

An Alternative Social Development in Thailand : The Asoke Buddhist Community¹

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In an era globalization has made things possible, even the taming of capitalism (Beck 2000:2), Thai people face insecurity from environmental and ecological crisis, rights violations, a risk society, unequal development, and unequal social status caused by the economically one-dimensional development policy. Institutional Buddhism² can only be described as conservative and stagnant. If the Sangha's (the state Buddhist monastic order) stagnation and the state's emphasis on economic developmentalism can be called the dominant "system", then the perception of the crisis in Thailand development has incited a range of anti-developmental "anti-systems". These movements have highlighted the importance of local self-sufficiency, self-reliance, autonomy, and community culture, as well as local wisdom. Particularly after the disastrous collapse of the "bubble economy" in 1997, and after a famous speech by HRH the King, on the occasion of his birthday, to the nation in December of the same year, there has been support and encouragement for Thai society to become more self-sufficient³.

One of the most prominent of these Thai "anti-systems" is the series of communities operated by the Asoke Buddhist movement founded by the Buddhist monk, Phra Phothirak. In 1971, Phra Phothirak criticised Thai Buddhist clerical practices and began a reform movement that has created a major scandal within the Sangha hierarchy. However, for almost thirty years, Phra Phothirak has persisted in his efforts to build new forms of Thai community based on his

¹ This paper was presented at the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Canberra from 29 June–2 July 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and it appears on the Conference Proceedings website with the permission of the author who retains the copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments, as well as other relevant legislation.

² Institutional Buddhism in this paper means the state Buddhist monastic order or Sangha.

³ Setthakit pho pheang = "The economics of sufficiency"

interpretation of Buddhist philosophy. His followers have now set up communities in more than eight provinces in Thailand. The members of these Asoke communities conduct their lives by Buddhist precepts. They have an alternative theory of social development called the theory of 'Meritism' (*Bun-ni-yom*), which is opposed to capitalism. Interestingly, the Asoke communities were not hit badly by the 1997 economic crisis.

In this paper, the focus will be on the Buddha's teachings, which the Asoke Buddhist Group has reinterpreted to challenge institutional Buddhism and mainstream society. These reinterpretations have become an alternative social development, which is a foundation for the way of life of the Asoke communities. Finally, this paper will discuss the relationships within the Asoke group as well as its relation with the larger society.

Thai Anti-System : The Asoke Buddhist Group

The Asoke communities are a religious and social movement for the alternative lifestyles which have been established by Phothirak since the 1970s. Phothirak is a Buddhist monk, who has been ordained in the state Sangha for the past 30 years. He was not pleased with the lax practice of mainstream Buddhist monks. Thus, he ended up forming his own group of disciples. When structural transitions begin, the processes of the old historical system do not thereupon cease. In fact, precisely the opposite occurs: the old processes continue and intensify, which is exactly what is provoking and intensifying the structural crisis (Wallerstein 1991:46). This is also true in the case of Phothirak. The Sangha intensified its efforts to dominate the whole system by eradicating the anti-system. Phothirak was ostracized by the Sangha, both the Thammayut Order and the Mahanikay Order, in 1975, followed by a state legal action against his status and his dressing as a Buddhist monk between the years 1989-1998.

Though ostracized by the mainstream Sangha, Phothirak has remained as outspoken ever. The Asoke reformist Buddhist group is strictly vegetarian with an emphasis on the monastic *vinaya* rules. The group has ordained women as Ten-Precept nuns, while requiring laypersons to adhere to at least Five-Precept rules. The group has also presented very radical interpretations of Buddhist Pali concepts. All of these have been annoying to the state Buddhist monastic order and the traditionally rather lax and fun-loving Thai monks, as well as lay Buddhists.

