

NEW BUDDHIST MOVEMENTS IN THAILAND

Towards an understanding of
Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke

Rory Mackenzie

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THE HISTORY OF THE SANTI ASOKE MOVEMENT AND A DESCRIPTION OF ITS VARIOUS COMMUNITIES

Rak Rakphong and the founding of the Santi Asoke movement¹

The founder of Santi Asoke, Rak Rakphong, was born in 1934 in Srisaket, a province in North-East Thailand. He was named Mongkol by his Chinese father and Thai mother. His mother died when he was a teenager and he worked hard supporting his six brothers and sisters. During his studies at Poh Chang College of Arts and Crafts, he changed his name from Mongkol to Rak.² After graduation from college in 1958, Rak began working with a Bangkok TV station, in time becoming well known as a song composer and TV programmer.

Rak's spiritual search took him to 'black magic', faith healing, hypnotism and mediumship before focusing on the teachings of the Buddha (*Bangkok Post*, 22.7.88).

He shocked his family and friends by shaving his head, wearing only simple white clothes and going round barefoot. By the time he finally decided to resign from his job, he had been a strict vegetarian for a number of years.

(Poompanna, 1989:12)

In his autobiography the Asoke leader describes an insight experience he had which convinced him he was an *ariya*, or worthy disciple of the Buddha.

At two o'clock in the morning of Tuesday January 1970 I woke up and walked from my bedroom into the bathroom to relieve myself. Suddenly a brilliant flash occurred within me – a brightness, openness, and detachment which could not be explained in human terms. I knew only that my life opened before me and that the whole world seemed to be revealed. I knew at that moment that I had no more doubts.

(Swearer, 1991:180)

In November 1970, aged 36, Rak was ordained as a monk by Phra Ratchaworakhun, abbot of Wat Asokaram, a Thammayut monastery in Samut Prakaan, some 20 kilometres from Bangkok. One probable reason for the choice of monastery was its association with the ascetic practices of the Thai forest

tradition. On his ordination Rak was given the Pāli monastic name of Bodhiraksa, Bodhirak in Thai.³

It would appear that Bodhirak was not only strict in his practice of Buddhism but he was intolerant of those who he considered to be lax in their spiritual practice. He began to preach sermons to the laity denouncing his fellow monks for superstitious practices, smoking and eating meat (although this is not forbidden in the *vinaya*) and being lazy. In his preaching he taught that, if his fellow monks 'were not able to give up crude *kilesa* (moral blemishes) such as these, they would not be able to give up subtle *kilesa* and so progress towards *nibbāna*' (Jackson, 1989:161). Bodhirak's call to disciplined living struck a chord with a number of lay people but understandably drew fire from his fellow monks who regarded him as being divisive. Bodhirak justified his critical remarks by maintaining that his state of insight gave him the ability to discern the spiritual behaviour of another, and placed on him the responsibility to correct (what he considered to be) substandard behaviour and teaching.

Bodhirak is recorded as saying 'I am frank. And loud. I am not a nanny. My job is not to cradle the baby gently' (*Bangkok Post*, 22.7.88). On another occasion he justified his forthright approach as follows:

There is a misconception that the Buddha only said nice things that fell easily on the ears. Once, after one of his sermons, 60 monks died suddenly because of the hard-hitting teachings, 60 resigned, and the other 60 attained enlightenment. No one has died or resigned because of my teaching yet.

(*Bangkok Post*, 22.7.88)

Bodhirak's lively and controversial teaching drew a following of both Thammayut and Mahānikai monks and lay people. He referred to his followers as the 'Asoke group', and they met outside Nakhorn Pathom, some 50 kilometres west of Bangkok. Bodhirak's 'Thammayut preceptor strongly objected to Bodhirak's project and demanded that he resign his Thammayut membership by turning in his official monastic identification card' (Swearer, 1991:670). The preceptor's objection was based on the fact that there were Mahānikai monks in Bodhirak's group. In 1973 Bodhirak handed back his monk's registration card to the abbot of Wat Asokaram and was re-ordained at a Mahānikai monastery at Nakhorn Pathom. Bodhirak continued to develop his own religious centre, known as Daen Asoke, situated at Kampanaen, some 40 kilometres from the provincial town of Nakhorn Pathom. There he and his followers practised what they considered to be the basic teachings of the Buddha, free from sectarian division and state control. He initially refused to register his centre as required by the Department of Religious Affairs, justifying his action as follows:

I do not need to be affiliated with either the Thammayut or Mahānikai because I was ordained into Buddhism. I do not wish to be either

Mahānikai or Thammayut because in the time of the Buddha there was no *nikai*.

(Jackson, 1989:161)

Dr Tavivat Puntiarigvivat is of the opinion that Bodhirak's background was such that he had no family affiliations to either Mahānikai or Thammayut, but that he also had a poor grasp of Theravāda Buddhism.⁴

Initial separation from the *Saṅgha* and growth of the Santi Asoke movement

Bodhirak eventually registered Daen Asoke as a monastery, as the provincial *Saṅgha* governor threatened to inform the police that he was contravening *The 1962 Saṅgha Act* (Jackson, 1989:161).⁵ In 1975, the *Saṅgha* governor of Nakhon Pathom province pressurised the abbot of Nong Kratum temple (who was well respected by the Asoke and local communities), to force Asoke monastics to wear the normal saffron robes, rather than the brown robes they had adopted.⁶ According to Swearer (1991:670), Asoke was also instructed to dismantle their accommodation⁷ at Daen Asoke.⁸ The abbot of Nong Kratum temple was reprimanded by the provincial *Saṅgha* governor for not dealing effectively with Santi Asoke, and when the abbot subsequently fell ill, this was viewed by the local community as being the indirect fault of Asoke. Bodhirak's response was to require the *Mahā thera samakom* to deal directly with him, rather than pressuring the abbot of Wat Nong Kratum (Feungfusakul, 1993:91). Bodhirak thus declared himself completely independent from the Mahānikai and Thammayut groupings, and the enforcing mechanism of state-regulated Thai Buddhism.

The *Mahā thera samakom* were unable to respond effectively to Bodhirak's unprecedented action. This slow and weak response to the Asoke community gave the movement time to grow and develop.⁹ The community in Nakhon Pathom province attracted the support of a number of lower middle and working-class people who felt that the state regulated *Saṅgha* favoured the establishment, who continued to marginalise them. Bodhirak's background prior to becoming a monk (Chinese father, poor circumstances and hard work until finally becoming well known and prosperous) was also attractive to this section of Thai society, as many of them had struggled to educate themselves and rise out of poor circumstances. Bodhirak's criticisms of 'superstitious' practice and his rationalistic approach to Buddhism certainly sat comfortably with this education-valuing group who favoured an approach to their religion based on rigorous self-effort, and rationalism.¹⁰

In 1976, three Asoke centres were established (Swearer, 1991:670).¹¹ These were: Santi Asoke in the then outskirts of Bangkok, Sri Saket in North-East Thailand and Sali Asoke in Phai Sali, Central Thailand. Feungfusakul (1993:92) mentions the mobile nature of the Asoke communities. Rather than depending on people coming to their centres, or focusing on the homes of members, they move out to where the people are. As they travel around, the Asoke monastics and lay people walk barefoot, eating

only one vegetarian meal per day, and sleeping in the evenings in a *klot*.¹² Thus, the Asoke interpretation of the *Dhamma* is taught from place to place. Indeed, the Asoke term for this peripatetic activity is *charik*, meaning ‘to roam’.¹³ This ‘roaming’ was distinct from the forest monks’ approach which usually involved individual monks going to remote parts to practise meditation in solitude. The Asoke approach included both monastic and laity, involved a considerable number of people and focused on the urban rather than the rural.¹⁴ As a result, a large number of people were presented with the Asoke message. Some, particularly those who felt themselves to be suffering, or not receiving the justice they deserved, aligned themselves to the group.

The *charik* facilitates the spiritual development of those who participate. The practice involves a high level of self-discipline, and mindfulness in all activity undertaken, particularly walking barefoot. Not only does this lead to a building up of strength and self-discipline but it also improves concentration eventually, it is said, leading to enlightenment.¹⁵ As participants listen to sermons from the monks, and talk to people about Asoke belief and practice, and how these beliefs have led to a great reduction in suffering for them personally, they are strengthened in their beliefs and practice.

In 1977, the Dhammasanti Foundation was founded. This branch of the Asoke movement deals with the production and distribution of literature, varying from monthly news letters to doctrinal books written by Bodhirak.

In November 1979, the *Mahā therā samakom* met to consider Bodhirak and his growing group of followers. They sought to challenge Bodhirak’s credibility and described the movement as being subversive, levelling the following charges against the Asoke community:

- Many of the monks had been being incorrectly ordained. According to Thai monastic law, the preceptor who sponsors an ordination must have been a monk for at least ten years. Some monks at Bodhirak’s centre were officially ordained elsewhere but others were ordained by Bodhirak who had not been ordained for the required length of time;
- Bodhirak’s monks wrongly criticised other Buddhist monks for being lax in their practice;
- Bodhirak’s monks disseminated propaganda which promoted a misunderstanding of the *vinaya*;
- Bodhirak’s monks advertised themselves as being disaffiliated from the Thai *Saṅgha*.

