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Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement:
Building Individuals, Community, and
(Thai) Society

Juliana M. Essen

Soka University of America
Aliso Viejo, California
Email: esse0026@yahoo.com

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Juliana M. Essen

One day King Mahājanaka visited the Royal Park where he tasted the sweet fruit of a mango tree. When he passed the tree later, he found it had been plundered and uprooted by greedy people scrambling for its delicious fruit. . .

His Majesty the King of Thailand uses this traditional Buddhist riddle in his recent book to teach his kingdom lessons about sustainable development. Prominent Thai scholars such as Dr. Prawase Wasi interpret it as an analogy for “development driven by greed.” Dr. Prawase laments, “We are short-sighted. . . . When people struggle only for economic gain, society and the environment are destroyed.”¹ Indeed, after more than three decades of promoting rapid economic growth via capital-intensive industrialization, Thailand faces a widening socio-economic gap, environmental devastation, and a decline of Buddhist values. The late 1990s economic crisis in Southeast Asia thus marks a critical moment in Thailand’s history. Now, many Thais pause to reevaluate their nation’s development path and to consider alternatives for a primarily Buddhist, agrarian society.

The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement in Thailand offers one such alternative. The Asoke group’s aim is not a Western ideal—to accumulate high levels of material comfort, but a Buddhist ideal—to release attachment to the material world and attain spiritual freedom. Like other Buddhist approaches to development, Asoke-style development begins with personal spiritual advancement; yet it emphasizes worldly engagement in order to address contemporary social, economic, and environmental dilemmas. This paper draws from ethnographic research at one Asoke community to illustrate how Asoke Buddhist beliefs and practices contribute to development on three levels: individual, community, and society.

Context: Thai Buddhism(s)

The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement is chiefly concerned with the practice and propagation of Buddhism in a nation that is 95 percent Buddhist. As such, background on Thai Buddhist practice and responses to modern problems will facilitate a deeper understanding of the Asoke move-

ment's foundational principles and its significance within the wider Thai context. The literature on Thai Buddhism deals primarily with monastic practice and the relationship between Sangha and State. Though important, this emphasis neglects the majority of Buddhist practitioners. In contrast, this paper gives more attention to lay practice so as to better explicate the Asoke movement, which is composed largely of laity.

Lay Buddhist Practice

According to anthropologist Niels Mulder, "To conventional believers who constitute the vast majority, Buddhism is a way of life, an identity, and the key to primordial 'Thai-ness.'"² Thais learn from an early age—at home, school, and the temple—how to be a "good person" according to Buddhist standards (following the Eightfold Path), so that they may ultimately achieve enlightenment and escape the suffering of rebirth. Though few individuals make a lifetime commitment to religious pursuits (necessary to reach nirvana, according to the Therāvada School), there exists a cultural expectation that men enter the monkhood for a short period as a rite of passage or an act of filial piety.

If monastics are but a small minority of Thai Buddhists, what then of the laity? Anthropologist S. J. Tambiah points out, "A question that puzzles the student of popular religion is how a lay public rooted in this world can adhere to a religion committed to the renunciation of the world."³ Max Weber's solution to this paradox is a "religion of the masses" that develops alongside the official doctrine.⁴ Following Weber and Robert Redfield,⁵ Ganath Obeyesekere explains, "In orthodox doctrine, the prescriptions for the layman are very inadequate so that under pressure of mass needs there has developed a peasant (little) tradition of Buddhism, some elements of which have no doctrinal justification."⁶ Thus, Obeyesekere propounds that in doctrinal Buddhism, individuals desiring salvation follow the monastic path; while in practical Buddhism, individuals limit the effects of bad karma by using magic or appealing to the appropriate deities.

Tambiah observes that the "spirit cult" in Thailand is more complicated than Obeyesekere's categorization might suggest:

It is a phenomenon which some writers have called "animism" and which with pseudo-historical conjecture they have identified as pre-Buddhist. Moreover, they have variously treated it both as incompatible with, and as combining with, Buddhism. In actual fact, its relationship to Buddhism is not simple but complex,

involving opposition, complementarity, linkage, and hierarchy.⁷

Charles Keyes further argues that Obeyesekere's theory is inaccurate because South and Southeast Asians call upon magic and spirits to solve mundane—not karmic—problems.⁸ “Spirit houses” for local spirits are ubiquitous in Thailand, protecting homes and businesses alike. Similarly, every city has a shrine to the local guardian spirit where citizens may give offerings and ask for material wealth and well being. Amulets of certain saintly forest monks are also quite popular, even among educated urbanites. These amulets are thought to be imbued with supernatural power that will make the wearer safe, wealthy, virile, or clever.⁹ Moreover, monks are often called upon to perform ritual blessings—to sprinkle holy water, draw symbols over the door of a new house or car, or tie a white string around the wrist—as protection from malevolent spirits that bring sickness or peril.