Nevertheless, Santi Asoke Buddhist Centre, the first name that was used to present the Asoke group, has made its stand for over 30 years and thus laid the foundation for the Asoke communities (*chum-chon Asoke*). The communities have a presence in more than eight

provinces, both in Bangkok and in the countryside. In each community, there are four prominent components. The first component is the temple as an axis, which has priests, novices, ten-precept nuns, and at least eight-precept laypeople or “*kon-wat*”. The second component consists of at least five-precept laypeople that live around the temple as villagers. The Samma Sikkha School is the third component in some communities which have the resources to establish a school. And the fourth component consists of laypeople who admire the Asoke group’s teaching but still live in their own homes.

The number of members, however, cannot be exactly counted. Marja-Leena Heikkila-Horn (1998) has categorized the members into three groups. The first group consists of approximately 700 persons belonging to the axis: priests, novices, “*Kon Wat*” (or people of the temple), and villagers. The second group has approximately 8,000 active members. This number is an estimate based on membership of the activity groups. The last group has approximately many ten thousand members who admire the vegetarian assembly (cited by Soontranurak 2000:84-85).

Admirers say Phothirak has done some good for society, for instance, by preaching equality, peacefulness, autonomy, and self-sufficiency. Sombat Chantarawongsa, the prominent Thai political philosopher, called the Asoke community a “Buddhist Utopia” (Chantarawongsa 1988). Praves Vasee, a prominent scholar in Thailand, talked about Asoke as a peaceful community:

The most important element of the Santi-Asoke movement is not the vegetarianism but the peaceful community. “*Sila*” or the Buddhist precept is the system of life that is harmonious with nature, with no exploitation as well as no profit. It makes people participate and support each other through “*bun-ni-yom*” or “meritism”. (T) (Vasee 1995:97)

Another prominent Buddhist scholar, Sulak Sivalaksa, admires many points of Phothirak’s thought particularly its social dimension. However, Sulak criticized Phothirak about his mistaken interpretation of the Pali Text and called Phothirak “*Mijcha Tithi*” or mistaken notion (Vasee 1995:61).

Opponents, on the other hand, have said that Phothirak would destroy the religion. In 1982 Anan Senakhan published a book denouncing Phothirak, called Phothirak – The Highly Dangerous Prophet (Phothirak – *Saatsada Mahaaphay*). He did so under the auspices of his

movement, namely, the Organisation to Protect Buddhist Teachings of Thailand (Ongkaan Phithak Phutthasaat Pratheet Thai) (Jackson 1989:170).

In fact, even neutral observers were shocked when Phothirak delivered one of his characteristic thunderclaps, claiming that he is a “Phra Bodhisattava”, a reincarnation of the spirit on its way across lifetimes to Enlightenment. According to orthodox teaching, it is not permitted for monks to talk about the level of spiritual achievement they have attained, let alone to claim to be on the way to becoming another Buddha (Ehachai 2002).

An epistemological reading of the *Kalamasutra* in the Buddha’s teachings reveals that in order to analyse by ourselves we must first trust ourselves. Because there are many perspectives for the Asoke Buddhist Group, thorough analysis and reinterpretation of Buddhist teaching and the radicalizing “system” of Phothirak is necessary.

Prominent Themes in Radicalizing the “System”

Phothirak is not like other reformist Buddhists who try to reinterpret the Buddha’s teachings to be relevant for modern society. Instead he overthrows the contemporary values and social system both in its theoretical and practical dimensions.

In the theoretical dimension, there are four broad themes which are the foundation for all Asoke communities.

The first theme is “*bun-ni-yom*” or “meritism” philosophy: this is radical both in mainstream Buddhism and in capitalism. In institutional Buddhism, laypeople “tam bun” or make merit by donating money or material to monks. The purpose of making merit is not for ending self-centredness as in the Buddha’s teaching, but more for self-centredness, to accumulate good deeds, which will bring one to better states of life. It has become the notion of Buddhist “meritocracy⁴” that has been criticized by reformist Buddhists as well as Phothirak.