(Jackson, 1989:169)

Bodhirak was therefore accused of threatening the well-being of Buddhism and the security of the nation. Consequently the *Mahā therā samakom* instructed all abbots in Thailand to keep a careful watch on the activities of Santi Asoke.

Perhaps Santi Asoke’s most vocal critic is Phra Anan Senakhan (Chayananto). In 1982, while ordained as a monk, Anan published a book heavily criticising

Bodhirak for not conforming to traditional practice and for disassociating himself from the *Saṅgha*.¹⁶ In fact, Anan is also critical of monks who are *superstitious* and/or lax in their practice, stating that such practice only strengthens Bodhirak's case.¹⁷ Anan and Bodhirak are both critical of what they consider to be substandard practice within the *Saṅgha*; Anan, however, wishes to purify from the inside, while Bodhirak pursues a 'back to basics' approach, in open confrontation with the *Saṅgha*.

Certainly Anan, a police officer prior to his ordination into Thammayut monastic orders, was pro-Thai bureaucracy and wants to see the state protection and favour of the *Saṅgha* continue. In return, the *Saṅgha* should continue to legitimise the government so that Buddhism prospers because of central control. Bodhirak did not come from a family with government connections. His working-class Chinese background means he is marginalised by Thai bureaucracy.

Anan and an associate made an official complaint at the beginning of 1982 to the Commander of the Suppression Division of Bangkok police (Jackson, 1989:173). The result was that the *Mahā thera samakom* 'eventually wrote to the police advising that they should find more facts and conduct more investigations before proceeding further with the case' (Jackson, 1989:174). Phra Anan¹⁸ responded by saying that the statement should have been released a long time ago but said that the secretariat had been more concerned with the *Rattana Kosin* bicentennial celebrations recently (*Bangkok Post*, 1.7.82).¹⁹

A number of dynamics come into play here, but two brief comments are relevant. First, Bodhirak keeps the *vinaya* and according to the *vinaya* he had taken no action (not even the returning of his ordination certificate to his preceptor) to suggest that he is not a monk. However, in terms of *The Saṅgha Act of 1962*, Bodhirak could be accused of substandard practice with regard to a number of issues.²⁰ Clearly, the difference between the *vinaya* and the state imposed *Saṅgha* acts is a very difficult issue to resolve for the *Mahā thera samakom* and to a lesser extent, the Department of Religious Affairs. Second, the emergence of the middle class and their increasing ability to articulate their political and social views lessens the establishment's ability to act as it might wish. Indeed, it has to be said that there are those within the new elite who are anti-establishment.

Santi Asoke, Chamlong Srimuang and Thai politics in the 1980s

During the 1988 General Elections, the spotlight shone once again on Santi Asoke due to the campaign of Major General Chamlong Srimuang to become governor of Bangkok. Chamlong, born in 1935 into a lower-middle-class family, had been a high-profile figure in Thai politics since his appointment in 1980 as Secretary General to Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond.

Known as *mahā* for living a frugal, highly religious life, and eating only one vegetarian meal a day, the *Bangkok Post* (3.8.81) points out Chamlong's commitment to his work, leaving home at 6.30 am and returning at 10 pm²¹

When asked why so many senior monks had so many worldly possessions, he replied 'I now have so many enemies, don't let me have more among senior monks.' Chamlong travelled around the country giving talks or sermons to various groups of people. On these occasions he would sleep outside under a *klot* just like a wandering forest monk. Of course, Chamlong travelled beyond the confines of Thailand. When he did he attracted attention due to his ascetic lifestyle, as the following quote indicates:

The star of General Prem Tisulanonda's trip to Australia last week was apparently not the prime minister himself but his 46 year old Secretary General Col Chamlong Srimuang. The *Melbourne Age* pointed up the colonel's practice of eating one vegetarian meal each day, practising celibacy along with his wife and his crackdown on bars and night-clubs which made him unpopular with tourists.

(*Bangkok Post*, 12.7.86)

It was in 1981 that Chamlong had launched his first political campaign. His leadership and rhetoric skills focused on the defeating of a proposed abortion bill. With the backing of a group of Santi Asoke supporters, Chamlong organised a series of pro-life, nationwide meetings. Despite drawing cross-party support, and engaging in successful rally-style politics (which was later to become a hallmark of his political style), he was unable to stop the bill becoming law (McCargo, 1993:84). Indeed, the first reading in the House of Representatives resulted in a 79 to 3 vote to legalise abortion, with many politicians abstaining. This resulted in Chamlong resigning his position as secretary general in disgust (*Bangkok Post*, 21.10.81). Chamlong's position is that according to Buddhism, life begins when an ovum mixes with sperm. Abortion then breaks the First Precept (the taking of life). It also contradicts the Second Precept which forbids theft because abortion 'is tantamount to stealing the life of a baby' (*Bangkok Post*, 25.5.88).

Chamlong and his wife Sirilak were both active in the Santi Asoke movement. In 1981, Chamlong set up the 'Dhamma Army Foundation'. The name of this charitable trust 'suggested an early Chamlongian vision of Santi Asoke, as a military force engaged in a form of moral Buddhist warfare' (McCargo, 1993:85). Some 3 years later, Chamlong established the 'Dhamma Practitioners' Association'.²² Chamlong was promoted from colonel to major general in October 1985 but resigned two days later in order to take part in civil elections for governor of Bangkok. A good number of Santi Asoke practitioners formed the core of Chamlong's support group²³ which helped him reach an overwhelming victory in his quest to become Bangkok's governor in 1985.²⁴ Chamlong was the first ever independent candidate to be elected governor of the capital (*Bangkok Post*, 15.11.85) and the first elected governor in a decade of Interior Ministry appointments (*Asia Magazine* 11.1.87). Of course, there were others outside the Santi Asoke network who helped Chamlong to victory, principally a number of loyal military associates. In spite of the obvious close relationship between

Chamlong and his Santi Asoke supporters, an appearance of detachment between the two was maintained in public (McCargo, 1993:87).

In 1988 Chamlong set up the Phalang Dhamma political party.²⁵ The party was able to meet the Interior Ministry's criterion of 5,000 members spread widely throughout the country before it could be registered. This was made possible through the nationwide Asoke network. Indeed, 10,310 names were submitted as members of Phalang Dhamma (McCargo, 1993:89). The new party decided to contest more seats than any other party for the elections of 24 July, and most of the party's executive committee and around half of the candidates who contested for seats outside Bangkok were known followers of Santi Asoke.²⁶ Bodhirak's approach was to encourage his lay followers to be politically engaged and indeed viewed such activity as *Dhamma* activity or practice. Santi Asoke members may well have been advised to vote for the Phalang Dhamma Party and certainly would not be expected to support a candidate whose moral views were in conflict with the Santi Asoke movement. Bodhirak publicly expressed his support for Chamlong before the elections, but apparently predicted that the party would not do well. It should be pointed out that many of the candidates were rejects from mainstream parties. The party was extremely disappointed as only 14 out of its 295 candidates were elected to parliament. Only one candidate was a Santi Asoke practitioner. Chamlong was disheartened with the result because of heavy vote buying and a low turnout of voters in the capital (*Bangkok Post*, 28.7.88).

At the time of the 1988 elections, many opponents of the Santi Asoke movement felt that Chamlong's position as governor of Bangkok and his membership of Santi Asoke gave a certain protection to the Asoke movement. Chamlong enjoyed a good relationship with General Prem, the then prime minister. General Prem was trying to 'clean up' national politics, Chamlong was attempting to do the same in the metropolis, and Bodhirak had introduced rigorous standards into the way Asoke practised Buddhism. Yet Chamlong's association with Santi Asoke at this time was not entirely positive. Aspersions were cast on Santi Asoke for having a political agenda. Bodhirak had gone on record during the run-up to the elections as saying 'religion and politics are one and the same' and clearly many senior monks were alarmed by this mix of religion and politics.

The ascetic practice and frequent references to Buddhist teaching was perceived as evidence of Chamlong's moral goodness (*kwam di*). Chamlong was viewed as a politician with moral stature and charisma (*pāramī*), which had a particular drawing power. Politicians and army generals often seek out ascetic monks who have a good reputation and ask for a blessing (usually a fairly public ceremony). This 'stamp of approval' by the monastic evidenced in his blessing of the leader gives a measure of credibility to the leader. McCargo (1993:43) points out that Chamlong 'unifies the secular and the sacred in a single personage, [and] already possesses the kind of spiritual "credibility" which many other prominent figures in Thailand so conspicuously lack'.

Chamlong was very popular as governor, having a reputation as an anti-corruption, simple living, wise leader.²⁷ Whilst governor of Bangkok, Chamlong

spent his entire entertainment budget on providing breakfasts for the capital's street sweepers. This was served by Chamlong and his top aides. Indeed, Chamlong who normally rises at 3 am has been known to join the street sweepers in their early morning cleaning (McCargo, 1993:54). The thesis Chamlong completed for his MSc degree was on labour unrest in Thailand. His understanding of working-class mentality brought about by his studies and upbringing meant he related well to manual workers. That said many street sellers allegedly expressed their disappointment with Chamlong as he moved them off Bangkok streets in his attempts to clean up the city (McCargo, 1993:61).

