

Thesis

#2171

Style and Ascetics:
Attractiveness, Power and the Thai Sangha

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Ph.D. Thesis

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Abstract

The majority of research for this thesis took place during the Thai general election of 1988 when the new religious movements Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya were subject to investigation for political activity despite, respectively, defiance or denial. The relationship between the Thai Sangha and lay devotees is examined in order to discover how it is that Thai monks, whom many researchers find powerless, can be accused of political activity. In the past, monks have been used to legitimate lay political leaders and have taken active roles in local leadership. This thesis aims to determine whether monks in Thailand have power and, if they do, how such power becomes politically threatening to the status quo. As is suggested by the rise of new movements, the Thai Sangha is not an institution of uniform standard and activity; monks often appear different from each other in subtle yet distinctive ways and these differences can be noted by the lay public. Differences in appearance often reflect variations in monks' pastoral involvement in the lay community. In short, there are different styles of Thai monk, each with a lay following which is attracted to his particular style. There are four factors which effect the relationship between the Thai Sangha and the lay public: monks, devotees, temples and day-to-day religious life. Each of these factors – among the mainstream Sangha, Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya – are examined, compared and contrasted in order to determine the nature of monastic power in Thailand and how that power works in society to allow the Sangha to act as legitimators and local leaders and, on occasion, to be perceived as a threat. Particular attention is given to the devotees and the style of monk they find attractive. It is this attraction that is the basis of monastic power.

Notes on Transliteration and Language:

Thai words in this thesis have been transliterated by the same method as Allison (1973). The Roman alphabet is used without diacritics, allowing for the reader unfamiliar with Thai to closely approximate the pronunciation of words without having to refer to a guide. The only deviations from English are as follows:

‘th’ is pronounced ‘t’ as in tin

‘ph’ is pronounced ‘p’ as in pin

‘kh’ is pronounced ‘k’ as in kin

‘t’ is pronounced as if ‘dt’

‘p’ is pronounced as if ‘pb’

‘k’ is pronounced as if ‘gk’

‘eu’ is pronounced as the vowel sound in ‘good’

‘ae’ is pronounced as the vowel sound in ‘bad’

Names, however, do not always follow this method but are spelled according to the preference of the person, when known (e.g. Somkuan). Further discussion of my occasional use of real names and not aliases appears in section I.1.2. In order to avoid confusion, place names, as in the case of temples, are spelled according to documents from the temple, if available (e.g. Wat Dhammakaya) or, as in the case of geographic locations, according to popular usage (e.g. Bangkok instead of Bahngkaw).

The issue of language has been more problematic. My informants, when discussing religious terms, invariably used the Thai pronunciation. I considered writing Buddhist terms according to the Thai rather than the Pali pronunciation because Thai Buddhist terms do not always follow Pali, appearing on occasion more like Sanskrit (e.g. *traibidok* resembles *tripitaka* more than *tipitaka*). Other

studies of Theravadin societies cited in this thesis, however, refer to Buddhist terms in Pali (e.g. *dutanga*, Carrithers 1983b). Therefore, for the sake of coherence, I use Pali terms in this thesis even when the Thai was used by my informants (e.g. *Vinaya* instead of *Winai*). In such cases the Thai pronunciation follows the initial appearance of the Pali term in italics. When the term is not discussed in Pali, I use only the transliterated Thai (e.g. *ubosot*, *abhai*). The exception is when a movement itself used the Pali spelling for its own name or the names of programmes it organised (e.g. Wat Dhammakaya, the Dutanga Retreat).

There are often no direct translations for Thai religious terms. Throughout this thesis, English Christian terms are often used to express Thai Buddhist concepts (e.g. church for *Sangha* and monk for *phra*). I acknowledge that this is not always satisfactory. However, the English terms are used whenever they express a concept which closely translates from the Thai. If a concept cannot be easily translated, I will use the Thai word (e.g. *ubosot*). When English religious terms are used for Thai Buddhist concepts for the first time, they will be followed by the transliterated Thai word in italics. At times, references cited use Christian terms when there is no corresponding Thai concept (e.g. gospel, Jackson 1991). I do not alter that use.

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This thesis could never have been completed without the support of my supervisor Dr. Andrew Turton. Not only was his advice invaluable, his faith, encouragement and understanding have been immeasurable. He was exactly what I needed of him when I needed it. When I sought guidance, he had insight. When I needed time, he gave me space. When I lacked confidence, we talked until I found it. Most importantly, however, he never gave up on me, not even when I had given up on myself. Dr. Turton is an *ajahn* in the true sense of the word and there is no way I can thank him sufficiently for seeing this through. I wish also to thank Dr. Lola Martinez whose comments, on numerous occasions, pointed out my glaring oversights. She taught me to see what was always there. Dr. Tadeusz Skorupski's lectures made it possible for me to begin learning about Buddhism and Dr. Rachel Harrison's advice on transliteration and her hospitality when I felt profound despair helped me over the final hump.

Without the gracious *mettā* of H.H. Princess Vimalachatra I would never have had the data for this thesis. She is an elder whom I not only respect but love deeply. We have had great fun together and I am grateful she has shared her wisdom with me. I wish also to thank Khun Somporn Thepsitta, Khun Somkuan Laolapha and their colleagues at Thailand's National Council on Social Welfare. I am indebted to Khun Sutthaya Vacharabhaya, and my friends at all the mainstream temples and the new movements Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya, especially the ladies of the Wednesday Group.

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สันติอโศก : แนวทางใหม่ของพุทธศาสนา ในสังคมไทย

Santi Asoke :

The New Trend of Buddhism in Thai Society.



Figure 1: the front cover of a public relations pamphlet depicting the residential area at Pathom Asoke *phutthasathan*. Note that the pamphlet is in black and white and crudely designed.

DHAMMADĀYĀDA

**A NEW HOPE FOR
THE THAI NATION**



**WORLD PEACE CAN BE ACHIEVED BY
DHAMMAKĀYA...THE INNER PEACE.**

Figure 2: the front cover of a public relations pamphlet depicting the *ubosot* at Wat Dhammakaya

Contents

Abstract	1
Note on Transliteration.	2
Acknowledgements.	4
List of Illustrations.	13
List of Maps and Charts.	16

I. Introduction/Methodology: The Search for Truth

1. <i>A Personal Path to Discovery</i> : methods and motivations	19
1.1. initial motivations for exploring this aspect of Thai society	
1.2. personal background: the search for Truth	
1.3. inklings of the power relationship between monks and laymen within society	
1.4. preparations for the field	
1.5. return from the field and the delay in writing up	
1.6. sect vs. movement: a definition of terms	
1.7. good fortune: elections declared the day I left for the field	
1.8. weird people: perceptions of devotees	
2. <i>Scriptural Foundations</i> : preparation for the field	38
2.1. the Pali Canon	
2.2. interpretation as the major source of education	
2.3. the need to judge monks	
2.4. other Thai Buddhist texts	
2.5. a new Buddhist gospel?	
2.6. the greater debate: the true nature of Buddhism	
3. <i>Past Ethnographic Studies</i>	52
3.1. the relationship between monks and laymen	
3.2. merit	
3.3. Taylor's contextual shifts	
A. city monks	
B. village monks	
C. forest monks as religious virtuosi	
4. <i>The Theoretical Basis of this Project</i>	62
4.1. analytical concepts	
4.2. continuity within the discontinuity	
4.3. concepts to examine	
5. <i>The Ways of Power</i> : the Study of Power	63
5.1. power in a western scholarly sense	
5.2. the power of example	
A. charisma: being <i>keng</i>	
B. recognising charisma: <i>sattha</i> and <i>leuamsai</i>	
C. monks do not have power, they have <i>barami</i> : the vocabulary of power	
5.3. the source of power in the Thai monastic context	
6. <i>The Aims of this Thesis</i>	76
6.1. What is Buddhism in Thai society?: different styles of monk	

II. The Course of Thailand's Middle Path	81
1. <i>Pre-Bangkok</i>	82
2. <i>The Fall of Ayutthya and the Founding of Bangkok</i>	84
3. <i>The Establishment of the Thammayut Order</i>	85
4. <i>The Turn of the Century</i>	86
5. <i>Buddhism and Political Philosophy</i>	88
5.1. Buddhism and anti-colonialism	
5.2. Buddhism against communism	
5.3. the scandal of Phra Phimontham	
6. <i>The Political Turmoil of 1973</i>	93
7. <i>The Socially Critical Monk</i>	96
8. <i>The Election of 1988</i>	98
8.1. Political Violence in Burma and Sri Lanka	
8.2. the emergence of the Phalang Dhamma Party and Santi Asoke	
8.3. the persecution of Wat Dhammakaya	
8.4. different outcomes from different strategies	
A. the honours and fake monk scandals	
B. the corrupt monk scandal	
C. The new movements	
D. the Mainstream: continued trouble	
9. <i>The Sangha After the Integration of Wat Dhammakaya</i>	113
III. In Quest of the Ideal Monk	
1. <i>The Fallacy of the One Monk</i>	117
1.1. What makes a man recognisably a monk?	
1.2. style and monkhood	
IV. Styles of Monastic Practise.	125
1. <i>The National Council on Social Welfare</i>	128
1.1. Khun Somkuan Laolapha	
1.2. The Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong ideology	
1.3. frustration and political opinions in the Sangha: the conference of village monks	
2. <i>The Development Monks (nak phatthana).</i>	152
2.1. the forest and city monks	
A. the forest monk	
B. the city monk	
2.2. the assistant abbot of Wat Dhammakaya	
2.3. Conclusion	
3. <i>The Scholar Monks (nak wichakahn).</i>	167
3.1. the author monk	
3.2. the nakleng monk	
3.3. the Oxford monk of Wat Dhammakaya	
4. <i>The Meditation Monks (nak wipasana)</i>	187
4.1. the abbot of Wat Dhammakaya	
4.2. the irrepressible monk	

IV.	
5. <i>The Practising Monks (nak patibat)</i>	205
5.1. the history of Santi Asoke	
5.2. Phothirak and his teachings	
6. <i>Which Monk?</i>	220
V. Devotees	223
1. <i>The Chao Asoke</i>	225
1.1. social hierarchy	
1.2.. monks as followers	
A. Samana-Phrahm Vasavatiko	
1.3. nuns	
A. Maenen Thipthevi	
B. Maenen Yaowalak	
1.4. lay informants	
A. Chamlong	
B. Auw, my guide	
C. the doctor	
D. Wantana	
E. the lawyer	
2. <i>Wat Dhammakaya</i>	251
2.1. social hierarchy	
2.2. monks as followers	
2.3. Khun Yai	
2.4. the Wednesday Group	
A. Khun Pa Mali	
B. Khun Pa Tiw	
C. Khun Na Sutee	
D. Ajahn Taew	
E. My Aunt	
3. <i>Similarities</i>	275
3.1. the goal of the Buddhist: improvement of this life, not <i>nibbana</i>	
3.2. demographics	
A. women	
B. the middle class	
VI. The Temples and the Physical Manifestation of Buddhist Teaching . .	281
1. <i>Mainstream Temples</i>	285
1.1. Wat Benjamabopit	
1.2. Wat Somanasvihara	
1.3. Wat Pa Darabhirom	
2. <i>The Phutthasathans</i>	290
2.1. Santi Asoke	
A. the <i>soi</i>	
B. the administrative building	
C. the beautiful flowers	
D. the temple building	
E. meals	
F. the monks' area and the nuns' quarters	

VI.	2.1.	G. lay quarters	
	2.2.	Pathom Asoke	
		A. the entrance	
		B. the store and the medicine hut	
		C. the monks' area	
		D. the temple building	
		E. the residential area	
		F. Chamlong's house and the women's house	
		G. the food production areas	
	2.3.	Conclusion	
3.		<i>Wat Dhammakaya</i>	316
	3.1.	the World Dhammakaya Centre	
		A. the road to Dhammakaya	
		B. the outer section	
		C. the inner section	
		D. the entrance	
		E. the temple building	
		F. the grounds	
4.		<i>Comparisons and Contrasts: Ideal Environments</i>	325
VII.		The Life with the New Movements	327
1.		<i>Life with the Chao Asoke</i>	328
	1.1.	Asoke administration	
		A. dispute settlement	
	1.2.	an enduring lifestyle	
	1.3.	the daily schedule and activities	
		A. the daily meal	
		B. sexual relations	
		C. a day's work	
		D. day's end	
	1.4.	technology and practising Buddhism	
	1.5.	the monastic lifestyle among the Chao Asoke	
	1.6.	conclusion	
2.		<i>Life at Wat Dhammakaya</i>	344
	2.1.	modern Buddhism	
	2.2.	<i>patibat tham</i> : meditation as practice	
	2.3.	raising money	
	2.4.	ritual: living life with <i>sati</i>	
	2.5.	ceremonies out of the ordinary	
	2.6.	Wednesdays	
	2.7.	the Dutanga Retreat	
	2.8.	Visakha Bucha: Luang Pee Sudhamo's ordination	
3.		<i>Attraction and the New Movements</i>	383
VIII.		Contrasting Styles	
1.		<i>Makha Bucha</i>	386
2.		<i>The Mainstream: wian thian</i> at Wat Benjamabopit	388
3.		<i>Wat Dhammakaya: wian thian</i> on Makha Bucha	390

VIII.	
4. <i>The Content of Style: monastic presentation</i>	398
IX. Conclusion	399
1. <i>Summary: images of the ideal</i>	401
1.1. history	
1.2. monks	
A. appearance (<i>na ta</i>)	
B. voice (<i>siang</i>)	
C. being a source of reliance (<i>pen thi pueng</i>)	
D. knowledge (<i>khwam ru</i>)	
E. conclusion	
1.3. devotees	
1.4. temples	
1.5. life	
2. <i>Examples of Power</i>	413
2.1. <i>amnat</i>	
2.2. <i>phalang</i>	
2.3. <i>itthiphon</i>	
2.4. <i>abhiñña</i>	
2.5. <i>barami</i>	
2.6. the limits of power	
3. <i>The Experience of Thai Buddhism.</i>	420
3.1. transmission	
3.2. life cycles of a movement	
Appendices.	423
1. Introductory Letter to Informants	
2. Statement of Purpose Sent to Informants	
3. Interview Questions Sent to Informants	
4. Chronology of Events Relevant to Field Work	
5. Thai Buddhist Calendrical Holidays	
Glossary of Thai terms.	434
Bibliography.	437

List of Illustrations

Note: the photographs I took which are used to illustrate this thesis were taken as memory aids and focused on subjects interesting to me at the time of field work. The subjects depicted are what I considered important at the time and reflect this particular viewpoint and its limitations. In hindsight, I would have taken more pictures of informants because I tended to focus on events. The black and white photographs were taken from film given to me by one of the Wat Dhammakaya public relations photographers when I ran out. He had no need of it since most of the film he was using was for slide transparencies which were more suitable to computer-aided layout design. All of the photographs I took during field work with the Santi Asoke movement have been lost. The illustrations depicting this movement were taken from promotional materials provided to me by their public relations department and the selection available reflects Asoke priorities although the choice of photographs included here is mine. In order to provide a basis for comparison, I have included photographs from Dhammakaya public relations materials as well. All photographs of Pathom Asoke are from (SRV 1987). The photograph of Luang Phaw Dhammajayo is from Dhammadayada : a new hope for the Thai nation.

- Figure 1: the front cover of a public relations pamphlet depicting the residential area at Pathom Asoke *phutthasathan*.6
Figure 2: the front cover of a public relations pamphlet depicting the *ubosot* at Wat Dhammakaya. 7

The National Council on Social Welfare

- Figure 3: Khun Somkuan Laolapha outside the Mahidol Building at the National Council on Social Welfare.132

Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong

- Figure 4: the road into a Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong village.135
Figure 5: rice fields and the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong village. . . 135

The Conference of Village Monks

Figure 6: a model of a Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong village.	146
Figure 7: board displaying the work of a fund for village welfare	147
Figure 8: board displaying the work of a fund for village welfare	147
Figure 9: a participant posing for the camera.	148
Figure 10: a participant posing for the camera as if in meditation	149
Figure 11: Khun Somporn Thepsitta of the National Council on Social Welfare addressing the abbot of Wat Bowornnivet (the eventual Supreme Patriarch).	150
Figure 12: participants at the conference for village monks.	150
Figure 13: the abbot leaving the conference.	151

The Scholar Monks

Figure 14: Than Chao Khun Thepveti (Phra Rajavaramuni) outside his <i>kuti</i> . .172	
Figure 15: the <i>kuti</i> of Than Chao Khun Thepveti.	173
Figure 16: the <i>kuti</i> of the <i>nakleng</i> monk.	173

The Meditation Monks

Figure 17: the abbot of Wat Dhammakaya, Luang Phaw Dhammajayo	192
Figure 18: the irrepressible monk, Than Chao Khun Sri Wisutthikavi in the Buddha room in his <i>kuti</i>	201
Figure 19: Than Chao Khun Sri Wisutthikavi teaching meditation in the <i>ubosot</i> of Wat Somanasvihara.	201
Figure 20: female meditation students.	202
Figure 21: male meditation students.	203
Figure 22: volunteers at Than Chao Khun Sri's meditation seminar.	204

The Chao Asoke

Figure 23: Maj Gen Chamlong Srimuang at the first political rally of the Phalang Dhamma outside Lumpini Park.	242
Figure 24: close-up of Maj Gen Chamlong Srimuang	242

Pathom Asoke

Figure 25: offering food to an Asoke nun (<i>sikhamat</i>)	313
Figure 26: offering food to Asoke monks.	313
Figure 27: the residential district of Pathom Asoke	314
Figure 28: the rice fields at Pathom Asoke.	315

The World Dhammakaya Centre

Figure 29: the landscaped grounds of the <i>boriwen nai</i> at Wat Dhammakaya . .323	
Figure 30: an illustration of the plans for Dhammakaya World.	324

Life With the Chao Asoke

Figure 31: daily labour at Pathom Asoke	341
Figure 32: Chamlong and Phothisrak surveying the construction.	342
Figures 33 and 34: a meeting at the <i>ubosot/viharn</i> of Pathom Asoke	343

Life at Wat Dhammakaya

Figure 35: posing for the camera as if meditating at the *lan tham*. 349

Figure 36: soliciting funds at the *Makha Bucha* festival. 353

Figure 37 and 38: buying food to donate to monks 354

Figure 39: monks lining up to accept alms. 355

Figure 40: an *ubasok* taking an overflowing alms bowl to be emptied. 356

Figure 41: Luang Phee Sudhamo beginning his ordination 379

Figure 42: monks chanting at Luang Phee Sudhamo's ordination. 379

Figure 43: the senior female members of the wat at Luang Phee Sudhamo's ordination. 380

Figure 44: mainstream monks leaving the ubosot after Luang Phee Sudhamo's ordination, accompanied by Luang Phaw Datta. 381

Figure 45: monks leaving the *ubosot* in procession after the Luang Phee Sudhamo's ordination. 382

Figure 46: the *Makha Bucha* festival at Wat Dhammakaya. 396

List of Maps and Charts

Note: all maps have been reproduced from Ulack (1989)

Map 1: Bangkok	17
Map 2: Thailand	18
Chart 1: the Wat Dhammakaya meditation chart.	193
Chart 2: Potirak's funnel.	219
Chart 3: the social hierarchy among the Chao Asoke.	232
Chart 4: the social hierarchy of Wat Dhammakaya	255

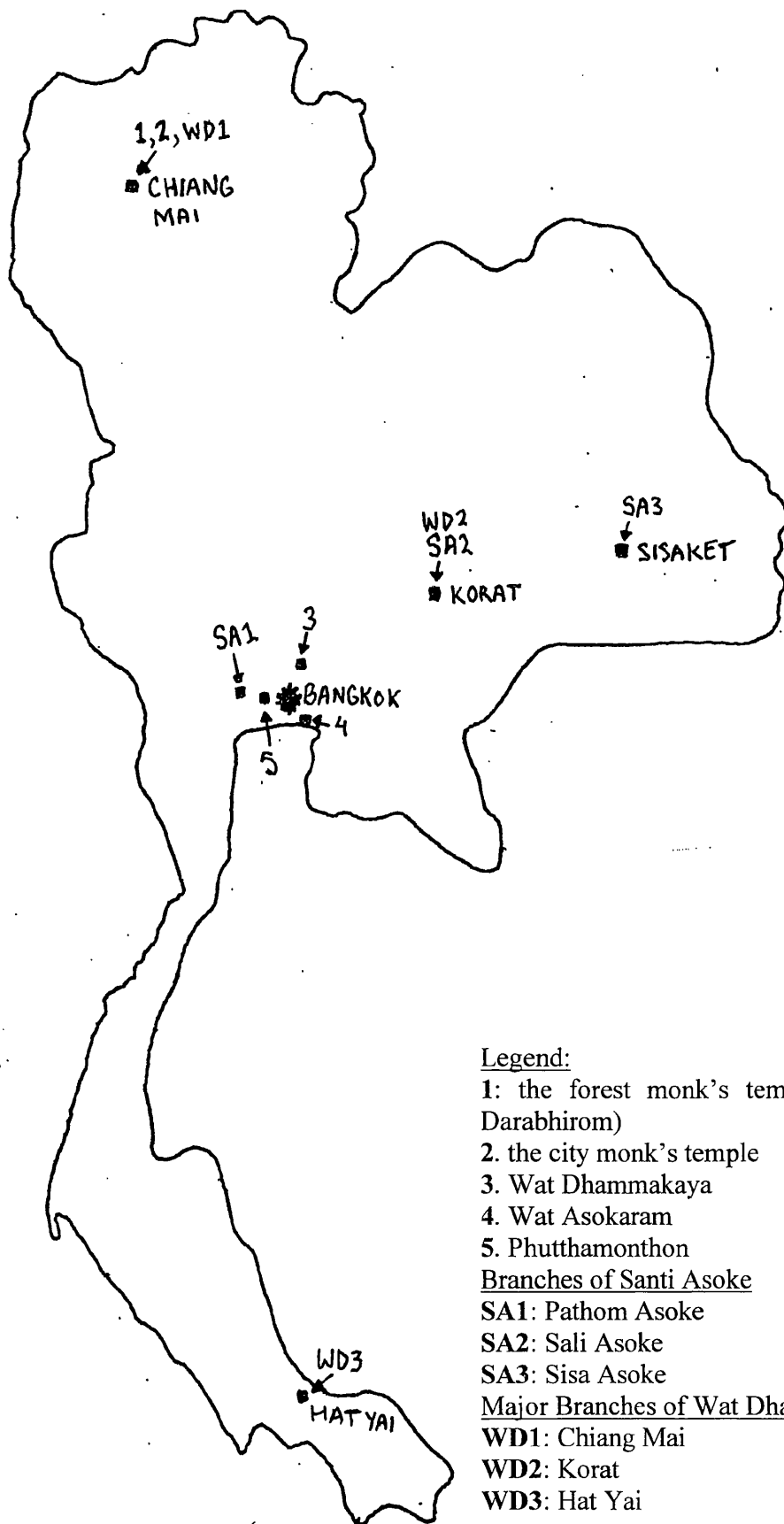
Map 1: Bangkok



Legend

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. the National Council on Social Welfare | 6. Wat Benjamabopit |
| 2. Santi Asoke | 7. Wat Dhammakaya |
| 3. Wat Somanasvihara | International Relations Centre |
| 4. Wat Bowornnivet | 8. my house (base of operations) |
| 5. Wat Mahathad | |

Map 2: Thailand



Legend:

- 1: the forest monk's temple (Wat Pa Darabhirom)
 - 2: the city monk's temple
 - 3: Wat Dhammakaya
 - 4: Wat Asokaram
 - 5: Phutthamonthon
- Branches of Santi Asoke
- SA1: Pathom Asoke
 - SA2: Sali Asoke
 - SA3: Sisa Asoke
- Major Branches of Wat Dhammakaya
- WD1: Chiang Mai
 - WD2: Korat
 - WD3: Hat Yai

I. Introduction/Methodology

1. *A Personal Path to Discovery*

1.1 initial motivations

The intellectual stimulus for this project came from two books: World Conqueror and World Renouncer (Tambiah 1976) and Political Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Somboon 1982). Both discussed the relationship between the Sangha, or Buddhist church, and political power in Thailand, coming to similar conclusions about the relative lack of independence of monks (*phra*) in Thai society due to their place in the lay state bureaucracy. Laws prohibiting independent political action by the Sangha and the Sangha's reliance on the secular political administration for financial support made it dependent on government policy and effectively deprived monks of any political role besides legitimation of whichever regime happened to be in power. I was intrigued, however, by the different situations described in each work. Tambiah felt the Sangha was a tightly controlled sacred institution serving the needs of a secular administration. Somboon, however, described numerous occasions when monks acted politically, either when the government administration had a weak hold on power, which allowed monks to show a limited degree of independence and involvement in secular politics, or when the government needed legitimation which allowed a monk who supported the administration to exercise his influence on a political level.

My own experience as a child visiting Thailand during the seventies tended to corroborate the situation depicted by Somboon. The question which arose from comparing and contrasting the two works was not which depiction of the Sangha was more accurate, rather it was how could there be any political role or potential of independent action by a sacred institution purported to be securely

under the control of a secular administration? Although it was asserted that the Sangha was relatively powerless due to tight secular control, the political situations described by both Tambiah and Somboon contradicted the view that the Sangha was a powerless institution. The fact that it could be used for legitimation at all and that, during situations when government control was relaxed, members of the Sangha were able to become involved in politics, in however a limited fashion, indicated that there was potential for the Sangha or its members to act on its own politically. It became clear to me that a dependence upon secular authority did not necessarily translate into a lack of power. My interest became to discover the type of power monks had, how it was exercised within the restrictions of government control and whether it could be exercised independently, without the parameters laid by a secular, government administration. I decided to examine the relationship between monk and layman and how this interaction could influence an individual layman's behaviour in a political manner, whether through parliamentary process or through local administration. Furthermore, I wished to determine whether this influence of monk over layman was a relationship specifically reliant on direct interaction between individuals or whether there was the possibility of a monk influencing a large group of people.

I.1.2. personal background

This project was an opportunity to rediscover cultural roots. As a Thai who left Thailand at the age of eight months (with sporadic visits every few summers, the total time I had spent in Thailand prior to fieldwork amounted only to about eighteen months), studying Thai culture was and will continue to be a

highly personal experience. Because my identity proved an important part of the field work, my informants' perceptions of me not only formed a great part of this self discovery but also aided and influenced my field experience in ways unlike that of many researchers. Because I was neither an outsider studying a foreign culture nor was I an insider studying at home, I had the benefit of cursory acquaintance with the culture I was studying and much was still new to me.

I was born of a privileged family, and the advantages of this position played a major part in any success I can claim during research. All the fruitful contacts I had were initially personal and social; although I tried introducing myself to people on my own, my family name is recognisable. I considered at one point disguising my identity, but since my professional connections were always initially social it would have been too difficult. Besides, there was so much discussion of the concept of 'truth' (*khwam jing*) with my informants that to lie about myself would have felt like a betrayal of trust. It became an important part of the project because many of my monastic informants spoke with firm conviction of the Buddha's truth, highlighting the fact that there are different kinds. Which one were we discussing? Was it personal truth? Perhaps it was historical truth or political truth. Was I searching for religious truth? Indeed, recounting his experiences as a Thai Buddhist monk, Randall encounters three kinds of truth, with one being '*the truth* (his emphasis), that (is) *vijja* (knowledge) in the Buddhist sense as opposed to *avijja* (ignorance) (1990:139). The conclusion I came to, as will be apparent at the end of this thesis, was, like Foucault's, that truth is relative (1980) and like Rappaport's that there are many kinds of truth (1999). One man's truth is another's fallacy. It is important to note, however, that many of my informants believed that there was one,

pervading truth.

As for the identities of my informants, in many cases I have used their real names rather than giving each an alias according to common anthropological practice. This is due to the fact that most of my informants did not want me to hide their identities. All my interviews began with assurances of confidentiality but the confrontational political atmosphere at the time led many informants to want to take an open stand concerning their opinions. Many felt that hiding their identities would suggest that they either wanted to hide something personally or wavered in their religious affiliations. Furthermore, many of my informants were prominent and outspoken monks who felt that hiding their identities was unnecessary. I therefore have used real names frequently throughout the thesis. Due to the long and complex names of informants, however, I often use nicknames. In cases where there was no outright insistence on using the informant's real name, I have either used a nickname or a description of the informant such as 'the lawyer' or 'my aunt'.

In the field I found it was helpful to my informants to have social references for me; when I received a personal introduction, I got results much faster and more satisfactorily than if I went on my own. I believe that a personal reference made my political loyalties unquestionable and my social values understood. While this understanding was generally a help due to the inherent belief that my opinions would naturally be conservative and that I posed no threat to the status quo, it was occasionally a hindrance when I spoke to people who opposed the establishment. The lack of financial constraint gave me not only status, but also many practical benefits. My informants were aware of possible social as well as financial advantages in cultivating my friendship and

the subsequent support that could come of it. I never felt that I was expected to pay my informants or subsidise any causes, however. In fact, at the end of field work, I expressed a wish to make financial contributions to some of the organisations I studied and was rebuffed by both Santi Asoke and the National Council on Social Welfare. I believe the exchange was more subtle, like a debt of honour; for my informants' co-operation, I was expected to know that I owed them support at a later date and, with my social and financial background, that support would not be insubstantial.

In short, although I left Thailand at an early age, I was given a place in Thai society. This benefit cannot be overestimated. My having a point of social reference was not the only advantage in conducting field work in my own country. Unlike most field workers I was living in a situation that was not unfamiliar. I suffered only minor alienation; when I went home at the end of the day I had friends and family to return to. While living in this context had its problems (on which I will expand in section I.1.6), the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages. My proficiency in the Thai language was probably superior to most foreign field workers but was nevertheless far inferior to any Thai; although it is less pronounced now, I still speak with a heavy American accent. My appearance is also not that of an average Thai. My family are much taller than most (at five feet eight inches I am the shortest male member, but still tall enough to be larger than most Thais). My demeanour is also noticeably foreign. Because I sounded different and because I looked different from the average Thai I found that I was forgiven for asking as many questions as I did and for the facile nature of such questions. It was fortunate that such curiosity was met with approval. My age proved advantageous since

the study of Buddhism in Thailand is considered an occupation of older people; there are great connotations of piety for a man of twenty-six (at the time) to have an interest in religion. Whether or not I truly was as people perceived me, I cannot say because I still am not absolutely sure of their perceptions. Even after field work there are facets Thai life and thought that mystify me.

I.1.3. inklings of the power relationship between monks and laymen

I was brought up a practising Buddhist. At the age of twenty-one I ordained as a novice monk (*nen*) temporarily (for three days) as part of my grandmother's funeral rites. My interest in religion was aroused although the actual decision to devote a large portion of my life to this interest was not made until I began post-graduate study. When I began research, many of my pursuits were chosen through personal experience and recollections. I recalled, for example, adults discussing the political involvements of a monk in the mid-seventies. It is these recollections which gave impetus to my interest in Thai political history and the role monks have played in it.

Although one reading of history would support the notion that Thai monks, in order to be exploited politically, must always have had some power over their lay congregations (Somboon 1982) , it was the task of finding concrete, documentable evidence to support this notion that posed the biggest problem in planning field work. I wanted to witness power as it was exercised between a monk and a follower in order to map the patterns of it such that it could be described and understood. My goal was to see a monk as he instructed a devotee to act politically. How I was to witness any such action was unclear. The definition of political action was unclear. Furthermore whether this action

constituted power was also unclear. Not only that, definitions of power to be used for analysis were unclear. I knew merely that I had to find a monk prominent on a national scale yet representative of all monks in terms of personal deportment and background. Because history and ethnography seemed to support the fact that monks have power, I was sure of being able to witness such a situation; I felt that once I found a monk who suited my criteria, I would inevitably witness political action or power if I stayed with him long enough. My plans at the start of this project were therefore aimed at making me as prepared as possible to be a witness or participant observer. Ironically this situation which I was so confident of seeing never materialised; I never saw a monk instruct a layman to act politically. It was only after having been in the field for several months that I realised my thinking was flawed because not only had I assumed that one monk would be representative of a universal ideal but also that this ideal monk would exert his power through verbal instructions. I found that there was more than one ideal monk and that monks had many ways of communicating to laymen.

I.1.4. preparations for the field

Preparatory reading and coursework involved not only ethnographic literature, but also readings and lectures on Buddhism. A discussion of the specific literature appears below in section I.21. I wanted to be as prepared as possible on the subject before questioning others. I was to discover, however, that a year and a half of reading is pathetically little preparation when discussing philosophical topics. The only advantage of my preparation was that it gave me cursory exposure to the concepts to be discussed. Before leaving for field work,

the definitional problems of this project involved such matters as who my informants would be, whether there was a community to study, where I would live, and whether I would be staying in one place. The formation of plans revolved around nothing more definite than the central concept of monastic-lay interaction.

Because the subject I wished to study was potentially sensitive I made an initial trip to Thailand in an effort to assess the possible restrictions. I stayed approximately four weeks at the end of 1987 and contacted several people through relatives. On this initial trip I met Khun Somporn Tepsitta of the National Council on Social Welfare which acts as the liaison between the Department of Religious Affairs and the Sangha. I also contacted several scholars, most notably Prof. Pattaya Saihoo of Chulalongkorn University and the late M.R. Pattanachai Chaiyant of the Siam Society. These initial connections were encouraging, indicating the possibilities in research. I found that there were few restrictions, although I would have to couch my subject matter in terms palatable to everyone. At this stage I adopted the working title of: the influence of Buddhism in Thai society, with emphasis on the relationship between monks and laymen. It was also at this point that I decided to interview three groups: scholars, monks and laymen. Beyond narrowing my approach to this project through the choice of informants, this initial trip focused attention on such pragmatic decisions as equipment, places to stay, and informants. Since I expected to be interviewing extensively, I decided a tape recorder would be essential. A camera would prove useful as well. By basing myself in Bangkok (perhaps with trips about the country) I could use a computer to store notes and data. I also had a car.

The disadvantage of preparing for field work outside of Thailand was that the literature was outdated. Aside from newspapers, there was little to provide a current view of affairs in Thailand. I found when I got to Bangkok in the spring of 1988 my impressions of the people I would be studying were not current with monks prominent at the time. The initial trip to Thailand was not helpful because there seemed to be many more monks with whom I might work than less. Those monks prominent in the literature available in London had been superseded by a host of new monks. My first trip to Bangkok may have been positive by helping to determine the pragmatic aspects of research, but in many respects it still left me unclear on how I would start. Although I had an idea of how I would contact my informants, I had little idea of who those informants would be.

I.1.5. return from the field and the delay in writing up

No matter how much I read, there was little to prepare me sufficiently for the field. Likewise, I found that there was little preparation which helped me analyse my data upon return. Furthermore, there was a long gap of over seven years in between fieldwork and the final stages of preparing this thesis. I had grown to love Thailand and decided to return after having spent a year in London following the completion of field work but not of this thesis, temporarily giving up thoughts of writing up and returning to America, my home before studying in England. Offered jobs at Post Publishing, the parent company of the English-language daily newspaper the *Bangkok Post* and then at *The Nation*, Bangkok's other daily English newspaper, it was several years before my thoughts returned to completing this project. The result was ultimately, I believe, beneficial.

Continued exposure to Thai society through my job as a journalist gave me perspective on the worldly, political aspect of the ongoing debate on Buddhism. The economic boom following the election of 1988 had a profound impact on demands the Thai people placed on their religion and religious figures and I was able to observe the developments. As time passed, I was given the opportunity to see what became of the people I studied. Those groups which survived controversy during fieldwork, in turn, gave me an opportunity to speculate on why they ultimately survived. From my preparation based primarily on ethnography, history and scripture, I attempted to avoid theoretical presuppositions which may have biased the nature of the data I collected. Although the prolonged absence from anthropology made re-familiarising myself with the material imperative, it also gave me distance from that data and a chance to look at it afresh.

I.1.6. sect vs. movement: a definition of terms

Very early in the process of writing up, it became very clear that terms such as sect, cult and new religious movement would have to be defined before I could discuss my experiences in the field. Throughout this thesis, I use the term new movement as opposed to the terms sect or cult to describe the groups I studied whose practices diverged from Buddhist practice in society at large. According to Bryan R. Wilson, a new religious movement is based on an old religion and, rather than offering new beliefs and practices which constitute a break from that religion, claims to restore that religion to its true meaning or former purity through divergent practices (1976). New movements generally grow from elitism and scepticism in society. Salvation is considered more

accessible in a new movement by its members due to the spiritual abundance available as opposed to scarcity and exclusivity. For example, a new movement is marked by fewer distinctions between priests and laymen (B.R.Wilson 1990). I found that all of these criteria were present in the groups I studied but in different ways, as shall become clear in discussions throughout this thesis.

Alternatively, Wilson finds that the members of a sect voluntarily define their group as a new interpretation of an old religion. The sect demands exclusivity of its members, offering them elite status and is led by a charismatic figure who meets the demands of 'a new religious challenge based on a new apprehension of the divine' (B.R.Wilson 1970:19). A sect is a precursor to a new religion. For example, Christianity started out as a sect of Judaism but then became a religion in its own right (ibid). Sects also become denominationalised, however and are assimilated into society from one generation to the next (ibid). A cult, according to Wilson, is dependent on youth membership and relies on strict asceticism but is ultimately unsustainable as a group due to its rigorous guidelines and rejection of society at large (1976).

As will emerge in discussions throughout this thesis, the two groups I studied, Wat Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke, do indeed meet some of the criteria for sect and cult, but I feel that the term 'new movement' best suits them due to the fact that both groups still considered themselves Buddhist and that they felt their approach to religious practice and any innovations they introduced was a return to the essence of Buddhism. I will hereafter refer to Wat Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke as 'new movements'. Wilson's categories notwithstanding, however, the primary distinction I make throughout this thesis is between the mainstream Buddhism practised by the majority of Thais and the new

movements. The most important distinction between them is that the mainstream Sangha remains under government control while the new movements test the limits of that control with their innovative practices. It is ironic that Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya should be grouped together, however. Due to differences in religious practice which will be made clear throughout this thesis, the two movements probably would be loath to be placed within the same category.

I.1.7. good fortune

I cannot stress too much the role good fortune played in my field work. The day I left London for Thailand, the Thai parliament was dissolved and a general election was declared, establishing circumstances which were unique in modern Thai history. At no other time had monks been as prominent socially, politically and religiously during a general election. Media coverage helped indicate which monks or movements with whom I should try to work. Within a month of arrival I determined, through monitoring the television, newspapers and religious magazines, that the target monks and movements were: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Phra Phayom, Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya. I spent the first two months trying to contact people by phone and by personal calls, but felt defeated at every turn. I considered working for a political party to see if I could get a start that way, but was unsuccessful. At this point I was trying every contact I had but would spend days waiting by a phone which would invariably prove to be out of order. At this time I encountered the greatest annoyances from my family who viewed my lack of concrete progress as idleness. I was asked to oversee the redecoration of the house since I 'wasn't doing anything'. In retrospect, the time spent watching the phone and overseeing workers was put to

good use as it gave me a chance to become versed on current events and study religious debates which had gained prominence in place of those I read about in London.

Although I never finished at one place before going onto the next (I would often go between three different institutions in one week) my research can be organised into four stages; the first when I had not yet started interviewing but was reading about current affairs; the second when I began meeting informants through the National Council on Social Welfare; the third when I started research at Wat Dhammakaya; and the fourth when I started at Santi Asoke. The first contacts I had, the National Council on Social Welfare, were able to provide me with the majority of my initial interviews through their connections to both the Sangha and the secular government administration. Although it was a secular institution, the Council was viewed as a neutral mediator between the sacred and secular parties and allowed me, through my association with them, to assume a neutral position to both. I was given an opportunity through the Council to interview Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, but a study on him had just emerged (Jackson 1988), I therefore decided to concentrate on the activities of the Council, Santi Asoke, and Wat Dhammakaya in order to lessen the chance of overlapping with research already done.

With the National Council on Social Welfare, I had to submit a list of interview questions as well as a brief paragraph on the objectives of my research (see appendix 1, 2 and 3). These were sent, along with two different letters of introduction -- one for monks and another for laymen -- to the prospective interviewees, whose names and biographies had been compiled by my contact at the Council, Khun Somkuan Laolapa. Most of the interviews were conducted

with Khun Somkuan present. At first I thought this may have been a way of monitoring my actions, but later realised that my being accompanied was more a matter of respect for my social position than distrust of my actions. In the end, Khun Somkuan and I became good friends. During these interviews arranged through the Council, my goals were photographing the informants in the setting of their own choice and taping the conversation. Despite assurances of anonymity, there were occasionally periods when I was asked to turn the tape recorder off. At this point I realised that if I tried to speak Thai without adding foreign terms to my speech as do many Thais educated abroad, I was given a better reception. I believe I appeared to be trying harder if I spoke only Thai. Since I was also given a status of respect, my trying to use only Thai words removed a social barrier between me and my informants. Eventually this consciousness of a language barrier even in Thai made me quite judgmental of the Thai who liberally sprinkled English or French terms such as 'practical', 'liberal' and 'project' into their speech.

I did not find an introduction to Santi Asoke until the last month and a half I was in the field. I was introduced to the movement by a distant cousin of mine who had been a member of the Phalang Dhamma Party and was active in politics at the time. Ah Oy knew several of the members of Santi Asoke, but not well. It was primarily his association with the political party which gave me entrance to the movement. Because my time at Santi Asoke was limited, the type of data I acquired there was very much interview oriented; I know more what people told me than what I was able to observe. Although I did some participant observation, it was of a hurried nature. I was never able to verify much of my findings and therefore must take many at face value.

On the other hand, my research at Wat Dhammakaya took place over the course of the first nine months of 1989. Because I was introduced by my aunt, a steady follower who is also a socially prominent member of the aristocracy, I came with a reference that was unquestionable at a time when the temple was under a government probe and would have been wary of any researchers. Since my aunt's patronage was a matter of prestige for the temple, great care was taken not to offend her. I was therefore given almost free rein to do and ask as I pleased. Great pains were taken to co-operate with my research and to plan my time at Wat Dhammakaya. Such planning was arranged by the temple's public relations department, however, so it must be borne in mind that while I was allowed to do and ask as I pleased, it was always within the context of an arranged though not always supervised situation. I learned as much as I did by exploiting my good fortune as much as possible. Not only did having a point of reference gain me almost immediate trust, it also gave me a position in the lay hierarchy at Wat Dhammakaya; I am known to the temple's disciples as *Khun Lahn*, or 'Mr. Nephew.' Although my informants included the abbot, a nun who is his assistant, other monks and many of the lay workers and devotees, I chose to spend most of my time with the group of women who attended the temple on a regular basis with my aunt since I wished to concentrate on the interaction between devotees and monks. My main informants were therefore a group of women generally referred to as 'the Wednesday Group.'

Although the questions varied with each institution I studied, the interviews followed the same general pattern as those arranged through the National Council on Social Welfare. I hoped that by allowing monastic informants to arrange their own photographs, I would find those aspects of their

appearance they wished to stress. For the most part this exercise was rewarded with good results; some monks would pose very formally while others made a big show of not posing. In no case did I find a monk who was not aware of his appearance one way or another. The interview questions varied most between monks and laymen. Among the laymen, I distinguished between scholars and lay devotees, often asking scholars the same questions as I would the monks. For lay devotees I would ask more personal questions of a nature which dealt with their own sense of religious faith. Aside from adapting the interview questions to the informant, most of the questions dealt with current events. I asked for personal opinions as well as professional ones, if the two were divergent. This distinction is important; many people held opinions which were different from the official line. Sometimes I was accompanied by friends who would ask prearranged questions I would not have dared ask for fear of offending my hosts. I could then apologise for my friends later. I found this a successful way of gaining important information. One such question was, 'And do you really think meditating like this is going to make society better? Why?' Another prearranged question was, 'I've often heard the rumour that only women who have been abandoned by men show an interest in religion. How true is that here?'

Aside from interviewing, I took part in many of the rituals organised by the institutions with which I was working and found participant observation to be most helpful in learning about lay perceptions of a monk or a temple. I chose not to stay at any of the temples where I did my research, instead attaching myself to specific lay groups who attended services regularly and taking part in their religious and social activities. Associating primarily with the congregation helped with my understanding of the frames of mind and the attitudes of the

layman over whom the monk exercised influence. I favoured the lay aspect over the view of the monks or institutions (although I did not ignore this view) due to general, public preconceptions and popular attitudes toward devotees of religious movements.

I.1.8. weird people

Judging from media coverage, occasional conversations with uninvolved laymen, and the advice of my own friends, it is safe to say that public opinion finds the devotees of new religious movements to be weird (*plaek*). Not unlike their counterparts in Europe or North America, many Thais who are uninvolved in steady religious practice view members of these movements warily. Religious movements like Wat Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke seem to demand great changes in the behaviour of their devotees, giving rise to a concept which to some would seem contradictory: the Buddhist as fanatic proselyte. The widespread public distrust of fanaticism among the new movements or, at the very least, a wariness of fervent displays which might indicate a misguided fundamentalism, was seen as distinctly threatening to society at large and, throughout the time of field work, friends teased me with their fears that I might disappear only to emerge years later glassy-eyed and emaciated from prolonged religious ecstasy.

Whether or not the groups I studied could be considered fundamentalist shall be discussed later, most specifically in the case of Santi Asoke in section VII.1. By fundamentalism, I refer to the criteria discussed by Caplan which includes a movement's concentrating on a particular part of accepted religious text, rejecting the accepted norms of general religious practice and seclusion

from society at large (1987). I also refer to Ernest Gellner's point that fundamentalist groups adopt an unquestionable religious text to which they refer as a basis of religious practice (1992) and Barr's study of Christian fundamentalists which emphasises reliance on the Bible, a rejection of modern technology and exclusivity of membership (1995).

Observers in society at large found that the members of both movements I studied to be abnormal, even threatening. Before I began research at Wat Dhammakaya, for example, I was told a story of a flamboyant young homosexual man who, after a weekend retreat there, refused to go out to discos at night in preference to meditation, abandoning his glittery wardrobe and make-up for a white T-shirt and blue jeans. He refused to associate with his old friends (even those who were heterosexual) thereafter. Even his speech changed. There were also stories of drugged food to create a feeling of euphoria, thereby instilling a desire to return. Paradoxically, members of these same movements which are viewed with suspicion are also upheld as models of appropriate behaviour in Thai society. The threat is not so much to the social ideals of behaviour as it is to an individual's spiritual and psychological integrity. Having mentioned earlier that my age was a factor in my seeming inordinately pious, it is important to note that such religious fervour is rare only among youth. It is taken for granted that older people, having lived their lives to the fullest, will turn to religion, whether in the mainstream Sangha or through new movements like Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya. Any influence seen to be activating this impulse before its time is suspected as unnatural. When older men who have lived profligate lives take to the religious fold, no one is surprised. However, when a young rascal (or flamboyant homosexual) suddenly reforms after a weekend retreat, there is talk

of brainwashing. Any attempts at proselytisation by those regarded as fanatics, both young and old, are regarded with suspicion.

I gradually discovered that my own attitude was not dissimilar but had arisen due to different reasons. Having grown up in America and having heard rumours of the Rev. Jim Jones, Dr. Sun Myung Moon, and the Baghwan Shree Rajneesh, I, too, was wary of organised religion. Needless to say, none of the movements I studied was ever as extreme as the rumours I heard. The new Buddhist movements in Thailand are not the same as the mainstream Sangha, of course, but my studying them alongside each other played an important part of my self discovery that went far beyond a rediscovery of my cultural roots. I found that my own spiritual and psychological integrity remained intact, but with their whole traceable to discrete parts from various cultures. I became aware of which parts of me were western and which parts of me were Thai.

I. Introduction/Methodology

2. *Scriptural Foundations and the True Nature of Buddhism*

Although the nature of my research was anthropological, much of my preparation for fieldwork was not. I found ethnographical and historical studies more useful on writing up but scriptural preparation proved invaluable in the field. I was able to draw on my brief exposure to Buddhist texts when conversing with informants and familiarity with them gave me perspective on the religious debates in Thailand at the time. Unless otherwise specified, the brief account of Buddhism and its history in this section is derived from my own conversation in field work with Sathienpong Wannapok, Phra Rajavaramuni and other informants as well as from Reat (1951), Skilton (1994) and Snelling (1987).

I.2.1. the Pali Canon

The primary difference between the Theravada Buddhism of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka and the Mahayana Buddhism of East Asia, Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal is scriptural. Legend has it that, on his deathbed, the Buddha bade his follower Ananda to carry forth his teaching, but also specified unimportant parts which could be omitted. When informing the rest of the Buddha's followers, however, Ananda forgot which of the teachings were unimportant. What followed was the division of Buddhism into different sects, which eventually became two major groups: the Theravada and the Mahayana. Theravada scripture is based on the Buddha's teachings as they were before His death in their entirety, without any omissions; some of the Buddha's followers who survived Him were unsure of which teachings were important and did not wish to risk a mistake when selecting the parts to be retained and discarded. These

teachings subsequently were recorded in the Pali Canon and became the scriptural basis of the Theravadins (Webb 1975).

The greater part of the Pali Canon, is the *Tipitaka* (Horner 1954, 1993), *ti* in Pali meaning three and *pitaka* meaning baskets. The three sections, or baskets, are the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the *Sutta Pitaka* and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*. The *Vinaya Pitaka* is of particular interest to Thai Buddhists. The first part of it, the *Suttavibangha*, lists the two hundred and twenty-seven precepts restricting the action of monks and includes the *Bhikkhuni-vibangha* which is a list of further precepts pertaining to bhikkhunis or female monks (who are considered different from nuns in Thailand. This distinction will be discussed in section V.3.2). The *Kandaka*, the section of the *Tipitaka* which follows, further discusses rules for the conduct of monks, detailing the execution of ceremonies (e.g. ordination) and the personal habits of monks (e.g. permissible articles of clothing and furniture). The last section, the *Parivara*, is a summary of the first two sections used when examining members of the order.

The object of this list of precepts in the *Vinaya* is to guide a monk to his ultimate goal: eliminating human appetites and attaining *nibbana*, the escape from *Samsara*, the eternal cycle of reincarnation. Four monastic offences are listed in the *Suttavibangha* which can incur expulsion. They are: sexual intercourse, theft, taking life or inciting another to commit suicide and falsely boasting of supernormal attainments (Ingersoll 1975). The prohibition of sexual intercourse is designed to prevent stimulation of the innate appetites which are an integral part of human existence and which are a barrier to peace of mind. The threat of temptation is so strong that a monk is not even allowed to directly touch a woman's alms, let alone her person; the woman must lay the offering on a cloth

before the monk can accept it. In the same respect, theft is a form of submission to the covetousness of human nature. Taking that which belongs to another is the worst manifestation of this appetite which is a source of human suffering. Respect for all life requires a monk to refrain from even passively condoning any method of killing; he may not support a lay venture into warfare in any way. In preventing claims of divinity, the last offence forces a monk to keep from falsely advertising any supernatural abilities in order to gain a following. In the course of field work, I found the above list of offences particularly interesting due to the scrutiny applied to monks in both the mainstream and the new movements. The monks at Wat Dhammakaya were under investigation throughout my time in the field and several mainstream monks were defrocked due to transgressions against the *Vinaya* (which will be discussed in section II.8). Potirak, the leader of Santi Asoke, was ultimately defrocked as well and the entire movement was barred from calling itself Buddhist as a result of a court ruling against the movement's practices.

Although the rules in the *Vinaya* are meant as a guideline for monastic behaviour, they also apply to laymen. The first ten of the two hundred and twenty-seven precepts are rules for novices and nuns but particularly pious laymen have been known to adhere to them. They are:

1. *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī* — to abstain from taking life
2. *Adinnādānā veramaṇī* — to abstain from taking that which is not given
3. *Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī* — to abstain from unchastity
4. *Musāvādā veramaṇī* — to abstain from false speech
5. *Surāmerayamjjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī* — to abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness
6. *Vikālabhojanā veramaṇī* — to abstain from untimely eating
7. *Naccagītavādītavisūkadassana veramaṇī* — to abstain from dancing, singing, music and unseemly shows
8. *Mālāgandhavilepanadhāraṇamandanavibhūsanatṭhānā veramaṇī* — to abstain from wearing garlands, smartening with

- scents and embellishment with unguents
9. *Uccasāyanamahāsayanā veramaṇī* — to abstain from the use of high and large, luxurious couches
 10. *Jātarūparajatapaṭiggahaṇā veramaṇī* — to abstain from accepting gold or silver (Phra Rajavaramuni 1985: 256-7)

The precepts in the *Vinaya*, therefore, are the same for all practising Buddhists, but monks are meant to observe more of them than laymen. Nothing prevents a layman from observing all of the precepts; should he wish to do so, he may live like a monk without undergoing ordination. In Theravada Buddhism, there are no secret texts available exclusively to religious specialists. Therefore, as a document which is theoretically available to all literate people for their own interpretation, the *Vinaya* makes it possible for laymen to judge not only the behaviour of their fellow man but also the behaviour of monks.

I.2.2. interpretation as the major source of education

As a means to greater personal religious proficiency, however, Thais nowadays rarely are able refer to scripture directly. Rather, they rely on religious specialists and clergy to translate and interpret scripture for them. This is due to various factors — most notably that, although sections have been translated into Thai, the *Tipitaka* in its entirety is available only in the original transliterated Pali. There is even debate over the correctness of this transliterated version. There is no modern Thai gospel (Jackson 1991), therefore there is no universally accepted Thai-language Buddhist reference text. There is no word in Thai for ‘gospel’ which bears the same connotations of the exclusive and direct transmission of holy teachings. The word *khamphi* is often used in reference to the Bible and the *Tipitaka*, but this merely means important text and is not necessarily religious. There are martial arts *khamphis*, for example.

Although the literacy rate in Thailand is unusually high for a developing country, Pali is predominantly taught only in monastic institutions and is unknown to the average layman, making the *Tipitaka* by and large just as inaccessible to the general public today as it was in the thirteenth century when Buddhism was a state-sponsored religion and a Thai-language script had just been invented. The significance of this inaccessibility to scripture is that the majority of lay informants derive their knowledge of Buddhism through the filter of a monk's particular emphasis and interpretation. Furthermore, Pali is generally taught through repetition and memorisation, making the intricate grammar difficult to grasp. From personal experience at the Thai Buddhist temple in London, the study of Pali in a Thai religious institution is an onerous task. After a year, I gave up, having learned little to serve me in good stead in the field. I resorted to reading scripture in translation (Geiger 1912, Horner 1954, 1969, 1993) and relying on the lectures of Dr. Tadeusz Skorupski at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

While some laymen devote substantial amounts of time to studying scripture, most of my informants, despite a genuine interest in Buddhism, found there were more pressing priorities in everyday life than to read difficult religious literature. Interpreted religious texts in the form of pocket books, television programmes or sermons recorded on cassette, then, are the more common way to study religion for the average Thai. Interpretation is therefore a key issue in Thai Buddhism, necessitating an examination of the clergy and lay scholars as the vehicles of it. This revelation deeply influenced the conclusions of my research.

I.2.3. the need to judge monks

Monastic practice is the primary concern of Thai Buddhists due to the inaccessibility of text; monks, as religious specialists, act as the translators and interpreters of the Buddha's teaching. Therefore, a means of judging those specialists is imperative. While this conclusion may have been drawn from the focus of my research, I believe that it is more from the debates on Buddhism taking place at the time. The specific nature of these debates will be discussed later in section II.8.4. The important point is that by focusing on monastic standards as criteria for judging a monk's religious proficiency, Thai laymen focus on a simple set of prohibitions which are recited at the beginning of most Buddhist ceremonies. Because laymen are acquainted with these prohibitions, they often feel knowledgeable enough to judge a scriptural interpreter or religious teacher.