Phothirak still uses the word “*bun*” or merit, but he has corrected its meaning to conform to the Buddha’s teaching of spiritual practice. Furthermore, for Phothirak, “*bun*” is not only an individual merit, it is also a social merit. In Asoke, merit simply means giving out as much as possible to society while taking in as little as possible. So both monks and laypeople have their duty to make merit, not to monks, but to society. Not only is it radical in mainstream Buddhism, but it is also radical in capitalism; the reinterpretation of “*bun*” becomes “*bun-ni-yom*” or

⁴ “*Meritocracy*” is a criticism of the mainstream Buddhism by Phra Buddhadasa. He then proposed an idea of “*dhammocracy*”. Please see more details in Jackson 2003:228.

meritism to ridicule “thun-ni-yom” or capitalism (Heikkila-Horn 2002). Getting more than giving as in capitalism, or making a profit, is actually a loss in “bun-ni-yom” because it is an evil which hinders self-development.

The second theme is “*lokuttara pañña*” or thoroughly knowing the truth. In institutional Buddhist teaching and practice, in which there is a sharp distinction between the mundane and supramundane realms, world-involvement has been associated with the lay form of the religion. However, Phothirak has followed Phra Buddhadāsa, the prominent reformist Buddhist, in integrating the positive valuation of action in the material world with a strict doctrine, which is what has been traditionally regarded as the *lokuttara* or world-renouncing form of the religion appropriate only for monks (Jackson 2003:143-147). While Buddhadāsa seeks to integrate the *lokuttara* concern with salvation with the *lokiya* emphasis on world-involvement, Phothirak has emphasized the aim of moral practice or *lokuttara pañña* (Sirikarn 1997:33). This is seen as the truth of *lokuttara dhamma* in ourselves. In other words, the highest of Buddha’s teachings is the target for everyone, both monks and laypeople alike.

The third theme is the eradication of “*kilesa*” or wanting more than what is enough or necessary. This idea is treated as an irrelevance in modern society. Nowadays everything, especially material goods, seems to be important, such as mobile phones, cars, televisions, computers and updated technology. However, even in the Western world there are problems and ambiguities in the realm of desire, want and need. Phothirak clearly reinterprets “*kilesa*” in a broader sense than in the traditional understanding. There is extravagance in things other than the four basic needs which must be satisfied for life to continue. Even sexual activity is also *kilesa*. The Asoke people think that worrying about the four basic needs is the cause of accumulation, hoarding, delusion, anxiety, greed, want, crime, war, and wrong occupation. This reinterpretation of *kilesa* results in a frugal way of life. For instance, Asoke communities have one meal a day, one style of clothing and hair-dressing, do not use scents, and they have few personal belongings.

This interpretation of “*kilesa*” conforms to a Buddhist economy that emphasizes the highest efficiency of consumption. It is against the mainstream economy which emphasizes the greatest pleasure. In Buddhist teaching, the pleasure from consumption is impermanent; it is a cause of renewed desire and renewed desire continues the cycle of suffering. A Buddhist economy removes the pleasure from consumption; the focus is only on survival and the fulfillment of physical needs. The most efficient form of consumption is the lowest level of

consumption which can sustain human beings in more spiritual practice⁵. This will eventually lead to self-sufficiency or the economics of “enoughness” in the community.

The fourth theme is compassion. In Theravada Buddhist teaching, it is not against the Buddhist precept to eat meat if it has not been specially prepared for us. However, in Mahayana, meat eating is a cause of life’s suffering so they do not eat any meat. Phothirak agrees with Mahayana teaching and further elaborates that not exploiting animals engenders compassion in humans. In other words, compassion is not only for human beings, but also for animals. This reinterpretation of Phothirak has resulted in extensive criticism and has encouraged vegetarianism in Thailand.

The practical reinterpretative dimension is reinforced by the theoretical reinterpretations. As for spiritual practice, the Asoke people do not meditate in the traditional way by sitting or walking. This is considered a waste of time and a way of escaping the reality of the world. Instead, they practice meditation with their eyes open, while engaging energetically in any type of work in the Asoke community. The main point is work, which is not valued for the result or the gain, but for the process itself. To work in a team requires compassion to your fellow workers and concentration to carry out the work. The Asoke have said that practice is not only external behaviour, but also internal spirituality.