Of course, not everyone found Chamlong's style of governance attractive!

Some critics see him as a Thai Buddhist version of the Ayatollah Komeini. Others say that he is an uncompromising man who cannot take criticism lightly, that he will become a dictator if he attains power, that all that he has done for the last two years is sweep the streets of Bangkok.

(Bangkok Post, 2.11.88).

Clearly, Chamlong's agenda was driven by his ascetic nature, desire for cleanliness and belief that greed should be curbed (all Santi Asoke distinctives). His goal to reduce the national debt and focus on moral rather than economic development meant he did not invest in urgently needed public programmes such as better waste-disposal systems and public health. Of course, setting up systems gave businessmen the opportunity to engage in corrupt activities, something Chamlong was particularly keen to stamp out.

Another attack on the Asoke movement came as a result of the criticisms of Samak Sundaravej, leader of the Prachakorn Thai Party. Working closely with the conservative Buddhist movement Parian Dhamma Samaakhom, the Prachakorn Thai Party distributed 5,000 eight-page booklets in central Bangkok, criticising Santi Asoke and their involvement with Phalang Dhamma. A Parian Dhamma Samaakhom banner displayed on a truck read 'Choose Phalang Santi Asoke to be MP's and get a sexually abnormal person for prime minister and Bodhirak Bhikkhu as head of a new Buddhist order' (McCargo, 1993:91).²⁸

The assistant abbot of Wat Bovornnivet, Phra Sophon Ganabhorn, declared that 'Santi Asoke could be a threat to the stability of Buddhism within Thailand' (McCargo, 1993:92).²⁹ The idea here is that if Chamlong became Prime Minister, and/or if Phalang Dhamma obtained a strong presence in parliament, Santi Asoke could become a legitimate fraternity like Mahānikai and Thammayut, and this could lead to a detrimental change of the status quo in state-regulated Buddhism. Immediately after polling was completed on 24 June 1988, Phra Dhammapitaka (Prayudh Payutto) released an unbound booklet entitled *Karani Santi Asoke*.³⁰ The booklet criticised the support Santi Asoke offered the Phalang Dhamma Party, and while it did not influence the outcome of the election, it was calling for a serious examination of Santi Asoke's approach to political involvement.

Ecclesiastic and civil court proceedings against the Santi Asoke movement

After considerable discussions between the *Mahā thera samakom* Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education and the National Security Council, Bodhirak was approached in September 1988 with the following five point proposal:

- Asoke has to come back under the control of the *Mahā thera samakom*;
- Asoke has to be legally registered with the Department of Religious Affairs. This would require the approval of the *Mahā thera samakom*;³¹
- Asoke has to stop criticising the *Mahā thera samakom*;
- Asoke has to discontinue its activities;
- The authorities will not take any measures against Asoke.

(adapted from Feungfusakul, 1993:183)

Santi Asoke rejected this five point proposal. On 23 May 1989 an assembly of 150 senior monks meeting at the Buddha Monton Centre on the outskirts of Bangkok, unanimously agreed to ask the Ecclesiastical Council to defrock Phra Bodhirak for allegedly defying and distorting the *Saṅgha's* discipline. The Supreme Patriarch and chair of the meeting, Somdet Phra Yana Sangvorn lauded the senior monks' decision, saying the move would be a 'blessing to Buddhism'. Describing Santi Asoke's refusal to come under the Ecclesiastical Council as 'a thorny issue subverting the religion and the *Saṅgha*,' the Supreme Patriarch went on to compare the Asoke issues to the controversies which arose in the *Saṅgha* after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha when some monks challenged the Buddha's teachings. The chairman of the Ecclesiastical Council, Phra Thera Yana Mune of Wat Pathum Kongka, informed the gathering that Bodhirak's denunciation of the Ecclesiastical Council posed a major threat to Buddhism (*Bangkok Post*, 24.6.89).

In response, Bodhirak pointed out that the Ecclesiastical Council's 'action was severe and provocative, but that he and his group would show mercy towards the council because it does not know what it is doing'. The Asoke leader commented that monks who pass judgement should be monks who do not break the monastic code of conduct imposed by the Buddha and questioned how many of the monks who passed judgement on him practice all the precepts (*Bangkok Post*, 31.5.89). Bodhirak went on to apply that piece of polemic by adding 'according to Buddhist law, monks with sins cannot judge other monks'. Sunai Sethboonsan, an Asoke follower and assistant secretary to the Bangkok governor, Chamlong Srimuang said that 'the reaction against Asoke was fuelled by jealousy of other monks at the movement's popular appeal to a large number of followers' (*Bangkok Post*, 3.6.89). Sunai went on to suggest a debate between the two disagreeing factions (i.e. Santi Asoke and the Ecclesiastical Council).

The well-known social critic, Sulak Sivaraksa, responded to the crisis by urging Santi Asoke to leave the *Saṅgha* and become an independent entity with a new name and a change of uniform, commenting that Asoke should not be so obsessed

with the saffron robe. Sulak demonstrated even-handedness by making the point that ‘*The Saṅgha Act of 1962* upon which the verdict against Bodhirak was based had its origins in a time when Thailand was under the dictatorial rule of the late Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat’ (*Bangkok Post*, 3.6.89).

The government clearly did not wish this controversy to escalate, or to draw criticism of the *Saṅgha* leadership. Interior minister Police General Pramarn Adireksarn ‘ordered the Special Branch to “request” the press to refrain from favourable coverage of the Buddhist centre [Santi Asoke] which is in conflict the Ecclesiastical Council. Closure threats were also levelled against media running stories, cartoons and photographs deemed to ridicule the council or give a negative image of Buddhism’ (*Bangkok Post*, 4.6.89). General Pramarn is recorded as defending himself by saying he was ‘merely seeking co-operation from newspapers and had not ordered them to refrain from covering the issue’. The Reporters’ Association of Thailand, although critical of General Pramarn, did not make an official complaint as the warning from the Interior Ministry had been verbal, not written (*Bangkok Post*, 4.6.89).

Bodhirak, after discussions with the Minister of Education on 9 June 1989, agreed to stop using the title ‘*phra*’ and start wearing a different colour and style of robe from the mainstream monks.³² According to Bodhirak’s lawyer, Thongbai Thongpao, ‘Bodhirak even consented not to identify his institutional activities with the word Buddha’ (Poompanna, 1991:23). Phra Sophon Kanaporn, deputy abbot of Wat Bovornnivet, claimed that Bodhirak’s change of robes was ‘a trick to gain public sympathy’. He expressed the official line that Bodhirak’s activities during the past years have been a ‘threat to the teachings of the Lord Buddha’, and that Bodhirak is ‘destroying the whole structure of Buddhism in this country, creating disunity and causing the people to go astray’ (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:71). Bodhirak’s compromise was not sufficient for the Ecclesiastical Council and the Education Minister Mana Rattanakoses insisted that the Asoke leader must agree to a formal defrocking ceremony before 17 June 1989 (*Bangkok Post*, 13.6.89).

A face-saving approach was taken by the National Tactical Operations Centre in an attempt to resolve the ecclesiastical conflict. It was reported that the plan had been presented to Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, thus indicating the seriousness with which the conflict was now being taken. Bodhirak reported the loss of his identity card at Lard Prao police station. The monk then went to Bangkok district office where he was photographed and provided with a temporary identity card in the name of Rak Rakpong, aged 55. ‘One of Santi Asoke’s lawyers, Police Lt-Colonel Rungrot Roengrit, who accompanied Bodhirak to the district office, said the centre’s 79 other “monks” would begin applying for ID cards today’ (*Bangkok Post*, 16.6.89). Chaipak Siriwat, secretary to the Minister of Education maintained that ‘Bodhirak’s application for an ID card was sufficient to signify departure from the monkhood and he hoped the Ecclesiastical Council would be satisfied’ (*Bangkok Post*, 16.6.89). The same article which carried the headline ‘Santi Asoke leader is now a layman’ reported Phra Sophon Kanabhorn, assistant abbot of Wat Bovornnives, the leading Thammayut temple, as saying

‘Phra Bodhirak, in legal terms is no longer a monk’. The deputy abbot added ‘By the *Saṅgha* discipline, he should still have to utter the words that he is leaving the monkhood to complete the defrocking ceremony’.

The creative solution to the stand-off was unsuccessful and Phra Bodhirak was detained on 19 June 1989 ‘at the Police Private School in Bangkhen district on charges of violating *The Saṅgha Act of 1962* in failing to defrock himself.³³ The Santi Asoke leader was denied bail and his dark brown robe was changed for a white one at the detention centre’ (*Bangkok Post*, 20.6.89). Heikkilä-Horn (1997:71) informs us that the ‘Ministry of 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. The media coverage ban was a ploy to prevent Bodhirak’s expected criticism of the Thai *Saṅgha* and its leadership from reaching the public. Santi Asoke took the opportunity to inform people that their leader did not wish to defrock and that by reciting the formula that he wished to leave the monkhood Bodhirak would be telling a lie: Bodhirak was quoted ‘Would those senior persons who have *Dhamma* or ethics in mind be content to force someone to lie?’ (*Bangkok Post*, 20.6.89).