Despite the monks' involvement in spirit cults, Thai language distinguishes believing in (*cheua*) spirits (*phī*) from believing in or revering (*nap theu*) Buddhism (*sasana phut*), rather than lumping everything together as practical Buddhism. In fact, the spirit cults encompass Thai lay practices frowned upon by many reform-minded Buddhists such as the late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the most prolific Buddhist philosopher in Thailand. Than¹⁰ Buddhadasa further criticized the worship of Buddha images now sullied by popular ideas about their supernatural powers (an extension of the spirit cult). In his *Handbook for Mankind*, Than Buddhadasa cites the Buddha as saying:

If a man could eliminate suffering by making offerings, paying homage, and praying there would be no one subject to suffering left in the world. . . . But since people are still subject to suffering while in the very act of making obeisances, paying homage, and performing rites, this is clearly not the way to gain liberation.¹¹

Thus, for Than Buddhadasa, Buddhism depends on reason and insight.

Returning to the issue of options available to the laity, Keyes agrees with Obeyesekere that Buddhism's moral code for lay life is vague and “humanly impossible to fulfill . . . ‘to the letter.’”¹² However, both Keyes and Tambiah argue that this is not the only doctrinally derived option available for lay salvation. While nothing can change past karma—not magic nor spirits—an individual may balance the negative effects of past karma by improving future karma through meritorious actions. Though karma is not an exclusively Buddhist concept, Buddhism holds that the laws of causal dependence

governing nature encompass human behavior, such that “good deeds bring good results; bad deeds bring bad results.”¹³

Thais conceptualize karma as a relationship between *wibāggām*—the consequences of past evil deeds, and *bun*—merit that may be accumulated through good deeds to improve one’s lot in this life or the next. As a phenomenon ordinary people experience in their everyday lives, karma may provide a stronger motivation to be “a good Buddhist” via merit-making than the elusive notion of enlightenment. Thus, making merit (*thombun*) is central to most Thais’ understanding of practicing Buddhism. A typical ranking of merit-making activities in Thailand might include completely financing the construction of a temple, becoming a monk, having a son become a monk, contributing money to repair a temple, giving food daily to monks, observing every Buddhist Sabbath, and strictly observing the five precepts.¹⁴ Most lay people—except members of the Asoke movement—tend to rank morality and meditation low as merit-making activities because they perceive these practices as beyond their capabilities.

One Asoke monk shared with me his unsettling experience with the law of karma:

I was traveling (to Srisa Asoke) from Bangkok, and when I got to Surin province, there was an accident. The vehicle had a bad axle and it fell to the middle of the road. I almost didn’t escape with my life. Part of my skull caved in, my molars came loose and were bleeding, the eye on this side popped out. I can’t see with this eye. I was lucky (he laughs). So I believed in *wibāggām*. When I was a child at home, I used to kill animals When the cutting (of the chicken’s neck) was finished, the chicken was not yet dead. It would wriggle and writhe. We would grab its legs and hit it hard with a pole. Its head would break, the eyes would pop out, red blood would flow from the mouth. We did it a lot because the farmers helped each other harvest rice, so we made food following the custom of *long khaek* (feeding guest workers) I had the feeling that I had killed so much that *wibāggām* would come. But when? I was afraid one day I would meet with an accident, and it would surely be like this So I felt, it was urgent to make good, to sacrifice, to help others. Because I read a book, and I felt I have made karma, and I must certainly receive karma. Karma will surely come. Slow or fast, this life or next, it depends. When I had this accident—Bap! It was the same image as of the chickens we killed. I thought of that

Just like that, I thought, oh ho! This is *wibāggām*. We might not have a way to know (for certain that it was a result of karma). But the image was the same. And so I felt that I could believe in the subject of karma. The Buddha taught that we have karma in ourselves, we have made karma, and *wibāggām* will come. It will come out in form: people who like killing animals, cutting life—they die They will die not as old people die but die in accidents, or they might not die but be handicapped and have pain and suffering. This is the *wibāg gām* of people who like to kill animals, to oppress animals When the form was like this (gesturing to his own misshapen head), I thought of the teachings of the Buddha. It made me believe them.¹⁵

Than Din Thām believes that ordaining as a monk a few years before this accident may have saved his life. Thus, the urgency “to make good” to lessen future suffering caused by karma can be a force so powerful that lay people take the leap into monkhood (or at least into a strictly disciplined group like the Asoke movement).