I.2.4. other Thai Buddhist texts

The Pali Canon has not always been the only scriptural basis of Thai Buddhism, however. There are interpretative texts which are based on it, the oldest and most revered in Thailand is the *Triphum Phra Ruang* or the *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982), written under the orders of King Ruethai (Ruang was the name of the ruling dynasty) in the thirteenth century Thai kingdom of Sukhothai. Powerful state sponsorship meant that the *Triphum* was adopted as the 'gospel' (Jackson 1991) of Thai Buddhism and was considered so for nearly six centuries. Even today, this text remains popular and scenes from it are often depicted on temple walls (Reynolds, F. 1975). At one time, such scenes were even discussed as the basis for a series of amusement park rides at Wat Dhammakaya. The *Triphum*

departs from the Pali Canon, or more precisely the *Tipitaka*, by concentrating on mystical cosmology, discussing each realm of existence within the three worlds of life and modes of birth experiences in each realm. Man is only one of many beings who suffer in the cycle of *Samsara* until *nibbana* is attained through the accumulation of merit. Social inequalities are explained in this text through an individual's merit accumulated throughout his successive lives (*kamma*), thus supporting the position of an absolute ruler whose *kamma* was superior to others. The *Triphum* does not emphasise *nibbana* as mankind's goal however. Rather, types of retribution incurred for specific transgressions (e.g. adultery) are described in lurid detail. The effect is to illustrate the punishments of sin rather than the benefits of virtuous living. This association of virtuous living to the avoidance of punishment does not encourage the pursuit of good, rather, it establishes Thai Buddhism as a set of restrictions instead of a set of directions to enlightenment, or even more specifically, as a religion which encourages non-action over action. The ramifications of this focus on the relationship between Thai monks and their lay followers cannot be underestimated and will be discussed in section III.

Another text which originated during the Sukhothai period was the *Dika Malai Deva Sutta*, the account of a man who was able to travel between the cosmological realms (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982). In a similar fashion to the *Triphum*, this text is an exposition of the differences between each realm and a description of how one could reincarnate from one world to another. If there is any text which provides examples of good behaviour, it is the *Jataka*, a collection of fables which tell the stories of the Buddha's past lives (Gowell 1995). The behaviour described in each of the stories is often used in sermons to

both adults and children.

The political and social significance of the texts discussed above is that anyone who controlled their content was also able to control, define and interpret the formal, or orthodox, conceptions of good and bad behaviour and their benefits and repercussions. Religious legitimation of the government has always been in the hands of those who have such control. To this day, the interpretation and translation of religious texts is a source of conflict not only within the officially-sponsored Sangha but also between the Sangha and new movements. But, as stated above, it is not only the content of religious texts but how people learn them which ultimately has impact on religious discourse.

I.2.5. a new Buddhist gospel?

Without exception, my informants were, at best, unconcerned with the information in the *Triphum Phra Ruang*. At the worst, they treated the text as fairy tales. No one truly believed anymore that there were three realms of existence and that some sinners would be punished by having their mouths shrunk to the size of a pinhole, as detailed in the *Triphum Phra Ruang*. This change in belief is an indication of the change in religious convictions which are a response to changes in society. A more comprehensive discussion of the influences which have brought about such change will appear in the conclusion, section IX.2.2. The need for a religious reference book for Thai Buddhism has been addressed, however, by Phra Rajavaramuni, a monk who has written many treatises on Buddhism and modern Thailand. Although his book *Buddhadhamma* (Phra Rajavaramuni 1995) is an immense volume, its discussion of the Buddha's teaching is comprehensive and is written in language which is

extremely accessible to the average layman. Jackson argues that this book should be adopted as the 'new Thai gospel' (1991). Although a universally used reference text similar to a King James Bible would be a useful tool in unifying the interpretative stance of modern Thai Buddhist thought, nowadays it would take more than extremely powerful state support for such an adoption to be successful. Not only would the credibility of interpretation in this particular text have to be undisputed by the majority of the Buddhist populace when there are other texts available, it would also be necessary that people begin to learn about religion and religious practices through the study of text rather than through sermons and practice. These logistical problems confronting the adoption of a Buddhist reference is a perfect example of the debate between text and context. While I believe that texts are important to the study of religion in Thailand, it is the context of religious study which dictates how people ultimately learn and practice Buddhism and how I approach much of my research data.

I.2.6. the greater debate: the true nature of Buddhism

The need for a new gospel illustrates the question which I found to lie at the heart of all discussions concerning Buddhism in Thailand today: what is the true nature of Buddhism? Before there can be agreement on a text which teaches orthodox Buddhism in Thailand, there must be agreement on proper practice. There may never be any such agreement. As will be discussed in section II, it is a lack of consensus among religious scholars and practitioners which is perceived as the problem confronting contemporary Thai Buddhism and, as has been discussed above, there are numerous pragmatic problems which hinder the adoption of a single, orthodox text. Concerning the direction Thai Buddhism

should take, some argue for preservation while others argue for innovation. Indeed, as will also be discussed in section II, throughout history, Thai Buddhism has been changing in reaction to both internal and external cultural influences. What, then, are the factors which are contributing to change now? Which factors contribute to stability? More importantly for an anthropological study of Thai Buddhism, the climate of change during field work highlighted the following question: what is the role of Buddhism in Thai society?

As an anthropologist, my approach to finding an answer to the above questions were focused on informants and participant observation. Any conclusions on the nature of Buddhism are therefore drawn not from scriptural truth, but from the demands placed on the religion by those who practice it and their religious convictions. This approach appalled the Buddhologists with whom I would discuss my project. Among the scholars and lay informants I interviewed in the field, I was occasionally the object of reproach and, in one instance, effrontery. A participant at a meditation seminar which will be described in section IV.3.2, felt that the new movements would ultimately destroy Buddhism by leading people away from the true content of the Buddha's teaching and that monks leading the new movements were involved in activities that were inappropriate to the Sangha (*"mai chai kij khong Song"*). This informant felt that my studying the new movements legitimised them in a way that was dangerous to the monks with religious integrity. Indeed, Sathienpong Wannapok, the noted Thai Buddhist scholar and columnist on religious issues, when interviewed, felt that the new movements were dangerous not because they threatened to destabilise society, but because they would lead people astray from what he felt was a finite and un-negotiable concept of Buddhist truth.

Sathienpong felt that by focusing their religious practise on worldly and physical pursuits such as the visualisation of material images in meditation, a new movement like Wat Dhammakaya threatened to corrupt people by concentrating on the exact opposite of what the Buddha taught. When I returned from field research, a fellow student in a Buddhist studies class expressed indignation when I told him my informants were unconcerned with *nibbana* but just wanted a way to make life liveable. There is tension, then, between the anthropological and Buddhological approaches to the subject of the role of Buddhism in Thai society. My Buddhologist informants and colleagues were debating religious truth while I, as an anthropologist, examined Buddhism as it was practised by my informants and how religion and society would interact to create a system which was viable to its members.

In his article, *What is the Anthropology of Buddhism About?*, David N. Gellner (1990) argues for a comparative framework with which to discuss Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. His discussion of anthropological approaches to Theravada Buddhism contributes to my discussion of the Thai Buddhist quest for religious truth. Gellner finds that anthropologists have three different views on the disparity between Buddhism as taught in scripture and Buddhism as practised by people studied by anthropologists. The central question in all of these studies is whether the societies are really Buddhist. As far as anthropology is concerned, Gellner rightly points out that this question of being Buddhist or not derives 'from western rather than Asian conceptual priorities' (ibid:101). Religious study in the west is generally taught through studying gospel whereas in Thailand, as stated above, Buddhism is taught through religious specialists. It is understandable why western scholars would

therefore have difficulty in accepting the legitimacy of practice that does not derive from religious texts. Due to the way Thais learn religion, I found that the concept of a Thai Buddhist gospel is relatively unimportant to the average layman. Furthermore, my informants from the mainstream and new movements alike would often point out that it is not possible for a layman to follow the Vinaya completely although “one does what one can” (*tham dai thao rai kaw tham thao nan*). They also point out that one of the Buddha’s teachings is that a layman needn’t believe everything He taught in order to be a Buddhist. I never came across this in my studies of Buddhist text, but then those studies were highly abbreviated. What I can confirm, however, is that my informants would make this point often and believed it.

Gellner finds there is a spectrum of anthropological views of Theravada Buddhism which can be divided into three views: the Modernist/‘Protestant Buddhist’ position, the Anthropological position and the Populist position. The modernist position is that Buddhism is improperly practised by the masses and is only truly understood by an elite group of monks and laymen. The anthropological position is that ‘Buddhism contains a hierarchy of teachings and roles, and coexists with other systems in a structured hierarchy’ (ibid:102). The populist position is that Buddhism as practised by the masses is the true Buddhism and it is the middle class which distorts it. Gellner’s spectrum argues the opposition between two different types of Buddhism where only one can be real. Of the two, one is canonical or scriptural and the other is practised by the masses and is syncretic, incorporating such beliefs as the worship of spirits and religious relics. Gellner later declares, however, that he ‘cannot accept that, in different ways, Buddhists never thought about what Buddhism is and should be

before they had contact with Europeans' (ibid:109). From my experience in the field, I feel that my informants are deeply involved in a discussion on what Buddhism is and should be. What I observed is that while there is indeed a dichotomy between canonical and practical Buddhism, it is rather more a dynamic where the two interact and — rather than coexisting or acting in opposition — influence each other.

Because religious texts like the *Triphum Phra Ruang* can come in and out of fashion and because there is a perceived need for a new Buddhist gospel, it is clear that religious conviction and truth change. It seems reasonable to conclude that society has changed enough that people no longer believe the information contained in the *Triphum Phra Ruang* and want a Buddhism that better reflects their changing belief of what they feel is Buddhist truth. The decision on what to believe is not arbitrary, however, it is based on religious conviction and wrenching debate. Texts such as *Buddhadhamma* are not simply made up to satisfy a modern public but can be traced to the Pali Canon. I therefore place the judgement as to whether someone is really Buddhist in the hands of the society who, through either debate or dictate decide for themselves what will eventually become canonical. If this can be the case, then the decision as to what is really Buddhist results from an interaction between those who have the power to decide and the demands of the masses in a relationship which is ongoing.

The contribution of this thesis to the discussion of true Buddhism is an examination of the relationship between text and context through the relationship between monks and laymen, with monks acting as interpreters of text, deciding which parts are important and which parts are not in response to changing lay beliefs on religious emphasis. I feel that it is an examination of the relationship

between monks and laymen which will illuminate the details of this interaction between canonical and practical Buddhism and will illustrate how the true nature of Buddhism is a reflection of the times.

I. Introduction/Methodology

3. *Ethnography of the Thai Sangha*

3.1. the relationship between monks and laymen

The primary focus of anthropological preparation for this project was to examine the role monks played in Thai society rather than to search for theories to analyse my data. Although this approach helped me to avoid looking for results to satisfy a specifically pre-conceived theoretical scheme, it created difficulty in conceptualising my argument upon return. I had, however, numerous examples of what others observed of Buddhism in Thai society. I could then compare my own data with it and perhaps find a theory which would describe what I observed. Re-examining much of the ethnography was therefore imperative upon writing up and guidance came from examining concepts which were applicable to my data.

Tambiah's discussion of the Sangha and the state in Thailand provides a comprehensive history of the relationship between the two and details the state's use of the Sangha for legitimation (1976). His overwhelming evidence from much historical research supports this conclusion which is corroborated by Keyes (1987), Jackson (1989), Somboon (1982), David A. Wilson (1962), Wyatt (1984), and others. Tambiah and Bunnag (1973) agree that the relationship between monks and laymen is one of patron and client where the state supports the Sangha on a national level and the individual layman supports it on the local level. In fact, patron/client relationships have been observed as the basis of secular political alliances (Scott 1977). Bechstedt points out that Thai social hierarchy has a tendency toward unequal relationships and he finds that the patron/client relationship is one of them (1991). This fact might suggest that the relationship between Sangha and state is also unequal when viewed in the

context of political patronage, especially in terms of Sangha legitimation of rulers who provide members with food, shelter and general welfare.

However, the Sangha serves more purposes than legitimation. The lay community supports the local temple and this, as Bunnag (1973) points out, allows laymen to make merit through the donation of alms to monks, an exchange which is more personal than political. Although they have ordained ostensibly to further their efforts to attain *nibbana*, monks perform pastoral duties which benefit the individual layman (ibid). This puts into question the perception that an individual monk and individual layman are in an unequal patron/client relationship. If it is alms for merit, the relationship seems more one of exchange. After all, who is to say that there is a higher value to the alms that the layman gives to the monk than the opportunity to make merit that the monk gives to the layman? This issue of whether the relationship between monk and layman is an equal exchange or whether it is an unequal patron/client relationship must be decided by values in Thai culture and is particularly relevant to my data and will be discussed further in the conclusion, section **IX**.

I.3.2. merit

The concept of merit is crucial to the relationship between monk and layman in Thailand; monastic ordination is the greatest meritorious act and supporting the monastic order is one of the most meritorious acts for laymen. A monk's pastoral duties, therefore, are primarily accepting support from the layman and then blessing him for it. There are, of course, other meritorious acts which do not involve monks, but the primary means for a layman to accumulate merit is his relationship with the Sangha whether as a member or a supporter.

The accumulation of merit, or *bun*, is the means of reaching *nibbana* or, at the very least, improving one's *kamma*, one's record of behaviour throughout *samsara* which influences the circumstances of one's successive lives. (The pursuit of *nibbana* as a goal shall be discussed in section V.3.1.) Conversely, committing de-merit, or *bahp* is the opposite of *bun* and removes, bit by bit, the merit one has accumulated (Keyes 1979, Obeyesekere 1968). Although David N. Gellner notes that "Theravada doctrine is clear one cannot give merit to others but Buddhists have wanted to be able to do this" (1990:105), Obeyesekere finds that in Sri Lanka his informants believed that not only can merit be accumulated but transferred as well (1968). In other words, one can make merit with the intention of transferring it to others, thereby gaining it for oneself. I found that my informants would often make merit for others. I myself have taken part in such transfers when I ordained as a novice for the soul of my grandmother. The best example of making merit for others is a man's ordination for the soul of a relative who has just passed away (ibid).

Those who are perceived to have much merit are often in positions of power or respect in the local community. Tanabe (1986) and Swearer (1976b) find that a past association with monkhood often leads to respect for a layman who then becomes an advisor and counsellor on both religious and lay issues. Obeyesekere has also observed that a man who behaves more like a monk than a layman is accorded the same or often more respect than a monk.

The results of having made much merit in either this life or a past life can be measured in effectiveness (Hanks 1979). The more merit a man has accumulated, the easier it is for him to accomplish worldly acts, thereby increasing his chances of making more merit. Kirsch notes that, in the 19th

century, Thai men, who had much merit, were encouraged to enter the civil service which was considered meritorious work while women and Chinese immigrants who had less merit, were encouraged to go into business (1975). As the most effective person in society, the monarch has the most potential to make merit and, by supporting the Sangha, is able to legitimate his position as leader (Tambiah 1976). Hanks distinguishes between merit and power, however (1979). Power is acquired differently. Mystical power might come from an amulet or from the auspices of a benevolent spirit. Military power comes from having the support of a strong army. It takes power to be effective, but it takes merit to retain that power. To use Hanks' example, it is possible through the use of a love potion to seduce a woman, but it takes merit to have a good marriage. The important point is that there are methods of augmenting effectiveness which are considered short cuts. The proper method of acquiring effectiveness is to improve *kamma* through the accumulation of merit. Those who are able to climb the social hierarchy and improve their effectiveness are said to have much merit. Merit is not permanently acquired, however. It can be exhausted. Good *kamma* must be preserved through the steady performance of meritorious acts. David A. Wilson notes that when two Prime Ministers fell from power, it was attributed to his not having enough merit (1962)

I.3.3. Taylor's contextual shifts

To complicate matters when discussing the relationship between monks and laymen, the Sangha does not play the same role in the context of village society as it does in that of the city. Contextual shifts place the forest (*pa*) in opposition to villages (*bahn*) and cities or the state (*meuang*) (Taylor 1993b).

Although this contextual shift involves more than religious issues, in terms of the Sangha, the demands on monks in each area are different.

Depending on location, a temple is often more than just an ascetic retreat where those who ordain leave behind the worldly demands of society. A temple is often important for practical reasons as well as religious ones. Aside from serving as a residence for monks and a place for worship, the temple can also be a school, meeting ground, and courthouse. Because monks are meant to renounce all worldly interests, lay members of the community often paradoxically defer to them as leaders due to the fact that monks are considered impartial. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, there are documented instances where monks are asked to settle disputes and even to act as mediators between villagers and the central government (Ingersoll 1975) (Moerman 1966). In cities where local administration provides services such as education and dispute settlement, temples are not called upon to fulfil the same duties as they are in villages (Bunnag 1973). The different demands placed upon a temple and its monastic occupants varies from place to place but, in general, city communities have different needs from village ones. On the other hand, one of my Asoke informants had read anthropology and specifically compared the Santi Asoke brand of monasticism to Heinze's description of a branch of the Thai Sangha, the Ariya Sangha, or monks who do not belong to any monastery but are upholding their vows independently in the forest (1977). Heinze notes that there are at least five qualities associated with the forest monks of the Ariya Sangha which highlight a withdrawal from contact with the secular world:

1. to live in the forest
2. to subsist solely on alms
3. to dress in robes made out of rags
4. to dwell at the root of a tree, never under a roof

5. never to eat fish or meat (ibid: 53)

There is a dynamic, then, between the shifts between city, village and forest monks which can be depicted in terms of their appearance, the appearance of their temples and roles the monks play in their communities. Between the three categories, there is a corresponding variation in appearance for both monk and temple and these variations are drawn from the roles monks play in the community.

The visual cues which signify city, village and forest are drawn from the extent of monastic involvement in the community as well as location. For example, because temples are the centre of village life, the involvement of village monks in lay affairs is extensive. As will be described in my encounter with a monk who was possibly fake (i.e. a layman who had masqueraded as a monk for material gain) in section II.8.4.A, it is understood that village monks know less about the Vinaya but are more versed at helping and leading members of their community. A village monk and his temple are less polished in appearance due to a lack of funds and a lack of free time to cultivate polished appearances due to extensive pastoral duties. There is less order in a village temple than in a city temple and many of my lay informants, most notably the scholar Sulak Sivaraksa, felt that such monks were less corrupted by material concerns than city monks due to this lack of concern with appearance. Conversely, my informants at Wat Dhammakaya felt that village monks were less rigorous in their adherence to the Vinaya and that unkempt appearances indicated too much attention paid to pastoral activities than to asceticism.

I.3.3.A. city/state monks

City monks and temples are in marked contrast to village temples in that they are often far wealthier due to the corresponding wealth of their congregations. Members of the Sangha bureaucracy, the Mahatherasamakhom, live in city monasteries and are therefore affiliated with them. The architecture in city temples is generally more carefully planned and the grounds are more carefully landscaped. City temples often safeguard priceless treasures and relics such as the Emerald Buddha (Jumsai 1971). Since community affairs are not at the forefront of a city monk's concerns, his pastoral duties are more ceremony oriented. Monks at prominent city temples are generally better educated than village monks, having attended Buddhist university in Bangkok or even abroad. The monks at such temples as Wat Thepsirinthrowas and Wat Benjamabophit are known for their harmonious chanting whereas I attended one ritual in a rural area where the abbot suddenly stopped awkwardly in the middle of a chant and announced that they had done enough.

I.3.3.B. village monks

The best illustration of the difference between village monks and city monks is through the function of temples in the community. For example, an upcountry village temple is more than simply a place of worship as it is in the city. It is the civic centre of the village, often housing not only the community's monks, but also its school, its assembly hall and its fair ground (Moerman 1966). City temples, although many have affiliated schools, are rarely such centres of community activity. Monks play a much more active leadership role in the life of the village than they do in the city. In fact, Ingersoll points out that a particularly respected monk is solicited by the lay community to take on

leadership roles in the village (1975). Provincial governments often rely on the local monk to gain support for national development projects (Keyes 1979). The provincial or the state authority is not the same as the village, however, and villagers will put local interests before those of the state, even if the desires of the state are presented by a monk (Piker 1979). To be respected, the monk must be judged to have at heart the genuine interests of the local congregation. The criterion by which a monk is judged, then, may well be local loyalty. Another factor, however, is also that the monk is judged by his congregation to be a better opportunity for making merit due to his stricter asceticism. Ingersoll notes that a monk who has ordained for a long period of time is more popular than a monk who has ordained for only one *phansa* or rainy season. Indeed, the duration of ordination would prove to be a major factor in the perceptions of my lay informants as to a monks' popularity. A long period of ordination was considered an indication of the seriousness of a monk's vows and his proficiency. Therefore, a highly respected monk need not be a member of the community but a superior practitioner of monastic asceticism.

I.3.3.C. forest monks

Due to their more rigorously ascetic practices, forest monks are often considered religious virtuosi and have a greater reputation than state or village monks for following the precepts of the *Vinaya* (the concept of a religious virtuoso will be discussed further in section III). As mentioned above, Heinze's Ariya Sangha live by even more rigorous observance of the *Vinaya* than other monks. Forest monks in Sri Lanka are meant to follow the rules of the thirteen *dutangas*, taken from the Buddhist text the *Visudhimagga*, although few do so

absolutely (Carrithers 1983b). Phra Rajaworamuni divides the thirteen *dutangas* into four categories involving robes, alms and food, resting places and energy (1985). They are listed below (comments in parentheses are mine):

connected with robes:

1. *pāmsukūlikaṅga* — refuse-rag-wearer’s practice (wearing only discarded rags)
2. *tecīvarikaṅga* — triple-robe-wearer’s practice (owning only three robes)

connected with alms and food

3. *piṇḍapātikaṅga* — alms-food-eater’s practice (eating only donated alms)
4. *supadānacārikaṅga* — house-to-house-seeker’s practice (seeking alms from every house)
5. *ekāsanikaṅga* — one-sessioner’s practice (eating only one meal a day)
6. *pattapiṇḍikaṅga* — bowl-food eater’s practice (eating only from the alms bowl)
7. *khalupacchābhattikaṅga* — later food refuser’s practice (eating only one helping)

connected with resting places

8. *āraññikaṅga* — forest-dweller’s practice (living in the forest)
9. *rukhamūlikaṅga* — tree-root-dweller’s practice (sheltering only under the foot of a tree)
10. *abbokāsikaṅga* — open-air-dweller’s practice (living in the open air)
11. *sosānikaṅga* — charnel-ground-dweller’s practice (living in a cemetery)
12. *yathāsanthatikaṅga* — any-bed-user’s practice (sleeping in whatever beds are offered)

connected with energy

13. *nesajjikaṅga* — sitter’s practice (never lying down) (ibid: 306-8)

Although the *dutangas* are not adhered to strictly, it is nevertheless much harder to be a forest monk than a city or village monk. Taylor’s account of the life of Acharn Man Phuurithatto is an illustration of the forest order's popularity. It details Man’s divergent practices, his popularity with the lay public and how he became considered a Buddhist saint (Taylor 1993b).

Another reason that forest dwelling monks are considered more ascetically pure is that they have fewer pastoral demands placed on them in comparison to village or city monks and are able to spend more time in meditation. Taylor finds that this gives rise to a paradox: ‘The more a monk

renounces, the more power he has (both magical and political) over worldly aspects of life (ibid: 316).’ As will be discussed in further detail in the sections on Wat Dhammakaya (IV.3.1) and the National Council on Social Welfare (IV.1.1), meditation as a source of social or political power is not exclusive to individuals who have been ordained. In fact, Turton has discussed the relationship between meditation as a means to perceived invulnerability among laymen (1991a) and Van Esterik has found that involvement in local meditation groups and meetings gives a layman enhanced social stature and is a vehicle of social mobility (1977).

Because forest monks are considered more ascetically proficient due to a lack of pastoral duties, when they do become involved in worldly issues, it is considered out of the ordinary and extremely meritorious. Such activities often garner great lay support (Taylor 1991). Most significantly, Taylor states that, ‘while a dissenting activist, Man was nevertheless a potential danger to the establishment until his “power” was eventually translated, into normative terms, symbolic of the classic Buddhist saints’ (1993b: 131-2).

I. Introduction/Methodology

4. *The Theoretical Basis for this Project*

4.1. analytical concepts

In *Why Humans Have Cultures*, Carrithers (1992) refers to the Agannasuttanta, a Buddhist text, to illustrate his view of metamorphosis and creativity in human life. He states that the Agaññasuttanta 'stands as evidence, not for some immutable cultural pattern echoing down the ages, but for the irreducibly plural and unstoppably metamorphic character of common social life' (ibid:145). Theories of analysis, however, are meant to be timeless in the sense that they may be used to analyse social institutions which existed centuries ago, as with Foucault's examinations of discipline throughout European history (1972) and Asad's study of it in medieval monasteries (1993). Geertz (1966) finds that religion provides either a model for or a model of a society's culture, regardless of time or history. Anthropology's relationship with history, however, is often problematic due to Western linear concepts of history which has its own impact on anthropological analysis (ibid). In her conception of anthropological 'moments', Harris argues that the post-modern moment is one where anthropologists emphasise 'flux and change as a constant process; agency is emphasised in contrast -- indeed in opposition to -- structure. . . performance, voice and poetics have replaced a concern with text' (Harris 1996:7). This approach is particularly relevant in view of the discussion of scripture in section I.2 and Keyes' criticism of Tambiah below. Ernest Gellner's argument against postmodernism, however, is also apt in its criticism that relativism refuses to find constants in the analysis of cultures, and he therefore proposes rationalist fundamentalism as a means of understanding religion and society although this, too, is hardly a conclusive concept (1992). From the basis of my data and

experiences in the field, I acknowledge that, in the study of cultures, Foucault's concepts of continuity, discontinuity, and rupture (1972), are an integral part of society or, at the very least, the society I was studying and, while acknowledging rupture, my analysis shall take note of the continuities within the discontinuities of the Thai Sangha.

The most critical reading of *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Tambiah 1976) came from Keyes who found Tambiah's approach 'inadequate for the purposes of identifying the process of change' (1978b:169). Keyes' primary criticism of *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Tambiah 1976) is based on the fact that, before Tambiah had finished his research and before he had published it, the Thai Sangha underwent unprecedented politicisation in the political upheaval of 1973 which belied Tambiah's primary conclusion that the Sangha was an institution whose political action was restricted by the secular government (op.cit). Keyes felt that although Tambiah indicated 'his awareness that the conclusions he reached may no longer (have been) valid' his theoretical analysis was unable to allow for such a development (ibid:169). Tambiah felt that the Thai Sangha is one component of a tripartite power structure which is reliant on the existence of two other vital components, the monarchy and the military, suggesting that one was reliant on the others. Harmon, concurs but feels the tripartite relationship is between the monarchy, the Sangha, and the populace (1978). Keyes' point, one that I agree with, is that the relationship between Sangha and monarchy, rather than being one of structure, is one of historical development (op.cit.). In other words, that the two have evolved together, but that they are not necessarily inextricably fixed together. As Keyes puts it, 'lay Buddhist ethics are not dependent on the existence of a monarchy'

(ibid:165). Concurrently, in his study of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Gombrich describes the simultaneous evolution of Sangha and state as 'an autonomy of different areas of human culture' (1988:14). Each area has its own history and one may influence the development of another, but 'they do not necessarily move in step' (ibid:14). Keyes offers a model of how change takes place in society by discussing the dialectic tension between meaning and experience (Keyes, 1978b). Persistence, or continuity, comes not from ideological structures, but from situations when tension between meaning and experience maintains a balance. When the tension becomes too great, it leads to an evolution of one or both.

The above approaches to history and anthropology challenge Weber's conclusion that religion and economics develop together (1968b). However, although there is much to question with Weber's assessment of Buddhism, there is much which is apt. On the one hand, Obeyesekere finds that Weber's concept of theodicy needs to be altered before it can apply to Sri Lankan Buddhism (1968) and Cohen finds that Buddhist social ethics are 'at variance with Weber's claim that Buddhism is a mystical, asocial religion that cannot generate a positive ethic of action in this world' (1984:210), Weber's concept of charisma is especially useful in examining my data on monastic leaders and religious movements. Furthermore, as Carrithers points out, Weber's conclusions on the inevitable 'domesticisation' of religious practitioners are applicable in the context of Theravada Buddhist forest monks and, therefore, the new movements I studied. Weber's finding that doctrines adjust themselves to religious needs (1948b) could be used to describe the whole history of the Thai Sangha and Keyes' theory of change bears much similarity to it. In short,

although I found myself agreeing with those at variance with some aspects of Weber's theories on Buddhism, I found that his vocabulary is still extremely useful in a discussion of my data.

I.4.2. continuity within the discontinuity

The goal of this thesis is not to take either a specifically post-modern or a specifically anti-relativist approach to the Sangha in Thailand. In fact, I am hesitant to give any label to my analysis. I do find, however, that there are concepts which are helpful in making sense of what I observed. Aside from the concepts discussed above, there are several others which have proven helpful considering the nature of my data. As this argument progresses, the relevance of such concepts will become self-evident. Foremost are Foucault's concepts of continuity, discontinuity and rupture (1972). As will be discussed in section II, Buddhism in Thai society has been subject to constant change. The idea, therefore, that there is a traditional Thai Buddhist practice set in stone and any reform is in opposition to that tradition does not seem applicable to this project. The new movements which are discussed in this paper are but another evolution of Buddhism in Thailand in general rather than an effort to overthrow tradition. They are a reaction to tension between meaning and experience in Thai Buddhism. As will be shown, reformers draw on religious antecedents in history in their quest to reform Buddhism in Thailand. Therefore, there is continuity amidst the discontinuity.

I.4.3. concepts to examine

Aside from Foucault's rupture, continuity and discontinuity (1972), other

concepts which have been helpful to my analysis are discourse, knowledge (Foucault 1980) and certainty (James 1995). I find these closely related to the concept of truth as has been discussed in section I.1.2. which not only concerned me a great deal in my approach to this project, but also would often be brought up by my informants. Because religious truth in Thailand does not rely on a readily accessible scripture and a need has been expressed for a new gospel, it became obvious to me that Buddhist truth was created through religious discourse which, in turn, became knowledge on the part of informants. According to James, certainty as a concept is an agency of ideological domination in that, like strong currencies spreading into weak economies and ultimately taking them over, new certainties threaten to overwhelm knowledge or belief (ibid). When applied to the context of Thai Buddhism as I observed the dynamic between the mainstream Sangha and the new movements, such concepts are especially helpful in discussing their interaction and their successes and failures in co-existence.

As discussed earlier in section I.2.1., both the mainstream and new movements may be scripture-based to the extent that they refer to the Pali Canon but, due to the lack of translated scripture available to the Thai-literate public, it is through performance, poetics and rhetoric (Turton, 1991a), which compose parts of the language of discourse, that members of the Sangha interact with their lay following and disseminate knowledge and certainty. As Houtman has pointed out, there is a difference between text and context and my data supports his belief that context provides the primary source of learning on Buddhism (1990). My data, therefore, will also be examined with these concepts in mind.

I. Introduction/Methodology

5. *The Ways of Power*

5.1. power in a western scholarly sense

That a monk's dissenting activity may be considered dangerous and powerful demands an examination of how that power works. Is this power religious and only a threat to the Sangha status quo or to religious truth? Or does it involve the secular world as well? If a monk can become active, for example, in environmental preservation, I would believe that his power involves influencing laymen to act on issues which are not religious. Tambiah clearly illustrates that such monastic power can be used for legitimising the secular state (1976), but how does it work between individual monks and laymen? How is it possible that a monk can be considered a local leader? Where does he derive his power? Is it possible to describe this power? Therborn dismisses legitimacy theories as invalid due to their suggestion that individuals in society act as groups without individual motivation (1980). Motivation as a factor of power must be examined for an effective theory on it to be formulated in order to fill the gaps left by discussing power only in terms of the individual's interaction with the state.

Western thinking on the subject of power draws much from the Enlightenment which places the individual in opposition to the polity. Most western definitions of power, therefore, tend to indicate dyadic, asymmetrical, repressive relationships (Debnam 1984). These theories demand two parties, cause, and effect before power can be manifested. Foucault finds two approaches to the analysis of power, one which he calls the old system and one which he calls the war-repressive system (1980). Dating from the Enlightenment, the old system discusses an individual's right to autonomy that

he surrenders to the state in exchange for protection. The limit of the state's power in this case is the abuse of the above contract, or oppression. The war-repression system concentrates not on the contract, but on how the individual's surrender of his autonomy allows the sovereign to oppress his subjects. Arendt considers violence a factor of power (1970) and Lukes (1986), like Weber (1968b), finds that an individual's will or consent must be defied for power to have been exerted.

But as we have seen, power is not always reliant on force, violence or coercion, especially not in the case of Thai monks. Turton examines domination in peasant society and finds that ruling institutions dominate society through both repressive means (e.g. the military, the police) and ideological means (e.g. educational, religious and familial among others) (1984). Sources of communication are the agency which maintain the hegemony of a ruling class over a subjected class. Means of communication such as poetics -- the restriction of topics of discussion through ideas of appropriateness -- or through rhetoric -- how something is said -- are the process (Turton 1991a). Although such discussions of power involve a ruling party or class, they are also relevant to the interaction between monks and laymen through rituals undertaken during pastoral duties and through the rhetoric of sermons.

An emphasis on ritual characterises Asad's discussion of discipline and medieval monasteries where monks would obey the abbot's authority due to their belief that it represents God's authority (1993). In essence, the monks in Asad's discussion asserted self-discipline. Upon returning from field work, I found that Asad's description of monastic discipline particularly pertinent due to the similarities with what I observed in the field as a layman's relationship with a

monk. The concept of self-discipline will be examined in greater detail throughout this thesis. From my own experience in Thai society I question the universality of the opposition between the individual and a more powerful entity, whether that is another individual, the state or a ruling class, as key components in a definition of power.

I.5.2. the power of example

A. charisma: being *keng*

In my quest to discover the root of monastic power, I found that the most important quality a monk must have is to be *keng*. The most direct translation for this word in English is: to have charisma. Every single informant, without exception, used the term *keng* to describe a monk he trusted or one with a great following. This is a blanket term which is not exclusively religious and can be applied to golfers, prostitutes and politicians as well as monks of any kind. Loosely translated, *keng* means 'to have great prowess' but the definition is actually more precise than that. While a prostitute can be *keng* for best knowing how to please her clients, a monk can be *keng* as well for being a master of Buddhism. The key point is not simply to perform the chosen tasks well, but to be able to rise beyond or to challenge the established standard or the highest authority.

Unlike charisma, however, not only is proficiency a factor in being *keng*, so is defiance. In the course of field work, I found that there is great respect accorded those who are defiant but only if they are able to supplement their attitude with true ability. In all cases when a layman respected a monk, it was due to the fact that the monk was able to establish his own standard of practice. When a monk was *keng* he was more monk-like than others and could acquire a

following from this quality.

Wallis declares that ‘it is . . . only of any importance what charisma is, if we think that by designating it one way rather than another, we can explain its occurrence, variation, composition, and so forth, or if we think that designating it in this way will help us to explain something else.’ (Wallis 1993:167) Discussing the quality of being *keng* is useful in examining the relationship between monks and laymen because a monk’s lay following is based on his being charismatic or *keng*.

I.5.2.B. recognising charisma: *sattha* and *leuamsai*

From interviews with monks, religious scholars and laymen, I heard two other Thai terms which described the feelings of laymen upon recognising a *keng*, or charismatic, monk. Both were feelings which led to their trusting and following members of the Sangha: *sattha* and *leuamsai*. Although informants on occasion used the terms in reference to secular relationships, the nuance was always religious, much like the word ‘catholic’ in English. Informants have translated *sattha* as ‘faith.’ This word was spoken in such context, however, that I feel it connoted something more deeply felt. I would prefer to translate *sattha* as: charismatic attraction which inspires devotion. Informants used the term *sattha* when referring to an attraction that elicited not only donations of time but also energy and money. *Leuamsai* is similar to *sattha* in meaning but with less fervour. It is used to express an initial attraction that may lead to feeling *sattha* on better acquaintance.

A monk’s lack of popularity could be traced to the lack of *sattha* in his dealings with laymen. I am of the opinion that *sattha* provides the basis for

monks' power, allowing them to be used in development programmes or, in the case of Potirak, to influence the actions of those in political arenas. When I interviewed Sathienpong Wannapok, the Buddhist scholar and social critic, he told me that when a layman felt *sattha* he would follow his monk blindly and would accept all manner of excuses should that monk behave inappropriately.

I.5.2.C. Monks do not have power, they have *barami*: the vocabulary of power.

Rather than stressing the actors and outcome in a power relationship, I find that Thai concepts of power tend to describe the way in which it works, with the concern concentrated more in the way it is exercised. In the field I encountered many terms for power, but primarily four used in the social context: *amnat*, *phalang*, *itthiphon*, *abhiñña* and *barami*. I did not encounter all such terms immediately, rather, they came gradually in the course of time in the field.

The first term, *amnat*, connotes commanding force and is used most often in reference to army officers or sorcerers who, in order to accomplish worldly ends, may mobilise guns or other weapons, magical powers or a great number of people. Those who have *amnat* are able to elicit fear through physical or mystical force and as such, are able to demand respect.

Phalang, as in the Phalang Dhamma Party, connotes physical force as well, but is much more physiological and private, suggesting personal strength. In the name of the political party, it is the physical embodiment of the power of the Buddha's teaching or the physical strength of the Dhamma's followers.

Itthiphon, the term suggested to me by the irrepressible monk as appropriate for the title of my thesis, is most often translated into English as influence, although the term 'influence' in English often defies theoretical

definition just as much as the term ‘power’. What is meant by *itthiphon* is a relationship characterised by much less force than *amnat*. *Itthiphon* suggests whereas *amnat* commands. Although *amnat* would never be used in reference to the Sangha or to individual monks due to the inference of coercion (in which monks, in their efforts to renounce the world have no interest), *itthiphon* is often used when referring to religion’s impact on worldly society. Those who have *itthiphon* are able to bring about worldly ends, but through good will more than through force. Financial influence is a form of *itthiphon*.

The word *abhiñña* is used exclusively with monks in reference to mystical power (see section IV.4.1). It is considered a natural ability which is acquired through monastic practices such as meditation. I have also heard the term *itthiphon* used in terms of a monk’s mystical power but have the impression that the appropriateness of such power is suspect though not forbidden. Randall discusses the term *iddhi* as supernatural but is scornful of such power (1990). Turton also finds the *iddhividha* is a related form of power which provides invulnerability through amulets and meditation but this form of power is related to the criminal underworld rather than monks (1991b). *Iddhividha* is, in fact, one of the qualities of *abhiñña*. *Amnat*, on the other hand, is always considered inappropriate for a monk because it is exercised through commanding evil spirits.

Barami, like *abhiñña*, is a term applied almost exclusively to royal and religious power and especially to monks. *Barami* is the Thai pronunciation of the Pali term *parami* which is a category of ten qualities of perfection which can be accomplished through ascetic practice. I believe, however, that its use in Thai is a case of Houtman’s ‘Pali Trap’ (1990) where Pali terms are commonly and

improperly used and come to have a vernacular meaning all their own. In fact, there has been a documented change in the meaning of the term *barami* since the beginning of the Bangkok era in Thailand (Sirindhorn 1981). In Thai it began as the ‘perfections; stages of spiritual perfection achieved by a *Bodhisatta* on his path to Buddhahood’ but later became ten specific religious attributes and has now come to mean merit or a particular kind of power (Phra Rajavaramuni 1985:387). Van Esterik notes that in village Thailand, *barami* is taken to mean accumulated merit (1977) when male informants speak of not having accumulated enough of it to ordain. One of my informants at Wat Dhammakaya also referred to her hope of accumulating enough *barami* to continue coming to the temple. Phra Rajaworamuni’s *Dictionary of Buddhism* lists attributes of *barami* as below (if the Thai pronunciation is different from the transliterated Pali, it is provided before the Pali which is italicised):

1. than, or *Dāna*: giving; charity; generosity; liberality
2. sin or *Sīla*: morality; good conduct
3. *Nekkhamma*: renunciation (or, more popularly, to ordain)
4. panya or *Paññā*: wisdom; insight; understanding
5. wiriya or *Viriya*: energy; effort; endeavour (in doing that which is your duty)
6. *Khanti*: forbearance; tolerance; endurance
7. sajja or *Sacca*: truthfulness
8. atitthan or *Adhitthāna*: resolution; self determination
9. *Mettā*: loving kindness; friendliness
10. ubekkhā or *Upekkhā*: equanimity; indifference to praise and blame in the performance of duty (Phra Rajavaramuni 1985:284)

When used in conversation *barami* is never broken down into these categories. However it is perhaps, these qualities which give a monk power. It is more likely, however, that most Thai laymen are unaware of the above list and have their own sense of the meaning. Unlike *amnat*, *itthiphon* or *abhiñña*, the act of exercising *barami* is passive rather than active. Linguistically, *barami* does not connote action, i.e. a monk does not exert his *barami* to have a prominent

scholar freed from jail, rather, he relies on it.

I.5.3. the source of power in the Thai monastic context

Although a monk is meant to adhere to the *Vinaya* in order to improve his own pursuit of *nibbana*, many monks actively pursue a relationship of *sattha* with their lay congregation which would allow them to rely on *barami* to influence others. At the National Council on Social Welfare conference for monks described in section IV.1.1.C, I heard a monk speak of planting *sattha* in members of his rural community by taking interest in local affairs (*plook sattha*). Although he mentioned four qualities that a monk should cultivate in order to plant *sattha*, (1. appearance or *na ta* 2. voice or *siang* 3. becoming a source of reliance or *pen thi peung* 4. knowledge or *khvam ru*), no lay informant ever referred to this list; it is perhaps known primarily to monks. As will become clear throughout this thesis, however, all the qualities mentioned above were discussed by my informants as criteria for judging a monk and are important.

The above list notwithstanding, specific traits which inspire either *sattha* or *leuamsai* varied according to the individual layman's perceptions; different people may have felt *sattha* for the same monk, but for different reasons. In terms of appearance, one layman may have found the monk's gait suitably humble while another found his expression appropriately serene. If it were the monk's voice, some may have liked his gentle speech while others liked his melodious chanting. It could be said that the conditions of a *sattha* relationship depended almost as much on the layman's own preference as on the monk's personal qualities. This thesis explores the component qualities contributing to a monk's being *keng* which would lead to a layman's feeling *sattha* and the

subsequent *barami* the monk would acquire from this situation.

I. Introduction/ Methodology

6. *The Aims of this Thesis*

6.1. What is Buddhism in Thai society?: different styles of monk

The preceding sections of this introductory chapter aimed to provide a brief explanation not only of my preparations for entering the field but also of the theoretical issues which effected my analysis of the data I acquired. The remainder of this thesis will often make reference to the preceding theoretical discussion, which, in turn, means to provide a framework with which to discuss Thai monastic power through descriptions of monks, temples, devotees and the interaction among them both in general and in particular as the mainstream and the new movements strive to determine what they believe to be the true nature of Buddhism in Thailand.

I will begin with an examination of the monk in Thai society. Due to various factors, among them a major binary sectarian division within the mainstream (discussed further in section II), there are different styles of monks in Thailand. (Throughout this paper, I will use the word ‘style’ in reference to monks and their practical emphases. While many of my informants might well object to my use of this term due to its association with a consumerist lifestyle such as fashion and interior design, I find it appropriate and will explain my choice in terminology in section III.1.2.) When there are different styles of monks, however, are there correspondingly different monastic ideals for the lay followers of the various monks or is there just one ideal interpreted in diverse ways? I wish to discuss the contributing factors to such ideals, if they are indeed different, in order to determine whether they involve the monk’s behaviour, appearance or otherwise. Is there a direct correlation between a monk’s following and his devotees’ conceptions of perfect monkhood or is it simply a

matter of emphasis? Is there an iconography of monkhood that has meaning and indicates a monk's particular accomplishments? I will discuss dynamic tension between different contextual shifts within the Thai nation: city/state (*meuang*), village (*ban*) and forest (*pa*) and how these divisions interact to create a varied Sangha. In the field, I encountered five different popular categories of monks beyond sectarianism or membership in new movements: scholar (*wichakahn*), practising (*patibat*), development (*phatthana*), meditation (*wipasana*) and magical (*saiyasat*). Whether or not a monk is a member of the mainstream or a new movement, I found that my informants would put him into one of the above categories although, at times, he appeared to me from his activities to fall into two or more. Not only does this point to different ideals of monkhood, but to what appears to be informants' desire to classify a monk as being of one speciality to the exclusion of other activities. (This will be discussed in the conclusion, section **IX**.) Strangely enough, when my informants were questioned on the ideal monk, their answers were almost all the same despite their categorising monks in different styles. Section **III** of this thesis examines the possible reasons for this uniformity of answers.

To further explore the concept of a monastic ideal, in section **IV**, I will discuss monks of the mainstream as well as those of the Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya movements with emphasis on the observable attributes of each, whether it involves individual monks, their dress, behaviour and activities, temple grounds or group activities involving both monastic and lay members of each movement. I feel that all of these factors contribute to a layman's experience of a monk. By experience, I do not mean a monk's own past or the individual's cumulative interaction with that monk. By experience, I refer to the

different encounters a layman had with a monk, the monk's teachings and the monk's movement as well as the layman's own participation in Buddhist activities organised by the monk or his movement. All of these encounters would have an impact on the layman's own vision of the true nature of Buddhism. Through discussions of individual monks, I will then refer to the preceding discussion of the ideals of monkhood in order to determine how the mainstream and new movements meet those ideals through monastic styles.

Having discussed the monks, I will turn my attention to the lay devotees of the new movements: Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya. Section V is a general discussion of life histories and how biographical data relate to lay preferences in worship and devotion. The aim in this section is to provide an understanding of the lay sources of monks' power. Is it the devotees' individual finances or manpower which contribute to a monk's power? Moreover, which devotees would be able to contribute to a monk's or a new movement's power?

Because the mainstream and the new movements are very different in all aspects of practice and appearance, in section VI I will discuss anthropological landscape (Hirsch, E. 1995): the temple as a physical manifestation of specific beliefs and how those beliefs reflect the lay experience of Buddhism. The lay need for visual evidence of a monk's superior ascetic standards applies not only to the monk's personal appearance and habits but also to his environment which effects the layman's experience with the monk. To fortify my descriptions of the monks discussed, I will compare the grounds of mainstream temples to those of Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya. In the same way that I examined the concept of an ideal monk, I will examine the concept of an ideal temple.

As the ultimate embodiment of religious ideals, all temples, whether part

of the mainstream or a new movement are separate societies within Thai society at large. They have their own priorities governed by religious dictates which have impact on the lives of residents and frequent visitors. In the course of field work, many of my informants in the new movements talked of wishing to move eventually into the temple as a permanent resident. In the mainstream, ordination is generally the only means of gaining access to temple life on a permanent basis. Devotees of mainstream temples, however, while often devoted to a monk or a temple, would rarely talk of ordination as one of their goals. Many informants from the new movements also spoke of ordination but the majority who wished to live in the temples were given the option of residency without having to become monks or, in the case of women, nuns. What kind of experience do the new temples offer to make the prospect of becoming a part of their community so enticing?

In section VII, I therefore discuss life in new movement communities. The society in a mainstream temple may be separate in the sense that its members are different from the rest of the community and live by different rules. Nevertheless, a mainstream temple is an integral part of Thai society with the daily activities of the temple and the world beyond intertwined. New movement communities, however, attempt to be self-sufficient. Santi Asoke went so far as to build a Buddhist utopia at Pathom Asoke, their community in Nakhorn Pathom, one of Bangkok's neighbouring cities (Sombat 1988) and Wat Dhammakaya had plans to build a community of condominiums for devotees. From meals to personal tasks, the life of a member of either Santi Asoke or Wat Dhammakaya followed a strict pattern. They both had intricate hierarchies, with members of each movement knowing, more or less, where he or she fits in and

what role he or she plays in that society. The daily life was often different from that of mainstream temples though not unfamiliar to the average layman due to their Buddhist nature. An account of special occasions at a mainstream temple and at Wat Dhammakaya and everyday life at Wat Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke follows in section **VIII** to illustrate how each one either fits into Thai society at large or creates its own ideal society separately.

Promulgating the concept of an ideal society, whether it is through setting a new example or through maintaining existent religious standards is very much a part of Buddhism's role in Thailand. The role monks play in creating an ideal society is hotly debated, but the fact that they are examples of ideal behaviour is the basis for much of their following. After having discussed monks, temples, devotees and temple life, I will conclude this thesis with a discussion of power as it exists among monks in Thailand by taking into account a monk's style and a layman's experience with it. While the ultimate goal of this thesis is to understand the relationship I observed between monks and laymen in terms of power, I believe that this was power in a social relationship between individual monks and individual laymen as they practised their conceptions of the true nature of Buddhism. This, in turn, allowed for a wider interaction between monks and groups of lay individuals which had the potential to effect the interaction between those groups within the polity.

II. The Course of Thailand's Middle Path

Through preparatory research and subsequent observation in the field, it became apparent that historical context plays an important role in the issues addressed in contemporary Thai religious discourse. It must be borne in mind that, as Weber postulated, whenever there is a shift in doctrinal focus it often takes place to accommodate or adapt to the state of society at the time (Weber 1948b). Not that changes are rarely made out of both secular and religious leaders' personal convictions but, in the Thai context, history has often effected the demands placed on Buddhism and the Thai Sangha and that precedents play an important part in modern religious debate. In this section I shall give a few examples, in order of chronological occurrence, of how political affairs have been involved in religious affairs at certain moments in Thai history. The historical data of this summary has been derived primarily from Keyes (1987), Somboon (1982), Tambiah (1976) and D.K. Wyatt (1966) unless otherwise cited. Additional history of the Thai Sangha during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was derived from Butt (1978) and C.J. Reynolds (1973). I rely on data gathered during field work and two local English-language newspapers *The Nation* and the *Bangkok Post* for my account of events after 1988. I hope to make it clear that the Sangha, as a social institution, historically and currently plays an important role in the support or the deterioration of the status quo and that secular governments can easily justify their involvement in religious affairs by pointing to this history.

II.1. *Pre-Bangkok*

Buddhism reputedly came to Thailand through Sona and Uttara, missionaries from the court of Asoka, the great Indian Buddhist monarch (Jumsai 1971). Tambiah, however, traces Thai Buddhism's history from India to Sri Lanka to the Thai kingdoms of Sukhothai and Lanna (1976). Whatever the origins of Thai Buddhism, the establishment and renewal of the Sangha through the exchange of monks and monastic traditions has been historically a factor in all of the Theravadin states. The renewal of the Sri Lankan Sangha through the infusion of Thai traditions (Gombrich 1988) and vice versa was mirrored in similar exchanges between Sri Lanka and Burma (Mendelson 1975). State sponsorship of such renewals was imperative due to the diplomatic nature of such undertakings and was a great source of prestige for the rulers involved. From the very beginning of Buddhist history in Thailand, then, periodic efforts at revitalising the Sangha led to constant changes in the face of what was considered the gradual deterioration of ascetic standards or what Carrithers, after Weber, calls 'domesticisation' (1979).

A confederation of city-states, Dvaravati's local regional influence was instrumental in disseminating Buddhism to other Southeast Asian kingdoms. Although they have now been reduced to an ethnic minority in Thailand, the Mon people of Dvaravati left a religious legacy that remains to this day. The Buddhism practised in Thailand is an evolved blend of indigenous animism and imported Theravadin orthodoxy (Kirsch 1977, Tambiah 1970). The precise recipe of animism and Buddhism has formed one of the debates on proper practice today as many modern Thais have begun to reject the mystic practices of animism. The reasons for this rejection will be discussed in upcoming sections.

By the thirteenth century, however, Buddhism prospered under state patronage in the ethnically Thai kingdom of Sukhothai. A large monastery complex dominated the city and the Sangha, whose administrators were appointed by local leaders, served as advisors in state affairs. The commissioning of the *Triphum Phra Ruang* (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982) and state-sponsored exchanges of Buddhist relics with other polities enhanced the prestige of the king and neighbouring rulers (Andaya 1978). Indeed, the possession of sacred objects often was a source of legitimation for a ruler in both Thailand and Laos (Reynolds, F.E. 1978a). This practice continues in modern times and sacred gifts empower the recipient not only on a state level but also on a personal level. The transfer of charisma in Thailand from individual monks to amulets has been a common practice and many Thais collect such amulets (Tambiah, 1984). Keyes (1977) notes that during the millenarian movements of 1902, sacred amulets were given as gifts from monks to peasant leaders they supported. Aside from possessing sacred objects, religious rituals served to unite rebellious peasants at the time (Tanabe 1984). Such use of religious legitimation illustrates how, historically, Buddhism has served not only as a means of diplomatic exchange and internal renewal, it has also been a means of consolidating local autonomy in the face of outside threat. Peasant uprisings occurred periodically throughout Thai history and since 1699, there have been at least eight, the last one in 1959 (Chattip 1984).

The use of religion as legitimation led to the end of Sukhothai's independence in the fifteenth century, however, when it was absorbed by the southern kingdom of Ayutthya. King Trailok of Ayutthya earned respect by restoring local monasteries in Sukhothai and by ordaining, along with almost two

and a half thousand followers, in the northern order. When the king returned to the south, his followers remained behind, infiltrating the Sangha of Sukhothai and eventually using their support to confirm Ayutthya's sovereignty.

II.2. The Fall of Ayutthya and the founding of Bangkok

With no clearly specified line of royal succession, Ayutthya's crown was often in dispute. The Sangha, representative of religious orthodoxy, was instrumental in consecrating the monarch. Although Ayutthya enjoyed diplomatic relations with Europe (King Narai was the first to send an ambassador to France and England) relations with Burma to the immediate west consisted of perpetual warfare and ultimately Ayutthya was sacked by the Burmese in 1767. The kingdom was destroyed and, in the resultant social upheaval, the Sangha fell into disarray. Without government or lay sponsorship, monks had no source of economic support and were seen scavenging in the countryside. Once peace had been restored, the populace remained distrustful of the Sangha and monks did not regain respect without royal patronage. It is at this time that Thai monks began shaving their eyebrows as well as their heads not only in order to differentiate themselves from Burmese monks who were attempting to infiltrate the Sangha, but also from the Thai monks who had been guilty of misconduct during the privations of war. This issue of shaved eyebrows would become important when I conducted field work. The monks of Santi Asoke stopped shaving their eyebrows and claimed this to be more correct in monastic practice than the mainstream Sangha.

In 1782, Thailand regained independence under the leadership of Phya Taksin who crowned himself king and moved the capital to Thonburi, in the

process guiding the re-establishment of the Sangha. Taksin's reign lasted only a year, however, as he proceeded to alienate himself from his supporters and, more importantly, religious authorities. Taksin proclaimed himself a demi-god who had supernatural powers and was above the Sangha. He was declared mad and then executed by one of his generals Phya Chakri, founder of the current dynasty.

II.3. *Establishment of the Thammayut Order*

The introduction of western scientific, rational thought to Thailand in the nineteenth century had immense impact on Buddhism. The education system for the urban middle class would become greatly influenced by Christian missionary schools which introduced western rationalism and science and became the basis of education for the middle class. Many of my informants attended such schools as did my mother. As will be shown later, the quest for proof became also the quest for truth. The most important figure in modern Thai Buddhism was King Mongkut, or King Rama IV who, before his succession, spent his life as a monk. In response to western influence, Rama IV suspended the use of the such texts as the *Triphum Phra Ruang*, turning instead directly to the *Tipitaka*. He created a more rigorous order within the Sangha, the Thammayut, and thereafter, elite monasteries under royal patronage were under this order. The education system was given a new association with the Sangha due to the fact that most of the local schools were in the monasteries; a revised approach to dogma provided for western science, an effort to modernise the country under the auspices of religious practice (Kirsch 1978). Although the introduction of a new order and more involvement with secular education may have been beneficial to the

Sangha and the Thai education system at the time, these innovations would eventually lead to factionalism between the Thammayut order and the rest of the Sangha, now called the Mahanikai, or greater, order (referring to numbers) and to the eventual bureaucratic subjugation by the Sangha of the Ministry of Education.

