest and most active centres. The centre accommodates some 50 houses in the village and the largest Asoke *samma sikha* boarding school with approximately 80 students enrolled.

The area of Sisa Asoke covers 50 *rais* and has *kutis* for about 30 monastics. The Asoke group always celebrates the Buddhist festival of *maghabucha* or, in Asoke terms *pluksek*, in Sisa Asoke and then the area accommodates more than two thousand persons.

Sisa Asoke has very similar activities to the other rural centres. They have gardens, rice fields, a mushroom farm, a tofu factory, a co-operative *Bun Niyom* shop and a gas station selling unleaded gasoline. They also have several workshops where they produce tools for agricultural work. They have been more successful in cultivating rice than Pathom Asoke because they happen to have neighbours who have no scruples about killing rats. This has even saved the rice fields of Sisa Asoke. Sisa Asoke sends rice once a month to Santi Asoke for the *Palang Bun* shop and for the vegetarian restaurant.

The school has a reputation for being a pioneer in many fields. It was the first school to be opened by the Asoke group and is still

considered to be a model school which others take as an example they strive to follow. Surprisingly, the school has no fixed building. The primary school students study in the building where the boys sleep, but the secondary school students study in various places around the village.

The schedule of the Sisa Asoke school differs from the others and is seen as an example that the other schools are planning to follow.

4.00	wake up
4.00-5.00	individual study
5.00-6.00	work at the mushroom farm
6.00-7.30	work on any of the 21 chosen bases ¹²⁰
7.30-8.30	breakfast
8.30-9.00	free
9.00-9.30	listen to the preaching in the temple
9.30-10.00	flag ceremony
10.00-14.00	classes
14.00-14.30	free
14.30-15.00	“home room”
15.00-16.30	work
16.30-18.00	dinner
18.00-19.00	free
19.00-21.00	videos
21.00	silence

The children study every day except Wednesdays and Thursdays. On Wednesdays they go to work in a garden situated nine kilometres outside of the temple compound. On Thursdays, the children have to clean the village in the morning and attend the sermon in the temple and eat their meal there. Also, on Tuesdays, they attend the sermon and eat their meal in the temple which changes their schedule for the whole day. On Tuesdays the flag ceremony does not take place until 12 o’clock. As we can clearly see, the centres are relatively free to decide on their daily and weekly schedules.

In the flag ceremony the children raise the Thai flag, sing the national anthem and recite the Buddhist prayer “*Namo tasso arahato*” which is a general practice in every Thai school. After that they sing

the song of the Sisa Asoke, the words of which go:

“We are all Buddhist students of Sisa Asoke.
We have order and discipline.
Our mind is very brave.
We intend to learn every subject
including virtue, and we diligently try to do good”.

And the song concludes:

“We all have the precious ideal
to develop ourselves
to become good human beings,
ready to help society,
so that we can have a calm and happy society,
to create all good things,
so that everyone can be saved from peril.”¹²¹

After the song, a student representative asks the others whether someone did not wake up at 4 a.m., and whether someone forgot his or her name label from his uniform. The replies to these questions are expected to be “no” in unison. The final question asks whether there have been any problems in any of the 21 work bases where the children are working. These problems can then be openly discussed.

2. 3. 4. Sali Asoke

Sali Asoke is situated in the Nakhon Sawan province in Northern Thailand. It concentrates on agricultural and shampoo production. The Sali Asoke village has some 30 houses for lay people to stay in permanently or temporarily. Sali Asoke also has a co-operative shop selling clothes, food and eating utensils.

Approximately ten monks reside permanently at Sali Asoke. They concentrate their activities on natural agriculture and they have rice fields right next to the temple compound. Sali Asoke recently opened a school which, at the start of 1995, had just 15 students.

Sali Asoke is the stage for the yearly national gathering called *phuttha phisek* around the Buddhist New Year (*songkhran*) in April.

On that occasion, the area has to accommodate approximately 2000 people in the open air. The ceremony can be compared to the *plukse* in Sisa Asoke and encourages the participants to follow strict practices.¹²²

2. 3. 5. Sima Asoke

Sima Asoke is situated in the Nakhon Ratchasima province in the Northeast. It is the newest Asoke centre and covers some 100 *rais* accommodating about 20 monks and 30 houses in the village for laypeople.

Sima Asoke specialises in producing noodles in a “noodle factory”, a small workshop where 2-3 elderly laywomen manually produce the noodle plates from rice flour. The work is hot and hard. The women start in the early morning by cooking the rice flour. In the afternoon, when the noodle plates are dry, young men come from outside the temple compound to help to cut the noodle plates into narrow stripes with an old-fashioned manual apparatus. The noodles are then sold and served in the vegetarian restaurant in Nakhon Ratchasima run by the Vegetarian Society of Thailand.

In Sima Asoke there is the largest mushroom farm which produces several different types of mushrooms.

The monks and the villagers mainly do agricultural work. There is a big garden with banana and papaya plants and many other fruits and vegetables. The gardens are fairly new and therefore in impeccable order and shape.

There are also rice fields in Sima Asoke and all the work in the rice fields is done by natural methods without using modern machines or chemical pesticides or fertilizers. Manure bought from some neighbouring farmers is used to fertilize the fields.

There is no school in Sima Asoke which makes the place very quiet and peaceful. In Sima Asoke there is also the same loudspeaker system as in the other centres, but less music is played and, compared with Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke and Sisa Asoke, fewer personal calls are transmitted through the system. The great majority of the villagers are elderly ladies; except for the monks who stay in Sima Asoke permanently. In fact, there are very few men altogether.

There are some 60 laywomen living either in the village or in the dormitory built for women. Many of these old women weave fabric for making clothes on an old-fashioned wooden loom. In Sima Asoke there is a small shop which sells necessities such as batteries for flash-lights and eating utensils.

There are some laymen who work in the vegetarian restaurant in Nakhon Ratchasima, where they also stay overnight. In the same building, there is a small shop which sells food, books and tapes.

Every Saturday and Sunday, the monks from Sima Asoke travel by truck to Nakhon Ratchasima for an alms round. They make a long walk lasting more than one hour through the streets and markets of the town. They appear to receive food as frequently as the mainstream monks. The truck driver meets the monks three times during their alms round to collect the donated food in big bowls after which the monks can continue their alms round.

2. 3. 6. New centres and groups

The newest centre is situated in the province of Ubon Ratchathani in the Northeast. The centre has no monks staying there permanently, and is therefore not regarded as a Buddhist centre. It is, however, commonly known as "Ratchathani Asoke".

Ratchathani Asoke covers an area of 100 *rais* beside the Mun river. The area was flooded during the rainy season in 1994 and all buildings were covered by water. When I visited the centre in December 1994, some 15 persons were staying there permanently. They were busy digging canals to prevent the same catastrophe recurring during the next rainy season. They had also started with a garden.

On an island in front of Ratchathani Asoke, there is a big *kuti* built for Bodhiraksa, which can also accommodate his two attendants who follow him everywhere. Chamlong Srimuang has built huts for himself and his guests in the close vicinity the Ratchathani Asoke centre.

The Ratchathani Asoke group also runs a vegetarian restaurant, *Bua Bucha*, in the town, in a house which happens to belong to Bodhiraksa's mother. Bodhiraksa's birthday in June is celebrated at Ratchathani Asoke. The day is called the "empty day" as people are

encouraged to fast the whole day.

Another future centre is taking shape in the province of Chiang Mai in North Thailand. The group is called Lanna¹²³ Asoke and draws support from the provinces of Lampang and Lamphoon. The group members have bought several pieces of land where they practice natural agriculture. None of these has, as yet, developed into a Lanna Asoke centre, even though the group often invites monks and Sikkhamats to visit them and stay for a while.

The Lanna Asoke group runs a big vegetarian restaurant in the city of Chiang Mai, the restaurant often accommodates visiting monks or Sikkhamats. The building also accommodates ten volunteers who work in the restaurant. The restaurant was opened in 1990, and the building was constructed using money borrowed from Santi Asoke. The restaurant has approximately 200 guests each day. The Lanna Asoke group has existed for about ten years and has some 200-300 active members, according to their own estimate.¹²⁴

There are several other small groups of lay people scattered in nearly every province of Thailand. The group in the south is somewhat more organised and is commonly known as Taksin Asoke.

2. 4. THE NUMBER OF ASOKE MEMBERS

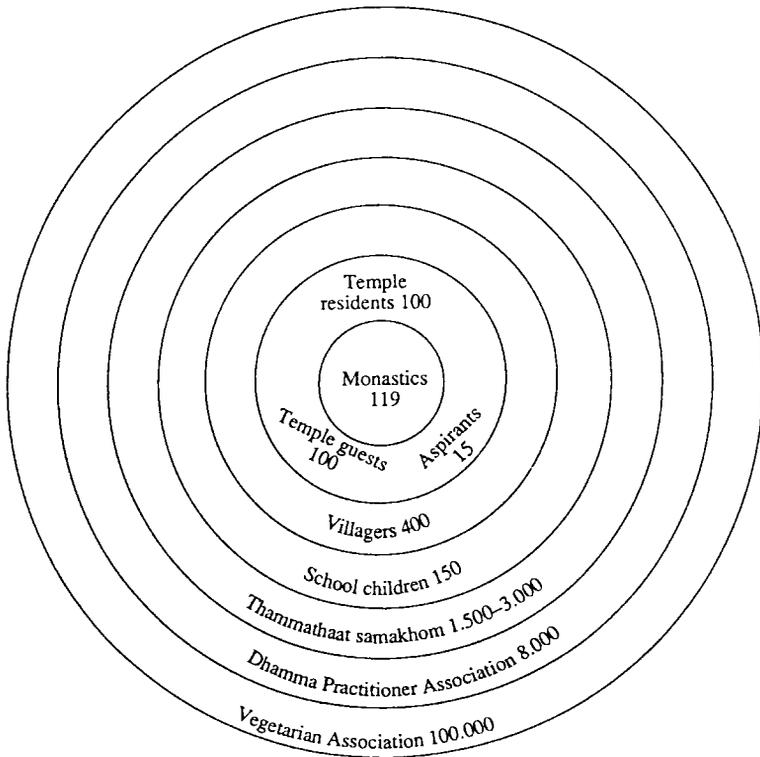
Nearly every centre has a village where the laypeople have built their houses and where they stay either permanently or temporarily. Such villages are found in Pathom Asoke, Sisa Asoke, Sali Asoke and Sima Asoke. Altogether, there are some 160 houses in the Asoke villages; 50 houses in Pathom Asoke and in Sisa Asoke, 30 houses in Sali Asoke and in Sima Asoke. If we estimate that two persons stay in one house - either a married couple, a mother and a daughter or two sisters this means that some 300 people live in the Asoke villages.

In Santi Asoke in Bangkok there are no villagers, instead many followers live in the vicinity of the temple. They have either bought or built houses in the area. There is even a new condominium with six stores called the "Tawangai building" which can accommodate about 60 persons. The two narrow streets surrounding the temple

compound are partly populated by the lay followers. One can estimate that there are some 100 lay followers living in the immediate vicinity of the temple. Many lay people also live across the main road or further away on the lanes. In a one kilometre radius of the centre there are, altogether, approximately 200 lay followers of the Asoke group.

The core of the Asoke group can thus be seen as consisting of the 119 monastics, 15 aspirants, 200 temple residents (including permanent and temporary guests), 300 villagers and 100 Santi Asoke residents. Altogether, the hard-core consists of some 700 people, which must be regarded as a rather low estimate.¹²⁵

FIGURE 2: Number of the Asoke people



The schoolchildren of the Asoke boarding school reside inside the temple. Yet, they cannot be regarded as members, even though they stay permanently inside the temple compound. There are altogether over 200 students: 54 in Santi Asoke, 60 in Pathom Asoke, 80 in Sisa Asoke and 15 in Sali Asoke.

In addition to the active lay followers, there are approximately two thousand people who regularly receive cassette tapes from the Santi Asoke "Thammasot" tape centre. In 1994, 2952 members were registered, of whom 1518 were regarded as "active members". The membership fee for receiving tapes is 100 *baht* a year or 900 *baht* for the long-term membership which covers nine years. Some of these people are also members of the Dhamma Practitioner Association (*samakhom phu patibat tham*), which has some 8000 members. The central committee of the Dhamma Practitioner Association meets once a month to discuss their activities and future plans. For many years the chairman of the association was Chamlong Srimuang.

The largest association with contacts to the Asoke group is the Vegetarian Society of Thailand, which runs the vegetarian restaurants in Bangkok, Nakhon Pathom, Chiang Mai and in Nakhon Ratchasima. The coupons sold in the restaurants carry the name of both the Dhamma Practitioner Association and the Vegetarian Society of Thailand. The Vegetarian Society claims to have some 100 000 members, but the definition of membership status is somewhat unclear as the coupon states that "these coupons are only sold to the members". Earlier, buyers were encouraged to join the association by paying the membership fee of one *baht*. Nowadays, however, everyone is free to buy the coupons. The chairperson of the Vegetarian Society is Chamlong's wife Sirilak Srimuang.

In conclusion, we can estimate that the Asoke sect has over 700 core members, 8000 active members, and some tens of thousands of sympathisers among the members of the Vegetarian Society of Thailand.¹²⁶

The Asoke group prints the *Saan Asoke*-magazine in 7000 copies. The magazine targets active members, this would indicate that my estimate of nearly 9000 active members is fairly accurate.

2.5. THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE ASOKE

The Asoke group runs five independent centres; Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke, Sisa Asoke, Sali Asoke and Sima Asoke. Once a year, during the national gathering (*mahapawarana*) in Pathom Asoke, after the Buddhist Lent, new abbots (*somphaan*) are elected for each centre. Often the same monk stays in that position for several years if he wishes to stay and if the results in terms of agricultural production and Buddhist practice at the centre are satisfactory. Equally often, the abbots are changed after one year. The monks make the decisions among themselves, the Sikkhamats and the lay people have no power to influence these decisions. It is, however, of great interest for the lay people - especially for the villagers, temple residents and permanent guests - to know who the abbot in their centre will be. In the *mahapawarana* of 1994, fervent rumours were circulating amongst the lay people before the decisions were made public by Bodhiraksa.

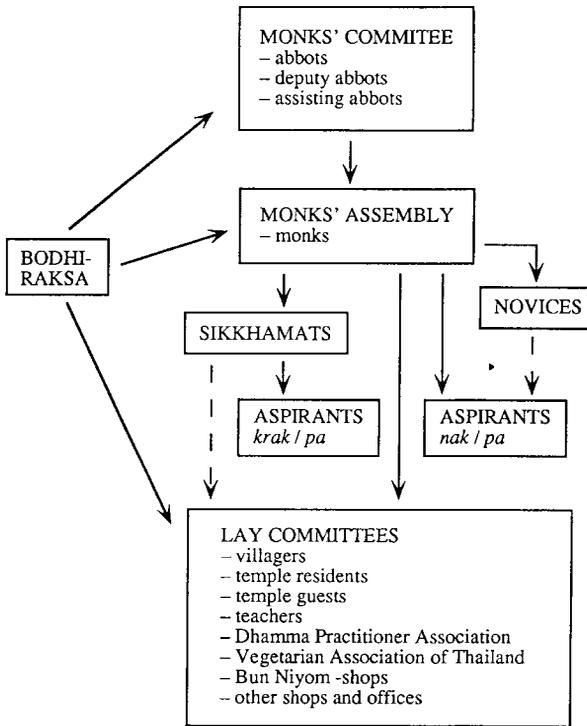
The abbot is responsible for all activities and for the monks and the lay people of his centre. According to the lay people, if the abbot is an active person, the centre will thrive. But, if the abbot for instance concentrates in wrong type of agricultural products, then the harvest can be very meagre and life very difficult, especially for the villagers. There is slight competition between the lay people staying in the different Asoke centres. Every lay person seems to have a strong opinion about which centre is the best - regardless of where they themselves are residing. This competition between the centres is not relevant for the monks, because the monks are free to move from centre to centre, except for the abbots.

Santi Asoke in Bangkok is the co-ordinating centre of the whole group. The activities in each of the centres and lay groups are regularly reported to Santi Asoke, where these reports are summarised and published in some of the publications of the Asoke group. Santi Asoke is thus the focal point of all the activities of the Asoke group in co-ordinating and informing about them, without having any actual power to influence these activities.

Bodhiraksa's role as *de facto* leader of the group is more

ceremonial than administrative. He is regarded as an advisor or consultant for the group and presides over nearly every significant meeting of temple residents, teachers, practitioners, office workers, restaurant workers and other lay groups. He spends half the week in Pathom Asoke and half in Santi Asoke.

FIGURE 3: Organisational structure of the Asoke group



Each centre is led by an abbot (*somphaan*), sometimes assisted by a deputy abbot (*rong somphaan*) and an assistant abbot (*phu chuei somphaan*) depending on the work load of each centre each year. The monks' committee is constituted of the abbots, whereas the monks' assembly includes all monks of each centre. The abbots present problems and plans concerning their own temple to the monks' assem-

bly and let the monks discuss the problems and postpone or reject the plans. The villagers form their own committees to discuss their problems, these meetings are chaired by the monks. The other groups, such as teachers, shopkeepers, office workers and others form their own committees to make decisions. The monks chairing these meetings play an advisory role in the group and their opinion is asked concerning moral and practical questions.

The Sikkhamats also have an administrative structure, albeit a more loose one than the monks. Officially, for instance, in Santi Asoke three Sikkhamats have been elected as representatives of the group towards the outside world. They act as mediators between the monks and the Sikkhamats, and they are responsible for the female aspirants, and for the female temple residents and permanent guests.

The Sikkhamats have their own meetings once a month which are presided over by a monk to discuss general problems, in addition to the fortnightly conferences at the time of the half-moon. The same applies to the female aspirants, where every second meeting is chaired by the Sikkhamats and every second by the monks. The Sikkhamats, however, never chair the meetings of the male aspirants or male temple residents. The Sikkhamats are expected to chair the meetings of the female temple residents and permanent guests.

2. 5. 1. Hierarchy in the Asoke

The hierarchical pattern of the Asoke sect closely follows the pattern of the outside Thai society and the mainstream Buddhist monasteries.

The monks pay respect by prostrating (*kraap*) to the leader of the whole group Bodhiraksa, who is also the most senior monk of the group. Bodhiraksa himself pays respect only to the "Triple Gem" - Buddha, *dhamma*, sangha, together with the other monks during sermons.

The Sikkhamats pay respect by prostrating to Bodhiraksa, to all the monks and to the eldest Sikkhamat. Originally this tradition separated the group from the mainstream, where the three bows are directed to the Triple Gem. Even in the Asoke the three bows are, however, often confused with paying respect to the Triple Gem.¹²⁷

The novices are theoretically on the same level as the Sikkhamats but, in practice, they are regarded to be on a higher level in accordance with Thai tradition. The Sikkhamats consequently bow to the novices. The aspirants are expected to pay respect to both the monks and the Sikkhamats. The temple residents and permanent or temporary guest all are expected to pay respect to the monks and the Sikkhamats. There is, however, a slight tendency for male lay followers to forget to pay respect to the Sikkhamats. Their behaviour seems to follow individual rather than general patterns.

Before the sermons, the lay people pay respect by prostrating (*kraap*) to the leading monk, to who ever is preaching, to the group of monks and, finally, to the Sikkhamats.¹²⁸ After the sermon, the lay people should bow three times again in the same order.

The lay people are also expected to pay respect to both the monks and the Sikkhamats. When consulting the monastics, a lay person should sit on the floor in front of the monk or Sikkhamat who either sits on a chair or in his or her *kuti*. When talking to a monk, a laywoman is expected to hold her hands in the greeting position (*wai*) all the time, the same applies to the Sikkhamats talking to monks. These rules follow the mainstream practices.

The senior-junior hierarchy amongst the monastics is as important for the Asoke group as it is in mainstream Buddhism. The monks also pay respect to their senior monks and, instead of using each others given names, the junior monk calls his senior *phante*, whereas the senior one usually calls his junior either *awuso* or by his name. The same applies to the Sikkhamats.

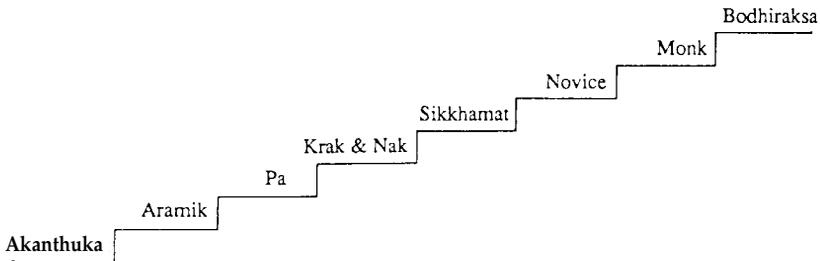
During the sermons, the monastics sit in the order in which they were ordained. They also walk their alms rounds in this order.

The hierarchy amongst the lay people, temple residents or outsiders follows the general pattern of Thai society outside the group where age is respected.

During the sermons, the monks sit in the front on an elevated stage and the Sikkhamats sit at the side on a somewhat lower stage. In Santi Asoke the Sikkhamats sit on the right hand side of the monks, in Pathom Asoke they sit on the left hand side, which means that there are no fixed rules about this. In the mainstream the *mae chis*

usually sit together among the lay people on the floor in front. The female aspirants sit next to the Sikkhamats on the floor, whereas the male aspirants sit next to the monks on the floor. The lay people sit scattered on the floor in no specific order. If possible, a segregation of sexes is observed, but in larger gatherings this pattern usually disappears.

FIGURE 4: Hierarchy in the Asoke



2. 6. STATE REACTIONS TO THE ASOKE GROUP

The Asoke group has been attacked several times by the state authorities, by the police and by some monks from the mainstream. One of the first attacks concurred with the crushing of the student-led democracy movement in October 1976, when rumours had it that the Asoke people were hiding weapons in their centre in Nakhon Pathom. The police raided the compound, but no weapons were found.

In 1982 a mainstream monk, Phra Anan Chayananto, a former policeman by the name of Anan Senakhan, urged the police to arrest the leader of the Santi Asoke religious centre: "In the name of the Organisation for the Protection of Buddhism. Phra Anan said that the Crime Suppression division police should arrest the Santi Asoke leader for violating the Constitution, the Buddhist Order Act and illegally establishing his religious centre".¹²⁹ The Deputy Education Minister ordered the Religious Affairs Department's Director-Gen-

eral to investigate Santi Asoke's activities. This led to no further action.

After disrobing, Phra Anan continued his campaign against the Asoke sect as Police-Major Anan Senakhan. In August 1988, the mainstream Buddhist orders attacked again. A senior monk from the Wat Mahathat temple supported Anan's proposal that the government should take action against the Santi Asoke religious centre. According to the senior monk "everybody can do anything if it does not bring troubles to others, but today it's not so when some people set up their own vegetarian group and accuse those who eat meat of being evil". According to him Santi Asoke's establishment of a so-called "Buddha Utopia" village is "not proper activity for Buddhist monks".¹³⁰

Chamlong Srimuang was publicly pressed to give a statement concerning the legitimacy of Santi Asoke. He defended the centre vigorously by saying that "people who wonder why the monks at the centre did not shave their eyebrows, wear robes of a different colour and eat no meat should go there and make up their own mind". "The monks own nothing, not even a radio set, unlike other temples which do things merely for wealth."¹³¹

Some official negotiations were carried out between the state authorities and Asoke representatives. The group was represented by Thongbai Thongpao, one of the most famous lawyers in Thailand, and 10 other lawyers who defended the legitimacy of the centre.¹³² The final verdict was that since Bodhiraksa had never officially left the sangha, he was still legally a monk, but the centre was encouraged to seek official registration with the authorities in order to come under the Religious Affairs Department.¹³³

The following year, the controversy continued with new vigour. The new Supreme Patriarch (*sangharaja*), Somdej Phra Yana Sangvorn, chaired a meeting of 150 senior monks from all parts of Thailand, where the decision was made to ask the Council of Elders (*mahatherasamkhom*) to defrock Bodhiraksa for "defying and distorting the sangha's discipline".¹³⁴ Bodhiraksa's denunciation of the Council of Elders "posed a major danger to Buddhism" according to the mainstream statement. According to the *sangharaja*: "Thai monks

must follow the sangha discipline and the Tripitaka. (Monks who are) defying the sangha discipline and denouncing the Tripitaka should not stay in Thailand.”¹³⁵ In response, Bodhiraksa was quick to point out to the public that “the Constitution does not state that Buddhist monks have to be under the Council of Elders”.

The controversy continued for a couple of weeks and the Council of Elders was expected to defrock Bodhiraksa. Then the main accusation changed: Bodhiraksa was accused of claiming that he was an incarnation of Saributra, one of the principal disciples of Buddha. A refusal to accept the defrocking, as ruled by the Council of Elders, could lead to a jail sentence of up to six months.¹³⁶ Bodhiraksa once more publicly announced that he would refuse to be defrocked, and announced that he was even willing to go to the jail and continue preaching there. He insisted that his group was doing nothing wrong, and pleaded with his followers to remain calm.

On the 30th of May 1989, the decision was finally announced that the Council of Elders had decided to defrock Bodhiraksa and his 79 disciples for “defying monastic discipline followed by mainstream Thai Buddhist monks”. They had seven days to comply with the council’s ruling.¹³⁷

Bodhiraksa refused to disrobe and the controversy continued. In a new meeting for mainstream senior monks, new accusations were presented against Bodhiraksa: violation of Buddhist disciplines, declaration of opposition to the Buddhist disciplines that prohibit monks from claiming superiority, violation of the country’s laws, subversion of Buddhism and national security, public declaration of involvement in politics, distortion of Buddhist disciplines, and declaring his independence from the Thai sangha.¹³⁸

Bodhiraksa continued his daily activities with his disciples and followers, albeit in front of hundreds of press photographers, TV-cameramen and journalists who were practically camping in the Santi Asoke compound.