Buddhist Responses to Modern Problems in Thailand

Far from renouncing the world as Buddhists are thought to do, a growing number of Thai Buddhists are motivated to action by their everyday experiences of environmental degradation, economic struggle, and change in social values—all problems associated with rapid economic growth. The early work of “development monks” exemplify this socially engaged Buddhism. In the 1970s, a decade after Prime Minister Field Marshall Sarit initiated a program of rapid GNP growth through capital-intensive industrialization, many rural monks realized that villagers were worse off than before. As the monks and villagers searched for alternative development models based on local Buddhist tradition, economic improvement was not their only objective. They also hoped to preserve village culture as a cure for what they regarded as growing materialism, moral degradation, and the deterioration of rural institutions.¹⁶ In 1984, Somboon conducted a study of 72 “development monks” who offered the following reasons for their activities: (1) Involvement in development activities is consistent with the Sangha’s responsibility to serve society. (2) The prosperity of the religion and the Sangha depends on the prosperity of society. (3) Secular development has proceeded too rapidly and people have become excessively materialistic; and as a consequence, people neglect religion.¹⁷

More recently, some Thai Buddhists have focused specifically on environmental concerns. While there is an ongoing international scholarly debate as to the relationship between Buddhism and ecology, Susan Darlington contends that most studies denying a connection have not examined the conscious efforts of Buddhists to grapple with environmental problems. For example, in a creative blending of Buddhism and environmentalism, Phrakhu Pitak performs “tree ordination” ceremonies now popular in protecting threatened forests. In this ceremony, trees are wrapped with monks’ robes and a modified ordination ritual is performed. Thais will view cutting this tree as a form of religious demerit, likened to killing a monk.¹⁸ Sadly, many forest monks have become environmentalists out of necessity, as their tradition quickly recedes with the nation’s forests.¹⁹

The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement

The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement is among these socially engaged efforts to make Buddhism more meaningful to the modern world. The Asoke group emerged in the early 1970s when a young critical monk left the Thai monastic community to establish his own Buddhist group. Samana Bodhirak denounced the Thai Sangha for its moral laxity and its social disconnect, stating: “A religious institution should help the society in solving its problems; otherwise, the existence of the religious institution becomes meaningless, which has happened to the mainstream Buddhist institutions in Thailand.”²⁰ Thus, with a mission to “revive Buddhism in Thailand,”²¹ Samana Bodhirak and a handful of followers began an “experiment in an alternative way of life.”²² Now, the national Asoke movement encompasses seven thriving communities with altogether 800 residents and several hundred boarding school students, as well as roughly 7000 nonresident Asoke members who support the movement with four lay organizations and participate in local or national activities.

In creating the Asoke movement, Samana Bodhirak acted on Than Buddhadasa’s concerns for the fallacies of lay Buddhist practice and the escalating materialism in Thai society. The Asoke group diverges from mainstream lay Buddhist practice by rejecting the worship of Buddha images, practicing strict morality, and emphasizing everyday work as meditation. Moreover, Samana Bodhirak and Asoke intellectuals articulate a biting critique of capitalism—particularly the prevalence of greed, competition, and exploitation—as the root of Thai society’s problems. In their view, modern “social preferences” influenced by the global flow of Western culture and

capitalism exacerbate human suffering and the ruin of nature. To counter these forces, the Asoke group proposes “meritism” or *bun niyom*, Asoke’s unique model of development based on Buddhist and Thai values.

Srisa Asoke Buddhist Center

Meritism is enacted variously in the lives of Asoke members, at Asoke communities, and during Asoke festivals across Thailand. Ethnographic research for this project took place at the Srisa Asoke Buddhist Center, located in the rural Northeast. Srisa Asoke is an intentional community established the purpose of practicing Buddhism rather than a typical village into which people are born. Srisa Asoke owns 200 acres of fruit orchards and rice and crop fields; but the heart of the community—the village, temple, and school—occupies just 3.2 acres. A walk through the grounds shows a well established operation. At the center is the Common Hall where both religious and secular activities take place. Surrounding this domain are tree-lined lanes of wooden houses on stilts; facilities for cultivating mushrooms, weaving cloth, and recycling trash; organic vegetable and herb gardens in every available space; forested areas; as well as a museum, a convenience store, a library, a rice mill, a boarding school for 200 students, and much more. It is astounding that just twenty-five years ago, this beehive of activity was a bare cemetery.