II.4. *The Turn of the Century*

Rama IV's successor, King Chulalongkorn, or Rama V, initiated a programme of national integration in an effort to consolidate the country in the face of European colonialist expansion. In the late nineteenth century, Burma was rapidly becoming annexed by the British Empire and the subsequent withdrawal of state support for Buddhism would result in the politicisation of the Burmese Sangha (Spiro 1970). The Sangha's active role in the resistance to British rule would continue until independence and then ultimately would result in involvement in secular politics through to modern times (Mendelson 1975). Although Rama V ceded some territory to the British and the French, he succeeded in maintaining Thai sovereignty through a number of policies which centralised the federal government. Among the revisionist policies initiated was the Sangha Act of 1902, meant to consolidate state control of religion. In order to give the semblance of equality between the sacred and secular, the Sangha administration was restructured to mirror the provincial administration; for each position in the national government, there was a corresponding one in the Sangha hierarchy. However, strict control over religious practises was maintained by bringing the Sangha directly under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. The Department of Religious Affairs was established as a

subsidiary of the ministry to administer Sangha affairs. The religious implications of the Act of 1902 were to change the regional variations of religious practice, including prayer and doctrinal text, establishing modern orthodoxy for the nation. Under the new act, religious teachings were even more controlled than before and all of the religious ceremonies had to be conducted in the Central Thai dialect. Opposition to Rama V's consolidation policy was mounted through millenarian movements in the north-east. Lay religious leaders called *phi bun* or *phu mi bun* (literally, those with merit), who opposed centralised rule with the support of local monastic leaders illustrates that there is a precedence of using religious uprisings to protect local interests in face of state consolidation (Butt 1978, Keyes 1977, Ishii 1975, Chattip 1984).

Although there were initiatives for national integration under the Sangha Act of 1902, one of the monks who was not integrated into the Central Thai Sangha was Khru Ba Srivichai, a northern monk who continued to preach in the local dialect and to follow the rules of the local monastic traditions (Taylor 1993b). To this day he is revered as a saint in the northern province of Chiang Mai. A contemporary of Khru Ba Srivichai was the forest monk Ajahn Man Phuurithatto who gained a large following through practising the rules of *dutanga*, discussed in the section I.3.3 (ibid). The historical impact of the forest monks who avoided integrated into the mainstream Sangha cannot be underestimated due to the fact that the forest tradition would later become famous for producing religious virtuosi who were more strict in their ascetic practices than monks in the mainstream. The result has been that the forest tradition would be reputed to train better monks and the new movements which would emerge later would claim an association with the forest monks in their

efforts to reform the Sangha. The tradition of forest monks was not isolated to Thailand, however, and throughout the twentieth century, forest monks with similar traditions have practised in Sri Lanka (Carrithers 1983b).

II.5. *Buddhism and political philosophy*

The revolution of 1932, which replaced absolute rule with a constitutional monarchy, spread to religious affairs through the Sangha Act of 1941. A change in the Sangha administration was wrought in an attempt to make it conform with a democratic system of government conferring independence on the Sangha itself. Despite the absorption of the Department of Religious Affairs into the Ministry of Education, the Sangha was able to control its own affairs more directly without the interference of outside agencies. The monastic authority was democratised through the creation of three separate departments to serve as the Sangha administration. The *Sangha Sapha* was established as an assembly who worked with the Supreme Patriarch to devise Sangha policy. The *Khana Sangha Montri* was formed to act as a cabinet of advisors to the Supreme Patriarch; and the *Khana Winaithorn* was created as a judicial division to adjudicate ecclesiastical disputes under the rules laid out by the *Vinaya*. The possibility to enact policies independently of government control, however, would compound factionalism begun with the introduction of the Thammayut order in the reign of Rama IV.

II.5.1. Buddhism and anti-colonialism

After 1932, Buddhism became a theoretical basis for politics. In fact, Buddhism was associated to Marxism through its rejection of materialism which

was then interpreted as an endorsement of socialism (Ling 1979). Indeed, in Burma there was a Buddhist-Marxist syncretism which combined western and eastern thought (Sarkisyanz 1965). Pridi Panomyong, the Thai revolutionary leader, is said to have corresponded with the Burmese leader U Nu concerning the use of Buddhist doctrines to espouse indigenous political philosophy (Cohen 1984). Such attempts to tie Buddhism and politics was much more successful in Burma, Sri Lanka and Cambodia (Somboon 1993) than in Thailand where the government strictly controlled monastic activity and there was no history of colonial resistance. The association of Buddhism with egalitarianism was a departure from traditional Thai interpretations of Buddhist social theory such as in the *Triphum Phra Ruang*, which supported an inegalitarian status quo.

II.5.2. Buddhism against communism

In 1958, a coup d'état led by General Sarit Thanarat replaced the democratic government with a vehemently anti-Communist military dictatorship. Moving swiftly to suppress any political dissent the new government instituted anti-Communist legislation, including the prohibition of ordaining communists as monks. The term *communit* came to be used in reference to anyone who opposed the status quo (Turton 1984). As late as the parliamentary debates of 1997, older politicians still raised the spectre of *communit*. In the 1960s Sarit's government recruited two national symbols in his efforts to consolidate power; the monarchy and the Sangha were inducted to legitimate government policies. Later, during political turmoil taking place in the 1970s, the government would even induct the Village Scouts, an organisation based loosely on the Boy Scout movement, to ensure popular loyalty on the village level (Bowie 1998). Sarit

encouraged the royal family, whose travel in rural areas had been restricted since 1932, to regularly visit remote parts of the country and to advocate the government's anti-Communist stance. In order to further counter the communist threat, the Thammathut and the Thammajarik programmes were created to recruit monks in propagating national development policies through the use of Buddhism (Harmon 1978, Somboon 1977). These programmes would eventually develop into the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programme of rural development which I studied under the auspices of the National Council on Social Welfare. The Thammathut monks taught doctrine that encouraged loyalty to the government and encouraged villagers to accept governmental development programmes (Harmon 1978, Hirsch, P. 1990). The Thammajarik monks furthered national integration through evangelistic work with non-Buddhist groups in the north. Public opinion on the programmes was mixed; many felt the Sangha was being tainted by worldly concerns; others felt monks should actively seek to retain their relevance in a rapidly changing society. This argument as to whether the purity of the Sangha was challenged remains the basis of much discussion today. The debate at the time, however, extended to whether monks, by nature unknowledgeable about the profane world, should perform duties and express opinions more appropriately left to laymen. By 1969, however, the programmes so established monks as emissaries of the government that two of them were shot by communist insurgents. The use of monks to legitimate the government was not isolated to Thailand, however, during the 50s, the Bandaranaike government of Sri Lanka also relied on monks for support (Bechert 1978). Lester discussed co-operation between Buddhism and the secular government to preserve the religion not only in Thailand, but in Laos and

Cambodia as well (1973). Fears for the survival of Buddhism were very real, however. Schechter went so far as to call Buddhism a 'faith in flames' (1967:i). Any efforts at preservation of Buddhism in Cambodia were in vain, however, after the Khmer Rouge took power and actively pursued the destruction of religion as well as many other cultural traditions (Keyes 1994). It was not until the Khmer Rouge lost power after 1979 that efforts were made to re-establish Buddhism in Cambodia.

II.5.3. the scandal of Phra Phimontham

Phra Phimontham, the abbot of Wat Mahathad, was responsible for implementing Sarit's legislation barring the ordination of communists but refused to follow the order on doctrinal grounds. This monk was highly respected for introducing *wipasana*-based meditation to Thai Buddhism. This meditative tradition is very similar to the *wi'-pat-tha-na* practised in Burmese Buddhism (Houtman 1990). Unlike Burma, where it has been promoted by the state since the 50s (Mendelson 1975), meditation did not become popular in Thailand until the mid-70s. Phimontham argued that anybody who wished should be allowed to take vows as a monk and that such legislation went against the principles of Buddhism. In delaying, Phimontham openly defied the government and the Sangha authority. The issue was widely publicised and not only did Phimontham find supporters in the Sangha, but in the general public as well. Finally through the co-operation of a monk who was a member of the Thammayut order, the government accused Phimontham — a Mahanikai monk — of having committed sodomy, whereupon he was defrocked and placed on trial for breach of the *Vinaya*. Phimontham's being defrocked allowed him to be

charged in the lay court for supporting communism. This persecution of Phimontham was an outcome of factionalism that arose following the initial division of Thai Buddhism into the two orders as well as the Sangha Act of 1941. The clash between the two Buddhist orders, the Thammayut and the Mahanikai, involved competition for positions within the Sangha administration. The monk who accused Phimontham was later appointed Supreme Patriarch.

Phra Phimontham's trial started in 1962 and remained controversial until it ended in 1966 (Somboon 1982). Throughout his trial Phimontham upheld the two hundred and twenty-seven precepts in his living arrangements and was popularly seen as wrongly accused. The public outcry in support of a monk who opposed the ruling government illustrated that the populace felt capable of judging a monk's ability for themselves without relying on the government to suggest the proper religious attitude. Although he eventually was acquitted, Phimontham was not reinstated as abbot of Wat Mahathad until 1975 when public protests by members of the Sangha forced the government to retract. In the recent persecution of the Santi Asoke movement, the leader Phothirak based much of his behaviour on that of Phra Phimontham.

Legislative action followed the arrest of Phra Phimontham. The Sangha Act of 1963 disbanded the three departments of the Sangha administration and replaced them with one body of advisors to the Supreme Patriarch, the Mahatherasamakhom, a change which stands to this day. The members of this advisory body were appointed by the king on the advice of the government. The abolition of an ecclesiastical court made the Sangha administration completely dependent on the secular government in the enforcement of its internal policies, rendering the Sangha administration and its policy subject to government

discretion.

II.6. *The Political Turmoil of 1973*

After several changes of government, Sarit's eventual successor to the military dictatorship was Thanom Kittikhachorn. Although he held free elections in 1969, Thanom outraged the Thai public by staging another military coup d'état in 1971 which would bring him back to power. His rule was to last only until 1973, when he was forced to resign after a student-led demonstration involving several hundred thousand urban sympathisers resulted in confrontation with armed government troops. Over fifty civilians were killed and hundreds injured (Morell and Chai-anan 1981). A sign that monks were becoming involved in civic affairs was that among the casualties was a young monk. Like the political dissent expressed in secular affairs, monastic protests increased gradually as the government steadily weakened in power. In 1972, when Thanom was still in office, sixteen Sangha provincial governors claiming to act on behalf of the Sangha in north-eastern Thailand sent a letter to the government demanding the reinstatement of Phra Phimontham. In 1973, a month before Thanom resigned, 4,580 monks nation-wide signed a petition to the Supreme Patriarch calling for Phimontham's reinstatement. Such letters were sent repeatedly until, in January 1975, over a year after Thanom's resignation, 2,000 monks staged a sit-in demanding the restoration of the Phimontham as abbot of Wat Mahathad. A few months later, he was reinstated.

At this time individual monastic groups began undertaking public relations campaigns and, for the first time, the media became an important part of monastic activity. Open demonstrations conducted by members of the Sangha

similar to the one held on behalf of Phra Phimontham were fairly common during the period lasting from the end of Thanom's regime to 1976. Political groups of monks with leanings both to the left and the right emerged in the ensuing elimination of political, intellectual, and journalistic censorship. The major differences between the groups were not only ideological. The right-wing groups were better organised internally and were able to solicit immense contributions from the establishment.

Most prominent in the political activity of the leftist groups was the peasant demonstration of 1974. The demonstration began as a rally demanding government aid for peasant farmers. The farmers were joined by student organisations and monks who made speeches. Lasting ten days, the rally culminated in a march involving approximately 30,000 to 40,000 people. Suksamran observed the march.

it is worth noting that in the demonstration the symbols of the Thai nation, religion and monarchy were fully exploited. This is clearly demonstrated in the order of the march. The front line was made up of about fifty monks who linked arms together as a protective gesture. About twenty old female farmers made up the front of the second line. They held pictures of the king and queen in a reverent manner. The third line comprised of farmers holding Thai national flags symbolising their identification with the Thai nation. The fourth line consisted of farmers who held Dhammachak flags representing Buddhism. These were followed by the mass of farmers, students, labourers and sympathisers (Somboon 1982:106-107).

Although the demonstrators were successful in gaining their demands, the provisional government, whose duties were to oversee the restoration of democracy, was so alarmed by this demonstration that it sought to have the monks who took part expelled from their temples. The left-wing groups were not deterred, however, and monks were seen campaigning in 1975 endorsing

various candidates for the general elections that were to take place the following year.

At a time when monks began taking political sides, Kittiwuttho Bhikkhu emerged as the most prominent of those supporting the establishment (Keyes 1978a). He founded the Abhidhamma Foundation as a privately funded Thammathut and Thammajarik programme. Private funding was a factor that led to great success; contributions to the Foundation were considered a method of making merit. The estimated value of the foundation including Chittaphawan College (its training facility for monks and novices) in 1979 was over five hundred million Baht (approximately eight million pounds). The Foundation's main objective was to defend Buddhism against the communist threat. The nationally circulated magazine *Jaturat* published an interview where Kittiwuttho quoted from a Sri Lankan Theravadin text, the *Mahavamsa* (Geiger 1912), declaring, that killing enemies of the faith (in this case communists) was acceptable. Such rhetoric gained Kittiwuttho a large, influential following among the establishment, including the King and Queen who laid the cornerstone for the main building of Chittaphawan College. At its zenith, the Abhidhamma Foundation had a radio station and two serial publications with which to proselytise the teachings of the foundation and its leader. Despite the support he garnered, Kittiwuttho was not without critics. Many complained about his radical attitude; opponents, monks, and laymen alike, reacted strongly to his statements. Eventually Kittiwuttho faded into obscurity, but his use of the media set a precedent that would be followed with a vengeance by subsequent Buddhist movements to challenge the mainstream Sangha despite tight government control over broadcasting (Hamilton, 1991).

A military coup d'état in 1976, brought renewed political repression forcing most of the left-wing monastic groups to fade from prominence or to go into hiding. However, after twenty years of activity, the Thammathut and the Thammajarik programmes had acquired acceptance for Sangha involvement in national affairs. Buddhist universities established for the education of Sangha members followed the lead of Chittaphawan college and introduced courses which remain controversial to this day such as Economics, Sociology, Government and Political Science. Those opposed to change felt that monks should in no way be involved in worldly matters and that the introduction of such subjects would only lead to the corruption of the Sangha. Those in favour of change, however, felt that without introducing new curricula into Buddhist universities, monks will lose touch with society at large and, consequently, all relevance to lay life. Few decisions have been made in terms of internal Sangha policy due to the low priority religious affairs has been given by governments from the late eighties onwards. Although the government has not made Sangha educational policy a high priority, the demands of the lay public have continued to effect the Sangha. The economic boom of the late eighties and early nineties gave rise to unprecedented financial prosperity among the populace, giving a disillusioned lay public the ability to donate heavily to such movements as Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya, allowing these movements to grow without government sponsorship.

II.7. *The Socially Critical Monk*

By the mid-eighties, the socially critical monk became an established part of Thai society. Although Kittiwuttho enjoyed a good deal of notoriety in the

late seventies, his teachings were replaced by those of more moderate, yet socially outspoken, monks. The acceptance of such socially involved thinkers in the Sangha was an indication of the changing trends in what Thai society demands from monks. The most popular of the contemporary monks was the late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, considered to be the most extensive interpreter of contemporary Buddhism (Jackson 1988) and Phra Phayom. Buddhadasa's theoretical stance was a highly unorthodox blend of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. For example, Buddhadasa dismissed the Abhidhamma Pitaka to concentrate more on some Mahayanist texts. In his work *Dhammic Socialism* Buddhadasa's theories bore little resemblance to the ideas formulated by Karl Marx, but his use of such politically loaded terms as socialism drew immediate attention to his teachings (Buddhadasa 1986). Basing his ideas on his own views of the traditionally Buddhist, Buddhadasa stated that the proper interpretation of socialism was to take only enough from society and that excess is un-Buddhist (ibid). While Buddhadasa encouraged individual members of society to take only enough, his vision allowed for unequal distribution of goods, encouraging the rich to perform great acts of charity. Such views, of course, were well endorsed by the status quo. Buddhadasa was but one in the ranks of the modern Sangha to exploit the media in promoting religious discussion. Use of such mass media as print, radio and television was by now widespread despite earlier efforts at state control through censorship. The continued use of the media has had great impact on the growth of the new movements (Hamilton, 1991).

Known as the common man's monk (*phra chao ban*), Phra Phayom had his own television show on Sunday mornings which was filmed in a large concert hall filled to capacity with people who would come to listen to his

sermons. He was also a familiar voice in newspaper interviews on such subjects as the nation's youth. Many in the establishment, especially academics, found Phra Phayom offensive due to his use of vernacular language and confrontation in his sermons. He was tremendously popular, however, with the working class.

II.8. *The Election of 1988 and the Events During Fieldwork*

As stated in the introductory section I.1.6., by far the single most significant development in my study of monks and power in Thailand was the dissolution of Parliament the 29th of April 1988. In the ensuing political fallout, new parties and alliances were formed as politicians jockeyed for positions of power. Religious groups and figures which heretofore were not explicitly involved in political campaigns began taking an active role. The significance of religious legitimisation cannot be underestimated in these circumstances. Politicians were often photographed paying respects to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu or sitting before collections of Buddha images and amulets. There appeared to be a gap in my data between the time I had prepared for field work and the time I actually got to the field. Not to say that the preparation was fruitless. My familiarity with past events gave me a basis of understanding which proved useful when discussing contemporary events with informants; I merely had a bit of catching up to do. In the time which had lapsed between my preliminary research and my actual field work, two new movements had emerged and were considered very powerful: Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya.

The emergence of two movements which diverged from the mainstream to such a great degree was an illustration of the limits of state Buddhist ideology (Apinya 1993). Taylor finds that the two movements reflected a critical response

to the mainstream based on capitalistic economic growth (1990). While the economic factor was highly important, there was also widespread disenchantment with the modern Sangha due to state patronage and control (Schober 1995). In view of this, it is important to note that the impetus for monastic reform at this time made an extremely significant leap from state sponsorship to that of lay individuals. Annual lay contributions to a temple such as Wat Dhammakaya was claimed to equal hundreds of millions of Baht. It was the beginning of the middle class involvement in the affairs of the Sangha on a national scale through financial support of both the mainstream and new movements. As discussed above in section II.3, the introduction of western rationalism and science to the educational system encouraged such a development. The rise of the new movements would be similar to the advent of Protestant Buddhism in Sri Lanka decades earlier (Gombrich 1988) and further transformations of Buddhism into several different kinds of practice: a Protestant/intellectual religion; a cult religion and a syncretic one (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). The impact on society of an educated class which could act independently of and disagree with the government suggests the beginnings of a transfer of power from the state to the people. Nowhere is this better reflected than in the suspension of a dam project which, although lucrative to corrupt officials, was a threat to the environment (Stott 1991). Monastic involvement in environmental issues often garnered a great deal of support. Often a monk was seen to be the last hope against avaricious developers and corrupt officials (Taylor 1991).

II.8.1. political violence in Burma and Sri Lanka

At this time, monastic activity in Burmese politics was reported sensationally in the media. Images of monks taking part in the armed democracy movement against the Burmese government or SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) shocked Thailand and the more conservative members of the mainstream warned that such scenes were imminent in Bangkok. Of the two new movements, however, Santi Asoke was the only one to openly support a political figure; Wat Dhammakaya, on the other hand, vigorously denied any political involvement whatsoever despite allegations of political intentions. Although it emerged that in Burma it was individual monks independent of the Sangha authority (Tin 1993) who took part in the movement, the spectre of a monk carrying a gun was enough to prompt many Thais to call for a crackdown on the new movements.

Buddhist monks never came to take part in any violent or armed conflicts in Thailand, however. The issue of political violence in a Buddhist society has been the focus of the majority of Tambiah's recent work which discusses political conflict in Sri Lanka (1986, 1992) and other south Asian countries (1996). The historical development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Burma have been similar in many ways to its development in Thailand but with one glaring difference: colonialism and resistance to it. There have also been ethnic issues involved in the violent conflict in Sri Lanka which weren't an issue in Thailand. In short, while Buddhist monks have been involved in politics in other cultures, the issues leading to violence were not religious conflicts, but secular ones in which monks became involved. The primary focus of debate in Thailand, however, was not a matter of secular politics but religious conviction. While it will be shown below that there were secular elements to the problems involving

the mainstream and the new movements during my field work, because much of the debate took place not in the streets with guns and bombs but in religious conferences, most of the confrontation occurred in monastic and secular courts with words, both written and spoken as the primary weapons of conflict.

II.8.2. the emergence of the Phalang Dhamma Party

Soon after the dissolution of parliament, the governor of Bangkok, Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang formed the Phalang Dhamma Party (literally the ‘Power of Dhamma Party’ the meaning of which inferred that members were the physical agencies of the Buddha’s teaching). The PDP (as I shall refer to it) capitalised on Chamlong’s image as an incorruptible religious ascetic (McCargo 1997). His adherence to the strict principles of the Santi Asoke movement was considered a guarantee of his uncorrupt political intentions and a guarantee for his responsible political behaviour. Tired of the usual corrupt, arbitrary politicians, the people of Bangkok embraced Chamlong with a sense of relief and the PDP became one of the political forces to be reckoned with in the Bangkok metropolitan area, if not all of Thailand. By 1988, Chamlong had proved himself and his staff so efficient at running the city and so unwilling to be tainted with graft that he earned the sobriquet of ‘Mahachamlong’ or the great Chamlong. The religious innuendo in this nickname cannot be mistaken; the prefix *maha* is often given to great monks. This was the first time a religious nickname was given to a national political figure. Chamlong’s success as a politician rested on his association with strict religious conduct and the intimate relationship his success had with religion cannot be unravelled. Chamlong was religious therefore he was considered a moral man and therefore a trustworthy leader.

After the formation of the PDP, more press was given to Chamlong and his new party than to any other, such was the curiosity factor as well as the genuine respect that Chamlong commanded. The media, both print and video, examined in minute detail the life stories of Chamlong and his wife detailing his time in the army and his devotion to the Santi Asoke movement. It was this intertwining of morality and leadership which focused scrutiny on Phothirak (due to a court ruling, he lost his right to use the title *Phra*, the Thai equivalent of the Venerable), the leader of Santi Asoke of which Chamlong is still a member.

During the 1988 election almost equal coverage was given to Phothirak as was given to Chamlong. But for all the media attention, Phothirak remained an mysterious figure. This was not for want of biographical detail which will be discussed later, rather it was due to speculation and suspicion over his motives for becoming such an ascetic who would nevertheless use this position to be as vocal a social critic as he had become. As interest in Chamlong and his religious beliefs grew, so did suspicion in Phothirak. But with the increased scrutiny, Chamlong seemed more and more pure and Phothirak seemed more and more corrupt; while Chamlong was more purified by the religious associations, Phothirak was tainted by the worldly one. The reasons this happened will be explored in the conclusion, section IX.4.1., but it illustrates that in Thailand the categories of sacred and profane effect each other reciprocally and that it is only positive when the profane becomes more sacred and negative when the sacred becomes more profane. A good example of the elevation of the profane through sacred associations is the respect accorded a local leader who once was a monk (Tanabe 1984).

As a political force, the Phalang Dhamma Party was overwhelmingly

popular among educated Thais. Bangkok voters, disenchanted with the political status quo, embraced Chamlong's promise of a working government in the hopes that his personal morals would carry over from the metropolitan administration into parliamentary politics. Chamlong's close association with Phothirak was seized upon by the press and his political opponents who pointed out the law against monastic involvement in politics. When questioned by the press, Phothirak defiantly declared that despite any laws, he would back 'good' candidates. Phothirak's declaration was largely ignored by Chamlong's political opponents until the PDP won a parliamentary by-election in Bangkok province by a landslide. Afterward, allegations of political, or unmonk-like activity, were raised against the Santi Asoke movement. For the good of Phothirak and Santi Asoke, Chamlong attempted to distance himself from the abbot and the movement, but by that time, political opponents smelled blood and it was too late. One month later, Buddhist groups pressed charges against Santi Asoke, claiming that the movement taught the Buddha's teaching heresy (*phid sasana*). The attacks on Santi Asoke actually had little political fallout for Chamlong and his party. After the general elections were held in July, Phalang Dhamma may have emerged with only fourteen seats (less than 10%), but had established itself as a political force by claiming most of the votes in Bangkok where votes cannot be bought from a politically interested and educated electorate.

The persecution of Santi Asoke continued despite Chamlong's political success. The removal of Santi Asoke from the ranks of Buddhism sanctioned by the Thai religious mainstream occurred within the following year. The proceedings were characterised by attacks on Phothirak for the quality of his Buddhist scholarship and the correctness of his interpretation of the Buddhist

scriptures. The strict asceticism was criticised as being a perversion of what the Buddha meant. Furthermore, the movement's work ethic was criticised as being politically subversive in its embrace of communal living. Santi Asoke members (who called themselves *Chao Asoke* or Asoka's people) would only add fuel to the accusations of political subversion by dressing in traditional Thai garments which were predominantly blue, a colour worn primarily by rural rice farmers.

Early in the proceedings, in August of 1988, it seemed that Phothirak would be willing to compromise by offering to submit to the Mahatherasamakhom, but his opponents, sensing victory, ruled out any possibility for early compromise. The rejection of this capitulatory overture gave forth to a siege mentality among the Chao Asoke. Indeed, at times police were sent to patrol the area around the community amidst fears of unrest. Despite these intimidation tactics, the Chao Asoke denied any subversive intentions. The opposition to Santi Asoke by the mainstream continued beyond June of 1989 when Phothirak was arrested.

The outcome of the court case against Phothirak was that the movement could no longer call itself Buddhist. Most of the Asoke monks and nuns -- those ordained by Phothirak -- were declared illegally ordained and therefore unable to fulfil their roles as clerics in the eyes of the law; they were not even allowed to be called monks (*phra*) but had to be referred to as *samana-phrahms*, a newly created term which had no meaning in Thai, but was taken to mean Asoke monk to the general public. Such attempts at removing Santi Asoke from the religious and political arenas were stymied by Phothirak's initial refusal to recite the actual words that would ritually signify his abandoning the order. Throughout his persecution, Phothirak tried to model his behaviour on that of Phra Phimontham.

Despite the fact that the appearance of the Asoke monks had always differed from that of the mainstream Sangha, the courts decreed that Phothirak would have to wear white and his monastic followers would have to wear brown and white costumes, separating them further from the popular image of the saffron-robed monk.

Although Phothirak retained most of his following, the mainstream decrees were effective in curtailing public interest in the Santi Asoke movement as a purer form of Buddhism. Today, Phothirak is rarely given news coverage and his teachings attract little attention from Thai society at large. I am firmly of the opinion that the moves initiated against Santi Asoke were meant to discredit Chamlong. It is notable that one of the most vocal opponents of reconciliation between the Mahatherasamakhom and Santi Asoke was Samak Sundravej, leader of the Thai Citizens' Party which is in direct competition with the PDP in Bangkok. In tarnishing Chamlong's image, however, the Phalang Dhamma Party's opponents were unsuccessful. Although the public eventually became disenchanted with Chamlong, it was not due to his association with Santi Asoke. What bears interest is that Chamlong, through his association with Santi Asoke was fortified politically despite the fact that Phothirak and his movement were ultimately discredited.

When parliament was dissolved in April of 1988, the burning question was not a religious one, however, but a constitutional one. Prime Minister Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda had been an unelected prime minister for several years and there was much petitioning for him to step down to allow for an elected prime minister. When Prem complied, there was more focus on party leaders like Chamlong since, as with the British parliamentary system, the party with a

parliamentary majority makes its leader prime minister. After his party won the most parliamentary seats in the election held on the 24th of July 1988, Gen. Chatichai Choonhavan formed a coalition government which did not include the Phalang Dhamma Party. Chamlong's party won all of their seats in Bangkok by landslides but chose to remain neutral instead, allying themselves only with those they considered to be on the righteous side of the issues.

When religion became a political issue in 1988, social debate became concentrated on the mainstream Sangha and various temples which differentiated themselves from the mainstream either by appearance or by practice. The resultant media scrutiny of all monks in general led to revelations of monastic scandals which were to rock the religious status quo. Although there had been much debate in Thailand concerning religious standards in the Sangha, it is important to note that only when they became a political issue was action taken by the authorities, both religious and lay. The scandals included, for the mainstream, the 'honours scandal', the 'fake monk scandal' and the 'corrupt monk scandal' all of which will be discussed in more detail in section II.8.4.A. The intense public scrutiny of monks was compounded by the death of the Supreme Patriarch and the quest for a new one. Public outrage over the moral decline of society was whipped into frenzied proportions as each day the media revealed more and more aberrations in monastic practice. With Santi Asoke, there was, as mentioned previously, a debate over proper religious practice as well as questions of political motives. At Wat Dhammakaya there were not only questions of finance and land acquisition, but also meditational practice.

II.8.3. The Persecution of Wat Dhammakaya

While Wat Dhammakaya did not come under scrutiny until after the general election was over, by mid-July, a portent of things to come appeared when the Bangkok Post reported that irate villagers attacked monks in a temple row. The conflict was due to a dispute concerning land ownership and the movement's rapid expansion. Local residents were afraid that Wat Dhammakaya would take over their local temple. (The name Wat Dhammakaya means literally the temple of the physical manifestation of the Buddha's teaching. Having a different name ensures that there is no mistaking the movement's temple and grounds from those of the local temple or *wat*.) *The Nation* billed the dispute as one of the poor fighting back against incursion from the rich. By mid-November of 1988, *The Nation* reported that Wat Dhammakaya was under investigation.

Media coverage of the conflicts involving Wat Dhammakaya was equal to that of Santi Asoke. One night, the large Buddha image at Wat Dhammakaya was vandalised (a more detailed description of the Dhammakaya grounds appears in section VI.3.). There were rumours to the effect that Wat Dhammakaya was communist; that it had amassed a large weapons cache and a complex radar and surveillance system; that several people had gone to visit the temple and never returned. I also heard that actually the Dhammakaya meditation technique was a method of brainwashing. Then, on the opposite end of the economic and ideological spectrum, there were rumours that the temple was soon to undergo floatation on the Bangkok stock market, that it was to use its financial resources to evict every farmer in the Pathum Thani area and that, after having gained enough financial and political influence, it would take over the Thai Sangha and reshape it in the image of Wat Dhammakaya. Informants critical of

Dhammakaya orderliness equated the military precision of the monks' processions to Hitler's military pageantry. In the course of my stay, the Sangha initiated an internal investigation into the affairs of Wat Dhammakaya through the Mahatherasamakhom, much like one which took place at Santi Asoke. Newspaper headlines often referred to Wat Dhammakaya in the widening government probe, but eventually nothing came of the investigations due to prolonged negotiations between the movement's administration and the Mahatherasamakhom.

Wat Dhammakaya's opponents were not based only in the mainstream Sangha; they included several social critics, newspapers and student organisations as well. At the root of the rumours and accusations levelled at Wat Dhammakaya lay fears which, according to the opponents of the temple, were legitimate. Wat Dhammakaya's penchant for expansion led many mainstream temples to fear for their own popularity, especially in times of scandal and disillusionment. Dhammakaya devotees showed a marked preference for their own monks. I recall one incident of an informant's preparing meals to donate as alms. Not only did Dhammakaya monks arrive to collect them, but other ones as well. Rather than dividing the rather sumptuous meal she had prepared so that everyone could have a bit of something, she preferred to give a complete meal to the Dhammakaya monks and nothing to the mainstream monks.

II.8.4. different outcomes from different strategies

Proceedings to expel a monk or movement from the Mahatherasamakhom have been rare. Generally, the Sangha supreme council has taken a leisurely attitude to crackdowns over religious compliance and has been very

accommodating of dissent or lapses in practice, taking action only if provoked either by the secular government or by flagrant violations of the monastic code which have outraged the public. As will be discussed below, even in the case of public outrage, the mainstream can be slow to act. Due to this forgiving attitude to the maintenance of religious standards, the majority of laymen saw all unexpelled monks as adhering to the same universal religious standard, which was not the case as shall be elaborated in section IV. Because the Mahatherasamakhom worked closely with the secular government, one might have assumed that approved philosophical stances were part of a central policy that also controlled the non-religious aspects of Thai life. Due to the diverse practises introduced in the name of innovation, it would be a mistake to assume that any kind of central philosophical and ideological policy in Thailand was tightly regulated; the varied teachings and practises in monasteries throughout the country attest to the laxity of control over religious thought and practice. While such diversity has been one of the mainstream's strengths, the lax enforcement of standards has also allowed for criticism.

II.8.4.A. the honours scandal and the fake monk scandal

The story of the honours scandal began appearing in newspapers long before the general election but did not truly attract widespread attention until May of 1988 when a senior abbot who had been implicated hanged himself. The scandal involved monks' forgery of documents which enabled unqualified people to receive royal medals or honours. If a lay person donated a sum of money to a temple, he or she would receive a royal honour. Often the medals and certificates themselves were forged. Over 200 temples throughout the country

were implicated, including Wat Thebsirinthrowas, a royally sponsored temple whose assistant abbot was eventually arrested and defrocked in relation to the scandal. Because even one of the most venerated temples was involved, it became clear that problems in the Sangha had a much wider scope than previously thought.

The fake monk scandal caused a stir when the media revealed that poverty-stricken villagers from upcountry were masquerading as monks in order to make money. Giving alms to monks has been a regular part of the day for many Thais, but generally the donations are in the form of food put into the monks' alms bowls every morning. The villagers capitalised on the fact that many people living in urban areas who had limited free time were beginning to donate cash to monks and temples for various charities as an alternative to putting food in alms bowls. While the *Vinaya* forbids monks from touching money, lay assistants would handle the cash donations and it was taken for granted that the money was properly administered to the appropriate cause. Furthermore, although it is considered counter to *Vinaya* rules for a monk to ask for anything, many were lending support to fund drives in order to legitimise various temple charities.

Fake monks would walk about with an accomplice acting as a lay assistant. The fake monk and accomplice would then ask passers-by to contribute to their fake charity. Newspapers reported that tens of thousands of Baht were received in this manner. In the course of field work I encountered what I suspected to be one such team while visiting a friend's shop. An elderly man dressed as a monk with a saffron robes and shaved head and eyebrows came in, followed by a lay assistant. The supposed monk walked directly up to my

friend who was standing behind a counter, showed her some printed leaflets and asked for some money to support the charity described in the leaflet. Such behaviour was highly irregular. In all my time in the field I never saw a monk ask for anything in such a direct manner. My friend (a woman) took out a small sum of money and put it on her counter. The assistant took the money and the couple left. There was no ceremony, neither was there any blessing given for the donation of alms. In general, a monk is not allowed to accept alms directly from a woman, so a woman's donation must be placed on a cloth which the monk has laid out. In every case, the monk must bless the alms giver. There was no such ritual. From this experience, it seemed quite easy to differentiate a real monk from a fake one. When questioned why she gave the obviously fake monk some money, my friend told me that although suspicious, she didn't want to risk denying alms to a monk, just in case this one happened to be from upcountry and wasn't very well versed in monastic rules. The monk soliciting donations might not have been fake but simply a village monk not as familiar with the rules of the *Vinaya* as a city monk. Therefore my friend was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. It was such suspicions over authenticity which harmed the mainstream Sangha.

The fake monk scandal was revealed in October of 1988 while the Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya controversies were just beginning to attract widespread public attention and harmed the Sangha's image by instilling further doubt in the sanctity of the saffron robe. If people did not suspect a monk of actually being a layman in disguise, they began to question the strictness of monastic adherence to the *Vinaya* and therefore the validity of the monastic order. Furthermore, the fake monk scandal became a vaguely political issue

since it was treated in the media as a reflection of the new government's focusing more on attracting lucrative foreign investment than the plight of the common man. Many media reports focused on the desperate circumstances which led villagers to commit the sin of masquerading as monks. The villagers were considered to be driven to it by poverty, much as they are to prostitution.

II.8.4.B. the corrupt monk scandal

The corrupt monk scandal was revealed in June 1989 and was the final straw for many laymen. Although the outrage would be eclipsed in later years by more sensational revelations of licentious behaviour on the part of monks, at the time this scandal was sufficiently outrageous to cause widespread indignation. A religious storm was created when the media uncovered the existence of a monk at a respected temple who made a living by stealing motorcycles and who had two wives. He was ultimately defrocked and expelled, but damage to the Sangha's image was done and it seemed even more difficult to find a monk worthy of respect anywhere. The ultimate result of all the scandals was that the public began to look beyond the mainstream for religious figures worthy of veneration. While the coverage of Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya in the media was hardly favourable, it did bring to light alternatives and encouraged the debate on whether the mainstream Sangha was still a valid institution in the lives of modern Thais.

II.8.4.C. the new movements

While it is true that the general election brought attention to the Santi Asoke movement, it was the resultant media coverage which, compounded with

various scandals, would lead to the mainstream's feeling that it was under siege. The conflicts between the Mahatherasamakhom and movements like Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya centred on a religious debate over the proper way to practise Buddhism as embodied by monastic standards. As in previous times, the old demon of communism was cited as a reason for cracking down on the new movements, but by this time, the threat of communism had lost much of its edge. Nevertheless, even though the threat was not one of political ideology, the Mahatherasamakhom and conservative people in society felt that the new movements were dangerous enough to merit investigation.

II.8.4.D. the mainstream: continued trouble: Phra Yantra

In the early '90s the mainstream underwent further discrediting when it was discovered that a monk, highly popular among the social elite of Thailand, had a wife, a daughter and even a credit card. This case of Phra Yantra was particularly damaging due to the fact that it took several months to finally defrock him and this was seen as due to political infighting within the Mahatherasamakhom. The former monk moved temporarily to California, but has since returned to Thailand and ordained once again, despite massive public indignation.

II.9. *The Sangha After the Integration of Wat Dhammakaya*

Bryan R. Wilson finds that new movements often have a limited life span and can fail due to such factors as ideology, leadership, organisation, constituency, institutionalisation and other external considerations (1990). The expulsion of Santi Asoke and the negotiations between the mainstream and Wat

Dhammakaya are examples of how a new movement does not sustain its outsider status but either is marginalised or integrated. As I was leaving Thailand to return to London after field work, the ceremonies at Wat Dhammakaya were in the process of change. As time passed, changes were made to the daily life at the movement in order to re-enter the jurisdiction of the mainstream. By the time I returned to Thailand a year after field work, the ceremonies in which I took part with my group of informants had changed beyond recognition. The movement has continued to grow in popularity but my group of informants began to disappear into the larger numbers of attendants. The assistant abbot is in the process of building the world's largest gold stupa and has hopes that it will become the eighth wonder of the world. The subscriptions for the fund to build the stupa are completely sold. The popularity of Wat Dhammakaya has grown to the degree that HRH Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn was televised presiding over the Maga Buja ceremony of 1995 and the attendance has continued to grow. In 1998, I witnessed an attendance of at least 100,000 people. Negotiations with the Mahatherasamakhom have been successful and persecution of the movement has lessened although as recently as 1998 there have been continued accusations of financial corruption from the national print media. This continued harassment has done little to hurt the popularity of the movement, however. The movement's Dhammadayada (literally the 'heirs of *Dhamma*') programme, aimed at university students, holds annual mass ordinations at Wat Benjamaborpit, a mainstream temple better known as the marble temple. Posters advertising the yearly event are seen throughout Bangkok in shops and in restaurants at the beginning of each rainy season. Such ordinations are now considered a normal part of mainstream practice.

Despite the marginalisation which followed government persecution, my informants at Santi Asoke remained loyal to the movement, and it garnered much public sympathy for supporting pro-democracy rioters in the anti-government protests of 1992. Chamlong, however, suffered political setbacks growing partially out of the fact that his involvement with the anti-government riots of 1992 were seen by many to be motivated by self-interest and out of his withdrawal of support for the government of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai which led to that government's collapse in 1995. The Santi Asoke movement was recently in the media once again when it was revealed that a high-level government official had joined after losing all of his money in the economic crash of 1997. In the riots of 1992, the Sangha mainstream was very clearly in support of the army.

The mainstream has been in an extended crisis since before the time of my field work. This crisis started with the controversy over Phra Phimontham which highlighted the competition between the Mahanikai and Thammayut orders, and culminated in the series of scandals (discussed above) that gave the media a field day, heightening the sense of disillusionment among many of the lay public. There has been much debate over the course that Buddhism should take in order to be more credible and more relevant to modern society. Indeed, it is the Sangha's central problem of credibility and relevance that has been under the scrutiny of a society in varied states of rapid change. Among the many social critics and historians who have been particularly interested in the future of Buddhism, those I interviewed agreed that it was only with a combined image of doctrinal purity and social sensitivity that Buddhism would retain its role of importance in Thailand. There was very little agreement, however, as to the

precise nature of this image and the course that should be taken to achieve this view among the lay public. It was in reaction to the confusion and variation in the mainstream that many of the new movements became popular.

III. In Quest of the Ideal Monk

1. *The Fallacy of the One Monk*

What is a monk? This was a question I regularly asked informants, both monastic and lay, in an effort to determine whether there was an ideal by which monks were judged. If there were such an ideal, I assumed that a monk who had many followers would compare well to it. In corroboration with my assumption, the answers I received were actually quite similar, if not uniform: a monk is a good man. He is someone who has taken vows of ordination (*buat*) and lives according to the precepts (*silas*) of monkhood detailed in the *Vinaya Pitaka*. A monk is a man who shaves his head and wears a monastic robe (*pha jiworn*). Informants felt it was possible to judge a good monk by the manner of his conduct and appearance, both of which should meet the dictates of the two hundred and twenty-seven precepts detailed in the *Vinaya*.

As discussed earlier in section I.2.1., the scriptural standard by which all monks may be judged is not one that is universally known in detail to all Thai Buddhists because there isn't a readily available official Thai translation of the *Vinaya*. Therefore many lay informants, especially women — who aren't allowed to ordain — are not familiar enough with the *Vinaya* to judge a monk on the finer points of his conduct. Although by tradition all Thai men are meant to learn the *Vinaya* by heart when they temporarily ordain for the duration of one *phansa*, or rainy season, their ability to recite the precepts during the ordination ceremony is often from memorisation through repetition and not the result of detailed study. From my own experience as a novice, the recitation was memorised phonetically just to get through the ceremony. My adherence to the precepts depended not on personal knowledge as much as on the supervision of a senior monk supervising me. I was told that the most important precepts to

remember were the first ten which, as a novice, were the only precepts I needed to mind. My experience, while not the same as those who ordain as full-fledged monks, was representative of ordination, however. Although I do not dispute that there are many who ordain with a personal, quest for enlightenment, many informants who had ordained out of tradition generally remembered no more than the first ten precepts if they remembered any at all.

The influential people whom laymen believe to have a superior knowledge of scripture are often either monks themselves or senior lay members of a movement. Therefore, the measure of a good monk is often whether he appears to conform to a lay informant's concept of ideal monkhood which, despite a scriptural basis, is often the product of several factors: the layman's own, generally limited understanding of the precepts, the advice given by others about those precepts and the layman's own general notion of a monk's goodness which is rooted in the monk's social interaction with lay members of the community.

The nature of the precepts is one of restricting action or purposeful non-action. The rules of the *Vinaya* are phrased to limit, not to prescribe, a monk's actions. In other words, according to rules laid out by scripture, a monk should be judged by what he doesn't do, not what he does. The monastic ideal in Thailand, if one relies exclusively on the *Vinaya*, is to restrict involvement in worldly activities to the point of rejecting the material world altogether and the monk does nothing. Ideally, a man ordains out of self interest, in order to improve his *kamma*, if not to reach *nibbana*. The aim of ordination is not to better serve the community. But, as discussed earlier in section I.4.1., all anthropological studies of Thai monks, notably Bunnag, describe interaction

between the monk and society at large (1973). Although the monk's involvement in community affairs is actually discouraged by the *Vinaya*, the monk's congregation demands that he take an active role in the community. There is tension in these dual requirements of ordination: while scripture demands that a monk reject the material world, society demands that he is constantly involved in it. Because there are no rules concerning how and to what extent a monk maintains involvement with society at large, there is no universal standard of judging interaction between monks and the community. This allows for monks to become involved in a wide variety of worldly activities, none of which is actually sanctioned by scripture but rather demanded by the monks' own community. Nevertheless, when a monk attracts a following he does so by behaving in ways a layman believes appropriate, bringing into debate the degree of compromise between monastic detachment and worldly involvement.

The layman's dilemma in judging a Thai monk, then, arises when the monk's involvement in the community comes under scrutiny. From my own experience at a conference of village monks organised by the National Council on Social Welfare (to be discussed further in section IV.1.1), monks themselves had a difficult time defining the scope of their worldly activities due to the lack of scriptural guidance on a monk's social role. At this conference, it became clear that while the Mahatherasamakhom made attempts to dictate a policy on the roles monks should accept, the extent of monastic involvement in the lay community usually was decided on the basis of the Sangha's response, either through tradition or innovation, to the community's demands for pastoral work. One monk complained, for example, that villagers asked for his advice on how to raise pigs while the Mahatherasamakhom's efforts were devoted to having

monks teach meditation. The criteria for judging a monk therefore often comes not only from scripture, but also from tradition, from congregations' particular needs and from a layman's own conception of what a monk should be. I believe it is these extra-scriptural criteria which are part of the source of the variations in conduct between monks in Thailand. The other sources have been introduced in section I.3.3 and I.6.1. and will be discussed further in the sections which follow.

III.2. style and monkhood

When questioned about how a monk's conduct could be judged, informants invariably pointed not only to sustained acquaintance and examination of his behaviour but also to the monk's appearance. Simply appearing to be a good monk was often enough to satisfy a lay informant. While charisma as described by Weber (1968a) has much to do with a monk's appeal, I found appearance to be indicative of the type of monk a layman preferred and that this preference was predicated on the nature of a monk's personal presentation as the term is used by Goffman — his demeanour, his encounters with others (both monastic and lay) and pastoral duties assumed within the lay community (1959). The visual cues to a monk's presentation communicate information about that monk to the layman and ultimately allow the layman to judge him. I therefore use the word 'style' to describe the different impressions monks present.

Visually, all Thai monks are immediately distinguishable from other members of Thai society by their appearance. Unlike some religious specialists in other cultures — such as American Evangelical Christian ministers — who

dress and groom themselves much like their congregation, Thai monks look distinctly different from average members of society. Unlike most Thais who nowadays wear western-style clothing, monks' heads are shaved, they wear orange-yellow, or saffron, coloured robes and they frequently carry a shoulder bag or alms bowl. This form of appearance is recognised as religious by the Thai community at large. Every single one of my informants was able to recognise a monk when he saw one. As mentioned in the discussion of fake monks, it is considered a sin or demerit (*bahp*) to masquerade as a monk so efforts were made to avoid looking like one; there could be no mistaking a layman for a monk or vice versa. The occasionally well-intentioned foreign tourist who loved the colour and fabric of a monk's robe so much that he or she would have western styled clothing made out of the material was generally found offensive. No Thai would do such a thing.

Although everyone could differentiate a monk from a layman, the difficulty for many of my informants came when a distinction had to be made between different types of monk, although differences could be recognised visually by a knowledgeable observer. If a man shaved his head and wore an orange-yellow robe, many lay informants felt that was enough to make him a monk. Despite a general lack of concern about the finer points of a monk's appearance on the part of many laymen, there is, for each monk, a consciousness of which sect or movement he is a member and how he and his group of affiliation stand vis-à-vis other monks in terms of both appearance and practice. Depending on their affiliations, monks often look different from each other by either intention or happenstance. Thammayut monks, for example, do not wear shoes of any kind. Mahanikai monks, on the other hand, are allowed to wear

flip-flop sandals. There are different ways of wearing a monk's robe; when a Thammayut monk ventures into the outside world, his entire body is covered, but when he is in the temple, he is allowed to expose his right shoulder. At some temples there is even what I perceived as a dress robe for special occasions. Further distinctions exist between the new movements and the mainstream. For example, a monk from Santi Asoke does not shave his eyebrows while the rest of the monks in Thailand do. The monks at Wat Dhammakaya wear robes which are of startlingly uniform hue whereas in a single mainstream temple, there can be huge variations of colour between one monk's robes and another's, depending on who donated the robes and who manufactured them. Although this is not a rule, monks who live in the forest tend to wear robes which are darker in colour than the rest. Many informants felt that the darker the colour, the more pious the monk due to the fact that the Buddha's robes were actually a funeral shroud, muddied and torn, which He had found on the side of the road. Other informants, however, felt that the more clean a monk appeared, the better a monk he was. One Dhammakaya informant felt it was important for a monk to appear serene (*samruam*). While such personal preferences are based on the varied individual interpretations of a monastic standard among laymen, the fact that there are many styles of monk is indicated by variations in the appearance of Thai monks. This variation gives visual confirmation that the Sangha is an institution which is involved in constant debate about the differing requirements of different lay individuals and communities throughout the kingdom all of which conform to varying traditions and have different expectations of monkhood.

It is possible not only to tell the difference between forest and city monks,

but different types of city monk. Although robes are essentially the same for monks throughout the kingdom, different ceremonial paraphernalia such as fans or embroidered shoulder bags often indicate different status within the ranks of the Mahatherasamakhom. Although, at the time of field work, they had distanced themselves from the mainstream Sangha, monastic members of the new movements such as Wat Dhammakaya or Santi Asoke also wore the same type of robe as monks in the mainstream, but with subtle variations in appearance. These variations drew on precedents already established historically on the basis of differing types of involvement in the community (more on that in section IV which follows immediately) and indicated different emphases of religious practice. For example, the monks of Santi Asoke wished to convey an image close to that of forest monks, therefore all of the movement's efforts at visual differentiation from other movements or sects were aimed at an association with the forest. As has been discussed earlier in section I.3.3.B, the age of a monk is also a significant factor in a layman's judgement. In general, the older the monk, the more he was considered experience, learned and proficient at monastic practices, whether in the mainstream or the new movements. Such variations, then, were not simply made up. They had cultural and historical antecedents. Santi Asoke monks' refusal to shave their eyebrows and their purposeful association with the forest was a visual indication of a standard which dated from a pre-Bangkok era that, presumably, was untainted by modern, corrupt values and was therefore implied to be closer to the ideal.

There is meaning, therefore, in a monk's style which makes reference to an image that has been established in the consciousness of most laymen. The importance of such variations is that particularly keen devotees of a movement

could recognise the style immediately while many laymen who are not particularly observant or interested in religion would rarely notice the differences at all until such variations were brought to attention. Even if lay informants would not immediately know the association between a monk's appearance and his social role or the religious emphasis of a monk's order or movement, they were able to figure it out when asked to consider the monk in question. This indicated some awareness among the lay public of the historical antecedents referred to by the various styles adopted by monks. The important point is that there is a disparity between monks in terms of appearance which is pointed out by laymen and I wish to use this disparity in discussing Buddhism in Thailand in order to explain how some lay Buddhists, relying on visual criteria, can see no difference from one monk to the next while some others in the same situation feel a sense of differentiation or even alienation and decide to reject the Mahatherasamakhom and ultimately turn to one of the new movements. The object of the upcoming section **IV** is to discuss monastic style as a factor which contributes to choices of sects and movements in their cultivation of an image and how this image influences a movement's lay following.

IV. Styles of Monastic Practise

As discussed in sections I.6.1 and II, from data collected throughout field work, I found that monks' pastoral activities could be divided into five different categories, or specialities, and that there was a loose correlation between activities and contextual location of temples. My categories have been derived from the pastoral activities of a monk; they are therefore not recognised by all of the Thai Buddhist community. Among the applicable terms that I heard in the course of field work were: development (*phatthana*), scholar (*wichakahn*), meditation (*wipasana*), practising (*patibat*) and magical (*saiyasat*). These specialities of monk did not appear in any specific analysis of the Thai Sangha, they were terms informants used to describe monks.

As stated in section I.1.6, a monk would often appear to me to fall into more than one category. As will become apparent in the following section IV, their interests, pastoral activities and abilities were often so varied they seemed, to an outside observer, to defy categorisation. My informants, however, were very clear as to which activity was the field of a monk's speciality. Therefore, consensus of perception among lay devotees was also a factor in this identification. As discussed in section I.6, there were four qualities a monk cultivated in order to plant *sattha*: appearance, voice, becoming a source of reliance and knowledge. While a monk's appearance was a significant factor in a layman's judgement of him, then, the monk's activities, position and role within a movement or organisation in relation to other monks were also significant factors in defining style. Furthermore, a monk's religious heritage (i.e. his teachers) was often the basis of that relationship. Kamala discusses forest monks' search for a teacher as a significant part of their development (1997) and,

for Wat Dhammakaya, the lineage of meditational practice from the former abbot of Wat Paknam Phasijaroen was an important link with the mainstream.

Development monks or *nak phatthana* were those focussing on development but, due to the heavy promotion of meditation by the Mahatherasamakhom as social development, meditation monks or *nak wipasana* were often associated with development monks as were practising monks or scholar monks. While those members of the Sangha who initiated rural development projects were generally village monks, it will be shown later that there was at least one who claimed an association with the forest.

A scholar monk or *nak wichakahn* was well versed in the scriptures and took part in philosophical debates on Buddhism and society, often publishing his own interpretations of scripture. Scholar monks were generally city monks and often were part of the Sangha administration. They were generally respected by Thais who had been educated to a higher level, both locally and abroad. Much of their effort was directed at reconciling Buddhism to modern society. Many of the scholar monks would point to the discovery of molecular physics as proof that the Buddha's teachings of perpetual change and motion were truth.

A practising monk or a *nak patibat* was one whose conduct placed emphasis on the precepts in the *Vinaya*. Often, forest monks who were considered religious virtuosi were the primary examples of practising monks but, once again, there seemed to be no firm rules. Attempts to induct forest monks in the efforts toward rural development both through advocating meditation and supporting infrastructure projects often placed a monk in several categories at once. No matter what emphasis his pastoral activities took on, however, strict adherence to the *Vinaya* restricted the activities of a practising monk.

Magical monks or *nak saiyasat* were the most controversial during my time in the field due to their claims at having magical powers such as the ability to see into the future through astrology or to bless phallic amulets which would bring owners success in worldly affairs. As discussed earlier, the mainstream included monks who were proficient in all the above categories because he was considered a part of the mainstream so long as a he did not reject it.

The mainstream Sangha managed to fulfil the needs of a diverse population of worshippers because it was diverse as well. The common thread in mainstream monks was that they responded to lay demands whereas the new movements set a standard and then expected the lay community to follow it. The extent of a mainstream monk's community involvement depended on his congregation's demands. A monk who would appeal most to a young, urban professional was not the same monk who would appeal to middle-aged conservatives and again was not the same monk who would appeal to a scholar or to bureaucratic policy makers. The strength of the mainstream was its ability to provide different styles of monk to meet different demands of a lay public. Its weakness, however, was its susceptibility to charges of fragmentation and internal disagreement. Attempts at maintaining the Sangha's integrity to date merely succeeded in keeping the administration conservative. Hence the calls for modernisation and the rise of new movements. The debate on the Sangha's ideal role in society was complicated by different traditions of community involvement depending on contextual shift. However, if demographic generalisations could be made concerning the styles of monk preferred by certain groups of laymen, the source of a monk's power might be determined from such generalisations.