The secretary to the Minister of Education, Chaipak Siriwat, came to meet Bodhiraksa on June the ninth and tried to convince him to comply with the decision of the Council of Elders. Bodhiraksa finally compromised by changing his robes into a new uniform: a

long-sleeved brown shirt and a brown robe.¹³⁹ He also dropped the title “*Phra*” in front of his name, and he and his monks have used the title “*Samana*” ever since.¹⁴⁰

On the 15th of June 1989, Bodhiraksa agreed to go to apply for a new ID-card under his lay name, Rak Rakpong, as he had no official ID-cards from the mainstream sangha.¹⁴¹ These changes did not satisfy the opponents and the campaign against Bodhiraksa continued. The deputy abbot of Wat Bovornnivet, Phra Sophon Kanaphon, regarded Bodhiraksa’s change of robes as a “trick to gain public sympathy”. According to him, Bodhiraksa’s activities during the past years have been a “threat to the teachings of the Lord Buddha”. Bodhiraksa is “destroying the whole structure of Buddhism in this country, creating disunity and causing the people to go astray”.¹⁴²

A senior politician M.R. Kukrit Pramoj¹⁴³ accused the Asoke of being a major financier for Bangkok Governor Chamlong Srimuang’s Palang Dharma Party. The accusations were denied by party representatives.¹⁴⁴

On the 19th of June 1989, Bodhiraksa was finally arrested by the police and taken into custody. The Ministry of the Interior announced that all TV coverage of the detention will be banned and that TV stations breaking the rule would simply be closed down. Press coverage was also restricted.¹⁴⁵

Bodhiraksa was denied bail and had to stay overnight in the custody in the Bangkok police school. His disciples and followers started to gather outside the building together with the press and TV cameras. The first night he appeared on the balcony to greet his followers in a white robe. This caused shock and confusion amongst the followers, as white colour indicates a layman’s status. Bodhiraksa stayed in custody for two nights, and was visited by a delegation of senior monks from the Council of Elders, who once more tried to convince him to defrock. Bodhiraksa was finally released on bail for 600 000 *baht*.¹⁴⁶

In August, the police ordered all Asoke monks and Sikkhamats to gather at the Santi Asoke temple for detention. The next day, the police arrested 106 monks and Sikkhamats and transported them to the Bangkok police station. 26 monks were released, because they

had originally been ordained within the mainstream. The rest, 60 monks and 20 Sikkhamats, had been ordained by Bodhiraksa and were thus regarded as “illegally adorning traditional Buddhist robes”.¹⁴⁷ The monks and nuns stayed in police custody for one night, and they were followed by some 200 lay supporters who waited for them outside. The monks and Sikkhamats were provided with black sarongs as a rumour was circulating that the change of the colour of their sarong would reduce the charges. The day after the whole group was released on bail for 200 000 *baht*. It was also officially announced that they would face one year in jail or a 2000 *baht* fine, if the court found them guilty of “imitating orthodox monks’ dress”.¹⁴⁸

2. 6. 1. The court case against the Asoke group

Bodhiraksa and the Asoke group faced 113 charges in criminal court. In addition to the one main charge against Bodhiraksa, there were 27 charges against him for being responsible for a group of 27 monk disciples, six charges against him for being responsible for a group of female clerics. Of the charges against the group, 27 charges were directed against a group of 27 monk disciples, 32 charges were directed against a group of 32 monk disciples, six charges were directed against a group of female clerics and 14 charges were directed against a group of female clerics.¹⁴⁹ The Asoke people were charged for acting as Buddhist monks and female clerics in different provinces on different occasions.¹⁵⁰

The leading legal defender of Bodhiraksa was Thongbai Thongpao, known as a human-rights lawyer, Thongbai was accused of being a communist by the Sarit government and imprisoned from 1958 to 1966. At a human-rights seminar in Bangkok in May 1990, Thongbai emphasised with reference to the Santi Asoke case that “no one or no group can monopolise religion”.¹⁵¹ He pointed out that, according to the constitution, the king is the protector of all religions in Thailand - even Islam and Christianity - and thus all religions and religious congregations should be free to act in Thailand.¹⁵² Thongbai demanded that the case be dropped since Bodhiraksa had already agreed to drop his Buddhist title “*Phra*” in June 1989, and had promised to wear different robes from the mainstream. Bodhiraksa had

also applied for a new ID-card in his lay name, Rak Rakpong, and thus had "conceded enough".¹⁵³

Bodhiraksa regards the trials as a struggle between good and evil - evil condemning the good.¹⁵⁴ In his defence, Bodhiraksa refers to the freedom of religion granted in the constitutions from 1932, and from 1978, which was still valid in 1989. The constitution guarantees the "right to every person to enjoy full liberty to profess a religion, a religious sect or creed, and to exercise a form of worship in accordance with his belief, provided that it is not contrary to his civic duties or to the public order or good morals".¹⁵⁵

The court case has been pending since 1989 until 1995. The trials have been organised, both in Bangkok and in the countryside, as the accusations deal with the monks' and Sikkhamats' activities in various parts of Thailand. The case was first discussed in the sangha court in Wat Mahathat, where an angry group of mainstream supporters greeted the accused Asoke monks and Sikkhamats by hitting and spitting on them.¹⁵⁶ The court case was finally moved to the civil court, where the case has been proceeding very slowly.

The case was reopened in Bangkok on March the 20th 1995, when all the accused monks and Sikkhamats gathered at the civil court. Some 2000 lay supporters had arrived at Santi Asoke from all parts of Thailand. The occasion was transformed from a trial to a religious national gathering. Supporters kept arriving during Sunday the 19th, and spent the night in various places in and around the Santi Asoke compound, wherever there was free space. Next morning, both the preaching and alms rounds were omitted. Instead, the lay people began preparing food early in the morning, and the only meal of the day was served around 6 a.m. Around 7 a.m. the first trucks and vans started to transport people to the court building. The court case was due to be opened at 9 a.m., but because of the notorious traffic jams of Bangkok, at least two hours had to be reserved for the journey.

In the court building a small room for about 10 persons was reserved for the Asoke group, even though there were approximately 100 persons who had been accused. After long negotiations, a larger room was shown to the group which could accommodate all the ac-

cused. About one hundred lay people sat on the floor and the rest, some 2000 persons, sat on the corridors of the court building.

The first reopening of the case was postponed after the accused and their supporters had waited for over three hours. First the prosecutor was an hour late, and when he finally arrived, he stated that he was new on the case and needed more time to study. Some dusty boxes with documents were, however, carried to him and for a while it looked as if the case could be started. The final reason for postponing the case was that none of the 14 witnesses for the prosecution had arrived. The case was postponed for one week.

The following Monday, a somewhat smaller group travelled to court again. This time the case was opened and the prosecution had a witness present: a police officer who had raided the Santi Asoke compound in June 1989. An alms bowl had been confiscated and was shown as evidence that some Asoke members pretended to be monastics. The only problem that day was that nobody in the courtroom could hear the witness due to the acoustic problems in the room.¹⁵⁷ The court-case continued every Monday until the end of the year, albeit in less farcical manner.

III ORTHODOXY, UN-ORTHODOXY AND THAI BUDDHISM

Biograpy of Sikkhamat Chinda, Santi Asoke

“I was born on the 29th of March 1946 to a Chinese family in Sampeng area in Bangkok. My father is Chinese, but he was born in Thailand. My grandfather came from China as a young man; he was a specialist in Chinese herbal medicine. In Bangkok, he established a shop selling herbal medicine on the Soi Sampeng.

My father never wanted to learn to speak Thai, even though he was born here. My father looked down upon the Thais, and used to speak only *Teochew*, which is his Chinese dialect. My mother was also Chinese. She was born in China, but when she came to Thailand she moved to my grandfather’s house in Sampeng. My grandfather had a second wife, a Thai, and my mother learned to speak Thai from her stepmother.

I have one elder brother and two sisters. My older sister died about 10 years ago, so now I only have one younger sister left.

We were living in the same building as the shop selling Chinese medicine. We had a big traditional Chinese house with three floors. On the first floor there was the shop and at the back of the building we had a kind of balcony from where we could observe what was happening in the kitchen. Our whole family lived there as well as the people who were working in the shop.

As a child I went to a Chinese primary school and did not speak Thai very often. We were all Chinese in the school and we naturally spoke Chinese to each other. My secondary school was a Thai school and, even though most of us were Chinese, our teacher forced us to speak Thai. We had to pay one *saleung* for each Chinese word we said. That is how I learned to speak more Thai. My mother spoke *Teochew* to me when I was a child, but later she also preferred to speak Thai to me. I also started to speak Thai to my sisters because we had to speak Thai in the school anyway.

I never met my grandfather. I have only seen his picture. He looks very strong and smart in that picture. After my grandfather’s death, my father took over the herbal shop, but he was not a very successful business man and, finally, we managed to sell the shop, and moved away from the Sampeng area to the Rajathewi area. At that time, my elder brother graduated from the University of Chulalongkorn where he had studied Western medicine. He opened a clinic on the Soi Talaat Phetchaburi and our whole family moved into that house. My brother still has his clinic in that house today.

After graduating from high school I moved to Chiang Mai to study chemistry at the university. I mainly stayed on the campus which was then very new and modern. I seldom joined my friends when they went to the downtown. I preferred to stay in my room and read. But sometimes, when they all left the girls’ dormitory to join a big festival, I was too scared to stay there alone so I joined them and went downtown to Chiang Mai.

I was asked by Chomrom Buddhasilpa of the Chiang Mai university to give

singing classes to the children of a Buddhist group called Yuwabuddhiga Samakom at a Buddhist centre. That was how I became a member of Chomrom Buddhasilpa, and one day they went to Wat Muangmang to meditate, and so I also learned to meditate there.

After graduating from Chiang Mai with Bachelor's degree, I started to work in the office of Atomic Energy for Peace in Bangkok and I continued to live in my brother's house as before.

I was already fascinated by Buddhism when I was a child. I felt so sad when I thought that I could never meet Buddha himself because he had lived more than two thousand years ago. I went to different temples seeking the truth and the best way of practicing for myself. I wanted to learn to meditate and studied in the Baan Dhammaprasit in Thonburi, which later became known as the Thammakaai sect. I studied meditation under their present leader, Dhammajayo Bhikkhu, who had just began his monkhood after graduating from university.

I was, however, not successful with that way of practising. I tried to concentrate on the crystal Buddha image - one could concentrate either on a crystal ball or on an image which we had in front of us - but I tended to fall asleep. I meditated in this group for two or three years, and it helped me to survive an emotionally difficult time when my mother was dying of cancer. I started to meditate there on the 6th of June 1970.

My mother died on the 12th of July at the age of 58 that same year. People used to say that I was the one of the three girls in the family who most resembled my mother, and that even my character was similar to hers. When she died, I started to think that perhaps I would also die at the same age. Whilst studying at the Chiang Mai University, I had already decided that I would spend half of my life in a temple following Buddha. This meant that I wanted to join a monastery at the age of 29. Even if I had not found this group, I would have joined a monastery as a *mae chi*. The group itself was not important; even if the group was bad, I could still practice in my own way.

My boss at the Isotopic Production Division in the Office of Atomic Energy offered me a UNDP fellowship from the International Atomic Energy Agency to go to California to observe the use of radioactive isotopes. I decided to accept the offer, because I calculated that I still would have time to pay back the fellowship by working at the office before I reached the age of 29.

I moved to California in 1972. I stayed in Verano Place at the University of California Irvine. The campus was quite far away from the office where I worked, and I had to learn to drive and buy a car. I had two good friends there: two Philippino girls called Gloria and Evelena, who used to drive me around both before and after I bought my own car. I shared a room with a Taiwanese girl called Anlie. She had the same family name as I have. We could not communicate in Chinese, because I can not speak Mandarin, so we used to speak English with each other. In the public, however, we were too embarrassed to speak English because everybody knew that we were both Chinese, so we never said a word in any language in public to avoid

embarrassment. She persuaded me to join the Chinese student club, instead of joining the International student club. In the Chinese student club there were also young American Chinese. I was quite shocked that they did not behave like Chinese at all. They looked Chinese, but they behaved like Americans. I was particularly shocked at the way boys and girls behaved towards each other; it wasn't like the Asian Chinese.

Before returning to Thailand, I visited many friends in the States whom I had known while I was staying in the UCI. One of them was an Indian girl, Rathanamana, and her sister. I remember her wondering why I, as a Thai Buddhist, was not a vegetarian. Rathanamana was vegetarian, because she was Hindu. She prepared a chicken especially for me. In Chicago, I visited a Chinese couple from Taiwan, Maisie and Peter, who had been working on their post-doctoral degrees at the University of California. I also travelled alone to Washington D.C. visiting many important places, like the headquarters of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which had paid for my stay in California. On the way back to Thailand, I made a short stopover in Amsterdam to visit my Dutch friends, a nice couple called Jerome and Miriam, whom I had met in Irvine.

When I returned to Thailand, I continued to work in the Office of Atomic Energy for two years. In another department of the office, there was a girl who was also interested in Buddhism. She was then preparing herself to become a nun. My colleagues told her about me and so the two of us met, and we started to read books by Phra Putthathaath¹⁵⁸ and discuss them together. Then, one day, she showed me a book from the Asoke group and I told her that I already had the book, although I had not yet read it. My sister and I had got it whilst visiting Wat Asokaram in Samut Prakarn. Phra Pothirak¹⁵⁹ was living in the monastery then, but we did not meet him during our visit. I looked at that book, but I felt too scared to read it. I read only a few sentences, and then I put it in my bookcase. I was then still practising meditation and I did not want to do anything else. When my friend offered me the same book, I started to read it again. My sister, who was then living in the South in Songkhla, wanted to read the book too, and I told her that I was still reading it. She wondered why I did not read it whilst she was away, and why it had taken such a long time to read it. But I did not tell her that I had been too scared to read it.

I decided to become a nun in two years time so I began to practise by keeping the eight precepts. The most difficult thing in the beginning was to give up singing. I loved singing and during my childhood and school years I had sung all the time, every day. I sang at all the school parties; I just loved singing. But when I started to follow the eight precepts, I decided to give up singing.

I had also become vegetarian. I was living in my brother's house. At first I tried to hide this from my family and ate only one meal a day. I stayed long hours in the office, and when I came back I told the servants to take away the food that my family had left for me. But of course they finally found out and my brother, as a doctor, blamed me for ruining my health and told me that I was going to die of hunger or diarrhoea if I did not eat. I was also staying in my elder sister's house

near the Kasetsart University because it was closer to my office. I stayed in her house for the time immediately prior to joining the Asoke group.

I met the Asoke group in mid February 1974. My friend from the Atomic Energy Office was then joining the Asoke group in Nakhon Pathom. She was later ordained as a Sikkhamat, but had to disrobe in order to take care of her mother one year after I had been ordained in the group too.

When I met the Asoke group I immediately felt that I wanted to join them. I went to pack my things in Bangkok and two weeks after my first encounter with the group I came back to Daen Asoke in Nakhon Pathom on the second of March 1974. I left my sister's house early that morning for the bus station in Morchit, from there I could take a bus to Daen Asoke. I left a short note telling her not to worry about me. But of course she did worry, and even came to ask me to come back to live with her. She told me that I could live as I wished, eat only one meal a day and do good, if I only stayed in her house with her. She cried a lot.

Another problem was that I was still obliged to work for the office in order to pay back my fellowship. My boss also came to Daen Asoke to complain, and so I agreed to fulfil my worldly duties and go back to the office to work for one more year. I had become a *pa* in the group and had shaved my hair. During the time I worked in the office, I became a *krak*, but I continued wearing the clothes of a *pa*, because I had to go to work every day. In the office I wore a white gown and my boss even persuaded me to wear shoes to protect myself against the radioactive radiation, so I was quite a strange sight with my shaven head and white gown.

I was finally ordained as a Sikkhamat on May 15th 1975. Although it was easier for women to become ordained in the Asoke group in those days, it took me a long time, because of my promise to the office.

My entire family was shocked and did not accept my decision to become a Sikkhamat. I have had very little contact with my family ever since I joined the Asoke group. My sister sometimes comes around the new year to wish me a happy new year. My brother completely refuses to meet me. Once he came here to Santi Asoke with his wife. His wife and children came to meet me in the temple and to tell me that my brother was waiting for me outside. We were just eating and I could not leave just like that. I told my sister-in-law to wait a little while and I would come to meet my brother outside the temple. She then went to tell my brother this, which further infuriated him, and he refused to wait for me. My sister-in-law came to tell me this, and promised to come to visit me another time alone. My brother never came to meet me again.

Life in the Asoke group then was very different from what it is nowadays. If I met the group now I would not have joined it. Everything is too noisy and there are too many different activities and too many different people. When I joined this group, I wanted calm and peaceful surroundings, which we had then. We were very serious in those days. We rarely smiled and I preferred not to speak even. I could stay silent the whole day. Especially if there were foreign visitors I just kept my mouth shut and never spoke English to any of them. I think people were quite

afraid of us then. We all looked very serious and we were working very hard.

We have always been publishing Dhamma books and, in the beginning, I was also working with these publications in a publishing house called Hong Pab Suwan which belonged to Phra Pothirak's friend. Before I joined the group, the Asoke group was situated in Asokaram. From there they used to come to Hong Pab Suwan to publish a leaflet called *Asoke*. Later we continued with a publication called *Saeng Soon* (The light of emptiness). I have done very little manual or agricultural labour because my health is not so strong and, as a "city girl," I am not used to that kind of work.

At first I just wanted to concentrate on my own mind and not to get involved with other people. Only very slowly I started to speak more with the other people - now someone has even criticised me for speaking to the foreign visitors too much. They complain that I seem so lively and eager when I speak English or Chinese, but when I speak Thai they say I behave quite differently.

I had nearly forgotten my Chinese *Teochew* dialect, but once some monks from our group stayed in Lumbini park where there was a group of Chinese exercising. I had recorded one sample tape of preaching in Chinese. My Chinese in those days was so bad, that nearly every second word was Thai. We did not practice speaking Chinese in our group, although seven Sikkhamats are of Chinese origin. The Chinese in Lumbini park wanted to know who was the person who was preaching in the tape, and so the monks called me to come quickly to the park. I had great difficulties in finding the right words. Even now I find it difficult to preach in Chinese. Nowadays, almost all Chinese visitors from abroad or from Thailand come to talk to me. So my own Chinese has improved quite a lot.

When more and more visitors started to come to our temple that forced us to relax and start smiling again. A smile in Thailand means let's be friends. Now we try to receive visitors and guests with a friendly smile. Poh Than¹⁶⁰ himself shows us a good example of how to receive the people.

At first I stayed in Daen Asoke, but when Mrs. Kittiya donated this land to the Asoke group in 1974 and some *kutis* were built here, I moved to Santi Asoke. The name of the place originates from Mrs. Kittiya's name, who had changed her name to become Santiya after she met Phra Pothirak¹⁶¹. People soon started to come to listen the preaching of Phra Pothirak every Saturday and Sunday.

In the October of 1976, I stayed with Sikkhamat Phussadi in "Prakarn Asoke"; a centre we were starting in the house which belonged to Sikkhamat Rinpha's mother. She was very interested in the Asoke group. There I also met Sikkhamat Rinpha for the first time when she was still a laywoman. That centre was, however, never successful, so we gave up a few years later.

In the early years in this group we used to go *thudong*¹⁶² very often. Now it is forbidden for the Asoke group to go *thudong*. Three Sikkhamats went *thudong* for three years and I joined them for the final year. We stayed overnight under the trees or anywhere where it was peaceful enough for us and we knew that nobody had followed us. We walked all over Thailand in the North, South and Northeast. The

North was easier, because the streets were better and there was a proper space for us to walk. In the South it was more difficult because there is only space for cars and motorcycles and then there is a kind of ditch, and we had to balance between the road and the ditch. Besides, it is often raining in the South.

One night we were walking in the rain not far from Chumphon. The rain was falling very heavily and we decided to go to stay in a temple we saw on the roadside. Actually, we often stayed in the temples if the abbots allowed us to stay. In that temple in the South there was nobody. We stayed there overnight quite happily and only afterwards somebody told us that the abbot of that temple had been beheaded, after which the temple was deserted. We felt quite scared afterwards when we heard this.”

3.1. WHAT IS ORTHODOX BUDDHISM?

As I discussed in the Introduction, a functioning state-sangha relationship is of vital importance to the ruling elite of Thailand. In this chapter, I shall study how the secular state hierarchy is involved in the Buddhist monastic hierarchy.

Because the Asoke group has often been accused for being heretical¹⁶³, it is important to study the type of Buddhism practised in Thailand. What the basic tenets of Buddhism are, how is it practised, what values are cherished and the kinds of trends that can be found in modern Thai Buddhism. I shall look at some individual monks and groups who have represented new ideas and practices in Thai Buddhism. It is worthwhile comparing the state reactions to these various dissidents and groups.

The Asoke group is often described as an “unorthodox Buddhist group” by the Thai press and, therefore, I shall consider the nature of “orthodox” Buddhism: how it is manifested, how it differs from “un-orthodox” Buddhism and which authority can decide whether a type of Buddhism is orthodox or un-orthodox.

I shall start by studying the sangha as the basic manifestation of Theravada Buddhism, and the sangha’s relationship with the Thai state, as expressed in the legal acts.

3.2. THE EMERGENCE OF NEW TRENDS AND DISSIDENCE IN THAI BUDDHISM

I shall start this chapter by a short introduction of some individual Buddhist monks, all of whom can be regarded as to belong to the mainstream. This introduction will be quite short and superficial as it is mainly based on the literature and not on my own research. For a deeper analysis the reader is hence advised to consult the existing literature concerning these monks. Here, only the points relevant for understanding the differences between the ideas and practices of the Asoke and the mainstream will be highlighted, as well as the differences in action from the part of the Council of Elders in cases of conflict and dissent.

Further down in this chapter, I will compare the merit-making activities of the mainstream sangha to those of the Asoke group. The moral values promoted by the Asoke group in their merit-making activities will be presented and analysed in this chapter.

3.2.1. From Buddhadasa to Yantra

One of the most revered old monks was Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993), who was regarded as a reformer. He was probably the first monk to try to bridge the gap between the two existing Buddhist sects: Mahanikai and Thammayutnikai. He himself was ordained as a Mahanikai monk, but insisted on cultivating close relations also with the Thammayutnikai monks.

Buddhadasa was a diligent writer and published extensively after studying the classics of the Pali canon. Many of his speeches or preachings have been published, and some 10-20 books have been translated and published even in English e.g. *Handbook for Mankind*, *In Samsara exists Nirvana*, *The Right Approach to Dhamma*, *Buddha-Dhamma for Students*, *Toward the Truth* and others. Some of his books deal purely with meditation techniques such as *Mindfulness with Breathing*, whereas others deal with social and moral questions.

In 1932 Buddhadasa established his own centre, Suan Mokkh in Southern Thailand. His temple became a popular meditation cen-

tre both for Thais and Westerners. Buddhadasa commented on the social circumstances in Thailand particularly in his work *Dhammic Socialism* (1974) where he criticised both capitalist and communist societies. He tried to distance socialism from communism and Marxism by emphasising class harmony instead of class distinction. Buddhadasa was not willing to abolish the class society, but preferred to maintain it and called the classes *varna*. He wanted the class distinction to be based on function and duty of the class, rather than on the birth. The ruling class, the warriors (*kshatriya*) should be maintained but they should be apart of the dhammic socialist system and govern the world accordingly.¹⁶⁴ His socialism, which he also spelled as social-ism, was to be seen as social service to the society.

Despite Buddhadasa's careful wording in social affairs he was accused for being a communist in 1948, but due to his good relations with the *sangharaja*, no action was taken against him. In the 1960s he was again accused for the same reason by the Sarit government, and again in the 1970s and early 1980s by Police-Major Anan Senakhan, who later became an ardent opponent of the Asoke group.

Buddhadasa opposed the worship of the Buddha images, and tried to demythologise Buddhist cosmological ideas by explaining heaven and hell as the mental states of well-being and woe. Buddhadasa pointed out that one should work for nirvana through productive material activity, because work in the form of "right occupation" (*samma ajiva*) is one of the components on the Noble Eightfold Path. Buddhadasa interpreted nirvana in terms of non-attachment; it is a return to the original condition, to be non-attached and to be free, at peace, quiet, non-suffering and totally aware. Suffering is caused by being attached to things. According to Buddhadasa the problems of hunger, illiteracy and illness are not real problems, they are only symptoms of greed and selfishness which govern people. Buddhadasa saw genuine Buddhism as unselfish, as there is no self.¹⁶⁵

Buddhadasa criticised the traditional Thai merit-making rituals, since he viewed this form of merit-making as a mechanical "contract" for buying oneself a good rebirth.¹⁶⁶

One of the most famous Thai monks in the Western political literature is Kittivuddho, a right-wing activist, who, in 1976, stated

that “killing a Communist is not demeritorious”. He should, however, also be regarded as an important religious teacher, albeit controversial.

In 1965 Kittivuddho established the Chittabhavan college in Chonburi province, close to the beach resort Pattaya. It rapidly developed into a centre at which thousands of boys have been ordained as novices and hundreds of monks have been instructed in Kittivuddho’s own version of Buddhist social action each year. According to Kittivuddho, the monks should not remain in the temples waiting for the laity to seek them out for purposes of merit-making. Monks should go out and actively propagate Buddhism and even try to convert non-Buddhists.