Like other Asoke communities, the organization of Srisa Asoke could be called collective or cooperative. The eighty permanent residents (including seven monks) volunteer for jobs that ideally match their interests and skills while fulfilling community needs. This labor is non-wage, but not uncompensated. In return, residents receive spiritual support, the four necessities for a comfortable material existence (food, shelter, clothing, and medicine), as well as free education and a positive environment for their children. While a few residents maintain private houses, money, and vehicles, most give up all ownership to the collective and share the common resources. It is important to note that this community came together during a time when communists were killed in Thailand to preserve national security. Hence, residents clarify that they are not communist: members are free to come and go, to choose and change their work, and to participate in decision making through democratic vote at weekly community meetings.

Ah Payasin, a 43-year-old former teacher who works in Srisa Asoke’s Common Hall, library, kitchen, and gardens, explains the community’s organization this way:

We eat using the central kitchen; when we listen to sermons we use the central hall; and money—we use money from the central fund. Whenever I buy brooms or other things for the temple, I use central money. Whenever we sell things and receive money, we bring the money to the central fund. It is a system of public property that the Buddha taught, to make it central and not have things that belong to any one person. Everyone works and puts in the central part, they don't take it for their own. If it is our own, we will want to get a lot and won't want to give it to other people. But if we keep it in the central fund, we sacrifice—whoever wants it can take it, can use it. But this is for practicing Dharma. Also, it yields our defilements. When we work together, we have conflict—we have views that do not agree—so we must try to adapt our hearts. So we can reduce anger, selfishness, and have tolerance when we are different from others.²³

Ah Payasin's explanation indicates that the Asoke system of organization serves a larger purpose than affording convenience to members and facilitating community self-sufficiency: namely, Dharma practice.

Meritism: The Asoke Development Model

Bun niyom literally means “to prefer merit” (as opposed to *tun niyom* “to prefer capital”). When I asked Asoke members what *bun niyom* meant, many offered this example: Selling a pen that costs 10 Baht for 12 Baht makes a material profit but is viewed as losing 2 Baht of merit. Alternately, selling the same pen for 8 Baht brings a “noble profit” of 2 Baht. (They do not actually calculate merit in this way, but it is a simple illustration.) However, since Asoke Buddhism originated before this theoretical model, members more frequently responded that the essence of their practice is first “to depend on oneself” and then “to sacrifice” to others. These two key elements of meritism are mutually reinforcing in Asoke communities, where residents sacrifice time and energy for the good of the community, and community-wide self-dependence allows individuals to help “outside” Thai society. Thus, Asoke beliefs and practices foster spiritual and material development on three levels: individual, community, and society.

Building the individual

Like other Buddhist approaches to development, the Asoke movement asserts that development must begin with the individual; and according to Asoke view, individual development means to “build people to be good people.” This involves a spiritual aspect (developing according to the Eightfold Path) as well as a material aspect (developing the four basic needs required to support spiritual development). Now that the community of Srisa Asoke is fairly stable and self-sufficient, basic material needs are not a pressing concern for residents. As for individual spiritual growth, there are two main strategies in everyday life.

The first strategy is refining morality by following the Buddhist precepts. To live at Srisa Asoke or any Asoke community, individuals must commit to the five precepts stipulated by the Buddha for lay people: abstain from killing, false speech, sexual misconduct, stealing, and taking sense altering substances. Since the Asoke movement views eating meat as a violation of the number one precept, community members adhere to a strict vegetarian diet. All residents must also refrain from *abayamook* (the six vices: alcohol, drugs (including cigarettes), gambling, nighttime entertainment, laziness, and sexual playing). As regular community members advance in their practice, they may ascend to higher levels with stricter moral codes: “temple people” (so called because they live in huts circling the temple) add three more precepts; novices and nuns keep ten precepts; and monks abide by the 227 rules of the monastic code. Morality is not merely an ideal dictated from above, but one shared by individuals throughout the group at every level of practice. Of the Srisa Asoke residents I interviewed, the majority (60 percent) declared morality to be the most important factor in the Asoke way of life. Furthermore, they do not adhere to morality out of custom, but consider the results of their practice. Residents spoke often about the practical advantages of keeping the precepts (such as saving time, money, and effort) as well as grander benefits including increased mindfulness and wisdom and being an example for others.

The formal Asoke method of evaluating progress in morality development is quite relaxed. Every Sunday night at 7:00 p.m., Srisa Asoke residents gather into three groups of students, young people (18- to 29-years-old), and adults (over 30-years-old) for “morality check.” A monk leads each group confession by explaining the precepts one by one and inviting those who have violated each precept to raise their hands and to describe, if they wish, what they did. The monk then offers guidance to the erring practitioner. These evenings of morality check are not solemn but matter-of-fact

and punctuated with laughter. Thus, this group confession is more for the purpose of self-reflection and learning from each other's mistakes than social sanction. In a typical adult session at the Common Hall, twenty-nine people were present but only five people raised their hand to a violation. An old woman's admission that she killed a mosquito is met with kind head nods, and Ah Plekuan's joking self-deprecation about forgetting to ask before she borrows things elicits light-hearted teasing. When the group of university students reach the sixth precept, two female university students reluctantly raise their hands to "talcum powder" in the list of "bodily adornments." These women argue that using powder is not in violation of the sixth precept because it is necessary for comfort in this hot, sticky climate. The leader (also a student because there were not enough monks available this night) calmly replies that talcum powder is a luxury and a waste of money and suggests to his peers that if they gradually stop using powder, they would discover that they no longer need it.