IV.1. The National Council on Social Welfare

All of my interviews with mainstream monks were conducted under the auspices of the National Council on Social Welfare under Royal Patronage. The Council is an intermediary body between the government and the Sangha, sponsoring social welfare and development programmes throughout the country not only in rural areas, but also urban ones. Officially, the Council enjoys the patronage of HM the King but not the secular government and as such is supposedly removed from the same stigmatic connotations of political bias as the royal family. While some would argue that the royal family still hold much influence in politics, in the case of the Council an affiliation with the royal family is meant to lend credibility to philanthropic work often done with government co-operation. I found, rather, that the council had the thankless job of acting as liaison between government and Sangha; each party would see the Council as a medium to air complaints to the other, resulting in the perception that the Council took the opposition's part in all matters of conflict. Other than running welfare programmes with the participation of the Sangha and local secular welfare groups, the council also worked with organisations ranging from Planned Parenthood to those seeking American MiAs in Vietnam. They also sponsor seminars and conferences on current topical issues in Thai society. The first such conference I attended was on the impact of religion (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism were among those included as well as Buddhism) on constitutional reform. I also attended three others, one on welfare programmes in Thailand, one on raising social and political consciousness in the nation's youth, and another a national conference for monks involved in

development. The Council gave me invaluable assistance by providing me with introductions to prominent mainstream monks, all of whom were on their lists.

My initial contact with the National Council on Social Welfare was Khun Somporn Thepsitta, the deputy chairman and his personal assistant Khun Kanchana Rangka-urai. Somporn and Kanchana were the administrative leaders of the Council, although the titular chairwoman was a prominent socialite. Somporn acted as spokesman and often would represent the Thai Sangha internationally. While I was conducting research, Somporn and Kanchana took trips to Switzerland for a Moral Re-armament meeting and to Japan on a regional conference on Buddhism. In between these international trips they travelled constantly throughout the country in the Council's minibus, often leaving the headquarters by six in the morning.

IV.1.1. Khun Somkuan Laolapha

In Somporn's and Kanchana's absence, the Council was left in the care of regular staff who not only took care of bureaucratic organisation, but also helped plan development projects. Between the months of July and December of 1988, I became a familiar sight in the Council headquarters as I followed several of the conferences and seminars. I became particularly close to one team and its leader, Khun Somkuan Laolapha. Somkuan's team consisted of Kanchana's secretary and several others. They arrived to work every morning at about six in the morning and stayed late into the night. Occasionally I would be driving past the headquarters on a Sunday afternoon only to hear sermons broadcast over the loudspeaker. If I dropped in, Somkuan was invariably there.

I met Somkuan on my preliminary trip and had found him amazingly intimidating. He is of average height for a Thai (about five feet, five inches) and slight of build. His eyes are not aligned and that contributed to my unease in his presence as I was never quite sure where he was looking or what he thought of me. On first acquaintance his natural reticence was augmented by a communication gap born of my less than fluent Thai. Upon hearing that I had left Thailand at the age of eight months, he appeared impassive. Revealing this was a ploy I often used in the beginning to gain sympathy when my Thai wasn't good enough. With Somkuan it didn't work and I quickly worked at becoming more fluent. Somkuan's knowledge of and acquaintance with members of the Sangha administration is formidable. As a reference he is invaluable. Merely mentioning his name and an acquaintance with him was enough to gain the trust and candour of practically every mainstream monk I met.

For about twenty years, Somkuan was a monk himself, having achieved the ninth rank in the Buddhist universities (the highest, equivalent to a master's degree). His sermons and writings were in great demand and despite a promising career, he found himself at risk of compromising his vows; eventually, he left the order to start a family. His dedication to his religious belief or to social welfare remained, however, and he has continued his work through the Council. Initially, I always felt that Somkuan disapproved of me and much of my hard work at behaving more like a Thai was dedicated to earning his respect.

Somkuan accompanied me on all of my initial interviews arranged through the Council. I found his presence helpful as I became included in the social banter before the interview between the informant and Somkuan. At first I thought that his presence might in some way restrict the conversation, but

enough controversial subjects were brought up and thrown about to quell that fear. I did not shed my vague sense of awe for Somkuan until I saw him lead a seminar for school children. He was transformed, openly joking and playing with the children, clearly exhilarated when they responded. The most valuable understanding derived from Somkuan's friendship was the earnestness that motivated the Council, the programmes that roused their imagination and those that discouraged them.



Figure 3: Khun Somkuan Laolapha
outside the Mahidol Building at
the National Council on Social Welfare

IV.1.2. The Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong ideology

The Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong ideology was the major concern of the Council during my research -- the term *phaen din*, meaning nation or land and the word *thong* meaning gold in the sense not only of material wealth, but also of beauty and well-being. Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong is a term originated by King Rama VI and, in this case, refers to an ideology fostering a nation relying on the Buddha's Dhamma as a means to prosperity. This is essentially a development programme employing monks for social welfare. The espousal of the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programme is in many ways a retraction of previous development policies where financial prosperity was the goal. It was explained to me that under the previous programmes monks encouraged the pursuit of financial prosperity to the detriment of spiritual prosperity. P. Hirsch disparages the effectiveness of this programme however, citing little popularity among the villagers it aims to help (1990).

Through meditation the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong ideology attempts to develop rural areas not only economically, but morally as well. The application of Buddhist psychological theories to social problems such as crime and unemployment encourages a reliance on meditation as the means to improving society. Most such social ills are attributed to *lohp*, or greed. Using meditation to solve social problems is to address *lohp* directly. It was thought that if greed could be forestalled individual by individual, material and spiritual prosperity would follow and crime, unemployment and prostitution would gradually be eradicated. Villages are established as Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen

Din Thong development targets and then monks are the bureaucratic network for implementation.

The Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong villages I visited were on the outskirts of Chiang Mai and appeared quite prosperous. One, in particular, was so developed it looked like a suburb of Bangkok. A paved road, albeit a narrow one, wound through the village. The homes, all of which were built of wood in northern Thai style, were carefully tended and sprays of flowers spilled over the wooden fences. The villages had been electrified and many had phones. The residents were predominantly rice farmers. The temple schools were quite good, however, and the proximity of a large city made it unlikely that the children would follow in their parents' footsteps after having received a good education. This was obviously a showcase village of the programme. I am sure there were other villages which were not as nice. The goal was to create economic and spiritual prosperity and I was witness to economic prosperity. Although it was impossible to judge spiritual prosperity without prolonged acquaintance with village residents, there were quite literally plenty of signs posted about which stated moralistic slogans. I was told that, of course, everyone meditated and that none of the residents had engaged in the widespread prostitution which seemed to plague many rural villages. I was unable to confirm the statement about meditation, but the level of economic and educational development in the villages I visited would indicate that prostitution would not be the primary economic alternative for the inhabitants.



Figure 4: the sign marking the entrance to a Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong village outside Chiang Mai



Figure 5: rice fields and the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong village outside Chiang Mai

IV.1.3. frustration and political opinions in the Sangha; the conference of village monks.

Perhaps the best way to understand the workings of the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programme is through a discussion of a conference organised by the National Council on Social Welfare for monks who had been involved in development throughout the country. The conference took place in late November of 1988 at Wat Bowonnivet, the present Supreme Patriarch's temple (although he had not yet been appointed at the time). The participants included one hundred and forty-eight monks from thirty-nine provinces. The monastic participants were invited through the Sangha bureaucratic network; each district head was given the task of informing all of the abbots in his area who then informed the monks in his *wat*, or temple. Over two thousand *wats* were informed of the conference. Most of the monks who came were the most senior in their districts. Aside from these monks there were guest speakers from the lay community. Otherwise, the only other lay participants were the workers from the Council.

Wat Bowonnivet is a royally sponsored monastery in one of the older sections of Bangkok. Kings Rama IV, V, and VI ordained as monks here (Jumsai 1971). The area was developed in the late '30s, although I believe the monastery is actually a bit older. It is located in the same section of town as the old parliament building and the 1932 Revolution monument. This section of the city was built when King Chulalongkorn's urban planning was still in practise so the streets are quite wide and are still lined by trees. The entrance to the monastery is quite difficult to find as I could only find parking in the back. Schoolboys running about the temple school gave me directions to the building I wanted. Away from the school, modern and traditional Thai architecture rose

cheek by jowl, separated only by trees that would obscure one building from another's view. The conference took place in the ground and first floors of a large hall. Due to lack of space, some of the monks' meals had to be served in the monastery library next door.

The hall's ground floor was a cavernous, high-ceilinged room divided in two by a heavy curtain. Its general use was obviously religious. At the front of one section there were twelve life-sized and larger Buddha images. Flower arrangements adorned a profusion of small, mother-of-pearl inlay tables placed before them. To the left of the Buddha images a large Styrofoam bulletin board with the National Council on Social Welfare seal had been erected with the ubiquitous polystyrene lettering found in most Thai gatherings. Also spelled out in polystyrene was the title of the conference: the Seminar for Monastic Scholars and Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong. A video camera recorded the proceedings and a podium, television monitor and projection screen stood to the right of the Buddha images. The podium was removed and replaced throughout the day, according to demand. Opposite the podium, enough school desks for the visiting monks were arranged in rows. On the other side of the curtain, an exhibit of model Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong villages had been erected. There were more bulletin boards showing pictures of the King at the Putthamonthon, a large Buddhist park begun on the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment in 1957. A long registration table was also in this area, with about ten staff members arranging paperwork there.

I arrived at eight in the morning -- late, of course (rarely was I ever able to gauge the traffic properly) -- just in time for the opening ceremony. The first day was devoted to speeches (there were over five) and the airing of complaints

and opinions by the participants. The opening, morning, and closing speeches were delivered by guests and by organisers while the afternoon was devoted to monks who had special topics to bring up. The speeches by guest speakers were primarily motivational in nature, all geared to explaining the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong ideology. Despite the good intentions of the organisers, I did not get the impression that there was much optimism at this conference from the start. Considering the time limitation and the conference's goals it seemed difficult to believe that much could be accomplished. Both workers and monks involved seemed to feel the conference was a needed formality, but finding constructive solutions through sharing experiences and problems in just two days seemed an ambitious goal.

For the opening speech, a special chair had been placed at the front of the room for Somdej Yanna Sangwawn (the abbot of the monastery). He entered slowly, a plump, old man, (whose age seemed increased no doubt by his shaved head) bent forward slightly amidst a flurry of Council photographers and personal attendants. He carried a pair of reading glasses and his speech. There was a hush of respect as the abbot entered; at this time he was widely tipped as the most promising candidate for Supreme Patriarch. During the late Patriarch's extended illness, the abbot had assumed his administrative duties. The good opinions of the audience were not unfounded but interests began to waver after the speech's first few minutes. Despite a microphone which had been placed very close to his chair, the abbot's slurred diction was difficult to follow. He read slowly and monotonously with his head inclined toward his lap on which he held his papers. He spoke of the fact that the world of monks must necessarily be separated from society in general, but that for their own mutual survival, they

must also necessarily interact. Politics and economics cannot be successful if they are not governed by morally sound principles. The answer to this moral void was the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong ideology. In the next twenty-five minutes there followed a series of references to scripture and how it is applicable to monastic involvement in rural development. By the time he was finished, most of the audience had dozed off. They were aroused only by his departure. Like all other speeches during this conference, the end was greeted by silence; monks do not clap.

Aside from the opening speech by the abbot, there were six other forty-five minute speeches, interrupted by a break for lunch. Of these speakers, three were laymen and three were monks. I noticed that when a monk spoke there was greater interest in the audience, but nevertheless most of the audience participation came in the form of sporadic coughs. The day was not particularly hot by Thai standards and the desks were hardly comfortable enough to induce slumber. I can only conclude that it was the subject matter and monotonous delivery that put most of the audience to sleep. Aside from the occasional mention of flood relief in the south (recently there had been devastating floods due to massive deforestation) there was endless and repetitious explaining of Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong principles and the goals of the programme. The stress was primarily on development of morals in conjunction with economic development. This tandem development would occur through the teaching of meditation as well as the building of schools and irrigation canals. At one point a man showed slides and graphs of the target numbers that were hoped for through the programme. One statistic was that the monks should aim for fifty to sixty percent participation on the part of their villagers. Of these

opening speeches, the speaker who got the most interest was a monk who called for the compilation of a handbook for monks and development and that perhaps the results of the conference would contribute to that end. He earned murmurs of approval from saying, '*Jai sa-ngob laew, yang kae panha mai dai.*' (The mind may be at peace, but problems remain unsolved.) On the whole, the speeches were meant to motivate, but seemed to me rather to daunt. Typical of the exhortations during this opening session was the speech of one monk who called upon his colleagues to provide educated help to their villagers; monks of today must all have young recruits waiting to assume their mantles; in addition to being examples of moral rectitude to their communities and to having good scriptural knowledge, this modern monk must have a firm command of farming techniques, agricultural economics, and animal husbandry.

After lunch the opening speeches continued through to a tea break. It was after this tea break that the audience truly began to take an interest in the conference and that the most controversial and frustrated declarations were made. This session was an open one chaired by Somporn, giving monks in the audience an opportunity to air their suggestions and grievances on the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong ideology. Each speaker was asked to walk to one of two microphones and address the room. There were nine monks in all who were given a chance to speak and, judging from the show of hands and murmurs of agreement many more would have spoken, given the time. The first monk complained of a lack of official support for development programmes involving monks. He felt that once recruited to work on development, a monk was left on his own without official moral support let alone administrative and financial back-up. Somporn, who was supposed to give an answer to each query was hard

pressed for a response to this dilemma. He ended up saying that to best help others, one had to start with oneself. It was clear that no one found this answer satisfying not even the man who gave it. The second monk used a cane. He was quite young, so I assumed that he had been injured. I noticed him when I got there in the morning because he was the only disabled person to attend. He had been in a bus accident and was seething with indignation at his plight. Apparently the bus driver ran away without taking responsibility for his actions (a common occurrence). The monk had decided, as a responsible person, to get to the bottom of the situation but ended up seen as a trouble maker instead. He complained that if the well intentioned are thus rewarded, how is there any hope for the country? Of the speakers from the audience, this monk took the longest, going into minute detail on various complications he experienced from the indifference of the local police to the sympathy of this fellow passengers (who, incidentally, did little to help him). Somporn's answer in this instance was to congratulate the monk on his good intentions. The third monk complained of the fake monks who were damaging the reputations of the real monks, demanding that the government do something to stop this proliferation immediately. But by this time the conference had already started to go overtime and Somporn cut his answer short to give others a chance to speak.

I am still unsure how the airing of grievances turned into aggression, but it happened suddenly. One of the remaining monks started by mildly attacking Somporn and his answers, thus giving impetus to the other monks to unleash their own frustration with the government. In any case, the remaining six monks who spoke lashed out with stinging criticism of the government to the extent that Somporn had to warn them of the dangers of monastic involvement in politics.

One by one, they spoke of being given practically impossible tasks without support from local leaders. When a monk asked for assistance he was told to start with himself first. But participants complained that the problem with starting with oneself was that merely being good could not eradicate evil in others. From murmurs in the audience there seemed to be universal agreement that it was all very well to talk of becoming experts in animal husbandry, but where could a monk readily get that kind of training? One monk called, out of turn, that it was time to tell the truth about development: if the government wasn't serious about it, how could monks be? To this there was another general murmur of agreement. The manufacture of cigarettes and liquor, the lottery were all government money-making enterprises. If the government truly wanted to help people why did it sponsor schemes detrimental to society? A further complaint was that monks themselves were also becoming corrupt. No wonder people were turning to Santi Asoke and other new movements. Many expressed despair that the country would never improve and the Sangha would never be able to help because there was no true democracy in Thailand. In the end, Somporn could only ask for a bit of sympathy, explaining that he got frustrated complaints on the Sangha from the government as well and that, ultimately, Thailand's future was in everybody's interests. At this appeal, the monks smiled understandingly and the first day of the conference ended. I would like to add that the atmosphere during the latter complaints was particularly tense, in fact, more so than I ever experienced in a roomful of monks throughout my entire time doing field work. That the tension could be so easily dispelled was due, I am sure, to the fact that the aggression came from monks who were not supposed to become so moved emotionally. Of all who spoke, I found from later

conversation that the only monk to retain any anger was the one who spoke on the absence of democracy in Thailand.

The following day began with more speeches. This time they concentrated on Buddhist psychology rather than development. The speeches lasted only until mid-morning before the conference broke up into three smaller discussion groups; each one addressing a branch of development: moral, social and economical. Each group had only an hour and a half to discuss problems and possible solutions before lunch. I joined the social development group, which met in one of the upstairs rooms. The room appeared to be a classroom for there were more school desks arranged in rows and the monk who chaired the meeting sat at the teacher's desk which was slightly bigger. I sat at the back of the room and therefore could not see the monks' faces, but was able to get a general impression of feelings from tone of voice. The anger of the day before had given way to discouragement. Most of the monks seemed to complain half-heartedly. But then because I couldn't see their faces, it may well be that they were being more respectful because the chair was a fellow monk. I was particularly impressed by the chair who was amazingly efficient -- we finished on time and there was a genuine exchange of information.

The prevailing subject was youth. Most of the participants found that there was more cause for optimism in the nation's youth than in any other sector of society. The youth training programmes were the most successful. The biggest complaints seemed to be lack of co-operation; that monks and officials have different information that isn't exchanged, but should be; that monks lack much of the expertise and training needed in development programmes; that the family unit is not an efficient way to disseminate development ideology and that

families will often give little co-operation. There were a few voices of despair telling of monks expected to give more help than they could ever get. Monks who had earned the trust of their villagers only to let them down when proper help was beyond their powers spoke desperately of antagonising people through promises that proved to be hollow. Sometimes a monk had to contend with criticism not only from the government, but his congregation. In the end, the group meeting seemed most effective by allowing limited catharsis. When the entire conference reconvened after lunch and synopses of each group meeting were given, there was enough optimism to merit a vague attempt to talk of Thailand under a truly democratic government, although this strain of discussion was cut short due to its political nature.

The closing ceremony was a source of anticipation. After a closing speech by Somdej Phra Yanna Sangwawn, the abbot was to give out commemorative shoulder bags to those who had attended. It was obviously a great honour and many of the monks had prepared cameras for the occasion. As they had no doubt seen me taking pictures throughout the conference, I was asked to take several. The abbot's speech was uncommonly long, however, and he seemed to be falling asleep himself. The mild weather of the day before had been taken over by heat which, along with the bright strobes used for the videotape cameras, only contributed to the soporific effect of the abbot's closing statement. It was to everyone's consternation then, that, after having spoken, the abbot left. Before anyone could stop him, he was already out the door. It was up to Somporn to distribute the bags instead. They were handed out in piles at the end of a row; each monk took one and passed the remaining bags down the row to the next until all had received one.

Because no one seemed particularly encouraged by the seminar for monks and the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong ideology, I feel it is important to explain that there are other programmes under the auspices of the National Council on Social Welfare that are considered more productive although none of these involved monks. The important point in discussing this conference is that many monks felt the Sangha was placed in a position opposing the government by demands placed on them. That they, along with the staff at the Council, were eager to help improve society cannot be disputed. It also was clear, however, that all parties in this case were at a loss as to how monks could best be put to use and how they could best be helped. I believe strongly that there were many monks in Thailand who felt much the same; they saw and understood society's problems but were unsure of their role in helping Thai society. It was this doubt that brought people to say that monks were ignorant of society's changing needs and were therefore losing their relevance. On the contrary, I found that many concerned monks whose efforts were frustrated by being in difficult positions. Furthermore, all the political talk indicated an awareness of politics and an abundance of political opinions on the part of monks.



Figure 6: a model of a Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong village on display at the conference of village monks



Figure 7: board displaying the work of a fund for village welfare sponsored by the National Council on Social Welfare at the conference of village monks

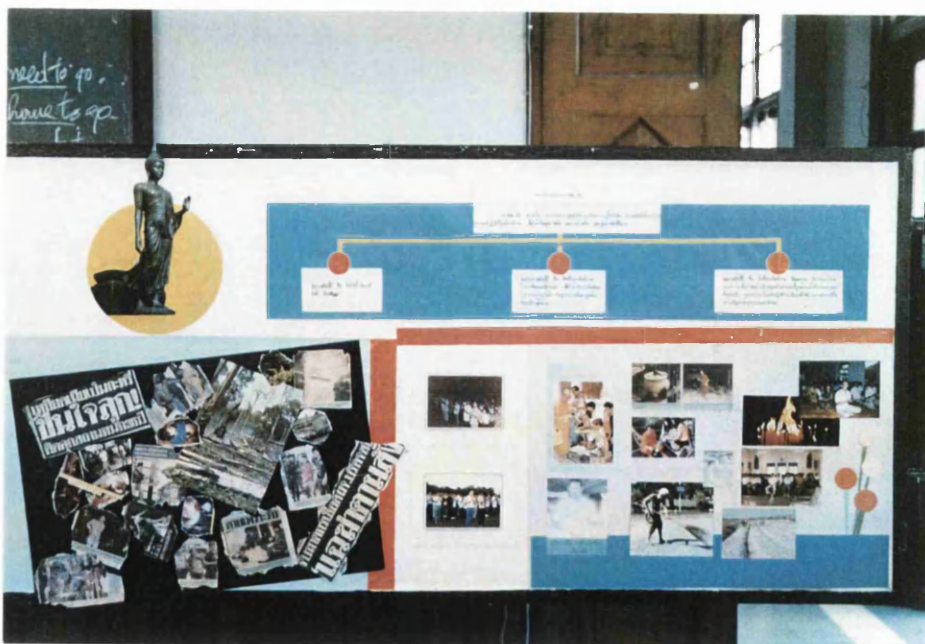


Figure 8: a board displaying the work of the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programme at the conference of village monks

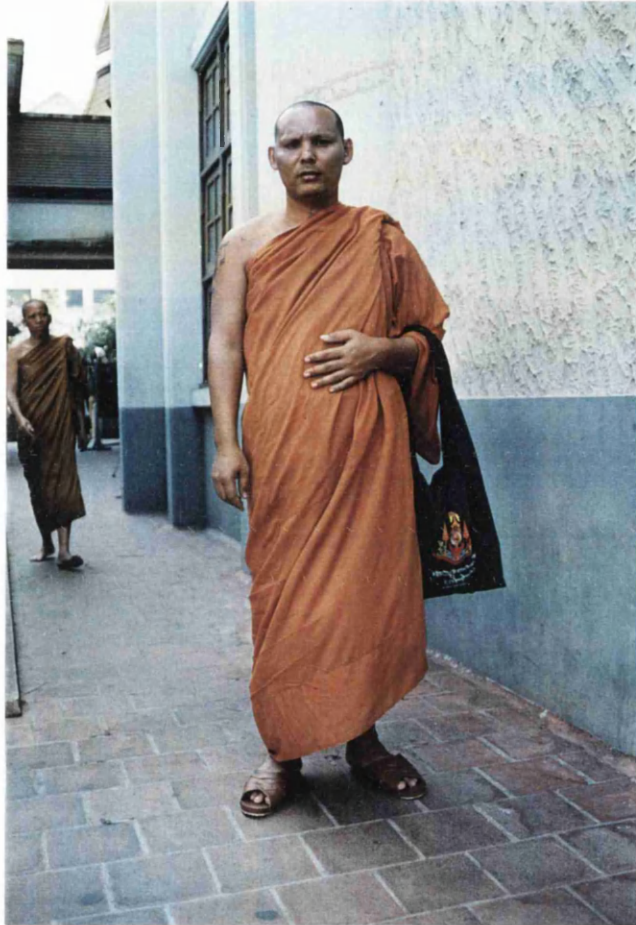


Figure 9: a participant at the conference of village monks posing for the camera. Note that this monk has chosen to pose very casually, as if having his photograph taken is inconsequential.

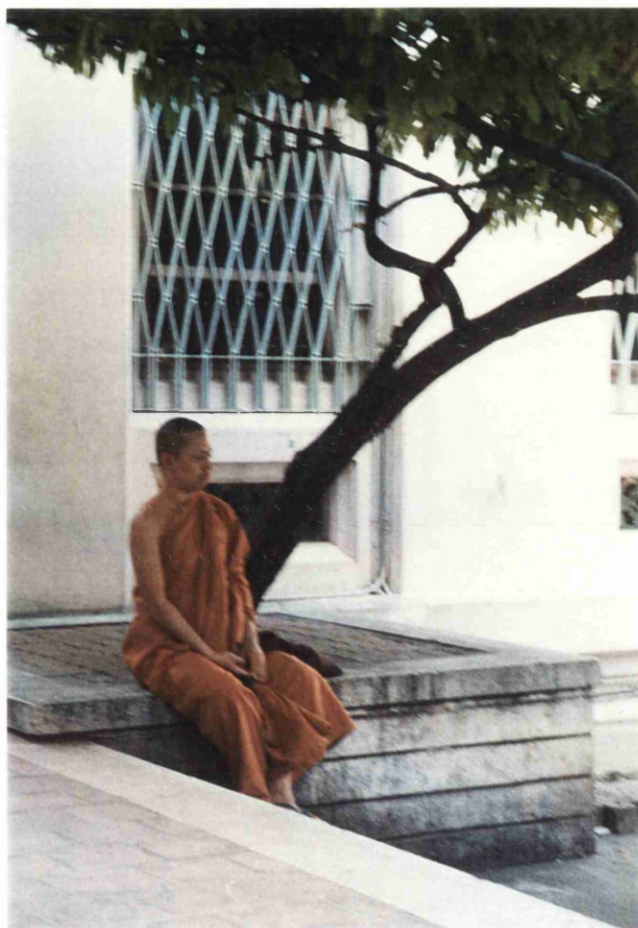


Figure 10: a participant at the conference of village monks posing for the camera as if in meditation. This monk took the time to find a tree under which he could pose.



Figure 11: Khun Somporn Thepsitta of the National Council on Social Welfare addressing the abbot of Wat Bowornnives (the future Supreme Patriarch). As a mark of respect, Khun Somporn is on his knees and his hands are pressed together in a *wai* position.



Figure 12: participants at the conference of village monks

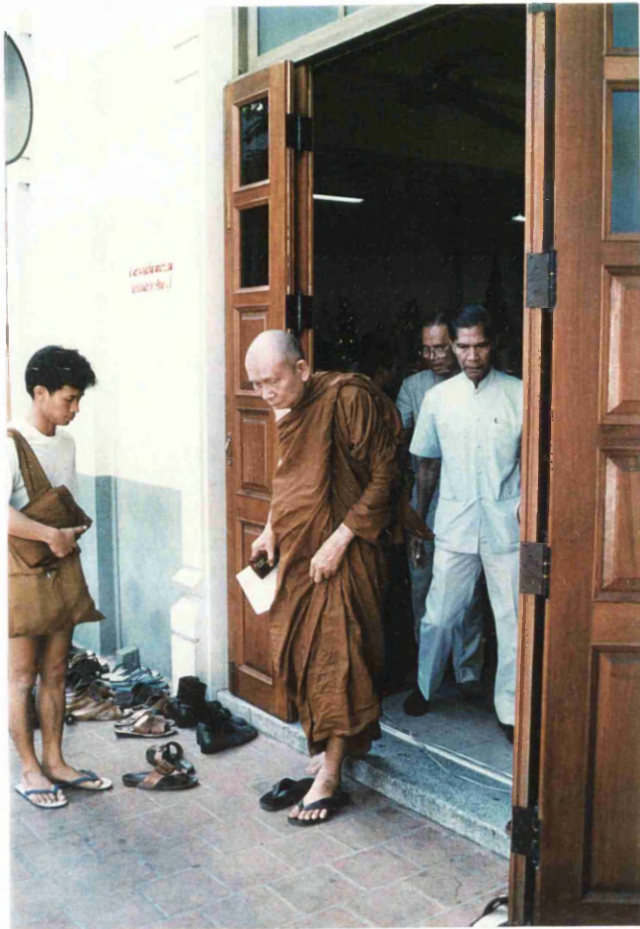


Figure 13: the abbot leaving the conference.
The young man on the left wearing shorts is the abbot's personal attendant and is carrying his shoulder bag. The uniformed official behind him is from the National Council on Social Welfare.
Khun Somporn Thepsitta stands in the background.

IV. 2. The Development Monks (nak phatthana)

2.1. the forest and city monks

Although I did not interview the two following monks with the intention of comparing them, comparisons are inevitable considering they were both based in Chiang Mai, in the north, and both were involved in development but with very different approaches. In the Spring of 1989 I travelled to Chiang Mai for a week with the dual intention of seeking prospective projects that might prove fruitful and attending the ordination of a friend who lived there. I went in the company of another friend Vichien who had been with me on several interviews and who had proved helpful by asking prearranged questions. Throughout my stay in Thailand, Vichien's help proved invaluable as his insights often showed up my westernised instincts as not always precise. On one occasion I found a layman's manner to be particularly rude and wondered what I had done to bring this on. Vichien pointed out that the man was from the provinces and that most of the Thais I had encountered were from the city and had citified manners; the offending layman was not being rude, but merely crude.

Born of a Chinese immigrant family, Vichien in many ways represents the growing Thai middle class. He was never educated abroad, but was given the best possible Western-oriented education in Thailand; he was put through schools that taught him French and English and he speaks both fluently. Although he was trained as a civil engineer, Vichien is a businessman by profession; he runs an export company and owns a leather goods factory. At the time of my field work he was thirty-three years old. I found that Vichien's opinions were very much like those of a Thai who had been educated in the West. This led me to assume that many of the Thai with a similar middle-class education had the same mild distrust of what westerners would call superstition

and placed similar demands on the logic taught by religious institutions. I found this to be the case when discussing my project with his friends of similar background.

IV.2.1.A. the forest monk

Vichien accompanied me on my first interview in Chiang Mai at Wat Pa Darabhirom -- the term 'Pa' means forest and places an emphasis on the fact that this temple is a rural one although there is no pretence of being anything other than a village temple. Somkuan had suggested the abbot of this temple, Phra Thepkavi, as a good example of a *nak patthana*, or a development monk. I secured an interview by phone from the hotel the day before. The abbot had received my letter of introduction a month earlier and had been wondering whether I would ever show up. I, of course, had been expecting an answer from him and had felt unsure of whether I would get an interview. In every case but one, when I sent a letter of introduction, I never got an answer but was always expected.

A detailed description of Wat Pa Darabhirom will appear later in section VI.1.3. My interview with the abbot took place in his *kuti*, or personal bungalow. At the *kuti* we were asked to wait downstairs while the abbot finished attending to business. The wooden walls had bulletins and pictures of temples taped or tacked to them. Neat piles of books and papers lay about the uncommonly hard concrete floor. We sat down in proper Thai style, with our feet tucked behind us and within a matter of minutes, my legs, from the knees down, were asleep. It was not long before I had lost all feeling in them and the interview hadn't even started. The morning sun beat down on the back of my

neck relentlessly. And this was the cool season, I reflected. With satisfaction, however, I noted that Vichien soon started squirming as well.

The abbot was a tall, skinny, darkly tanned man who appeared to be in his fifties. His face was lined, but not deeply. On some monks the shaved head gives an impression of youth; the face appears rounder. This monk, however, seemed merely bald. Before the interview began, the abbot gave me several books and brochures on the temple and its projects, one of them in English. They were, he said, printed as part of a yearly drive to gain funding from international development organisations so that new projects could be initiated and the established ones expanded. After this brief introduction the interview was hard work. To all my questions he answered in monosyllables and gave the impression that he was a busy man who didn't have time to humour anthropology students. When I asked him for details about his life, he suggested I read one of the pamphlets he had just given me. He refused to be drawn into a discussion of any kind on the more controversial temples that had become popular; the point seemed to be that if people liked them they were good and no concern of his. When discussing his work, however, he was much more forthcoming and actually seemed relatively animated. His goal was to help people in rural areas become self-sufficient. The abbot's work had begun when local villagers asked him to help with the construction of a school over fifteen years previously. It was imperative that his projects responded to local requests or to genuine need in the community. Nothing was initiated in response to the national government, but rather to problems he felt needed to be rectified. From that single school, his projects had now expanded to those ranging from irrigation, refuges for homeless women, cottage industries such as the

manufacture of clothing, baskets and tablecloths and buffalo banks (where farmers who had no animals to plough their fields could borrow one and pay interest with a share of their rice crop, which was then lent out to farmers whose crops were short that season).

The most important factor in the success of any of the abbot's programmes was follow-up, and constant adaptation. His programmes succeeded where others failed due to this flexibility. At the time I visited, there was a general meeting of the paid workers who took part in the programmes -- there were twelve men in all, no women -- and the volunteer workers. Such meetings took place on the average of every five weeks. Projects were assessed at each of these meetings and adapted to changes, if necessary. Each of the paid workers oversaw a sector of the targeted development area and would frequently visit the communities in his sector. The abbot's role was to act as administrative director with the help of his two assistants, a monk and a Chiang Mai nobleman. After having talked for about half an hour, the interview ended with the abbot's suggesting I tour the temple grounds with his assistants. When I asked to take a photograph, the abbot just sat waiting for me to take the picture; he wanted no time to arrange himself or his robes or any of the mess around him. Of all the monks I photographed, he was the only one who seemed not to care.

As we finished touring the factory, I learned from conversation with the assistants that a foreign woman had just studied them for a year. Unfortunately, in the interests of not repeating someone else's work, studying this temple had lost much of its appeal. It was a shame, however. I was attracted by the obvious success and logic of many of the abbot's programmes. I left with an appointment to return the following month for the next general administrative meeting (which

I ended up not attending since it got postponed and I had commitments elsewhere).

In the car, on the way back, Vichien was effusive about the abbot. I had never before seen him so enthusiastic about any monk, especially a monk involved in any organisation. Generally Vichien was a sceptic, criticising those monks who were too much involved in worldly affairs as being financially motivated, but then also criticising those who isolated themselves too much from secular society as being irrelevant. The abbot's demeanour appealed to Vichien who felt his reticence was appropriate to a monk. That he seemed not to have time for me impressed Vichien as well; it meant he was a busy man. It was clear to Vichien that the abbot's work was effective; the state of the temple made it obvious that his programmes were truly beneficial. The way the organisation worked was logical in a businesslike way. In all, to my unexpected pleasure, Vichien had found a monk worthy of veneration.

IV.2.1.B. the city monk

A few days later, I went to interview the abbot at a temple in the centre of Chiang Mai. The interviewee was Phra Udom Kittimongkol, the abbot and the pioneer of the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programme in the north. In contrast to Wat Pa Darabhirom, this temple was in the heart of the city and its grounds reflected that. There were no lawns; rather, all space around the buildings had been paved over with concrete to create a large parking lot that would accommodate urban devotees' personal transport. The buildings were magnificent in their ornamentation. In every corner, the roof of the *ubosot*, or ordination hall, was covered with gilding and coloured glass. A group of tourists

dressed disreputably in shorts and singlets stood in front taking snapshots. Several monks sat in the shade of a large tree that grew out of the concrete; the morning sun was already hot.

From the directions taken on the phone the evening before, I found the abbot's quarters behind the *ubosot*. The *kuti* was a modern building with tinted sliding glass doors. The one huge room served the purpose of office, living quarters and reception area. It was cool and dark; the tinted glass kept out most of the glare. Directly across from the entrance, against the wall, an enormous Buddha image sat, effectively dividing the room. To the Buddha's right was a raised dais that served as the abbot's office. To the Buddha's left were several desks with typewriters and other office equipment. All across the floor in this half of the room were large bulletin boards with brightly coloured writing on them. Some boards had photographs piled on them, others had the photographs pasted in some sort of order. It was in front of the Buddha that I found the abbot deep in conversation with a layman. He told me to sit down and look at some of the boards in order to get an idea of the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programme in the north of Thailand. There were about twenty-five boards in all, arranged in rows presumably in order. I had to bend down and look at them closely since there wasn't much light (for this I was thankful -- it kept the room cool). Evidently the villages depicted were different and the profusion of boards and photographs was meant illustrate the popularity of the programme. Most of the pictures showed the abbot as he toured the targeted areas. He was generally being greeted by a line of anonymous villagers meditating. Underneath each picture there was a caption written in handwriting so completely illegible that I wasn't even sure whether it was English or Thai. These boards were obviously

not the final exhibits and had just been assembled. The abbot called out to an assistant monk who came over and pulled out more boards that were more finished looking. By the time the assistant was done there were boards covering the floor in every direction I turned.

Although the abbot seemed to feel that my looking at the bulletin boards would tell me all about his projects, I found myself distrusting them entirely. Most of the photographs seemed posed and I couldn't tell what the situation was actually like in the villages where he worked. This is not to say that I thought him unsuccessful. The problem is that I had just come from an interview a few days before with a man who was able to show me the fruit of his efforts immediately. Instead of feeling impressed by the bulletin boards, then, I felt suspicious that I was being shown public relations releases. The interview with this abbot was conducted in the shadow of Phra Thepkavi, the abbot of Wat Pa Darabhirom. I had spoken to several local people about this interview and many of them had told me it wasn't worth my effort, that the first monk was the more important one.

The first part of the interview consisted primarily of *my* life story, with detailed questioning on my education, my family and, finally, my activities in Chiang Mai. Upon hearing that I had been to Wat Pa Darabhirom, the abbot began to talk of how his projects were different. It seemed that he had had to make the same speech before. The Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programme is quite active in the north. Indeed the show village I visited was on the outskirts of Chiang Mai. The programme does not merely teach meditation, it also converts the hill tribes to Buddhism. The scope and ambitions of this programme were much greater than Phra Thepkavi's and I began to realise how

little they could be compared. It is very easy to base judgements on results, however, and I could see how people found the aims of Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong less productive than the smaller scale development programmes.

In general, I found Than Chao Khun (an informal form of address meaning abbot) Udom to be an affable man who worked hard at what he believed to be a project that would do much good. His duties were to handle the religious, or meditational, part of an overall development programme and he obviously had the trust of the directors of Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong in Bangkok. His administrative talents seemed quite considerable. At the time of my interview, the abbot was very obviously busy. Several people went in and out of the room; because it was dark and because the room was large, I didn't notice all of them, but the one I did meet was a government official. I can only conclude that favour with the government does not immediately equate to favour with the general public. The difference between the two development monks seems obvious. A monk who worked for the government appears biased to official interests (Moerman 1966) while an independent monk like Phra Thepkavi appears to have the interests of his congregation at heart due to his responding to local demands and not the demands of the government. The picture I took of Phra Udom Kittimongkol was in front of the Buddha image in the centre of the room. He was surrounded by bulletin boards that had not yet been put away.

IV.2.2. the assistant abbot of Wat Dhammakaya

Although the monks at Wat Dhammakaya concentrated on meditation, the movement also boasted a monk who had studied Buddhism at Oxford

University in the United Kingdom (an account of my interview with him follows in the next section) and senior monks who had all been graduated with a minimum of a bachelor's degree at university. The fact that the movement would often refer to their monks' educational credentials was a matter of contention with the mainstream due to accusations of elitism. However, this was a source of reassurance to my informants at Wat Dhammakaya who felt that they could better respect a monk who had the basic intellectual training of a university degree. There was a level of scholarship at Wat Dhammakaya which was a source of pride for the devotees of the movement. My first encounter with the scholarship of Wat Dhammakaya was on my very first visit. Luang Phaw Dattajivo, the assistant abbot took the afternoon off his administrative duties to give me a special lesson on Buddhism before I was to interview him. This initial encounter would have led me to classify Luang Phaw Datta as a scholar monk but, as I spent more time with the movement, my informants would always refer to him as a development monk because he supervised all of the construction at Wat Dhammakaya, including the modernist *ubosot*.

Although no one came out and said so, from the amount of excitement this special lesson elicited from the ladies whom I would eventually come to call the Wednesday Group, I gathered that this was a great honour accorded to me because of my special status. The smoothness with which the afternoon progressed convinced me that such events often took place as one of the many special accommodations the movement made for VIP visitors.

A classroom had been set up in the roofed area outside the assistant abbot's office, with a white board and several chairs facing it. (This was the only occasion I would be given a chair to sit in. Thereafter, once I became a regular

member of the group, I was expected to sit on the floor as most people did.) The assistant abbot arrived riding a bicycle which to me was quite startling since seeing a monk on a bicycle was a strange sight; all other monks I had met walked everywhere or were driven by laymen. A monk driving himself or riding a bicycle seemed bizarre because it was profane. I quickly found out, however, that Dhammakaya monks often rode bicycles to get around the compound since it was so large. (After negotiations with the Mahatheerasamakom, the Dhammakaya monks stopped riding bicycles and had to be driven about the temple's vast grounds.)

Luang Phaw (an informal title referring to an older monk) Datta was a robust, jolly man whose loud voice had the type of timbre monks would be commended for. In secular life, a man of his build would have made a good rugby player. Of all the monks I got to know in the course of field work, I came to feel the greatest personal affection for Luang Phaw Datta. He appealed to my American respect for hard work and plain speaking. For the same reasons, he was also my aunt's favourite monk at the temple. On our drives to the wat every Wednesday, my aunt and I would discuss the relative merits of each monk and what it was that we liked about them. Although none of the other Wednesday ladies shared this opinion with my aunt and me (they either preferred the abbot or Luang Pee Metta, the Oxford-educated monk), I believe that many others must have felt the same way as we did about Luang Phaw Datta.

Once we were all seated, the Luang Phaw drew a pyramid (or a Chedi he said) on the white board. He then drew a flag on top of it with '*nibbana*' written on one side and 'freedom from *kilet* (worldly appetites)' written on the other. Each side of the pyramid represented three basic aspects of how we should live.

These in turn could be divided further into three positive behaviour patterns. On the left side of the chedi, he wrote 'renouncing evil'. In the middle he wrote 'doing good'. On the right side he wrote 'making one's heart clear'. There were 21,000 lessons in each of the first two sections (giving up evil and doing good) and 42,000 lessons in the third (making one's heart clear) When combined, these three groups of lessons equalled the 84,000 sections of the *Tipitaka*.

Through following the 84,000 lessons, one could become free from *kilesa* and reach *nibbana*. The route to *nibbana* was threefold: renouncing evil, doing good and clearing one's heart will rid one of earthly appetites. While few people had any hope of reaching *nibbana*, there was the possibility of becoming a better person simply by taking the three steps. Luang Phaw Datta simplified them in the manner below. Each step was given a numbered heading. Beneath were things one could do to accomplish the goal of taking that step. For example, one renounced evil by speaking properly and so on.

1. renouncing evil

a. speaking properly

This did not merely mean to refrain from lying but to speak of things in a manner which would effect others positively.

b. taking on the correct leisurely pursuits which would not disturb others

making sure that what one did for fun was not disruptive to other individuals and to society.

c. taking on the correct types of work which would not disturb others

One should not profit from activities which would be disruptive to other individuals and to society.

2. doing good

a. diligence in following the proper path -- at changing for the better

Improving oneself was the first step to improving the world.

b. mindfulness (*sati*)

being aware of one's actions

c. *samadhi*

concentrating on one's action

3. making one's heart clear

a. meditation

which should be done according to the Dhammakaya method

Of the three lessons above, it was important to be aware of the difference between *sati* (awareness) and *samadhi* (concentration). There were few people who actually knew the difference between *sati* and *samadhi* but it was important to understand the difference because the two were the most important factors in practising meditation properly. Luang Phaw Datta likened them to using a nail and a hammer. The nail would be held in place by *sati*, but driven in by *samadhi*. Only after years of practising could one have the *samadhi* to realise the potential of meditation.

According to Luang Phaw Datta, the most important point of the Dhammakaya interpretation of the Buddha's teaching was that these tenets were not established by the Buddha Himself, rather, they were laws of nature He discovered. The Dhammakaya contribution to society was that through meditation one simultaneously followed all three routes to reaching *nibbana*. By embracing the *dhammakaya* (the physical manifestation of the Buddha's teaching), one gave up evil; the active pursuit of the *dhammakaya* was a good act; and meditation on the Buddha's laws cleared the heart.

As I spent more time at Wat Dhammakaya I noticed that it was rare for Luang Phaw Datta to be absent on a Wednesday. His presence became an expected part of the monks' mid-day meal and the prayers which led up to and which followed it. After the meal was over, he would speak to the Wednesday group from the dais where the monks ate about current events or personal subjects. If he knew that the son of one of the group was ill, he would ask after the boy's health. Often Luang Phaw Datta would ask how my research was

going and where else I had been interviewing people. Discussions with him never skirted around subjects out of decorum the way many Thais would in general. On one occasion, the press was accusing the *wat* of having an arms cache in the temple's basement. Luang Phaw Datta's indignation was palpable. He remarked that first of all the temple had no desire for arms, but even if they did, who would be stupid enough to hide them in the basement where people were free to walk in and out?

Luang Phaw Datta's reputation at Wat Dhammakaya was as the reformed *nakleng*. Stories were often told of his chequered past and how he was originally a country boy gone wrong. By his own account, however, from an early age, Luang Phaw Datta was interested in meditation due to the purported supernatural powers one could acquire through it. He was raised upcountry in Kanchanaburi where many monks were taught him meditation. He used the word *itthiphon* (meaning influence) that they exerted to get him involved in Buddhism. There were no rules or methods taught by these monks, however, one just followed their lead. So Luang Phaw Datta came to realise that for many years he was involved in 'black magic' (he used the English term) not Buddhism. It was the abbot (an account of my interview with him appears in the following section IV.3.1.) and the nun who was his assistant who showed Luang Phaw Datta the difference between the two.

When asked to talk about his personal life, however, Luang Phaw Datta felt there wasn't much to talk about. When I mentioned that this modesty clashed with his reputation, he laughed. Luang Phaw Datta went to university before ordaining, so he actually ordained later in life. His interest in becoming a monk arose from his enjoyment of meditation. True meditation, as taught him by

the abbot and his assistant gave Luang Phaw Datta a chance to see himself and he found that the best way to reform was to ordain. So Luang Phaw Datta ordained at Wat Paknam Phasicharoen (the spiritual precursor to Wat Dhammakaya) after three years of studying there. After his ordination, Luang Phaw Datta realised that he must help others to improve themselves as well, and so joined the abbot and his assistant to establish Wat Dhammakaya. While the abbot's role was to teach meditation and the nun's role was to raise funds, Luang Phaw Datta oversaw the actual construction and administration of the temple.

IV.2.3. conclusion

The above discussion of the forest and city monks, as I have called them, points out that, even among monks who consider themselves in the same group based on the nature of their pastoral activities, there is a disparity in terms of practical emphasis and the roles they play in their communities. Those, like my friend Vichien, who were sceptical of city monks decried the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong philosophy of development due to their belief that the only true development is of the nature conducted by the forest monk as described above where villagers' social conditions are improved through programmes which emphasise moral and economic development as being one and the same. At Wat Dhammakaya, scholarship was the primary means of proselytisation and expansion. Luang Phaw Datta's initial encounter with me seemed very scholarly, but I later found out that many junior monks also gave the same talk to prospective members. It was in deference to my status that the movement's assistant abbot himself spoke to me. My informants at Wat Dhammakaya considered Luang Phaw Datta a development monk, however,

because he supervised the construction of architectural works which developed the movement's property and furthered its goal of becoming a world-class Buddhist centre.

IV.3. *The Scholar Monks (nak wichakahn)*

Development and scholarship were very closely associated in the minds of most of my informants in the mainstream and Wat Dhammakaya. This is due to the fact that scholar monks were either teachers at Buddhist universities or were authors who discussed the state of society and the role Buddhism played in it. The account of the monks which follows is of interviews with those who, by my informants' definition, were scholar monks.

IV.3.1. The Author Monk

The most prominent of the scholar monks and one who was revered by all of my informants familiar with monastic scholarship, regardless of affiliation to orders or movements was Phra Thepveti. Due to his having been promoted several times after having published, Phra Thepveti was known by his work under several ceremonial names before having been promoted, among them: Than Prayut Prayutto and Phra Rajavaramuni. The reputation of this monk preceded him. The author of numerous books on Thai society, he was, after Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the most renowned scholar monk in Thailand. Many of his books had been translated into English, most notably *Buddhadhamma* which was widely acknowledged as the handbook of Thai orthodoxy (Phra Rajaworamuni, 1995). Jackson, in his discussion of the search for a new 'Thai gospel' has argued that *Buddhadhamma* replace the *Triphum Phra Ruang* (Jackson, 1991). Than Chao Khun Thepveti was very much a pragmatist. He acknowledged that society was far less than ideal and he proposed solutions that take such failings into account. For example, he believed that many of the problems Thailand encountered in westernisation resulted from the haphazard

adoption of certain western social attitudes without bearing in mind that in the west they were in context, but when transplanted to Thailand, they became extraneous. He advocated adapting imported ideas to the Thai context in order to make them more useful (Phra Rajavaramuni, 1987).

This interview took place on a Sunday afternoon. Not having had an opportunity to eat, I arrived with a slight headache. I had expected to eat with Somkuan, but he came to the National Council on Social Welfare late and we had to leave before I could have lunch. At the time Than Chao Khun Thepveti lived all the way out at Pathum Thani, a suburb past the airport. It was close to a site where an Air Vietnam flight had recently crashed and Somkuan was on the lookout for the wreckage, pointing ominously at every plane that flew overhead. On the way we encountered a white utility estate car with a monk sitting on the passenger's side. We stopped the car and Somkuan went out and asked whether Than Chao Khun was in. The occupants of the car recognised Somkuan and chatted with him for a few moments.

Than Chao Khun Thepveti's *kuti* was in the middle of a lily pond. To get there one had to cross a wooden bridge. There appeared to be some sort of construction taking place nearby, but I never quite figured out what it was; there was the occasional thumping noise during the interview. Than Chao Khun was regularly the abbot of Wat Phra Phiren in Bangkok, but due to ill health (he suffered from severe allergies) he moved out into the country to *phak fuen*, or rest and recuperate. The air was indeed very clean smelling in a tropical kind of way -- quite wet. Aside from the occasional thump of construction, it was very quiet. We crossed over the bridge to the abbot's *kuti* after I took some photographs.

Inside, on a raised dais sat an old toothless monk. At first I thought that this was he. Having read so much about and by Phra Thepveti, I assumed he would be an old man. I immediately started apologising to the old monk for being so late. He smiled and nodded back with benevolent encouragement. Then to my surprise, Somkuan cut me off and turned to a rather young looking monk who, despite being grey, was really quite the opposite of the toothless man sitting opposite me. It seemed to me that my mistake was a natural one, but Somkuan actually seemed quite embarrassed that I should misunderstand that it was the younger man I had come to interview. From his biography I knew Than Chao Khun Thepveti to be forty-nine, but he looked much younger. He was quite small in stature (shorter than the toothless man) and had a face that was completely unlined. I was expecting a man in ill health, but his complexion was pale and clear; he looked much stronger than most of the monks I met. Perhaps I mistook serenity for strength. There was a deep calm to this monk although he displayed emotion. When he smiled, it was broad and earnest, but the transition in his features occurred gradually without jarring the expression that was there before.

He had his own tape recorder for the session which seemed shrewd of him and yet not intimidating in the least. I began by excusing myself for diverging from the interview questions I had sent him with my letter of introduction; his books had answered most of those questions. I suggested we use his books as a springboard from which we could speculate as to realistic solutions to the dilemmas he found most urgently in need of attention in Thailand. Again, I stress that his manner was the most serene I ever encountered. Unlike many monks whose reticence bear a trace of haughtiness,

his silence or an incline of the head was marked with a warm smile. He was honest about having to think about an answer, often not responding to a question immediately, but taking a minute or so to consider. He took care in answering his questions, but there never seemed to be a trace of suspicion that hampered any directness.

The discussion was on an entirely different level than any I had with other monks. He was able to suggest solutions other than merely meditation or studying scripture. For example, a pressing problem was prostitution. He admitted that no amount of meditation was going to eradicate the financial need that would bring people to consider prostitution as an economic alternative. The abbot suggested Buddhist reforms in economic policy instead. If it could be said he had a panacea, it was education. Not only could education solve problems in contemporary society, it would help to avert problems in the future. The important factor was the type of education offered to people in Thai society. As far as monks were concerned, education was painfully deficient. The reason that monks were unable to maintain any relevance to society was that their education had always been severely limited to scripture. Laymen no longer trusted monks because the gaps in their education was leading to gaps in experience that couldn't be bridged. Monks risked losing all perspective on the world beyond their temples. Once education improved, the state of society would improve as well.

I attempted to end the interview when the abbot seemed to be getting a dry throat. The conversation kept on going, however, when the toothless monk got him a glass of water. I stopped the interview after over an hour and yet the abbot seemed surprised that I didn't want to go on. If I had had the energy I

would have, but it was I who was exhausted. He gave me about ten books that he had written and I left after he consented to seeing me again.

Of all the monks I met, this one impressed me the most. What I liked best about him was his being unafraid of not having an answer. This humility accompanied by ideas obviously carefully thought out and a willingness to allow me, a mere anthropology student, my own ideas and whatever pitfalls that came with such ideas impressed me more than the monks who tried to bowl me over with indifference or intimidation. Perhaps it could be said that only such a monk would appeal to someone with my family background and my education. I can only say, however, that somehow I felt affection for this monk; it seemed that if only people listened to him more, there might actually be hope for society.



Figure 14: Than Chao Khun Thepveti (Phra Rajaworamuni) outside his *kuti*.
His pose is very informal but nevertheless a pose.
He had been walking me out after the interview
when I asked to photograph him.



Figure 15: the *kuti* of Than Chao Khun Thepveti
at his *phak fuen* retreat in Pathum Thani



Figure 16: the *kuti* of the *nakleng* monk.
The young men sitting on the floor in the background are *dek wat*.

IV.3.2. the *nakleng* monk

In contrast to Phra Thepveti, the *nakleng* monk was by far the most unpleasant interview I had. To this day, I still cringe at the memory of it. Although the term *nakleng* has been discussed in terms of power and local leadership (Johnston 1975, Turton 1991a), I use the term in an adjectival way, as one that is commonly used in Thai to denote a type of character. While the most common *naklengs* are rural bandits, the term itself refers to someone who is tough, loud and intimidating. Although the term is generally used with negative connotation, I have heard it used affectionately. The category extends to taxi drivers, students, teachers and leaders. I even know of a *nakleng* princess. That a monk should have characteristics that would bring him under this classification of Thai is therefore not surprising.

The day I went to interview the *nakleng* monk, there was a bit of confusion as to where the interview would take place. When I rang to ask for the interview the monk tried as best as possible to evade any meeting at all. I attributed it to modesty, so I pushed by telling him how he was highly recommended by Somkuan and how important it was for me to get the opinions of someone in his position. In the end he acquiesced. Nevertheless, he rang off before I could find out where the interview would take place. I could not get him back due to the vagaries of the phone system. I was to meet him on a Sunday so it was unclear whether the monk would be at the temple where he lived or whether he would be at the monastic university at Wat Mahathad, where he taught. Somkuan and I spent the early part of the afternoon phoning about the city and then driving to the monk's home temple only to find that he had left for the university. At this point I still had not been in Thailand long enough to lose

all caring as to arriving places on time. I worried that the monk would be kept waiting, that perhaps when we got to the university, he would have left, or that he would feel I didn't care enough to arrive on time. Imagine my surprise, then, when Somkuan told me that I didn't really need to be driving so fast because I would probably have to wait until a televised boxing match was over before I could start the interview.

Wat Mahathad on Sundays is the site of a weekend market. We dodged rubbish, market stalls, stray dogs, cats, local browsers and tourists on the way to the building where Somkuan thought the interview might take place. Once again, I had only a had a quick lunch and was seriously distracted by a woman roasting sausages next to a couple of noodle stands. The noise of chatter was aggravated by a sermon loudly piped through strategically placed speakers which would have done any discotheque proud. We got to some steps and I looked up and found to my surprise that we were at the steps of a large institutional building, at least five stories high. Surrounded by the stalls, I hadn't noticed that it was there.