Nevertheless, there is a space for transformation from the theoretical to the practical dimension. The *lokuttara panña* in the theoretical dimension transfers to *sila* or the Buddhist precept in the practical dimension. The Asoke people emphasize strict practice in *sila* until it achieves the target of life. Even *sila* practice can lead to *panña*, but at the same time, *sila* can confine *panña* if it changes from the path to the target. As Masanobu Fukuoka, a philosophically natural farmer, said in his book, “*The One Straw Revolution*”. “Every one knows that the target of life is to go beyond the world of relativism to the world of freedom, but to keep holding on to theory will become a bad dream” (T) (Fukuoka 1987:120).

According to the reinterpretations of Phothirak, there are two prominent influences on his ideology: Mahayana Buddhist teaching and Phra Buddhadasa. Influences from Mahayana Buddhist teaching have two principles. The first is “practice by working” or mass practice with an emphasis on compassion. The second is the reinterpretation of the first precept, including forbidding the eating of animals that results in “being vegetarian”. However, the practice of the Asoke Buddhist group admits that Mahayana Buddhist teaching is different from institutional

⁵ See more detail in Consumption Theory of Buddhist Economy in Panthasen, Apichai. 2001. *Buddha Settasart: vivattanakarn trissadee lae karn prayuk kab settasart saka tang tang [Buddhist Economy: evolution, theory and other applied economy]*. Bangkok: Amarin Printing.p 445-454.

Buddhist teaching. As a matter of practice, most of the practices still follow Theravada Buddhist teaching. For example, strict practice in *sila* and *vinaya*, non-scented stuff, or even joss sticks and female status is not maintained.

The influence from Buddhādāsa is in the area of theoretical reinterpretation, such as the interpretation that makes *Lokuttara* the target of spiritual practice for everyone refusing the distinction between mundane and supramundane, practice by working, and “*bun*” as a spiritual practice. However, Phothirak has criticized Buddhādāsa’s reinterpretation for still not being beneficial in practice. Phothirak reinterprets both the Buddha’s teachings and the Buddhādāsa’s reinterpretation, both of which have led to alternative social development in the Asoke communities.

Alternative Social Development of The Asoke Communities

Asoke communities are in themselves the embodiment of the direct and concretely political and social critique. In Asoke, *dhamma* practice is not only an individual issue. In fact, it hinges on social conditions and environment. This perspective emphasizes three major aspects of alternative social development.

First is the radical social structure and value system, *ariyatham* or civilization. Instead of the hierarchy of modern society, in which the civilized or the uncivilized are marked by wealth of material and power, in Asoke, the civilized is marked by the level of mind or spiritual practice. Human hierarchy in the Asoke communities is elaborated by the level of *sila* or precept practice. Phothirak deconstructs capitalist social structure and then reconstructs the new structure within the *dhamma* meaning. As for “*bun-ni-yom*” philosophy, the highest hierarchical position for laypeople is for people who practice eight precepts, who sacrifice themselves, and who do good in society. A motto which reveals the Puritan pride of the Asoke group is “diligence, be initiative, dare to be poor, endure sarcasm” (Kaewthep 2003:5). An example of the Asoke people who are well known in Thai politics is Chamlong Srimuang. Chamlong is a “*kon-wat*” or a member in the temple of the “Pathom Asoke Community”, Nakornprathom province. Chamlong has practiced the eight precepts and has sacrificed himself for the society in the Thai political movement.

Second is social distribution, “*Satarana Pokee*” or the public welfare system. As in Buddhādāsa’s philosophy, a political ideology is not as important as the fact that it must yield a

just and equitable social order⁶. Phothirak reinterprets it in a practical dimension; a public welfare system has been established and has been called “*Satarana Pokee*”. In this system, all necessities of life, such as food, clothing, medicine, and transportation fees, are prepared for all temple dwellers according to their need not to their ability (Settabunsang 2000:67). Because Asoke’s people have a thrifty life style from eradicating “*kilesa*” or “*kin ngai yu ngai*”, or the simple eating–simple living philosophy, *Satarana Pokee* is not an expensive system. Furthermore, with the “*bun-ni-yom*” philosophy, the Asoke people try to volunteer for any work that the community can do by itself. In other words, *Satarana Pokee* helps the Asoke people to practice their spirituality through cooperative work. It yields quality in material and bolsters the *Ariyatham* social structure in the community. *Satarana Pokee* system is definitely a radical departure from capitalism. It tends more towards a *Dhammic Socialism*⁷.