The second strategy for individual development is living by the Asoke slogan "Consume Little, Work Hard, and Give the Rest to Society" in order to practice nonattachment and concentration. The ideas intended by the slogan are expressed by Ah Kaenfa, the administrative leader of Srisa Asoke:

We have a principle philosophy that we here must eat little, use little, and work much. The leftovers support society. This is sacrificing to society—the part that is left over. We do not accumulate. Accumulation is sin. Therefore, we stipulate that we will come to be poor people in the view of people in the other world. The other world is the system of capitalism, that must have much money, much property. . . . We will be people who do not have property. But we will be people who are hard working and industrious, who have knowledge, efficiency, capability. We will have great diligence but we will not accumulate—we will spread it out to other people. . . . Everything we have here, we have in order to help other people. . . . We don't believe it's ours. We come to live together, not hoping to find the material way. That is, we come to help each other to reduce desires that cover the hearts of humans. The less desire you have, the more hardworking you are. . . . But the things that arise from our needs fall to humanity. We don't organize this to be ours. We are not possessive.²⁴

This slogan is not empty rhetoric but is enacted daily by Srisa Asoke residents. For example, Asoke members do indeed consume little compared

to outside Thai society. As stated previously, they habitually cut their consumption of meat (first precept), alcohol, drugs (including cigarettes), gambling, nighttime entertainment (*abayamook*; precepts 3, 5, and 8), cosmetics, perfume, jewelry, the latest clothing fashions (sixth precept), and furniture (tenth precept). Moreover, sharing communal resources as Srisa Asoke residents do—for example, cooking, eating, and watching TV together in the Common Hall—makes personal possessions redundant. Therefore, most individual homes in Srisa Asoke are Spartan, lacking the usual accoutrements found in rural Thai households, such as TVs, radios, refrigerators, stoves, and cooking implements.²⁵ Residents also consume little by following a Western environmental edict, “The Four Rs”: recycle, reuse, repair, reject. Striving to obtain maximum usage out of bicycles, clothing, plastic bottles, and other durable goods lessens both the need to buy new things as well as the waste produced from consumption.

Many residents who reflect on their practice of consuming little show an appreciation for balance and the relation between the spiritual and material worlds. Deeply concerned with the root defilement, greed, Asoke members value *mak noi*, “to be content with little.” Yet they caution: “Use enough, don’t use little to the level that one is lacking—not a shortage”²⁶ because “the Buddha taught to support life by a proper amount, not to be too needy and not too luxurious, but just right to be able to have happiness.”²⁷ How much is enough must be proven by each individual. For example, a single meal in a day is simply not enough for some people laboring in the fields. A second idea members stress in combination with *mak noi* is *sandood*, “to be satisfied with what one has,” in accordance with the Buddha’s revelation that desire causes suffering. Ah Wichai, one of Srisa Asoke’s training organizers, adds, “Being content with what one has is important because if (what you have is) enough, you are richer, suddenly richer.”²⁸ Thus, reducing consumption decreases suffering in economic matters—a significant fact for the average Thai with financial troubles. Without economic worries, one can better focus on their spiritual development, as demonstrated in the community of Srisa Asoke.

As for the slogan’s second component, Asoke members work hard not only because they must support themselves, but also because diligence is a Buddhist virtue and—more importantly—because work serves as the primary method of *samādhi*, achieving concentration through meditation. The common image of Buddhist practice is sitting still with eyes closed, monitoring the breath; but this is only one method of meditation. Several Srisa Asoke residents commented that the peace generated by meditating in isolation is lost as soon as that person reenters the world. Asoke members

thus practice “open eye” meditation continuously as they work and interact with others within their community. This approach shows the influence of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, who was in turn influenced by Zen Buddhism. Than Buddhadasa explains the concept simply: “Dhamma sweeps the heart while the broom sweeps the ground.”²⁹ Following the original meaning of the Thai word for work, *gnan* (formerly, “all life-related activities”), the Asoke group includes working for one’s livelihood as well as attending meetings, chanting, eating, watching movies, and chatting with neighbors in their understanding of work. Ah Jaenjop, who taught meditation for 20 years before joining the Asoke movement, explains, “From the time we wake up until we go to sleep, it is all work—any kind of work, even work of the heart, that is work just the same—to build our spirit.”³⁰ Though many individuals confessed it is difficult to maintain full consciousness 100 percent of the time, they do their best to develop general awareness, a calm mind, concentration on tasks and interactions, and control of feelings such as anger, jealousy, aversion, and pleasure throughout their daily activities.