Kittivuddho became heavily involved in Thai politics in the 1970s. Kittivuddho’s supporters, the leaders of the military junta Prapass and Thanom, hastily escaped from Thailand after massive student demonstrations in October 1973, when the king was forced to expel the two hated generals and nominate a civilian as the new Prime Minister. During the three years from 1973-1976, Thailand experienced an unusual freedom of speech, publishing and new organisations sprung up. The students, monks, peasants and workers organised themselves into leftist movements which demanded land reform and higher wages for the workers. The right-wing started to organise itself to counter these organisations. One of the right-wing organisations was led by Kittivuddho. Nawaphon¹⁶⁷ was founded by the military and financially supported by the urban *petit bourgeoisie* and village headmen.

The war in Indochina was over in 1975; the communist-led FNL seized Saigon, communist Khmer Rouge invaded Phnom Penh and the communist-led Pathet Lao government abolished the Lao monarchy. These radical changes shocked the Thai establishment, and Kittivuddho often referred to these developments in his political speeches.¹⁶⁸ When Kittivuddho was accused of breaking the *vinaya* rule which forbids monks to be politically active, he defended himself by claiming that Nawaphon was not a political organisation but a “principle of nationalism”.

Kittivuddho led a mass demonstration in January 1976 which

demanded social welfare, land reform and the crushing of the communist and other left-wing groups. Critics demanded that the Council of Elders condemn Kittivuddho for violating the *vinaya*, but the Council of Elders found Kittivuddho innocent. At the same time, a left-wing monk was forcibly disrobed for leading a peasant demonstration.¹⁶⁹

In a liberal Thai magazine, Kittivuddho publicly stated in June 1976 that “killing a communist was not demeritorious”. The interview caused a furore among the intellectuals and leftists. Kittivuddho was forced to explain his statement in several other interviews. Some monks demanded the Council of Elders to investigate whether Kittivuddho had violated the *vinaya* by encouraging man-slaughter. The *sangharaja* defended Kittivuddho in the public by declaring that “from the religious point of view, any action taken in the interests of both the person and the public is legitimate. But if it is taken for only personal interest, it is definitely wrong...”. Before the Council of Elders decided on the case, Kittivuddho hurried to announce that he did not mean that killing a communist was not demeritorious, but that killing communism as an ideology, an ideology which he compared with the devil (*mara*), was not demeritorious.¹⁷⁰

In June 1976, Kittivuddho had implicitly indicated that he was a saint (*araha*) who could consequently easily reach *nirvana* - again a violation of the *vinaya*. Kittivuddho managed to escape the punishment by claiming that he had in fact only warned his supporters to claim that he was an *araha*.¹⁷¹

In the late 1980s, Kittivuddho was appointed as an abbot of a Bangkokian royal monastery, which enjoys an annual income from donations of 10-30 Million *baht*.¹⁷² In the early 1990s, Kittivuddho was jokingly called as *Kittivolvo* due to his taste for expensive cars. Kittivuddho still has close contacts with the military leadership, and is known to be a strong supporter of General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh and his policies.

One of the most well-known living Buddhist monks in Thailand, since the death of Buddhadasa, is Phra Prayudh Payutto, whose present title is Phra Dhamma Pidok, and who was awarded the UNESCO Peace Prize in 1994.

Prayudh Payutto, earlier known as Phra Rajavaramuni and as Phra Debvedi, has published extensively in Thai. His works include: *Dictionary of Buddhism* (1972-75), *Social Dimension of Buddhism in Contemporary Thailand* in 1983, *Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World. A Survey of the Buddhist situation* in 1984, and *Looking to America to solve Thailand's problems* in 1987, which was translated into English by Grant Olson. In 1988, he published a booklet on *Buddhist Economics* which has also been translated. The book, *Freedom: Individual and Social*, was written in English by Prayudh Payutto and published in 1987.

Prayudh Payutto comments upon the social circumstances of modern Thailand. According to Prayudh Payutto, Thai society has lost its cultural direction, it has abandoned its old and deeply rooted values and institutions and apes the West all too readily. This has created a growing gulf between the elite and the masses. In the process, the masses now lack effective cultural leadership, whilst the "modern" ruling class lacks direction and has forgotten the function, role and usefulness of a viable monkhood in Thai society.¹⁷³

In his book, *Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World*, Prayudh Payutto complains that the monks in contemporary Thailand have been recruited from the underprivileged peasant class. The monks have therefore lost their position as intellectuals and they have fallen into the class of the common uneducated people. Modern intellectuals are recruited from the privileged classes in towns and cities; they are children of government officials and merchants. These modern intellectuals leave the major rural sector under the "awkward uninformed leadership of the monks."¹⁷⁴

Prayudh Payutto sees the future direction of the sangha as being unpredictable; there are risks of both secularisation and politicisation.¹⁷⁵

In his book on Buddhist economics, he criticises the modern consumerist society and businesses which create new desires through advertising. The advertisements exploit common aspirations, prejudices and desires. Social values are rapidly changing due to the impact of this advertising, and the Thais wish to consume as much as the Westerners are supposed to consume. However, according to Prayudh Payutto, the problem is that Thais do not produce as much

as Westerners do. Prayudh Payutto points out that the economic growth should also secure an increase in the quality of life, without forgetting the well-being of the environment. Prayudh Payutto preaches new work ethics to the Thai:

“The path from contentment to production would be similar to that taken by Western countries when the Industrial Revolution was based on the Protestant work ethics”.¹⁷⁶

The historical background of the Dhammakaya movement is closely related to one of the most revered Thai monks, Luang Poh Sod, also known as Mongkhonthepmuni. He taught his own meditation method, called as *dhammakaya* method at Wat Paknam in Thonburi. One of his best students was a *mae chi* called Khun Yay, who after Luang Poh Sod’s death continued teaching this method. In the 1960s a young schoolboy, Chaiboon Sutipol joined her meditation classes at Wat Paknam. He established a group called Dhammaprasit and collected money to build a new house for Khun Yay. Chaiboon graduated in 1969 from the Kasetsart University having studied economics and the same year he ordained as Dhammajayo.

In 1970, 80 acres of land in Pathum Thani, north of Bangkok, were donated by a rich widow to the Dhammaprasit group, who started to build the Dhammakaya meditation centre. Dhammajayo was joined by Phadet Pongswardi, another Kasetsart University graduate. He had studied agriculture and assisted in planting trees on the former paddy fields. He was ordained in 1973 as Dattajivo and became the vice-abbot.

Dhammajayo started to plan meditation training courses for young university graduates with Bachelor’s degrees. The first hot season meditation course was arranged in 1972, and large-scale mass ordination ceremonies for students were initiated. At the same time, the Buddhist university clubs began; in Bangkok nearly all of them were controlled by the Dhammakaya supporters and still are in the 1990s.

The construction of a temple was started in 1977 with Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn laying the foundation stone. A member of the Council of Elders led the opening ceremony of the temple in 1980.

A lay organisation, called *Kalayanamitra* (good friend) was established in 1984, with an office in central Bangkok. Dhammakaya has now Kalayanamitra centres in 58 provinces, as well as abroad. The temple grounds expanded from 80 acres to 800 acres in 1984 and, in 1985, a larger meditation hall was constructed to accommodate 100 000 people. The temple compound now has 1000 acres and Dhammajayo is planning to establish a World Dhammakaya Centre in the same compound with a Buddhist university, a meditation research centre and archives.¹⁷⁷

The Dhammakaya movement is mainly known for its meditation techniques. Early in Sunday mornings, nearly one hundred white buses leave from different parts of Bangkok transporting white-clad lay people to the Dhammakaya temple free of charge. When entering the Dhammakaya compound from a huge car park, the first thing one meets is a giant-size picture of Khun Yay. Behind the picture there are rows of tables where food and flowers are sold to be donated to the monks. Some 30 monks can be seen sitting in a row, each monk having a line of some 50 persons kneeling in front of him. The line slowly crawls closer to the monks to donate, the monk blesses the donor, and two assistants behind each monk take the donation. The donation ceremony usually takes 1-2 hours. After donating, people go to eat breakfast served by the hundreds of white-clad volunteers working at the Dhammakaya temple.

At 9 o'clock, people gather in the meditation hall where the first meditation session, which lasts about two hours, is led by abbot Dhammajayo, upon which lunch is served. The food may consist of fish, pork or Thai sausages. At 1 p.m. the second meditation session starts again lasting about two hours. However, many people stroll in the peaceful and cool Dhammakaya park during the second meditation session. In the compound there is a shop selling Dhammakaya publications, tapes, videos and stickers. It is also possible to donate more to the Dhammakaya temple; the volunteers give receipts to the donors, these receipts are popularly regarded bringing luck and paving the way to *nirvana*. After 3 o'clock the buses take people back to Bangkok.¹⁷⁸

During big ceremonies, such as *kathin* and *maghabucha*, the

Dhammakaya temple has become a popular place of pilgrimage - even for those who do not regularly attend the Sunday meditation sessions. The ceremonies are organised on a grand scale. Some 3000 Buddhist monks from different parts of Thailand were invited to attend the *maghabucha* of 1992. At sunset, approximately 50 000 white-clad laypeople gathered in front of the giant Buddha statue in the area holding torches in their hands. 3000 monks marched to the same area in orderly lines, and eventually the abbot, the vice-abbot and some other leading monks arrived. They placed themselves close to the Buddha statue with the abbot in the highest position. After a short meditation session, the sun set and the spotlights were switched on to illuminate the Buddha statue and the top hierarchy of the Dhammakaya movement.

The monks, with torches in their hands, started to circumambulate the Buddha statue in the inner circle. Inside the circle there was an artificial pond in which artificial lotuses were illuminated. The lay people, also with torches in their hands, started to circumambulate the statue and the monks in the outer circle. The white-clad volunteers directed the ceremony with walkie-talkies, and gave orders through loudspeakers. After the traditional circumambulation of the Buddha statue, people returned to their places and there was a spectacular show of fireworks, after which a small girl sang a sentimental song praising the Dhammakaya. The ten top monks of the movement were first to leave the place while the people prostrated themselves before them.¹⁷⁹

The former Commander in Chief of the Thai Army General, Arthit Kamlang-ek, is a well-known supporter of the Dhammakaya movement, as well as is General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh who in 1992 attended the *kathin* ceremony of the Dhammakaya movement and, according to the rumours quoted in the *Bangkok Post*, donated a large sum of money to the temple. All told the temple received 400 Million *bath* (appr. USD 20 Mill.) in donations during the *kathin* ceremony in 1992.¹⁸⁰

The most popular young monk in the early 1990s was Yantra, who had congregations both in Thailand and in the West. Yantra was a mainstream monk and was introduced to the public as a seri-

ous disciple of Lord Buddha: he walked barefoot, did not touch money and ate only vegetarian food, which he even mixed with water in order to make it more tasteless - a great sacrifice in the eyes of traditionally gourmet Thais. He had a reputation for supernatural powers and lay people could pass their amulets to him to be sacralised.

Yantra was in his early 40s when he became famous. He was considered to be rather handsome, and consequently gathered a large female following.

Yantra taught meditation in his sermons on the basis that a calm mind, which may be attained by a simple meditative breathing technique, can give one a tool to contemplate the laws of nature i.e. that all things are impermanent, ever changing, and non-self. The concentration will lead to a deep understanding which will free people from clinging to the illusion of self, of "me" and "mine", which are the main causes for human suffering. Compassion will rise and fill one's heart when one realises through contemplation that every human being is one and the same, regardless of age, sex, race or creed. Everyone wants to be free from suffering and has the dormant ability to be so. This knowledge leads to tolerance and the willingness to serve others.

Yantra also emphasised the significance of nature and ecological balance. When delivering a sermon to farmers, who were his supporters, he talked about ecological farming against cash crops at the cost of nature. He criticised the corruption and the greed-driven economy which makes investors richer and farmers poorer.¹⁸¹

Yantra visited Finland in May 1993 at the invitation of the local Thai community, which planned to establish a Sunnataram Buddhist Centre in Helsinki. Yantra arrived with several monks, *mae chis* and lay followers. His secretaries carried portable computers on which they could easily note down the names and addresses of supporters and sums of money donations. A great food offering ceremony was arranged for the monks at the Senate Square in Helsinki. On Saturday the 22nd of May, Yantra, with his entourage, arrived two hours late for the ceremony, the faithful supporters were waiting for him on the windy Senate Square from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. The

night before, he had stayed up late at the home of a Thai-Finnish family, watching TV and eating cheese cake prepared by the Thai ladies.¹⁸² On leaving Finland, he continued to other European countries for a two month tour.

Yantra experienced a serious backlash in January 1994 when several *mae chis* and female lay followers revealed that they had had sexual relations with Yantra. The accusations were originally presented to the press by a monk, Phra Phayom, formerly a popular speaker himself, who claimed to have evidence against Yantra. This evidence, however, never materialised, instead the accusations changed at the same pace as they grew. Finally, Yantra was accused of embezzling the donations his group had received. Later several women, both Thai and foreign, were willing to testify against Yantra.

Whether the accusations were true or not, they were disastrous for Yantra and his followers. He was in the headlines of the Thai language press, especially in *Thai Rath* and in *Matichon* for one year. Angry lay Buddhists attacked him violently outside the building, where he was to explain his activities to the Council of Elders (*mahatherasmakhom*).

Yantra was finally forced to disrobe in March 1995, after which he continued preaching in dark-green robes for some months, before he disappeared via Cambodia to the United States in August 1995.

Yantra's place seems to have been taken by an old monk in his 70s, Luang Poh Koon in Nakhon Ratchasima, to whom famous politicians and other celebrities flock to be blessed. He is regarded to possess magic powers and his amulets are consequently regarded to be the most powerful ones at the present.

3. 3. INTERACTION BETWEEN THE SANGHA AND THE LAY BUDDHISTS

One of the most important religious activities in a life of the average Thai Buddhist, regardless of status, is to earn or make religious merit.¹⁸³ Merit can be earned during a lifetime in order to improve the economic conditions and social status into which a person is born in her or his next life. Merit has a two-way impact; the merit earned in the earlier life or lives results in the *karma*¹⁸⁴ of every person and explains the social status and economic conditions into which a person is born in this life. Thus the past, the present and the future are all dependent on and justified by the concept of merit.

Merit-making also plays an important part in the Asoke temples; although the Asoke people show very different values in their merit-making activities. In order to study the differences between the mainstream Buddhists and the Asoke group it is worthwhile comparing their ideas concerning merit-making.

Merit has been characterised by three traditional aspects, which are generosity (*dana*), keeping the Buddhist basic precepts (*sila*), and meditational development (*bhavana*). Generosity can be practised by giving food, robes, money or land to support the monks. *Sila* should be practised by keeping the five precepts for laymen - abstain from killing, stealing, using intoxicating drugs, practising illicit sex and lying. More spiritually advanced laymen will also acquire merit by meditation.¹⁸⁵

According to Phra Khantipalo, a Buddhist mainstream monk of Western origin, merit "purifies and cleanses the mind" from all evil unskillful tendencies. The three evil tendencies he lists out are greed, aversion and delusion. Demerit is defined as the possession of resultant fruits from evil unskillful actions, rooted in the roots of non-skill: greed, aversion and delusion. Merit is connected with what is skillful and beneficial, either to oneself or else to other beings.¹⁸⁶

According to Khantipalo, it is the making of merit that ensures that a Buddhist leads a balanced and harmonious life. For a Buddhist, it is not sufficient just to read about the doctrine and have the theoretical knowledge. It is also insufficient to blindly follow tradi-

tion without a knowledge of what it really means. Khantipalo lists the ten ways of making merit, mentioned in the Pali canon:

1. giving (*dana*)
2. keeping the precepts (*sila*)
3. mind-development (*bhavana*)
4. reverence and respect
5. service or help to other people
6. giving away merit
7. rejoicing in the merits of other people
8. listening to dhamma
9. teaching dhamma
10. straightening out one's views

Khantipalo emphasises that the merit-making not only has advantages for the actor, but also for other people. For instance, *dana* benefits the receiver and reverence and respect ensure harmony in any society. *Dana* can also be seen as a gift in the form of education, training, and teaching dhamma. *Sila* emphasises not only the observation of the precepts, but also leading a life which is not harmful to others. Khantipalo also stresses that there is no need to wait for a future life in order to benefit from virtue. The present is the time when one has to live. Khantipalo finds the translation of *bhavana* into "meditation" inadequate and misleading and prefers the term "mind-development": one meditates to calm the grosser mental defilements and develop the mind in such a way that it comes to know real wisdom, with which there is the realisation of *nirvana*.¹⁸⁷

The listening and teaching of dhamma is a simple way of making merit both for laymen and monks, and can easily be practised especially during weekends or Buddhist holy days (*wan phra*). The tenth way of making merit is meritorious conduct in practice, based on knowledge and following the nine other ways. It also means that the person has the "right view" and can see things as they really are. Khantipalo emphasises that a person should clearly understand that one suffers from one's own foolishness and not because of any outside power. To see this is the supreme merit.¹⁸⁸

The ten ways of making merit can also be seen as a parallel road to the Noble Eightfold Path:

1. right understanding
2. right thought
3. right speech
4. right action
5. right means of livelihood
6. right effort
7. right mindfulness
8. right concentration

The two first paths should result in the third, fourth and fifth paths, which then lead to the sixth, seventh and final eighth path. The tenth way of making merit i.e. meritorious conduct can be compared with the “right action” and the “right means of livelihood” in the Noble Eightfold Path. According to Khantipalo, the basic fruit of merit is happiness here and now.

Another fruit of merit is the possibility and ability to make use of opportunities. “Merit opens doors everywhere. Whether one requires beauty and wealth, whether one aspires to rule, to gain a birth in the celestial realms, or perhaps to pass utterly beyond all birth and death - by making merit all is gained”. Khantipalo takes a rather pragmatic view of the reality: “The general desire of all beings throughout their lives is to escape from painful, unwelcome experience and to seek circumstances giving rise to happiness”. In conclusion he states: “The way to happiness lies in merits”.¹⁸⁹

3. 3. 1. The values manifested in merit-making

Merit-making requires an addressee or a “field of merit”. A field of merit is the person or persons to whom a meritorious deed is addressed. The sangha is usually seen as the field of merit - without the sangha the laymen would find it hard to earn merit. A monk is the mediator of, and vehicle for, merit-making and acquiring merit. The main and traditional religious function of the monk is to perform at the merit-making ceremonies which are directed towards the layman’s spiritual benefits.¹⁹⁰

The well-being and purity of the sangha has consequently been one of the most important questions in a Theravada Buddhist state. It is the duty of the ruler to patronise and control the sangha so that

the lay people can make merit. The behaviour of the individual members of the sangha is carefully followed in the Thai press, and occasional misdeeds reported on the front page. The moral purity of the sangha is a necessity for the merit-making laymen. A morally corrupt sangha is regarded as a threat to the whole society.

The Buddhist texts mention the building of religious structures and the material support for the sangha being the most meritorious deeds. Mother, father, relatives and guests are also said to be good fields of merit.¹⁹¹ Western social scientists who started to pour into the Thai countryside *en masse* after the second World War have also been studying the impact of merit-making in the society. Here the works of Kaufman, Tambiah, Mulder, Terwiel and Ingersoll will be shortly discussed.

Kaufman conducted field research in Thailand in a village called Bangkhuad where he spent a total of 200 days and seven nights over a period of 12 months. Kaufman draws a ranking list which is based on the findings of a questionnaire distributed to 25 farmers. They were asked to list in order of quantity received, the following means of acquiring merit:¹⁹²

1. Becoming a monk
2. Contributing enough money for the construction of a temple
3. Having a son ordained as a monk
4. Making excursions to the Buddhist shrines throughout Thailand
5. Contributing towards the repair of a temple
6. Giving food to the monks daily, and giving food on holydays
7. Becoming a novice
8. Attending the temple on all holy days and obeying the eight laws (*sila*) on these days
9. Obeying the five laws at all times
10. Giving clothing to the monks at the *kathin*¹⁹³

The only comment Kaufman gives concerning his list is that all forms of giving to acquire merit must be accompanied by two requisites: the donor must sincerely want to give and he must never have any regrets for having given. In his conclusion, he states that

Buddhism as it is practised in Bangkhuaed is the reason for passivity and fatalistic beliefs among the Thai farmers.¹⁹⁴

Tambiah interviewed 79 family heads¹⁹⁵ in a village in the North-eastern Thailand. They were requested to rank eight types of religious acts which were presented in random order. In the final hierarchy, he reduces the results to only six different acts:

1. Completely financing the building of a temple
2. Becoming a monk oneself or having a son become a monk
3. Contributing money to the repair of a temple or making *kathin* gifts
4. Giving food to the monks daily
5. Observing every holy day
6. Strictly observing the five precepts (*sila*)

Tambiah draws the conclusion that merit making through gift giving is more valued than merit making through the observance of Buddhist precepts and the pursuit of Buddhist ethical aims. He suggests that strict observance of the five precepts and meditation have little positive interest for the villager. Either because lay life is not possible without breaking some of the prohibitions or because one must renounce lay life altogether to pursue such aims. The villager therefore rates these pursuits, in so far as they bear relevance to his life, low on the merit making scale. This is not because he downgrades them but because they are not normally open to him.¹⁹⁶

Mulder comments upon the above mentioned ranking lists and draws three conclusions. First, joining the sangha is as meritorious as giving large sums of money. Second, giving receives great emphasis. Third, the amount of merit received tends to be of relatively minor importance when only religious duty is involved. Mulder sees a shift in emphasis in the sense that giving is becoming more important at the expense of joining the monkhood.¹⁹⁷

The value of a merit also depends upon how many people the act of merit will affect. Donating money to a Red Cross Hospital reaches many people and is therefore highly meritorious.¹⁹⁸ Building a monastery is ranked high because it also benefits many persons: both monks and laymen of present and future generations.

The *kathin* ceremony is one of the main opportunities for merit-making. Usually one person organises the ceremony and collects money from relatives, friends and colleagues. All political leaders, rich Chinese business men, members of the royal family and other dignitaries perform *kathin* ceremonies publicly. The merit goes mainly to the organiser, but the other donors also gain some merit. Officially the merit is not dependent upon the amount of money donated in the ceremony. According to Mulder, however, “ten *baht* earns more merit than one *baht*”. According to Tambiah, more expensive gifts to the monks are considered more meritorious. Terwiel also refers to this and interprets it as a social obligation at village level.¹⁹⁹

The names and donations can be made public over a loudspeaker or in a book open for inspection.²⁰⁰ Every contribution to a life-cycle ritual is carefully recorded in a notebook, not only to make it public, but also to give guidelines for future contributions. The villagers have a reciprocal relationship in financing merit-making activities in the context of *rites de passage*. According to Ingersoll's observations the poorer villagers spend a larger portion of their income on the merit-making than do their wealthier neighbours.²⁰¹

It is interesting to notice that the Buddhist monks preside over nearly every public ceremony from the opening of new department stores and military headquarters to university graduation ceremonies. The Buddhist monks also bless aeroplanes, cars and new industrial plants, which indicates that modern lifestyles have managed to incorporate merit-making.

In the 1970s, Heinze observed that “lower class people” and small shop owners were active in daily merit making by donating to the monks in their early morning alms rounds. The white collar and upper class people donated either by inviting monks to their homes for religious ceremonies in grand style or by sending food and other gifts to the monasteries. This enabled the upper class people to select the monks to whom they wished to donate.²⁰²

3. 4. RANKING MERIT-MAKING ACTS IN THE ASOKE

I shall begin by analysing the values emphasised in the monastic-lay interaction in merit-making. In order to improve his (or her) social and economic status in the next life, a Buddhist should earn religious merit which then affects his future existence and, according to a more popular interpretation, his present life. The Asoke sect has not abolished this system, but has criticised the traditional forms of merit-making. Consequently, it has developed values which differ from the values of the other Theravada Buddhists in Thailand.

In order to examine this, I suggested 15 alternative merit making activities to the Asoke people and asked them to give the six most meritorious acts in rank order from one to six. The alternatives which were presented deliberately resembled the ones presented by Kaufmann and Tambiah to the mainstream followers. In this group following options were presented:

Attending the ceremonies at the temple every holy day, becoming a monk, contributing money either for the construction of a temple, or a hospital, or a school, each given as an alternative. The alternative of contributing money to the repair of a temple was presented separately. Other typical mainstream alternatives included: having a son ordained as a monk, giving food daily to the monks, giving money in the *kathin* ceremony and strictly observing the precepts.

In order to adjust these merit-making activities to the values of the Asoke group, manifested in their activities and publications, the alternative of eating vegetarian food was added. The emphasis on vegetarian food in the Asoke sect is related to their strict observance of the first precept i.e. to abstain from killing. Also, the fact that the Asoke group has a large number of female monastics and female lay followers the alternative becoming a Sikkhamat was presented to balance the male alternative. The question on precepts was divided into two alternatives, observing the eight precepts or the five precepts. As extra alternatives, the option of giving money to the beggars was added.

The final ranking list of merit-making alternatives reads:

1. Attending the ceremonies at the temple every holy day
2. Becoming a monk
3. Becoming a Sikkhamat
4. Contributing money for the construction of a temple
5. Contributing money for the construction of a hospital
6. Contributing money for the construction of a school
7. Contributing money to the repair of a temple
8. Eating vegetarian food
9. Having a son ordained as a monk
10. Giving food to the monks daily
11. Giving money to beggars
12. Giving 100 *baht* in a *kathin* ceremony
13. Giving 1 000 *baht* in a *kathin* ceremony
14. Strictly observing the 5 precepts (*sila*)
15. Strictly observing the 8 precepts (*sila*)
16. Doing something else, explain what ²⁰³

The ranking list of merit-making activities was perceived as problematic by many individuals in the Asoke group. Some left the question unanswered, some ticked all the 16 alternatives as equally important, some ticked six alternatives with number one, six alternatives with number two etc. Others gave only three to five alternatives. All these insufficient alternatives were disqualified and only complete answers were considered in this survey. Of the 187 questionnaires, which were returned, 156 were complete. Of the 84 monks, 73 replied according to the instructions on the merit-making question, 13 of the 16 Sikkhamats, three of the four novices, 11 of the 15 aspirants, 37 of the 38 laywomen and 19 of the 30 laymen.