Bodhirak was apparently unperturbed by his detention. Some 50 lay members of the movement arrived at the Police Private School. These included the well-known, socially engaged pop singer Yuenyong Opakul (better known as Ad Carabao). Santi Asoke monks went about their alms rounds as usual, in the area around their temple. Prime Minister General Chatichai indicated that the ban on reporting the arrest of Asoke leader applied only to TV stations, and ‘the government felt it was not proper to give religious problems TV air time’. The prime minister continued ‘We think that some unsuitable pictures might be publicised. This is a sensitive issue. We did not intend to cover up anything. Newspapers are free to report on the issue’ (*Bangkok Post*, 21.6.89).

On 22 June 1989, Bodhirak was released on 20,000 Baht (£335) bail. The money was put up by an Asoke sympathiser. There had been representations from the Civil Liberties Union to permit bail for the Santi Asoke leader. The letter was signed by the union’s president, Professor Samphon Hunayon who noted that the charge, if sustained, carried a maximum penalty of only six months imprisonment, and should not be considered serious. He also indicated that Bodhirak gave no indication of planning to escape. Professor Somphon’s letter was in response to the refusal by the police to grant bail on the grounds that Phra Bodhirak’s ‘release could cause confusion and might trigger a confrontation between mainstream Buddhists and Santi Asoke followers’ (*Bangkok Post*, 22.6.89). On the same day the human rights lawyer, Thongbai Thongpao, agreed to defend Bodhirak. He commented ‘Bodhirak is no longer a monk in legal terms after he applied for an identification card’ (*Bangkok Post*, 22.6.89).

Police investigators recommended that the public prosecutor charge Bodhirak and ‘it was intended to set up a committee of 36 police officers to conduct further investigations in areas where Bodhirak’s disciples are located’ (*Bangkok Post*, 12.7.89). The following week it was reported that the abbot of Wat Pan-On in Muang District

was dismissed by a meeting of senior monks in Chiang Mai. The 43-year-old abbot was asked to sign a statement expressing his desire to resign for following the teachings of Santi Asoke. The abbot refused to sign the document, indicating that he went to many different centres such as Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Suan Mokkh to gain ideas about preaching the *Dhamma*. On 8 August 1989, all of the Asoke 105 clerics were detained for questioning at the Bangkhen Police Private School. Metropolitan Police Deputy Commissioner Police Major General Viroj Pao-In indicated that the police had now 'sufficient evidence to interrogate all Asoke monastics for allegedly defying Article 208 of the Penal Code'. This article 'specifies that whoever wrongfully dresses or uses a symbol to manifest that he is a priest, novice, holy man or clergyman of any religion is liable to imprisonment not exceeding one year, or a fine not exceeding 2,000 Baht, or both' (*Bangkok Post*, 9.8.89). On 9 August 1989 police released 26 of the 105 members of Santi Asoke 'after finding they were properly ordained as monks' (*Bangkok Post*, 12.8.89). The remaining seventy-nine monastics were released shortly after on bail of 8,000 Baht (£135) each.

Bodhirak and his seventy-nine clerical followers were ordered to be released on a temporary basis after investigators failed to complete their investigations in time. 'The Public Prosecutor said the eighty suspects were asked to report back to his office on 6 October 1989 for a decision on whether investigators had gathered sufficient evidence to support prosecution' (*Bangkok Post*, 9.9.89). A month later 1,500 people turned up to witness Bodhirak's second hearing. Defence lawyer Thongbai Thongpao cross-examined acting Director General of the Religious Affairs Department, Sanoh Puangpinyo.

Mr Tongbai pointed out that *The Saṅgha Act of 1962* does not prohibit the setting up of a new Buddhist sect and Article 25 of the constitution gives the Thai people the right to religious beliefs. 'Moreover, Mr Thongbai presented documents such as an ID card, which showed that Mr Rak [Bodhirak] had complied with the *Saṅgha Council's* order to disrobe him. Mr Sanoh reportedly failed to reply to many questions
(*Bangkok Post*, 5.10.89).

Defence lawyer Tongbai Thongpao was successful in his attempt to have the court consider as one case all 80 cases lodged against Phra Bodhirak and his 79 followers. 'Mr Tongbai reasoned that all 80 cases contain the same charges and require the same witnesses for examinations' (*Bangkok Post*, 21.2.90). Fifty-two lawyers were tasked to defend the accused who were being charged with imitating Buddhist monks (a violation of Article 208 of the Criminal Code). The trial was set for the first and third Thursdays of each month, and was appointed to be held in a civilian court. Amnesty International called on Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun and his government to drop legal action against the Santi Asoke leader and his seventy-nine followers, and end their persecution in court. The British-based human rights charity referred to each of the Asoke monastics as a 'potential prisoner of conscience' (*Bangkok Post*, 26.9.02).

The *Bangkok Post* of 30 December 1995 carried a summary of the court's findings. Bodhirak was not a monk authorised to conduct ordinations. He and his seventy-nine followers had no right to accept alms or wear saffron robes. The court sentenced Bodhirak to 66 months in prison and his followers to three months. The sentence was to be suspended for two years as there was no record of previous convictions. The court also found Bodhirak guilty for not meeting the defrocking deadline, although they acknowledged he stopped wearing the saffron robe and called himself Mr instead of *phra*. On the other hand, they noted he still received alms and referred to himself as *ātama*.³⁴ For this offence, the court handed down a six months suspended sentence to Bodhirak. The six-month sentence on the second charge was upheld by the Appeals Court on 19 March 1997. The 66-month suspended sentence (now for some reason 54 months) was upheld in the Supreme Court on 16 September 1998 (*Bangkok Post*, 17.9.98).

Santi Asoke, Chamlong Srimuang and Thai politics in the late 1980s and 1990s

Chamlong's association with Bodhirak clearly provided ammunition for his enemies to attack him. One week before the general election of 24 July 1988, Mr Sangwian Poorahong, president of the Parian Dhamma Association, expressed his organisation's intention to take action against Bodhirak because he had announced support for Chamlong and the Phalang Dhamma Party. Sangwian indicated that he would also 'ask the police department to investigate Phra Bodhirak and his followers for allegedly wearing Buddhist robes without authority'. He went on to say that if Santi Asoke were allowed to continue operating it 'could become a threat to the stability of Buddhism in Thailand' (*Bangkok Post*, 18.8.88). Sangwian acknowledged that Major General Chamlong had not violated the law, yet went on to protest that 'As a top administrator who could become prime minister in the future, he [Chamlong] should not support Santi Asoke, which has introduced a religious cult that could be detrimental to national security' (*Bangkok Post*, 18.7.88). Bodhirak responded the following day by saying 'he felt sorry for them [the Parian Dhamma Association] who misunderstood him but thanked them for thinking about him'. He went on to say 'he had not seen the Bangkok governor for several weeks'. The Asoke leader continued, 'We regard all people here (at the centre) as equals, and Governor Chamlong is one of the many people who are interested in studying the *Dhamma* at Santi Asoke' (*Bangkok Post*, 18.7.88).

In the *Bangkok Post* (29.5.89), Chamlong appeared in a photo taken at an Asoke monastery. He indicated that he had just returned from Surat Thani where he had spoken to several monks who practised the *Dhamma* at Suan Mokkh and they expressed sympathy for Santi Asoke.³⁵ He argued that Buddhādāsa, 'who is known never to hold reservations against corrupt practices of any monks, does not even say anything about Santi Asoke'. The governor pledged his attendance at a *Dhamma* ceremony the following week to mark a Santi Asoke anniversary. On the other hand,

there were some 14 members of the Phalang Dhamma Party who released a statement indicating that their party had no connection with Santi Asoke.

The only connection was that our leader Maj General Chamlong went to practice the *Dhamma* at Santi Asoke' said Dr Udomsilp Sriangnam, the party's Secretary-General. Dr Udomsilp said he could not understand why Santi Asoke, which taught people to be good, had been attacked. In contrast, monks who distributed *palad khik* amulets (depicting the male sexual organ) were praised.

(*Bangkok Post*, 25.5.89)

In January 1990, in the immediate wake of Bodhirak's trial, Chamlong was re-elected governor of Bangkok with a huge majority. Anti-Asoke members of the public sought to make an issue of the association between Chamlong and the outlawed movement.³⁶ Cleverly, Chamlong was able to cite the criminal court order on making public comments about Santi Asoke thereby silencing public criticism.³⁷ The relationship between Santi Asoke and Chamlong was a dilemma for the governor of Bangkok. While he trusted Asoke members who were politically involved with him, according to McCargo (1993:99) Chamlong did not wish Asoke members to be selected as parliamentary candidates as the connection with the movement was proving to be too problematic. There were those within Santi Asoke who continued to show respect to Chamlong but felt he could have done much more in their defence. Not only had many Asoke members volunteered their services to help Chamlong during his campaigns, but their political involvement had attracted both monastic and public criticism. Some may well have felt that this resulted in the ecclesiastic and civil court cases in 1988, following a period of relative silence.

