

### 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 Putthathaat<sup>158</sup> 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 Pothirak<sup>159</sup> 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 Than<sup>160</sup> 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 Pothirak<sup>161</sup>. 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*<sup>162</sup> 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 heretical<sup>163</sup>, 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.<sup>164</sup> 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.<sup>165</sup>

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.<sup>166</sup>

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. Nawaphon<sup>167</sup> 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.<sup>168</sup> 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.<sup>169</sup>

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.<sup>170</sup>

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*.<sup>171</sup>

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*.<sup>172</sup> 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.<sup>173</sup>

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."<sup>174</sup>

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

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”<sup>176</sup>.

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.<sup>177</sup>

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.<sup>178</sup>

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.<sup>179</sup>

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.<sup>180</sup>

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.<sup>181</sup>

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.<sup>182</sup> 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.<sup>183</sup> 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*<sup>184</sup> 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.<sup>185</sup>

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.<sup>186</sup>

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*.<sup>187</sup>

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.<sup>188</sup>

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”.<sup>189</sup>

### 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.<sup>190</sup>

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.<sup>191</sup> 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:<sup>192</sup>

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*<sup>193</sup>

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.<sup>194</sup>

Tambiah interviewed 79 family heads<sup>195</sup> 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.<sup>196</sup>

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.<sup>197</sup>

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.<sup>198</sup> 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.<sup>199</sup>

The names and donations can be made public over a loudspeaker or in a book open for inspection.<sup>200</sup> 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.<sup>201</sup>

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.<sup>202</sup>

### 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 <sup>203</sup>

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. Observance 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.<sup>204</sup>

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?