3. 4. 1. Values in merit-making among the Asoke people

The replies of the different groups formed a distinct pattern of ranking order for merit-making activities which clearly differs from the pattern in the mainstream. In the mainstream, building a temple or contributing money to a construction of a temple was ranked highly, as were becoming a monk or having a son ordained as a monk.

The Asoke monks, novices and aspirants, laywomen and laymen ended up with similar ranking lists, whereas the Sikkhamats as a group gave different answers, which will therefore be discussed separately further down.

TABLE 1: List of merit-making activities among the Asoke people in rank-order

	Monks	Novices	Aspirants	Laywomen	Laymen
Total:	73	3	11	37	19
Merit-making activity					
Becoming a monk	61	3	8	23	12
Becoming a Sikkhamat	39	3	8	23	7
Observing the eight precepts	38	3	7	23	10
Observing the five precepts	39	3	7	22	9
Eating vegetarian food	33	2	4	20	7
Giving food to the monks daily	19	1	2	9	3

83% of the monks were of the opinion that becoming a monk was the most meritorious act that can be performed. 53% of the monks were of the opinion that becoming a Sikkhamat was the second best alternative in merit making. Of those who did not rank “becoming a Sikkhamat” in the second highest position, 16 monks regarded strict observance of the eight precepts as the second best way of making merit.

All the three of the novices considered becoming a monk as the best way of making merit. They also regarded becoming a Sikkhamat as the second best alternative in merit-making, observing the eight precepts as the third best alternative and observing the five precepts as the fourth best alternative.

Among the aspirants - *nak, krak, pa* - 72% regarded becoming a monk the highest alternative and same percentage regarded becoming a Sikkhamat as the second best alternative. Observing the eight precepts as the third alternative was supported by 63%, the same percentage supported observing of five precepts as the fourth highest alternative on the ranking list. In this case, the gender of the respondent seemed to play a role. Interestingly only two of the female aspirants regarded becoming a monk as the best alternative and none of these future Sikkhamats ranked becoming a Sikkhamat as the highest option of merit making. One of the female aspirants regarded observing the eight precepts as the highest option, and observing the five precepts as the second highest option. Only 28% of the female aspirants followed the common pattern set by monks of placing "becoming a Sikkhamat" on the second place. One female aspirant regarded doing something else more valuable than anything else: "to decide firmly to reduce anger (*thosa*) and passion (*rakha*)".

Of the male aspirants, 75% regarded his own future position as the highest alternative. Only one failed to see his own future position as the highest option, giving preference for doing something else instead: "Closely following the teachings of the sutras in Tripitaka." The alternative of becoming a monk was, for him, the second best and becoming a Sikkhamat the third best way of making merit.

One of the male aspirants, who regarded becoming a monk as the best alternative, gave "strictly observing the eight precepts" as the second best alternative thus jumping over the alternative of becoming a Sikkhamat which was irrelevant for himself of course.

It is, however, interesting that a great majority of the female aspirants felt hesitant and discouraged by their future status; even though the path to becoming a female aspirant is restricted, and the path to becoming a Sikkhamat still harder.

Of the laywomen, 23 i.e. 62% regarded becoming a monk as the highest ranking act of merit making, and equally 62% regarded becoming a Sikkhamat as the second highest option on the ranking list. Six laywomen of the 37 regarded strict observance of the eight precepts as the highest ranking meritorious act. Of course this shows

some differences in their way of approaching the question. In the questionnaire it was not explicitly stated whether the person should consider the alternatives from his or her personal point of view or more in general terms. The final judgement was left to the person answering the questions, but clearly the great majority replied more in general rather than personal terms. The six women who considered strict observance of the eight precepts as the best alternative for themselves, regarded strict observance of the five precepts as the second best alternative for a laywoman.

The first choice was not as problematic for laymen as it was for the women; becoming a monk was clearly seen as the most meritorious act that could be committed by a man. 63% of the laymen chose this option. Becoming a Sikkhamat was the second highest option according to only seven laymen (36%). An equally competitive alternative was strict observance of the five precepts.

The precepts were generally ranked highly by the Asoke group, contrary to the results of the studies of mainstream followers. 52% of the Asoke monks selected observing the eight precepts as the third highest alternative on the ranking list, and 53% selected observance of the five precepts as the fourth best way of making merit. Both the novices and the aspirants replied in unison that observing the eight precepts was the third best option and observing the five precepts was the fourth best option in making merit.

The laywomen listed the observance of the eight precepts higher than observing the five precepts. The same applies to the men with some exceptions: The 31% of the laymen who ranked strict observance of the five precepts in the second place, usually placed observing the eight precepts on the first place. Again, this indicates that the laymen were considering the options from their individual point of view, and not in general terms. Some laymen regarded eating vegetarian food as the second best way of making merit, after being ordained.

The fifth highest meritorious act on the list of the majority of the Asoke people was eating vegetarian food; 45% of the monks, 43% of the novices and aspirants, 54% of the laywomen and 36% of the laymen placed this in fifth place. There were no clear alterna-

tives to this; the other selections were distributed evenly between attending ceremonies and giving food to the monks daily.

There was a great dispersion for the sixth best way of making merit. However, in total, 23% of these four groups of Asoke people regarded giving food to the monks daily, as the most suitable activity to be listed as number six on the ranking list.

This survey very clearly indicates that the values of the Asoke group separate them markedly from the mainstream Thai Buddhists. The emphasis on personal commitment in the form of becoming ordained is stronger in Asoke than in the mainstream. Equally, personal commitment is required by those who strictly observe the eight or five precepts. The strong emphasis on the precepts clearly differentiates this group from the mainstream Buddhists. Placing the more demanding eight precepts in front of the less demanding five precepts shows that the laypeople in the Asoke group are willing to follow the more cumbersome path to enlightenment than is offered by the mainstream.

The strong emphasis on eating vegetarian food again demands personal commitment - especially in the Thai society where vegetarianism is mainly connected with Brahmanism and not with Buddhism. The Chinese community in Thailand celebrates a week-long vegetarian food festival in October each year, but even finding a vegetarian Thai restaurant outside the Asoke circles is very difficult in Thailand.

Giving food to the monks daily is the easiest alternative for a Buddhist layperson and somewhat self-serving for the monastics. This alternative has also always been ranked fairly highly amongst the mainstream followers, as it is one of the few occasions for merit-making for women. In the Asoke group, other serious alternatives for number six on the ranking list among the monks were contributing money for the construction of a hospital or contributing money for construction of a school. Attending ceremonies ranked as the sixth meritorious act on the ranking list of seven monks.

3. 4. 2. Values in merit-making among the Sikkhamats

Of the 16 Sikkhamats who replied to the questionnaire, three failed to reply properly to the question concerning the rank order of merit making activities. The 13 Sikkhamats who did reply to the question, form a clear pattern of values which decidedly differs from the general pattern in the Asoke group.

Of the 13 Sikkhamats, only two regarded the question in more general terms and accordingly selected "becoming a monk" as the highest form of merit making. Nine of the 13 Sikkhamats gave the alternative of "becoming a Sikkhamat" as the best way of making merit, which clearly shows that these women have developed a strong identity as a Sikkhamat. This means that 69% of the Sikkhamats saw their own position as the highest way of making merit.

Fairly unanimously the second best way of making merit was, according to the Sikkhamats, to strictly observe the eight precepts. Five Sikkhamats selected this option.

After these two clear alternatives the pattern disappears and becomes more dispersed. Support for the third best way of making merit is fairly evenly scattered between eating vegetarian food, observing the five precepts or observing the eight precepts. Two of the three Sikkhamats who selected "observing eight precepts" as the third best alternative, selected "becoming a monk" as the first alternative, "becoming a Sikkhamat" as the second alternative and thus "observing the eight precepts" became the third option. For them, the fourth alternative is logically "observing the five precepts". Thus these Sikkhamats follow the more general pattern set by the Asoke group. One of these three Sikkhamats placed "eating vegetarian food" on the second level in the ranking list.

The fourth best alternative for making merit, according to four of the Sikkhamats, was observance of the five precepts. Three Sikkhamats regarded "eating vegetarian food" as the fourth best alternative and three regarded "observing the eight precepts" as the fourth best alternative.

The fifth best alternative for making merit, according to the Sikkhamats, was again observing the five precepts. But, four of the Sikkhamats placed more weight on having a son ordained as a monk

or becoming a monk. Three Sikkhamats regarded giving money to beggars as the fifth highest option in merit-making.

The 16th alternative given in the questionnaire, “doing something else, explain what” was selected as the sixth best alternative in merit-making by five Sikkhamats. One Sikkhamat regarded “spreading religion” as an alternative, giving your work-force to the temple or devoting labour to the society were mentioned. Helping needy people and working with the kind of work that nobody else is doing, was also seen as an important merit-making activity.

The pattern set up by the Sikkhamats seems to emphasise the precepts very strongly. “Becoming a Sikkhamat” is clearly the best alternative according to the Sikkhamats, followed only by the “observing the eight precepts” and “observing the five precepts”.

Since there is considerable dispersion in the replies of the Sikkhamats, I shall also look at the entries given by the Sikkhamats regardless of the number of the ranking order.

TABLE 2: Ranking list of merit-making activities among the Sikkhamats

Merit-making activities	Entries
1. Obervance of the eight precepts	13
2. Observance of the five precepts	13
3. Becoming a Sikkhamat	12
4. Doing something else	7

The alternative of becoming a Sikkhamat received 12 entries, which means that only one Sikkhamat failed to see this as an option to select for making merit.

The alternatives of observing the eight precepts and the five precepts both received 13 entries, which means that all the Sikkhamats put emphasis on this alternative. Eating vegetarian food received 11 entries, and the 16th alternative, “doing something else, explain what”, received seven entries altogether.

3. 5. SUMMARY

From this study of the earlier developments inside the Thai sangha and the cases of the dissident monks, it becomes quite clear that differentiation, as such, can hardly be avoided in any religious or political group. Different people have different values and opinions depending on their social, political and economic background and personal interests.

Another obvious conclusion must be that the reactions of the top hierarchy of the state sangha, the Council of Elders are very inconsistent. For example, the claims of magic by the supporters of the popular old monk, Luang Poh Sod, have never been disputed in Thailand. On the other hand, a monk who was fighting against magical practices and beliefs, and who tried to rationalise the Buddhist doctrine by rejecting the worship of spirits (*phi*), amulets and statues, was accused of being communist in several occasions. Only the open support of the royal family and by the Thai intellectuals saved Buddhadasa from being persecuted. On the other hand, he realised the risks and retired to his home base in Southern Thailand after the first accusations.

A politically right-wing monk, Kittivuddho, has been tolerated despite all the different accusations against him. Kittivuddho declared himself to be a saint (*araha*) - just as Bodhiraksa did - but was not persecuted for it. He openly encouraged man-slaughter, a serious break of the first Buddhist precept, but was never persecuted for that either. Now, what is the secret of Kittivuddho? In the short biography of Kittivuddho, it becomes quite clear that he is supported by the top hierarchy of the sangha authority as well as by the royal family and by the military-political leadership.

There is a certain connection between the Dhammakaya movement and Kittivuddho, both originate from the same temple, Wat Paknam in Thonburi, and both are supported by top politicians. Is it a mere coincidence that General Chaovalit has been an ardent supporter of both groups?

Prayudh Payutto is clearly a follower of Buddhadasa, a scholarly monk, who has published extensively, and who has been wise

enough to stay outside the political turmoils of Thailand. Both Buddhadasa and Prayudh Payutto have a rather small following in Thailand - they are respected amongst the intellectuals, but they cannot be called popular monks in the true sense of the term. Bodhiraksa is also regarded as a follower of Buddhadasa, but has found himself in serious conflict with the state Buddhist authority due to his open criticism of mainstream monks.

Kittivuddho and the Dhammakaya movement have criticised the mainstream sangha - albeit in a more subtle way. Kittivuddho encouraged the monks to act in society, to take part in community development, and to educate themselves. His giant-sized Chittabhavan college still continues with these activities. Dhammakaya's criticism of the mainstream is discretely disguised in their own practice; their temple is clean and well-organised. Their monks are well-educated and have neither been involved in sex scandals nor in gambling or drinking. Their temple has no stray dogs, no magic practices are promoted, no fortune-telling and there is no consecration of amulets. Their behaviour is their criticism, since it is not expressed verbally. Consequently, they still enjoy good relations with the mainstream sangha, and particularly with some members in the Council of Elders. Many Thai intellectuals criticise both Kittivuddho and the Dhammakaya movement, but their criticism bears no fruit as both groups are in the protection of the royal family, the Council of Elders and the top military-political leadership.

The reactions to Yantra were revealing. He was originally promoted as a "superstar" by the press and the other media - for what purpose, and in whose interest? My conclusion is that in Yantra the mainstream sangha found a "clean" monk, a vegetarian, a modest charismatic young monk, who could bring some of the frustrated lay people back to the mainstream. Yantra could thus improve the distorted image of the scandal-ridden mainstream sangha. Consequently, Yantra rapidly collected large crowds of followers and, more importantly, billions of *bahts* in donations. He had good contacts with some of the members in the Council of Elders, who supported and protected him until the final disrobement.

The initial campaign against Yantra was probably just a jeal-

ous act on the part of the formerly popular monk, Phra Phayom. I would claim that the tactics used against Yantra bore some resemblance to the campaign that was conducted against the Asoke group; the accusations changed whenever they could not be verified.

Yantra and the Asoke group share one obvious similarity; no top political leaders took them under their wings. Yantra had the support of extremely rich and influential business women, but no politicians openly and exclusively supported him. The Asoke group, on the contrary, does have a politician amongst their most well-known lay supporters. Unfortunately for the Asoke group, Chamlong is perceived by the other military-politicians as a serious threat to their interests in politics and economics.

My study on merit-making activities indicates that the values of the Asoke group distinctly separate them from the mainstream Thai Buddhists. The emphasis on personal commitment is stronger in the Asoke group than in the mainstream, whereas the act of donating is ranked low. Personal commitment is required by the ones who observe strictly the eight precepts or even the five precepts. The strong emphasis on the precepts also clearly differentiates this group from the mainstream Buddhists, where the precepts were placed very low in the ranking order. Placing the more demanding eight precepts in front of the less demanding five precepts shows that the lay people in the Asoke group are expected to follow a more cumbersome path to the enlightenment than is shown to the mainstream Buddhists.

The emphasis on eating vegetarian food demands personal commitment especially in the Thai society, where vegetarianism is mainly connected with Brahmanism and not with Buddhism. The Chinese community in Thailand celebrates yearly a week-long vegetarian food festival in October, when vegetarian food is widely served. In other times, even finding a vegetarian Thai restaurant outside the Asoke circles is very difficult in Thailand.

In the mainstream the economic commitment is emphasised - as shown by Kaufman and Tambiah - however unrealistic the requirements of constructing a temple might be. In the Asoke group direct economic commitments are not openly encouraged; the monks

and the nuns are not allowed to accept money as donation. In the questionnaire the alternatives “giving 100 baht in a *kathin* ceremony” and “giving 1.000 baht in a *kathin* ceremony” did not receive any support by the 156 respondents. Even the alternatives “contributing money” whether for construction of a temple, a hospital or a school, and to the repair of a temple received fairly little support. Three monks, four lay women and two lay men ticked the alternative “contributing money to the construction of a temple”, whereas even less support was given to the other construction projects.²⁰⁴

All donations are channelled through foundations connected with the Asoke group. The donor transfers the money to these foundations without any rituals and the person does not get his name mentioned in any ceremonies, contrary to the mainstream, where both the name of the donor and the amount of money donated is often made public through loudspeakers in religious ceremonies.

In the next chapter, I shall examine what Bodhiraksa and the Asoke group believe in in more detail: What do they teach to their followers? And how do they conduct their rituals, ceremonies and their daily life?

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*.²⁰⁵

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*²⁰⁶, the second level is *Sakitakhami*²⁰⁷, the third level is *Anakhami*²⁰⁸ and the fourth level is *Arahan*²⁰⁹, 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*²¹⁰ - *moha*, *thosa* and *loba*.²¹¹ 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 Pothirak²¹² has reached this level and is an *Arahan*. I am not sure if anyone else in Thailand has reached it. Phra Phutthathat²¹³ 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*²¹⁴. 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.”²¹⁵ 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:²¹⁶ “Politics should be based on Buddhist principles”. Monks who are working with the people are already in a way involved in politics.²¹⁷

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.²¹⁸

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.²¹⁹

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.”²²⁰

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.²²¹ 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.²²²

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.²²³

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.²²⁴

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.²²⁵ 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,²²⁶

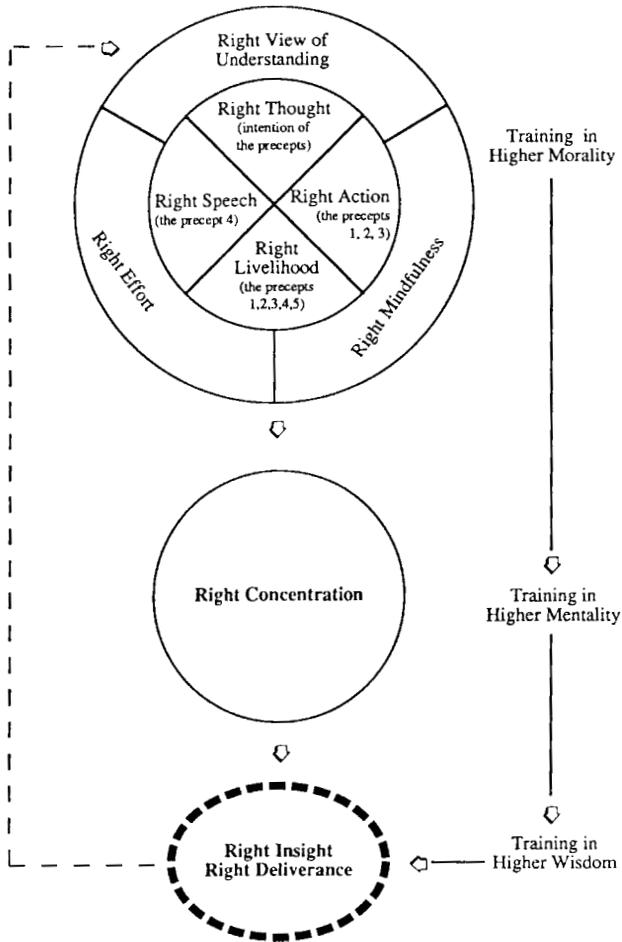
which will result in “right concentration” (*samma samadhi*). “Sitting doing nothing is not the whole Eightfold Path. Just control the mental activities is not the whole Eightfold Path.”²²⁷

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.”²²⁸ 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".²²⁹

FIGURE 5: Dynamics of the Noble Eightfold Path in Asoke ²³⁰



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”.²³¹

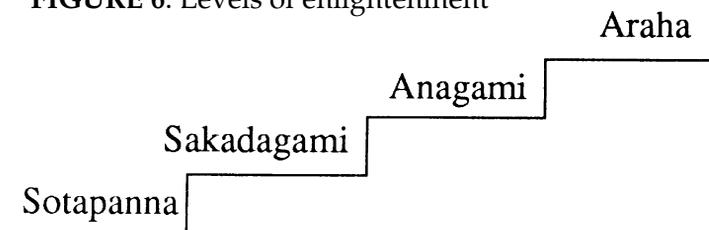
Another dispute between the mainstream and the Asoke concerns their vegetarianism. The background for vegetarian practices is explained with a reference to Buddhist scriptures.²³² According to this, Buddha said that offering meat to the monks in order to increase their enjoyment of food is a demerit 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.²³³ 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*²³⁴, a stream enterer who will become a saint (*araha*) within seven rebirths. The next stage is a *sakadagami*²³⁵ a once-returned, who has destroyed the intermediate forms of sensual delight and ill-will. The next stage will be an *anagami*²³⁶, a non-returned, and the highest stage is finally an *araha*, who will enter nirvana at the time of his death.²³⁷

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.²³⁸

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.²³⁹

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.²⁴⁰

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.’”²⁴¹

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, lockets, amulets or other adornments sold to the ignorant people.”²⁴²

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”.²⁴³

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.²⁴⁴

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”²⁴⁵ monks in the Northeast.²⁴⁶

“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.²⁴⁷

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.²⁴⁸ 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.²⁴⁹

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.²⁵⁰ 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.²⁵¹

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.²⁵² 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.²⁵³

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”.²⁵⁴ 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.²⁵⁵ 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.²⁵⁶

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

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.²⁵⁸ 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.”²⁵⁹ Bodhiraksa claims he has found the “truth and wisdom” because of his *barami* - accumulated merit from previous lives.²⁶⁰

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.²⁶¹

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.²⁶² Bodhiraksa believes that he is supported by the “silent majority”.²⁶³

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* ²⁶⁴. 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".²⁶⁵

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".²⁶⁶

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."²⁶⁷

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.²⁶⁸

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.²⁶⁹

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 1955-1962.²⁷⁰ 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".²⁷¹ 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."²⁷²

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.²⁷³

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.²⁷⁴ 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.²⁷⁵

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.²⁷⁶

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.²⁷⁷

The early morning session starts with chanting²⁷⁸ 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.²⁷⁹

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.²⁸⁰ 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.²⁸¹

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.²⁸²

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.²⁸³

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*).²⁸⁴

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.

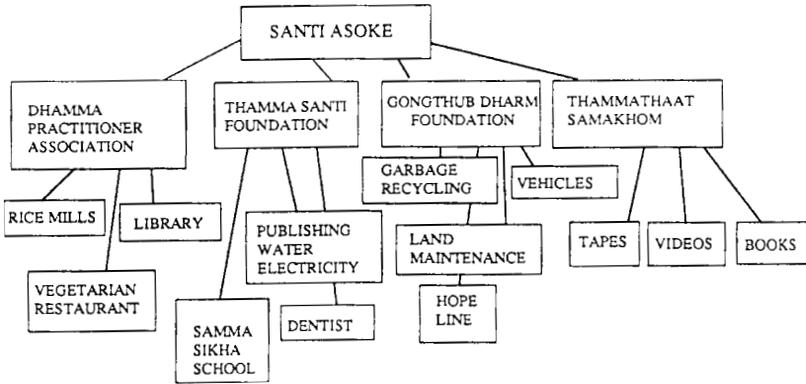
The Thamma Santi foundation (*Muniti Thamma Santi*) is chaired by Mrs. Kittiya Viraphon, who is the owner of the land on which the Santi Asoke Buddhist centre is built.

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 Apai²⁸⁵ 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.²⁸⁶

The other private company is the Fah Apai publishing house,²⁸⁷ 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.²⁸⁸

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.²⁸⁹ 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.²⁹⁰

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” (*parwarana*) 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.²⁹¹

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 Wilson²⁹², 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.

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 loosing 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.

VI CLASS, STATE AND THE ASOKE

Biography of Krak Phrae Fan, Santi Asoke

"I was born in Nakhon Pathom on the 9th of February 1949 to a Chinese family. I have one younger sister and two older sisters. My father had two wives and for some years we all lived together in one house. My father had 12 children with his minor wife: eight daughters and four sons. When the minor wife had five children they moved out with my father. I was then 10 years old. I and my sisters stayed with my mother. My mother supported the family by becoming a food vendor, later she sold clothes. My father is Chinese, whereas my mother was of Sino-Thai origins. My father is now 75 years old and my mother would be 83 years old, if she was still alive. The minor wife of my father is 70 years old. My father used to have a clothes retail shop, but later started a pig farm in Nakhon Pathom.

My eldest sister studied at the secondary school for only one year, and then started work. At first she sold clothes in our aunt's shop. She married when she was 22 years old and has now four children. Her family used to live in Nakhon Pathom, but later moved to Bangkok. They had a shop in Nakhon Pathom, selling electrical appliances. Now one of their sons is selling *salapaws*³²⁴ to support the family. My sister sold cosmetics as "direct sell". One of her sons is working in Japan. One of her sons is already dead and the youngest one is studying in a technical school. I have met my sister once after I became *krak*. She is not at all interested in the Asoke group.

My second sister is a teacher. She has a B.A. in English and is teaching in a primary school in Sriracha. Her husband is a broker dealing in real estate. They have three children, two daughters and one son. My sister is six years older than me. All her children are still studying.

My youngest sister lives in Chachoensaeng and has a photo shop. Her husband died a couple of years ago and she has one son who is 10 years old. Before I became a *krak* I used to visit her quite often, but now I am not allowed to go to visit lay people alone, I would have to have someone from the temple with me.

When I graduated from the school in Nakhon Pathom, I came to Bangkok to study at Suan Dusit Teachers' College for four years. My major subject was science and my minor subject was mathematics. I also choose handicraft as a minor and learned to make flower garlands quite well, but now I have forgotten it already. Anyway, here in Santi Asoke it would no longer be appreciated as it is against the precepts.

Then I moved to Ban Saeng to study for two more years in order to get a Bachelor's degree in science education. I studied chemistry and mathematics. I stayed

in a dormitory where I shared a room with another girl. In Suan Dusit there were ten girls sharing one room.

After graduating I moved to Bangkok and lived in Pratunam. My first job was to teach Thai. They promised to give me a position as a science teacher in that school later. A friend of mine informed me about another position in another school, a girls' school, and I quit after two weeks and moved to this other school. I taught there for one year. My students were about 15 to 16 years old, I was then 23 years old.