We removed our shoes, hid them on Somkuan's insistence, and then ascended a grand flight of stairs. On the third floor, directly opposite the landing, we entered an air-conditioned (for this I was thankful) conference room with seven or eight monks sitting at a large table. The focus of attention was a small black and white television. ('What? You don't have a colour one?' Somkuan joked.) The monks were indeed watching the boxing. I felt strangely uncomfortable as it seemed to me very un-monk-like behaviour for the room's occupants to watch a boxing match let alone having several of them grunt, punch at imaginary opponents, and scream encouragement. I looked around and

wondered which man I was to interview. There were several tough looking customers sitting around that table; I had this sense that if things didn't go as well as they would have liked I could well be the next punching bag. Then, to a chorus of approval, the match was over. An older, muscular monk whose cheers and jeers had been among the loudest turned to the monk sitting next to him and said, 'You owe me ten Baht,' walloping him on the arm and laughing. This was my interviewee.

He hastily pulled his robes together and came over to Somkuan and me. Although the monk was almost as tall as I was, he was about twice as wide and all muscle. His expression seemed to me belligerent, but I can't be sure; he would have been very good-looking had he not kept pursing his lips and then puffing them in and out. His gaze was mildly scornful. I wasn't so much afraid of his wanting to beat me up as his thinking I was a wimp. Nevertheless, it was with great difficulty that I stammered my greetings and asked where we could conduct the interview. I explained about my project and what I hoped to do. He nodded and sat down at the conference table. When I asked him whether he would mind if I used the tape recorder he agreed to have the interview taped. Before we started, however, he suggested we move to a desk underneath the air-conditioner. I thought nothing of it at the time, but found to my dismay afterward that the only part of the interview that had appeared on tape was my questions; because the monk had spoken in such a low tone of voice, none of his comments could be heard above the air-conditioner's fan. I have no idea whether this result was contrived or not, but I have the feeling that I would be very wrong to underestimate this monk's shrewdness. This interview made me thankful that I took notes and did not rely solely on a tape recorder.

I started the interview with an apology for being so late. He merely frowned at me. In response to my first question, he looked at me deprecatingly and answered in such a way as to make it clear that he felt it was unskillfully put and that I needed to make myself clearer. He gave me two different answers to the question and indicated that I could choose the one I wanted. The question was, 'Where did you learn about religion?' (I had purposely tried to make my questions as open-ended as possible so that they could be accommodated to any situation.) Somkuan immediately apologised for me, telling the monk that my Thai wasn't that good. At that point, it must have been nerves that impeded my speech. Even toward the end of my stay, whenever I found myself in a stressful situation, my Thai proficiency would diminish at least five-fold. As the interview progressed, (I assume it was after the monk was satisfied that I was sufficiently cowed) things got easier. Not only was he streetwise, he was also highly educated and articulate. More importantly, he was willing to talk about his views and let it be known that he did not always agree with the Sangha administration, although he considered himself a part of it. The range and depth of the subjects discussed in this interview were by far the widest and most profound of any I had.

The *nakleng* monk felt that the basic ideas to be used for the salvage of Thai society lay in Buddhist scripture. He did not specify which and when pressed said scripture was a source of real values as opposed to false ones. Not worshipping money was basically what he meant, derisively using the term *tunniyom* (meaning capitalism as the basis for judging all value).

According to the *nakleng* monk's interpretation of scripture, society lies at the apex of a triangle made up of man and nature. A balance between the two

makes society run properly. When this balance is upset, society must suffer the consequences. It is therefore imperative that man take heed to ecological issues. The monk lamented that Thais tend to ignore the environmental repercussions of exploiting the land for financial gain. This interest in money over morality would exact a higher price than could be regained.

In rapid succession, the *nakleng* monk pronounced that the greatest problems of Thai society were: poverty, debt and unemployment, all of which would lead to rural migration into the city. He scoffed at the government sponsored efforts at getting monks to teach rural Thais meditation in order to solve society's problems because unemployment comes from not having work, not from being lazy or immoral. Buddhism can help society solve these problems by instilling good values but the government needed to take its fair share of responsibility. The responsibility for improving society is shared by the leaders in Thai society, those in temples, villages and schools. When one aspect fails, it is to the detriment of all the others.

The *nakleng* monk felt that the ideal society for Buddhists is the Buddhist commune, where basic physical and social needs are provided (meaning equality for all people), where culture is given a chance to grow and where development is in the mind as well as in the pocket. In short, he felt that the ideal society uses wisdom to solve problems, not strength. (Considering his demeanour, I found this statement ironic.) And of course that wisdom is to be found in the Buddhist scripture. He reminded me that religion is not necessarily in monks alone; the Sangha, after all, includes the lay community who follow the Buddha's teachings. One maintains religious standards by being a good layman. The maintenance of religious standards through the establishment of a Buddhist

community will be discussed later in the section on temples, section VI.

As for the persecution of Santi Asoke, this was a political question and not a religious one. The monk found that Santi Asoke was acceptable so long as they abided by the *Vinaya*. This gave him the opportunity to complain that there should be more religious freedom in Thailand. It must be noted, however, that this is his personal opinion and not that of the Mahatherasamakhom. The problem with Santi Asoke is that members separated themselves from others, prompting the disintegration of not only the Sangha, but Thai society as well. If they really wanted to help Thai society, they should have embraced the mainstream.

As for monks and power, the *nakleng* monk felt that monks were involved in Thai politics and it was useless denying it. The way they would continue to maintain their credibility, however, was to get involved only in ‘people politics’ not party politics. In this instance he used a very interesting example in Rasputin and the Russian empire. The *nakleng* monk felt that religious institutions could and should get involved with politics without jeopardising their credibility so long as they kept from allying themselves with political parties. As soon as that happened, both party and monk were doomed to failure. I found the concept of ‘people politics’ particularly interesting in that it was his explanation as to why monks were respected as leaders. He recounted a situation at his home in Korat where he once stepped in to help some poor landless people. The monk went to a landowner and asked if the poor people could cultivate and use his land if the tenants would not also demand the right to sell it. The landowner agreed. The monk used this as an example of how he could help out in community matters; monks know about right and wrong and

are accurate judges of injustice. Because they are obviously good and non-partisan, they can be trusted to act as impartial mediators. Another example of a monk's acting in community affairs was when a family could not pay off a debt that required ten percent interest per month. The monk was able to convince the creditor that if he lowered his interest to something the debtors could actually manage, he would actually get more money than if he foreclosed on the land that was put up as collateral.

Among some of the other surprising things the monk said were that the present government at the time was not a good one; that Samak Sundravej was a better man than Chatichai. Chatichai's party was too corrupt. His opinions on politics also ranged to foreign countries as well. The situation in Thailand in 1973 was different from the situation in Burma at the time. In 1973 there was an internal power struggle in the Thai military. In Burma it was the people against the military. There were no similarities between the two and he felt I couldn't compare them.

He didn't seem to feel that the Sangha was in any way in crisis. I asked several questions to that order and he made his scorn clear. He just glossed over the topic. He did say, however, that Thai Buddhism had managed to maintain its integrity in the face of social change. When asked about how people should be brought into the fold, so to speak, he said that people invariably found their own way into it, whether by the mainstream or by Santi Asoke or Wat Dhammakaya.

Before leaving I asked the monk for his photograph. He posed at the conference table, in front of the large Buddha image that was behind it. He sat with one elbow resting on the table and looked directly into the camera, unlike most other monks who, whether they pose formally or not, seem to want to stare

off into space, as if to deny the camera's existence. Strangely enough, my pictures of him didn't turn out; they were overexposed.

On our way out, Somkuan said in amazement, 'Oho! He really was candid with you.' It made me wonder about the discretion of the monks I interviewed, whether it was out of tact that many feigned ignorance to monastic involvement in social issues. It took me a long time to digest this interview. I found the monk's shrewdness and worldliness daunting. I must admit, however, that for a monk, he seemed to know what he was talking about. He was very much aware of his position and how he could best use it to help the poor in his congregation. No mistake could be made as to where his loyalties lay. In this instance, much like the rude country man I discussed with Vichien, it may well be that the *nakleng* monk either assumed or refused to abandon his crudeness in order to maintain credibility with a rural public.

IV.3.4. the Oxford monk of Wat Dhammakaya

At the time of field work, the man who was being groomed to take over the duties of the senior members of the *wat* was Luang Phee Metta, the Oxford educated monk. The head of the international division, Luang Phee Metta was the best educated of the Dhammakaya monks, having been through medical school before getting a post-graduate degree at Oxford. When I returned to London after field work, Luang Phee Metta travelled to America to begin a Ph.D. at Harvard. Of all the monks at Wat Dhammakaya, Luang Phee Metta was the only one who used his intelligence and education to establish superiority in a relationship with laymen. His behaviour was markedly different from the other Dhammakaya monks in that he often would sarcastically use his vast knowledge

of affairs both sacred and secular to make a point. His wry sense of humour was a great source of entertainment during sermons when he would recount his experiences with monks from other sects and movements. In appearance, Luang Phee Metta was an imposing figure. Tall and overweight, he looked a lot like the fat Japanese smiling Buddha.

My interview with Luang Phee Metta took place at the office of the movement's international division which had been rented from Kasetsart University. (The existence of such a division was highly unusual and the success of the movement's efforts to become recognised globally will be discussed further in sections VII.2.7 and VIII.3.) A corner was screened off from the rest of the office by plastic partitions often found in modern, modular offices. There was a big plastic armchair at one end of this corner with a coffee table before it. Just as at any of the rooms where monks gave lessons or sermons at Wat Dhammakaya, a small vase of flowers was on the table. I sat on the floor across from Luang Phee Metta.

During the interview, what struck me most about Luang Phee Metta was his pragmatism. He had a western train of thought and I found this easy to relate to. I attribute this to the way he was educated. From our conversation, he displayed an understanding of the media which I had not found in a monk with perhaps the exception of Phra Phayom whom I never met but saw interviewed on television in the first months of field work while I waited at home waiting for appointments with informants. Luang Phee Metta's answers to my questions were verbose yet guarded. Of all the Dhammakaya monks, Luang Phee Metta was the most forthcoming about his personal life. The details he gave were as if he had been used to speaking about himself and knew what people interviewing

him would want to know. He had his own opinions and yet they rarely diverged from *wat* policy. For example, when questioned on his goals for the Thai people, he flatly declared that he had hope for only about twenty percent of the population; the rest were beyond reach. Such a statement can be interpreted as either pragmatism or elitism. Either way, however, it agreed somewhat with Luang Por Datta's sadly admitting that only about twenty per cent of Thailand would be receptive to the good Wat Dhammakaya hoped to accomplish.

Luang Phee Metta was the oldest son from a wealthy Chinese-Thai family. His father was a doctor and his mother was a nurse. He was never interested in Buddhism as a child, in fact he frowned on it, having developed a scorn for it from his school days at Assumption, a Catholic school attended by boys from many well-to-do families. Luang Phee Metta's interest in Buddhism began through meditation, having first heard about it from two men who discussed the breathing methods taught by mainstream monks. Because his studies were so tiring, Luang Phee Metta wanted to know more about meditation. He kept listening to the two men's discussion and decided to try it at home, following the method he overheard. To his surprise he enjoyed it. Luang Phee Metta was taking exams at the time and found that he could rely on meditation to help him concentrate. In fact, meditation was so helpful with his studies that Luang Phee Metta was able to get into Triam Udom Seuksa, a prestigious high school. His grades went up from seventy to ninety and kept improving. Luang Phee Metta credits meditation for helping him succeed in studying medicine at Chulalongkorn University, one of Thailand's most prestigious medical schools.

Luang Phee Metta's introduction to Wat Dhammakaya was on the 12th August 1975 when Chulalongkorn University was on holiday for HM the Queen

of Thailand's birthday. Luang Phee Metta went for the wat's annual Queen's birthday celebrations and met the abbot and the assistant abbot. He was impressed by the abbot's youthful appearance. The abbot asked all the students to a talk which lasted two hours and touched on many subjects. Luang Phee Metta was especially impressed by the abbot's ability to speak with knowledge and authority, even though he appeared young. Luang Phee Metta compared ordination to his father's life and decided that a monk's life was a good one. Luang Phee Metta's father had a lot of money but didn't have peace of mind (*khwam sukh*) whereas a monk's quest for *nibbana* was ultimately more satisfying. This revelation prompted Luang Phee Metta to come to the *wat* every weekend for seven years. He helped with *wat* business and was able to speak to the abbot and the assistant abbot frequently which made him very happy.

Eventually, Luang Phee Metta decided to observe the first eight precepts one day out of the week and to meditate every day. After he started meditating, he found that the family was never in debt. His parents' respect for him grew and they would come to him with their problems. Because he was successful at whatever he did in *wat* affairs, Luang Phee Metta eventually became a youth leader and was able to help the *wat* expand. After seven years, Luang Phee Metta decided to ordain. Luang Phee Metta's mother, however, threatened to hang herself, so opposed was she to his abandoning a medical career. Despite her opposition to his ordination, Luang Phee Metta's mother didn't forbid him from going to the *wat*, however, because religion seemed a better alternative to the student political movement which was taking place during the 1970s.

Ultimately, it was the abbot who was instrumental in getting Luang Phee Metta to ordain. The abbot was convinced that Luang Phee Metta would make a

good candidate for lifetime ordination. According to the regulations at Wat Dhammakaya, one had to be a full-time lay worker (*ubasok*) at the temple for five years first. Deciding that five years would be too long to wait, Luang Phee Metta decided instead to go to America to further his studies and so asked his parents to allow him to ordain for one month. The abbot, however, felt strongly that Luang Phee Metta should ordain for life and so consented to help him towards that goal. Eventually Luang Phee Metta's parents gave their permission for ordination because they thought he would ordain for only one month. But after the months went by and he kept refusing to leave the order, his parents became reconciled to the fact that he never would return to his medical career.

Although Luang Phee Metta's parents initially pleaded for him to leave the order through long letters, they relented when he began appearing on television proselytising the teachings of Wat Dhammakaya and when he became popular for sermonising throughout the city. They became proud of his accomplishments and how he made the wat more famous. Finally when Luang Phee Metta went to Oxford, his father was very proud to send him off at the airport.

Much of the work Luang Phee Metta did for Wat Dhammakaya was in a public capacity. On one occasion when a historian who had published a book about Wat Dhammakaya without ever having been there presented a paper at the Siam Society, Luang Phee Metta was in attendance to refute him. When Wat Dhammakaya was represented at a meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, Luang Phee Metta was sent as the movement's representative.

According to Luang Phee Metta, a monk's first duty to society is to practise the Dhamma and to try to reach *nibbana*. Without this goal there is no

point in ordination. A monk's next duty, however, is to help with society's welfare by performing pastoral duties. Counselling is part of that. A good counsellor must be able to listen. A monk often doesn't have to advise, but merely needs to be available for people to unburden themselves. Luang Phee Metta felt he was able to help people through teaching meditation. The most important thing for him was to teach the terminally ill to meditate so that they could put their minds at peace before going on to the next life.

Although I saw Luang Por Datta with the Wednesday group, the monk I encountered most frequently outside the temple was Luang Phee Metta. Whenever there was a public event where the wat needed representation, Luang Phee Metta was chosen to go. His good command of English also led to his acting as host whenever foreigners came to visit Wat Dhammakaya.

Since the time of fieldwork, Luang Phee Metta and Wat Dhammakaya suffered a dispute and their association has ended acrimoniously with Luang Phee Metta accusing the temple of improper practices (particularly financial) and then taking refuge at Wat Paknam Phasijaroen. Many believed the dispute grew from the movement's refusal to support Luang Phee Metta's intervention in a criminal case in the United States involving the murder of monks and devotees at a Thai temple in Arizona. Luang Phee Metta had been sent to Harvard to sit for a Ph.D. and was living in Boston at the time. The defendant, a called Jonathan Doody, was the son of one of the Thai devotees of the temple. Luang Phee Metta's appeal for clemency for Doody was given a huge amount of publicity even in the US but was discouraged by the Dhammakaya administration. Ultimately, Luang Phee Metta returned to Thailand without having had any impact on the case.

IV.4. *The Meditation Monks (nak wipasana)*

Meditation is a relatively recent innovation in Thai Buddhist practice, having been introduced in the 1950s. The predominant meditative technique practised is of controlled breathing but, in the past three decades, visualisation has become popular through the efforts of the Wat Dhammakaya movement. Although meditation is now widely accepted despite initial opposition, visualisation remains controversial. Sathienpong Wannapok, the noted Buddhist columnist, when interviewed, opposed visualisation because it might lead to fixating on worldly objects. Visualisation is a key element of Mahayanist meditative traditions, however, and there are many subjects which students are taught to envision (Conze 1972). The Dhammakaya technique bears some similarity to Mahayanist traditions but is distinctly different. The two monks described below are representatives of the two schools of meditation in Thailand: Dhammakaya visualisation and mainstream breathing.

IV.4.1. the abbot of Wat Dhammakaya

The teaching of Wat Dhammakaya concentrates on meditation and all the monks there are meant to be proficient enough to teach it but, among the members of the movement, both laymen and monks, it is acknowledged the most proficient meditator is the abbot, Luang Phaw Dhammajayo (section VII.2.2 describes the Dhammakaya meditation technique). Unlike Potirak, whose biographical data was often recounted by Chao Asoke, Luang Phaw Dhamma's life story was not the source of the devotees' respect. Meditation was. The abbot was from a middle class family and was a medical student at Kasetsart University when he began studying meditation with Khun Yai, the nun who

became his assistant in the establishment of the movement. It was through Khun Yai's encouragement that the abbot gave up a medical career and its material benefits for a career helping people through teaching meditation. Informants occasionally cited the abbot's university degree as proof of the movement's appeal to intelligent, modern people, but otherwise there seemed to be little interest in his biography other than his meditational proficiency.

My first encounter with Luang Phaw Dhamma was when he rode by on a bicycle the first day I was at the temple. This caused quite a stir among the Wednesday ladies. Despite the fact that he would often be seen riding by, this encounter was the subject of conversation among the Wednesday ladies for a good part of the morning. Since all Dhammakaya monks rode bicycles, it was not the abbot's riding a bicycle which was noteworthy. The ladies all talked about how impressive the abbot looked, commenting on his figure and bearing. I found that whenever the Wednesday ladies saw the abbot passing by, it would become an event that was talked of for much of the morning. Each time, the topic of discussion was the same: the abbot's figure and bearing and how impressive he looked. By my observation, the abbot appeared non-descript as opposed to other monastic leaders I had met. He appeared to be of average height and weight and did little to draw attention to himself. The one distinguishing feature about him was that he wore a pair of rectangular, gold wire-rimmed spectacles with lightly tinted lenses. But when pressed for details of why the abbot was so impressive, the ladies responded that it was due to his embodying all the ideals of monkhood. The abbot appeared *sai*.

As I came to know the meaning of *sai* over the course of my stay at Wat Dhammakaya, I realised that it meant many things, often different things to

different people. Appearing *sai* was always a compliment and always praise for great meditating prowess. Literally, the word means to be clear and ostensibly at Wat Dhammakaya, clear means to have the benefit of a clear mind through meditation. In the case of the abbot, who was the embodiment of *sai*, it meant an impassive, calm demeanour but with an undercurrent of energy nevertheless. The Wednesday ladies never referred to other qualities I have heard of in exemplary monks such as a powerful sermonising voice or an active involvement in the issues confronting the congregation. Indeed, the abbot actually had a very quiet, unremarkable voice and rarely appeared in any of the daily ceremonies in which the Wednesday group took part. Most of those duties were taken on by the assistant abbot. In the case of Dhammakaya devotees, the outward manifestations of prolonged periods of meditation were the requisites for the abbot's superior figure and bearing. In others, I would often find that the compliment of being *sai* meant a look which was, quite frankly, dazed and sluggish from the extensive time spent meditating and deprivation of sleep. In others it meant serenity and good humour. In short, while the abbot was meant to be the embodiment of *sai*, others who were often did not appear much like him and through his personifying *sai*, he did not appear like other monks. Eventually, I gathered that *sai* meant a freedom from tension which would manifest itself in different ways in different people.

The Dhammakaya meditation method was to sit in a cross-legged, pseudo-lotus position with the hands in the lap, the right above the left with the tip of the left thumb touching the tip of the right forefinger. In the beginning one was told to repeat the words *samma arahang* or 'supremely enlightened one' (Randall 1990:34). Aside from the seating position, meditation focused on

envisioning the image of a crystal ball. One swallowed this ball and brought it to rest in the centre of one's body (slightly above the pit of the stomach). After some practice one should have seen the crystal ball clearly within oneself and a bright light emanating from it. Those who were particularly adept would see the light in spectrum and on occasion the Buddha Himself and angels.

For a while long talks with Luang Phaw became a fixture of Wednesday afternoons. The talks with the abbot generally concerned meditation, how one does it and what one acquires from it. There were also occasional discussions on how well the wat's operations were going and how the administration was responding to the accusations against them in the popular press. For the most part, questions during these afternoon lessons were asked by Ajahn Taew, the university professor member of the Wednesday group, who would call herself *look* (child, or daughter) as if she were the child of Luang Phaw despite her being quite a bit older. None of the other ladies asked questions but all were attentive.

According to Luang Phaw (the abbot) meditation is a source of psychic power (*abhiñña*). There is a distinction made between the psychic power acquired through meditation and that of demonic magic (*amnat*). (The word *abhiñña* is used in opposition to *saiyasat*.) Randall concurs although he uses the word *itthi* instead of *amnat* (ibid). Phra Rajaworamuni defines *abhiñña* as 'higher knowledge; superknowledge; supernormal powers; higher psychic powers' (1985:415) with six different categories:

1. *iddhividhā* — magical powers
2. *dibbasota* — the divine ear
3. *cetopariyañāna* — penetration of the minds of others; telepathy
4. *pubbenivāsānussati* — remembrance of former existences
5. *dibbacakkhu* — the divine eye
6. *asavakkhayañāna* — knowledge of the exhaustion of all mental intoxicants (Phra Rajaworamuni 1985:235)

In other Buddhist traditions, psychic powers are acquired through the rational pursuit of wisdom and truth. There is never any mention of commanding demons or spirits to do one's bidding. Presumably this rationality is the difference between *abhiñña* (there is an implication that this is true power because its source is oneself) and *saiyasat* (which is power that relies on the ability to command others). At any rate, the preference of *abhiñña* over *saiyasat* connotes the perceived superiority of the rational mind over superstition because one is developing one's own mind. It is a source of great pride to monk and layman alike at Wat Dhammakaya that their teachings can be verified scientifically and are therefore more accountable to modern logic. Despite such claims of rationality, however, much of the belief in *abhiñña* appears grounded in irrationality. With the *abhiñña* acquired from meditation, one can actually heal the sick. People often appeal to the abbot to meditate for a loved one in hospital. Khun Yai is reputed to have moved the site where the Americans planned to drop the atom bomb from Thailand to Japan through the power derived from meditation.

One afternoon, the Wednesday group had the honour of being taught meditation by the abbot himself. As encouragement perhaps or as proof of the power of the Dhammakaya method of meditation the abbot told us a story of how Luang Phaw Wat Paknam (Phra Mongkhol Thepmuni, the original teacher of the Dhammakaya meditation technique) was challenged to a contest over who had more power (*itthiphon*) by another monk who was reputed to be able to stop fires. Luang Phaw Wat Paknam won the contest by not even bothering to exercise the power himself, but by making a novice create an earthquake.

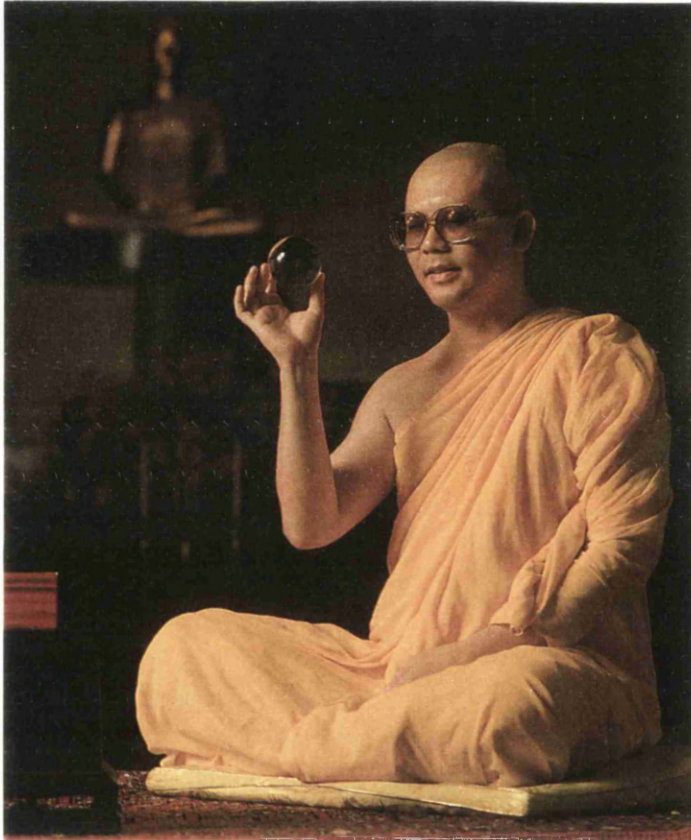
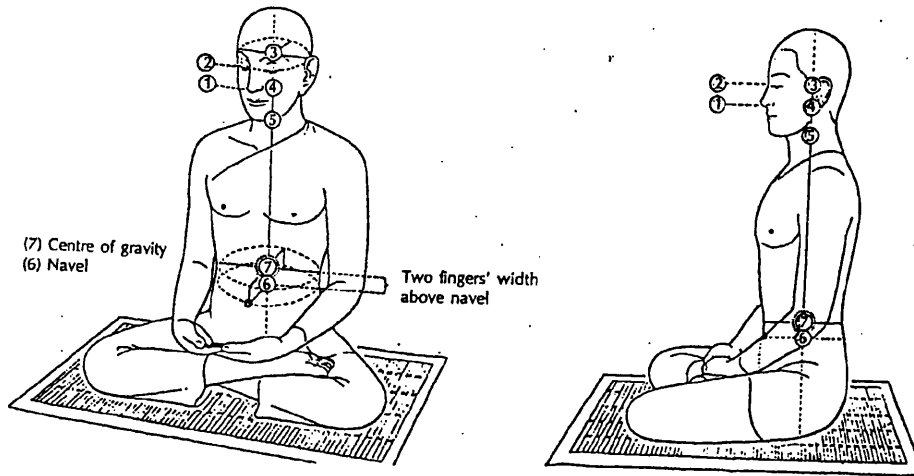


Figure 17: the abbot of Wat Dhammakaya, Luang Phaw Dhammajayo

Chart 1: the Wat Dhammakaya Meditation Chart
 (illustrating important points of the body)

- Base (1) Nostril [Left nostril for women
right nostril for men
- Base (2) Bridge of nose [left for women
right for men
- Base (3) Middle part of head
- Base (4) Roof of mouth
- Base (5) Throat



IV.4.2. the irrepressible monk

In contrast to the meditation at Wat Dhammakaya, the mainstream method makes fewer claims as to the individual's potential once he becomes proficient. While the stated aim of the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programme was that teaching meditation would help to solve social problems such as prostitution, there were no claims that it could lead to supernatural powers, but simply to less personal stress which would lead to a sense of well-being. The first monk I met in the course of field work was Phra Sri Wisutthikavi, the abbot of Wat Somanasvihara. This was during my first trip to Bangkok in November of 1987 but it was several months later before I had the opportunity to conduct a formal interview. Than Chao Khun Sri was at the National Council on Social Welfare giving meditation class to participants at a conference. His voice was piped over a public address system throughout the building, presumably for the benefit of those who could not sit in the room where he was teaching. Even over the sputtering and scratchy speakers, his clear, high-pitched voice rang through. It is this type of voice that could become a trademark for many public speakers. Than Chao Khun Sri's presence is equally formidable. He appears to be in his early forties, although he may well be older. Despite his having to shave his head on a regular basis, I have never seen him without a crew cut. It is as if even his hair is irrepressible. He is a very aggressive, outgoing man and, it would seem, if he had his way, he would be out in the streets, personally dragging people into his temple to learn meditation. He is immensely popular and is invited to public and private institutions to teach; several banks enlist his services. He was the first (and only) monk to respond to my letter of introduction; within a week of sending it, I had an appointment to

interview him at his temple.

I went to the interview with Somkuan in tow. Although we were late due to the vagaries of traffic, the abbot was nowhere to be found. We sat waiting at a picnic bench outside the ground floor of his *kuti* where a young man and woman were playing with a small puppy. It had been several months since I had last met the abbot so I didn't realise I knew him. I recognised his voice immediately as it carried from a conversation he was having with a layman while ambling over from the *ubosot*. He seemed quite surprised to see me, having forgotten our appointment entirely. He apologised, but said that he could only give me about twenty minutes since he had been invited to preach at someone's funeral that night. Before giving an interview, however, he had to take a bath and change so he would be ready when they sent a car for him. He asked us upstairs and we sat on the veranda outside his room. The clutter upstairs was amazing. There were books and papers everywhere, not only official looking papers, but also religious magazines and calendars. Photographs from a pilgrimage to India where a large hole in the ground was meant to be the Buddha's footprint were also taped to the walls.

Than Chao Khun Sri emerged not five minutes later, looking much refreshed. I asked him immediately for a photograph since I might not get a chance before he left. He looked around and, obviously finding the veranda an unsuitable place, opened the door to an altar room and arranged himself very carefully in front of a group of Buddha images. After taking one picture, the abbot told me to take another in case the first one didn't turn out. Then we both went out on the veranda where Somkuan waited and the interview began. Than Chao Khun Sri sat in an armchair and I sat before him on the floor. I started to

thank him for giving me the interview and gave him a bit of my own background and reasons for asking to speak to him when he interrupted me by asking the title of my thesis. I told him, 'The Sangha and Social Change in Thailand' (*Phra Song lae Khwam Plian Plaeng nai Sangkhom Thai*). He gave me a stern look and told me it was an inadequate title and would serve no use. (He was right; I had no intention of using any such title. I merely gave him this one as an expedient, carefully avoiding the use of any words in the title which might give offence yet which would still remain somewhat close to the truth.) My title, he told me, would have to be more specific if I wanted to make any contribution at all to the study of Buddhism. For the next ten minutes we worked out what my title should be and decided on 'The Thai Sangha and its Influence on Social Change' (*Itthiphon Khawng Phra Song taw Khwam Plian Plaeng nai Sangkhom Thai*). Initially it didn't seem to me that there was much of a difference in the two titles and that the abbot's changing my title was an annoying way to assert superiority in the context of this interview. After reviewing the data, however, I realised that the abbot's use of the word *itthiphon*, or influence, was important because it was a conceptualisation of power. I will discuss this further in the conclusion, section IX.

Once this working title was established, he proceeded to tell me all I would need to know, starting with history. Except for several telephone interruptions and people walking below who would attract his attention and to whom he would call out, his delivery was inexorable; there was no way that I could get a word in edgewise and, when I tried, he would give me another stern look, stern enough to silence a still timid anthropology student. Needless to say, twenty minutes was by no means enough and I made another appointment to see

him a week later. The second interview picked up right where the first one left off and lasted a good hour and a half. I heard about Thai Buddhist history up to the present day (the abbot's version seemed much simpler than any I had read) and how meditation was the answer to all of contemporary Thai society's ills. This interview concluded with an invitation to a meditation seminar that was taking place at the temple in two weeks. Of course I did as I was told and went.

The meditation seminar had been organised at the request of a local business. Although I had the opportunity to interview the seminar participants, with my limited time (the conference lasted only a week) and still awkward means of gaining interviews, (I hadn't yet gathered the courage to simply introduce myself to people. I would wait around until they came and spoke to me. In retrospect I am amazed at the fact that I got any interviews at all.) I preferred to speak to members of the abbot's lay congregation who came to help, feeling they would provide better information on how this monk could arouse devotion. Directing the seminar participants were a group of approximately ten women. Acting on the abbot's orders, they handed out name tags and made sure that people were in their places. Most of the women were middle aged, and one brought a daughter in her mid-twenties. From their education and their knowledge of — but not acquaintance with — certain socialites (*phu dee*, meaning, quite literally 'good people' or in popular vernacular *hi-so* for 'high society') I judged them to be from the upper middle class. Almost all had attended university and some of them had been classmates at a prestigious school for girls.

The women sat at the entrance to the *ubosot* under a small marquee that had been raised as a registration booth. At a table set beneath, one of the women

sold traditional medicine and another sold religious books. Although the job of registering and directing the seminar participants could easily have been managed by one person, they preferred the help of their friends if they got stuck at any questions. While each considered herself a devotee (*look sit*) of Than Chao Khun Sri, not one meditated with the people in the *ubosot*; they spent their time chatting outside. In this atmosphere vaguely reminiscent of a garden party (most had dressed in white to appear more proper), I found the women happy to discuss their feelings toward the abbot, although I was occasionally called into the temple by the abbot to meditate.

As to why they chose Than Chao Khun Sri over other monks, the organisers gave me a variety of reasons involving his teaching technique. The most common reasons for feeling devotion were that the abbot's type of meditation was easy to practise and that he gave pertinent sermons on the problems confronted by contemporary society in language that was easy to understand without being too pedestrian (as opposed to Phra Phayom who is famous for his preaching in youthful vernacular and outright swearing). When pressed, the women spoke of the abbot's knowledge of the precepts, although they did so only when comparing him to other monks. Strict adherence to the *Vinaya* was not a minor concern with these women, however, rather it seemed that any monk worthy of respect naturally would adhere to the precepts with necessary strictness. The women admitted that they could not be sure of the extent of the abbot's abstinence unless they were to live with him. It was more the appearance of strictness and his activity in purely meditational pastoral work that gained a following. When I later had a chance to meet two of the women's husbands over the weekend, they were much more outspoken. They men were

extremely conservative in their viewpoints on the Sangha and the involvement in any social activity beyond teaching religion and meditation. They felt that Than Chao Khun Sri was one of the few remaining monks whose characters could be judged from pastoral activities that still remained within the parameters of acceptable Sangha business. Any monk who involved himself more in social affairs was corrupt. As has been discussed in section I.1.6, one of the men was even affronted at my interest in the new movements because to pay them any attention only led to diminished support for legitimate monks. Unlike the women, the men took part in the meditation.

An interesting episode took place during this seminar involving the woman who was leading the lay organisers of the event. During the weekend, her son stopped by and she tried to get him to join the meditation lesson. This led to an angry exchange between them culminating in the son's declaring that he had no interest in meditation and that he would never do it. Since we were about the same age, his mother pointed at me and said, 'Look at that nice young man over there. He's interested in religion. When will you grow up?' The only reaction on the son's part was to give me a look which I construed to be one of vague disgust. While I was, of course, mortified, this incident is illustrative of how religion is considered a grown-up interest.

The meditation lessons were held in the *ubosot* but broadcast outside through speakers. About seventy people attended, with a predominance of women. The participants were separated by sex with men taking one side of the hall while women sat on the other. At the beginning of the seminar, after the opening speeches, instructions were given on how to sit comfortably on the floor for long periods of time. The meditation technique taught by Tan Chao Khun Sri

consisted of relaxing then saying prayers commonly taught at childhood, then breathing to the abbot's count until respiration became deep and regular. The participants were then left alone until it was time to come out of meditation, whereupon the abbot called out softly and gave instructions on how to wake. Although there were guest speakers at the opening ceremony, the seminar relied primarily on Than Chao Khun Sri who oversaw the proceedings from beginning to end. I had the impression that without his considerable enthusiasm the seminar could not have taken place.



Figure 18: the irrepressible monk, Than Chao Khun Sri Wisutthikavi in the Buddha room in his *kuti*. The interview had been conducted outside on the balcony, but he chose to pose formally inside, before the Buddha images and a cabinet containing the *Tipitaka*.



Figure 19: Than Chao Khun Sri Wisutthikavi teaching meditation in the *ubosot* of Wat Somanasvihara. The golden upholstered chair to the right was for an elderly guest speaker monk who would appear later.



Figure 20: female meditation students



Figure 21: male meditation students



Figure 22: volunteers at Than Chao Khun Sri's meditation seminar.
They are dressed in white in a show of piety.

IV.5. *The Practising Monks (nak patibat)*

Although the term *patibat tham* at Wat Dhammakaya refers directly to meditation and the members of the movement will judge religious proficiency on the basis of meditational proficiency, I would more often encounter the term *patibat* in relation to a monk's asceticism. Generally, as with the participants in Than Chao Khun Sri Wisutthikavi's meditation seminar, it was considered a matter of course that a monk should be proficient at adhering to the precepts in the *Vinaya*. The only monk I met with a reputation for a special proficiency in terms of *patibat* was Phothirak, the leader of Santi Asoke.

IV.5.1. *Phothirak and his Teachings*

A. the history of Santi Asoke

I digress briefly in order to provide a history of the Santi Asoke movement. It is meant to give a basic background of the events leading up to and revolving around the expulsion of the movement and its followers from the Thai Sangha. More complete descriptions of followers and of their communities will be given in sections V and VI, respectively. The purpose of this introduction is to provide a basic understanding of the events which grew out of Phothirak's efforts to teach a superior form of Buddhism in Thailand.

While Buddhism's philosophy of maintaining the middle path of moderation in all things would seem to discourage extremism, Santi Asoke was considered so by many people who were not members. The extreme nature of the movement lies in the strict observance of scriptural precepts in the *Vinaya Pitaka* and the rejection of mainstream Thai Buddhism. Most of my informants outside the movement felt that the Asoke standards of asceticism were unnecessarily harsh. For example, the Asoke restriction of eating to one morning

meal for all members, for example, was considered severe for monks, not to mention laymen. Tension between Santi Asoke and the Buddhist establishment reached such a height that in late 1989, when its leader Phothirak was arrested and forced to defrock. The movement has since been out of the media spotlight and has therefore lost much of its former prominence.

The beginnings of Santi Asoke lie in the religious awakening of Rak Rakpong, a Christian-born actor whose popularity was based on an image of youthful rebellion (Taylor 1993a). Often compared to James Dean, Rakpong's good looks and charismatic screen presence led to a strong following, especially among women. In August of 1970, Rakpong, inspired by the Buddha's teachings, asked the abbot of Wat Asokaram for permission to build a hut where he could go on retreat. Within a matter of months, he had taken vows as a Thammayut monk, announcing his intention to remain within the order for life.

Taking the monastic name of Phothirak (meaning love of the Bo, a tree which sheltered the Buddha), Rakpong made a reputation for himself as a quick-witted commentator on moral dilemmas. It is often the practice of the Thai faithful to attend a monk after his sermons and to pose questions about life which the monk should answer to the congregation's satisfaction. From his hut at Wat Asokaram, Phothirak held weekly question and answer sessions which established his reputation and led to such success that he was able to start a temple of his own, Daen Asoke (Land of Asoka) with contributions from the faithful.

The establishment of Daen Asoke was the beginning of Phothirak's troubles with the Mahatherasamakhom. As a Thammayut abbot, Phothirak was forbidden to allow Mahanikai monks to take up residence in his temple. This

rule was instituted at the establishment of the Thammayut order to ensure that it would not be corrupted by the lax practices of Mahanikai monks. Phothirak took exception to what he viewed as a divisive policy and, in order to allow monks of both sects to reside at Daen Asoke, he took his monastic vows once again as a Mahanikai monk. As with establishing his own temple, such a step was highly irregular. Traditionally, a monk rose through the ranks within the monastic hierarchy and, if ambitious enough, would eventually be promoted to the rank of abbot. To establish a temple of one's own was to go outside the system. Then to declare one's temple open to all Buddhist monks defied the hierarchy even more. Phothirak stopped wearing brightly coloured saffron robes in favour of drab brown ones and stopped shaving his eyebrows, declaring that the Buddha had never stipulated shaving eyebrows as a necessity. By August of 1975, Phothirak officially broke off his relationship with the Mahatherasamakhom, declaring himself independent of the Sangha authority.

The break did not effect his congregation, in fact it probably increased it. Without lay support, Phothirak would never have had the resources with which to break away from the mainstream nor would he have had the support to establish his own Buddhist communities, called *phutthasathans* (places of the Buddha). Within 1976, Phothirak created three such communities: Santi Asoke, Sisa Asoke and Sali Asoke. Santi Asoke was established in the Bangkok suburb of Sukhapibal while the others had rural locations. Phothirak's breakaway group eventually became known by the name Santi Asoke, the group's administrative centre in Bangkok. The showcase of the Asoke way of life, Pathom Asoke, was not established until 1980. The plan of Pathom Asoke was much more ambitious than any of the earlier communities. It was an attempt to create a completely

self-sufficient village which conducted life according to the Asoke way as preached by Phothirak. The Chao Asoke themselves often refer to Pathom Asoke as a 'Buddhist utopia' (*puttha-utopia*).

For the following eight years, Phothirak's reputation as a Buddhist abbot grew. The strict asceticism Phothirak taught made him seem more monk-like than the mainstream monks. His following grew to include prominent left-leaning singer and political activist Ad Carabao as well as other academics. The most prominent devotee of Phothirak's teachings, however, was Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang, a retired army officer who had political ambitions. As detailed in section II.8.2., it is Santi Asoke's support of Chamlong which eventually led to the group's greatest troubles with the Mahatherasamakhom and, ultimately, its expulsion from the Thai Sangha.

IV.5.1.B. Phothirak and his teachings

It could be said that Santi Asoke was a cult of personality centred on the charismatic figure of Phothirak. Without hesitation, all informants confirmed that the movement revolved around his leadership. Referred to by his followers as '*Phaw Than*' (father monk or reverend father) Phothirak's spiritual presence was felt in all of the *phutthasathans* and his teaching was the basis of the Asoke way of life. Although I briefly discussed his monastic career in the previous section outlining the history of the movement, it is necessary to examine Phothirak and his teachings if one is to understand the Chao Asoke and life in the *phutthasathans*.

According to informants, Phothirak's three most important qualities as a religious leader were his rhetoric, his teaching, and his living habits. Of these

three qualities, informants spoke mostly of his rhetoric, which was considered to be more provocative than that of other monks. When discussing Phothirak's sermons, informants stressed the violence of his delivery (*phud run raeng*) and their initial reactions, often of shock, due to his confrontational tone and powerful voice (*siang mee phalang*). Phothirak regularly challenged members of his congregation to answer fundamental philosophical questions only to tear their answers to shreds. Through his detailed questioning, Phothirak showed listeners that they were not truly devout people and that they were living with sensory illusions, as all humans do. The only recourse was to follow his teaching of the Buddha's word which, by his assessment of course, was the true teaching. Once enlightened to this truth, sometimes through sudden flashes or through gradual experimentation, my informants found that the Asoke way of life was their only true path to peace of mind.

Phothirak's sermonising style could only be described as belligerent. From my observation of him I had the impression that he was indeed decidedly un-monk-like. His aggressive appearance, attitude, and rhetoric was much more like that of a secular leader than the vast majority of monks I met. In conversation, he displayed his wit by playing with words, often using modern vernacular and swearing; he made jokes about current events and was very good at it. He would be a formidable rival in debate to the cleverest Thai politician and often succeeded in extricating himself from trouble with such oratorical talent.

Phothirak's presence was very much an intimidating one, perhaps more so because one would not expect to encounter such a confrontational personality in a monk. In one taped sermon I heard, he went on a diatribe about

the mainstream's accusations against him. Phothirak would rhetorically ask how dare they (the mainstream) say that he is a self-styled monk who had the *audacity* (emphasis his) to assume a monastic name on his own *without* the Sangha's approval on such and such a date at which point he mockingly imitated the officials' voices. Well the officials are wrong. Phothirak yelled; he is a self-styled monk who had the audacity to assume a monastic name on his own without the Sangha's approval on *this* (a different) date.

Like any fine orator, Phothirak knew how to work a crowd by keeping them on the edges of their seats, switching tone and dramatically changing the subject. After having ranted and raved, Phothirak's voice might suddenly become very subdued. Similarly, his knit brow, penetrating stare and pointing finger could be replaced by a radiant smile which augmented his good looks, dispelling the atmosphere of tension and throwing listeners completely off the guard assumed as protection from his annoyance.

In all aspects of his self-presentation, Phothirak showed adeptness in handling the public eye and in addressing the media. Interviews were given with great dramatic flair. At mine, Phothirak mocked my bad Thai, answered some of my questions with questions of his own, dismissed other questions of mine as irrelevant and often used slang he knew I'd find confusing. At one point he even suggested I find a new thesis topic. Since the interview was conducted before an audience of Chao Asoke, my friends eventually took pity on me and one even offered to act as an interpreter. That in itself became the object of endless ridicule. My interview with Phothirak was almost as uncomfortable as the one with the *nakleng* monk. I felt comforted, however, by the fact that there was an audience which was full of friends.

Phothirak was the only Thai I met who used sarcasm on a steady basis. In my first encounter with him, he asked me in a loud voice -- so that all the people in the hall could hear -- “Why are you coming here to study Buddhism? Only the Therasamakhom knows about Buddhism. (leaving out the “maha” prefix lessened its significance -- *maha* means great). The rest of us are just fake Buddhists (*khon thue sasana Phut plom*).’

During my time in the field, the media regularly followed the events leading up to his arrest and then the ongoing trial, often with attention given to his defiance. Defiance is an important element of not only Phothirak’s charisma but all men who are considered superior. This topic will be discussed more in depth in the conclusion (section **IX.4.1**) because it is a source of admiration and, therefore, a following. Both a man’s devotees and detractors alike are impressed by defiance and this is an important factor of both monastic and lay leadership in Thai society.

Most of Phothirak’s contact with his followers came through sermons delivered at the day’s morning (and only) meal for the Chao Asoke. A microphone was placed in front of him on a dais where he ate with the other monks. In the time I was doing fieldwork at Santi Asoke, the subjects of discussion were usually his own trial, the accusations against him and the qualities of a true monk. Phothirak’s criticism of the Sangha mainstream was as biting as it was accurate; his favourite subjects of ridicule were the corruption, mystic charlatanism, and general ignorance rampant in the ranks of the mainstream. All of the sermons were taped and often played again over a loudspeaker system at a later date.

Not only were Phothirak’s sermons taped, their texts were also

transcribed and printed in the various books and magazines churned out by the Asoke press. As part of the work ethic preached by Phothirak, the presses at Santi Asoke were in use daily, printing religious tracts and magazines. Very untypical of Buddhist practice, monks worked along with the lay Chao Asoke, often side by side with women. In the publications I have seen there was extensive use of complicated graphics, photographs and other artwork to help bring the message across. Aside from sermonising, Phothirak also composed songs which were recorded by stars who were devotees. The tapes were sold at stores outside the *phutthasathans* and also can be borrowed, along with his taped sermons, from a lending library on the premises. The current musical tape during my fieldwork had the title of ‘*Abhai*,’ or forgiveness, signifying his forgiveness of his persecutors. It was promoted with T-shirts bearing the picture of his hand with a metal cuff and chain around his wrist. Aside from the books and tapes of Phothirak’s sermons, there were also books of his translations from Pali into Thai (whose inaccuracies were pointed out by the mainstream Sangha and acknowledged at Santi Asoke), and also his translations of daily prayers. The recorded and print media was highly successful in making Phothirak’s teachings accessible to the world at large. The tapes and publications sold well and, during his trial, were a source of curiosity, if not general interest.

Phothirak’s teaching was based on the understanding that when Buddhism came to Thailand a thousand years ago, it was corrupted by indigenous animism; in order to understand the true teachings of the Buddha, one had to purge animism from religious practice. One would do this by taking the *silas*, or the precepts in the *Vinaya*, and using them as a basis for interpretation. In the mainstream Sangha, only monks were required to live by all of the *silas*;

novices and nuns were required to observe only the first ten and laymen could adhere to them at their own discretion. In an attempt to raise moral standards for the Chao Asoke, Phothirak strongly encouraged them all to live by the Buddha's first ten precepts. In the mainstream, only novices and nuns lived with such restrictions.

The silas at Santi Asoke, however, were actually much stricter due to Phothirak's interpretation. The average lay Chao Asoke found the *silas* much more confining than those of the average novice or nun in the mainstream (Arporn). Below are listed the ten *silas* as interpreted by Phothirak:

1. To abstain from taking life -- while most people in the mainstream were content to interpret this precept as to keep from swatting at mosquitoes or flies or from actually killing the animals they ate, Phothirak felt that it was not enough to abstain from the act oneself if one were to sanction another's committing it. Therefore all Chao Asoke were vegetarian. While they drank milk, they would not eat eggs because that was considered taking a life.

2. To abstain from taking what is not given -- at times the Chao Asoke extended this to abstaining from taking the unnecessary, the wasteful or the inappropriate. A point of contention with the mainstream Sangha but a source of pride for many of the Chao Asoke was that, on occasion, Phothirak and other Asoke monks were known to refuse alms. Gifts of money were also not accepted because a monk may not handle gold or silver; food that consisted of any kind of meat, eggs included, was refused on the grounds that the Chao Asoke did not wish to promote killing. The mainstream took exception to this particular interpretation of Phothirak because to refuse a layman's alms was to deny his opportunity to make merit. As we have seen in section I.4.1., one of the primary

functions of monks is to accept alms, allowing laymen to make merit.

3. To abstain from unchastity -- even married members of Santi Asoke refrained from all sexual relations or self-induced ejaculation. The reason for this was that giving in to sexual appetites encouraged human dependence on sensory-based illusion and endangered peace of mind. In the case of the Chao Asoke, chastity was abstention from any sexual act.

4. To abstain from false speech -- not only did the Chao Asoke abstain from lying, they would not engage in idle conversation. I would sit in the Santi Asoke offices waiting for an interview and people worked without making any conversation at all. If not for the Asoke music on the loudspeakers, there would have been silence.

5. To abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness -- while cigarettes and coffee would not cause heedlessness or drunkenness, the Chao Asoke do not use them at all either deeming them as stimulants to the human appetite for sensory-based illusion.

6. To abstain from untimely eating -- while in the mainstream eating after noon was forbidden, two meals were commonly eaten per day, one at dawn and one in late morning. The Chao Asoke ate only one meal at the beginning of each day.

7. To abstain from dancing, singing, music and unseemly shows -- although music was played throughout the day at Santi Asoke, it was music to spread Phothirak's word and no one sang along. In the evening the people at Pathom Asoke would watch television or videos, but a discussion would be held afterward on the immorality of the subjects depicted.

8. To abstain from the use of high and large luxurious couches -- all the

Chao Asoke slept on the floor of their huts and many without pillows.

9. To abstain from wearing garlands, smartening with scents and embellishment with unguents -- at Santi Asoke, this precept was extended to all aspects of personal grooming which was considered giving in to sensory illusion. Before he was forced to wear white by the courts, Phothirak refused to wear saffron robes, because the bright yellow fabric was beautiful and banned by the Buddha. The Asoke monks' robes were a drab brown and often threadbare. The lay Chao Asoke all tended to wear traditional farmer's clothing such as *mawhawm* shirts and trousers, sarongs and *jongkraben*, a trouser-like garment made from one piece of draped cloth. Most of the clothing was blue, not only a practical colour but also worn in sympathy with Thailand's farmers whose clothes were traditionally blue. As for refraining from smartening with unguents, this was sometimes extended to involve personal hygiene. One of the nuns proudly announced that she rarely bathed because it was unnecessary. She even pointed out that despite her robes having become stiff and encrusted with perspiration, she was undisturbed by it due to the fact that cleanliness and comfort were merely sensory illusions. Despite this example, however, the Chao Asoke who did bathe used soaps and shampoos made from herbs and flowers they grew.

10. To abstain from accepting gold and silver -- Santi Asoke discouraged donations of any kind from outsiders. Once a layman became one of the Chao Asoke, however, donations were considered appropriate, but only after the person has become a trusted member of the community. Profit was roundly rejected at any of the Asoke enterprises such as tape sales or the general store where vegetarian foodstuffs were available. Profit was considered a form of

accepting gold or silver unnecessarily.

By preaching that his followers should uphold the Buddha's precepts but by interpreting them in ever stricter fashion, Phothirak invited comparisons to the mainstream. Out to prove that he lived as a true follower of the Buddha, Phothirak implied that mainstream monks and devotees were but corrupted, even sloppy versions of the ideal. Although this was never explicitly stated, Phothirak's constant comparison of the Chao Asoke to others and the ridicule of mainstream monks in morning sermons left no doubt of his meaning.

According to the Chao Asoke, the emphasis on the *silas* was due to Phothirak's having proven, through his own pursuit of the truth (this term literally — *khwam jing* — was often used), that the Buddha's precepts provided the best possible solution to the confusion and suffering inherent in human life. Phothirak taught that through the confused basis of sensory illusions, our desires (which bring on suffering) are like a funnel, growing forever wider and wider. But if one understands the truth that all sensations are illusion, then life becomes comprehensible and one can change direction to go down toward the small end of the funnel by abandoning all wants. In this way life's inherent sufferings are alleviated, if not eliminated. One lesson that was often repeated to me was that one is not truly proficient at practising the teachings of the Buddha if one only gives up that which one doesn't like (this was said to me in reference to my not drinking alcohol), one is only truly proficient if one gives up that which one loves. One of the nuns very proudly spoke of how much her heart broke when she left her husband to take vows, but like all illusions, this was but passing.

The challenge of the Asoke life was abandoning as many worldly wants as possible. Such renunciation of the world would remove all sensory-based

illusion to acknowledge the Buddha's truth (as interpreted by Phothirak). Acknowledging this truth allowed one to become self-sufficient and free of worldly shackles. Later descriptions of Asoke life on the *phutthasathans* in section VI.2. will discuss this pursuit further.

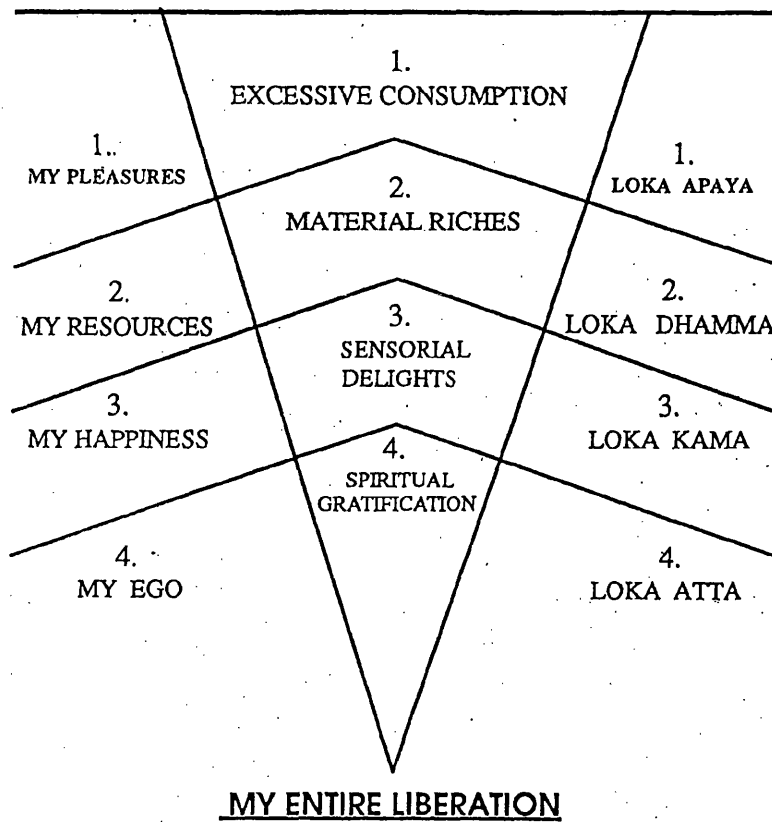
Although such philosophy may sound like a quest for *nibbana*, I found that none of the Chao Asoke ever mentioned the *silas* in any context other than helping to achieve happiness in this lifetime. There was never any mention of the next life nor of breaking the cycle of *samsara*. If I mentioned the possibility of benefits beyond this lifetime, the reaction was usually, 'the next life? Oh yes, well that too, I suppose.' (*chart na ler kha? Aw chai, khong ngan duay kha.*)

Phothirak taught that practising was not the means to an end, but was actually the end in and of itself. Productivity was a highly important part of the teaching and the Chao Asoke were extremely proud of their assembly lines and self-sufficiency. When Phothirak heard that I spent much of my time at Wat Dhammakaya, his reaction was one of bemusement. I was asked if anything was accomplished through meditation, inferring that the Asoke work ethic was better for you than meditation. Despite his scorn for Dhammakaya meditation, however, Phothirak did institute a five minute moment of silence and reflection every mid-morning. When I asked informants whether that was enough, their answer was that everything done at Santi Asoke was done with mindfulness (*sati*) which was a form of meditation in and of itself.