The third aspect of the slogan is detailed in the section on “Building society.”

Building community

In this tripartite model, each level is made possible by the preceding one, such that individual development—especially personal efforts in nonattachment and work/concentration—fosters development at the community level. Nonattachment is a central Buddhist aim that partly concerns the stuff people use, accumulate, and throw away. The prime objective of limiting personal consumption and accumulation is individual spiritual development; however, nonattachment at the individual level benefits community development in a number of ways:

- Consuming less and consuming communally conserves resources like the energy needed to cook and watch television.
- Having fewer personal belongings means that time and energy that might have been spent caring for them may be applied elsewhere for the common good.
- As mentioned above, practicing nonattachment reduces problems with waste disposal, which is critical in rural Thailand where trash piles up or is burned in the absence of curbside pick-up.

- And subsequently, the compilation of these benefits is an increase in the community's capacity for self-dependence.

It should be noted that in the Asoke movement, limiting personal accumulation does not necessarily limit public accumulation. The most startling example is the fantastic million Baht Asoke temple in Bangkok. Even at Srisa Asoke, the most "traditional" rural community, there is an air-conditioned administrative office equipped with modern technology and a new guest and meeting facility contracted of costly materials. A few members remarked that the Asoke movement does not consider these things to be their own but uses them to spread Buddhism. I accept that these sentiments are sincere, but I also perceive some motivation stemming from a typical Thai appreciation for beautiful appearances.

Regarding work, productive activity contributes to community development in a very obvious, practical way: providing food, shelter, clothing, medicine, and other material needs. Yet there is much more to work at Srisa Asoke than the mere production of goods. By practicing "open eye" meditation as they work, Srisa Asoke residents simultaneously perfect their own spiritual development while contributing to the development of their community. More specifically, as Asoke increase their concentration and awareness of thoughts, speech, and actions, the quality of their work and social interactions improves. Signs of good meditation at Srisa Asoke are the lush gardens, well-built structures, clean streets, and congenial relations between residents.

Still, Srisa Asoke is not a utopia as some reports label it.³¹ It has problems just like any other group of people trying to live together. For example, many Srisa Asoke residents identify "too many differing views" as a significant obstacle to community development. It would be suspect if community members did not have differing viewpoints, considering their diverse backgrounds: single, married, divorced, and widowed men and women aged eighteen to eighty-four, with and without children, from Chinese, Thai, Northern, or Lao families, who grew up in rural areas, provincial towns, or Bangkok, with educational levels ranging from none to graduate degrees and occupational backgrounds covering the entire spectrum. Srisa Asoke residents are also at different levels of spiritual development, and in my observations, those who are less advanced have less nuanced understandings of community goals.

Fortunately, the Asoke movement has a well established means of dealing with problems. Through the weekly community meeting, differing views are hashed out, conflicts are mediated, new ideas are proposed, goals are set, and

progress is evaluated. There are also countless other meetings for particular purposes, such as planning curriculum (for the boarding school), trainings, or events. An exceptional example of the power of meetings occurred during an “Intensive Human Development” weekend seminar for Asoke members. For one afternoon’s activity, we divided into small groups to brainstorm solutions to problems of community self-dependence. While my group became entangled in an argument between two outspoken women, another group came up with a comprehensive plan to increase food production by five times over the next few months in preparation for a national festival to be hosted by Srisa Asoke. This proposal received unanimous approval at the next community meeting and was immediately put into action. Even though the goal turned out to be overly ambitious, the community of Srisa Asoke would surely cease to exist without this kind of conscious working together.

Building society

The third stage of the Asoke development model is directed toward “outside” Thai society. As mentioned above, sacrifice is a key element of the Asoke Buddhist way of life. The act of giving is training in selflessness or non-self, the pillar of Buddhism. Giving to make merit, the currency of spiritual wealth, is a common practice for Thai Buddhists. Yet while most Thais give offerings solely to temples, Asoke Buddhists reverse the flow to benefit the wider community of monastics, ordinary people (Asoke and non-Asoke alike), and the environment they live in.