Then I moved back to Nakhon Pathom and started to teach in another girls' school whilst staying in my mother's house. I taught in that school for one year. I was not a civil servant but a freelancer teaching on a temporary basis. That year I started to wear make-up. A new teacher came to Nakhon Pathom and as she was very good at doing make-up, she taught me how to do it. I felt that it was not good to wear make-up, I only did it for the society. I wore make-up every day for about one year, but I stopped gradually after meeting the Asoke group.

I taught in this school for one year and moved to another school. In that year, 1974, I taught in three different schools, two were in Nakhon Pathom, one was in Bangkok. That year, I finally became a civil servant and taught permanently for more than two years in the school in Bangkok, but continued to live in Nakhon Pathom in my mother's house. I taught chemistry in a secondary school in Yannawa in Bangkok. That was a boys' school and very famous so I wanted to teach there, even if it was quite tiring to travel every day back and forth between Bangkok and Nakhon Pathom. That is when I learned to fall asleep easily on the bus. I taught there for about three years, until 1977. After that I got a position teaching in Nakhon Pathom again, in a government school. I was happy to move closer to my mother's house as she had become ill. I had to take care of her, as my sisters had moved out of the house already. She died in 1980, after which I moved to the house of a friend of my mother's.

I taught in this government school for three years, until 1980, and after that I went to teach in an other school which was also in Nakhon Pathom. That school was a primary school, it situated very close to the big *chedi*³²⁵ and I had a short walk to that school. I taught for five years in that school - then I joined the Santi Asoke.

I had met the group in 1977 in Santi Asoke in Bangkok. I came here with a former student of mine who was interested in Santi Asoke. My student knew this group because the group had been preaching in his school in Yannawa. I was not impressed by the group at all. I can't remember feeling anything when I met them. I just looked around in the temple. I remember talking to one of the monks, Than Thiracitto.

I had been interested in Buddhism for about two years then. In 1975 I went to visit a place in Petchburi, where there were lots of female practitioners. The monk there asked me: "You want to show respect to Buddha, but what do you know about Buddhism?" I told him that I know the basic idea of the Three Gems - Buddha, *dhamma* and sangha. The monk answered: "Buddhism is science. You have to prove it by living it. You are a scientist, and you use tests to experiment. In religion you have to use your own body to experiment". The monk offered to teach me and asked me to resign from my job, which I did in 1975. Before that I was "ordained" in Petchburi for seven days, and became a *chi bhraam*.³²⁶ After the first week the monk asked me to come again, which I did for many weekends. He then asked me to stay there permanently. My letter of resignation was finally signed by the head master. It was the fifth letter of resignation that I had submitted. I resigned from my school in 1975 and took my last salary to my mother. She cried and did not want me to stay in that monastery. She did not like the monk there because she felt that he was forcing her daughter to resign. Even my older sister asked the school authorities to refuse my letter of resignation. After I had resigned, they told me in the school that they were short of chemistry teachers. I took back my last letter of resignation, cancelled all my plans and started to teach chemistry again.

Now all my colleagues and friends knew that I was interested in Buddhism and they informed me about various places to study. I went to three different places to study Buddhism and to meditate. Santi Asoke was the fourth place I visited. I was not impressed by the magic practices and beliefs that dominated the mainstream temples that I had visited. When I visited the Santi Asoke, I immediately felt that this is the place where I want to die. I had no plans to get married, so I was looking for a place and a group where I would feel safe and stay the rest of my life. That was on the 12th of September 1977.

I was then living in Nakhon Pathom and used to travel to Bangkok to Santi Asoke every weekend I could. Sometimes I also visited Daen Asoke in Nakhon Pathom, but it was more difficult to reach that place, even though it was much closer to my home. One had to walk a long way through the forest to reach Daen Asoke.

Santi Asoke was different from the other Buddhist groups; the food, the life style and the preaching. Other temples did not teach us how to sleep - here in Santi Asoke they had a schedule when to sleep and when to eat. I did not read many of their books, although they sent me quite many. My mother told me to return the books as I was not reading them. I never worked here in Santi Asoke, I just came here to talk and to look around. I was not vegetarian then. I did not dare to come here if I had been eating meat. I practised strict vegetarianism for seven days before visiting the place, so that when anyone asked me, whether I am vegetarian, I could answer: "Yes". I did not find it difficult to become a vegetarian, it was just that if I

went out with my friends, I sometimes ate meat just like them.

Somebody suggested to me that I should become a Sikkhamat, but I felt that I should practise at home first, eating vegetarian food, and living a simple life without make-up. I used to walk barefoot to my school in order to practice. I told my mother that I wanted to become a Sikkhamat and she accepted it better than my earlier plans. I practised by reducing my meals gradually to only one vegetarian meal a day. I stopped meditating after I met this group.

I wanted to practise at home until I was quite sure that I could make it. I was fairly sure about myself by 1982, and started to stay in Pathom Asoke every week for six days. The seventh day I would go home to my aunt's house for one day, so that I did not have to *wikab*³²⁷. Actually I was only sleeping in Pathom Asoke, and in the morning I had time to listen to the early morning preaching. After that I drove my motorcycle back to Nakhon Pathom and went to teach in the school. In the evening, I returned to Pathom Asoke. I used to attend big Buddhist ceremonies organised by the Asoke group. I attended *plukse* and *Phuttha phisek* for instance first time in 1978. After that I went there every year, if my school gave me permission to go, and if my mother was not too sick.

In 1983 I applied to become a Sikkhamat. After handing in the application I went back home again and continued teaching. During those years I also saved some money in case I could not stay in the temple, and would have to come back to the outside life. I felt that I needed the money as a security. Now I have given away nearly all that money.

I finally resigned from the school and joined the group in August 1985 as an *akhantuka chon*.³²⁸ I moved to Pathom Asoke to begin with. I stayed there for four days after which I came to Santi Asoke, as there happened to be a car to Santi Asoke. My plan was to come to Santi Asoke and study six days a week, and work one day in Chomoro³²⁹. In fact the timetable I had planned turned out to the opposite way round; I went to work in Chomoro six days a week to sell coupons every morning around five o'clock and I stayed in Santi Asoke only one day a week. This continued for several years.

A friend of mine, here in Santi Asoke, became ill and I followed her to Pathom Asoke where she later died. I stayed in Pathom Asoke for some years. I became *pa* on the 23rd of October 1988. Two years later I moved back to Santi Asoke and, in 1991, I started to teach science and mathematics in Sisa Asoke, when they started the first Asoke school there. I stayed as a *pa* for a little bit longer than five years and became a *krak* on the 7th of May 1994.

What I really liked was travelling, playing, eating and sleeping. I came here to get rid of all those things that I used to like."

6. 1. THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE ASOKE MEMBERS

We will start by looking at the place of birth of the Asoke members. In Thailand the social division between urban and rural is very deep as is evidenced in recent surveys.³³⁰ The central plains, the valley of Chao Phraya river has traditionally been regarded as the most fertile area for agriculture. After the Bowring Treaty of 1855 had attached Thailand to the modern economic world system, the central plains and Southern Thailand became thriving areas for business and trade. The Northeast of Thailand, in contrast, has been the least developed area ever since it was annexed by the central power in the late 19th century. The Northeast is disadvantaged in two ways: The population consists mainly of ethnic Laos who are treated as second class citizens in the Thai society. Their ethnic identity, and even their mother tongue although a Thai related language, has a low status. The land in the Northeast has been exploited by loggers and developers, by cash-crop cultivation and land speculation. The GDP per capita in Greater Bangkok area is four times higher than in the Northeast which has further encouraged uncontrollable migration to the capital city from the Northeast.³³¹

6. 1. 1. Place of birth

The Asoke monks mainly originate from these two economically and socially very contrasting areas: 48% of the monks come from Central Thailand and 35% from the Northeast. The division between the Sikkhamats is, however, very different: 68% of the Sikkhamats come from Central Thailand, whereas only 18% were born in the Northeast. These figures, however, have to be interpreted with some scepticism since seven out of the 23 Sikkhamats refused to reply to the questionnaire, claiming that it was "too difficult". We can assume that many of these Sikkhamats do originate from the Northeast, knowing that the level of education is lower among the Northerners in general, than among the Central Thai.

50% of the novices originally came from the North, 25% from the Northeast and 25% from Central Thailand. 46% of the aspirants originated in Central Thailand and 40% in the Northeast. 6% came

from the North and 6% from the South.

The laypeople who replied to the questionnaire at the *mahapawarana* gathering in Pathom Asoke were predominantly educated urbanites. 56% of the laymen were born in Central Thailand and only 20% were born in the Northeast. 34% of the laywomen were born in Central Thailand and 26% in the Northeast. The third largest group of laywomen were originally from the South i.e. 21%. Most of those who were born in the South are still active there. 13% of the laymen were also Southerners.

Of the Asoke people, both monastic and laypeople, who replied to the questionnaire, 47% came from Central Thailand, and 29% from the Northeast. From the North there were 12% and from the South 9%.

TABLE 3: Geographic origins of the Asoke people

	Monks	Nuns	Novices	Aspirants	Laymen	Laywomen
Region						
Bangkok	16	4	-	3	7	5
Central	24	7	1	4	10	8
North-east	30	3	1	6	6	10
North	10	1	2	1	3	6
South	4	1	-	1	4	8
Other	-	-	-	-	-	1
TOTAL	84	16	4	15	30	38

Some conclusions can be drawn from these figures: it is not surprising that the Asoke group has such a concentration in Central Thailand, since that is the area from which the movement started and originally drew its support. On the other hand neither is it surprising that 35% of the monks originally came from the Northeast as studies of mainstream monks have shown that the Northeasterners form the great majority of monks.⁵³² What is interesting is the combination of monks from very different origins in the Asoke group. The 35% of the Northeastern monks shows that Asoke cannot be

considered to be a fortress of the well-educated urban Sino-Thais from Central Thailand. The Northeast has her own Buddhist tradition of forest monks with many nationally highly venerated meditation teachers,³³³ which does offer an alternative and more strict form of practice for a Northeastern monk than the mainstream. The fact that Northeasterners still join the Asoke movement indicates that the Asoke group has, in one way or another, managed to present itself as an attractive alternative for the Northeastern Buddhist practitioners.

The high number of Southerners amongst the laywomen is quite surprising as the Asoke have no temples in the South. There is, however, the group known as Taksin Asoke which seems to be quite active.

As Bangkok is the centre of material wealth in Thailand, it is even more important to study how many of the Asoke group members originate from Bangkok and compare it with the number of the people originating from urban or rural areas outside Bangkok.

19% of the monks originally come from Bangkok. Whereas, 25% of the Sikkhamats were born in Bangkok, and none of the four novices came from the capital. 25% of the female aspirants were from Bangkok, and 14% of the male aspirants originated from Bangkok. A relatively small number of the laypersons attending the *mahapawarana* were born in Bangkok: 13% of the laywomen and 23% of the laymen.

The material collected by the Asoke members themselves in the *plukse* ceremony in Sisa Asoke on the *maghabucha* day the 14th of February 1995 gives a slightly different picture of the geographical origins of the Asoke laypeople. The group published a top ten list of the provinces with most participants in the *plukse*:

1. Sisaket	291
2. Bangkok	275
3. Ubon Ratchathani	193
4. Nakhon Ratchasima	94
5. Nakhon Pathom	94
6. Surin	93
7. Khon Kaen	81
8. Udon Thani	67
9. Roi Et	65
10. Buriram	64

This list covers 1317 persons of the total 2181 participants, and of the 1317 persons 948 came from the Northeast, whereas only 369 originated from Central Thailand. Expressed in terms of percentages this means that: 72% came from the Northeast and 28% came from Central Thailand.

The general statistics indicate that of the total 2181 participants, 61% originally came from the Northeast, 23% from Central Thailand, in addition to 13% from Bangkok, 9% from the North and 3% from the South.

TABLE 4: The geographic origins of the Asoke people at the *pluksek*

Region	Laypeople
Bangkok	275
Central	278
Northeast	1331
South	79
North	218
TOTAL	2181

These statistics both confirm the results from the *mahapatwarana* and indicate an even stronger support for the Asoke group in the Northeast than indicated in my study. The proportion of Southerners has decreased, as it is naturally easier for the Southerners to travel to Nakhon Pathom than to the Northeastern province of Sisaket.

6. 1. 2. Family background

Another way of measuring the social background of the Asoke group is to examine the profession of the father in the family.

45% of the monks stated that their fathers were farmers by profession. Half (50%) of the Sikkhamats were the daughters of farmers

i.e. eight of the 16 Sikkhamats came from peasant families.³³⁴ 28% of the monks replied that their fathers were merchants and 18% of Sikkhamats said the same i.e. three of the 16 Sikkhamats were born in merchant families.³³⁵

A considerable number of monks originate from families where the father was a civil servant: 17% of the monks in total. A civil servant can be anything from a post man to a primary school teacher or municipal administrator. In the Thai society, a civil servant has high prestige, albeit a low salary. There is a clear dominance of ethnic Thais in this group, as the path to becoming a civil servant has been restricted for the ethnic Chinese and even Sino-Thais for several decades. In this group with high prestige there is the natural ambition to educate their children also to become at least civil servants at the same level as their fathers.³³⁶

Only one of the Sikkhamats was born into a family where the family head was a civil servant, whereas three Sikkhamats indicated that their fathers belonged to the free professions which, in this survey, will be classified as "others". These include one fisherman, one tailor and one labourer. Two of the four novices said that their fathers were farmers and the other two were merchants. Seven of the fifteen aspirants' fathers were merchants, and only four came from peasant families.

The heaviest concentration of families where the father was a civil servant is amongst the laymen where 50% had this background. A further 23% came from merchant families and only five from a peasant background.

There was a more even distribution among the laywomen: 29% of the laywomen originated from merchant families, 29% from peasant families and 26% from families where the father was a civil servant.

TABLE 5: Profession of the father of the Asoke people

Father	Monks	Nuns	Novices and Aspirants	Laymen	Laywomen	Total
Farmer	38	8	6	5	11	68
Merchant	24	3	9	7	11	54
Civil Servant	15	1	2	15	10	43
Other	5	3	2	3	5	18
-	2	1	-	-	1	4
TOTAL	84	16	19	30	38	187

Altogether, the statistics indicate that the monks, the Sikkhamats and their supporters largely originate from peasant families. The great majority of the mainstream monks also originate from the peasant backgrounds but, contrary to the mainstream, in the Asoke group 45% of the monks also come from merchant and civil servant families, i.e. from higher social stratas.

6. 1. 3. Educational background

The third indicator of social background of the Asoke members in this survey was measured by examining the educational background of the monks, the Sikkhamats and the laypeople. Educational opportunities in Thailand are unevenly distributed and higher education is indicative of family wealth, a future privileged position in the society, high prestige and opportunities for upward mobility.³³⁷

29% of the monks have only primary school education, but an almost equal percentage, i.e. 28%, have university education. There are three monks in the Asoke group who have studied at the highly prestigious Chulalongkorn university, two at the Thammasat university, one at the Mahidol university and one at the Kasetsart University. Eleven monks have studied at the Ramkhamhaeng University, which is an open university and thus less prestigious, but which can still boost the upward mobility of a peasant child who manages to graduate.³³⁸ Six monks have studied at other universities. The rest

of the monks have studied either at a high school or a college.

There is a sharp distinction amongst the Sikkhamats between the highly educated and the lowly educated groups. Nine of the 16 Sikkhamats have only visited primary school - and we must remember that seven Sikkhamats refused to answer to the questionnaire, because they regarded it as "too difficult". We can presume that these seven Sikkhamats belong to the group who has only primary education or even less. This would mean that 16 of the total 23 Sikkhamats have had very little formal education. Five Sikkhamats have university degrees; one from the Chulalongkorn University, one from the Chiang Mai University, one from the Mahidol University and two from Ramkhamhaeng University. The rest, i.e. two persons, indicated that they had either visited high school or college.

Two of the four novices graduated from university, one has a primary school education and one has visited high school.

Equal proportions of aspirants hold university degrees or had only had primary school education i.e. five persons each. Gender makes a slight difference here: four female aspirants had university degrees, whereas only one male aspirant had a similar background. Two aspirants visited high school and three studied in college.

The overwhelming majority of the lay people who replied to the questionnaire in *mahapawarana*, were academics: 68% of the laywomen had university level education and 60% of the laymen.³³⁹ Only one laywoman and three laymen had primary school background. The strong concentration of academics amongst the laypeople in the smaller sample collected in the *mahapawarana* in 1994 gives a total of 42% with a university education in the Asoke lay group. 29% of the monastics had been to university and 34% of people only had primary school education. The larger sample collected from the *pluksek* ceremony cuts the proportion of academics down to 17% of the whole group of Asoke adherents.

The educational background of the laypeople according to the statistics collected in the *pluksek* in Sisa Asoke reads³⁴⁰:

No education	79
Primary school	1120
Secondary school	448
Vocational school	172
University	362

The largest group, 51% of the participants, had only primary school education, 25% had secondary school education. Only 16% of the participants had university degrees and 8% had vocational training. Proportionally the largest group of uneducated people originated from the Northeast where 44 persons indicated that they had no education whatsoever. The same applies to the laypeople with only primary school education i.e. 786 persons out of the total of 1120 originated from the Northeast. Proportionally, the largest groups of academics originated from the Northeast (178 persons) and from Central Thailand (136 persons). However, this only represents 13% of the Northeasterners whereas, amongst the Central Thais, the percentage is 24%. Interestingly the largest group of people with vocational training originate from Central Thailand, i.e. 77 persons which is 14% of the total.

TABLE 6: The educational background of the Asoke people

Schools	Monks	Nuns	Novices and Aspirants	Laymen	Laywomen	Total
Primary	25	9	6	1	1	42
High School	18	1	3	6	4	32
College	16	1	3	5	7	32
University	24	5	7	18	26	80
-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Total	84	16	19	30	38	187

The educational background of the lay participants in the *pluksek* ceremony differs slightly from the material collected from the *mahapawarana* meeting. From these surveys we can conclude that

the Asoke followers originate from both the highly educated and from the lowly educated strata of the Thai population.

6. 1. 4. Professional background

One more indicator of the social background of the Asoke people was to examine the professional background of the monastics and volunteers working for the group, and the laypeople still working outside the group.

25% of the monks were farmers before they were ordained. 20% of the monks had worked as civil servants and 9% had been merchants. A large group of monks have had different professions which are classified here as "other" professions, e.g. taxi drivers, bankers, soldiers, editors etc. 14% were studying before they joined the group and 7% were monks in mainstream monasteries.

Two of the novices had been merchants and one was civil servant, one worked in the group of other professions.

43% of the Sikkhamats had been working in public enterprises i.e. private companies, banks and factories. 18% had been working as civil servants and 18% were farmers before their ordination. One woman was a student and two were merchants.

Five of the aspirants had been civil servants, three merchants and four farmers. Gender in this case was not significant. Three female aspirants and two male aspirants had been civil servants, and two female aspirants and one male aspirant had been merchants before joining the Asoke group.

The professions of the laypeople prior to their joining the group are interesting - especially those who have joined the group on a voluntary basis, abandoning their worldly careers, living in the temples or in the lay group of practitioners. 44% of the laywomen who replied to the questionnaire were working full-time for the group. The professions of these laywomen varied from dentists to nurses and teachers. Only 26% of the laymen worked for the group full-time. Many of these were fairly young men in their 20s or early 30s - many of them former students.

TABLE 7: Profession before joining the Asoke

Profession	Monks	Nuns	Novices & Aspirants	Laymen	Lay-women	Total
Student	12	1	1	4	8	26
Farmer	21	3	4	-	1	29
Merchant	8	2	5	1	1	17
Civil-servant	17	3	6	17	20	63
Monk	6	-	-	-	-	6
Other	20	7	3	8	8	46
TOTAL	84	16	19	30	38	187

The profession of the participants at the *plukse*k was also listed in the statistics collected there. The overwhelmingly largest single professional group were the farmers - 26% of the total. 9% of those present were civil servants and 11% were private employees or entrepreneurs.

Teacher/ university teacher	127
Student/ school pupil	229
Civil servant	218
Private	256
Farmer ³⁴¹	577
Other	774

The largest group in these statistics were, however, people whose professions were classified as "other" - 35% of the total. The group of "others" includes the temple residents and permanent guests from different centres, who are no longer considered to have a profession i.e. approximately 200 persons, of whom the great majority took part in the *plukse*k ceremony. Another large group of "others" were the senior citizens; in total there were 419 people, aged 60 or older. In addition, there were a number of housewives, which was unsurprising considering that 60% of the participants were women.³⁴²

5% of the Asoke members indicated that they were either school teachers, university lecturers or professors. Together, with the civil servants, private employees and entrepreneurs they form the higher educated group of 534 persons who can be regarded as being lower middle class. The primary school graduates, the secondary school graduates and the persons with no education whatsoever total 1674 persons who, in addition to the 577 peasants and some youngsters in the group of 229 students and school pupils form the group of “others”.

6. 2. SOCIAL PRESSURE

According to Wilson, “minority religions are likely to suffer a bad reputation”,³⁴³ which is very true of the Asoke. The group is perceived as highly controversial and unorthodox amongst the Thai public, and negative stories about it are regularly published, particularly, in the Thai language press. The legal exclusion of the Asoke sect from the state sangha further confirms its image as a deviant Buddhist group.

According to Wilson, family relations are affected when a member of the family joins a sect: “Within the family, sect members are free to live in accordance with their own moral norms, yet the very fact that their moral assumptions differ from those of the society at large, is a source of tension.”³⁴⁴ Therefore, it is interesting to explore the impact of this social pressure on Asoke sect adherents and their families.

6. 2. 1. Length of affiliation

The Asoke group was formally excluded from the state sangha in 1989, after which the Asoke monks were no longer allowed to call themselves as monks, *phra*, but instead call themselves *samana*.³⁴⁵ Nor are they allowed to wear the brown robes they used to wear. After the crisis in 1989, the monks have been forced to wear white robes above their brown clothes in order to indicate that they are mere laypeople in the Buddhist hierarchy of Thailand. Yet 17% of the Asoke monks have joined the group after the year 1989. Three of

the Sikkhamats have also been ordained after the year 1989, but there one should remember that the path to become a Sikkhamat is considerably longer than the path to being ordained as a monk. We can thus assume that the three Sikkhamats were already involved with the group before 1989.

The most interesting figures are in the group of the novices and aspirants, because they have been elevated to their present positions fairly recently. Two of the four novices have been less than four years in their present position, which means that they were elevated to that position after 1989, and two have been in that position for 5-9 years already. Three novices have been loosely affiliated to the Asoke group since early mid 1980s, whereas one novice paid his first visit to Daen Asoke as early as 1976.

Six of the aspirants have been in their positions for less than four years, seven have been in their positions for 5-9 years and two have already 10 to 14 years behind them. Naturally we can again presume that their affiliation with the group reaches further back in time, but it still also shows that the legal steps against the Asoke group did not discourage these people from continuing along the path they had chosen. In fact, the male aspirants indicate starting their initial affiliation with the group during the first half of the 1980s, whereas the female aspirants can trace their affiliations back to the years 1975-78.

The laypeople attending the *pluksek* ceremony in Sisa Asoke were also requested to count how many times they had attended the ceremony.

1 time	562
2-5 times	770
6-10 times	575
10-15 times	196
16-19 times	37 ³⁴⁶

36% were attending the *pluksek* for the second to the fifth time. Since laypeople are not usually able to attend the week-long ceremony every year, these two to five years of participation clearly cover the critical year 1989. 26% of the persons were attending the ceremony for the 6th to the 10th time. Again, this figure also indi-

cates that the pending court case and the heavy accusations in the Thai language press have not affected the adherents dramatically. 25% of the persons participated the *pluksek* ceremony for the first time, but their affiliation has probably lasted for some time already.

TABLE 8: Length of stay in the Asoke group

Years	Monks	Nuns	Novices & Aspirants	Laymen	Laywomen	Total
0-4	15	3	8	5	3	34
5-9	29	2	9	8	14	62
10-14	21	4	2	14	17	58
15-19	14	3	-	3	2	22
20+	4	4	-	-	-	8
-	1	-	-	-	2	3
TOTAL	84	16	19	30	38	187

16% of the laymen attending the *mahapawarana* ceremony in Pathom Asoke started their affiliation with the Asoke group after the group was declared illegal. This figure is considerably smaller among the laywomen, where only 7% have started their affiliation after 1989.

Most of the Asoke monks i.e. 34% have been ordained during the last 5-9 years from 1989 to 1994 whereas 25% have been ordained for 10-15 years. 25% of the Sikkhamats have been in their present position for 20 years or more already, equally many have been for 10-14 years and 18% have been Sikkhamats for 15 to 19 years.

The great majority of the lay-people have been faithful to the group for 10 to 14 years: 44% of the laywomen and 46% of the laymen. 36% of the laywomen have been affiliated to the group for 5-9 years and 26% of the laymen. Only a few have had contacts with the group for longer than 15 years: only 10% both of the laywomen and

laymen. This can, of course, be explained by the fact that a longer affiliation usually leads to ordination and a change of status. Yet these figures clearly show that the official exclusion of the Asoke group from the state sangha and the negative publicity concerning the Asoke group has not been all that successful. There has still been a silent flow of supporters and followers to the Asoke group even after the legal crisis in 1989.

6. 2. 2. Reaction of the family members

Another aspect of social pressure concerns the reaction of the family members of the Asoke monastics and lay supporters. Again the harsh propaganda, the frequent condemnation of the Asoke group in the Thai language press and the pending court case have had less effect on the Asoke families than might be expected.