Most Asoke informants were impressed that Phothirak's teachings had nothing to do with superstitions involving spirits or magic which was another Asoke criticism of Wat Dhammakaya. The visualisation technique and the resultant *abhiñña* derived from it was considered magic by many, not only the

Chao Asoke. While not denying that spirits or magic exist, Phothirak stressed that such things were much too difficult for humans to understand and that true happiness (*khwam sukh*) as taught by the Buddha lay only in escaping sensory illusion through asceticism. While this harkened to Phothirak's view that modern Thai Buddhism was corrupted by the incorporation of indigenous animistic practices a thousand years ago, it also suggested a leaning toward a western scientific need for empirical evidence. The fact that truth could be proven through one's own experimentation and that such proof came through hard work was one of the Asoke beliefs which led me to suspect that much of Phothirak's teaching was influenced by his Christian background and his western-influenced, modern Thai education. None of my informants among the Chao Asoke ever spoke of Phothirak's religious origins, however. I found out from reading a short biography of him (Taylor 1993a).

Chart 2: Potirak's Funnel
(a guide to inner liberation)



IV.6. *Which Monk?*

Because of the project definition given Somkuan of the National Council on Social Welfare, he introduced me only to monks involved in social development (*phatthana sangkhom*) programmes (although not all promoted the Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong ideology). Somkuan also suggested I investigate magical (*saiyasat*) monks, but I never had a chance to. Due to the supernatural nature of magic such monks were scorned by the new movements. Although the abbot of Wat Dhammakaya mentioned led to supernatural powers and the assistant abbot made a distinction between black magic and power derived from meditation, they were at great pains to point out that their beliefs could be proved (*pisut dai*) scientifically (more on the western and modern influences on the contemporary Sangha in the conclusion, section IX). On the whole, however, although there were monks who had large followings through astrology or through blessing amulets and phallic symbols, I found the majority of debate concerning the Sangha revolved around monastic reform, whether it was introducing new religious practices as meditation, interpreting scripture innovatively or criticising the mainstream.

Although I admit that a monk's interview with an anthropology student had its own specific focus and this focus may differ from his interaction with an average member of his congregation, most of the monks treated me as an opportunity to disseminate their teachings; I often felt that, with me, they were behaving in a more self-consciously monk-like manner than usual. I justify this conclusion from the poses many assumed when photographed, whether studiously casual or properly rigid (see figures 9, 10, 14, 17 and 18). I also take into account efforts to intimidate or sermonise. When I was able to follow up an

interview with prolonged personal contact or with observation, I found this to be the case — monks indeed were more relaxed on better acquaintance. The fact remains, however, that the initial presentation was as close to the ideal that the monk in question was able to muster; in other words, he was putting on a good show for me and those who accompanied me. The nature of that good show proves that the mainstream encompassed many styles of monk and that the variety was a response to the variety of demands placed on the Sangha either from congregations or from the administration. There was not one monk who appeared to me much like any other in terms of style. This would seem to mean that there is no single answer to the question of what factors contribute to an ideal monk. Even within a single category such as ‘scholar’, monks of three very different styles were grouped together: Phra Thepveti the young-looking scholar monk, the *nakleng* monk, and the scholar monk from Wat Dhammakaya. The common thread tying together all the monks I interviewed was that they all considered themselves Buddhist and they all had a belief that Buddhism could help humanity improve. Their ideals for the course of that improvement, however, were as varied as they were themselves.

If it may be taken for granted that any man who shaves his head and wears orange-yellow robes adheres to the precepts of the *Vinaya*, then all monks, whether from the mainstream or a new movement, start on an equal footing. But the need for laymen to see a monk appear vigorously to adhere to the *Vinaya* belies this fact. Basically, what lay devotees demand from their monks is not the restriction of action or purposeful non-action. From interviews with informants, all of them, without exception, seemed to want a paradox: action illustrating adherence to restrictions on action found in the *Vinaya*. In order to distinguish

himself from laymen who ordained only temporarily, a monk's action illustrating his adherence had to continue for a long duration of time. In order to distinguish himself, a monk's appearance not only had to be remarkable, but his actions also had to be remarkable as well in order to influence public opinion. Because, as stated earlier, there are no prescribed actions for a monk to take, it is up to the layman's interpretation whether a monk embodies the ideals of Buddhism or not. This interpretation is the product of the layman's response to a monk's style which, in itself, has been a response to lay demands as well as the monk's own interpretation of the true nature of Buddhism.

This section has described long-term monks of various categories of pastoral activity in order to illustrate the variety of monks' styles in Thailand. As discussed in section I.6, there are four qualities that monks sought to cultivate in order to plant devotion or *sattha*: appearance, voice, becoming a source of reliance and knowledge. Each of the monks in this section were distinctive in at least one of those four respects, whether it was the abbot of Wat Dhammakaya's appearing *sai*, Phothirak's powerful voice, the forest monk's development programmes, the *nakleng* monk's speaking out in favour of the poor, the city monk's co-ordination of the northern Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programme, Luang Phaw Datta's overseeing the development of the Wat Dhammakaya's grounds, the irrepressible monk's teaching of meditation or the author monk's many published treatises. In many instances the monks discussed excelled in more than one of the four qualities. Whatever their activities, monks worthy of *sattha* did have distinctive styles which were a combination of the above-mentioned factors, making them worthy of veneration in the eyes of laymen.

V. Devotees

The following section will explore the correlations, if any, between the leading monks of the new movements and the social, economical and educational backgrounds of the lay members. The lay devotees of the mainstream whom I met and spoke to have been described briefly in section **IV.3.2**. It must be borne in mind that the vast majority of Thais go to mainstream temples: Thailand's population is currently sixty million and the new movements I studied had, between them, at the most four hundred thousand members. Most of my lay informants, however, were members of the new movements. This bias was unintentional due to the fact that my limited time led me to concentrate on members of the new movements since it was they who were under scrutiny for political involvement and it was my intention to determine the reasons a layman would follow any monk enough to allow that monk to be perceived a threat to the status quo. My intentions in concentrating on the followers of the new movements, then, was two-fold. I wished first of all to discover the extent to which they were able to give a monk or movement power through the weight of their following and secondly, to discover the how a monk was able to use that power. From the limited amount of time available, therefore, I decided to concentrate more on the new movements. My assumption was that the lay members of new movements were no different from lay devotees of the mainstream, but with a devotion strong enough to make them consciously decide to turn to a movement that was clearly different in emphasis or appearance from the established religious practices. Sections **IV.1**, **IV.2.1**, **IV.2.2** and **IV.3.2** therefore were devoted to the mainstream to provide a basis from which the new movements react and from which I could make comparisons.

I now discuss the followers of Phothirak and Wat Dhammakaya, both monastic and lay, to provide an understanding of the demands that devotees of new movements place on their temples and monks. I wished to learn the reasons behind their feeling devotion for their particular monk or movement of choice, how this motivation had impact on their religious beliefs and whether such beliefs would give that monk or movement power. In the context of cultural and historical antecedents in the Sangha, I wished to discover how my informants felt that the new movements were more worthy of devotion than the mainstream.

V.1. *The Chao Asoke*

My informants at Santi Asoke were chosen for me by a member of their publicity division. Due to the atmosphere of siege in the *phutthasathans*, great care was taken for me to receive the proper impression of the Chao Asoke and Phothirak's teachings. My guide knew that I had spent nine months at Wat Dhammakaya and wanted the month and a half I had available to me at Santi Asoke to 'match the nine Dhammakaya months' (*hai wela deuan khreung thi Santi Asoke thao kab kao deuan thi Wat Dhammakaya*). Variety seemed a great priority in the selection of interviewees and the people I spoke to ranged from an elderly peasant woman from the north to an engineer who had a law background and was working full-time on Phothirak's legal defence. Despite efforts to arrange for a variety of people to be interviewed, however, the reasons for their devotion to Phothirak were almost always the same. Every Asoke informant felt shocked by the violence of Phothirak's rhetoric (*kham pud run raeng*) and challenged (*dohn tha*) by the Asoke life. In this section I will discuss in brief some life histories of my Asoke informants. I have grouped them into the following categories: monks, nuns and laymen.

My Asoke informants were especially fervent in their devotion to Phothirak. One would believe that anyone adhering to the movement despite continuous official harassment had to be devoted but co-operation and social harmony among the Chao Asoke went beyond that of a people united by persecution. Although my research there lasted only a month and a half, I was at one *phutthasathan* or another almost every day throughout that period. While there were disputes needing mediation, as will be discussed later in section VII.1.1.A, for the most part, the Chao Asoke were united in their religious belief.

My guide at Santi Asoke told me that, since the trouble with the Mahatheerasamakom had begun, only two people renounced the order. It is, of course, possible that vows of poverty had left members of the movement with no resources in the outside world and no possibility of escape (This will be discussed in further detail below) but all the Chao Asoke seemed happy to live in hardship so I strongly doubt this.

Of the Asoke informants interviewed, eight were monks, four were nuns and ten were laymen. The lay Chao Asoke were predominantly women. I asked my guide about this ratio and her answer was that women have weaker spirits or softer hearts (*jai awn*) than men and were therefore more willing to accept the necessity of religion. This answer, strangely enough, corresponds to the one I got at Wat Dhammakaya when I asked why most of the Dhammakaya devotees were women. As at Wat Dhammakaya, I suspect that the situation at Santi Asoke might be more complex than this answer reveals. There were approximately four times more monks than nuns at Santi Asoke and this was due to quotas placing a limit on the number of women who could take vows. Similarly, there were about four times as many women than men among the lay Chao Asoke. The reason there were so many women is that many of them wished to take vows but could not. There is no limit to the number of men who are allowed to ordain so the men can become monks more easily while the women must wait for the quota to be available. Hence the greater ratio of monks to nuns and the greater ration of women to men among the Chao Asoke.

Although there was a large number of informants interviewed in a short period, there were some I came to know better than others. This often was due to my having increased contact with them but sometimes it was due to a friendly

rapport which grew from the initial interview. When I had spare time at one *phutthasathan* or another, I got to know these informants better and was able to substantiate their life histories or to get a better understanding of them through continued contact. It is these people I will discuss in this section.

Of all my informants, only one claimed to have come from the ‘*hi-so*’ class (Thai slang for high society) and she was unknown to any of my socially prominent contacts outside the movement. None of the other informants was ever a member of the socially prominent, the wealthy or the aristocratic sectors of society. Most had received higher education of some sort, however, and many of the other Chao Asoke had been educated to at least high school level. Although the Chao Asoke purport to be in sympathy with the kingdom’s farmers, most are from urban, middle class and lower middle class families.

V.1.1. the social hierarchy

The social hierarchy in the *phutthasathans* has many nominal divisions, but aside from the universal acknowledgement of Phothirak as leader, I was able to observe only two divisions in practice: that between ordained and unordained members of the movement and that between men and women. Otherwise, the different ranks between the lay followers seemed not to effect behaviour between them whether it was through etiquette or other shows of respect. There were few restrictions between monk and layman; they would work side by side (sometimes monks and women) on assembly lines. I assume restrictions on interaction existing between lay Chao Asoke to be equally relaxed as, if not more than, those between lay and ordained members. Had I more time to spend with the Chao Asoke, I would have noticed either more relaxed or subtle differences in patterns

of behaviour between them but, as it is, I can only describe the hierarchy. I would ask an informant the rank of another person and he or she would know immediately; it was never necessary to think. The social divisions within the Chao Asoke referred to stages of religious achievement with the goal of ordination in mind. The ranking was as follows: (beginning with the lowest and ending with the highest)

1. *akhantuka* was a person who visited the *phutthasathan* with the intention of following Phothirak's teachings. (I was not given even this status.) In the mainstream the term '*akhantuka*' referred to visiting monks from other temples.

2. *akhantuka prajam* or steady *akhantuka*, was a devotee who came regularly (generally on Sundays). *Akhantukas prajam* were vegetarian but were allowed to eat an evening meal. They were encouraged to uphold as many of the first ten precepts as possible such as abstinence, even if married, but were not required to do so.

3. *aramik* (the masculine) and *aramika* (the feminine) referred to those who must uphold the first ten precepts (beyond this rank, the restrictions became more and more stringent). They came to work at the *phutthasathan*, having given up their employment in the world outside. *Aramiks* and *aramikas* were allowed to have personal bank accounts, but were not allowed to carry more than one hundred Baht (about £2) on their person at any given time. They were allowed to live at home, but aspired to live in the *phutthasathan*.

4. *ubasika* was a new rank created only a few years earlier for women who wished to observe more precepts than an *aramika*, but, due to the quota for female ordinations, could not begin the process of taking vows as a nun and were

restricted from reaching the next rank up the scale. An *ubasika* had some additional behaviour restrictions to the *aramika*, but I could never get anyone to tell me specifically. (Generally I would be told that movement outside the *phutthasathan* was restricted, as were certain types of work, but it was difficult to pin down more.) An *ubasika* shaved her head and wore a white blouse with a *pha sabai* or strip of cloth that was wrapped around the bust and then passed over the left shoulder.

5. *phu patibat* (or *pa* for short) were those who had begun the path to ordination by taking preparatory steps. Men could apply for this position, but women had to be selected. In order to be accepted five of the monks had to approve. One remained a *pa* for approximately four months before moving on to a higher position. Those who had reached this stage were not allowed to have personal bank accounts and had to have given away all of their possessions. They were required to live on one of the *phutthasathans*, but could visit home. The *pa* shaved their heads, but otherwise wore much the same clothing as the other Chao Asoke.

6. *nahk* (the masculine) and *krak* (the feminine) were those who had already entered the ordination process. There was a corresponding position in the mainstream Sangha for men (*nahk*), but rather than retaining this rank for four months as the Chao Asoke did a man outside was generally a *nahk* for one night at the longest. A *krak* retained her position for eighteen months. The *nahks* and *kraks* wore white and shaved their heads. They were allowed to leave the *phutthasathans*, but were not allowed to spend the night and had to return in the evenings.

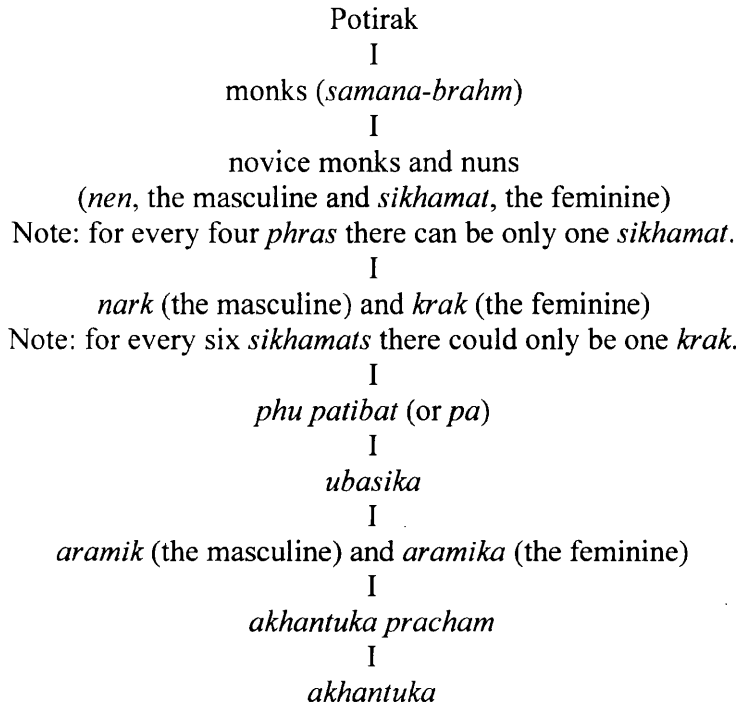
7. *nen* and *sikhamat* were the ranks of male novice and nun. In the mainstream the term *nen* existed and meant novice, but *sikhamat* was a term unique to the Chao Asoke. The *nens* and *sikhamats* (sometimes called *mae nen* - meaning female *nen* -- for short) had the same behaviour restrictions, but how much more restricted than the vows of a mainstream novice (who adhered to the first ten precepts) was never made clear to me. *Nens* and *sikhamats* wore brown robes similar to those of monks. (At the time of fieldwork it was impossible for women to reach a higher stage than *sikhamat* in this hierarchy, but I have heard that they can now be fully ordained as *bhikkhunis* or female monks. No women were allowed to ordain as female monks because a man could not perform the ceremony, a *bhikkhuni* would have to. Because there were no Thai *bhikkhunis*, it was necessary to find one from overseas to do it.) A *nen* remained in this rank for at least four months. He was allowed to ordain only with unanimous approval of all Asoke monks. If there was any dissent, the candidate was required to practise ascetic vows further before applying again. Some *nens* were allowed to ordain but with reservation. Unlike the mainstream, *sikhamats* were allowed to beg for alms with alms bowls like full-fledged monks.

8. *phra* (*samana-phrahm*) were the fully-ordained Asoke monks who observed the two hundred and twenty-seven precepts of the Buddha. Their position among the Chao Asoke was in the administration and often they were given positions of leadership. Originally, they shaved their heads -- but not their eyebrows -- and wore brown robes much like mainstream monks. Now they are required to wear brown and white costumes.

The quotas referred to earlier restrict only the numbers of women in the Asoke order. For every four *phras* there could only be one *sikhamat* and for

every six *sikhamats* there could only be one *krak*. At the time of fieldwork there were no more positions as *krak* available and this was the reason the rank of *ubasika* was created.

Chart 3: Social Hierarchy Among the Chao Asoke



V.1.2. the monks

A. *Samana-Phrahm* Vasavatiko

Of the Asoke monks, the one I got to know best was Phothirak's assistant *Samana-Phrahm* Vasavatiko. I met Than Vasa, as he was known for short, on my first day at Santi Asoke. He was a tall man with a slight stoop and a distinguished face. His demeanour was quite serious but interrupted periodically with a nervous chuckle that crinkled his features suddenly and unexpectedly. Just as suddenly as it appeared, the chuckle disappeared and Tan Vasa would be serious once again. I found this nervous habit to be quite disconcerting because I was never sure whether I was meant to laugh with him or not. When we first met, I asked how I should address him since I was unfamiliar with the Asoke etiquette. He responded that I should call him Than which was a casual, yet honorific title used in the mainstream with all monks. This was in marked contrast to the monks at Wat Dhammakaya who asked you to address them on more familiar terms like Luang Phaw or Luang Phee (Venerable Father and Venerable Older Brother).

Born in China, Vasavatiko emigrated to Thailand to live with relatives in 1949, after the communist victory. The oldest of nine children, Than Vasa had two younger siblings who emigrated in turn to America. Although he had a double bachelor's degree from Thammasat University in business and accounting, Than Vasa didn't study with any intentions of his own benefit, but to please his parents. They came from a poor background and so invested in his education in the hope that he would have a more comfortable life. Than Vasa had an economically difficult childhood. Although he always had enough to eat, as a result of all the struggles, from high school onwards, he had an interest in religion. Than Vasa's grandfather was an opium addict and lost his fortune,

showing him the worthlessness of possessions.

The initial exposure Than Vasa had to religion was when he first started reading about Buddhism from funeral books. There were few books on Buddhism available to him when he was young. He never thought to discuss religion with any of the monks he encountered when he was young because he felt that they were not well enough educated. He never felt that the local monks ever gave him any hope of relieving the difficulty in his life due to their limited knowledge. So Than Vasa studied Buddhism on his own and from listened to religious radio programmes.

Than Vasa ordained when he finished his university degrees. He took a liking to the monastic way of life and felt that it was 'fifty-fifty' (*ha sib ha sib*) as to whether he would leave the order at the end of his allotted time. He liked monastic life, but also found that there were few monks he respected enough as teachers. Therefore he left the order as was scheduled but continued to look for a monk who knew enough to teach him about the Buddha's Dhamma. Than Vasa wanted a teacher who was a practising (*patibat*) monk who would be able to lead the way in terms of adherence to the *Vinaya*.

Than Vasa became a devotee of Phothirak's when Phothirak had only been a monk for six months. The devotion Than Vasa felt was immediate because, the first time he went to one of Phothirak's sermons, he heard things that he had never heard before. It seemed that Phothirak was someone who understood the Buddha's Dhamma well enough to expound on the subject and to answer all questions asked of him. As a layman who had studied religion for years, Than Vasa felt impressed that Phothirak was able to renounce his comfortable lifestyle. As an actor Phothirak could have had anything, but chose

to give it up because he saw that the Buddha's teaching was the only truth. Than Vasa immediately became a disciple of Phothirak's and followed him through the establishment of Daen Asoke and the various *phutthasathans*.

Because he was the oldest son, Than Vasa felt that he would have trouble renouncing the world and ordaining because of his duties to his family. Therefore, it was relatively late before he actually took vows as a monk, despite his having been a disciple of Phothirak's from the beginning. As he was the oldest son, he was also the main income earner for the family. Than Vasa found, however, that Phothirak's teaching was better at helping people to change themselves. The difference was that Phothirak's method of teaching stressed knowledge and awareness of one's own *kilets* or appetites and showed one how to overcome them.

V.1.3. the nuns

A. Maenen Thipthevi

Despite the discrimination against women, many of the nuns felt there was more opportunity at Santi Asoke than at either the mainstream or at Wat Dhammakaya. The nun who voiced this view was Maenen Thipthevi, who, at the time of fieldwork, was petitioning Phothirak to be allowed to ordain as a *bhikkhuni* or female monk. Initially Thipthevi did not take vows as a nun with the Chao Asoke, but with the mainstream. When I interviewed her, she had been a nun for nineteen years, having joined Phothirak when he established Daen Asoke.

A former fashion model who worked in Paris, Thipthevi was still a beautiful woman, despite years of an ascetic life. Her manner was urbane and cosmopolitan and yet she was very unpretentious. When Thipthevi found that I

could speak French she asked that the interview be finished in that language since she could express herself most easily in it. The daughter of a Thai diplomat, Thipthevi grew up in a French convent but rebelled. She spent most of her university days with artists and found work as a model to help pay her way. Living a profligate life as a student, she experimented with drugs and sex. It came to the point where she felt that no matter what she did, she was always running without any idea of what she was running from.

Thipthevi chose to study medicine because she felt that medical school might help to quell her fear of sickness, suffering and death. In the course of her studies, she had to treat a child who had been crippled in a car accident. Her inability to help this child in any way shocked her and showed her the pointlessness of life. This experience plunged Thipthevi into an orgy of drugs, sex and thrills. She took up sky diving. Having had 'dozens of men' Thipthevi became distrustful of them and bored with sex. Among her conquests was Alain Delon, the actor.

Strung out on drugs, Thipthevi would isolate herself for days on end in her flat. After hitting what she considered to be rock bottom, Thipthevi went on a macrobiotic diet and experimented with homeopathic medicine. In a complete turnaround from her previous lifestyle, she became opposed to all chemical additives in her food and, for six months, only ate baguettes and bananas. She took up meditation. By this time — she was twenty — Thipthevi's parents were so alarmed at her behaviour that they begged her to come home to Thailand to study with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a distant uncle. Dismissing Suan Mokh as too far, Thipthevi studied meditation at Wat Mahathat, but found that it was too difficult. Her Thai was bad and she couldn't understand the lessons.

Furthermore, most of the monks chanted in Pali which was even more incomprehensible. The meditation was useless until, on a flight to London, she found that it helped her with air sickness.

Thus began an obsession with meditation. She took to meditating all day and only leaving her flat at night. One day while singing with the band she had formed with some friends, Thipthevi experienced a vision while on stage. She felt her *winyan* or soul asserting itself and pulling her back into the meditative state it preferred. That very night she decided to return to Thailand to become a nun.

While this story seems far fetched, Thipthevi produced photographs of herself in a French fashion magazine wearing platforms and hot pants. Then she took out clippings from a Thai newspaper headline which proclaimed how a wild child had given it all up to become a nun. The newspaper and everyone who knew her expected her to last a week under such hard conditions.

Thipthevi prepared herself for her vows by studying with Buddhadasa, but decided to become a nun at Wat Asokaram where the young Phothirak was beginning to gain a following. Phothirak's message of strict asceticism appealed to her and she found it a constant challenge to control her own urges and appetites. Thipthevi felt that the Asoke lifestyle gave ultimate freedom since it relieved the constant quest for more of everything. Through the challenge of making do with less and less, the urges and appetites were actually more satisfied than if she kept trying to satisfy them physically.

In her continuing quest to rid herself of her appetites, Thipthevi found success. She could fast for a week without any problem and often went without bathing for weeks at a time. On occasion her robes would become stiffened with

perspiration, but she did not mind. Unlike her quest for freedom in her youth through sex, drugs and other worldly experience, Thipthevi learned from Phothirak that ultimate freedom came from renouncing everything that she loved. No longer was she bound to the material world through attachment.

V.1.3.B. Maenen Yaowalak

Giving up that which one loves was an important part of Phothirak's teachings and was one of the greatest challenges of being his disciple. Another nun, Maenen Yaowalak, went through the heartbreak of giving up her husband for the movement. Born in Suphanburi, Yaowalak didn't come to Bangkok until she went to high school. She wasn't that knowledgeable about Buddhism although she came from a family who observed all Buddhist holidays and would regularly donate alms every morning. She didn't become interested in Buddhism until she went to study in England for her second degree in biological science.

As a student and then afterwards, Maenen Yaowalak did much travelling, but found herself unsatisfied with what she had seen. 'Was this all there was?' she asked herself. So she began reading Buddhadasa's books on Buddhism. She found that Buddhism was a kind of science that could be proven through one's own experimentation with life and that it was not about magic or praying for favours. If one lived by the *silas*, one made merit and one's life improved. Yaowalak began by following the Buddha's first five precepts. This aroused an interest in Buddhist radio shows and Dhammakaya meditation. Her efforts at meditation were never successful, however. She never managed to visualise anything.

Then in 1975, Yaowalak met Phothirak. Having just come back from a

trip overseas, her mother told her about an actor who had ordained and had written several interesting books on Buddhism. She liked Phothirak's approach, but didn't follow his teachings in any special way until one day her mother asked him to their house. By this time Yaowalak had been married for two years. What impressed her most about Phothirak was his sermon. It was as if he knew exactly that the family were Buddhists, but were obsessed with the mystic aspect of it. Phothirak pointed out that all the Buddha images people wore or had in their homes had no meaning; if one is to truly follow the Buddha's teaching, it is by living according to the *Vinaya*. The way Phothirak spoke appealed to Yaowalak who was logical and lived by reason. It was as if the truth was revealed to her that very day and she became a devotee. Gradually Yaowalak kept challenging herself to live according to the Buddha's precepts and began devoting more and more time to the temple. Eventually she came to Santi Asoke on a retreat and when her husband came to pick her up she told him that she wasn't going back because the truth lay in living by the silas. Her marriage had come to have no meaning. Her husband kept returning to take her home, but eventually gave up. When he started divorce proceedings, she felt heartbroken but realised that this, too was but a sensory illusion.

V.1.4. lay informants

A. Chamlong Srimuang, the governor of Bangkok

Throughout field work, I tried to obtain an interview with Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang and was only successful towards the end. Whether securing an appointment with him could be considered a success at all is open to debate. Upon arrival in Thailand, it became clear that the most powerful political figure associated with a new movement was Chamlong and if I were to witness a monk

instructing a layman to act politically, it would be through cultivating a relationship with him. My abortive efforts at becoming a member of the Palang Dhamma Party were aimed at gaining access to Chamlong. I tried ringing his office directly to no avail. Every connection I could find was recruited in helping me to obtain an interview but I was constantly put off and was given access to various assistants but never the man himself. It was not until I met Chamlong's wife, Siriluk Srimuang, at the Santi Asoke *phutthasathan* and managed to wrangle their home phone number out of her that I finally got to ask him for an interview. This was the fifth attempt I had made to meet Chamlong personally and the only successful one. He seemed to be aware of my existence and I can only assume that I got the interview so he could be rid of me once and for all.

The interview with Chamlong lasted fifteen minutes. He told me to go to his office that morning and that he would see me between appointments, making his annoyance with me as explicit as possible. He was stern and brusque. He wore a short-sleeved safari suit much like a mid-level bureaucrat. His hair was cut short and his face was lined in a way that was not discernible in photographs, lending not an air of age, but of stress. If his face hadn't been recognisable from all the media coverage, I would have taken him for his secretary or an assistant rather than the governor of Bangkok.

Needless to say little was gleaned from this meeting other than the fact that Chamlong was an adept politician who was more than a match for an anthropology student. He evaded all of my questions with considerable ease and, when my fifteen minutes were up, he rose from his desk and dismissed me. For a more comprehensive portrait of Chamlong, McCargo's study provides far greater

insight than any account of my brief interview could (McCargo 1997).



Figure 23: Maj Gen Chamlong Srimuang at the first political rally of the Palang Dharma outside Lumpini Park



Figure 24: close-up of Maj Gen Chamlong Srimuang at the Lumpini Park rally

B. Auw, My Guide

At the time of field work, although Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang had attempted to distance himself from the Santi Asoke movement, the association between the movement and the Phalang Dhamma Party was very close. Among my informants were several people who were members of both the party and the movement. Auw, my guide at Santi Asoke, for example, was one of the 'group unafraid of defeat' (*klum kla pae*) who ran as a candidate in the general election of 1988 in order to help the party fulfil the quota of candidates. In order for a political party to contest a general election, it had to field a minimum number of candidates. They called themselves 'unafraid of defeat' due to their running in districts where they were sure not to gain seats. At the time, Auw who was not a nun but had shaved her head as a step toward further religious achievement, had donned a wig in order not to risk being perceived as a nun when taking part in the election; it is illegal for those who have ordained or taken monastic vows to run as candidates for public office. Several other informants at the movement had also run as candidates and continued to be members of both the party and the movement. Although I never witnessed Phothirak instructing Auw to act politically, I assumed that it was with his approval, if not his encouragement that she joined the ranks of candidates for the PDP.

Auw was one of the first people I met at Santi Asoke when my cousin took me for the first visit. She was surprisingly pretty. I make this statement fully aware that it betrays the prejudice that pretty girls don't join religious movements because they can do better. I was quickly proven wrong after having met Thipthevi who had once been a fashion model. Auw was indeed very attractive. From her statements, she must have been in her mid to late twenties,

but appeared to be much younger. Her hair was cropped very short, almost like a crew cut but longer in back. In retrospect I assume her hair was just growing out from the time it had been shaved. On many other women this hairstyle would have been rather unbecoming, but on Auw it just complemented her pretty face and made her very striking. So much so that my cousin spontaneously asked her whether it was true that women who became members of such religious movements as Santi Asoke had generally been disappointed in love. This was not one of those occasions when a friend asked such a pre-arranged question and I found it quite embarrassing. The matter-of-fact tone of Auw's response initially sounded like she may have taken offence but after a brief period with the Chao Asoke I came to realise that this manner was in keeping with the Phothirak's teaching which discourages frivolous speech. Auw told us that indeed there were some people who had joined due to disappointments of all kinds, but everyone who joined Santi Asoke did so because of Phothirak and his teaching.

Due to the busy schedule she had arranged for me I never had a chance to interview Auw formally, but was able to piece together bits of her life from chats while waiting for interviewees to arrive. Auw's family lived in the neighbourhood of Santi Asoke *phutthasathan* and it was purely out of curiosity that she dropped by for a visit one day while Phothirak was sermonising. From that very first day, Auw was struck by how Phothirak was unlike any other monk she had encountered. She found him forceful and was initially offended by his speech and his manner, but was so impressed that she kept going back. Auw found it a challenge to become a member of Santi Asoke because she had to spend much time proving her seriousness in wanting to join. It was only after a

long period of time that she finally gained acceptance among the other members of the movement. Throughout the time that she was attending sermons at the *phutthasathan*, Auw began to relinquish material goods on her own initiative without being asked. First she began to carry less and less money with her. She gradually gave away much of her clothing and other worldly possessions until she had only clothing and a bit of money. When others began noticing that Auw was earnest in her intentions to follow the teachings of Phothirak, they began to realise that she would be a worthy member of the community and asked her to join. Eventually, Auw applied to live at the *phutthasathan* and was accepted immediately since she had proven herself. Auw's family were pleased that she had chosen this course in life and became followers of the Asoke way of life. Her mother and younger siblings often came to visit and take part in the activities at Santi Asoke.

V.1.4.C. The Doctor

The doctor not only served as the medical supervisor at Pathom Asoke, she was also the leader of the lay council of the community. A small woman, the doctor is in her late thirties but appeared older. Her hard, self-imposed work schedule was the major cause of her haggard appearance. Although she often appeared tired, the doctor's conversation was animated and very knowledgeable.

Born in Yala, where her Bangkok-born father had a business, the doctor was the oldest of six children. She was sent back to Bangkok at the age of fifteen to prepare for university, but was shy and had few friends. It was at this time that the doctor found she had an interest in religion. As an alternative to friends in school, she 'had companions in the Dhamma,' (*mee peuan nai phra tham*) the

doctor told me. She began to listen to religious radio broadcasts and through them found out about Buddhadasa's writings. It was also through the radio that she found out about vegetarianism and decided to adopt it.

The doctor experimented with meditation at Wat Paknam but found that it was a waste of time. Through the radio and Buddhadasa, she learned that the true meaning of Buddhism was to perform meritorious deeds. Deciding to study dentistry (an occupation almost totally held by women in Thailand), the doctor found that it was a means to independence. It was as a dental student that the doctor came to listen to Phothirak's New Year's Day sermon. She was immediately impressed by the casual atmosphere and lack of formality she had come to know at other temples. It was particularly impressive that Phothirak was accessible to anyone who wished to see him. Through his teachings, the doctor learned about the silas and that veganism was an extension of practising Buddhism. After meeting a Christian friend who was a missionary, the doctor decided that once her younger siblings were put through school, she would become a missionary for Buddhism. She decided not to marry but to devote herself to the Buddha's cause.

There was much opposition at home to the doctor's religious fervour. Her parents threatened to cut her off, but relented when they saw her resolve. After finishing her degree, the doctor lived in Nakhon Rajasima, or Korat, for nine years. She decided to move in order to gain independence and also to escape the city. It was at Korat that she introduced herself to and became a non-resident member of Sima Asoke, the *phutthasathan* located in Korat. After helping to pay for her younger siblings' tuition, the doctor would spend what remained of her earnings travelling to Santi Asoke and then, when it was

established, to Pathom Asoke. As soon as she could, she bought property at Pathom Asoke with the intention of living there full-time.

V.1.4.D. Wantana

Wantana was my guide at Pathom Asoke and was the closest I had to a friend among the Chao Asoke. She was close to me in age (thirty) and had studied journalism at university. At Pathom Asoke she acted as the registrar and records keeper. All the Chao Asoke's identity cards were issued by Wantana. While still in high school, Wantana became interested in Buddhism. She studied meditation at Wat Paknam but did not find it satisfying. After learning about Santi Asoke through books, Wantana liked Phothirak's doctrine of actively seeking out goodness through the practise of the *silas*. This way of life, Wantana found, lowers worldly appetites and leads to peace of mind.

Wantana's family was Chinese and were never religious. One of eleven brothers and sisters, she wanted for little as a child due to the fact that her father was the owner of a prosperous peanut factory. The turning point in Wantana's life came when she lost two close friends in rapid succession. One died inexplicably of a stroke and another was hit by a motorcycle. She began to wonder what she was going to do with her life before she died. With so little time left, she decided to do good by living according to the dictates of the *silas*.

Wantana's family were opposed to her coming to live in Pathom Asoke because the decision was made so rapidly; after having had only three months of contact with the Chao Asoke, she became a full time resident of Pathom Asoke. Wantana tried to live by Phothirak's teachings outside the *phutthasathan*, but lost all her life savings in a vegan food stand because she kept giving away the food.

Living with the Chao Asoke was encouraging, however, because there was a support group. The outside world would teach her to consume but the Asoke life would teach her to give. Wantana felt that the constant self denial lessened false pride and made it easier for people to live together.

The move to Pathom Asoke was disruptive to Wantana's life because she gave up everything. She didn't keep in touch with old friends because she found that there wasn't much to talk about any more and there was too much explaining to do.

V.1.4.E. the Lawyer

I met the lawyer through Auw at Santi Asoke he was also a member of the Phalang Dhamma Party. An interview had been arranged for me and it was considered important that I should interview a man who had no plans to ordain. Most of the lay members of Santi Asoke were women because most of the men had the goal of ordination. My interview with Khun Chaiwat took place in one of the houses bordering the Asoke property. He was working on some government documents and continued to do so throughout the interview. We never made any eye contact at all but he seemed to understand everything I said and answered clearly, albeit in a very taciturn manner. When we were finished he looked up for a minute to acknowledge my departure but then just went back to work.

Chaiwat was born in Buriram in the Northeast of Thailand and was the second of five children. Although his family was never interested in religion, he studied Buddhism for himself out of curiosity. He actually thought of himself as a man who had no religion. After he got his degree in engineering from

Chulalongkorn University, Chaiwat went to work and found that he was unsatisfied with his life. By then his older brother had also begun his own investigation into Buddhism and Chaiwat, at his older brother's suggestion, began reading some of Buddhadasa's books in 1975 when he was twenty-six. He found that while they taught the Buddha's philosophy about each person's relations with the material world, they did not teach one how to reach beyond the material. It was not until encountering Phothirak and his teaching that Chaiwat felt he learned how to achieve peace of mind.

It was from listening to sermons in 1977 that Chaiwat found that Phothirak's teachings could not be argued against effectively. As an engineer, Chaiwat's education trained him to reason through logic and Phothirak's logic was unassailable. Furthermore, Phothirak practised as he preached. This was not enough to get Chaiwat to live according to the Asoke rules, however. It was only after two or three years that he began living according to Phothirak's teachings. This change occurred when he realised that to merely appreciate the logic behind Phothirak's statements was not going to make him a better person. To improve his life, he would have to start living according to what he believed. 'The brain tells you that it makes sense to start living a certain way,' (*Samawng ja bawk wa man pen het phon thi ja roem chai chiwit baeb nan*) he said.

In 1981, Chaiwat moved to Santi Asoke. This came after years of visiting on a steady basis when he had days off. Recently he left his job to come work full time at Santi Asoke to assist with the court case against Phothirak. After graduating from Chulalongkorn, he studied law at Ramkhamhaeng University, so Chaiwat thought his contribution would be helpful. He did not plan on becoming a monk, however. As soon as the court case was over, he planned to resume

living outside Santi Asoke, although he would continue to visit on a regular basis.

V.2. *Wat Dhammakaya*

My informants at Wat Dhammakaya came from two sources: personal acquaintances and introductions made through the movement's public relations department. As stated earlier, my VIP status made it easy for me to explore. All I needed to do was mention that I wanted to take part in an activity or to interview a member of the administration and, sooner or later, arrangements would be made. My wishes were not immediately granted upon every utterance, however. At the time of field work, Wat Dhammakaya was the subject of a government probe and, while it was to their benefit to cultivate my favour, most of the administration were occupied with negotiations to integrate the movement into the mainstream.

Unlike the mainstream, regular members of Wat Dhammakaya were predominantly young. According to Luang Phee Metta, 75% were female and under the age of twenty-five. A factor which inspired devotion in informants middle-aged and older was that the great majority of lay workers at the temple were under the age of thirty — decadence among youth was believed to be the primary social ill and for a temple to attract the educated young in those modern times of religious scepticism was seen as a sign that Wat Dhammakaya had been able to adapt with the times in a way the mainstream had not.

Although Wat Dhammakaya began as an urban phenomenon, it spread rapidly to the country, with major centres in Chiang Mai, Khorat and Hat Yai and sixty-three other branches throughout provinces in all four regions of the country (central, southern, northern and north-eastern). Many devotees from the provinces were bussed in to the main temple at Pathum Thani for weekends and large scale ceremonies. Support among the wealthy and aristocratic was often

attributed to the great care taken to observe the social status of VIPs; one such group from Chiang Mai were given an air-conditioned courtesy room during the Makha Bucha day festivities. True to the efforts of the public relations division, there was a growing Dhammakaya lore about the monks and followers who were particularly devout; this involved stories of exemplary general conduct, of amassing worldly riches, of healing the terminally ill and of telepathic communication, among other things.

The monks at Wat Dhammakaya formed the upper echelons of the administration, but the finances, food preparation, maintenance and other worldly affairs were attended to by lay workers. This division of labour between sacred and secular members of the community was according to the Dhammakaya interpretation of scripture. There were two types of lay workers: those who were volunteers called *ubasoks* (the masculine) and *ubasikas* (the feminine) and those who were hired and have no special appellation. Most manual labour such as construction was performed by hired workers while only volunteers, who enjoyed higher status, worked in the offices. The volunteers who lived at Wat Dhammakaya were required to uphold the first ten of the *silas* while the hired workers were merely required to behave with suitable decorum.

V.2.1. the social hierarchy

The extensive organisation at Wat Dhammakaya was unique. Unlike other sects or movements, which relied solely on the charismatic leadership of an individual — usually the abbot — Wat Dhammakaya employed a combination of several charismatic leaders and good organisation. When Dhammakaya members spoke of devotion, they spoke in reference to the *wat* rather than

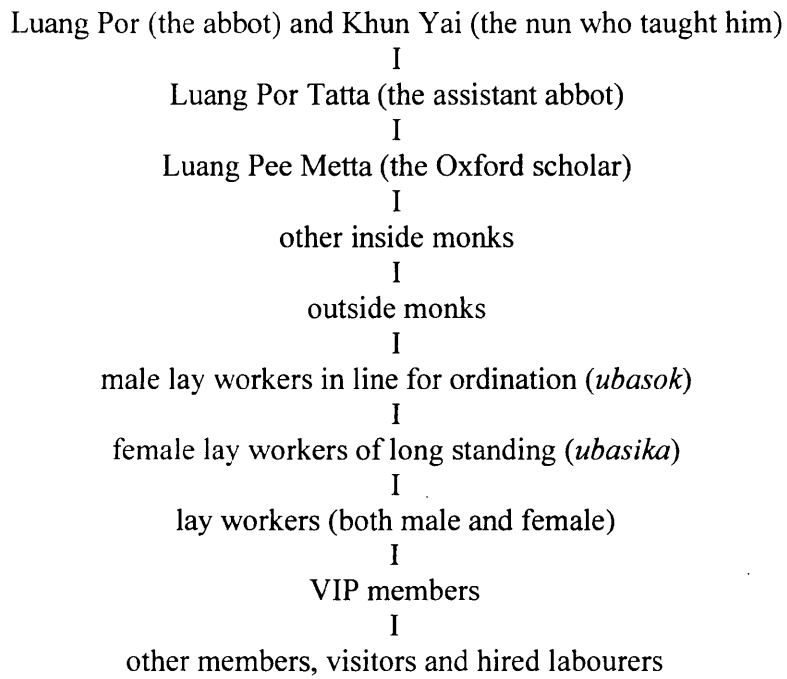
individual monks. While each of the devotees interviewed had special relationships with particular monks, at no time was there any question of the monk's becoming more important than the institution. The *wat's* three leaders, the abbot Luang Phaw Dhamma, Khun Yai the nun who was his assistant and the assistant abbot, Luang Phaw Datta, were the most senior members, each playing a different role in *wat* affairs. The abbot acted as the figure-head and the leader in meditation and ritual. Khun Yai, in earlier days (now she's quite elderly) acted as fund raiser. Luang Phaw Datta was the administrator. I am inclined to say that the administration of Wat Dhammakaya had become self-sufficient and self-perpetuating. Because Wat Dhammakaya was not reliant on the reputation of one charismatic leader, new monks were groomed to take older monks' places in the future. As well as the three leaders there were numerous junior monks and lay workers who kept the organisation running. Luang Phee Metta the Oxford-educated monk who did research on the *dhammakaya*, played an important role in the temple administration and bureaucracy. He was active in the international relations division which had connections with the World Fellowship of Buddhists. Among the other divisions which formed the Wat Dhammakaya bureaucracy were the publications division -- which published books and a monthly temple magazine -- and public relations, which formed an important part of the proselytising process.

Although there were about thirty monks and an additional twenty to thirty lay workers in residence full-time, the vast majority of the members of Wat Dhammakaya were the devotees who were said to number in the hundreds of thousands. While there were no special titles which differentiated one devotee from another, there were *phu yai* or senior devotees who enjoyed superior status

to others. These devotees enjoyed preferential treatment in the *wat*, reflecting their social standing in Thai society at large. VIP devotees had more access to the senior monks and had more comfortable conditions with which to attend religious ceremonies or study meditation. My aunt, one of the most prominent members of Thai society, was shown great respect by all members of the movement. She had positions of honour during temple ceremonies and often was asked to act as patroness of fund raising events. She was given a private, air-conditioned room to rest in and others of the Wednesday group were allowed to accompany her. No one felt that such special treatment was out of the ordinary because this division between members of the 'layman' category reflected real divisions outside the *wat*. Indeed, I suspect that much of the *wat*'s success in fund raising was due to tact and sensitivity to the social status of lay devotees and the preferential treatment given to those who expected it as their due.

During the time of fieldwork, ongoing changes were taking place within the *wat* administration and organisation in response to the threat of prosecution by the mainstream. Closed meetings were held by the monks throughout the time I was there. No laymen that I knew of were allowed to take part in these meetings, and their agendas were never discussed with me or any of my informants. Any questions on the subject of changing the temple were deflected either by vague answers from the lay workers or by out and out declarations by devotees of how such matters were not the concern of lay members of the *wat*. I was left to note the changes taking place at Wat Dhammakaya as they effected the rules and ceremonies which took place throughout the day. Such changes were discussed in section II.9.

Chart 4: Social Hierarchy at Wat Dhammakaya



V.2.2. the monks

Ordination was very important at Wat Dhammakaya. I believe that this was in reaction to the tarnished image in general of Thai monks. Informants considered ordination at Wat Dhammakaya better than elsewhere because Dhammakaya monks were perceived to be living under ascetic conditions which were more strictly enforced than at other temples. This perception included not only the monks who had ordained for life, but those who planned to ordain for only one *phansa*, or rainy season.

Monks ordaining for life were carefully screened. Mainstream critics of the temple felt that the differentiation between permanent and temporary monks diminished the status of those who planned to ordain for only one season. Wat Dhammakaya countered, however, that this distinction was made in order to give devotees a feeling that the temple leaders were monks who had been inspired with true religious fervour and were truly worthy of respect, unlike any layman who had ordained for a week or two for tradition's sake. The ordination ceremony of a life-long monk at Wat Dhammakaya was much grander than those who had ordained merely for a *phansa*. The differences will be discussed later in section VII.2.8.

Many of the life-long Dhammakaya monks would declare that their parents didn't want them to ordain. This is directly counter to the Buddha's teaching where He stipulated that all those who wished to ordain would need the permission of their parents. The implication of the suggestion that the lifetime monks ordained against their parents wishes is that the sacrifice made for faith was one which came at great social (and often economic) cost. The lifetime monks also talked about how often their parents would come and ask them to

leave the order. Their refusals were considered to be great demonstrations of piety. In earlier ethnographic work, it was often noted that a rural family could not afford to spare the manpower for a son to ordain for more than a short period of time (Moerman 1966). The Dhammakaya monks' notion of sacrifice is of interest because it was viewed with approval. While ordination is considered to be a personal decision, the sacrifice at Wat Dhammakaya became a social one, involving more than just the monk as an individual. The repeated trumpeting of such sacrifice enhanced the Dhammakaya monks' reputation in a way that was unusual since they were acknowledging social and economic necessities when traditionally, it was a great source of pride for a family to have a son who ordained. This type of rationalisation of the sacrifices made in face of social and economic pressures was modern and logical in a western sense, very much contrary to traditional Thai attitudes.

Indeed, meeting the monks at Wat Dhammakaya was more interesting than many other monks because they were so demonstrably intellectual in a way in that I, as a western-educated person, understood I suspect that this intellectual difference from other monks was the most important reason many devotees found that Wat Dhammakaya was a modern temple.

Because some of the monks at Wat Dhammakaya have been discussed in sections IV.2.3, 2.4 and 3.1, I will go directly to discussing Khun Yai, the nun who taught the abbot to meditate and acted as his assistant.

V.2.3. Khun Yai

Khun Yai was the nun who helped found Wat Dhammakaya with the abbot. The *wat*'s affiliation with Wat Paknam Phasicharoen was due to the fact

that she was the greatest student of Luang Phaw Wat Paknam, the originator of the Dhammakaya meditation method. When asked about the leaders of Wat Dhammakaya, Khun Yai is mentioned as sharing importance with the abbot, although she was the abbot's teacher.

An interview with Khun Yai had to be arranged for me by the public relations department since she was quite old and, unlike the monks, rarely appeared in public. Before my interview with Khun Yai, I was given a bit of warning by Areephan, the lay worker who acted as Khun Yai's attendant. Areephan was also called *sai* by the Wednesday ladies but appeared to me perpetually fatigued. She walked with a slight stoop and had dark circles under her eyes. Areephan was particularly devoted to Khun Yai, however, and was quite protective of her. Before the interview, Areephan told me that Khun Yai was getting on in years and was not as sharp as she used to be and that I was not to expect much in the way of revelation from her because her memory was going off.

After this preamble about Khun Yai, I was quite surprised when she seemed perfectly lucid. She had a very faint voice and did indeed appear to be quite old, but despite a small, thin and frail-looking body, seemed to have a very clear memory of her life and her goals in establishing Wat Dhammakaya. In the interview, Khun Yai touched briefly on her life and the reasons she started meditating before she spoke with some degree of pride about her role in raising funds to build the temple. When Khun Yai was a little girl her father had severe haemorrhoids and died without her being present. In her search for a way to make peace with her father or, as Khun Yai put it, to be with him once again, she turned to meditation at Wat Paknam.

As she became more proficient at meditation, Khun Yai felt closer to her father, but also found that she had peace of mind. Deciding to take vows as a nun, she began teaching meditation, carrying on the work of Luang Phaw Wat Paknam. She soon came to realise that she was in a unique position to help spread the word of Dhammakaya meditation. Since she was only a nun and not a monk, Khun Yai found that she would be able to raise funds to help proselytise in ways a monk could not. When she found a worthy student in the abbot, she made plans to establish a temple devoted to the Dhammakaya, hence the name of the movement.

In the nine months I spent at Wat Dhammakaya, I rarely saw Khun Yai take part in any of the Dhammakaya ceremonies. She often walked about the inner compound with Areephan and became a familiar sight, but, for all intents and purposes, seemed to have retired.

V.2.4. The Wednesday Group

As stated before, the Wednesday Group was an informal grouping of ladies who met every Wednesday to make alms by giving a mid-morning meal to the Dhammakaya monks. There were five friends in the core group who attended with regularity while several more would come sporadically due to busy schedules. I limit the following discussion to the five who came every Wednesday. I had formal interviews with each of them in the beginning, but came to know them better in the course of spending months with them. To this day I still keep in touch with the Wednesday ladies as well as my aunt and we get together for lunch occasionally. When referring to the Wednesday Group, I would always add the honorific title of 'Khun' as a sign of respect. The terms *pa*

and *na* mean older and younger aunt, respectively.

V.2.4.A. Khun Pa Mali

Although I am sure unintentional, Khun Pa Mali was the leader of the Wednesday Group. In her seventies, she was the oldest of the ladies and it was due primarily to her efforts that everyone attended. Despite her advancing age, she would pick up some members of the group, drive them to the temple and then take them home afterward. Khun Pa Mali was highly respected not only for her age, but for her genuine *joie de vivre* and courage in the face of tragedy. Everyone was entertained by the hair-raising details of Khun Pa Mali's life during her years in pre-Revolutionary China, post-World War II Vietnam, France, Italy and Brazil. Khun Pa Mali's husband was an Italian construction engineer who married her the day after she graduated from university. Although an agnostic at the time she converted to Catholicism because a Catholic priest was the only man who would officiate at her wedding due to Italian laws which, at the time, prevented mixed-race marriages. She later became acquainted with Wat Dhammakaya when Luang Phee Metta came to teach meditation to her sister Caterina who was terminally ill with cancer. Although Khun Pa Mali never mentioned it, I was told that she, too had cancer but that it was in remission. Her recovery was attributed to the meditation she studied at Wat Dhammakaya.

Khun Pa Mali is a striking woman. She is the daughter of an Italian architect and an aristocratic Thai woman. When he was twenty-six, her father came to Thailand with a group of architects and engineers to help oversee construction of the Ananthasamakhom, the old parliament building and Wat Benjamabopit, the marble temple. He never left, living to the age of ninety.

According to Khun Pa Mali, her father became more Thai than the Thai. He retained his youthful vigour to old age and, even into his seventies, would ride off with her mother to the royal beach resort of Hua Hin on motorcycle. It is very clear Khun Pa Mali inherited his love of life.

The first of two children, Khun Pa Mali was older than her sister Caterina by sixteen years, so it was a great shock to have her sister die first. Both sisters were educated in a Catholic school. Although Caterina considered herself a Protestant, Khun Pa Mali was not religious until she married, after which she would say Catholic prayers in Thai. However, it was not until Khun Pa Mali's husband died, leaving her penniless in Brazil, that she became interested in Buddhism. Through the kindness of friends, Khun Pa Mali returned to Bangkok to live with her sister and her sister's family.

When Caterina discovered she had breast cancer which had spread to her vital organs, she developed an overwhelming fear of death. A friend introduced both sisters to Luang Phee Metta who was conducting meditation classes for the terminally ill. It was only through meditation that Caterina found happiness and she would often meditate for two hours at a time. Because she found such peace, Caterina asked Khun Pa Mali to go to meditation class too, but was initially refused. Khun Pa Mali didn't care much for meditation until she found that Caterina was losing her bitterness and was becoming a happy person. At the time of Caterina's deterioration and subsequent death, Luang Phee Metta was constantly at her bedside to lend support. Caterina's dying wish was for Luang Phee Metta to take care of her sister because Khun Pa Mali smoked a lot and drank. Luang Phee Metta kept contacting Khun Pa Mali and asking her to attend meditation lessons at Wat Dhammakaya. When she went to the temple he would

follow up and thank her for coming. It was this persistence that got Khun Pa Mali to take up meditation.

At first the meditation began as a challenge from Luang Phee Metta, who asked Khun Pa Mali that if her sister could do it, why couldn't she? Eventually, Khun Pa Mali became interested in meditation because it was something new and exciting. Although meditation helped her to quit smoking, she never stopped questioning the movement and its policies. Throughout all of her doubts, however, Luang Phee Metta never abandoned her. In the beginning the relationship was difficult. After all, Khun Pa Mali had been to many different temples and had seen many idle monks lying about lazily and was not impressed. Khun Pa Mali had been to Wat Mahathat and felt it was dirty and tainted by the week-end market held on its grounds. She was impressed, however, by Wat Dhammakaya. The grounds were clean and it was very clear that the monks there had made sacrifices in order to be monks; ordination at Wat Dhammakaya was not a lazy, comfortable life. Luang Phee Metta's foregoing his medical career to help people like Caterina was very impressive. Khun Pa Mali was also impressed by the high standard of education among the monks at Wat Dhammakaya because she felt that it was necessary for monks to have an education in order to understand what Buddhism is up against in the modern world.

