

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 North-east. 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 sukhaaphaap*) 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

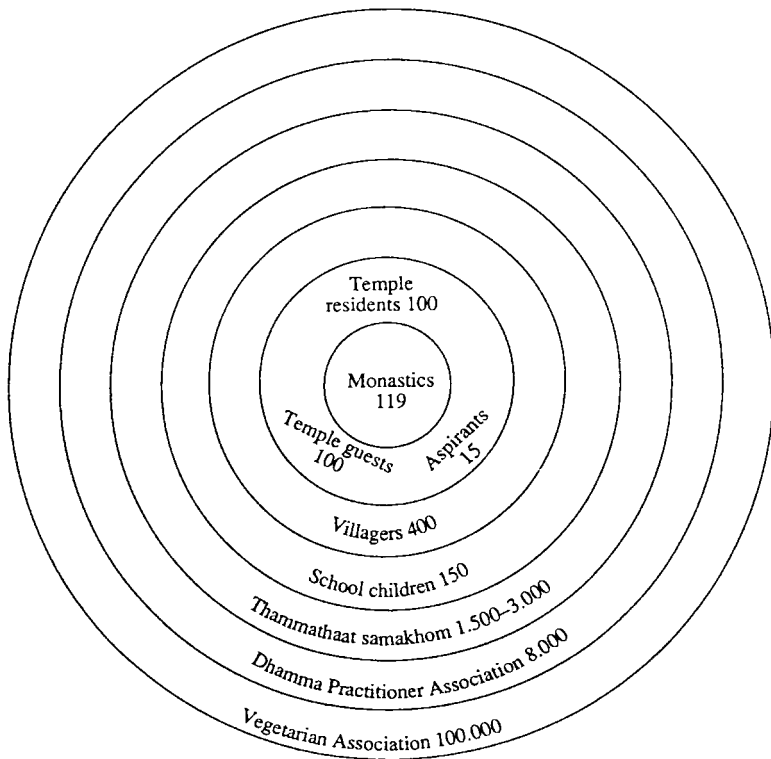
Nearly every centre has a village where the laypeople have built their houses and where they stay either permanently or temporarily. Such villages are found in Pathom Asoke, Sisa Asoke, Sali Asoke and Sima Asoke. Altogether, there are some 160 houses in the Asoke villages; 50 houses in Pathom Asoke and 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.

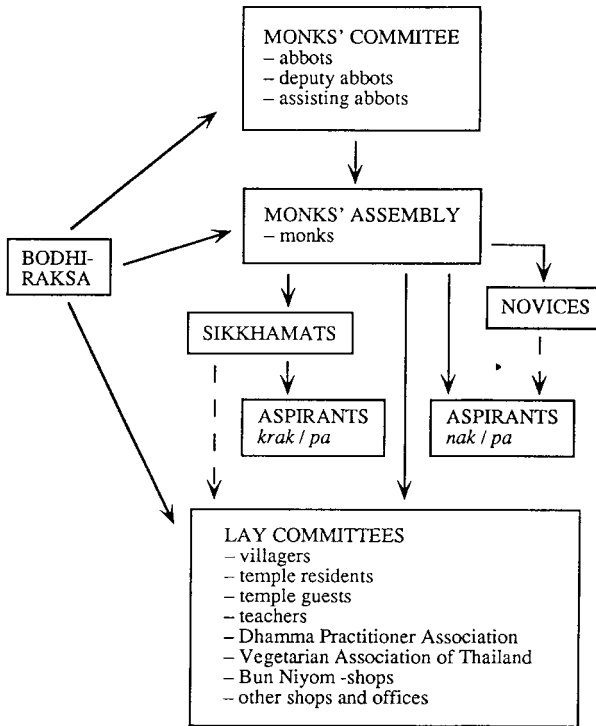
The abbot is responsible for all activities and for the monks and the lay people of his centre. According to the lay people, if the abbot is an active person, the centre will thrive. But, if the abbot for instance concentrates in wrong type of agricultural products, then the harvest can be very meagre 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.

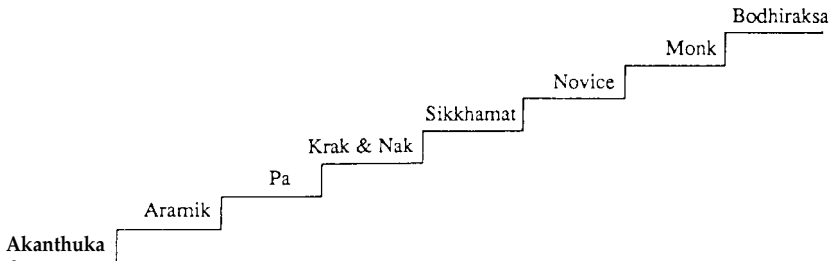
During the sermons, the monastics sit in the order in which they were ordained. They also walk their alms rounds in this order.

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.