Somewhat surprisingly, 75% of the Sikkhamats had family members within the group even though the status and role of a Sikkhamat is completely new and unfamiliar to the Thai society and could therefore be problematic and difficult to understand and accept by the family members. Only three Sikkhamats did not have any family members who supported the Asoke group. Of these three Sikkhamats, one had recently been ordained which maybe explains the lack of support by her family members. Two of these Sikkhamats have already been ordained for about 20 years, both come from upper middle-class Chinese merchant families which maybe explains the negative attitude held by the family members.

57% of the monks had family members in the group of lay supporters. Three monks even had their wives as lay followers and two monks had their children in Asoke schools. The most common pattern is, however, to have a mother or father and siblings among the lay followers. According to Thai Buddhist belief, the ordination of a son transfers a considerable amount of merit to the mother. This seems to have been adopted by the mothers of the Asoke monks as well.

A similar situation applies to the lay followers where 66% of the men had some family members in the Asoke group. 50% of the laywomen had family members follow them to the temple, whereas 44% had no family members and could even expect some hostility

and suspicion to their group of affiliation by their family members.³⁴⁷ Interestingly, however, none of the laypeople who had family members in the group indicated being the parent or a sibling of a monk or Sikkhamat. There were no major differences according to gender: 57% of all men - lay and monastics - had family members in the group and 53% of all women.

The most problematic group in terms of family relations were the aspirants, where only five had family members in the Asoke group and 10 had no family members who would have accepted their choice of life style. Gender in this case was not decisive: six female aspirants and four male aspirants had no family members in the group, whereas two female aspirants and two male aspirants had family support for their life style.

The statistics on monks and Sikkhamats shows, however, a higher level of acceptance by families than is the case of novices and aspirants. This probably indicates that at the time, novices and aspirants were still regarded as dwelling in a liminal stage where they are neither venerated as monastics nor respected for their lay status.

6. 3. THE RECRUITMENT OF ASOKE MEMBERS

In order to examine the recruitment process of people into the Asoke, the following questions were presented in the questionnaire: "How did you learn about the Asoke group?", "Where did you meet the group for the first time?" and "Where did you meet Bodhiraksa for the first time?".

Monks mentioned reading books and listening to tapes as an introduction to the Asoke ideas. One monk mentioned that he learned about the Asoke group through a "rumour". First encounters with the Asoke group have usually taken place in public places like the Lumbini park in central Bangkok, in department stores, or in schools and other places around the country during the time when the group was still allowed to move freely.

Sikkhamats also either read a book or accompanied a friend on a visit to the Asoke monks. The majority of the Sikkhamats have a longer affiliation with the Asoke group than the monks. First en-

counters with Bodhiraksa and the Asoke monks has taken place in the old centres like Daen Asoke or in Prakarn Asoke in Samut Prakarn.³⁴⁸

Novices mention reading a book or listening to a tape as a first introduction, or accompanying a friend on a visit to the Asoke group. The affiliation reached back to 1976 for one novice, whereas the others established contact in the 1980s.

Male aspirants encountered the group in mid 1980s, whereas female aspirants usually needed more time to convince themselves that they could reject the worldly life, follow the group and strive to become ordained. The latest encounter took place in the year 1983 and the earliest in the year 1975.

Laypeople usually mention reading a book as an introduction, but where they received the book is not mentioned.³⁴⁹ In the later years, new members have also been recruited through the tapes. The next encounter after reading the books has usually taken place in Santi Asoke or in other centres, often during the national gatherings.

Many laypeople first encountered the group in rural districts during the times when the monks and the Sikkhamats travelled around the country to preach and present their slide shows. Very often these activities took place in schools or in teachers colleges, which has resulted in the recruitment of many teachers to the Asoke group. Many people have also simply followed their friends on visits to the various Asoke centres.

In most cases people met Bodhiraksa at the same time that they met the group. People tend to remember the precise date of their first encounter with the Asoke group, or at least they can still recall the month and year in which it occurred.

One layman met the group in Daen Asoke as early as 1976, but he did not meet Bodhiraksa for nine years until they met in Pathom Asoke in 1985.

Several laywomen encountered the Asoke group for the first time in Lanna Asoke in Chiang Mai, which shows that even newly started groups with no well-established centres or temples can be successful in recruiting new adherents.

6. 3. 1. Advancement in the Asoke hierarchy

Any layperson who wishes to become ordained in the Asoke sect should follow a certain gradual pattern of advancement. The first step is to apply to become a temporary guest (*akhantuka a chon*) who will stay in the temple area. There are separate dormitories for men and women in Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke and Sisa Asoke.

The temporary guests prolong their stay every seventh day by asking permission (*wikab*) from Bodhiraksa or the person who has been preaching that day. A temporary guest is free to leave after the seven days and has no further obligations. During their stay in the temple area they have to be vegetarians and observe the eight precepts.

A person should stay as a temporary guest for at least three months before he or she can apply to become a permanent guest (*akhantuka pracaam*). A permanent guest also needs permission to prolong his or her stay every seventh day. Female guests often ask permission from the Sikkhamats to prolong their stay. A permanent guest must be vegetarian and observe the eight precepts. A person should stay in the position of permanent guest for at least six months before he or she can apply to become a temple resident (*aramik*). The person should stay for 18 months as a temple resident before he or she can apply to become an aspirant (*pa*).

Many of the temple residents are waiting for the permission to advance on the path to ordination, and thus all aspirants are chosen from amongst the temple residents. Yet, there are also temple residents who do not wish to be ordained, particularly amongst the women. They have realised that they have no chances of being ordained during their lifetime due to restrictions on the number of Sikkhamats. There is a certain degree of mobility in and out from the position of temple resident as was evidenced in the analysis of the number of the Asoke adherents discussed in Chapter II. Many of the temple residents, as well as the permanent and temporary guests, wear deep blue Northeastern peasant *mohom* shirts and blue trousers or sarongs. Usually they walk barefoot and eat only one meal in a day, but there are many exceptions to this both in terms of dress and with regard to the number of meals.

The first serious step on the way to becoming ordained is to become a *pa*. A man should stay in that position for at least four months before he can be promoted to the next step. A woman has to stay in that position at least for six months before applying for promotion. Male aspirants wear brown trousers and female aspirants wear a brown sarong. Both have white shirts and women still have long hair, but not longer than ten centimetres. Their daily duties include assisting the monks and Sikkhamats, washing their clothes, cleaning public spaces and buildings, and helping in the kitchen, especially in serving food to the monastics. Many aspirants work in the schools. There are aspirants only in Santi Asoke and in Pathom Asoke.

The next step for a male aspirant is to become a *nak*. Then he shaves his head, but continues wearing similar clothes except for a brown stripe in the collar of his white shirt. His duties are the same as before. A man is expected to stay in that position at least for four months.

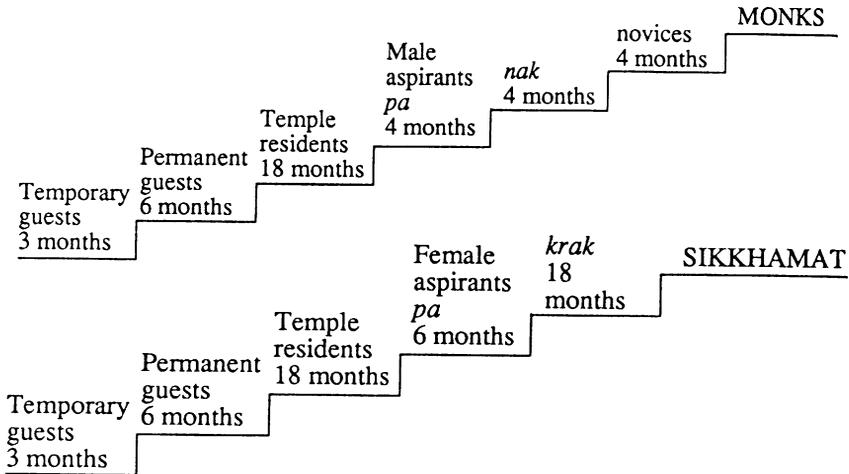
A female aspirant advances from the level of *pa* to become a *krak*. She also shaves her head and continues wearing similar clothes as earlier except for a brown shawl (*sabai*) which she hangs on her left shoulder in more formal occasions. A woman should stay in that position for at least 18 months.

A *nak* can advance after four months to become a novice (*samanutthet*). As a novice he starts to wear clothes which are similar to the monks: a brown sarong, a long loose brown shirt reaching down to the knees and a white outer robe. In the collar he wears a light brown stripe which distinguishes him from the monks. He should stay in that position for at least four months before he can be ordained as a monk.

A *krak* can advance to become a Sikkhamat after 18 months, but as the ratio of the Sikkhamats is restricted according to the number of monks, the path of advancement is also restricted to the female aspirants both *krak* and *pa*. One *krak* calculated that she can become a Sikkhamat, when there are 104 monks i.e. 11 monks more than at the present. On the other hand, to become ordained as a Sikkhamat, a woman has to be less than 50 years of age. There will

probably be exceptions to this in the future as the age of the female aspirants is getting higher due to the long wait.

FIGURE 9: Advancement in the Asoke



The decisions concerning advancement are made by the ones on the higher hierarchical levels. The monks decide about the advancement of the male candidates and the Sikkhamats decide about the advancement of the female candidates. The Sikkhamats have a meeting in which they interview the candidates on all levels, especially the *pa* and *krak*. After this, they bring their decision to the monks, who do not pose any questions to the female candidates.³⁵⁰

The steps from *pa* to *nak* or from *pa* to *krak* do not follow automatically. Sometimes a *pa* can be overtaken by his/her junior in promotion if the senior candidate fails in the interviews, or if he or she specifically wants to stay longer in his/her present position, hesitating to advance. Many aspirants have also resigned but still stay in the group as ordinary lay people, or they stay in the neighbourhood of a temple and continue to donate food to the monastics and attend the sermons.

6. 3. 2. General requirements for advancement

The main prerequisite for a serious Asoke follower's advancement, both spiritually and hierarchically, in the group is to strictly observe the eight precepts.³⁵¹ To assist this practice, one can take a small booklet called "Handbook of the eight precepts" (*ubosuttha sin baet*). This book helps the Asoke practitioners to examine their daily behaviour in the form of action, speech and thought with reference to the eight precepts.

The book first presents each precept in a short Thai version and then in the longer Pali version. After the presentation, examples are given as to how the person should evaluate his or her own behaviour and how many points one can credit to oneself. The practitioner receives zero points if he or she has broken the precept by action. The practitioner receives one point if he or she has broken the precept unintentionally, merely by accident. The practitioner receives two points if he or she did not commit any offending action but was talking about it. Three points to a practitioner who neither commits nor talks about the offending action, but still thinks about it. The highest four points can be noted when the practitioner manages to stop his or her thoughts about the offending act. Furthermore, the practitioner also has to be able to promote the opposite: namely positive feelings before the full four points can be given.

In the case of the first precept, one should not only refrain from killing but one should even reduce one's anger. Thus the positive action against anger is to show compassion (*metta*) and forgiveness. The second precept encourages one to refrain from stealing but is interpreted as "reducing greediness" (*lobha*). Thus the positive action is generosity. The third precept discourages "illicit sex" and is interpreted as "reducing passion" (*kama*). The positive feeling here is to increase one's feelings towards other human beings in the sense of "fraternity". The fourth precept encourages people to refrain from lying and thus increase the truth, which is interpreted as polite speech and which should subsequently promote the feeling of unity. The fifth precept encourages practitioners to reduce delusion and addiction to the six vices which are drinking, smoking, gambling, practicing illicit sex, frequenting night entertainment and being lazy. To

receive the full four points the practitioner should even campaign against these vices. The sixth precept requires the person to control his or her food consumption and ultimately limit the number of meals. For four points, one should even convince other people of the benefits of eating less. The seventh precept requires the person to reduce his craving (*rakha*) for dancing, music and for all decoration. To gain full points one should even feel happy to live without these things. The final precept for the lay people encourages them to refrain from sleeping in beds and sitting on elevated chairs in order to reduce their ego (*mana*). Instead of elevating themselves with elaborated pieces of furniture, they should show modesty (*maknoy sandot*).

The handbook should be filled daily and each week the book should be shown to a monk or a Sikkhamat for comments. The monastic should sign the handbook in order to confirm that she or he has seen it.

The handbook is freely distributed to any lay person, but it is obligatory for the temple residents and permanent guests. They are free to choose the person to whom they want to show their handbook. Male practitioners always go to the monks, but the female practitioners may choose between a monk or a Sikkhamat. Theoretically, the Sikkhamats are responsible for the female temple residents, but no-one can force a laywoman to show her handbook to a Sikkhamat.

The purpose of the book is to make the lay person more aware of his or her daily behaviour and to assist in the observation of the precepts. In the Asoke group, some lay people and temporary guests write diaries in free style and show them regularly to a monk or to a Sikkhamat for their comments after which they receive a signature.

Another paper that the temple residents and both temporary and permanent guests have to fill in is the *wikab* paper (*bai wikab*). Every seventh day, these people have to ask for permission to stay longer in the temple and, at the same time, show the monk or Sikkhamat how well they have managed to follow the rules of the temple.

The first question concerns the practitioner's health, where she or he can reply "sick" or "not sick", and then describe the illness or the symptoms. Next question concerns the number of meals per day

the person has consumed during the last seven days. If the person has eaten more than once a day, she or he will have to give the number of meals and describe what she or he has eaten in the early morning, in the afternoon or in the evening. Usually these extra meals consist of fruits or milk products.

The fourth question is concerned with sleeping hours, whether the respondent has slept during the day. If she or he has slept in the day a reason for this has to be given. Reasons for sleeping daytime are often such things as "travelling by bus" or a reference to sickness.

The fifth question deals with the ID-label (*bat prachamtua*) that everyone is expected to wear on her or his clothes. If the person did not wear it every day, the reason must be given again. Usually the explanation is: "I forgot it" or even: "I have lost it". The sixth question concerns going barefoot, a rule, which is usually not too difficult to follow.

The seventh question is concerned with whether the person got up at 3.30 a.m. - an explanation should be given if she or he slept longer. The eighth question asks whether the person went to the temple (*sala*) to listen to the preaching, and the next question is whether she or he joined the communal meal in the temple. If not, the reason should be given - the reasons are usually that the person was working somewhere else: in the offices, in the shops or in the restaurant. The last question concerns the evening meditation which is not obligatory for anyone.

The last point is to report the place where the person is sleeping: whether in the back-room of the restaurant, in the shop or in the dormitories. Sometimes the respondents fail to sign in the central register where they sleep, as they feel too sleepy to go to register and instead go to sleep wherever they are.

Finally a short description of person's state of mind should be given. The monastic then reads the paper, comments and asks reasons for the negative answers and signs the paper.

These are the group standards of conduct in the Asoke sect. Wilson emphasised the importance of an explicit commitment as a prerequisite to a sect member. In the Asoke group the "Handbook" should assist the members in their maintenance of their affiliation

through their behaviour. They should satisfy several tests of merit each day: wake up early, eat only one vegetarian meal, control their temper when interacting with other sect members and so forth. The values that the sect members listed in the questionnaire should not only be put in practice daily but are even controlled by the members on the higher hierarchical level.

6. 4. SUMMARY

My statistics include 187 persons, both lay and monastic, participating at one national gathering called *mahapawarana*, and 2181 lay persons from another national gathering - *plukse*. To summarise the wide range of material accurately, I shall only repeat a few points from the best samples. The sample of the monks, which included 84 monks out of the total of 92, i.e. 91%. The extensive sample of 2181 laypeople covered nearly all the participants in the *plukse* gathering. These two samples are more representative than the smaller samples of other groups. Only 16 out of the total of 23 Sikkhamats 23 replied, and the small samples of laypeople from *mahapawarana* include only 30 laymen and 38 laywomen from a gathering of approximately 2000 persons.

In order to determine the social strata of the Asoke people I shall only discuss the place of origin, education and profession of the respondents.

35% of the Asoke monks come from the poorest provinces of Thailand - in the Northeast. The proportion of monks coming from the wealthier provinces, Bangkok and Central Thailand, amounted to 47%. 61% of the lay people were born in the Northeast and 25% came from the Central region. The place of origin cannot function as the only indicator of social strata, so I also examined the level of education which was, in fact, more revealing than the geographical origin.

Of the Asoke monks, 25% have visited only primary school, which means 4-6 years of schooling. A further 28% of the monks have visited universities, the rest has secondary education or tertiary education in vocational institutes. This means that education is evenly distributed amongst the monks. 51% of the laypeople had

only visited primary school and 16% had studied at the universities. A low level of education amongst the laymen is typical.

I also considered the professional background of the Asoke monks: 25% were farmers before taking the ordination, 20% were civil servants and 23% had other professions, mostly in private companies, but they were not merchants which might indicate greater wealth. About the same percentage of the lay people, i.e., 26% were farmers, whereas 15% were civil servants and 27% were either civil servants or working for private companies. Here, the professional background seems to be fairly balanced, both lay and monastics share similar professional backgrounds. The incomes of these groups are difficult to ascertain precisely, but clearly neither farmers nor civil servants belong to the strata usually seen as being “upward mobile”.

This short review clearly shows that the Asoke people cannot be regarded as representing the urban, upwardly mobile middle-class. Asoke is a group where 51% of the lay followers have only primary school education, and 61% of them originate from the poorest region of Thailand. The laypeople seem to be more dominated by the poorly educated, rural Northeasterners, whereas the Asoke monks originate in more balanced proportions from the different social stratas in Thai society.

Therefore, I reject the earlier assumptions cultivated by researchers that the Asoke group represents the upper and upper middle classes in Thailand.

VII CONCLUSION

One of the first questions I raised in this study was the matter of why the Asoke group was banned: What made this group so much more subversive or deviant than all other groups? Why did this particular group have to be legally banned and the monastics forcibly disrobed? Was the Asoke group banned because it represents heretic Buddhism, or at least unorthodox Buddhism, and, if so, what is orthodox Buddhism according to Thai standards? Who is the highest authority deciding on the Buddhist orthodoxy and unorthodoxy? Were there other reasons for banning the Asoke group, and, what were those reasons? Why has the Asoke group been regarded as an oppositional movement in Thai society, not only in the Buddhist sphere but even on the socio-political level? Does Asoke present an alternative political programme and, what kind of society is it striving for?

In the history of the Thai Buddhist sangha's development, it is quite clear that there was a major split into two sects, Mahanikai and Thammayutnikai, during the 19th century. Of these two, the Thammayutnikai is generally perceived as being more orthodox. The importance of the schism is, however, consistently played down by the sangha authorities. I also observed that there have been several dissidents in the Thai sangha - even during this century. I noted that some of these dissident thinkers - like Kittivuddho - have not been very orthodox even according to Thai Buddhist standards, whereas some others - like Yantra - have behaved in quite an unorthodox way. I concluded that there were political reasons as to why some dissident monks have not been forcibly disrobed, despite their repeatedly breaking monastic moral codes and rules. On this basis, I would like to propose that orthodox Buddhism and unorthodox Buddhism in Thailand are definitions which are outlined by the state authority rather than by any independent or Buddhist scholarly authority.

The monks and groups which are supported by the leading military-politicians seem to have a surprising degree of freedom to act - even against the monastic rules - without incurring any sanctions by the state sangha. This was shown in the case of Kittivuddho.

The reasons that the Dhammakaya movement has not been banned, despite its controversial meditation teachings and its disputed economic transactions, were also political. Again, this group is openly supported by some leading military-politicians.

It is quite clear that the close link between the state and the sangha forms a Buddhist authority *par excellence* in Thailand with power to monopolise religion and to decide which group and which monk will be tolerated and who should be banned and forcibly disrobed. This strong link between the sangha authority and the state authority gives the impression that they define the limits of state Buddhism rather than Thai Buddhism. The state dictates the decisions of the sangha authority, thus a deviant monk or group do not have to be deviant according to the general Buddhist or to the Thai Buddhist standards, but only from the viewpoint of the state Buddhist standards.

If this is the case with Asoke, what then were the political reasons for banning the group? Why was it interpreted as being against the state? In this study, I showed how Bodhiraksa openly cultivates very close contacts with Major-General Chamlong Srimuang and his Palang Dharma party. This connection has further complicated the existence of the Asoke group since Chamlong is widely perceived as being an opposition leader representing different political, social and economic values than the other politicians in Thailand. Whether Chamlong really has a different policy on the practical level can be discussed elsewhere, but the fact remains that Bodhiraksa's association with Chamlong seems to be the main cause for the legal problems the Asoke group has faced since Bodhiraksa rejected the state authority.

I also made a point that the Asoke group has legally existed as an independent group outside the state Buddhist administration since 1975, yet did not incur any significant reactions by the state sangha until 1988. While the renegade status of the Asoke group was not a major problem for 13 years, it started to irritate the state authorities in the wake of Major-General Chamlong Srimuang's candidacy for Palang Dharma party in the general elections of 1988.

I also examined whether the Buddhism taught and practised by the Asoke group is so deviant that it cannot be tolerated by the

orthodox state Buddhist authority. Bodhiraksa and the Asoke group emphasise modesty, frugality and hard work. The values cherished by Asoke are entirely based on the general Buddhist moral precepts, which the state Buddhist authority also observes in theory but rarely in practice. This is evidenced by the frequent sex, money and other scandals within the mainstream as well as in the daily life of the great majority of Thai monks. The moral ethos of Asoke separates it from the easy-going and fun-loving Thai society, where rampant corruption, prostitution and environmental degradation are tolerated. For example, even though the official state policy has been oriented towards more reforestation than deforestation since the disastrous floods in 1989, the illegal logging continues under the eyes of the state authorities and leading military-politicians.

The Asoke ideology, for its part, emphasises conservation and environmental values by encouraging ecologically sound agriculture, rejecting chemicals and recycling garbage. The Asoke group's national development programme stresses the development of rural areas, whereas the official state development programme concentrates on rapid industrialisation of urban centres along the lines with other East Asian and Southeast Asian newly industrialised countries.

The emergence of Asoke in the wake of the democracy movement in the early 1970s seems to link the movement with the democratic and egalitarian values cherished by students, intellectuals and Buddhist monks during those years. One should not, however, draw too one-sided conclusions based on this. After the democracy movement was crushed in 1976, Asoke and other religious groups were the only organisations which could have channelled the discontent of the former pro-democracy activists. Yet, I did not come across with any of these 1970s activists in Asoke. Most people joined Asoke out of sense of frustration that they felt towards the mainstream sangha's corrupt and lax practices. The political activity of Kittivuddho and the likes of him, leading to the crushing of the democracy movement, was one of the main causes that shattered the image of a united sangha. The politicisation and secularisation of the sangha encouraged people to look for new Buddhist groups in Thailand.

The state campaign against Asoke, which started in 1988 in

the wake of the general elections, seemed to increase rather than decrease the support for Asoke among the second-generation political activists. Banning a religious group aroused the interest of many intellectuals who had been looking for alternative socio-political movements. The activities of the Asoke group have clearly expanded since the official state ban: schools were opened, new centres emerged and the promotion of natural agriculture gained a prominent position in the group's activities. Their alternative national development programme, based on rural development, is propagated by the well-educated lay intellectuals who started to join the group around the year 1989.

Earlier research on Asoke tended to connect the group with the Weberian concepts of economic growth and the spirit of capitalism. The economic policy of Asoke is, however, clearly anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist. This was demonstrated in the analysis of their economic ideals of merit-ism (*bun niyom*). They have even managed to make their ideals concrete by opening Bun Niyom-shops, where they can experiment with their economic programme.

The frugality taught and practised by the Asoke can be interpreted as a direct criticism of consumerism. This puts the group in opposition to the state economic programme which encourages consumption. In the present consumerist Thai society, where individualism is gaining increasing importance, Asoke emphasises communal values and self-sufficiency. Asoke people are encouraged to work for the group and society.

The Asoke group cherishes similar values to those described by Weber in his discussion about the Protestant ethics: frugality and hard work. Yet, the difference is that individual wealth is not regarded as a reward for asceticism in Asoke. The values connected with frugality and diligence are sacrifice and devotion to society. I concluded that the individuals in Asoke work for the group, and the wealth accumulated by the volunteers is expected to benefit the whole group.

The moral conduct of the Asoke monastics is of utmost importance in this context; whether they are practising "world-rejecting asceticism" by concentrating on spiritual counselling, or "inner-worldly asceticism" by participating in the actual labour of the Asoke.

The borderline between these two forms of asceticism seemed somewhat fluid among the monastics. As long as the monastics do not use the money for their own enrichment, neither do the laypeople wish to enrich themselves individually. The lay followers are satisfied with accumulating capital for the Asoke group collectively.

One characteristic of a sect, according to Bryan Wilson, is that it claims to have better access to salvation than the mainstream religious body. This idea links Asoke to the millenarian *phu mi bun* movements with whom Asoke seems to have some similarities. Both are predominantly based in rural areas, particularly in the impoverished northeastern part of Thailand, and both promise an immediate this-worldly salvation as Chatthip indicated when describing the traditional *phu mi bun* movements.

The Buddhist salvation or enlightenment indeed is interpreted by Asoke in a different way from the mainstream. The Asoke group has further demythologised nirvana, a process which was initiated by Buddhadasa. According to Asoke, everyone who manages to stop smoking, drinking, lying, stealing, killing and practicing illicit sex already is enlightened. After this the person can start to struggle for the higher levels of enlightenment by following quite explicit steps which will lead to this goal.

The notion of a concrete attainable nirvana brings Buddhism closer to the ordinary Thai laity and encourages them to follow the ideals and moral guidelines of Buddhism. I came to the conclusion that it moves the sangha-centred practices towards a more worldly level which is open to all lay people. Losing the sangha-centredness of Buddhism destroys the traditional interdependence between the sangha and the state. Therefore the idea of an attainable nirvana is revolutionary in the Theravada Buddhist context. It can change the submissiveness of the underprivileged when they are encouraged to struggle for nirvana through their own behaviour, regardless of their social status and without the financial sacrifices to the monks in merit-making ceremonies.