In January 1992, Chamlong resigned his post as governor of Bangkok in order to stand for parliament. The Phalang Dhamma Party was very successful in the elections of March 1992, though according to McCargo (1997:102) there were virtually no Santi Asoke members among those elected from the Phalang Dhamma Party. A corollary of this was that Phalang Dhamma was perceived no longer to be closely associated with Santi Asoke. Indeed, there was a greater degree of tolerance towards the Asoke movement, possibly because it had been dealt with by the *Saṅgha*. When Suchinda, the non-elected army general who was imposed as the army's choice for prime minister, criticised Chamlong in parliament for trying to establish a new Buddhist order, he was not taken seriously. In fact, it was felt to be 'a ploy to divert attention from the real political issues at hand' (McCargo, 1997:102).

Chamlong's high-profile rally style of political protest, along with his fasting surprisingly went against him and the Phalang Dhamma Party in September 1992. The more people came to realise the 'blackness' of the events of May 1992, the more Chamlong was blamed (at least in part) for the deaths, injuries and disappearances (McCargo, 1997:276).³⁸ Chamlong's main political rival, Chuan Leekpai, was able to market his non-involvement in the protests of May 1992 as reasonable and polite,

claiming he had worked behind the scenes to help secure the king's intervention. McCargo (1997:278) points out that while some believed Chamlong had 'boldly risked his political future to challenge the NPKC's attempts to continue dictatorship', others (especially in Bangkok) favoured the democratic approach of Chuan to the confrontational approach of Chamlong.³⁹

Chuan as leader of the party (Democrats) with most votes was elected prime minister. Chamlong was relegated to the back-benches as he had indicated prior to the election that he would only serve as prime minister, and in no other capacity. Veteran politician and economist Boonchu Rojanastien became the Phalang Dhamma leader; party MP's, however, continued to meet at Chamlong's house on Tuesday mornings. This resulted in both of Thailand's English newspapers to referring to Chamlong as 'the party's de facto leader from January 1993 until September 1994, when he resumed formal leadership of Phalang Dhamma' (McCargo, 1997:284).

Although honoured as a pro-democracy hero overseas, Chamlong's popularity within Thailand was waning.⁴⁰ This was perhaps best brought home to Chamlong on 22 July 1993 when he went to pacify protestors against the government's decision to use part of Lumpini Park in central Bangkok as a workshop for the new overhead railway. McCargo (1997:285) comments 'the once-loved former city governor found himself booed and jeered by an angry crowd in a nasty incident which almost turned violent'.⁴¹ Chamlong was re-elected leader of Phalang Dhamma on 17 September 1994. This was despite the lack of support of half of the party's MP's who supported Boonchu, and felt Chamlong favoured the other half of the party which included some who were Asoke supporters. A month before the party elections, Bodhirak claimed that he had been calling on him [Chamlong] to withdraw from Phalang Dhamma since the MP's rebellion of 1990. He said that Chamlong had not taken his advice and had fallen into the trap of the Democrats because of power seekers among his party members (McCargo, 1997:290). It may well have been that the abbot could see that Chamlong was a 'yesterday man' in the ever-changing nature of Thai political life, and continued involvement would be unproductive for Chamlong, and therefore Santi Asoke.

Bodhirak's advice turned out to be sound. A change in the party's membership meant Chamlong had to make decisions based on compromise with ministers of a questionable political/financial reputation. After some months as deputy prime minister, Chamlong withdrew the support of Phalang Dhamma from the coalition government, which led to the collapse of the government led by Chuan Leekpai of the Democratic Party, and the general election of 2 July 1995. Chamlong resigned from leadership of Phalang Dhamma and was replaced by Taksin Shinawatra, satellite communications and mobile phone baron who was to become prime minister in 2000. Chamlong's attempt to return to his previous position was unsuccessful at the June 1996 elections for governor of Bangkok. Phalang Dhamma was virtually wiped out at the November 1996 general election, the Bangkok electorate dissatisfied with Taksin's political performance.

Chamlong and his wife Sirilak continue their association with Santi Asoke, but are not nearly as involved as they were during their years of political activity. They have a very small house (modelled on a monk's shelter, or Pāli *kuti*) in the grounds of Pathom Asoke, some 50 kilometres west of Bangkok, to which they sometimes retreat. Chamlong's energies are now focused on leadership training sessions for new generation politicians and emerging community and local government leaders. It could be argued that Chamlong's training programmes based in Kanchanaburi (Central Thailand) keep him from having more contact with Santi Asoke. There may also be some truth in the idea that Chamlong feels a certain 'loss of face' at not having listening to Bodhirak's advice to be less politically involved after ceasing to be Bangkok's governor.

Santi Asoke centres and activities

Santi Asoke in Bangkok

There are currently nine Santi Asoke centres in Thailand and each centre administers its own affairs. The Santi Asoke headquarters, located in the suburbs of Bangkok, 20 kilometres from the city centre, function loosely as the coordinating centre of the movement, with good transport links with the other centres. The land on which the temple and buildings are built was donated by an elderly female member. Surrounding land has been purchased, resulting in a fairly large centre. On the edge of the temple compound and fronting a very busy road are a number of shops and stalls belonging to the movement. The vegetarian restaurant is popular with Asoke supporters visiting the centre (especially at weekends) as well as non-Asoke members. Asoke members are pleased that non-Asoke vegetarian restaurants have recently opened up in the vicinity; there are now eight. The vegetable and fruit stalls, also noted for their value, are well patronised, as are the herbal medicine shops and the two supermarkets.

There is also a well-stocked air conditioned shop selling Asoke and other approved Buddhist publications and teaching tapes.⁴² The results of a questionnaire indicated that 18 per cent of the respondents were first drawn to Santi Asoke through reading the movement's literature.⁴³ This relatively high percentage is not surprising given that Santi Asoke has its own printing press (Fah Apai Co. Ltd.) and is dedicated to spreading its teaching through low-cost or even free literature designed for different target groups such as students and farmers.⁴⁴ Current printing projects include *San Asoke*, the monthly Asoke newsletter which has a circulation of 9,000 copies.⁴⁵ *Dok Bua Noi* ('The Little Lotus') is a magazine aimed at young teenagers and 8,000 copies are published every two months. *Row Kit Aray* ('What We Think') contains a lot of articles written by Bodhirak; it is also a bi-monthly magazine with a circulation of 2,500 copies. The most widely circulated publication (22,000 copies) is the bimonthly magazine *Dok Yaa* ('Daffodil'). Each of these publications make use of creative artwork and reflect Bodhirak's training and continuing interest in that area.

There were two respondents (3.2 per cent) who indicated that they were first attracted to Santi Asoke through listening to the movement's radio programmes. The Asoke communities in Bangkok and Nakhon Phatom both broadcast part-time on FM local radio and serve to build a bridge between the movement and the community.⁴⁶ Only one respondent indicated that she was drawn to the movement through listening to teaching tapes. Santi Asoke produces a lot of such tapes and videos and it is surprising that they do not figure more significantly as the entry point into Asoke.

In the lanes leading away from the main road there are a number of houses which have been converted into microfactories, where, for example, medicines are prepared and packed, literature stored and shampoo produced and bottled. There is a medium-sized library which contains mainly Thai language Buddhist titles. A volunteer librarian is on hand to help Asoke members or visitors with their questions.

Aesthetically, the focal point of Santi Asoke in Bangkok is the temple. The architectural style bears no resemblance to traditional Thai temples. The circular tower structure has seven floors, and has at its base a large man-made waterfall. The temple dome allegedly contains relics of the Buddha and *Arahats*. A number of Buddha images donated to the temple are housed in the dome as Bodhirak did not wish Asokans to develop a dependence on images. Indeed, he did not donate these images to other temples as he believed they already had too many images.⁴⁷ The whole area with its trees and water features is a symbol of part of what Asoke is seeking to do, that is, drawing people back to a simple lifestyle and a harmonious relationship with nature. As of 2006, the interior of the temple is still to be completed and volunteer artists and other craftsman are working on projects which depict scenes from the life of the Buddha and Bodhirak. One mural depicts a policeman and a senior monk pointing at Bodhirak and declaring him to be an enemy of Buddhism – a clear reference to the court case against the movement, and its subsequent excommunication by the *Mahā therā samakom*. The Thai national flag and the Santi Asoke flag both fly from the top of the temple. The latter is a white ring on a brown background. The circle represents a mind free from all attachments; this is the Asokan understanding of emptiness (Pāli *sūnyatā*).

Pathom Asoke

Pathom Asoke is located at Nakhon Pathom, a 90-minute drive from the centre of Bangkok. A modern building houses the school and a state of the art recording studio where CD's are cut and videos edited and produced. A tofu factory (which also produces soya milk), large mushroom farm, charcoal producing station, small production centres for producing herbal medicines, food flavouring and natural fertilisers are all to be found on the 100 *rai* of land at Pathom Asoke.⁴⁸ Considerable effort is put into garbage recycling, and a resident inventor has for some time been working to develop a gas fuel produced by the burning of garbage.