The third is utopian society. The reinterpretation of *lokuttara panña* and *bun-ni-yom* has driven Asoke people to be strict in their personal discipline, as well as to do good for society. This leads to a peaceful society with a new kind of social organization. There is a self-reliance in each community, simultaneously, there is an egalitarian inter-relationship between communities. Each Asoke community is independent from other Asoke communities, but there is still a very close interrelationship as a group in *bun-ni-yom* ideology. Materials, products, knowledge and members are transferred between communities so that autonomous groups result. The Asoke Buddhist group is definitely released from the capitalist market system.

The self-reliance of each community is based on more than 30 activity bases that are organized on a voluntary basis. None of the work needs professional qualifications but only participation. The participatory relationship, the teamwork between clergy, dwellers in the temple and members around that temple carries out the group ideology and controls members who participate. It seems to be an anti-intellectual system opposing external society. The prominent work that is the foundation for the community’s self-reliance is “Natural Agriculture” which follows the first Buddhist precept, neither exploiting oneself nor others, which means not causing suffering to farmers or consumers, and not causing suffering to animals or the environment.

The concept of “natural agriculture” and all work in the Asoke community follows the production theory of Buddhist economy which deals with the integration of the economy. It

⁶ See more detail about Buddhādāsa’s thought and politics in Jackson 2003:206-209.

⁷ *Dhammic Socialism* was used by Phra Buddhādāsa. I have no evidence that Phothirak has ever mentioned the phrase *Dhammic Socialism*, but the *Satarana Pokee* system has the same aim as *Dhammic Socialism*. Peter A. Jackson analyzed *Dhammic Socialism* as follows: “ He (Buddhādāsa) also values socialism because of its emphasis on cooperative rather than competitive social activities. *Buddhadasa* proposed “*dhammic socialism*” as a form which does not simply aim at providing each person with the necessities of survival. Rather, it has as a higher goal the provision of social circumstances which enable each person to strive for *nibbana*...” (Jackson 2003:240)

emphasizes the real cost of all resources not only the monetary and material cost. For instance, wisdom, experience, and human labor are human resources; physical and social capital as well as hard and soft technology are artificial resources; energy and other natural resources are natural resource. It not only emphasizes every resource as input but is also concerned with waste from output as one of the costs⁸. Even the Asoke people may not have calculated all the complexities of this theory. They just truly know all the causes and effects from their activity. Then natural agricultural production is concerned with the real cost in itself.

The Asoke group has praised the work of natural agriculture as “the major occupation to redeem Thailand” because it is the foundation of self-reliance not only for Asoke communities but also for Thai society. Because of the abstemious life style and diligent volunteers, a lot more vegetable and herbs are produced than is necessary. This leads to some vegetarian food and organic products being sold to people outside each community for low-profit, sometimes non-profit, and even for free, an enterprise which is accounted for in the *bun-ni-yom* trading system.

Not only agriculture, but also rural Thai culture, is emphasized. Kin relations are revived in Asoke. The obvious example is in the *Samma Sikkha Schools*, which are in many Asoke communities. Students themselves as well as their parents⁹ are willing to strictly practice in five precepts and *bun-ni-yom* ideology. The educational philosophy manifests best in the slogan “Orthodoxy in Keeping Sila, Efficiency in Working, Knowledge in Studying Subjects” (Kaewthep 2003:13). Students learn both subjects and moral practice in a working atmosphere. All adults in the community become their teachers in the subjects, working methods, moral practice, as well as culture and ideology of the Asoke community. This is a re-productive system for the social practices and institutions that derive from Phothirak’s teachings.