One difference between the *phu mi bun* movements and Asoke can be found in the class composition of the two groups. In my examination of the social background of the Asoke adherents, I showed

that the group is not entirely composed of the rural poor - as is often the case in religious peasant movements. Neither does the Asoke group consist of the urban upward-mobile middle class, as was suggested in the research from the 1980s and early 1990s. The main shortcoming in the earlier research was linking the two entirely different, albeit contemporary, religious groups together - the Dhammakaya and Asoke - and drawing conclusions without the use of convincing empirical data. Another problem was the emphasis placed in these studies on the urban Santi Asoke centre while neglecting the importance of the rural centres. Furthermore, these studies focused on the person of Bodhiraksa, thus neglecting interviews with his supporters and followers.

My data on the social background of the Asoke people suggest that among the ordinary lay people the rural low-educated poor are in a great majority, whereas the monks are more divergent in class composition. They originate from the rural low-educated poor, from the somewhat more educated lower middle-classes and from the urban high-educated upper middle-class, in fairly equal proportions.

To call the Asoke group a fundamentalist movement, as Swearer does, is problematic. Swearer links the two new Buddhist groups - Asoke and Dhammakaya - together as examples of fundamentalist tendencies in Theravada Buddhism. As I hope to have shown in this study, the two movements differ quite radically both in theory and in practice, and particularly in their relationship to the state. Therefore, it is an over-generalisation to conclude, as Swearer does, that "both represent resurgent forms of fundamentalistic religion", because they both have a "distinctive ideology and religious practice", and they both are led by "strong, charismatic figures".³⁵² These characteristics apply to nearly all religious groups in the world; few groups, sects or new religious movements are led by weak, un-charismatic figures.

I suggested that Asoke challenges the mainstream from the gender point of view, as well. The traditional position of women in Thai Buddhism has been subordinate to that of men. According to a popular interpretation, a woman must be born as a man before she can even dream of enlightenment. The Asoke has ordained 23 women

as nuns, albeit with the title of Sikkhamat, in order to give them the possibility of devoting their lives to religious practices. The 23 Sikkhamats of the group are highly respected by Asoke people, and even if some lapses in showing respect to the Sikkhamats do occur, they still are in a very different social and hierarchical position in the group from any of the *mae chis* in the mainstream Thai Buddhist sangha. The fact that also a great majority of the monks and lay people saw “becoming a Sikkhamat” as the second highest alternative in earning spiritual merit (*bun*) is quite encouraging from the Thai women’s point of view. It shows that if an opportunity is given to Thai women to be properly ordained in the sangha, they can be as respected as the monks. The fact that the Sikkhamats themselves regarded “becoming a Sikkhamat” as the highest alternative, also indicates that the 23 women have developed a strong identity as Sikkhamats despite the fact that their position is completely new and unique in Thai Buddhism.

While the traditional definitions of the sect by religious sociologists, particularly Wilson, Stark & Bainbridge³⁵³, seem to correspond quite well with the Asoke group, some reservations should still be made. To define Asoke as a sect in the Thai context is somewhat problematic. The Thai word for sect is *nikai* and, as I showed there already are two sects in Thailand: Mahanikai and Thammayutnikai. The state Buddhist authority prefers to emphasise the unity of the sangha despite the schism, and it certainly will not accept easily the idea of a third Buddhist sect in Thailand. The Asoke members are also careful not to propagate the idea of a third sect in Thailand because they like to emphasise that Buddha himself was against the division of the sangha. The fact remains, however, that there already are two sects in Thailand, and several other Buddhist sects exist in the neighbouring Theravada Buddhist countries, e.g. Burma. All this indicates that sectarianism cannot be avoided in Buddhism.

If the Asoke group were permitted to exist and continue its activities, it can hardly be avoided that Asoke will, *de facto*, form a third Buddhist sect in Thailand whether recognised by the state or not. Whether their Buddhism is Theravada Buddhism or even closer to Mahayana Buddhism is an open question. It seems to combine

ideas from both schools: strict vegetarianism from Mahayana Buddhism and the Thai Theravada Buddhist idealistic values of strict discipline and celibacy on the part of the monastics as well as the daily almsrounds to offer the laity the opportunity of making merit. If the group has a future, it might be justified to call its brand of Buddhism "Asoke Buddhism". One prerequisite for this is, however, that the Thai state will truly follow the constitution, where freedom of religion is granted. This way Thailand could become a more pluralistic society.

As Stark & Bainbridge³⁵⁴ suggested, a sect can develop into a "church" when the class composition of the sect changes. The tendency for the sects to develop closer to "church" status remains to be seen in the case of Asoke. As could be deduced from the biographies, some of Asoke members feel that the group already has changed quite dramatically over the last 20 years. This can also be seen in the descriptions of Asoke in earlier research, where the living conditions of the Asoke members were described to still be extremely austere as the members were following their own strict rules of conduct. The results of this study indicate that in several cases minor bending of rules is tolerated nowadays; the Asoke still emphasise very strict ascetic Buddhist practices, but do not force anyone to follow these practices to the extremes. There are different disciplinary and spiritual levels upon which practitioners can dwell, and these levels also correspond with the practitioner's hierarchical position within the Asoke group and often are connected with the different levels of enlightenment. A major deviation from the mainstream Buddhist sangha, however, seems to exist: the Asoke monastics do practise what they preach.

My first visit to Santi Asoke took place in October 1991 when I visited the old wooden main temple and conducted my first interviews. The building was later destroyed by insects and, when I arrived in Santi Asoke in October 1994, I was surprised to see a huge construction site. The building of a giant-sized temple in concrete at the Santi Asoke centre in Bangkok seems to symbolise the change from an extremely austere and radical Buddhist group into a more socially-oriented one with manifold activities carried out by the fairly diverse membership.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *The Nation*, 9 August 1989. All quotes in this thesis have been left exactly as they appeared in the original.

² *The Nation*, 7 November 1994.

³ *The Nation*, 26 November 1994.

⁴ Also written Thammakaai, but here standardised throughout Dhammakaya - the form preferred by the sect members.

⁵ Suwanna 1990, Taylor 1990.

⁶ See Chapter III.

⁷ Celebrating Buddha's birthday and enlightenment, *Maghabucha* often falls in February.

⁸ Field notes; interview with Nicholas Woods, 1 September 1991.

⁹ Field notes, interview with Phra Thammanithet, also known as Phra Sophon Khanaphon, deputy abbot of Wat Bovornnivet, 7 October 1991.

¹⁰ Heikkilä-Horn 1992, *The Supernatural Power of Buddhist Rulers. The Ideological Background of Kingship in Theravada Buddhism*, unpublished Licentiate thesis for Åbo Akademi University.

¹¹ Heikkilä-Horn 1994, 165-168.

¹² Ishii 1986, 40-47, 164-166; Somboon 1982, 24, 158-159.

¹³ In Thai: *phra mahakasat, chart, sasana*.

¹⁴ Girling 1984, 393.

¹⁵ Girling 1984, 387-395.

¹⁶ Girling 1984, 395-401.

¹⁷ Turton 1984, 37-39.

¹⁸ Turton 1984, 25-26, 36.

¹⁹ Turton 1984, 41, 65.

²⁰ Turton 1984, 65-67.

²¹ Tanabe 1984, 86.

²² Tanabe 1984, 86.

²³ During this century the most important *phu mi bun* revolts occurred in the North-east Thailand in 1901-2, 1924, 1936 and 1959. Chatthip 1984.

²⁴ The Pali term "*dhamma*" usually refers to Buddhist doctrine, whereas the Sanskrit word "*dharmā*" here refers more to moral law and righteous rule. In Thai both are pronounced as "*thamma*" or "*tham*".

²⁵ Chatthip 1984, 117-124.

²⁶ Ames 1964; Spiro 1970; Kirsch 1977.

- 27 Ames 1964, 21-25; 35-36; 40.
- 28 Spiro 1970, 9-12; 19; 140. Sanskrit: *nirvana* is often used in its Pali form *nibbana* in the literature dealing with Theravada Buddhism. *Kamma* is the Pali form of the Sanskrit word *karma*.
- 29 Kirsch 1977, 252-253.
- 30 Wilson 1990, 4.
- 31 Wilson 1990, 6.
- 32 Wilson 1990, 17-18.
- 33 Wilson 1990, 9.
- 34 Grant A. Olson (1983) *Sangha Reform in Thailand. Limitation, Liberation and the Middle Path*. M.A. Thesis. May 1983, University of Hawaii.
- 35 Olson 1983, 66.
- 36 Olson 1983, 68.
- 37 Olson 1983, 68.
- 38 Olson 1983, 72. Chamlong Srimuang worked as the Secretary General in the Prime Minister's Office in 1980-81, during the premiership of General Prem.
- 39 Olson 1983, 72.
- 40 Olson 1983, 73.
- 41 Peter A. Jackson *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict. The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism*. Singapore 1989.
- 42 Jackson 1989, 9 - 10.
- 43 Jackson 1989, 164-166.
- 44 Jackson 1989, 6-7.
- 45 Jackson 1989, 11.
- 46 Jackson 1989, 24.
- 47 Jackson 1989, 37.
- 48 Jackson 1989, 50.
- 49 Jackson 1989, 55.
- 50 Jackson uses the spelling "Phothirak", in this study standardised throughout Bodhiraksa.
- 51 Jackson 1989, 166.
- 52 Jackson 1989, 51.
- 53 Jackson 1989, 50-51.
- 54 Jackson 1989, 189.

- 55 Anan Senakhan: *Bodhiraksa - the highly dangerous prophet*. (In Thai) Bangkok 1982.
- 56 Jackson 1989, 184-185.
- 57 Jim L. Taylor "New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: An "Individualistic Revolution", Reform and Political Dissonance", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, March 1990.
- 58 Taylor 1990, 135, 153.
- 59 Taylor 1990, 139.
- 60 Taylor 1990, 135-139.
- 61 Taylor 1990, 135-139.
- 62 Taylor 1990, 152-153.
- 63 Taylor 1990, 145-146; Anan Senakhan together with Phra Sophon Khanaphon and Sangwian Phurahong: *Maha Chamlong disciple of Bodhiraksa, a very dangerous teacher*, published in Thai in 1988 - shortly before the elections.
- 64 Taylor 1990, 145.
- 65 Sombat Chantornwong: *The Pathom Asoke Community. A Study of Buddhist Utopia*. (in Thai) Thamma Santi Foundation 1988; and Prawet Wasi: *Suan Mok, Thammakai, Santi Asok*. (in Thai) Bangkok 1988.
- 66 Suwanna 1990, 404.
- 67 Suwanna 1990, 407.
- 68 Suwanna 1990, 396-407.
- 69 Donald K. Swearer "Fundamentalism in Theravada Buddhism". in Martin E. Marty & R. Scott Appleby (eds) *Fundamentalisms Observed*. Chicago 1991.
- 70 Swearer 1991, 628.
- 71 Swearer 1991, 668. *Acharn* Man was a revered forest monk, a meditation teacher in the Northeast.
- 72 Swearer 1991, 672-677.
- 73 Swearer 1991, 677.
- 74 Swearer 1991, 678. Swearer's way of regarding both Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke as "fundamentalistic" movements weakens his argument and gives the impression that his conclusions are guided and simplified by the general title of the book (*Fundamentalisms Observed*) compiled by Marty and Appleby rather than being based on a deep analysis of the two Thai Buddhist groups.
- 75 Swearer 1991, 667.
- 76 Swearer 1991, 667.
- 77 Swearer 1991, 672.
- 78 Swearer 1991, 673.
- 79 Swearer 1991, 656.

⁸⁰ Biography (in Thai) *Sacca haeng chivit* (Truth of Life) 1982 pp.186-237, *Phutapluk* (The Externals of Buddha) 1985.

⁸¹ Apinya Fuengfusakul "Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravada Reform in Thailand". *Sojourn* Vol. 8 Nr. 1, February 1993.

⁸² Apinya 1993, 153.

⁸³ Apinya 1993, 159.

⁸⁴ Apinya 1993, 170.

⁸⁵ Apinya 1993, 180.

⁸⁶ Bunruam Theimchan "The Santi Asoke Case" (in Thai) *Khadi Santi Asoke* from 1989; Sunai Setboonsarng's MA-thesis from 1986; Bodhiraksa's criticism on Buddhadasa in "Social problems that cannot be solved, because of the wrong way of studying Buddhism" (in Thai) *Panha Sangkhom thii kae mai daai phro kaan sukka phutta sasana phit plaat* from 1985.

⁸⁷ Jim Taylor "Buddhist Revitalization, Modernization, and Social Change in Contemporary Thailand". *Sojourn* Vol. 8, Number 1, February 1993.

⁸⁸ Taylor 1993, 68.

⁸⁹ Taylor 1993, 69.

⁹⁰ Taylor 1993, 62-64.

⁹¹ Taylor 1993, 65. Grant Olson returns to the topic in his unpublished paper, "Bodhirak, Chamlong and Phonpichai: A trinity of Santi Asoke Biographies", which is based on biographies of three Asoke members. Olson interprets the three biographies as showpieces of the Asoke groups belief in *varna*. According to Olson, the biographies of Pongpichai, a young Asoke activist who died in a car accident, in different Asoke magazines, fill the gap in the biographic "trinity" of the Asoke by lifting up the life of a *sudra*. Whereas Bodhiraksa himself must be seen as a *brahmin* and Chamlong as a *kshatriya*. One of Olson's main arguments is that the Asoke group is more than just a Buddhist movement; it is a social movement against the corruption in the sangha and decay in the Thai society.

⁹² A monastic ceremony at the end of Buddhist Lent.

⁹³ Asoke ceremony during the *maghabucha* week.

⁹⁴ Letter, 25 December 1993.

⁹⁵ See Chapter IV for a description of the *plukse* ceremony.

⁹⁶ My Thai is unfortunately not enough for a throughout text analysis of even a minor part of the literature published by the Asoke group during the last 20 years. This work I will have to leave to a linguist.

⁹⁷ The questionnaires, a copy of the unpublished manuscript "Insight into Santi Asoke 3", the English video tape "The Santi Asoke case" and the video tape taken during Yantra's visit to Helsinki in 1993 are at the Department of Comparative Religion at Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland.

⁹⁸ I shall use the term 'Asoke' to signify the whole group and reserve the use of the term 'Santi Asoke' for the centre in Bangkok.

⁹⁹ Insight into Santi Asoke 1 (hereafter ISAA 1), 1989 12.

¹⁰⁰ Thai sangha is divided into two sects Thammyutnikai and Mahanikai.

¹⁰¹ IISA 1, 1989, 12.

¹⁰² The group was known as *Chou Asoke*, the Asoke group, as it originated from the Wat Asokaram.

¹⁰³ Sanitsuda, IISA 1, 1989, 13.

¹⁰⁴ In the article "The Man behind Santi Asoke" in *Bangkok Post*, 22 July 1989, Sanitsuda Ekachai describes Bodhiraksa as a man "you either love or hate". It is interesting to note that even though the article includes adverse criticism, a complete version of it was printed in the movement's own publication: in IISA 1, 1989, 9-17.

¹⁰⁵ IISA 1, 1989, 13.

¹⁰⁶ IISA 1, 1989, 15.

¹⁰⁷ IISA 1, 1989, 15.

¹⁰⁸ In fact there are no nuns or *bhikkhuni* in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. The nuns of the Asoke group could be regarded as female novices, their earlier name *mae nen* referred to this. The name Sikkhamat or *sikkha mata* means studying mother.

¹⁰⁹ The social and spiritual status of the mainstream *mae chis* is very low. *Mae chis* shave their head, dress in white and live in the temples. They are often regarded as beggars, and often behave that way since they cannot receive donations from any other source. My general impression is that the senior mainstream monks do not wish to improve the status of the *mae chis*, which forces the Asoke group to maintain a low profile on the question. For more about *mae chis* see Chatsumarn 1991, 36-44.

¹¹⁰ The reasons for her disrobement were not made public, and her disrobement came as a surprise to the Sikkhamats in Santi Asoke. She told me that she felt tired of the work in the group, and wanted to be free for a while, to test herself outside. She had plans to rejoin the group as a Sikkhamat in the near future. Thipdevi stays in close contact with the Asoke group visiting the centres regularly. She continues to dress in the manner of a Sikkhamat: a long dress and shaven head.

¹¹¹ The word "aspirant" has been translated by Sikkhamat Chinda into *phu triam buat* which means person preparing for ordination.

¹¹² *Aramik* for male and *aramika* for female temple residents; *Akhantuka* for both male and female temple guests.

¹¹³ In Thailand these types of books are generally called "Dhamma books".

¹¹⁴ January 1995.

¹¹⁵ In May 1995 a *samma sikha* school was opened in Santi Asoke on similar lines to the schools in Sisa Asoke and Pathom Asoke.

¹¹⁶ In a meeting in January 1995 on the teachers' day (*wan khru.*).

¹¹⁷ The *Palang Bun* shop was renovated in February 1995 air-conditioning was installed to make it look more like the other shops in the neighbourhood.

¹¹⁸ More about the Asoke ideology called "merit-ism" in Chapter IV.

¹¹⁹ One *rai* is 0.16 hectares.

¹²⁰ These bases include the following: kitchen, garden, rice field, tofu factory, shop, offices or any of the workshops.

¹²¹ Freely translated by Sikkhamat Chinda. Peril in Thai *aphai*, no-peril, no-danger, no-disaster.

¹²² *Plukse* ceremony will be described in Chapter IV.

¹²³ Lanna refers to the old Northern Thai kingdom, centered in Chiang Mai, which existed until the 1770s.

¹²⁴ In the national gathering to celebrate *plukse* in Sisa Asoke, there were 51 persons from Chiang Mai, 11 from Lampang and six from Lamphoon. Altogether there were 138 persons from the North.

¹²⁵ Bodhiraksa estimated the number of his disciples to be around 900 in a speech given in the *plukse* ceremony in Sisa Asoke, 17 February 1995.

¹²⁶ Swearer (1991, 672) talks about 10 000 core members and 100 000 peripheral members. Jackson (1989, 168) refers to an article in Thai newspaper *Matichon* from 2 February 1986, where a mainstream monk complained that “about 10% of people in Ubon Ratchathani and in Sisaket support Bodhiraksa”. According to the 1993 statistics the province of Ubon Ratchathani had 1,6 Million inhabitants, and Sisaket 1,3 Million; 10% would be 290 000.

¹²⁷ In Santi Asoke and in Pathom Asoke the Sikkhamats very consciously turn towards the eldest Sikkhamat for the third bow, who then receives the greeting by sitting straight.

¹²⁸ The laypeople in Santi Asoke and in Pathom Asoke remember to turn towards the Sikkhamats for the third bow. The same does not happen in the larger national gatherings.

¹²⁹ *Bangkok Post* (hereafter BP) 24 February 1982. Anan obviously refers to the Sangha Act 1962. The Sangha Act 1962 does not, however, require that every monk should dwell in a monastery belonging to the state Buddhist administration. The earlier Sangha Act of 1941, Chapter Seven / Article 54 states that: “Whoever without having been duly ordained according to the Buddha’s discipline wrongfully wears a dress imitating that of a Bhikkhu shall be punished with imprisonment not exceeding six months.”

¹³⁰ BP 17 August 1988.

¹³¹ BP 19 August 1988.

¹³² BP 24 August 1988.

¹³³ BP 1 September 1988.

¹³⁴ BP 24 May 1989.

¹³⁵ BP 24 May 1989.

¹³⁶ BP 29 May 1989.

¹³⁷ BP 30 May 1989.

¹³⁸ BP 7 June 1989.

¹³⁹ Insight into Santi Asoke 2, hereafter IISA 2, 1991, 23.

¹⁴⁰ All Buddhist monks in Thailand have the title “*Phra*”; the word “*Samana*” is a general Pali term for ascetic monks but, in Thai, the word sounds very similar to the Thai word for novice “*Samanen*”.

¹⁴¹ IISA 2, 1991, 23-24.

¹⁴² BP 12 June 1989.

¹⁴³ A former Prime Minister from the years 1973-1976, and former leader of the Social Action Party.

¹⁴⁴ BP 13 June 1989.

¹⁴⁵ *Far Eastern Economic Review* (hereafter FEER) 6 July 1989. The account hereafter is based on the unpublished video tape produced by the Asoke group of the material the media took after the ban.

¹⁴⁶ Appr. USD 20 000.

¹⁴⁷ *The Nation* 9 August 1989.

¹⁴⁸ *The Nation* 9 August 1989.

¹⁴⁹ IISA 2, 1991, 38-41.

¹⁵⁰ The second English language publication "Insight into Santi Asoke" from 1991 by Aporn Poompanna mainly deals with the court case against Bodhiraksa and the Asoke group. The booklet is a response to the ban declared by the government to the media to publish any report on the court case. This publication is trying to fill the gap caused by the ban, and is obviously approaching the foreign correspondents in Thailand. According to the preface, the purpose of the booklet is to present "preliminary information to encourage those who are interested to follow the results of the court judgement". IISA 2, 1991, 8.

¹⁵¹ IISA 2, 1991, 12.

¹⁵² IISA 2, 1991, 12-13.

¹⁵³ IISA 2, 1991, 23-24.

¹⁵⁴ IISA 3, 117.

¹⁵⁵ IISA 2, 1991, 51. The Sangha Act of 1962 obviously gives a possibility to interpret the Asoke case being against public order. Part four/Article 27 declares: "In the event that there is a Bhikkhu...who is not attached to any monastery, thereby living the life of a tramp, the Council of Elders is vested with the power to enforce a judgement for his disrobing". The penalty for a violation of Article 27 is "an imprisonment of not more than six months" according to Part seven/Article 42. Yet, the Sangha Act of 1962 fails to indicate that to be "attached to any monastery" in fact means any monastery under the state Buddhist administration. This, again, is somewhat illogical as the Chinese and Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monasteries are not under the state Buddhist administration.

¹⁵⁶ Similar aggressive reactions were broadcasted in the media during the final decisions in the Yantra affair in February - March 1995. More about Yantra in Chapter III.

¹⁵⁷ Based on my observations in the court on the 20th and 27th March 1995.

¹⁵⁸ Buddhadasa.

¹⁵⁹ Bodhiraksa.

¹⁶⁰ Bodhiraksa.

¹⁶¹ Bodhiraksa.

¹⁶² The term “*thudong*” (Pali: *dhutanga*) refers to ascetic practices of which one includes wandering around and living in deserted areas such as mountain caves and forests to devote their time for spiritual exercises. Heinze 1977, 229.

¹⁶³ McCargo 1993, 31.

¹⁶⁴ Buddhadasa 1986, 89.

¹⁶⁵ Buddhadasa 1986, 50-53.

¹⁶⁶ Mulder 1990, 129. More about Buddhadasa in Jackson, Peter (1986) *Buddhadasa - A Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World*; Gabaude, Louis and Swearer, Donald in Sulak Sivaraksa (ed) (1994) *The Quest for a Just Society. The Legacy and Challenge of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu*.

¹⁶⁷ The name is seen to refer either to the nine points of the organisation laid down as a program for preserving Thai nationalism, or to the ninth king of the Chakri dynasty, Rama IX. Keyes 1978, 151; Somboon 1982, 132-133.

¹⁶⁸ Somboon 1982, 135.

¹⁶⁹ Somboon 1982, 130.

¹⁷⁰ Somboon 1982, 151-153.

¹⁷¹ Keyes 1978, 155-156.

¹⁷² Jackson 1989, 149-150. More about Kittivuddho in Heinze, Ruth-Inge (1977) *The Role of Sangha in Modern Thailand*; Keyes, Charles: *Political Crisis and Militant Buddhism in Contemporary Thailand* in Smith, Bardwell (ed) (1978) *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Burma and Laos*; Somboon Suksamran (1982) *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*.

¹⁷³ Mulder 1990, 127.

¹⁷⁴ Rajavaramuni 1984 108-109.

¹⁷⁵ Rajavaramuni 1984, 117-118.

¹⁷⁶ Debvedi 1988, 35.

¹⁷⁷ Based on the Dhammakaya group’s own publications: *Light of Peace*, Mettanando, *Progress for Inner Peace*.

¹⁷⁸ Field notes, 1 September 1991.

¹⁷⁹ Field notes, 18 February 1992.

¹⁸⁰ BP, 2 November 1992. More about the Dhammakaya movement in Bowers, Jeffrey (1996) *Dhammakaya Meditation in Thai Society*, Chulalongkorn University Press; Apinya Fuengfusakul (1993) *Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two types of contemporary Theravada reform in Thailand*; Jackson, Peter (1989) *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict. The political functions of urban Thai Buddhism*; Taylor, Jim (1990) *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: An ‘Individualistic Revolution’, Reform and Political Dissonance*; Zehner, Edwin (1990) *Reform Symbolism of a Thai Middle-Class Sect: The Growth and Appeal of the Thammakai Movement*. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol XXI No. September 1990 pp. 402-426.

¹⁸¹ Based on an article written by Sanitsuda Ekachai in the *Bangkok Post* on th 13 December 1991. No biographies of Yantra or academic articles on him and his movement exist

to my knowledge.

¹⁸² 22 May 1993 video tape taken by Mr. Timo Vainikka.

¹⁸³ Merit in Thai is *bun* deriving from the Pali word *puñña*. The Pali word *kusala*, meaning cleverness, is also known in Thailand. Demerit in Thai is known as *baap*, in Pali *akusala*, which is translated as stupidity. The terms *bun* and *tham bun*, make merit, are widely used in colloquial Thai; *tham bun*, literally means to make merit.