There are eight organic vegetable gardens at Pathom Asoke, totalling about 12 acres. Most of the food consumption of the community is met by the produce of these gardens. A wide range of fruits and vegetables are grown but rice cultivation stopped several years ago. Rice is obtained from the other Asoke centres and from groups within the natural farming network. Here, as at other centres, the school children are involved in farming work. Indeed, the adults working without the assistance of the young people would be unable to produce such large quantities.

Asoke communities do not use modern agriculture chemicals such as pesticides and fertilisers. Santi Asoke was one of the first organisations in Thailand to start practising organic farming.

By following the first precept of Buddhism we vow to not harm any living creature, including insects, such as those found on and below the soil surface (and of course mosquitoes and flies have to be counted as living creatures!). And by farming organically, there is no harm arising from modern agricultural chemicals to ourselves, to customers who buy our product, or to other creatures.

(Santos, undated:5)

In order to minimise damage to the soil, there is in the Asoke communities a reluctance to plough, or otherwise disturb the soil.

In the Asoke communities a lot of reflection on practice and learning from experience takes place. This is particularly true of the agricultural work. Some 9 years ago in the Asoke communities there was a strong focus on putting into practice the Fukuoka approach to natural farming.⁴⁹ The mix of crops within a small space all maturing at different times does not overtax the soil. Although good soil management, it was found to require a lot of effort by those gathering in the produce, as large amounts were required for cooking and sending to the other centres. What was good practice then for a household was inappropriate for a large community. Another example of agricultural development is the improved quality of organic compost. The process is started by a microbe soup to which organic materials such as food scraps and leaves are added. The compost, which has a lot of microbiological life in it, is ready to use after a 20-day maturation process. Another method used to enrich the soil is the use of charred rice husks, as they have a high alkaline content which serve to balance out the acidic soil.⁵⁰

Sali Asoke and the Puttha Pisek festival

Sali Asoke is located outside the small town of Phai Sali, an hour's drive from the provincial capital of Nakhon Sawan. From 6 to 10 February 2001, I joined over 1,000 Asoke members for the annual *Puttha Pisek* ceremony. This coincides with the *Makha Bucha* day ceremony which is a public holiday in Thailand.⁵¹ In mainstream temples, after chanting by the monks in the evening, there is a clockwise circumambulation of the main pagoda three times by lay people who have candles and lotus

flowers in their hands. The ritual is referred to in Thai as *tien wein*. While mainstream practice focuses on the circumambulation, Asokans emphasise listening to sermons by Bodhirak.⁵² *Puttha Pisek* has the meaning in Thai Buddhism of making existing images, statues or artifacts powerful through the chanting of a group of monks. The intensive five-day training programme at Sali Asoke is referred to as *Puttha Pisek*.⁵³ Asokans are further polishing their buddha-nature, and bringing out the best in themselves through intense activity (as opposed to chanting over artifacts in order to sacralise them!). Here then is a jibe at mainstream practice, as well as an affirming comment on the Asoke spiritual development programme. This ceremony attracts all the monastics and the vast majority of temple dwellers, as well as committed members (*yatitham*) who do not reside at the Asoke centres.

The hospitality of the Asoke people was impressive. I was provided with a *klot*, two schoolboys were detailed to instruct me how to use it, and to show me around the centre grounds. For the duration of my five-day visit, I was provided with an informant who took me on tours of the centre, introduced me to many of the conferees, and sought to answer my many questions. Asoke communities are accustomed to researchers and appreciate any interest shown in the movement.

During the *Puttha Pisek* ceremony, the lay community live like the monks. A typical day started with rising at 3 am in order to be ready for chanting in the *bot* at 3.15 am.⁵⁴ The monastic community are at the front of the *bot* and when the half-hour chanting session is complete, they turn round to face the audience. In accordance with Thai monastic tradition the most senior monk (Bodhirak) sits on the extreme left of the audience, and then monks sit in a line in an order dictated by date of ordination. At 3.45 am Bodhirak commenced his sermon, which lasted for two hours. The theme of this year's *Puttha Pisek* was 'Emotional Quotient'. Bodhirak read from his 288 page book *EQ Lokuttara*, and commented on issues raised by the text.⁵⁵

After the sermon was completed, monks, *sikkhamats* and lay people prepared to go around the various villages in the area on an alms round.⁵⁶ The alms round terminated at the Asoke centre with members who did not go on the alms round giving to the monastics. After all the food was prepared, the monks, *sikkhamats* and novices took and ate their food. Lay people then lined up in two rows, sitting cross-legged, and facing each other. Apart from families with young children, men and women remained segregated. Large pots of food were passed down the rows of people. What is being emphasised in this method of eating is dependence on the land, valuing of traditional rural, community orientated Thai culture and simple lifestyle. This is accentuated by the simple peasant-style clothes worn by the lay people. The image of the poor farmer then is used to express Asoke values of simple lifestyle and world renouncing anti-materialism. This is further reinforced once everyone was ready to eat by a blessing said for the farmers and others who had worked hard to produce the food. While a good number of the movement are from rural backgrounds, Apinya Feungfusakul is unaware of Asoke members who are poor farmers who subsist on farming a small patch of rented land.⁵⁷ Those who are farmers within the Santi Asoke movement tend to own sizeable amounts of

land and cannot be considered to be poor. Feungfusakul's point is that the image of the peasant does not reflect the reality of the membership's socio-economic status. This is an important observation, and one perspective is to view the peasant focus as a symbol for communicating the Asoke value system. There again, it would be hard *not* to project the peasant image given the need to dress simply, because of manual work in vegetable gardens, rice fields or cottage industries. These cheap, blue, loose-fitting clothes function as a kind of non-military uniform (green clothes would be viewed as sinister due to its military connotation) which identify the wearers as Asoke members when they travel away from the base communities. A corollary of wearing peasant-style clothing and eating in the style that they do is the creation of an impression of a rural community from a previous generation.

A vegetarian meal is the only meal of the day for monastics and most temple dwellers. Children and those who are unwell eat again in the late afternoon. My informant asked me how I enjoyed the food; he was dissatisfied with my positive response and told me that the correct answer was 'it is not tasty, and it is not not tasty, it is nourishing'. This comment gives us an insight into the intensity of Asoke principles and practice. Eating is yet another opportunity to practise both mindfulness and non-attachment. I soon found out there was even an Asoke method of washing dishes, which minimised the use of water, made maximum use of scraps of left over food and provided another opportunity of practising mindfulness. When the meal was completed, lay people took the opportunity to approach the monastics with their requests and questions.

At midday, a bell was rung and everyone broke off their activities to meditate for one minute for world peace; this is a daily ritual throughout the Asoke communities. There was often some time at this stage in the day for conferees to talk to each other. The topics of conversation tended to focus on fairly weighty issues such as the benefits of organic farming, vegetarianism, the teachings of the Buddha, and how individuals were developing in the practice of the *Dhamma*. The Chow⁵⁸ Asoke standard greeting to members and outsiders alike is not '*sawadee*' but '*charun tham*', the Thai for 'prosper in the *Dhamma*'.⁵⁹ This greeting is an example of how the movement is seeking to return to a basic society founded on the teachings of the Buddha. It reacts against what is perceived to be a meaningless Thai greeting *sawadee*, as well as an informal Western greeting such as 'Hi!'

Asoke members show great respect to those more senior than themselves. Yet the lack of formal respect they offer mainstream monks is noticeable. It is not uncommon to have mainstream monks attend some of the Asoke meetings; there were six or so at the *Puttha Pisek* event I attended. When asked about this, my informant told me that mainstream monks did not have the high standards of the Chow Asoke, therefore did not merit the same respect. Santi Asoke, however, is less overtly critical of mainstream monks than they used to be.

In the afternoon, one could attend a demonstration of how to prepare and use natural fertiliser for organic farming. There were also a number of small groups of lay people sitting around a monk or *sikkhamat* asking questions and engaging in discussion. Quite a number of lay people did the rounds of the small groups

and settled where they found an interesting topic being discussed. The last hour, or so, of the afternoon was spent bathing, washing clothes and preparing *klots* for bedtime at around 9 pm.

The evening meetings (held outside) started with music and singing by some of the schoolchildren. Schoolchildren from all the Asoke centres were present, and were involved in the catering arrangements, moving equipment around and setting up and monitoring the sound and lighting systems. This was followed by a talk on diet and exercise by a panel of doctors. The evening was concluded with a talk from Bodhirak which included answering questions from the audience.

Santi Asoke communities in North-East Thailand

Sisa Asoke is located in the north-east province of Sisaket. It was opened in 1976 and although smaller than Phatom Asoke has a similar range of shops, gardening and farming facilities. Sima Asoke, which was opened in 1990, is located in the province of Nakhon Ratchasima. It has a large mushroom farm, orchards and produces noodles from rice flour. These products are used in the vegetarian restaurant in Nakhon Ratchasima, the capital town of the province. The third centre is located in the province of Ubon Ratchathani, and is referred to as Ratchathani Asoke. It was opened in 1997. The last centre to open in the north-east region is Hin faa faa nam in Chaiyabhum.⁶⁰

Santi Asoke in North Thailand

In 1995, a centre was opened one hour's drive from Chiang Mai, the principal city in the north of Thailand. Referred to as Lana⁶¹ Asoke, or Bhu pha faa nam, it is 800 metres above sea level, and is fast building a reputation for experimenting with natural agriculture.⁶² New monks spend their first five *phansa* studying at Lana Asoke under the tutelage of a senior monk.⁶³ Some years ago, Asoke communities experimented with having Wednesdays as a silent day. The adults, as far as possible, and certainly the monastics, did not speak. This practice has been discontinued except at Lana Asoke where Wednesday remains a day of silence.