V.2.4.B. Khun Pa Tiw

If it could be said that Khun Pa Mali had a lieutenant, it was Khun Pa Tiw. They would go together to Wat Dhammakaya every Wednesday and every Sunday. Because she had no family other than an older sister who was also

unmarried, Khun Pa Tiw was free to devote a lot of her time to the temple. Every Wednesday, she arrived early with Khun Pa Mali and immediately would start cooking food to donate to the monks. To this day the best rice noodles fried with soy sauce I have ever tasted were made by Khun Pa Tiw. Although much younger than Khun Pa Mali, Khun Pa Tiw met her at the *wat* and they became friends when they realised a distant relative of Khun Pa Tiw's was a good friend of Khun Pa Mali's. They would go together to all the Dhammakaya functions and the two often would ask me to join them in activities that the public relations department did not tell me about. Khun Pa Tiw had as adventurous a spirit as Khun Pa Mali. Despite her heavy build (she couldn't comfortably wear a car safety belt), she often walked long distances following Dhammadayada monks on their barefoot walk across the country to relieve their suffering by donating water to them (more on the Dhammadayada programme in section VII.2.5). Because I so often saw her with Khun Pa Mali, I considered them contemporaries. It was not until one day when Khun Pa Tiw appeared with a very chic short haircut that I realised she was a good twenty years younger.

Khun Pa Tiw was born in Bangkok and studied in Thai schools. Her family was moderately well off and she had the choice to study abroad but chose not to. After finishing her education, Khun Pa Tiw became interested in religion. Although no one else in her family went to temples on a regular basis, she started going to several different ones with her friends. Khun Pa Tiw didn't like the other temples much because she would always go into the kitchens and found that the food preparation was unsanitary. The unsanitary conditions were merely a reflection of the general disarray of the grounds of most mainstream temples in general. This, she felt, was an indication of the temples' low moral standards.

Khun Pa Tiw felt disgusted by mainstream temples because the monks in charge did nothing to maintain a uniform standard of moral behaviour. She remarked that Khun Pa Mali had even seen monks dancing at one of them (Khun Pa Mali never mentioned this to me).

The cleanliness at Wat Dhammakaya was an indication that it had higher moral standards and displays of frivolity like dancing could never take place there. From the first time Khun Pa Tiw came to Wat Dhammakaya in 1986, she felt that she had seen with her own eyes and experience that Wat Dhammakaya was worthy of respect. Just coming to the *wat* made her feel she was making merit. All the people were good as opposed to the licentious people at other temples. It was especially appealing to Khun Pa Tiw that Wat Dhammakaya had a high percentage of youthful devotees. She had never seen a temple that managed to attract as many young people and felt that any hope for Thai society lay in the *wat*.

Khun Pa Tiw felt strongly that a good monk had to be *samruam*. *Samruam* is a word which means emotionally contained. This will be discussed further in the conclusion, section IX.) As for the Dhammakaya monks, Khun Pa Tiw liked them all because she found them all equally rigorous in their adherence to the Buddha's precepts (she could tell from her own observations). The monks all had different personalities and that made each one distinctive, although the abbot was especially impressive to Khun Pa Tiw because he was the leader.

Others had told Khun Pa Tiw that Wat Dhammakaya helped her become more patient. Ever since she started meditating, she felt her life had improved. She meditated up to three hours a day, always an hour before she went to bed. As for the future, Khun Pa Tiw planned eventually to build a house and live at

the housing project being developed on the grounds at Wat Dhammakaya for devotees.

V.2.4.C. Khun Na Sutee

Khun Na Sutee was the restaurateuse who regularly brought over large amounts of food to donate to the monks every Wednesday. She would go by one of her fast food restaurants and pick up meals that her staff had prepared and would bring them over in her car. The amount of food she donated each month had a value of about 50,000 Baht, but she felt that it was worth the expense because ever since she started making regular donations, her restaurants did well and she was able to expand the chain to several restaurants in large malls throughout the city. She also became a consultant for the Thai kitchens in country club restaurants.

Khun Na Sutee was born upcountry, in Nakhorn Sawan and was interested in religion from childhood. She did not come to Bangkok until her son Ton was ten and entered school. At that time she started working at a large Bangkok hospital arranging the food service for them. It was while working at the hospital that she got her idea to open her chain of restaurants. Khun Na Sutee's husband was a bureaucrat who worked in parliament. He had been against involvement in Wat Dhammakaya in general, but after he had been there and seen that it was harmless, he allowed his family to be involved. Although he even attended on occasion, he never became a devotee.

It was Khun Na Sutee's son who introduced her to Wat Dhammakaya, but she didn't come regularly for many years. It was not until he asked for her permission to take ordain that she became curious about the temple. She was

pleased he wanted to ordain, but at the time was concerned about the expense since most ordinations upcountry were very expensive and many families strived to outdo each other with the opulent celebrations. However, Khun Na Sutee's son wanted to take part in the mass ordination organised by the Dhammadayada programme (discussed previously in section II.9.) which required minimal expense, which was a relief. Impressed by the high moral standards imposed on the Dhammadayada monks during the mass ordination, Khun Na Sutee started coming every morning to donate food to her son. She was so impressed that she returned day after day to donate alms for all two hundred monks in the programme.

Then Khun Na Sutee went to see the Dhammadayada on their barefoot trek across the country from Khao Yai national park and was so impressed by their dedication that she didn't believe that a temple which taught its devotees to such high moral standards could be bad. What touched her most was the sight of Luang Phaw Datta leading the Dhammadayada monks himself. A lay worker walked ahead of the line of monks and swept the road of pebbles as an act of piety to ease the monks' progress because they were barefoot. She felt the monks there were samruam. Due to their being able to endure the hardship of a cross country walk, they were displaying concentration (*samadhi*) which was uncommon.

Khun Na Sutee became convinced that the best monks were at Wat Dhammakaya. She used comparison as a means of telling which monks were good and which were bad. A good monk should observe the *Vinaya*. Khun Na Sutee could tell a good monk from the way he looked at a woman; he should have an averted gaze. Compared to any of the monks elsewhere, Khun Na Sutee

found Dhammakaya monks most worthy of respect. When she heard rumours that Wat Dhammakaya was communist, her curiosity was aroused because she had been so impressed by the monks themselves. So she visited the *wat* and looked for anything communist about the temple. She found nothing but a place which was restful and conducive to inner peace. Khun Na Sutee liked the cool atmosphere at the temple, especially the tall trees.

Khun Na Sutee started giving money to her son to donate to the *wat*. When they had to move her son asked to live in Pathum Thani which would be close to the temple. One day Khun Na Sutee decided to go pray at the *wat* for business success and immediately saw a Buddha floating before her surrounded with a halo of light. This made her feel that she could build her own personal *barami*, or power. (This term will be discussed in the conclusion, section **IX**. Although it was through Khun Na Sutee that I first heard the term, I would hear it more and more frequently when applied to monks, the royal family, senior members of society and devout laymen. Its importance cannot be underestimated.) When Khun Na Sutee became successful, she decided to start coming regularly and was told that on Wednesday there was a small group who came on a steady basis and decided to join them. The first Wednesday she came, Khun Na Sutee met Khun Pa Tiw, Khun Pa Mali and the rest of the ladies. Because she ran a restaurant, Khun Na Sutee started bringing food or sending it at least three times a week. Although she had been attending *wat* functions for quite some time before joining the Wednesday group, Khun Na Sutee only began meditating after joining. She felt the casual atmosphere of the Wednesday group made it easy to be devoted to the movement. Meditation helped her to remain calm even when stuck in traffic. I once even heard her talk of meditating in

order to improve traffic.

Khun Na Sutee was grateful to Wat Dhammakaya because it kept her son meditating instead of doing something awful during his free time. She felt bad because she worked so hard and had little time for her son. Their relationship was previously strained, but improved after he became a devotee of the movement. His studies improved. He was more respectful. At the time of field work, Khun Na Sutee still communicated with her son through notes and much of their significant interaction took place on paper since they were rarely at home at the same time. When they did meet face to face, their conversation became more fun due to their shared bond to the temple. Nevertheless, their relationship still had its difficulties. On one occasion, Khun Sutee talked about how her son went out till around midnight on many nights and that he had very sophisticated stereo equipment which he brought out for a party one night. After she suggested he put the stereo outside for the dancing, he got annoyed and disappeared from home for three days, appearing for meals at her restaurants throughout town. I later discovered that Khun Na Sutee's son had worked with the temple's photography studio. There was a time when he always took part in the Wednesday sessions and was particularly accomplished at meditation, but by the time I started my research at the temple, he had let his association slip.

During field work Khun Na Sutee had to have a hysterectomy. It was shockingly sudden and the Wednesday group were very supportive. They went to stay with her at the hospital and I went to visit her with Khun Pa Tiw. At first I felt intrusive, but there were four or five others from the *wat* there as well. One of them was a doctor (called Dr. Mickey) came to look at Khun Na Sutee's record and reassured her that she would be fine. Afterward, Dr. Mickey spent a

lot of time with her and would arrive with her every Wednesday morning. Less than a week after the operation Khun Na Sutee went back home. She felt that Dr. Mickey was a typical example of the youthful devotees of the wat. When asked about why she found Dr. Mickey so agreeable, she laughed and said that he did as he was told, ate what he was told and provided such wonderful company.

V.2.4.D. Ajahn Taew

Of the Wednesday ladies, the one I had the hardest time getting to know personally was Ajahn Taew. She was a very pretty lady in her late forties and was sweet and friendly, but guarded. We eventually became quite fond of each other, however, through our discussions about the *wat* philosophy. Whenever we talked about issues confronting Wat Dhammakaya, she was by far the most intellectual about the predicament and had the most scholarly answers to problems the movement was facing. Whereas others were often personally offended by the trouble, Ajahn Taew was logical about the reasons the mainstream was threatened by Wat Dhammakaya and was able to provide a canny analysis of events. Her husband was an army general who became an aide to General Suchinda during the political turmoil in 1992 and she herself was in the entourage of Suchinda's wife. Ajahn Taew was childless so had a great deal of time to devote to the movement. As a scholar who taught law at Ramkhamhaeng University (hence the title *Ajahn* which means professor), she became an advisor to the temple during the time it was under investigation. She often missed the Wednesday meditation lessons after lunch because she was in meetings with Luang Phaw Datta and other monks about the best defence against the accusations against the movement. Extremely protective of Wat

Dhammakaya, Ajahn Taew would very graciously change the subject when I asked her about how the temple administration hoped to cope with the problems confronting the movement.

The one occasion Ajahn Taew spoke openly about her role in *wat* affairs was on the 23rd of June 1989 when the English-language newspaper *Bangkok Post* ran a headline that Wat Dhammakaya was under investigation following the defrocking of Potirak. Despite the increased pressure, however, the atmosphere at the *wat* was quite calm. I saw Ajahn Taew and she was getting ready with Luang Phaw Datta to figure out how to be prepared. It was decided that they should increase security around the grounds to make sure nothing could be planted. Ajahn Taew complained the movement was being persecuted for no reason other than jealousy. Although there were articles in the Thai-language newspaper *Thai Rath* declaring that those investigating expected to find nothing wrong, the television station Channel 3 aired a scathing editorial in the evening news. I hadn't seen it, but according to Ajahn Taew, the television crew who had been given full co-operation went in and filmed the empty basement of the *ubosot* (temple building), mentioning that this was the place where arms had been kept. The film crew then went on to the Buddha image and proclaimed it was sculpted to look like the abbot, who was making himself out to be a new messiah. It was clear that Ajahn Taew was immensely annoyed. The television crew had been given co-operation and they had betrayed the movement.

Despite pressure from the media, however, the attention focused on Wat Dhammakaya was nothing compared to what I saw at Santi Asoke. The only indictment which seemed to have any meaning in the press was a follow-up article by a former Dhammakaya administrator, a monk called Phra Viriya. He

published an article in the Thai-language newspaper *Naew Na* about the movement's embezzling funds to build a condominium project and business projects like Dhammakaya World (to be described in section VI.3). This report was particularly damning because it came from a former insider and was, by my observation, an elaboration on the truth. Many planned to live in the condominium project, but rather than a luxury apartment building as depicted in the *Naew Na* article the project was just a small community of bungalows which were meant as retirement homes for people like Khun Pa Tiw who had no family. However much in bad taste a project like Dhammakaya World might have been, the goal was to teach the movement's brand of Buddhism, not to make money.

The general attitude at the *wat* seemed to be calm, however. The abbot had been advised by Ajahn Taew and the movement's lawyers not to give any more interviews. Luang Phaw Datta told me that the only thing to fear was that incriminating evidence would be planted on the grounds. In the end, the investigation turned out to be a non-event. The Ministry of Education officials never showed up. Whether this was due to some last minute negotiations is unclear; I was not privy to this type of information. I was quite sure, however, that Ajahn Taew had played an important role in averting investigation.

Ajahn Taew was born in Bangkok and had been sent to school and university in Thailand. She studied for a post-graduate degree in America and spoke English with a high degree of proficiency. Her introduction to the temple was through friends who worked for Thai Airways International, which has a large contingent among the devotees. Her primary focus at the *wat* was the abbot with whom she felt a great deal of respect. Whenever she spoke to the abbot, she would refer to herself as *look* or daughter and to him as *Phaw* or father. None of

the other Wednesday ladies ever took these forms of address and it was acknowledged that Ajahn Taew was the one most serious in her commitment to Wat Dhammakaya and its teachings.

When asked what attracted her to the temple, Ajahn Taew spoke more about the scholarly attitude the monks had and the logic behind the movement's philosophy than about the beauty of the grounds or the image presented by the monks. As a scholar who taught law, she had a great deal of respect for the intellectual development of the Dhammakaya monks. The lifetime monks had all been university educated and Ajahn Taew felt that this was important due to the fact that so many of the kingdom's leaders had the benefit of a university education, many of them having studied abroad. She felt that for Buddhism to be relevant to modern, westernised Thais, it had to appeal to these sceptics who wanted to have some sort of religious anchor, but were scornful of uneducated monks who had little understanding of modern life and the problems confronting modern Thais.

V.2.4.E. My Aunt

As mentioned before, it was a stroke of luck for me to have had an aunt who was so intimately involved with Wat Dhammakaya. Without my aunt and her friends in the Wednesday group, I would never have had the same level of success. My aunt became interested in Wat Dhammakaya through Khun Pa Mali, who was a childhood friend. They had kept in touch over the years Khun Pa Mali was living abroad and renewed their friendship when she returned to Thailand. My aunt was especially moved by the comfort Luang Phee Metta gave to Khun Pa Mali's sister Caterina and started attending the Wednesday sessions

for this reason.

My aunt was born in Bangkok and was educated in Thailand. Widowed at a very early age, my aunt was left with little resources for a lady of her social status and had to work to support a young daughter and son. Although she had never been educated abroad, she spoke English to such a high degree of proficiency that she was able to find work for many years with the BBC World Service in London. On her return to Bangkok, she worked in the consular section of the British Embassy. When she retired, my aunt, as a member of the royal family, took up duties in public life. Despite her busy schedule and the toll it took on her health, my aunt always found the time to come to Wat Dhammakaya every Wednesday. Before I began field work at the temple, my aunt would be picked up at her house in the mornings by Khun Pa Mali. After I started attending the Wednesday sessions on a regular basis, I would pick up my aunt and we would go together.

Although my aunt meditated for many years, she was not successful in visualising any of the images one was meant to see during meditation according to the Dhammakaya method. Instead, she derived comfort and refreshment from the act of meditating itself. It provided her with respite from her busy schedule and she was able to find peace of mind this way. As mentioned earlier, my aunt's favourite monk was Luang Phaw Datta. She felt that he was the monk who was genuinely concerned about the temple's devotees and that he was the one with the most energy to accomplish the movement's goals. My aunt was not particularly impressed by the other monks although she was never critical of them. While many of the Wednesday ladies were attached to the abbot or Luang Phee Metta, my aunt often questioned them on claims made about meditation and

the powers derived from it. On one occasion she asked how meditation was able to get the Americans to change the site where they planned to drop the atom bomb. (It was claimed that through meditation Khun Yai had managed to redirect the planned site for dropping the atom bomb from Thailand to Japan.) My aunt openly questioned this theory, stating that Thailand was not strategically important enough that the Americans would want to drop the bomb there. Apparently, Luang Phaw Datta was the only one who answered my aunt's question to her satisfaction. I was never told the nature of the answer, however, no matter how hard I prodded.

During most of the Dhammakaya festivals and ceremonies which took place at the time of field work, my aunt officiated as the temple's most senior devotee. Her patronage meant much to the movement, especially in times of trouble. On her part, my aunt would make the time in her busy schedule to assist whenever she could. She would try to get her own children to attend but was only successful in getting her daughter to accompany her occasionally. While my aunt was impressed by the temple grounds and the general appearance of the monks, her attachment grew from the fact that her times at Wat Dhammakaya were the rare occasions she would have time to herself and could put her mind at ease.

V.3. *Similarities*

3.1. The goal of the Buddhist

The informants discussed in the preceding sections were all self-professed Thai Buddhists, each the devotee of a new movement. While the reasons for their devotion were varied, there can be no doubt they felt the same benefit of their devotion. Without fail, my informants believed their lives had improved by following the teachings of a monk or movement. The ultimate goal of a Buddhist, however, should not be the improvement of life but the attainment of *nibbana*. None of my informants, however, had such goals, not even the monks. There have been corresponding observations in other Theravadin cultures as Sri Lanka (Southwold 1983) and Burma (Spiro 1970). In Sri Lanka, Southwold found that people realised that *nibbana* may have been an ultimate goal, but the goal of improved *kamma* in the next life was more easily attained (op.cit). While in Burma, Spiro noted that there are three types of Buddhism which he calls: nibbanic, kammatic and apotropaic, meaning, respectively, that there were Buddhists who aimed for *nibbana*, the improvement of *kamma* or protection from mystical danger (1970). With my informants, however, there was not even a thought given to improving *kamma* or the next life. Focus was directed rationally at the present existence with an aim to making the present life more liveable. I would ask each informant in as open-ended a way as possible why they were following the teaching of their preferred monk. (*Thammai thung tid tam phra roop nee?*) The answer, in one form or another, would invariably be because the monk helped the devotee to understand the nature of life. When I asked about *nibbana*, no one thought it possible to attain this state and when I asked about a future life, some answered that it was also a goal while others simply didn't think that far ahead. While the Wednesday Group did believe to

some degree in the magical protection afforded by Dhammakaya meditation, their primary emphasis was the same as the Chao Asoke in that they were looking for proof that a monk's teachings worked. This need for proof, rather than blind faith, turned the immediate concern to making the present existence more liveable because that was the only way to have concrete proof. In this light, it becomes clear that a monk's example, in the way he lives, is of considerable importance since he, as a human being, albeit an ordained human being, is living in a way that others may reasonably emulate.

V.3.2. demographics

A. women

The vast majority of my lay informants were female. There are many possible explanations for this, among them the fact that truly devoted men could ordain while women were denied this option. Both new movements, however, had a larger ratio of female to male members overall and at both places this was attributed to women's 'weaker spirits' or literally soft hearts (*jai awn*). Friends with whom I would discuss this topic during field work often had another interpretation, however, which is that Buddhism in Thai society, despite the discrimination in rules of ordination, may be the most socially acceptable means to personal independence for a woman. I dispute this argument, however, because many of the women I interviewed were independent already before joining the movement. A case in point is the doctor at Pathom Asoke who found employment away from her family, but nevertheless put her younger siblings through university before coming to live at the *phutthasathan* full time. Similarly, the restaurateur at Wat Dhammakaya was a successful businesswoman before her son invited her to join the movement. If anything,

membership in a new movement provided relief from the pressures of life in general. I found this to be the case for all of my lay informants who were members of new movements, whether male or female.

Gombrich describes a '*de jure*' discrimination against women in Sri Lankan Buddhism but '*de facto*' this discrimination does not exist because women are allowed to wear brown robes and behave like *bhikkhunis* even if they do not ordain (Gombrich, 1988). Indeed this is corroborated by both Klein in America (1987) and Kariyawan in Sri Lanka who find that Buddhism can be a feminist religion because Buddhist theories of the female self are psychologically no different from the male. Such equality is not the case in the mainstream Sangha in Thailand, however, as Keyes and Chatsumarn have both noted that women have inferior religious status to men (Keyes 1984, Chatsumarn 1991). In the Thai mainstream, a prohibition from ordination places the woman in an unequal position in terms of her opportunities to make merit. Because a woman can come no closer to ordination than being a nun, whose vows are only as rigorous as those of a novice monk, her status is inferior to a man who can make more merit through full ordination. A woman's means of religious advancement in Thailand, therefore, are generally focused on her serving or supporting a man who has been ordained (Keyes 1984). However, I never observed discrimination against women in the same way that Bancroft observed it in Japan where women in Zen Buddhism are often the objects of abuse of power by their *roshi*, or male teachers (1993).

Women in Thailand have a more economically powerful role in society and there is a predominant number of women who are active in the business community. This can be partially explained through Kirsch's assertion that, in

the past, women in Thailand, as meritoriously inferior beings, were encouraged to go into business while men, as meritoriously superior beings, were encouraged to enter the civil service (1975). Women nowadays are, therefore, often financially independent of men but nevertheless must serve or support monks in order to make merit in the mainstream. Keyes points out that while women can make an economic contribution, this does not improve their status in society (1984).

My observations support the conclusion that women may favour the new movements due to increased opportunity to attain superior stages of religious advancement such as ordination, as mentioned by Maenen Thipthevi who has, since my field work, been allowed to ordain as a *bhikkhuni* and has assumed supposedly equal status to a monk. It is impossible for a Thai woman to become a *bhikkhuni* in the mainstream because the ordination must be performed by a woman who has been ordained herself. Since there is no tradition of female ordination in Thailand, there are no *bhikkhunis* to perform the ceremony. When the Asoke *sikhamats* were finally ordained, great efforts went into finding *bhikkhunis* from abroad who were able to perform the ordination. That effort is indicative of the greater opportunity for women in the new movements.

The respect given to Khun Yai at Wat Dhammakaya is another example of how women are given more opportunities in the new movements despite the sexual discrimination at both. Proficiency at meditation and ritual practice at Wat Dhammakaya led to enhanced social status for women in the Wednesday group not unlike the heightened status observed by Hardacre among the women in Japanese Nichiren Buddhism (1984) and the Kurozumikyo church (1986). While none of my female informants exaggerated her submission to her husband

as the women did in Hardacre's study of the Nichiren Buddhists, male members of Wat Dhammakaya would often defer to female members in the performance of such rituals as leading the morning prayers (which will be described in section VII.2.6) because the women were considered more active and more knowledgeable in ritual as were the active female followers of Kurozumikyo.

V.3.2.B. the middle class

It seems to me that the more important demographic figure was that both movements appealed to the middle class. Although in the following section it will become clear that both movements take great pains to associate themselves with the forest, it is important to note that the vast majority of members, both monastic and lay, came from the educated middle class whose level of education allowed for personal, independent study of Buddhist scripture, whether through original or interpreted texts. Although Santi Asoke claimed to be in sympathy with farmers, relations with their rice farming neighbours at Pathom Asoke were notoriously bad due to their intellectual approach to Buddhism. (This will be discussed further in section VI.2.2.A.)

Wat Dhammakaya appealed not only to middle-class university students but, unlike Santi Asoke, was able to garner a large following among the aristocracy and among rural villagers (one of whom was on retreat with me and will be discussed briefly in a later section VII.2.7). I am convinced that Wat Dhammakaya benefited not only from the far superior numbers of lay devotees but also from the fact that many of those devotees were from the middle class and aristocracy who had a good measure of economic, social and political power, all of which contributed to the movement's survival whereas Santi Asoke

eventually became marginalised despite the support of a powerful and popular politician (more on this in the conclusion section **IX**).

VI. The Temples and the Physical Manifestation of Buddhist Teaching

There is no way to communicate a religious movement's ideals as directly as through the atmosphere of a temple. While those building mainstream temples rarely think specifically about communicating messages other than delineating sacred ground, the priorities, demands and financial capabilities of a local congregation influence the architecture and the landscaping (if there is any) in such a way that the temple has an atmosphere which establishes whether it is a city, village or forest temple. The new movements, on the other hand, are eager to distance themselves from the mainstream and therefore are aware that much about their beliefs can be communicated through their temples. A layman's experience with a new movement relies greatly on the atmosphere of a temple. While an effort is made by the new movements to separate themselves from the mainstream, they draw on existing elements of temple ideals. The difference between the mainstream and a new movement is that the atmosphere of a new movement temple is purposely contrived to convey a message which contributes to a layman's experience while the atmosphere at mainstream temples occurs almost spontaneously as a response to local environment, lay demands and financial resources which, in itself, communicates a message of its own.

An examination of temples and temple communities is useful because they reflect a theoretical landscape. In his discussion of landscape, Eric Hirsch describes a 'relationship between an ordinary, workaday life and an ideal, imagined existence' (1995:4) The physical surroundings in sacred areas express the culture's potential. In this respect, according to Hirsch, landscape becomes process, a view which is particularly apt when discussing the following descriptions of temples, both new and mainstream. In each case, an ideal is

made real by the landscape of the temples or their communities and this, in turn, contributes to a layman's experience of a monk or a movement.

It would seem that just as there is a wide variety of monastic activities which contribute to various ideals of monkhood as mentioned earlier, there should be a wide variety of ideals for temples. This is not the case, however, the contextual shifts of city-village-forest bear heavily on the ideal image of a temple in the minds of the lay public and the atmosphere at a new movement temple reflects this through the use of iconography. New movement temples are often built according to master plans. However, temples in the mainstream, especially village temples, consist of several buildings constructed over the years whenever a devotee or group of devotees wishes to make merit and will sponsor construction. There is rarely a carefully laid plan which is executed according to a schedule. There are, of course, such exceptions as Wat Benjamabopit, or the marble temple, which was built in the reign of King Chulalongkorn, or Rama V, but this temple was royally sponsored and built to plan as a show of royal piety and support for the Sangha. In general, the difference between a mainstream temple and a new movement temple is one of style. The new movements are very much conscious that laymen have an ideal for a temple just as they have an ideal for a monk which is derived from historical and cultural antecedents. Although there is no single, universal ideal for either temple or monk, the new movements choose from antecedents among the mainstream's city-village-forest dynamic in creating a temple atmosphere as a physical manifestation of their beliefs just as the monks in a new movement have a style of their own which partially relies on their involvement in the lay community as scholar

(*wichakahn*), practising (*patibat*), development (*patthana*), meditation (*wipasana*) and mystic (*saiyasat*) monks.

Despite the differing images of city-village-forest in terms of atmosphere, there are basic elements which make a temple. All temples own property. Although some village temples own only the land the *ubosot* is built on, many city temples in the mainstream derive income from their real estate holdings through leasing it. There is often no restriction on the nature of the lessees and the property may be developed commercially as shophouses which are rented to local businesses. Village temples might not rent their property to others, but the delineation of sacred ground is clear. All temples have an *ubosot*, or ordination hall, and sometimes a *viharn*, or lay temple building, which, except for rare exceptions which will be discussed presently in section VI.2.1.D, houses a Buddha image. Sacred rituals such as ordinations or the chanting of prayers are conducted in this building. Aside from the *ubosot*, there is usually a *kuti*, or residential hall for monks. Sometimes *kutis* take the form of individual one-roomed bungalow-like buildings. There may also be a *sala*, or pavilion where secular activities such as classes for schoolchildren take place. Although I was repeatedly told that there were architectural elements which constituted a basic temple, I did not find this to be the case across the board. The postcard picture of the typical Thai temple sold to foreign tourists is invariably one of the royally-sponsored city temples and does not represent the vast majority of temples in Thailand which vary in architecture from district to district. Northern architecture, for example, is very different from that of the south and temples reflect this difference. The following descriptions of mainstream and new movement temples is meant to provide data which will be compared and

contrasted with reference to the monastic ideals discussed in the sections **III** and **IV**.

VI.1. *Mainstream Temples*

1.1. Wat Benjamabopit

Because urban congregations often were wealthier, mainstream city temples were usually wealthier as well. Temple buildings in the city were better maintained and there were often priceless treasures or relics kept there. Wat Benjamaborpit, for example, contained a replica of a famous northern Buddha image, Phra Chinarat and was a tourist destination featured in postcards and brochures (Jumsai 1971). Located in the Dusit quarter of Bangkok, the temple was in the same neighbourhood as many government offices and Chitralada Palace, the residence of Their Majesties the King and Queen of Thailand. It was at the corner of one of the quarter's main roads and a canal. The grounds were surrounded by a wall of white plaster and the paved area between the canal and the wall was often used to park cars. The main entrance was an elaborate door directly opposite the *ubosot* and had a pointed arch mimicking the temple's peaked roof. Immaculate landscaping was punctuated with boxwood and carefully tended turf. The temple school, administrative buildings and *kutis* were built in French colonial style with overhanging eaves, wooden gingerbread work and shutters which were painted in green, contrasting with the cream-coloured walls. A canal ran through the area of *kutis* and administrative buildings which lay to the south of the *ubosot* and was crossed by a bridge with a European-styled balustrade.

During the day, the temple was open to tourists and there was a steady hum of activity. The *ubosot* was built of a grey-white marble and the roof was multi-tiered and covered with coloured ceramic tiles. The crooks at the corners of each roof tier were covered in gold leaf. At the rear of the temple building

was a large gallery which housed a collection of priceless Buddha images and one was encouraged to walk around the gallery during festival days to pay respect to each one. The steady drone of traffic outside the temple walls echoed slightly off the gallery's marble walls, but once inside the *ubosot*, the noise was well insulated by the building's substantial construction. The temple's residents were generally nowhere in sight since many were members of the Mahatheerasamakom and had to perform administrative duties.

VI.1.2. Wat Somanasvihara

A lesser known temple in Bangkok was Wat Somanasvihara. Famous for its mid-nineteenth century wall paintings which depict the life of the Buddha in Victorian-style dress, this temple was situated on a small compound near the oldest section of the city. It was bordered by shophouses on all sides which were on temple property but leased to local businesses, in this case garages. One had to drive down a small lane edged by a dirty, stagnant canal to get to the parking lot in back where the resident lay workers often played football. Like most temple compounds, it was not very well kept; several stray, mangy dogs wandered about leaving droppings all over the footpaths. There was overgrown grass and rubbish in some sections. Modernisation had been carried out without much consideration for the older buildings; a crematorium lay at the back next to the parking lot and the monks' *kutis* recalled mass produced, pre-fabricated vacation bungalows. The *ubosot* lay in a section of the *wat* that was walled off from the rest of the compound and was insulated from the noise outside. Much of the old structure appeared about to crumble apart. The famous wall paintings were chipped and peeling.

VI.1.3. Wat Pa Darabhirom

In contrast to the two city temples, Wat Pa Darabhirom was located in the Chiang Mai suburb of Mae Rim, some twenty minutes drive from the city centre. Although the temple was well known, it was quite a way off the main road and it took some fairly detailed directions to get there. There were no signs pointing the way and the road I was told to take looked rather dubious. The landmark I was given to turn off the main road was a narrow lane with wooden (as opposed to concrete) shophouses on either side. The paving was bad and eventually gave way to packed reddish dirt. It was during the dry season and the large irrigation canal that ran alongside the lane had dried almost to the bed. Carefully painted grey, the temple wall became discernible underneath the trees that grew within and hung over it. The temple's name was on white painted bas-relief by the entranceway. There was no gate.

Shaded by tall trees, the grounds, at first glance, seemed deserted. The *ubosot* was a small whitewashed building that was closed. It seemed conspicuously to lack the elaborate ornamentation of the temples I'd seen in Bangkok. Most of the other buildings on the grounds were quite modern, resembling houses in many suburban Bangkok property developments. The grounds were neatly kept, with dirt paths and driveways clearly marked with stones placed along their edges. All of the buildings occupied were being used as classrooms. When I looked through the windows, several rooms had teachers standing before blackboards and pointing with their chalk. Absolutely no sound betrayed them, however; if one were to judge from the only audible noise — that of rustling leaves — one would have assumed that everyone was asleep. The monks' *kutis* were at the far end of the compound.

Along the path to the abbot's *kuti*, which doubled as his office, I was struck by the tidiness. The buildings, paths and plants had been carefully tended and it seemed paradoxical that the grounds of a village monastery, with its rural emphasis, should have received more attention than many temples I had seen in the city. I found this to be strange because most of the village temples I had seen resembled this one in many ways except for the tidiness. Usually the state of a village temple was much like that of Wat Somanasvihara: punctuated by stray dogs and their droppings which kept company with rubbish casually strewn about. The order at this particular temple was completely atypical, but I realised that the National Council on Social Welfare had directed me here because this obviously was a model place of which they were proud. The abbot, whose interview has been recounted earlier in section IV.1.2.A, was known as a particularly dynamic man who originated several projects in response to the need in his village.

As my friend Vichien and I walked about the grounds, monks began to emerge from the buildings for their meals. It was the first we had seen of them; until then it seemed that most of the temple population was lay. In fact the temple appeared more geared to a secular existence than a sacred one. Most of the buildings seemed to be for secular purposes, comprising offices, school rooms, meeting rooms, a women's dormitory, a cloth and clothing factory with looms and sewing machines, and a small shop/showroom where buyers were shown products of the temple cottage industry. Although clearly productive, the factory area was not bustling by any means. The workers consisted of about six or seven women (who lived in the women's dormitory behind the factory) working a few looms and sewing machines. The showrooms seemed equally

small as the factory, but I was assured that they exported much of their goods to Europe. The major point of the industry was to give villagers a chance to earn extra money and to learn to meet high standards of quality demanded for export. Women who had homes would work on their embroidered tablecloths or placemats in their spare time. For those whose goods met the standards of quality set by the temple, the work was quite lucrative; they were paid at the same rate as the middlemen since the temple took no profit. The drawback for any buyer was the fact that the products did not come in at a steady rate because they were made when the women had time. Buyers could be assured, however, of high standards and workers could be assured of the higher rates of pay for work of good quality.

VI.2. *the Phutthasathans*

Of the four *phutthasathans*, I visited only Santi Asoke and Pathom Asoke, the two most important communities based on land area and population. Although the *phutthasathans* were created as ideal communities where residents could live by the tenets of Phothirak's interpretation of the Buddha's teachings, not all of them were ideal communities. Pathom Asoke was the only one referred to as a *phuttha-utopia* because it was the only *phutthasathan* with enough land and residents necessary to support a semi-independent community (Sombat 1988). Because the Chao Asoke were limited in number and were unified by strong religious belief, life at the *phutthasathans* was strictly controlled and differed drastically from the world outside. While the Asoke people may have felt that the world at large was bent on eliminating their way of life, the *phutthasathans* maintained a high level of stability due to the united following of Phothirak. As discussed earlier, Asoke social order was based on Phothirak's interpretation of Buddhism and therefore all aspects of day to day life at the *phutthasathans* rested on a religious foundation. The communities were spatially planned according to the teachings of Phothirak as was the social hierarchy, the economy and the administration. The common element all *phutthasathans* shared was that they were run by the same set of internal rules.

Architecture at the *phutthasathans* was intentionally rustic. Whenever possible, buildings were made of wood rather than concrete and rarely were they painted. The explanation as to why the Asoke temples were self-consciously rustic was that the Buddha abandoned his palace in order to live in the forest. Why should temples mimic the architecture of the palaces the Buddha abandoned? Therefore any buildings at a *phutthasathan* were designed with the

intention to be as simple as possible. Although the layout of each *phutthasathan* was different, they all followed plans which included a combined *ubosot/viharn* where most meetings took place, a section for the monks' *kutis*, a separate section where the nuns lived, and laymen's quarters. The separation between the monastic and lay areas was clearly demarcated. For example, laymen's quarters and the monks' areas were separated and the Chao Asoke made every effort to observe that separation. All the monks' *kutis* were made of thatch with removable walls of woven palm fronds. Paths leading from one building to another were generally unpaved tracks of beaten earth. Landscaping was non-existent or at least was made to appear as if so. Although plants were left to grow about the grounds seemingly unchecked, trees had been cultivated with the intention of creating a forest rather than a garden; their placement seemed random and the varieties appeared to grow in no particular order. Since they were all saplings, however, it struck me that they had been recently planted and the randomness was intentional in order to resemble a forest.

The combined *ubosot/viharns* at the *phutthasathans* were two storeys high, with the sacred hall upstairs and the ground floor used for secular purposes. Unlike mainstream temples, there were no Buddha images at any of the *phutthasathans*. The reason for this was that Phothirak felt the Buddha did not wish for his followers to worship him but rather his teaching. Instead of a Buddha image, a cabinet with the Pali Canon was the object of veneration. Otherwise no images of people were subject to respect with one notable exception: on the ground floor of each temple building was a picture of the King and Queen of Thailand. With the exception of the *ubosot/viharn* serving dual purposes (even then the top floor and the ground floor were separated in terms of

use) there were definite demarcations between sacred and profane areas. Within those demarcations, men's and women's areas were also separated, although both monastic and lay male and female Chao Asoke worked together during the day, often on the same assembly line which will be described below in section VI.2.1.B.

VI.2.1. Santi Asoke

Santi Asoke, the *phutthasathan* from which the movement took its name, was the administrative centre of the movement. Located in the Bangkok suburb of Sukhapibal, Santi Asoke's urban location in the nation's capital made it ideal for such activities as public relations and monitoring the administration of the other *phutthasathans*. The headquarters of the Asoke press were located here where the largest amount of information could be disseminated to the largest number of people. Computer files with biographical data of the Chao Asoke (both lay and monastic members alike) were kept at Santi Asoke. The Thammasanti Foundation (the Asoke charity organisation) had its administrative centre in Santi Asoke as well.

Although it ran through residential and commercial areas, the road leading to Santi Asoke was a four lane, dual carriageway. Shophouses lined the side of the road and if one didn't know what to look for, there was little to reveal that Santi Asoke lay behind a small section of the continuous row of shophouses. A small wooden sign pointing down a cul-de-sac off the main road was the only indication that this was the entrance. The shophouses on this strip of main road belonged to Santi Asoke and were used to house various outlets of the movement's commercial ventures. Two of the shophouses were vegan

restaurants featuring delicious Thai food. Another was a bookstore which sold Asoke publications and tapes. A few others were taken up by the Phalang Bun Company Store. The shopfronts looked just like many other shops on the main road and, if one didn't look closely at the signs outside, one would never notice that these shops were any different from others.

The Asoke shops were different. They were operated by volunteers from among the Chao Asoke and were not aimed at making a profit. The Phalang Bun Company Store (*Phalang bun* meaning 'power of merit'), for example, sold goods manufactured at the *phutthasathans* such as mushrooms, umbrellas, baskets and clothing. Foodstuffs for those on a vegan diet, such as vegetable protein and various dietary supplements, were also sold. Established for those who follow the Asoke way of life but were not yet prepared to abandon their lives in the outside world, the shops were the first contact that many outsiders had with Santi Asoke and present a very normal looking, unthreatening face for the movement and its members. An extension of the vegan restaurant operated in the Sunday market at Chatuchak Park, introducing many to the joys of vegan cuisine. Prices were also very low at the Asoke shops since the enterprises were meant as a public service rather than as profitable ventures.

VI.2.1.A. the *soi*

The *soi* or lane which led to Santi Asoke's entrance had a row of townhouses built on either side. Although most of the houses belonged to Santi Asoke, several were privately owned. At the time of my field work, the movement was hoping to buy the remaining ones which still belonged to outsiders, but had not yet amassed enough donations. The townhouses were

white with moulded concrete, neo-Italianate ornamentation. They did not prepare visitors for the stark contrast of the ramshackle architecture at the end of the lane. A low, two storey, wooden building closed off the dead end and through a utilitarian, rusting wrought-iron gate, one could see the dimly-lit ground floor of the Santi Asoke administrative building.

The lane itself was usually full of parked cars and signs warned motorists not to block the driveway of one of the private homes. Apparently, the homeowner's driveway had been blocked by press vans and this increased the already tense relations the Chao Asoke tended to have with their neighbours. As a friendly gesture, the Chao Asoke put up a sign asking visitors to be considerate of the people living on the lane and refrain from parking in front of the homeowner's gate. On my first trip to Santi Asoke, I asked Auw, my guide, about the sign and she acknowledged that the press had been quite ardent in their attentions to the situation in the *phutthasathan*. How did she know that it was the press who were parking in front of the neighbour's gate? She replied that few Chao Asoke had their own cars and those who did knew better. On an interesting side note, throughout the course of my stay I noticed that most of the cars belonging to Chao Asoke were blue. In fact, when I was on my way to interview one of the nuns, Auw remarked to a woman who was getting out of her car about what a pretty blue colour it was. She then turned to me and explained that the car must have been new since she hadn't seen it before. It struck me as interesting that the colour which affiliated the owner with the movement was more worthy of note than the newness of the car itself.

There is no mistaking which townhouses on the lane belonged to Santi Asoke and which ones belonged to outsiders. On close examination the

townhouses owned by Santi Asoke were stripped down to the barest possible minimum and were in marked contrast to the private homes which had elaborate rococo fences and lawn furniture. The Asoke houses in the lane were used as a lending library and a granary where rice and other grains grown at the rural *phutthasathans* were stored and packaged for sale in the Phalang Bun Company Store. Several days a week, pick-up trucks brought loads of grain in from the country to be packaged for sale. Young male Chao Asoke would work with shovels to unload the grain while women would put it in plastic bags.

VI.2.1.B. the administrative building

The roofed area immediately inside the gate to Santi Asoke was actually the ground floor of the administration building and the centre of life on the *phutthasathan*. This area was a wide, open space of about ten by fifteen metres. Various posters and signs were hung in profusion throughout the hall, many of them bearing inspirational quotations from Phothirak. A raised dais was placed in the centre directly facing the entrance. The monks in residence at Santi Asoke, including Phothirak, when he was there, ate their single meal of the day on this dais. Phothirak's morning sermons were given here. This is where the day at Santi Asoke began although many were up since three in the morning preparing food in the kitchens. It was here the Chao Asoke ate the day's meal and said their morning prayers. At the break of dawn, by which time the prayers had been said and the meal had been eaten, Phothirak's voice could be heard over a public address system with the day's sermon. If Phothirak was not in residence, either another monk spoke or a taped sermon of Phothirak's was broadcast.

During the day tables were placed in this open area and the space was turned into an assembly line for all the Asoke literature produced in the offices upstairs. Monks and lay Chao Asoke worked side by side although there was a cursory attempt to separate the women from the men and monks. From my observation, no nuns seemed to be part of the assembly line and it was quite difficult to keep the sexes separate since one table would be collating pages and another would be stapling them together while yet another would be packaging the pamphlets or packing them into boxes. Although women worked at one table their output would have to go to another table where monks might be working. When asked about the possible temptation of the monks, my informants answered that casual interaction between an Asoke monk and a woman was not enough to cause him to break his vows. (I took this as an inference to the slackness of mainstream monks who are very careful not to have even the most fleeting or inadvertent physical contact with women since it might cause temptation.)

Although I couldn't tell if the rooms were part of the administration building or not because many sections of it were blocked off by boxes and partitions, also located in the general vicinity of the main hall, was a clothing factory where women sewed clothes from cloth that was donated by lay devotees. Closeby was a coconut shell factory where coconut shells were cut, lacquered and made into bowls and spoons. At the time of field work, the Chao Asoke were experimenting with making clocks out of the coconut shells in order to supplement the *phutthasathan*'s income.

Two stairways led from the main hall to the administration building above, one in back and another in front. Although the front staircase was the one

generally in use, I had no sense that the back staircase was for any purpose other than convenience. The Chao Asoke never seemed to feel they would need an escape route of any kind nor were there segregated rights of usage. The front staircase led upstairs to a small foyer which, in turn, opened out onto a large room with several small metallic desks which looked like they were US army surplus. Rickety wooden chairs or stools were placed in front of them. Several desks had computers on them. Many of my interviews with Asoke monks were conducted in this room. It served not only as an office but also a reception area for those who wanted to interview the members of the *phutthasathan* administration.

In this room there was a water cooler with a pink plastic cup placed overturned on the little rectangular basin attached underneath the faucet on the front of it. This was a common design and the purpose of the basin was to prevent water dripping from the faucet onto the floor. My first lesson in Asoke standards of hygiene came on my initial visit when I was offered a glass of water and was told I could use the pink cup. This cup was communal and everyone used it. In fact, I had noticed that many people had already drunk from that very cup. Not wishing to appear stand-offish, I did so too when offered some water. When I drank, the distinct smell of saliva was obvious and led to me believe that it had not been washed for quite some time but that no one seemed to mind.

At the time of field work, the administrative office was empty except for two or three people who were working on publications. Most of the Chao Asoke working in the office were monks and at the time were attending hearings on the legitimacy of their movement. Many also went to the courts to support Phothirak while he was on trial. I attended one hearing and the court was overflowing with

Asoke supporters. The corridor directly outside the courtroom was so full of people that it was impossible for officials to squeeze through. Some supporters stood waiting for news in the stairwell leading up to the courtroom while others milled around outside. It was possible to tell that the overwhelming majority of people in attendance were Chao Asoke from the way they were dressed. This was why Santi Asoke *phutthasathan* was almost deserted whenever I visited.

VI.2.1.C. the beautiful flowers

Above the first floor of the administrative building, was a small cupola with a steep flight of stairs leading up. This was the display room which exhibited the 'beautiful flowers' (*dawk mai ngarm*) of human existence. It was used for contemplation although one of my informants chose to have me interview him there. On show in the beautiful flowers exhibit was a collection of horrors by any culture's definition. The centrepiece was a preserved human corpse (which had been the mother of one of the Asoke monks). Encased in glass, I was told that the woman had not been embalmed but that her body had dried of its own accord and this was considered somewhat of a miracle. On various shelves which lined the walls of the room were other exhibits which included a cancerous uterus preserved in formaldehyde and an aborted foetus, also preserved in a large jar. The other exhibits included various tumours and dead animals.

While several forest mainstream monasteries in Thailand had similar rooms to the beautiful flowers, they were meant for use in meditation. The Chao Asoke did not meditate, however, since they considered it a waste of time which could be devoted to productive activity. The only time spent meditating was five

minutes out of the day when a bell would be rung (and broadcast over the public address system) and all activity would stop for five minutes as advocated by Phothirak as discussed earlier in section (IV.4). The beautiful flowers were not a part of this reflection. In fact, on questioning, informants revealed that people rarely went up to the beautiful flowers exhibition for any reason at all. I assume that the subsequent interview I had in this room was more a response to my questioning the frequency of the room's use than a genuine desire to be there on the part of the informant being interviewed.

VI.2.1.D. the *ubosot/viharn*

To the side of the administrative building was the *ubosot/viharn*. I spent very little time in there since there appeared to be little activity taking place in this building. I strongly suspect, however, that this may have been a factor of the hearings and trials going on at the time. There was little opportunity for any religious ceremonies because priority was given to extricating the Chao Asoke from legal trouble. The only use for the *ubosot/viharn* that I observed was a dormitory for male Chao Asoke who were applying to become monks. Unlike the administrative building, this building was made from brick which was plastered over. The architecture was nevertheless very simple and devoid of ornamentation.

Behind the administrative building and the *ubosot/viharn* was the area devoted to the monks' huts. The space covered about a quarter of an acre of land and saplings had been planted throughout with the intention that it would one day become a forest. There were approximately fifteen huts which were about six square metres in size and made of palm thatch. Monks were expected to build

their own quarters as had Phothirak whose hut was in an area conspicuous only by the clearing along one side of it where devotees gathered to consult with him on day-to-day affairs or to listen to him speak. Latrines were located at the far end of the space and were restricted to male use. Female latrines were located in the administration building or in the nuns' quarters. A canal with a fountain which was turned on occasionally to prevent the water from becoming stagnant ran along one side of the monks' area.

VI.2.1.E. meals

On the opposite side of the administration building, at the front of the main hall, was the area where meals were served. A shophouse which served as a kitchen stood on the other side of a wall and a gate. Food was prepared here and brought into the compound where some tables were placed. Beyond the tables were some racks which held coconut shell bowls and spoons belonging to the Chao Asoke and some enamelled metal plates and spoons which were used by visitors or Chao Asoke who did not live on the premises. At the morning meal, people would get food here and then bring back the empty plates, bowls and cutlery to wash them and leave them on the rack to dry. Two large plastic basins were provided for the purpose of cleaning, one with soapy water and one with plain. Contrary to Auw's claims, I was left with an impression that the Asoke standards of hygiene were less than sanitary. Every day I went to Santi Asoke the food area was marked by an overwhelmingly sour smell of mould and decay.

VI.2.1.F. the monks' area and the nuns' quarters

The monks' area, the administrative building, and the *ubosot/viharn* were surrounded by a fence made of palm fronds. At certain parts such as the front entrance or the kitchen area, a wall of cinderblocks separated the sections. It appeared to me that there was a distinction between this area and the other Santi Asoke buildings which were beyond this barrier although Auw was at great pains to deny this. The dividing walls and fences had been erected earlier, when the Santi Asoke *phutthasathan* had been smaller. As the need for space grew with the movement's popularity, buildings and walls erected by outside contractors for non-Asoke purposes were absorbed into the *phutthasathan*. The division was not one of sacred from profane, she pointed out, because the assembly lines were at work in the main hall and the clothing and coconut shell factories were in that area as well. However, I found that there were similar distinctions at Pathom Asoke in terms of the purpose certain areas served. This will be discussed further in section VI.2.2. on Pathom Asoke which follows. At Santi Asoke, the quarters outside the barrier were the nuns' house, the laymen's quarters (which included the kitchens and day care centres), the granary, the lending library and the shops which were on the main road.

The nuns' house was an American-styled split level ranch house whose garden had been allowed to become overgrown. As with many of the outside buildings taken over by the movement, the house had taken on the appearance of dilapidation, although the Chao Asoke insisted that they were in good repair. At the time of my field work, eight nuns were living in the house although several were campaigning to be given rights to build their own huts and to ordain as *bhikkhunis*.

VI.2.1.G. lay quarters

Along the same row of shophouses which housed the kitchen, a row of townhouses acted as quarters for the lay Chao Asoke. The houses could be rented by the Chao Asoke for 2,500 Baht a month and were the responsibility of the lessee. These houses appeared to be in a better state of repair than the nuns' house, but this may have been due to the newer paint and the more recent construction date of this set of buildings. The gardens outside were overgrown and the front gates were rusting. Inside, the decor was spare, although some had home-made posters with diagrams of Phothirak's funnel of human sensory illusion and religious slogans. The furniture inside is similar to that in the administrative offices, a combination of functional and rustic. Several of my interviews with lay Chao Asoke took place here.

The day care centre for children of the Chao Asoke looked like a junkyard to me. The garden was overgrown, but rusting petrol cans and plastic toys in various states of disrepair were strewn about the ground. Dolls with missing arms and legs or eyes were cast about, covered in mud. I often passed by the centre on my way back and forth between the nuns' house and the administration centre and would notice no more than two or three children playing there at once. The Chao Asoke were not childless, however. There were several children living at Pathom Asoke but the conditions there were much less run-down. I am unsure whether this impression was due to the fact that Pathom Asoke was in a rural area and there was little with which to compare the unkempt Asoke approach to landscaping. Santi Asoke *phutthasathan* was in an urban

area, however, and neighbours living on the same lane groomed their gardens and kept their houses painted.

VI.2.2. Pathom Asoke

The Chao Asoke's Buddhist utopia was on the outskirts of Nakhorn Pathom, a city about two hours' drive to the west of Bangkok. While the other *phutthasathans* were compromised either by location, population or other resources, Pathom Asoke was the closest a *phutthasathan* came to an independent, self-sufficient community. Although most of the people who owned land in the community came only for the week-ends, there was a full-time population during the week of over a hundred people. During the week-ends the population often doubled. Several of the full-time residents, especially the monks, went back and forth between Santi Asoke and Pathom Asoke. It was here that Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang had a weekend retreat. Unlike the other *phutthasathans*, it was possible for people to own property at Pathom Asoke. Plots of land could be bought for 17,500 Baht, but approval for the sale had to be consensual among all the residents.

A planned community, Pathom Asoke did not suffer from the overflow that marked Santi Asoke. There was still a great deal of land which had not yet been developed or cultivated. The major difference one noticed between Pathom Asoke and Santi Asoke was the quiet. There was an absence at Pathom Asoke of the background noise which characterised life at Santi Asoke. The din of music or sermons piped over a public address system at Santi Asoke was non-existent as was the drone of nearby traffic. Because the Pathom Asoke property was much larger, views were much more sweeping and much larger in scale. Roads

and paths lead off as far as the eye could see. The extent of the Pathom Asoke property was such that at times there was a view beyond the immediate one. For example, through the area where the monk's quarters were built, there was a view of a reservoir beyond the trees and the huts.

VI.2.2.A. the entrance

The approach to Pathom Asoke was by a provincial highway and the entrance, much like that of Santi Asoke was unremarkable. It was simply a dirt road marked by a gazebo of the type which upcountry villagers often used as bus stops. As one drove in, there were rice fields on the right which belong to the *phutthasathan*. To the left was an unaffiliated farming community. Relations between the Chao Asoke and their neighbours were tense.

From the colour, it was clear which fields belonged to the Chao Asoke. Because they did not use chemical fertilisers or pesticides, the Asoke fields were not as vividly green as those of their neighbours. The Chao Asoke would complain that their neighbour's pesticides would leak onto their fields and the neighbours, in turn, complained that even when they fumigated their own fields, the vermin would simply retreat to the Asoke fields before returning.

There were accusations on both parts of property incursion. The neighbours had been there for generations and the Chao Asoke were viewed as newcomers to the land. The neighbours also did not understand the Asoke philosophy and were dismissive of the Chao Asoke's requests to respect Asoke rules. The neighbourhood women often bathed in plain view of the monks whose huts are adjacent to the neighbours' homes. At times the neighbours' chickens and other farm animals wandered on to the Asoke property and caused

minor but annoying damage. At other times, the neighbours would use the monks' latrines without cleaning up after themselves. In an effort to make peace, the neighbours once sponsored the Asoke monks for a meal to make merit. Because Asoke monks did not chant blessings after the alms were donated, the neighbours felt cheated. No matter how much the Chao Asoke explained that the act of donating food was merit making in and of itself, the neighbours left the ceremony annoyed and there was bad feeling between the two communities ever since.

VI.2.2.B. the store and the medicine hut

At the end of the rice fields bordering the entrance road, there was a shop similar to the Phalang Bun Company Store. The primary clientele is visitors. Residents of Pathom Asoke had a storehouse where provisions could be requisitioned; food for the Chao Asoke living on the *phutthasathan* is provided every morning free of charge. Some foodstuffs such as vegetable protein and vegetarian shrimp paste could be bought, but the majority of the merchandise (T-shirts, trousers, umbrellas, coconut shell bowls and spoons as well as clocks) are aimed more at what can only be described as the tourist market.

Across from the shop was a medicine hut where the community doctor practised. Homeopathic medicines were made here and the doctor, who was trained as a dentist, had a chair where she provided dental care for anyone who asked for it. Backpackers were known to come here for inexpensive dental work. As with all Asoke enterprises no profit was made so the doctor charged only for the medicines such as anaesthesia. I spent a morning in the medicine hut talking with the doctor and my Pathom Asoke guide. We passed our time peeling a

special type of banana and laying them on racks for drying in the sun. Eventually, the bananas would be ground into powder and shaped into pills as a cure for heart disease. As with all work at Pathom Asoke, the pace was steady, but very slow. While there, I rarely saw people idle. However, the work was done sporadically between conversation and seemed very inefficient when compared to the ongoing efforts of the publications office at Santi Asoke. The medicine hut had a thatched roof and rainwater, filtered through the thatch and considered medicinal, was collected in large barrels at the side of the hut. The doctor and Wantana, my guide at Pathom Asoke offered me some as they were helping themselves. The thatch water is brown and appears to have particles of dirt floating around in it, but tasted much better than expected. The thatch lent it a flavour much like herbal tea.