The Asoke movement aids material and spiritual development in Thai society in a great many ways. Like many other religious groups, the Asoke movement distributes free publications about their philosophy and activities for children and adults. In addition, since the Asoke movement views vegetarianism as the most vital practice in upholding the precepts, members run inexpensive vegetarian restaurants and give away vegetarian food once a year to honor the King’s birthday. The Asoke movement also sacrifices to outside society through daily community markets like Srisa Asoke’s Goodwill Store and the annual Noble Market held during the national Asoke New Year’s Festival. The main purpose of these nonprofit markets is to provide the Thai public with low-cost, useful goods; however, they also serve as vehicles to convey the concept of meritism.

The most time-, energy-, and resource-intensive, outwardly-oriented activities are free trainings in the Asoke way of life. Aside from the elementary

and secondary boarding school with 200 students, hundreds of visitors come to Srisa Asoke each month for an afternoon tour or a four-day seminar. The seminars, called “Dharma Builds People; People Build the Nation,” aim to teach ordinary Thais specific knowledge and skills in the area of (Asoke) Buddhist morality and occupation. In particular, the Asoke model of right occupation comprises the “Three Professions to Save the Nation.” These professions—natural agriculture, chemical-free fertilizer, and waste management—form a circuit in which organic waste is composted fertilizer for the plants; people eat the vegetables, and the remains become fertilizer again. According to Asoke members, these professions will “save the nation” for many reasons: 1) everyone must eat; 2) agriculture is better suited for Thailand’s climate and environment than industry; and 3) with these professions, people can be self-dependent. The Three Professions are certainly appropriate for the Northeastern region populated by impoverished farmers. On a broader level, the concept resonates with national protests against the 17.2 billion dollar IMF bailout loan in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis that called for (national) self-reliance instead of reliance on foreigners.

In addition to these outreach programs, some Srisa Asoke residents see themselves as preserving Thai culture through their dress, buildings, livelihood, and manners. There is concern within the Asoke movement as well as among many other Thais that Thailand’s “traditional” culture is being replaced by a new culture centered on money and materially derived status.³² Yet Ah Ai, an English-speaking, critical thinking Thai Mormon who lives at Srisa Asoke, wonders how “traditional” can be pinpointed when culture is always changing:

What they’re always talking about is they want to restore the nation—what you call—to not be like America—to (not be) dominated by other nationalism. Because they say this is a cultural community. But I think we can keep our culture while we receive other culture—this has happened in Thailand since the past. If they want to keep Thai culture, they must have long hair and do something like this, like in Sukhothai period (he pantomimes winding hair into a topknot). . . . I think culture is not for keeping. It should grow. Something better, you receive it and modify it. . . . Even language—so if you want to keep Thai culture, you have to get rid of Pali and Sanskrit language because it’s not Thai, it’s Indian. Even Buddhism is Indian.³³

In reality, Asoke people select from a wide array of ideas and techniques available to them from global, regional, local, and historical sources, such

as modern information technology, natural farming methods from Japan, Western environmental concepts, and existing Thai cultural practices. In the imaginative combination of these elements, something entirely new is fashioned.

Lastly, the Asoke movement may help Thai society in the political arena as well. During the late 1980s, members of the Asoke movement had a brief foray into politics, by acting as “watchdogs” against corruption (particularly vote buying, bribery, and misappropriation of funds) in Governor Chamlong Srimuang’s Bangkok offices and by campaigning with Chamlong’s Force of Dharma Party for seats in parliament. This political activity was potentially threatening to the establishment and was effectively stopped short by a court case in which Samana Bodhirak and his followers were charged with impersonating monks. Now that the dust has settled from the decade-long court battle, Asoke members are once again considering politics as a forum for spreading Dharma. There is no overt campaigning at present, but the Asoke movement is collecting signatures to establish a political party called “For Sky and Earth.” Bier, a twenty-year-old former Asoke student who now volunteers at Srisa Asoke, is not shy about his aspiration to be Prime Minister in 25 years. Bier also has “500 friends all across Thailand” who also hope to serve their country as a “new kind of politician” who is honest and hard-working.

At this time, Srisa Asoke is experiencing imbalance between community development and development of society. Residents identified “too few able-bodied adults” and “incomplete self-dependence” as significant obstacles to community development. From my observations, these obstacles have a common source: Srisa Asoke residents are overwhelmed with caring for 200 boarding school students and hundreds of visitors who come each month for tours and trainings; and thus, they have little time for agricultural work. Clearly, an Asoke community would try to accommodate outsiders who wish to learn since the movement’s main objective is to spread the Buddha’s teachings. Unfortunately, by spreading themselves too thin, Srisa Asoke members impede their ability to make their community an example for others to follow. Despite this criticism, the Asoke group deserves applause for actively pursuing solutions to perceived societal problems while so many others complain but do nothing.