The vegetarian restaurant in Chiang Mai is large, housing the ten or so volunteers who work there, and providing accommodation for visiting monastics. Its location on the outskirts of the city and its closure over the weekends mean that it does not have the influence it might in terms of propagating its vegetarian message, and raising the Asoke profile. A more central location would seem desirable, given the large numbers of students in the city, as well as world travellers, many of them on a spiritual search.

Santi Asoke in South Thailand

The only centre in the southern part of the kingdom is Taksin Asoke in Trang, which is very close to the Thai border with Malaysia.

Membership of the movement

In 1995 there were ninety-two *samaṇas* and twenty-three *sikkhamats*. This increased to 102 *samaṇas* and 25 *sikkhamats* by March 2001. There were 9,929 registered members in 2001 but there are also a large number, perhaps several thousand, who are in sympathy with the movement and follow its activities with interest. In 2005 there were 105 *samaṇas* and 27 *sikkhamats* but no figure was available for registered membership. One indicator of the membership must surely be the number of monthly Asoke newsletters circulated to temple dwellers and registered members. Currently (2006) this stands at 9,000 copies. It may be that in the interests of saving paper Asoke do not circulate to each temple dweller and expect them to share. That said it appears that there is no growth in membership. This is contrary to members' perception that the movement is growing. This perception may be partly caused by the steady stream of visitors to Asoke centres.

Education of children and youth

Education of children

Some Thai schools are located on temple grounds, a reminder that traditionally schools were part of the temple and monks functioned as teachers. The Asoke movement have schools at their centres and they are staffed by volunteers. Some of the teachers are members of the movement; others are more loosely associated and teach on a part-time basis. In the Bangkok community there are around thirty to forty teachers, with a variety of visiting specialists who help in this manner.⁶⁴ These schools are recognised by the Ministry of Education and mainly serve the children of Asoke members or supporters. The school children wear blue uniforms, and at national and interschool events their respective centres may be identified according to the colours of their Boy Scout style scarves. There are currently 590 school children in the various Asoke communities.

In addition to the usual syllabus, collaborative working, art, music and Buddhist morals are particularly emphasised in the Asoke schools. Pupils who enter the Asoke secondary school system, regardless of their age, are required to start in the first year of the school programme. They and their parents are interviewed in Bangkok, and if the committee believe it to be appropriate for the pupils to commence schooling within the Asoke system, they are then accepted. If a pupil wishes to study at another Asoke centre, then he/she has to have an additional interview at that location. Much of the content of the teaching is negotiated between students and their teachers. If a student wishes to pursue a particular study interest towards the end of secondary education, then Asoke can provide specialist input through one of its lay members. Recent examples of this are studies in civil engineering and English language.

Exiting a highly structured community poses a challenge for any leaver. This is particularly true for the school children who have gone through the Asoke system

and intend continuing with their education at university or college. Some have successfully made that transition. Many opt to continue with the familiar and remain in the Asoke communities. As they have been raised with the concept that 'more is less' and possessions lead to suffering there is no incentive to go and make money. The retention of youth within the movement is crucial for the survival of Asoke. Many of these high school graduates are key workers in the agricultural and small-factory programmes.

Childrens' camps

Santi Asoke also organise camps for children and young people, typically ages range from 5 to 15 years, and the camps which run for about a week will focus on developing self-reliance. The first camp was organised in 1985 and currently around 500 children attend these camps. *Samaṇa* Thera Chitta, an Asoke member for 20 years commented 'initially the camp attracted only children of parents who often frequented the Asoke community and those who could not afford to pay huge sums to send their children to expensive camps, but now well off parents were increasingly sending their children to the community' (*Bangkok Post*, 19.4.99). The results of these camps include children returning home and helping parents with the household chores, keeping their clothes and rooms clean, and no longer snacking between meals.

Tertiary education

A course is now offered within the Asoke movement for those who wish to study beyond secondary school. The name initially given to the programme, *Mahālai Wang Chiwit*, drew the criticism that it was misleading, as it created the impression of an institute for higher learning (*Bangkok Post*, 8.6.96).⁶⁵ Santi Asoke responded by saying the name meant a great place to live. The name was adjusted shortly afterwards to *Sammāsikkhalaya Wang Chiwit*, and is normally shortened to *Wang Chiwit*. While conventional learning focuses on the study of textbooks and classroom based learning, the Asoke approach is that one's inner world is the most complex subject of study. The Asokan teaching approach thus emphasises constant practice at trying to reduce one's ego and selfishness through reducing greed and by working with other people. Nomdin Thayatham, one of the academy teachers, comments, 'Our aim is to study how to live a moral life and how to be self sufficient so that we will not be a burden on nature, or society' (*Bangkok Post*, 23.8.96). *Wang Chiwit's* educational philosophy, according to one Thai educationalist associated with the programme, is best expressed in their slogan 'Orthodox in keeping *sīla*, efficient in working, and knowledgeable in studying subjects' (Asoketrakul, undated:6).⁶⁶

The *Wang Chiwit* students are referred to as *nisit*, meaning 'inhabitants', as they are required to be resident in their respective communities throughout their

training. The *Wang Chiwit* programme was first started at Sima Asoke in Nakorn Ratchasima, but is also available at Pathom Asoke and Santi Asoke in Bangkok. In 2003 there were approximately 40 *nisit*, many of whom had completed their secondary education within the Asoke system. This figure rose to 241 in 2005. The significant growth may have been caused by Bodhirak's vision for lay members not to stagnate but to continue to grow through facing new and continuing challenges. The minimum age for entry to the *Wang Chiwit* programme is eighteen and there is no upper limit. While there is no academic entry requirement for the programme, candidates are required to live for a probationary year in an Asoke community and to pass an interview with a committee made up of *samaṇas*, *sikkhamats* and teachers. They are required to keep the Eight Precepts which according to the Asoke tradition includes being a vegan. Successful completion of the course leads to the award of a certificate (*panyabat*). A minimum period of six years is required for a *nisit* to complete his/her course at *Wang Chiwit*. A *nisit* may continue on the programme for as long as he/she wishes, provided the Eight Precepts are observed. Indeed, the longer the period, the more beneficial it may be for the *nisit* in making positive and permanent behavioural change (Asoketrakul, undated:6).

In terms of curriculum design, there is a strong focus on ecology, natural farming and Buddhism. Assessment of students is rigorous. It comprises of self-evaluation, peer and community members' evaluation as well as the evaluation of teachers. The 'learning-through-work' approach involves a lot of personal experiment. For example, each student will be given land to be responsible for, as well as being involved in one of the many cottage industries which are located at the Asoke centres. Once a week *nisits*, like all other temple dwellers, reflect in a group setting on how well they have kept the Precepts. This is referred to as *check sin* and involves the filling in of a form for each Precept.⁶⁷ In the context of a discussion with a *samaṇa* or *sikkhamat*, ways are examined of overcoming besetting failures. No *nisit* has yet completed the course and thus received the award of a certificate (*panyabat*).⁶⁸ It would be of interest to know what status potential employers place on the training given to Asoke graduates. Concerning employability of future graduates, Asoke member Somporn Soraniyo commented 'Whether they get jobs depends on the faith each work place has in Santi Asoke' (*Bangkok Post*, 6.7.96). It is quite likely, however, that many of the graduates will opt to stay as temple residents.

Annual festivals other than *Puttha Pisek*

Pluksek is similar to *Puttha Pisek*. The *Pluksek* ceremony takes place for seven days in April at Sisa Asoke. *Pluksek* is the term given to the setting aside of an item by a monk and his reciting a short Pāli formula over it. This is believed to sacralise the object so that it is considered sacred and contains power, for example, an amulet which is believed to ward off danger. The extremely rigorous week-long Asoke practice and listening to sermons for hours each day really wakes members

up and brings out the power from within!⁶⁹ This is another example of how spiritual development is recognised as taking place within the Asoke communities, as opposed to what they consider to be the ‘superstitious’ practices of mainstream Buddhism.

The Asoke remembrance day and the veneration of the relic of the Buddha day celebration (Thai *Asoke Lamluk*) is a ceremony which takes place at Santi Asoke in Bangkok. It was the wish of Asokans to have a ceremony on Bodhirak’s birthday (5 June). The founder, however, expressed a preference to mark the occasion (9 June) when he ceased to function as a *Saṅgha* accredited monk and began to function independently as a monk. Thus, Bodhirak and his fellow monks ceased to use the title *phra* (Thai title for a Buddhist monk) and changed to using *samanea* (Pāli word for monk). This is an occasion to commemorate the Asoke court case when the movement was accused of being unorthodox in its practice. The following day (10 June) there is the veneration of a relic of the Buddha housed in the dome of the temple. There is a carnival atmosphere about this ‘get together’ which runs for several days, unlike the austere *Pluksek* and *Puttha Pisek* gatherings.