As for kin relations, students call all adults or all teachers “aunt” and “uncle” and call the older students “sister” and “brother”. The older students and adults look after the younger students. They also serve as role models. This support system in Asoke community is also a part of traditional Thai culture. But the difference is that the younger students of Asoke are taught to have self-confidence in order to criticize and to propose their perspective to adults. This goes against the authoritarianism that is firmly rooted in traditional Thai culture. The Asoke Buddhist group selects some aspects of traditional culture whilst correcting its weak points.

⁸ Please see more detail on the production theory of the Buddhist economy in Panthasen 2001: 430-436.

⁹ Parents of students in the *Samma Sikkha School* are admirers, members around the temple or dwellers in the temple of the Asoke group. However, parents can send their children to study at the other communities of the Asoke Buddhist Group.

As for their perspective on modern technology, the Asoke people do not refuse modern technology but they in fact use it as an instrument for public benefit. The Asoke Buddhist Group uses technology in two ways. The first is media production to distribute *dhamma* and *bun-ni-yom* ideology to overwhelm the world. This consists of books, journals, leaflets, fortnightly newspapers, CDs, tape cassettes, VDO tapes, websites, community radio broadcasting, television interviews, as well as articles. The second is herbal products; the Asoke group has selected some technologies and machines to produce good quality herbal products. Nevertheless, modern technology is used for public benefit, and never for any personal comfort. As for eight precepts and *kilesa* eradication, dwellers in temple are not allowed to use any technology even electric lights of more than ten watts.

Present and Future of the Asoke Buddhist Group

Over this thirty years of impermanence, Thai society has undergone several changes, with the exception of the stagnation of the mainstream Sangha. The Asoke Buddhist Group is still ostracized by the state Buddhist monastic order. There are still a lot of people opposing the Asoke Buddhist teachings because of the Asoke group's strict practice and their reinterpretation of the Buddha's teaching. All of these have made Asoke people alien to the capitalist society. Nevertheless, the Asoke Buddhist Group has proved a success in its alternative to the consumerism of the mainstream system, namely, a self-reliant community based on selflessness, hard work and the simple religious life. In particular, the Asoke communities have not been hit badly by the 1997 economic crisis. To be more straightforward, Asoke communities have become a showcase for the government as an alternative social development.

From the economic crisis, there have been a lot of farmers struggling with their debts from the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC). The government, therefore, has launched a project called "stop the debt" (*krong karn pak cham ra ni*) for three years via BAAC. During this 3-year period, the bank has sent their farmer debtors to Asoke communities for courses of study on natural agriculture, self-sufficiency and sustainable development. The main purpose is to train these farmers to be more self-sufficient and to be free from getting into further debt. This training course began in 2002 and will run for three years. During this time, over 300,000 farmers will be trained in "*bun-ni-yom*" principles. Furthermore, in the last year, the *Samma Sikkha* School has become a showcase for the Ministry of Education as a model Buddhist school. It is in fact an alternative to the mainstream Western educational

model. For ordinary people, the Asoke practice is an alternative choice to mainstream Buddhism and capitalism. As a matter of fact, after the economic crisis in 1997, there have been more admirers joining the Asoke festivals that have been opened to the public.

The interrelationship between the Asoke community, government and ordinary people seems to be growing. The projects of BAAC and Ministry of Education may be a signal for changes in future development policy. In particular, Chamlong Srimuang, whom Duncan McCargo (McCargo 1997:78-94) has noted as having a close interdependence with the Santi Asoke¹⁰, has been a consultant in the human resources area to Thailand's present Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. With its theme as an alternative set of social and religious ideals, one cannot overlook its growth potential, both in rural areas and in the center of politics. It may be a "young shoot" which encourages social development to become more self-reliant, more egalitarian, more interconnected, to produce a peaceful society with religious ends in mind.

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¹⁰ McCargo has noted that Chamlong was first the spokesperson for Santi Asoke. With the assistance of Santi Asoke, Chamlong pursued his political career in the 1980s.

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