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to frame the Asoke way of life as a development model that is culturally and environmentally appropriate, focused on livelihoods rather than economic growth, and is endogenously inspired, implemented, and maintained. It is not intended as a new meta-strategy to replace conventional development, but underscores the notion that different problems require different solutions. It may not even be an approach that is reproducible throughout Thailand. Many non-Asoke Thais I spoke with felt that the Asoke way of life was too austere for them and not amenable to urban living. However, for those who are willing, the Asoke movement offers a viable alternative to the modern, capitalist lifestyle so prevalent in Bangkok. In fact, the seven Asoke communities that continue to thrive throughout the nation's economic troubles are a testament to the movement's success in raising the quality of life for ordinary people.

Yet there is more to this story than material development. As the abbot of the Santa Asoke Buddhist Center in Bangkok stated, if people come for purely economic reasons, they come for the wrong reasons and soon leave. At Srisa Asoke and other Asoke communities, the atmosphere is one of genuine effort to be a better person, to fulfill the human potential by following the (Asoke) Buddhist Path. Thus, for Asoke members who endeavor to be "good people," to be self-dependent and make sacrifices to mend society's problems, material and spiritual development are inextricably intertwined.

Notes

¹Bangkok Post, September 13, 1999.

²Mulder, Niels. 1996. *Inside Thai Society: Interpretations of Everyday Life*. Amsterdam: The Pepin Press, p. 129.

³Tambiah, S. J. 1968. "The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai Village." In *Dialectic in Practical Religion*. E. Leach, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 41.

⁴Weber, Max. 1958. *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

⁵Redfield, Robert. 1956. *Peasant Society and Culture*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

⁶Obeyesekere, Ganath. 1968. "Theodicy, Sin, and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism." In *Dialectic in Practical Religion*. E. Leach, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 26.

⁷Tambiah, S. J. 1970. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cult in North-east Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 263.

⁸Keyes, Charles. 1983. "Introduction: The Study of Popular Ideas of Karma." In *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*. C. Keyes and E. V. Daniel, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁹Tambiah, S. J. 1984. *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study of Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University of Press.

¹⁰"Than" is the Thai honorific title appropriate for monks.

¹¹Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. 1956. *Handbook for Mankind*. Bangkok: The Sublime Life Mission, p. 3.

¹²Obeyesekere 1968, p. 27.

¹³Payutto, P. A. 1995. *Good, Evil, and Beyond: Kamma in the Buddha's Teaching*. Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation.

¹⁴Tambiah 1968, p. 69.

¹⁵Personal interview, March 2001.

¹⁶Seri Phongphit. 1988. *Religion in a Changing Society: Buddhism, Reform, and the Role of Monks in Community Development in Thailand*. Hong Kong: Arena Press.

¹⁷Somboon Suksamran. 1988. "A Buddhist Approach to Development: The Case of Development Monks in Thailand." In *Reflections of Development in Southeast Asia*. Lim Teck Ghee, ed. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

¹⁸Darlington, Susan. 1998. "The Ordination of a Tree: The Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand." *Ethnology* 37:1.

¹⁹For examples, see Sanituda Ekachai. 1994. *Seeds of Hope: Local Initiatives in Thailand*. Bangkok: Thai Development Support Committee; and Taylor, Jim L. 1997. "Thamma-chāt: Activist Monks and Competing Discourses of Nature and Nation in Northeastern Thailand." In *Seeing Forests for Trees: Environment and Environmentalism in Thailand*. P. Hirsch, ed. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

²⁰Cited in Heikkil-Horn, Marja-Leena. 1996. "Two Paths to Revivalism in Thai Buddhism: The Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke Movements." *Temenos* 32, p. 97.

²¹Asoke. 1989. *Insight Into Santi Asoke, part I*. Bangkok: Dharma Santi Foundation Press, p. 9.

²²Bangkok Post July 22, 1989.

²³Personal interview, February 2001.

²⁴Personal interview, February 2001.

²⁵Certainly, there are a few houses holding more things: Ah Warn had no idea what to bring to live up country (although her husband forbid her to bring the microwave) and Ah Ai's family likes to play instruments and watch videos together. However, both individuals are middle-class Bangkokians and neither feels fully integrated into the community.

²⁶Ah Oi, personal interview, April 2001.

²⁷Ah Jaenjop, personal interview, April 2001.

²⁸Personal interview, April 2001.

²⁹<http://ksc.goldsite.com/Suanmokkharchive/garden1a.htm>

³⁰Personal interview, April 2001.

³¹For example, Apinya Fuengfusakul. 1993. "Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravada Reform in Thailand." *Sojourn* 8:1.

³²For example, see *Bangkok Post*, July 27, 1997.

³³Personal interview, March 2001.