¹⁸⁴ Pali: *kamma*

¹⁸⁵ Ling 1972, 213-214.

¹⁸⁶ Khantipalo 1973, 56-57. The concept of *barami* is frequently combined with the ideas concerning merit in the Thai context. *Barami* is used as an attribute of royalty and high political authority. *Barami* derives from the Pali *parami* meaning completeness, perfection and exercise of the ten principal virtues: 1. giving (*dana*), 2. moral conduct (*sila*), 3. selflessness (*nekkhamma*), 4. wisdom (*pañña*), 5. energy (*viriya*), 6. patience (*khanti*), 7. truthfulness (*sacca*), 8. self-determination (*adhitthana*), 9. love (*metta*), 10. equanimity (*upekha*) Pali-English Dictionary, 1972.

¹⁸⁷ *Nirvana* is usually translated into extinction or to salvation; in Pali: *nibbana*, in Thai: *nibhaan*.

¹⁸⁸ Khantipalo 1973, 59-65.

¹⁸⁹ Khantipalo 1973, 59-61.

¹⁹⁰ Somboon 1976, 8.

¹⁹¹ Khantipalo 1973, 61.

¹⁹² Kaufman 1960, vii, 183.

¹⁹³ A ceremony after the Buddhist Lent, when laypeople donate robes - among other things - to the monks for a period lasting one month.

¹⁹⁴ Kaufman 1960, 184, 210.

¹⁹⁵ Both Kaufman and Tambiah fail to mention whether the 25 "farmers" and 79 "family heads" were male or female. The religious and ceremonial behaviour of Buddhists varies according to gender.

¹⁹⁶ Tambiah 1970, 147-148.

¹⁹⁷ Mulder 1969, 9.

¹⁹⁸ Fieldnotes. Interview with Professor Sunthorn Na-Rangsi, 11 February 1992.

¹⁹⁹ Mulder 1969, 11; Tambiah 1970, 146; Terwiel 1979, 243.

²⁰⁰ My own observations from a *kathin* ceremony in Songkhla in October 1991 support Terwiel's observations from the 1970s. Terwiel 1979, 243.

²⁰¹ Ingersoll 1975, 236, 357.

²⁰² Heinze 1977, 89.

²⁰³ The last alternative on the list: Doing something else, explain what, was added by the suggestion of Sikkhamat Chinda in the Santi Asoke. She herself originally felt that none of

the given options could be ranked as the best alternative, but changed her mind when filling in the questionnaire. The last option, however, gave some very interesting alternatives and ideas, which will be discussed shortly.

²⁰⁴ Only 9 persons ticked the alternative “contributing money to the construction of a temple”, although a new huge temple in concrete is under construction in Santi Asoke in Bangkok, a project which has required several Millions of *baht* already. 15 monks ticked the alternative “contributing money for the construction of a hospital” and 13 monks ticked the alternative “contributing money for the construction of a school”. These alternatives were ranked between 1-6.

²⁰⁵ Two different levels of being an aspirant; a novice.

²⁰⁶ Pali: *Sotapanna*, stream enterer.

²⁰⁷ Pali: *Sakadagami*, once-returner.

²⁰⁸ Pali: *Anagami*, never-returner.

²⁰⁹ Pali: *Araha*, the enlightened one.

²¹⁰ Pali: *kilesa*, defilement.

²¹¹ The three defilements: anger, greediness and delusion.

²¹² Bodhiraksa.

²¹³ Buddhadasa.

²¹⁴ The Council of Elders.

²¹⁵ “The New Trend of Buddhism in Thai Society”, hereafter New Trend p. 15. (n.d.)

²¹⁶ IISA 3, 105. The third English language booklet “Insight into Santi Asoke 3”, hereafter IISA 3, still unpublished, includes several interviews with Bodhiraksa by foreign journalists. The names of the journalists are not always revealed, and the interviews are rearranged to fit the topic content.

²¹⁷ IISA 3, 98.

²¹⁸ New Trend p. 17.

²¹⁹ New Trend p. 18. This description seems to refer to the Dhammakaya movement fairly openly.

²²⁰ New Trend pp.18-19.

²²¹ In “Insight into Santi Asoke 1” the term “fundamental Buddhism” is used, whereas the older version of the same text in “New Trend” uses the term “authentic Buddhism”.

²²² New Trend p. 19.

²²³ The second publication in English was published in 1989 with the title “Insight into Santi Asoke 1” hereafter IISA 1. It was edited by Porn Poompanna alias Aporn Poompanna, a former lecturer in French of the Chulalongkorn university. ISAA 1, 4-5.

²²⁴ IISA 3, 100-101.

²²⁵ IISA 3, 49.

²²⁶ It should be noted that there are different translations of these terms. See

Khantipalo's translations in Chapter III.

227 IISA 3, 75-77.

228 IISA 1, 23.

229 IISA 1, 23-24.

230 IISA 1, 22. The same chapter was first published in the "New Trend" and later even in the "Insight into Santi Asoke 1" under the title "The Dhamma practices of Santi Asoke".

231 IISA 3, 49.

232 In one of the first brochures in English "The New Life at Dawn", hereafter NLD, a reference to Chiraka Sutta (Vol 13) is made. NLD p.3-4. The Pali word *Jivaka* is probably misspelled into Chiraka. We should remember that the Thais don't read the Pali canon in English, and are not familiar with the Western way of spelling Pali. The "Insight into Santi Asoke 1" also publishes translations of the "fundamental Buddhist precepts" taken from Cullasila (*Culasila*), Majjhisila (*Majjhimasila*) and Mahasila from Mahavagga and Cullavagga in Khandaka Vinaya Pitaka. Another translation is taken from the Brahma-Gala (probably a misspelling of *Brahmajala sutta*) Nikaya in Digha Nikaya from 1899, translated by Max Muller for the Pali Text Society in London. By publishing these texts in English the Asoke group wants to demonstrate that they are following the scholarly tradition and the fundamentals of the Buddhist teaching.

233 in Pali: *nibbana*; in Thai: *nibhaan*.

234 Thai: *Sodaban*.

235 Thai: *Sakitakhami*.

236 Thai: *Anakhami*.

237 Heinze 1977, 201-202.

238 The present king of Thailand is popularly regarded as a *bodhisattva*.

239 According to some informants the Sikkhamats should be on this level, but others are very careful about giving such statements.

240 In this Bodhiraksa follows the teachings of Buddhadasa, but at the same time criticises Buddhadasa for not showing the way to reach nirvana in practical terms. Bodhiraksa criticises Buddhadasa on these point in his *Social Problems.....*, more on the question on nirvana in *Major way* part 3, 1979, 57-65 and in *What is a human being* 1994, 545. (Translated for me by Sikkhamat Chinda.)

241 Thip 1978, 49. *Nome du plume* of Sikkhamat Thipdevi.

242 NLD p. 5.

243 NLD p. 6. Grant Olson discusses different views on the issue of "holy water" in Olson 1991.

244 IISA 3, 3-5; 29-30.

245 "Development" monks here refer to monks who are involved in community development programmes either by the initiative of the Thai state (the Dhammaduta-programme from the 1960s) or be their own independent initiative. More about development monks see Seri's book from 1988, and Keyes 1989, 140-141.

246 IISA 3, 6-8; 37.

- 247 IISA 3, 9.
- 248 IISA 3, 113.
- 249 IISA 3, 32-33.
- 250 IISA 3, 38-40.
- 251 IISA 3, 36
- 252 IISA 3, 50.
- 253 IISA 3, 69-70.
- 254 IISA 3, 57.
- 255 IISA 3, 63, 83.
- 256 IISA 3, 86-87.
- 257 IISA 3, 58.
- 258 IISA 3, 59-60.
- 259 IISA 1, 17.
- 260 ISAA 3, 12,18.
- 261 IISA 3, 64.
- 262 IISA 3, 113.
- 263 IISA 3, 72.
- 264 IISA 3, 90.
- 265 IISA 3, 91.
- 266 IISA 3, 92-93.
- 267 In *pluksek* in Sisa Asoke 17 February 1995.
- 268 Sunai, 2.
- 269 Sunai, 2.

270 Schumacher's article on Buddhist economics has been translated into Thai in one of the Asoke publications, according to McCargo 1993, 173 (footnote 3). I have not been able to trace it.

- 271 Schumacher 1973, 48.
- 272 Schumacher 1973, 48-49.

273 See my description of a *maghabucha* ceremony at the Dhammakaya temple in Chapter III.

274 During the first years, the Asoke group did not call the ceremony as *pluksek*.

275 Tambiah analyses sacralising amulets by preaching magic words in his book "The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets" (1984). The Thai verb *pluk* actually means to wake up and *khon* means a person.

- 276 More about the hierarchy in Chapter VI.
- 277 Many people get up before 2 a.m. in order to reserve good seats in the temple.
- 278 The Asoke group does not, in fact, chant, but tries to recite the prayers by reading without any rhythm. Chanting is regarded as singing, which is forbidden according to the seventh precept. The word chanting is used here for convenience.
- 279 Starting to eat vegetarian food, could be compared with a “conversion experience”, a characteristic of a “sect” according to Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 21.
- 280 The topic of all newspapers during the week from 11 - 17 February 1995 was the sex scandal involving Phra Amarobhikkhu Yantra from the mainstream sangha.
- 281 I used to sit outside the Sikkhamats’ conference building in my “natural office” every day. Only after several months was I finally asked to leave during the Sikkhamats’ meeting time. In fact, all one could here from outside the building was the chanting.
- 282 In January 1995 two school boys had disappeared and the other boys were so worried about them that next morning the English lesson could hardly be started. When asked what they believed had happened to their friends, they replied unanimously “*rong narok*”, hell-factories, or sweat-shops, where children work as slaves. The boys, however, returned the same day, they had arrived too late to the centre, and had slept in the health care centre (*sala sukphaphaap*).
- 283 Based on observations in funerals in Pathom Asoke the 5th of March 1995.
- 284 There are considerable irregularities in the romanization. “*Thamma*” or “*tham*” is the Thai pronunciation of the Pali word “*dhamma*” and Sanskrit word “*dharma*”.
- 285 The word “*fah*” meaning heaven, could also be spelled “*pha*” like in many Asoke names, but this is the standardised form in English that the company uses.
- 286 The director of the Palang Bun-shop in Bangkok is a layman called Hin Pha. Nearly every Asoke layman has a s.c. Asoke name, given to him or her by Bodhiraksa. These names are Thai words, often describing nature.
- 287 The manager of the Fah Apai publishing house is a layman called Sam Din.
- 288 Rules stated on the back page of the book. The shape of the saving book is exactly the same as from any Thai bank.
- 289 The number seven has been randomly selected, probably with the idea that a person should visit the temple at least every day for a period of week before he or she can start to donate money.
- 290 BP 12 January 1995.
- 291 The verb *pavarana* in Pali originally means to invite. The term is used in the yearly post-Lenten ceremony *mahapavarana*, where the monastics are “invited” to mutual criticism concerning their practice.
- 292 Wilson 1990, 47
- 293 Buddhadasa
- 294 Bodhiraksa
- 295 Shootings in the 14th of October 1973.

²⁹⁶ Prince Vessantara, a Jataka story.

²⁹⁷ Jackson 1989; Taylor 1990.

²⁹⁸ Weber 1963, 166.

²⁹⁹ Weber 1963, 169-171.

³⁰⁰ Weber 1963, 166.

³⁰¹ Weber 1963, 166-167.

³⁰² Weber 1963, 167.

³⁰³ Weber 1963, 168.

³⁰⁴ Weber 1963, 175.

³⁰⁵ Weber 1963, 183.

³⁰⁶ All the information is based on the replies to the questionnaire. See Introduction and Appendix One.

³⁰⁷ Kirsch 1977, Ames 1964.

³⁰⁸ Major general Chamlong Srimuang always builds a separate hut for his wife in the centres where he has a house (e.g. Pathom Asoke, and outside Ratchathani Asoke). Thus they do not have to share the bedroom, which might lead them into temptation, or the outside world to doubt their sincerity.

³⁰⁹ Chatsumarn 1991, 79.

³¹⁰ Jackson 1989, 1994 discusses the problems homosexuals are facing in Thailand.

³¹¹ For Stark and Bainbridge a "conversion experience" is one characteristic of a "sect" member. Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 21.

³¹² There can be exceptions even to this rule, as I observed during *mahaparawana* in 1994, when some schoolgirls who were over the age 14 danced folk dances.

³¹³ Usually known as *metta karuna*, but in the respondents' replies often only *metta*.

³¹⁴ A considerable exception to this principle is the construction of the new huge temple in Santi Asoke, where concrete is used as basic material.

³¹⁵ The word simple (*rieb*) signifies asceticism in Asoke terminology, whereas the word ascetic often refers to the forest monks.

³¹⁶ The concept *siasala* can also be translated as sacrifice, the practitioners should sacrifice themselves for the Asoke group.

³¹⁷ See "Hierarchy of money use in Asoke" in Chapter IV.

³¹⁸ Bodhiraksa declared in the teachers' meeting in Santi Asoke on the 4th of January 1995: "If you avoid work, you avoid practice. Everytime you work, you practise".

³¹⁹ Generally the word "pundit" connotes university graduates.

³²⁰ All Asoke temples are decorated with the five slogans.

³²¹ See Chapter IV for a discussion on the concept of *bodhisattva* in the Asoke group.

³²² Only one novice failed to answer properly and gave 'OK' or 'yes' to the questions C. 1-5.

³²³ Suwanna 1990, 407.

³²⁴ Chinese buns.

³²⁵ stupa

³²⁶ Laywoman with white clothes, not shaven head.

³²⁷ To ask permission to stay.

³²⁸ Temporary guest.

³²⁹ Vegetarian restaurant in Chatuchak in Bangkok.

³³⁰ Key Statistics 1994; BP 6 March 1995.

³³¹ Key Statistics 1994, 99.

³³² Rajavaramuni 1984, 108; Suwanna 1990, 406.

³³³ Tambiah 1984; Taylor 1994.

³³⁴ The words used to indicate their father's profession in Thai *chao na*, *tham na*, *tham rai* and *kam kaset* do not, in fact, reveal whether we are dealing with big landowners or small peasants. The other research on Thai peasantry, however, indicates that the great majority of the people classified as peasants cultivate very small plots of land. For big landowners, it is more common to practice absentee landlordism where the tenants take care of the land.

³³⁵ The Thai word used for a merchant *kham khaay* does not reveal whether we are dealing with a street vendor, a petty trader or a large scale businessman. The expression *kham khaay* simply refers to a person who is "selling things". A peasant wife selling agricultural products at the village market could be also classified as *kham khaay*, but as I asked for the profession of the father in this questionnaire, we can assume that the person indicated as a *kham khaay*, is more than a vendor at the market place - an activity normally reserved for women. A *kham khaay* in this context will be regarded as a petty trader living in a rural or urban centre belonging to the lower middle class possibly of Sino-Thai origins.

³³⁶ The original Thai word for civil servant is *kharatchakan* and means "servant of the crown". See more about the term in Keyes 1989, 141.

³³⁷ Fairclough in FEER 4 February 1993. Only 29% of the school children continue with their schooling after the obligatory 6 years.

³³⁸ Not all monks graduated with a degree from their universities, thus I can only state that they studied at the university which is still significant.

³³⁹ We should remember that the academics were the ones who were most interested in filling in the questionnaire in the *mahapawarana* in Pathom Asoke, whereas the less educated ones shyed away thinking it would be too difficult.

³⁴⁰ The terms for schooling were somewhat different in my questionnaire and in the paper distributed in the *plukse*. Primary school - *prathom* - is the same in both, secondary school and high school both refer to *mattayom*. My "college" has been translated to *witthayalay*, whereas the other paper talks about vocational education using only the Thai word *aachitwa* referring to vocation. Many of the colleges, however, can be interpreted as institutes giving a profession, such as nursing schools, teacher training colleges, technical colleges etc.

³⁴¹ Here the word *kaset* was used for farmer.

³⁴² The sex ratio in the *plukse* was also similar to the earlier results collected from the *mahapawarana* - the number of the laywomen exceeded the number of the laymen by 20%; 60% (1311) were women and 40% (870) were men. At the *mahapawarana* ceremony, there were 45 women and 30 men who filled in the questionnaire. The age division was similar to the division in the smaller sample. The largest group of participants belonged to the age group 31 to 40 i.e. 20%. The second largest group (15% of the total) were between the ages of 41 to 50 with 15% and the third largest group were senior citizens, i.e. people aged 60 or more, who totalled 14% of all the participants.

³⁴³ Wilson 1990, 62.

³⁴⁴ Wilson 1990, 63.

³⁴⁵ The Pali word *samana* (Sanskrit: *sramana*) is closely synonymous with *bhikkhu*, but the term has not been used earlier in Thailand.

³⁴⁶ This information was received only by 2140 persons.

³⁴⁷ This was mentioned to me by some laywomen. Only 36 of the 38 replied to this question.

³⁴⁸ Prakarn Asoke was a small temple in the house owned by Sikkhamat Rinpha's mother. Two Sikkhamats stayed there permanently for almost a year, after which the temple was closed down.

³⁴⁹ The fact that the people start to read a book dealing with Buddhist topics clearly shows that they have been seriously looking for spiritual explanations and a new life-style. Here the main interest is, however, why they chose the Asoke group and not another Buddhist group.

³⁵⁰ There is a great secrecy concerning these questions, and I was not able to hear any examples.

³⁵¹ To refrain from killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, using drugs, eating uncountable meals, listening to music and decorating oneself, and finally sleeping on elevated beds.

³⁵² Swearer 1991, 668.

³⁵³ Wilson 1990; Stark & Bainbridge 1985, 1987.

³⁵⁴ Stark & Bainbridge 1985, 150.

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The Nation

APPENDIX ONE

QUESTIONNAIRE (*Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn 1994*)

sex:

- male
- female

age:

- 10-20
- 20-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50-60
- 60-70
- 70-

Marital status:

- single
- married
- children.....person(s)

present status in the Asoke group

- monk
- novice
- nun (sikkhamat)
- aspirant
- layman/laywoman

How long have you been in that position in the Asoke group?
.....year(s)

A. SOCIAL BACKGROUND

1. Where were you born?

Village.....

Subdistrict.....

district.....

province.....

region.....

2. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

3. What is your father's occupation?

4. How many years did you go to school?

Primary school

High school

College

__ University

name of the institute(s)..... grades.....

5. What did you do before joining the Asoke group?

6. Where do you work now?

7. Do you have family members in the Asoke group? Who?

B. BUDDHIST EXPERIENCES

1. Have you ever stayed at a temple before?

yes __ no __

If yes,

a) How long did you stay at the temple

__ one week

__ two weeks

__ one month

__ several months

__ several years

__ several times for short periods

b) __ Did you meditate in that temple?

__ or anywhere else.....

c) On which occasion(s) / why did you go to the temple?

d) What was your position at the temple?

2. How did you learn about the Asoke group?

3. Where did you first meet the Asoke people?

4. When did you first meet the Asoke people?

5. What did you like about the Asoke people at first?

6. Where did you first meet Bodhiraksa?

7. When did you first meet Bodhiraksa?

8. What did you like about Bodhiraksa at first?

9. What is it that you don't like in the mainstream (big group)?

10. What have you received spiritually during your stay in the Asoke group?

C. THE ASOKE GROUP LIFESTYLE

Could you give me some reasons why you think.....

1. It is good to eat vegetarian food?

2. It is good to live simple life?

3. It is good to eat only one meal in a day?

4. It is important not to drink alcohol?

5. It is good to wake up early in the morning?
6. It is not good to wear beautiful fashion clothes?
7. What is the most important thing about the Asoke group for you?
8. How do you meditate while you are working?
9. It is good not to get married?

D. BUDDHISM IN GENERAL

1. Have you ever studied the Pali language?
2. What is the difference between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism?
3. Which countries have Mahayana Buddhism, which Theravada?
4. What is the difference between Mahanikai and Thammayutnikai?
5. What is the difference between the Thammakaai group and the Asoke group?
6. Have you ever practiced meditation? If so, what type of meditation?
7. What is the best way to make merit (tham bun)? Mention in rank order the six most meritorious acts from one to six:
 - (1.) __ Attending the ceremonies at the temple every holy day
 - (2.) __ Becoming a monk
 - (3.) __ Becoming a sikkhamat
 - (4.) __ Contributing money for the construction of a temple
 - (5.) __ Contributing money for the construction of a hospital
 - (6.) __ Contributing money for the construction of a school
 - (7.) __ Contributing money for the repair of a temple
 - (8.) __ Eating vegetarian food
 - (9.) __ Having a son ordained as a monk
 - (10.) __ Giving food to the monks every day
 - (11.) __ Giving money to beggars
 - (12.) __ Giving 100 baht in a kathin ceremony
 - (13.) __ Giving 1 000 baht in a kathin ceremony
 - (14.) __ Strictly observing the 5 precepts (sila)
 - (15.) __ Strictly observing the 8 precepts (sila)
 - (16.) __ Doing something else, explain what.....

APPENDIX TWO Questionnaire from *pluksek*

สถิติจำนวนผู้มาร่วมงานปลุกเสกฯ ครั้งที่ 19 แยกจังหวัด

ประจำวันที่ 14 ก.พ.38

กระบี่	3	บุรีรัมย์	64	เลย -	46
กรุงเทพฯ	275	ปทุมธานี	7	ศรีสะเกษ	291
กาญจนบุรี	14	ประจวบคีรีขันธ์	2	สกลนคร	49
กาฬสินธุ์	25	ปราจีนบุรี	2	สงขลา	10
กำแพงเพชร	12	ปัตตานี	3	สตูล	1
ขอนแก่น	81	พะเยา	8	สมุทรปราการ	17
จันทบุรี	20	พังงา	3	สมุทรสงคราม	2
ฉะเชิงเทรา	7	พัทลุง	9	สมุทรสาคร	3
ชลบุรี	21	พิจิตร	10	สระบุรี	5
ชัยนาท	4	พิษณุโลก	13	สระแก้ว	3
ชัยภูมิ	50	เพชรบุรี	2	สิงห์บุรี	11
ชุมพร	19	เพชรบูรณ์	17	สุพรรณบุรี	4
เชียงราย	29	แพร่	0	สุราษฎร์ธานี	3
เชียงใหม่	51	ภูเก็ต	2	สุรินทร์	93
ศรีสะเกษ	8	มหาสารคาม	35	สุโขทัย	4
ตราด	5	มุกดาหาร	7	หนองคาย	22
ตาก	0	แม่ฮ่องสอน	1	หนองบัวลำภู	28
นครนายก	4	ยะลา	3	อุบลราชธานี	4
นครปฐม	94	ยโสธร	53	อำนาจเจริญ	39
นครพนม	29	ระนอง	3	อุตรธานี	67
นครราชสีมา	94	ระยอง	5	อุตรดิตถ์	7
นครศรีธรรมราช	11	ราชบุรี	10	อุทัยธานี	7
นครสวรรค์	41	ร้อยเอ็ด	65	อุบลราชธานี	193
นนทบุรี	9	ลพบุรี	18	อ่างทอง	5
นราธิวาส	1	ลำปาง	11		
น่าน	1	ลำพูน	6		

สถิติงานปลูกเสกฯ ครั้งที่ 19 ประจำวันที่ 14 ก.พ.38

	รวมทั้งประเทศ	กทม.	ภาคกลาง	ภาคเหนือ	ภาคอีสาน	ภาคใต้	กลับไปแล้ว	เหลืออยู่
	จำนวนผู้มาร่วมเทศ	2181	275	553	218	1331	79	447
ชาย	870	93	201	85	563	21	203	667
หญิง	1311	182	352	133	768	58	244	1067
อายุ								
น้อยกว่า 20 ปี	298	23	51	20	219	8	116	182
21-30 ปี	252	30	57	33	149	13	57	195
31-40 ปี	455	80	149	47	239	20	97	358
41-50 ปี	436	77	143	40	239	14	76	360
51-60 ปี	321	32	74	30	211	6	49	272
มากกว่า 60 ปี	419	33	79	48	274	18	52	367
การศึกษา								
ไม่ได้เรียน	79	8	19	14	44	2	13	66
ประถม	1120	99	199	107	786	28	238	882
มัธยม	448	52	122	44	262	20	90	358
อาชีวะ	172	42	77	25	61	9	25	147
ปริญญา	362	74	136	28	178	20	81	281
อาชีพ								
ครู/อาจารย์	127	6	22	11	89	5	41	86
นร./นศ.	229	15	41	13	164	11	78	151
ราชการ	218	30	63	23	125	7	57	161
เอกชน	256	57	97	35	118	6	47	209
เกษตรกร	577	6	29	42	492	14	148	429
อื่นๆ	774	161	301	94	343	36	76	698

	รวมทั้งประเทศ					กลับไปแล้ว	เหลืออยู่	
	กทม.	ภาคกลาง	ภาคเหนือ	ภาคอีสาน	ภาคใต้			
ผู้มา ก่อนงาน	640	83	194	80	333	33	81	559
ตั้งใจมาร่วมงาน								
1 วัน	121	2	7	3	108	3	121	0
2 วัน	223	18	25	5	193	0	210	13
3 วัน	180	19	34	5	140	1	115	65
4 วัน	229	38	59	7	157	6	1	228
5 วัน	101	9	29	7	62	3	0	101
7 วัน	1234	175	375	188	611	60	0	1234
มางานนี้เป็นครั้ง								
1	562	40	87	57	398	20	233	329
2-5	770	98	198	93	445	34	148	622
6-10	575	88	178	47	330	20	54	521
10-15	196	39	72	13	106	5	9	187
16-19	37	4	9	6	22	0	3	75