The *Mahāpawarana* celebration lasts for five days and takes place in Pathom Asoke after the rainy season (*phansa*) when monastics remain in their monasteries. This period in early November is a time when elections of new abbots to the various *puthasatans* take place. Heikkilä-Horn (1997:131) comments that for the monastics the most important part of the ceremony is the gathering, where the monastics criticise each other. The monks and *sikkhamats* have their day-long *Mahāpawarana* meetings on separate days. No lay people are allowed to attend the meetings and discussions are never reported to lay followers.

The New Year Celebration and the *Ariya* Fair takes place at Ratchathani Asoke, and goods are sold at less than the cost of producing them as an act of merit-making and goodwill to the community (Asoketrakul, undated:3).

Structure of the Asoke communities

Each of the Asoke centres has an abbot (Thai *somphaan*).⁷⁰ If it is a busy centre where there is a heavy administrative load, the abbot may have a deputy *rong somphaan*. If the work load is especially heavy, an assistant abbot (Thai *phu chuei somphaan*) may be appointed. Each year, as we have seen, during *Mahāpawarana*, abbots are appointed for each centre and the monks alone are involved in making these decisions. The terms of service for abbots may be extended if they so wish, and if the results of the centre are good in terms of agricultural production and moral development of those associated with the centre (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:64). Bodhirak is the movement’s overall leader, and presides at the main meetings, as well as functioning as a consultant to the abbots and other leaders. He normally resides at Ratchathani Asoke but regularly spends time at the two other large centres of Pathom and Santi Asoke. This is due to the work at these three centres being more developed than at the other centres, and

thus requiring more attention to detail. He is always accompanied by at least one other monk. Even when he is sleeping he has someone close to his *kuti*; one reason for this practice is to avoid any suspicion of impropriety.

A committee comprising of all the abbots and deputies is referred to as the 'monks' committee'. There is also a monks' assembly, which includes all the monks in the Asoke movement. This committee considers, approves or rejects the plans put forward by the abbots for the development of the work of the centres, as well as working through some of the more serious problems of the centres (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:67). Hierarchy is considerably flattened, compared for example to Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Each Asoke centre has an elected committee which meet monthly under the chairmanship of a monk.⁷¹ The work of each centre is discussed monthly by committee members who represent different aspects of the centre's work. There is a board displaying the names and photographs of current committee members located at a central point at each Asoke temple (*putthasathan*).

The initial administrative structure to be started at Santi Asoke was the Santi Foundation (*monitee*). It was jokingly referred to as the 'ministry of the interior' by my informant! It is run by a committee of approximately twelve members who are elected each year. Interestingly, the chairperson is referred to as 'the servant' (*phu rap chai*), and is assisted by a secretary and a treasurer. There are no ordained people on the committee but monks may be consulted. The monthly meeting of this committee is held in Bangkok, but there is a cross section of representatives from the other Asoke communities. Bodhirak also attends the monthly committee meeting. Those who serve on this committee will work full time in administering the business of the community. The following four examples indicate key aspects of the committee's work:

- Schools: there are schools at almost all of the nine communities. In 2002, the principal ones were Sisa Asoke: 200 pupils, Pathom Asoke: 200 pupils, Santi Asoke: 85 pupils, Sali Asoke: 60 pupils and Chiang Mai: 35 pupils;
- *Gong Bun*: also known as *sawadeegaan*. This deals with the basic issues of accommodation, health and medicine, food, clothing and travel;
- *Pa Tea San Tan*: this covers the work of telephone counselling as people contact the centres to seek advice (some members are set aside to provide this service). It includes receiving people from outside the movement, providing information and face-to-face counselling;
- Administration: examples of this include ensuring that all community bills are paid, negotiating with government departments and service providers, for example, water board and electricity department.

Chamlong Srimuang was partially responsible for setting up the *Gong Thab Tham* (Dhamma Army) and continues to be elected each year as president. This foundation may be referred to as the 'ministry of the exterior'! This was started two years after the *Santi* Foundation and has the same structure of election and monthly meeting.

A significant responsibility of the Dhamma Army is to liaise with those who request speakers from Santi Asoke to speak at particular meetings, for example, university societies or clubs. Asoke local radio announces where meetings are to be held and invites members of the public to attend. A fairly typical programme might include a vegetarian cooking demonstration along with a presentation of the movement's basis beliefs. The preparing and serving of vegetarian food free of charge is known as *Rong Boon Mangsewerak* and offers Asoke people the opportunity to share their belief that there is great merit in reducing animal suffering. Large-scale vegetarian food festivals are held by all the communities on two to three occasions each year, the key occasion being the king's birthday.

The Dhamma Practitioner's Society came into being as the government would not accept the vegetarian restaurants as a non-profit making charity, and thus full tax was required to be paid by the restaurants. This society, known in Thai as '*Samakom Phu Patepattam*' has responsibility for the vegetarian restaurants and a variety of other projects such as vehicles, teaching tapes and videos, the libraries and the natural farming network.

Conclusion

Bodhirak seems to have the Chinese characteristics of hard working and straight talking. His success as a TV programmer and song writer meant he was used to forging his own way through life. Clearly a natural leader, it was never going to be easy for him to follow others. Bodhirak's re-ordination in 1973 in the Mahānikai tradition, and the forming of his own group mimics the culture of protest that was emerging in Thai society at that time. Many students (but also trade unionists) demonstrated against the military's practice of replacing government leadership at will. At the heart of these demonstrations was the desire for democracy.

Bodhirak's own quest was to practise Buddhism which had distinctives, such as rigorous lifestyle, vegetarianism, non-acceptance of financial donations except from those who knew the movement well and a rationalistic approach to teaching. This approach coupled with Bodhirak's charismatic style of leadership struck a chord with many who were disenchanted with mainstream Thai Buddhism and wished to be part of a radical and supportive community. Bodhirak's working-class Chinese background, and lack of connections with the establishment, understandably appealed to those from a similar milieu. Many young people joined Santi Asoke around that time. Indeed, many have remained with the group since its inception in the mid-1970s.

Proceedings against Bodhirak were not nearly as traumatic for Santi Asoke as the legal proceedings against Phra Dhammachayo proved to be for Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Excommunication of Santi Asoke from the *Saṅgha* seems to have been gradual. Initial proceedings were taken by the *Mahā therā samakom* against Bodhirak and the Asoke group in 1979. In 1991 Asoke monks ceased using the title *phra* (venerable) and began to wear a different colour of robe from mainstream monks. Santi Asoke temples were referred to as *putthasathan* rather than

wat (temple).⁷² In 1989, Asoke ordained members were detained by the police but later released. At the end of 1995 a court judged that Bodhirak and his fellow monks had no right to accept alms or wear the saffron robes of mainstream Thai Buddhist monks. In 1998 Bodhirak received a suspended prison sentence which was never served on the grounds that he had no previous convictions.

In the early days, Santi Asoke was extremely vocal in its criticisms of the Thai *Saṅgha*. The movement is now considerably less high profile. For example, it no longer goes on its peripatetic mission, or *charik*. It remains largely within the confines of its *putthasathan* and functions more as a model for harmonious living, rather than mounting hostile opposition to mainstream Thai Buddhism.

Asoke's perceived close relationship with the Phalang Dhamma political party was viewed as highly inappropriate by traditionalists within and out with the *Saṅgha*. Nearly half of the 319 party members who were candidates in the 1988 general election were Santi Asoke followers. Indeed, McCargo (1993:48) points out that 'an early action of the Chatahai Choonavan government was to reopen the file on Santi Asoke'. Of course the *Saṅgha* legitimises the state, and functions on occasions as its mouthpiece. In return, the state protects the *Saṅgha*. This symbiotic relationship has been viewed as both appropriate and necessary; yet any relationship between groups within these institutions, in this case Santi Asoke and the Phalang Dhamma Party, is viewed as subversive. The leaders of both groups, Bodhirak and Chamlong, both came from humble backgrounds, were viewed as excessively moralistic, and their special relationship together was viewed by many as a serious challenge to the status quo and national security. It is little wonder that monastic persecution of Santi Asoke intensified shortly after the start of the association between Santi Asoke and the Phalang Dhamma party.

The high-school students in the Asoke communities are a valuable labour resource. This is facilitated by a curriculum which has a strong focus on agriculture and cottage industries. While developing discipline, team working/leadership skills and mental awareness students are able to contribute effectively to the livelihood of their respective communities. On graduation many continue as valued adult members of the movement and have an increased input into the communities.

Santi Asoke's nine communities provide support for those who wish to engage in serious religious practice.⁷³ Although highly structured, decision making is often devolved to those who are most affected. The *mu glum*, or 'will of the group' is a highly valued process of decision making – as well as an effective tool for disciplining new members! The next chapter examines the distinctives of Santi Asoke and offers understandings of the movement from both within and outwith the movement.