At the medicine hut, the road forked. I found out later that this road actually went full circle around the *phutthasathan*. The left fork led initially to the *ubosot/viharn*, passing the monks' area. Eventually this road connected the vegetable gardens, mushroom sheds, various factories, the rice mill and vegetable gardens before leading back to the medicine hut.

VI.2.2.C. the monks' area

The area where the monks' *kutis* were built was much like Santi Asoke with saplings planted in profusion although some of them had signs on them identifying the type of tree. Phothirak had a hut here as well, but it was indistinguishable from any of the other monks' huts, unlike at Santi Asoke where there was a clearing for followers to sit and listen to him speak. It was also in this area that one could find the Pathom Asoke version of the beautiful flowers

exhibit. In one of the monks' huts, there was a coffin which contained the body of the resident's mother. The coffin could be opened and visitors were allowed to look at the corpse inside. It was explained to me that the resident kept his mother's corpse because he wanted to remind himself that attachment to any person or object was futile and but a sensory illusion.

VI.2.2.D. the temple building

Beyond the monks' area was the *ubosot/viharn*. Architecturally, it bore little resemblance to a mainstream temple which had white plastered walls and crooked, tiered roofs. The Pathom Asoke *ubosot/viharn* was a wooden, two-storey building much like the administration building at Santi Asoke. The ground floor served as meeting hall and the first floor as the sacred area. In size, the building appeared bigger than the administration building at Santi Asoke, but I am unsure whether this was due to actual space or whether there were fewer signs and partitions to break up the line of sight. As with the main hall at Santi Asoke, there was a dais as wide as the building. It was here the monks conducted morning prayers and the entire community ate the single meal of the day together. The morning meal was cooked in a separate building nearby which served as a kitchen for the entire community.

The first floor of the main hall was much like at Santi Asoke. There was no Buddha image but there was a cabinet housing the Pali Canon. The room was otherwise empty. A veranda circled the first floor and young male visitors often slept there. On the night I spent at Pathom Asoke I stayed there with two other visitors. One was an army private visiting his mother and another was considering applying for monkhood with the Chao Asoke.

VI.2.2.E. the residential area

Across from the temple building was a building made of red brick. It was half completed and looked out of place due to the bits of Dutch-style ornamentation at the roof, windows and doors. This was meant to house a set of presses which were to print more Asoke publications. During the month and a half I spent studying the Chao Asoke, I never saw construction taking place on this building although several homes were being worked on in the residential area.

At the time of field work, the residential area was the fastest growing part of Pathom Asoke. There were two new houses near completion and several others were proposed. The new houses did not signify new members of the movement, however. Buying property to build required years of acquaintance with the Chao Asoke and there had to be consensual approval in order to apply for the right to buy land. Building the house also required the labour of fellow Chao Asoke since outside contractors were not allowed to work on the *phutthasathan*. Wantana inferred that there were enough experienced carpenters in residence and that the houses could be built without having to risk the trouble of outsiders' inappropriate behaviour on Asoke property. Houses were not uniform in size or design, but did follow certain building codes. For example, they had to be made primarily of wood and they had to be of a traditional Thai design. The residential area was well planned, however, with plots side by side. The area was bisected by a well-maintained dirt road which was probably wide enough to accommodate a Land Rover.

Each house was decorated as the owner saw fit although I saw no displays of extravagance. Wantana told me that residents were allowed to plant gardens within their compounds if they wished. Indeed, several houses had very pretty flowers growing in profusion. Furthermore Wantana told me that the gardens grown by Chao Asoke were not of the kind which required meticulous manicuring; those would be frowned upon. Rather, Asoke gardens were meant to resemble the forest and were more the type which were occasionally trimmed when the owner had a free moment.

Both the houses being built during my time with the Chao Asoke were quite large. One belonged to the doctor and diverged from most of the Asoke architecture by having gingerbread ornamentation. I was told that because the design was traditional, it was considered acceptable. For the most part, however, the residential buildings at Pathom Asoke were simple two storey houses which did not appear to be bigger than the average tract house in suburban Bangkok.

VI.2.2.F. Chamlong's house and the women's house

In marked contrast to the other residential houses was the weekend retreat of Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang. Modelled after an Asoke monk's hut, Chamlong's house was a centre of attraction. It stood in a clearing and, much like Phothirak's huts in Santi Asoke and Pathom Asoke, was made of palm thatch with removable walls. There was one difference, however, and that was that in Chamlong's house some of the floorboards could be removed, revealing a hole in the floor with a toilet bowl underneath. There was also a built-in chest to hold his personal belongings. It was unlocked and Wantana opened it to show me that there was little beyond soap and other basic personal items.

At Pathom Asoke there was the women's house for nuns and those single women who could not afford to buy plots of land. It was my understanding that at the time the nuns were petitioning to be allowed to build their own thatch huts. Several of my female informants lamented, however, that change came very slowly to the Chao Asoke and because there was a great majority of monks over nuns they would have to persist yet remain patient.

VI.2.2.G. the food production areas

Although Pathom Asoke had the most residents of any *phutthasathan*, the most remarkable feature was not the residential area, but the food production areas. There were four major places where food was grown for the community, all of which were cultivated according to Asoke rules. The most important Asoke rule was that no chemical fertilisers or pesticides were to be used for fear of killing any living creatures.

VI.2.2.G.a. the gardens

There were two types of vegetable garden at Pathom Asoke. One was the organic garden where vegetables were grown in rows alongside plants which would act as natural pest repellents. The garden struck me as quite small, not covering more than an acre. At the times I visited there were never more than two people working there at a time, tending to the vegetables grown there. The most successful plants in the organic vegetable garden were local varieties. Although there was talk of experimenting with varieties of lettuce, the plants which yielded the most produce were Thai varieties of eggplant and pumpkin.

The other vegetable garden was cultivated by the Fukuoka method, which was pioneered by a Japanese agriculturist. Fukuoka gardens do without ploughing, tilling, irrigating, fertilising or pest control. I was taken by the Fukuoka-cultivated garden and it looked just like jungle. The theory behind this method is that plants which are best suited to the environment are those which will yield the most produce in the long run. Therefore it is impractical to introduce varieties of plants which require special irrigation or fertilisers because these will only deplete the land. The answer is to literally cast the seeds about the ground, see what grows and then gather the food. Fukuoka gardens are left to grow by themselves without the benefit of human attention. In a large enough area of land, enough fruit and vegetables will be able to support a community. Most of the fruit at Pathom Asoke came from the Fukuoka garden which yielded, depending on the season, enough papaya and mango for the Chao Asoke to feed themselves with enough left over to sell in the market along with other produce grown or products manufactured on the *phutthasathan*.

VI.2.2.G.b. mushroom cultivation

By far the most productive food cultivation areas in Pathom Asoke were the mushroom sheds and boxes. There were actually three different areas for growing mushrooms. One was a greenhouse-like shed where the atmosphere was kept very warm and humid. Pipes set on a timer would release a spray of water every few minutes onto racks of plastic bags filled with sawdust. It was out of these bags of sawdust that certain varieties of mushrooms grew. The major demand on labour in this shed was the production of sawdust which could be reused but would have to be supplemented by fresh wood shavings. All of the

sawdust had to be sterilised before it would get packed into plastic bags and mushroom spores were introduced. The bags were then hung on racks and, with care, the mushrooms would grow out of the bottoms of the bags. Work in this shed was extremely labour intensive and required a fair amount of expertise. There was one man who managed all mushroom cultivation. He had two to three assistants working with him every day at each of the mushroom growing areas. Between the manager and his assistants, enough mushrooms were grown to feed the *phutthasathan* with a surplus sold at local markets and the Phalang Bun Company store.

The two other mushroom cultivation areas were underneath tents. Straw mushrooms were grown inside large aluminium tanks full of straw. After each harvest, the straw was replaced and new spores were introduced. Wood mushrooms were cultivated in a similar fashion but on logs which were kept in the ground. Spores were introduced into the wood and left to grow.

VI.2.3. Conclusion

As with all aspects of Asoke life, the *phutthasathans* were aimed at creating a society governed by the Buddha's teachings as interpreted by Phothirak. The emphasis on the *Vinaya* at the sacrifice of all traditional pastoral duties performed by monks in the mainstream or other movements was part of the self-conscious effort at creating a community of forest monks, but modernised. The Asoke ideal, then, was for life to be as close to a forest existence as possible, but with use of technology when appropriate and which would not compromise the forest existence.



Figure 25: Chao Asoke offering food to an Asoke nun (*sikhamat*).
It is possible to tell that this is a nun from her clothing.
Her robe has sleeves and her skirt is longer than the monk's robes.



Figure 26: Chao Asoke offering food to Asoke monks.
Note that the robes cover the entire body but are shorter than a nun's robes.



Figure 27: the residential district of Pathom Asoke viewed from the road that circumnavigates the *putthasatan*



Figure 28: the rice fields at Pathom Asoke.
Top: note the mechanical plough in the foreground.
The Chao Asoke make use of modern technology when necessary.
Bottom: men and women work side by side.

VI.3. *Wat Dhammakaya*

3.1. The World Dhammakaya Centre

As with the *phutthasathans*, the atmosphere at the World Dhammakaya Centre was carefully orchestrated in order to convey the movement's teachings. The plan of the temple, according to my informants at Wat Dhammakaya, was to create an idealised forest where one would be able to feel at total peace and would be able to meditate most effectively.

VI.3.1.A. the road to Dhammakaya

The World Dhammakaya Centre was located an hour and a half's drive north of Bangkok in Pathum Thani. When I first was introduced to the temple, the name was Wat Dhammakaya, with plans to build a Dhammakaya World which was inspired by Disneyland in Los Angeles. The object was to create a centre to teach Buddhism to as wide an audience as possible. It was not until later that the name World Dhammakaya Centre was chosen instead, concentrating on plans to build a Buddhist community, complete with housing projects and university. As far as I know, this change had nothing to do negotiations with the Mahatheerasamakom, but more to do with growth of the *wat's* more sophisticated following who were more supportive of plans to build a university than an amusement park.

Throughout the time I conducted research at the *wat*, the road leading there -- which was also the main artery leading to the north of Thailand -- was undergoing expansion from a six lane, pothole-pitted road to a twelve lane quadruple carriageway. This motorway initially led to Bangkok's Don Muang airport before serving as the route to Thailand's northern provinces. Urbanisation had come quickly to the areas the motorway cut through; when I

first began research, there were still rice fields to be seen beyond the cranes, cement mixers and clouds of dust. By the time I left Thailand, the motorway was the focus of 'ribbon development' or clusters of buildings which sprang up on the roadside only to hide agricultural property behind. The motorway became lined with row upon row of shophouses. A small, single storey house whose lawn had given way to pavement, still stood by the roadside in testament to more pristine times. Before reaching the turning to Wat Dhammakaya, there were several factories, golf courses, and university compounds; Bangkok University, Thammasat University and the Asian Institute of Technology all had suburban campuses in this area and were the object of many proselytising efforts.

At the time of fieldwork, the secondary road which branched off and led to Wat Dhammakaya had so far been untouched by the flurry of development. The entrance to the centre has since changed, as has the centre itself. Now there is a direct entrance from the motorway. The old entrance, however, was two lanes, but barely wide enough for a car to overtake a lorry. Canals running along deep ditches on both sides provided hazard to anyone contemplating parking on the road's soft shoulder. Here there were fruit orchards, vegetable gardens and rice paddy. All were parched brown by the intense heat, however, even during the rainy season. There didn't seem to be any use of the canals as irrigation, if greenery was a sign of such use. The occasional palm-thatched hut stood on stilts over the canals and some served as noodle restaurants for locals. The local police station passed on the way to the *wat* was made of concrete and painted a lurid pink. Until one reached Wat Dhammakaya, this was the only splash of colour to relieve the monotonously pervading brown of dried out vegetation.

The grounds of the World Dhammakaya Centre could be seen from far

off down the road because this was the only patch of intense green for miles around. Before reaching the entrance to the *wat* compound, one passed an immense, open field of turf with a grass-covered mound in the centre, about a kilometre away from the roadside. From the road to the *wat* entrance, one began to realise the extent of the Dhammakaya land holdings; the *wat* occupied approximately five hundred acres and it took a few minutes of driving on the secondary road before one even reached the access road to the proper entrance. As one drove past the mound, however, one could see a nine foot high Buddha image atop it with a golden arch curved over it. This was the *lan tham*, or the field of *dhamma*. During conflicts with local neighbours, this was the Buddha image which had been vandalised. Concentric circles of pathways radiated from the buddha-mound which was the hub. Canals had been dug in the turf lawns surrounding the mound and lighted fountains were occasionally turned on to keep the water from becoming stagnant. Larger ceremonies like the Makha Bucha festival (those involving more than ten thousand and up to as many as thirty thousand participants) took place here as well as meditation retreats. These ceremonies will be discussed in more detail in section VII.2.5 and VIII.3.

VI.3.1.B. the *boriwen nawk*

Because the grounds were actually divided into two sections, the inner temple area (*boriwen nai*) and the outside area (*boriwen nawk*), I will describe each in detail; both parts, including the *lan tham* which was in the *boriwen nawk* or outside area, will also be discussed in the descriptions of life at Wat Dhammakaya (section VII.2). At the time of fieldwork, the *wat* administration had been roundly criticised by the mainstream for segregation within the ranks of

monks in the temple. The senior monks mentioned earlier had quarters inside the temple compound while others were relegated the large thatched huts in the outside area. Aside from the thatched huts and the *lan tham*, the outer area was the location of the assistant abbot's office referred to as the Ahsom (the word Ahsom is derived from the term *ashram* meaning refuge), various other administrative offices, the lay worker's quarters, the bookstore, conference rooms, a thatched pavilion which covered roughly an acre of land and large marquees called the Sapha Dhammakaya (meeting place of the *dhammakaya*) used for a variety of purposes which will be discussed in the section VII.2. There are also garages for heavy equipment such as cranes and nurseries to supply cut flowers and potted plants to the buildings in the temple. Corrugated metal caravans were parked in this area to provide housing to hired construction workers who were not devotees of the movement.

The Dhammadayada monks (who will be discussed further in section VII.2.5) were the primary occupants of the monks' quarters in the *boriwen nawk*. The other monks who lived in this area were those wishing to become disciples of Wat Dhammakaya, having finished the Dhammadayada programme and refusing to defrock, or those wishing to become part of the Dhammakaya organisation but had not yet become senior enough in the administration to earn quarters in the *boriwen nai*. Although this division had been a subject of contention with the mainstream, at the time of fieldwork segregation and discrimination was actually a source of success for Wat Dhammakaya. Most of my informants, even those who were uneducated, felt that it was good that monks were required to have both intellectual and worldly knowledge before taking vows and, only after having proved their willingness and ability to leave

the material world behind, should a true monk be considered a senior member of the wat and be allowed the right of access into the inner part of the temple grounds.

Ten years on, the *boriwen nawk* is now changed beyond recognition. Aside from the new entrance which is directly connected to the motorway, the Sapha Dhammakaya has been replaced by a building which appears the size of a football stadium. A project to build the world's largest gold stupa has been initiated and this lies beyond the stadium-like structure. The *lan tham* has been expanded to accommodate at least 100,000 people.

VI.3.1.C. the *boriwen nai*

Although the atmosphere in both inner and outer sections was much the same — that of pervading calm — they had slightly different characters. The *boriwen nai*, which occupies approximately twenty acres of land, was much more formal and was associated with the temple's senior members. Because space was visually divided by ponds, trees, and paths, one had the sense that there always was more to see. The outside section, or *boriwen nawk*, was characterised by wide, open space. There were no walls and very few tall trees; it was possible to see the roofs of buildings kilometres away because there was little to obstruct vision. Unlike the inside, one could never lose one's way because one could always see where one was.

VI.3.1.D. the entrance

Like all parts of the Dhammakaya property, the access road to the proper entrance was carefully manicured. Small, newly planted palm trees lined the

right side of the road which was also edged by a wide irrigation canal. A tall, white wall on the other side surrounded the inner section. Through a grand, wrought iron gate wide enough for two cars to pass, the *ubosot* lay at the end of a five hundred metre-long, tree-lined boulevard. Surrounding it were tall trees, artificial lakes and turf lawns as far as the eye could see. The effect was breathtaking, considering that just beyond the wall was parched farmland. This, I was told, was the forest created by Wat Dhammakaya.

VI.3.1.E. the *ubosot*

Compared to mainstream Thai Buddhist temples, the *ubosot* at Wat Dhammakaya was severely modernist in the western architectural sense of the term. Built from concrete, it was a graceful white structure devoid of traditional detailed ornamentation (e.g. a tiered roof, gold leaf woodwork or colourful tiling) but resembling a traditional temple in almost every other way. The floor plan followed those of the mainstream temples as did a balustraded terrace surrounding the building. Eight leaf-shaped *sima* stones demarcated the temple boundaries in the manner of mainstream temples. One of the monks who walked around with me the first time I visited pointed out that all the details in a traditional temple (the terrace and *sema* stones) were present at the Dhammakaya *ubosot* but in modern style. The decision to adopt this type of architecture was made in order to create a symbol of modern Thai Buddhism. In fact, some of the Dhammakaya literature bore a logo based on the design of the *ubosot*'s roofline.

VI.3.1.F. the grounds

Aside from the temple building the *boriwen nai* was also the site for

artificial ponds and a waterfall, the quarters of the life-long monks, the public relations centre, the film production centre, the kitchens, various pavilions and administrative buildings. It was here that the landscaping was most extensive; trees had been planted to the extent that it was often impossible to see one building from another. People, including — as mentioned before — monks, rode bicycles from place to place on concrete footpaths which meandered through the property.

During the week, the atmosphere at Wat Dhammakaya was almost eerily quiet; the only sound that truly could be heard throughout the inner grounds was the ringing of a large bell at eleven in the morning which called the monks to their pre-noon meal. On my first visit I wandered behind the *ubosot* to one of the ponds. Five hundred metres across the water, on the other bank, about twenty monks sat in meditation. Their immaculate, bright orange robes stood out in contrast to the green trees that sheltered them and the immaculate lawns beneath them. They were so still that the only sound to be heard was that of greenery rustling in a gentle breeze. While this surely was not staged for my benefit, it was an example of the self-conscious emphasis on order and peace which pervaded the temple. Outward manifestations of serenity were very carefully orchestrated and the effect of beauty was a goal to impress upon visitors and devotees that the *wat* manifested order and serenity. According to my Dhammakaya informants, creating physical manifestations of serenity was of the utmost importance in order for the atmosphere to be conducive to proper meditation and access to the *dhammakaya* within us all.

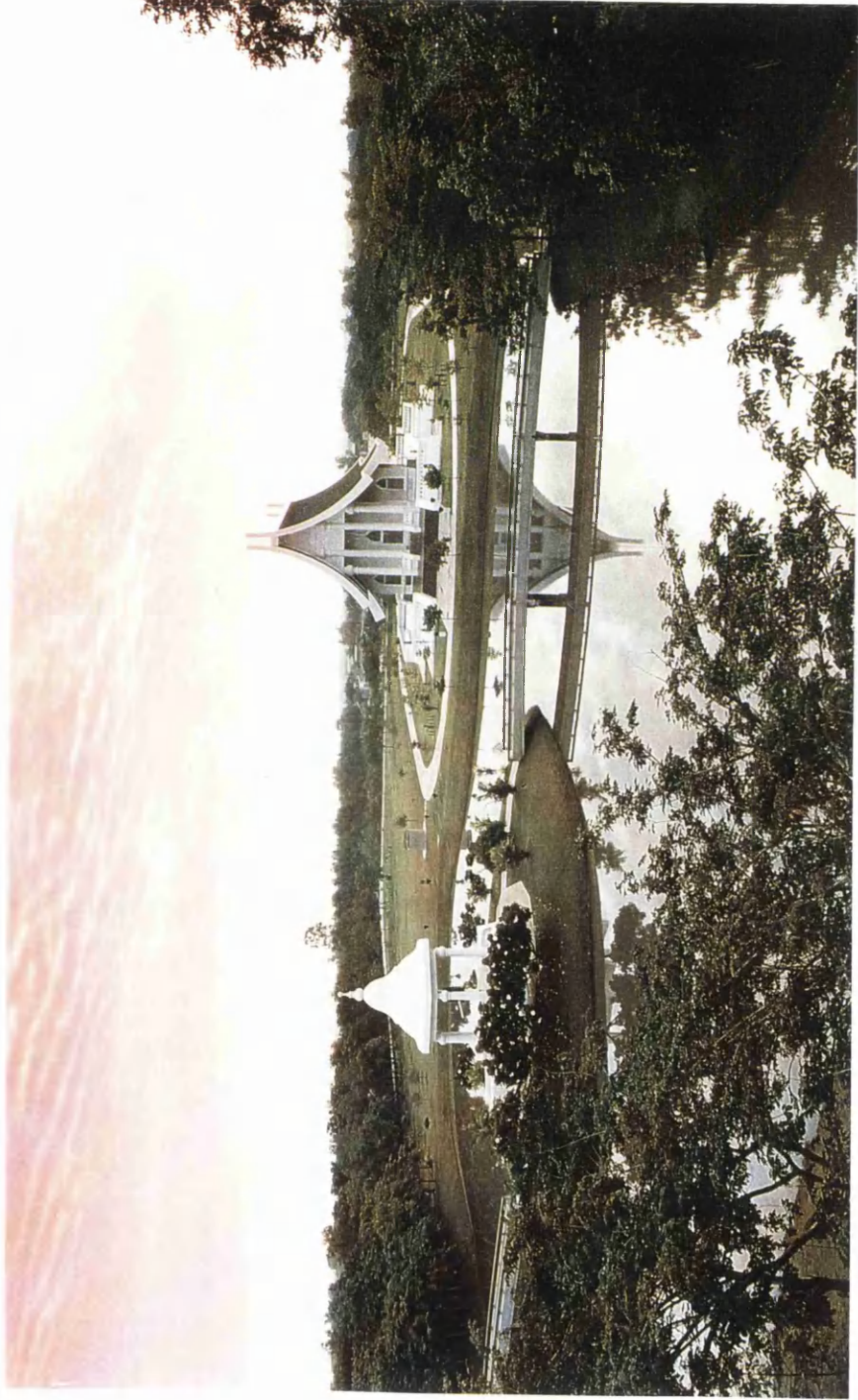
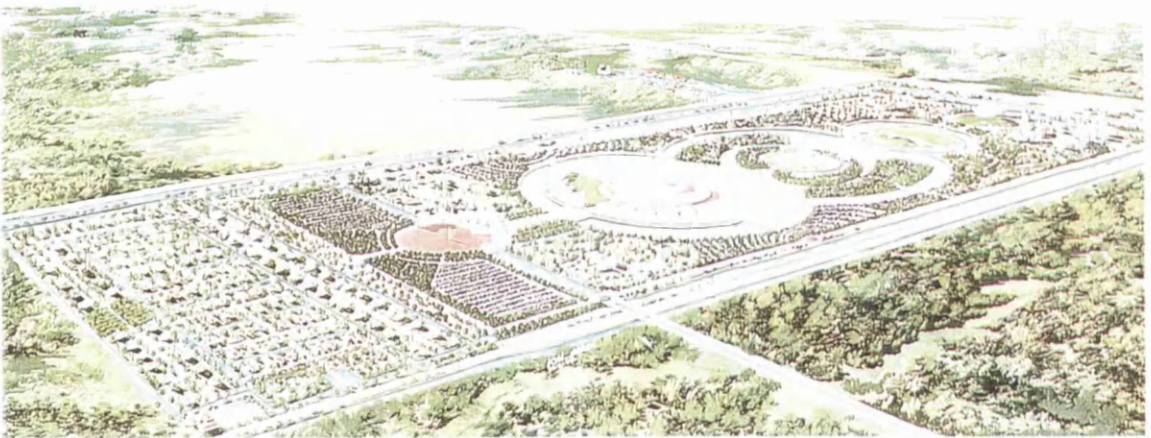


Figure 29: the landscaped grounds of the *borivien nai* at Wat Dhammakaya

Dhammakāya World



APPENDIX The Foundation has no affiliation with any political party or to any political cause. Dhammakaya Foundation was admitted to become an associate member of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, during its 15th Convention held in Kathmandu, Nepal, on the 27th of November 1986.



30; an illustration of the plans for Dhammakaya World
Note: the disclaimer was considered necessary at the time due to the investigations involving the movement.

VI.4. *Comparisons and Contrasts: Ideal Environments*

The mainstream temples described in this section were certainly not typical; they were the best. The National Council on Social Welfare sent me to them because these were ideal city and village temples just as Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya were the showcase temples for the new movements. At Wat Dhammakaya, informants would speak repeatedly of the appearance of temple grounds and monks; I often heard that one would feel at peace upon encountering them — the grounds were described as orderly, well-kept, beautiful and modern-looking. Another point of praise was that informants found not a trace of frivolity in either monks or grounds. The monks all had been well-educated, were aware of what it was they renounced, and therefore were more fit to help solve the problems of modern life when performing pastoral duties. At Santi Asoke, however, little was said by my informants about the grounds and the monks. Most of the praise was heaped on Phothirak and his teaching. As the physical manifestations of this teaching, however, the *phutthasathans* and Asoke monks had the appropriate austerity of appearance to fortify Phothirak's personal reputation.

Although their members often spoke of feeling in opposition to one another due to one movement's purposely rustic image and Christian-like work ethic and the other's modern, minimalist image and concentration on meditation, I found it interesting that both Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya chose to depict themselves as forest temples, albeit in different types of idealised forests. As stated earlier, forest monks were those believed to have minimal involvement in the lay community. This lack of involvement was meant to signify religious virtuosity or superior adherence to the *Vinaya* due to fewer pastoral duties and

liabilities of corruption through contact with the outside world. While many lay devotees of the mainstream seemed to feel that a monk would adhere to the precepts as a matter of course, the new movements made a special effort to illustrate their superior adherence through their monastic styles and the styles of their communities. The creation of a physical atmosphere allowed a layman to experience a monk's or movement's religious ideal without individual, one on one interaction between a monk and a layman. Although both were communities revolving around a religion-oriented life, by simply being at Wat Dhammakaya or in one of the *phutthasathans*, a layman could experience a new movement through the atmosphere without even speaking to a monk.

VII. Life with the New Movements

While movements like Wat Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke claimed, at the time of field work, over four hundred thousand followers each, the majority of Thai Buddhists -- those who followed the mainstream -- numbered fifty-eight million or so. The historical and anthropological discussions of the role of the mainstream, the mainstream monks and their activities in earlier sections of this thesis were meant to serve not only as comparative information on the role of the Sangha in Thai society but also as a basis of comparison with the following account of life among the new movements. The existence of differences in the mainstream indicates that contemporary lay demands on religion and styles of monk continued to be fragmented throughout the country. Indeed, the debate on the proper practice of modern Buddhism has taken place for nearly a thousand years now, beginning with the legendary introduction of Buddhist missionaries from the court of King Asoka. In the past few decades, there have been attempts at giving Buddhism a more civically involved role in Thai society by increasing monks' pastoral duties through involvement in the lay community, if not through the Thammathut and Thammajarik programmes then through such similar activities as Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong programmes. Many feel that this move away from an image of seclusion will taint the Sangha by corrupting the ascetic ideal. Others, however, feel that increased civic activity is the only way the Sangha will maintain relevance in contemporary Thailand. The new movements distinguish themselves from the mainstream by providing a stronger image previously found in religious antecedents in Thai Buddhism, both in the religious styles of their monks and their landscape. The major difference between the new movements and the mainstream, however, is that the new

movements have established their own ideal communities which live according to the movement's interpretation of Buddhist scripture. Mainstream *wats*, however, are a part of the community, serving as monasteries for monks or ceremonial centres for the laity, never as utopias in and of themselves. As discussed in the previous section on temples, the creation of an atmosphere allowed a new movement to be experienced by lay devotees without interaction with a monk. The following section discusses the life within the new movement communities in order to describe the individual layman's religious experience not only through interaction with fellow new movements members but also through his own practice, whether it is the observation of the *silas* at Santi Asoke or meditation at Wat Dhammakaya.

VII.1. *Life Among the Chao Asoke*

In comparison to the teachings of the mainstream Sangha, Santi Asoke presents laymen with a more rigorous code of behaviour. Their lives are much more restricted and involved in temple affairs because their conduct answers only to religious tenets. The difficulty in living the Asoke life is reflected in the fact that many of the Chao Asoke who do not live in the *phutthasathans* adhere only partially to the rules, although complete adherence to the Asoke way of life is a goal for which they strive continuously. Because the Asoke rules are a more rigorous interpretation of the *silas*, which are familiar to the Buddhist people of Thailand, it seems that the Chao Asoke take Thai religious life to extremes. (They are certainly perceived as religious extremists (*khreng pai*) by the general public because they observe vows unnecessarily strict in the practice of Buddhism. In fact, because they are seen as uncompromising, the Chao Asoke

are considered, in a way, un-Buddhist.) Prawase Wasi, a prominent religious scholar, among other accomplishments, has astutely remarked that the Chao Asoke elevate the *silas* as the essential part of the Buddha's teachings and base their philosophy on this aspect of Buddhism to the neglect of others (Prawase, 1987). It could be said that the Chao Asoke are fundamentalists and, indeed by concentrating on a particular part of the Pali Canon, by rejecting the norms of mainstream Buddhism, by secluding themselves in the *phutthasathans* and by adapting modern technology to fit their own ideology, they meet most of the criteria discussed by Caplan (1987), but the absence of an unquestionable religious text to which they could refer suggests that they do not meet those of Barr (1995) or E. Gellner (1992).

This popular image of Asoke extremism and fundamentalism is not without impact on Thai society in general, most notably in the attitude toward the Asoke monks. Transgressions which are ignored in normal monasteries are strictly prohibited in the *phutthasathans*, causing repercussions on the expectations of monks beyond the scope of Santi Asoke. With the constant spate of scandals which rocked the mainstream during field work, it seemed that the uncompromising strictness of the Asoke monks was the only way to maintain standards of monkhood in Thailand. Although the members of the Sangha administration publicly denounced Phothirak and his teachings, most of the monks I spoke to seemed to feel that Santi Asoke were good because they encouraged the Thai public to think about Buddhism as a social issue relevant to daily life. The majority of lay people I spoke to seemed to have the attitude of puzzlement when it came to understanding the persecution of Phothirak. A question that I, as someone who was meant to know about such matters, was

asked quite often was ‘If he teaches people to be good. what is the harm in him?’
(*Tha puea khao sorn hai khon pen khon dee man pen arai pai?*)

The difference between life on the *phutthasathans* and the world outside is not a subtle one. Everything about life is different from language to daily routine. The lives of the Chao Asoke are intimately intertwined with Phothirak’s ethic of asceticism and self denial. Their language is peppered with terms Phothirak has coined which are in use only among the Chao Asoke. For example, their greeting and farewell is not *sawasdee* as it is elsewhere in Thailand, but *jaroen tham* which means may your adherence to the *dhamma* prosper. Fraternity, or *pharadoraphahb*, is a goal of all Chao Asoke. To practise Buddhism, or to *patibat*, is to live by Phothirak’s interpretation of the *Vinaya*. Using special Asoke terms is a means of separating the Chao Asoke from outsiders. The use of language in this case is, as Turton points out, actually a process of power within the community signifying inclusion or exclusion (1991b, p2).

Because they live it themselves, the Chao Asoke understand the sacrifice and difficulty that this interpretation involves. They strongly believe, however, that their method of *patibat* is the right way to achieve peace of mind and will challenge anyone to try it. The conviction that the understanding and renunciation of sensory illusion will lead to ultimate freedom has led the Chao Asoke to give up lives in the outside world to lead radically different ones sometimes in their own homes, but usually in the *phutthasathans*.

VII.1.1. Asoke administration

Phutthasathan administration is divided between sacred and profane.

Although the communities are ultimately run by monks, laymen also have representation. Community officials are chosen through consensus and often people are pressed into duty. The doctor at Pathom Asoke had been chosen as the lay leader for a few years in a row although she always attempted to decline the responsibility. Each time the rest of the community pressed her into service and one occasion the *phutthasathan* abbot had to intervene, asking her to reconsider her refusal to serve her community whereupon she capitulated. (I found that the term *sompharn* which is the title used for the position of abbot at Pathom Asoke is one that is generally used in village monasteries and is a self-conscious reference to village temples whereas the more elegant term *jao awat* was normally used for the abbot of a city temple although they basically mean the same thing.)

The induction of the doctor into public service seemed to me an example of how Asoke society was kept in order by public pressure towards consensus. People lived by Phothirak's teachings and if anybody was seen to be doing anything counter to those rules there would be no overt confrontation but once word got out that others disapproved, the offending person would change to avert criticism. If there were greater disputes, a conference would be called and the monastic leaders would decide on a solution.

VII.1.1.A. dispute settlement

When I stayed at Pathom Asoke, there was a conference after the morning meal which was called by the *phutthasathan* leaders to settle a dispute between two residents. I was not allowed to attend this meeting and, despite vigorously questioning Wantana, was unable to find out much about the nature of

the dispute except that it involved property. I was told, however, that disputes rarely need to be brought before the community leaders since people in the *phutthasathans* all lived by the Buddha's teaching and would try to work out the problems among themselves as much as possible. The monks were only called upon when completely impartial mediation was necessary. Conferences to settle disputes were segregated by sex, with men and women settling their own problems. Only when a dispute involved both sexes was the abbot called in to officiate. Fifteen people were on the Pathom Asoke community council, although not all had to be full-time residents. Such meetings took place in the main hall of the temple building right after the day's meal.

VII.1.2. an enduring lifestyle

Although Phothirak was their leader and their teacher, the Asoke lifestyle eventually subsumed his importance to the Chao Asoke because, having learned enough of Phothirak's teachings to practice without him, their continuing was no longer dependent on him. Most of my informants insisted that they would continue even if Phothirak were to be jailed or executed. Prayers were said every morning and every evening at the Pathom Asoke main hall. (I assume that this was the case at Santi Asoke as well, but my schedule there was never such that I was present for evening prayers.) The *mantras* themselves were the same as morning prayers at mainstream temples with the exception of a Thai translation recited after every line of Pali. This translation was Phothirak's and not the same as what I often heard at other temples which was a point of contention with the mainstream. Eventually the parts which did not correspond with the mainstream translations were changed.

VII.1.3. the daily schedule and activities

The day at Pathom Asoke would begin with morning prayers at around 4am when a bell would toll to call everyone to the *ubosot/viharn*. Prayers began when a large enough group arrived. A few latecomers would trickle in, but for the most part, the community was very conscientious about arriving on time. People sat on the floor in neat rows with men in the front and women in back. The seating arrangement was not assigned by individual status but rather by group affiliations. More senior members of the community would sit in the forward rows of their sections and the younger members would sit behind. For example, even though she was the lay leader of the *phutthasathan*, the doctor sat behind all the men but in the front of the women's section. Evening prayers would follow much the same order.

VII.1.3.A. the daily meal

The daily meal at Pathom Asoke followed the morning prayers. Warning me beforehand not to be surprised by how much everyone ate, Wantana seemed proud that all visitors seemed to find the huge amount of food consumed by each person a source of amazement. Despite all attempts at being objective, I must say that I was astonished by the size of the daily meal. Basins which were normally used for washing up and must have had a capacity of at least two to three gallons were filled to the brim with food and consumed, even by the women. Vegetarian dishes of all kinds would be piled into the bowl until it was overflowing. As stated earlier, the Asoke food was delicious, but it was eaten all mixed up in that one basin in order to emulate monks who ate all of their food

from one alms bowl. I was told that the reason everyone ate so much was that daily labour was hard and everyone needed energy to perform their tasks. The food was placed in large aluminium serving trays which had wheels attached to them. The monks were the first to take some and then the trays were pushed along the rows of laymen who would fill their bowls to the brim. Unlike in the mainstream where food must be offered to monks by laymen, monks help themselves to food directly from the same serving trays as the rest. Several lines of food were going at once so I could not see any immediate priority as to who among the lay Chao Asoke was allowed to eat first.

Most of the food was grown on the *phutthasathan* but vegetables often would have to be bought from the market at Nakhorn Pathom when the vegetable gardens did not yield enough produce. Eggs and other dairy products were not consumed at Pathom Asoke unless by children who needed the extra protein. Although the Chao Asoke insisted that their eating habits were healthier than those of others, I strongly question this due to the doctor's confession that by far the greatest number of complaints she treated were digestive.

The food was prepared at a kitchen close to the main hall by those who chose this particular task as their contribution to the community. (I asked about work assignments at the *phutthasathans* and Wantana told me that there were none. People would do whatever work they wished. I assume, however, considering the consensual decision-making process, that people would feel the pressure of the community to take on whatever task the community decided was appropriate, much like the doctor was pressured into assuming administrative leadership.) Approximately ten people, both men and women, would rise at 3am to help a head cook (who was a woman) prepare the day's meal. They would

then join the morning prayer session before everyone would help to bring the food out into the main hall. As with Santi Asoke, there was an area off to the side which served as the cleaning area. Eating basins, cleaned by rinsing first in soapy water and then in clean water, were left to dry in racks.

VII.1.3.B. sexual relations

The Chao Asoke are not meant to have sexual relations because lust was believed to be sensory illusion. I asked Wantana about the families living at Pathom Asoke and she pointed out that one woman came to live in the *phutthasathan* with her children after her marriage failed. The other families who lived on the premises were allowed to grow if the parents wished to have more children. The fact that the couple were having sexual relations did not effect their standing in the community in any way other than their status in religious achievement.

VII.1.3.C. a day's work

There was never a shortage of labour at Pathom Asoke. Asoke fields enjoyed an abundance of labourers to tend them. On one of my visits, I went into the rice fields to help out with the work, but with the twenty to thirty other people working together, there was little for me to do. I ended up in conversation with a group of young Chao Asoke who kept asking when I would be coming to live with them forever. One of them pointed at some fish swimming about in the paddy and asked me if I had ever seen live fish in a field before. I had to say that I had never even been in a rice field before. Then another asked if I had ever slept in as cool a breeze or as free from worry as I had

when I spent the night at Pathom Asoke. Their argument was that I would have all the food I could ever want to eat, I would have shelter and I would have clothing and friends. What more could I want? At that point I found myself the closest I ever got to wanting to give up everything to live permanently with the people I studied. The attraction of Asoke life became clear to me.

While there was work to do throughout the day at Pathom Asoke, it was not marred by any pressure. The only interruption during the day was the moment of reflection which made life even more low key. There were no deadlines and when things needed to be rushed as with that day I went to help in the rice fields, most of the labour force would join in and everything would be done quickly. In general, the Chao Asoke seemed to want for little and had a great deal of spare time. The other food production areas often needed very little full-time tending. Although work at the mushroom sheds was labour intensive, the vegetable gardens were often deserted.

The Chao Asoke involved in cultivation were the younger people in the community. While there were people who appeared to be in their late forties when we were in the rice fields, almost all the others I saw working in food cultivation were in their twenties, with the exception of the mushroom manager who was aged in his forties. Although I was told women worked in the organic garden I saw none. All of the people working in mushroom cultivation were men.

Young people were also employed in the proselytising efforts of the sect. Any Asoke publications or tapes were often sold by the younger members of the community. On one visit, I recall one group of youths (both male and female) going off on bicycles to sell tapes of Phothirak's teachings in Nakhorn Pathom.

All labour at the *phutthasathans* was for the good of the community so no one earned wages.

Most of the older people at Pathom Asoke worked in factories. Several elderly ladies or women with children worked at home in the residential area making clothing. I saw several sewing machines on the ground floor of one of the houses but this was not a formal factory. Apparently, the sewing machines had been moved here because the women liked having company while they worked. Otherwise, elderly men made baskets and elderly women made umbrellas. I asked about this segregation of the sexes and Wantana told me the men preferred to make baskets and the women preferred to make umbrellas. Judging from the assembly lines at Santi Asoke where men and women work side by side, I would assume that if there were any sexual division of labour, it was not dictated by the community but rather by the desire of individuals to work and spend time with their own sex.

VII.1.3.D. day's end

The day at Pathom Asoke ended where it began, the main hall in the *ubosot/viharn*. At the end of the day, a television was turned on for those who wished to watch. A show would be selected for viewing and then at the end, a discussion would be held on the immorality of the world outside as depicted on the show. On the night I was there, discussion was half-hearted, however. The day had been a tiring one and most of the people wanted to get to bed since they would have to be up early the next day. By 9pm, most of the community was in bed asleep.

VII.1.4. technology, modernisation and the practising of Buddhism

Asoke life was full of innovations which were unexpected in a movement which practised a back-to-basics approach to life. Modern technology was in use throughout the *phutthasathans* in the form of computers and printing presses. At Pathom Asoke a mechanical rice mill was in use along with modern mushroom cultivation techniques. According to Asoke informants, the technological solutions were in keeping with the teachings of Phothirak because they were adopted in the name of self-sufficiency and efficiency.

Phothirak was unafraid to introduce new thought and technology into the Asoke communities even though the innovations may have been counter to either the mainstream Sangha or society at large. Phothirak did not deny the outside influences on his teaching. The adoption of many practices previously unknown to Thai Buddhism was justified by the benefit to asceticism and self-sufficiency. One such imported idea was the Asoke work ethic. Over and over again my guides at both *phutthasathans* would proudly tell me about how none of the Chao Asoke was ever idle. It was as if the Protestant work ethic were adopted. The appeal of such a work ethic will be discussed in the conclusion, section IX.2.

VII.1.5. the monastic lifestyle among the Chao Asoke

Even monks contributed to the labour force and during the afternoons, if someone had nothing to do, he would find something to do. In fact, on one occasion I happened to go to the temple building at Santi Asoke because an informant thought it might be a quiet place to talk without disturbing others. When we opened the door, two monks who had been napping hastily got up and

pretended to be at work cleaning. My informant told me that the monks were ill and their resting was an exception to the rule. I found it interesting that the monks at rest would have to pretend to be at work and that a member of the community would have to justify their resting. At no other temple was there a work ethic which involved monks as well. The lay community is meant to support a monk's efforts at reaching *nibbana*. Such efforts are impossible if the monk is expected to contribute to the labour force.

Close observation of the way a monk lives, not only at Santi Asoke, but at other temples as well, is considered to be the most effective method in discerning whether or not that monk is exemplary and worthy of a following. With this in mind, Phothirak used his media experience successfully to promote the Asoke image of asceticism beyond those immediately in contact with him personally. Through the media, public scrutiny was invited in all aspects of Phothirak's life. All of Phothirak's worldly possessions were on show at his quarters. Indeed, one could actually sit in his hut and examine them. It was proudly pointed out to me that there are no pillows or mats and that his alms bowl and spoon were made from coconut shells. That Phothirak was seen to conspicuously practice the asceticism he preached was often pointed out as proof that he was a holy man of the highest order and worthy of a devoted following.

VII.1.6. conclusion

According to the Chao Asoke, the reason their movement was tolerated for over ten years was the forest precedent in Thai Buddhism. (The precise date of the founding of the movement is unclear; some date it from the time of Phothirak's renouncing the mainstream Sangha in 1975, others from the time the

Santi Asoke *phutthasathan* was established a year later.) The Chao Asoke insisted that in founding the movement Phothirak was not doing anything out of the ordinary, rather, he was establishing a community based on the practice of forest monks or Heinze's Ariya Sangha (1977). The life at the *phutthasathans* was lived according to Phothirak's particular interpretation of this precedent. The point made by the Asoke monk who referred to Heinze's work was that Phothirak's teachings and practices were not that different from Buddhist precedents in Thailand; they were simply more rigorous interpretations of the forest tradition. The Chao Asoke felt their persecution was a political move against the Palang Dhamma Party and that the proceedings against the movement were unjustified. In general, it seemed my informants at Santi Asoke felt that they would be vindicated if only people would examine their way of life.

Considering Bunnag's observations on a Thai monk's pastoral duties (1973), Phothirak's mission, if it could be said that he had a mission, was to improve Thai society by making individuals better human beings. His outspokenness on politics and his criticism of the mainstream Sangha, while obviously a means to that end, made more of an impact than his teachings, unfortunately. Many see the persecution of the Chao Asoke as due more to Phothirak's candour than his heterodoxy.



Figure 31: daily labour at Pathom Asoke: (clockwise from the top right) planting at the organic vegetable garden; cooking in the kitchen; fetching water from the irrigation canal; spinning cotton for clothing (the Chao Asoke do not wear silk because it harvesting the silk kills the worm).



Figure 32: Chamlong (centre) and Phothirak (third right) surveying the construction at Pathom Asoke. Note that monks also take part in labour; they are wearing brief robes in order to facilitate their tasks.



Figures 33 and 34: a meeting at the *ubosot/viharn* of Pathom Asoke

VII.2. Life at Wat Dhammakaya

This section not only expands on previous discussions of the Dhammakaya meditation technique, but also discusses the teaching methods at Wat Dhammakaya to provide an understanding of the lifestyle advocated there. Unlike Santi Asoke, Wat Dhammakaya, at the time of field work, was not yet a community but a retreat. Plans to construct a condominium project for devotees had not yet materialised. The following sections describe special events which are significant to the Dhammakaya devotee.

VII.2.1. modern Buddhism

The appeal of Wat Dhammakaya is that the temple succeeds in adapting traditional Thai Buddhism to modern life in a way that is relevant to middle class values. Dhammakaya iconography, as seen in one of the movement's logos based on the roofline of the *ubosot*, is a good example of how the organisation blends the traditional with the modern. The simplified roofline is very clearly a Thai temple, but minimalist enough to indicate a modern place of worship unlike traditional temples in the mainstream. Indeed, the religious teaching and services available to laymen at Wat Dhammakaya take modern Thai life into account in ways the mainstream do not. Unlike the mainstream practice of holding religious ceremonies on *wan phra*, or holy days which sometimes fall in the middle of the week, Wat Dhammakaya ceremonies take place on Sundays in order to accommodate those who work and children who go to secular schools which are not in temples (as was traditional). The aim is to provide a place for a family to worship together when all members are free to do so at the same time. The Dhammakaya teachings are different from mainstream temples not only in the emphasis on meditation, but in the emphasis on performing rituals properly and

ceremonies in their entirety. The proselytisation programme reaches more people through the use of modern media such as videotapes and publications. Much of the movement's media and administrative work is done on computer. Most importantly, the *wat* has taken such problems as transportation into consideration by bussing devotees in from the provinces and providing a supportive network of human contacts to continue the proselytising efforts.

While the focus of teaching is primarily meditation, there is also a scriptural lesson which is taught at the *wat* to a select number of people. Throughout my nine months there, however, I attended only one such lesson which involved the *Tipitaka*. This lesson was the one arranged for my benefit on my first visit to the *wat*. Thereafter, the Pali Canon never played a significant role in any lessons during the time I spent there. I suspect that the scriptural lesson had been prepared and was delivered on occasions when *wat* officials felt the need to impress visitors demanding a scriptural basis for the Dhammakaya teachings. Without exception, my Dhammakaya informants were never interested in scripture; they devoted their efforts only to meditation. It seemed that scripture was irrelevant.

VII.2.2. *patibat tham*: meditation as practice

Throughout my time at Wat Dhammakaya, it was inferred that teaching the country to meditate would improve society by bringing everyone closer to the Buddha's teachings. When people actively try to rid themselves of *kilet* (appetites) the entire world will become a better place and the best way to rid oneself of appetites is to meditate. So Buddhism is not a path to follow which will improve just Thailand, but the world. This is why Wat Dhammakaya

became the World Dhammakaya Centre. It is to improve the world that the temple needs to expand. Luang Por Tatta asked me not to look at Buddhism as a religion or way of life but to look upon it as a description of the truth (*khwam jing*). Considering my own grappling with the concept of truth, it seemed interesting that the assistant abbot should use this term. By truth, however, I took Luang Por Tatta to mean religious although I later found out he meant western, scientific, empirical truth. One is challenged to try the Dhammakaya meditation technique to find the truth for oneself because, according to Luang Por Tatta, the two were one and the same (see section **IV.2.2**).

As mentioned in section **IV.3.1**, meditating is considered a merit making activity. At Wat Dhammakaya, the phrase *patibat tham*, or performance of dhamma is synonymous with meditation because it is a pursuit of the physical manifestation of the Buddha's Dhamma within each individual. Unlike mainstream temples, which preach the positive effects of meritorious actions on future incarnations, the rewards of merit at Wat Dhammakaya are promised not in the next lifetime, but this one. Here, the benefits of merit seem almost finite and quantifiable judging from talk about how specific merit-making activities have specific rewards. I will discuss the Dhammakaya interpretation of the rewards of merit in further detail in section **VII.2.3**.

The Wednesday group would have weekly meditation lessons on Thursday. Throughout the time of my fieldwork there, I would join in these sessions as well. Correct posture was very important and much was made of those who were able to assume the meditation position properly and appeared *sai*. Although the Wednesday group were given special meditation lessons every Thursday, Wat Dhammakaya offered Dutanga or *tudong* retreats for any who

wished to join. This retreat bore little resemblance to the lifestyle discussed earlier in work by Carrithers (1983b) and Taylor (1993b). A description of one such retreat follows later in section VII.2.7. but Dutanga week-ends consisted primarily of meditation lessons.

In a private moment, however, my aunt admitted to me that many people, herself included, had never been able to see the crystal ball after years of meditation. I myself, had one very limited experience with visualisation and found it highly disconcerting. On one occasion when I began to reach a deep meditative state, I saw a sudden, bright flash of light in the pit of my stomach. I awoke with such a start that the monk conducting the lesson noticed and asked what was wrong. Apparently my reaction was not unusual and I was told that I was on the threshold to greater achievement in meditation. The ladies of the Wednesday group were all extremely pleased for me. Unfortunately, I was so put off by the experience that I never reached that state again.

While my experience with the Dhammakaya method of meditation was not particularly successful, many others among my informants did feel that there were positive efforts. Although I never spoke to her about it, I was told that Khun Pa Mali felt it kept her cancer in remission. Another did not experience much visualisation but found that her young daughter was able to see not only angels but also the house spirit and spirits of the dead.

Although I question the seriousness of the comment, Khun Na Sutee showed up late one day and spoke about how she was meditating and invoking the abbot's name in traffic to get it to flow better. The belief in the meditation was such that this is but one of many such comments I would hear on a regular

basis. When questioned about whether they actually believed that meditating would help traffic, no one would say so but Khun Pa Mali felt it couldn't hurt.

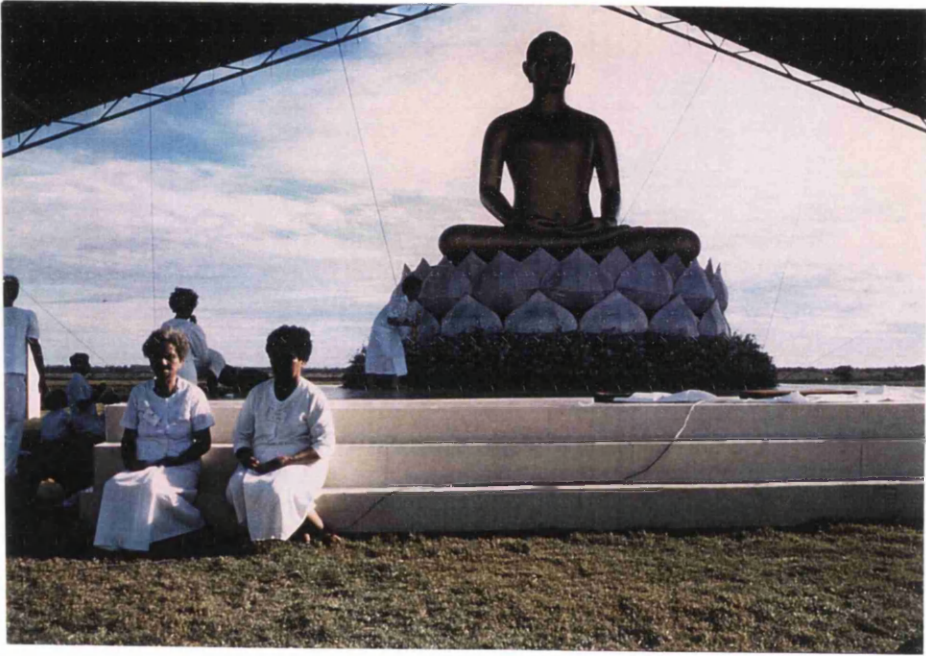


Figure 35: upcountry visitors posing for the camera as if meditating at the *lan tham* on the morning of the Visakha Buja day 1989, before Luang Phee Sudhamo's ordination. A marquee has been erected to provide protection for the image of the Buddha in meditation.

VII.2.3. raising money

After meditation, the next greatest method of making merit is to contribute money to the temple because this was the means of spreading the Buddha's teaching to others. The lay workers who devoted their lives to Wat Dhammakaya were taught to raise funds on behalf of the monks who could not do so due to their strict adherence to the precepts which prohibit accepting gold or silver. The *wat* lay administration was a well-oiled machine for soliciting and dispersing funds in the name of Buddhism. While meditating would bring rewards in this lifetime, the descriptions of merit were clearest when involving fund raising. It was as if merit was a type of investment. *Wat* workers told stories of millionaires who gave their entire fortunes to the movement and, in so doing, gained enough merit that they built new, even bigger financial empires once again. People were warned that if they donated alms (usually money) alone, they would have no friends in their next lives. Only friends who donated together would become friends again in the next life. While this was a widely-held belief even in the mainstream, I never heard anyone refer to it in order to solicit funds anywhere but at Wat Dhammakaya.

One example of the well-organised the fund-raising at Wat Dhammakaya was the way food was sold on retreats and special events for donation to the temple. In the name of helping people cope with the pressures of modern life, the *wat* ensured that one need not prepare food to donate as alms to monks. Stands selling unopened tins of food were set up on the *wat* property and devotees who may have been travelling from upcountry were able to buy this food to donate as alms. When the monks walked by begging for alms in the morning, devotees on retreat or attending special events gave tins of food to

monks unopened so that the food could be sold again later. This method of soliciting donations was satisfying to all involved. The laymen had the feeling that they performed a traditional ritual of donating food and the *wat* made money on the food it sold and resold. Because wealthy devotees often donated crates of food (indeed on several occasions I saw large warehouses literally full of crates of tinned food piled high), there was no initial investment. Eventually the food was eaten by the visitors and people resident at the *wat*, but more was donated on a steady basis.

The sale of food was not the only means of soliciting funds for making merit. Throughout special events and week-end retreats, donations were solicited on a steady basis over loudspeakers with stories told of people making and re-making fortunes as well as other tales of the benefits of merit-making. Marquees were erected with tables manned by lay workers who issued receipts for donations. Those wishing to be anonymous could also put money into boxes placed throughout the temple grounds. The movement also sold souvenirs of the *wat* as well as publicity and educational videos involving the World Dhammakaya Foundation and its activities.

Although many in the mainstream criticised Wat Dhammakaya for putting meditation and contribution above all other practices as means of making merit, the logic used to justify the practices appealed to those who ask for rational explanations. In fact, according to my informants among the administration, the *wat's* growing popularity among college students who demanded accountability was Luang Phaw Datta's lesson on scripture and meditation. Furthermore, while mainstream critics objected to the visualisation technique, as discussed before, such meditation methods were often practised in

Mahayana Buddhism (Conze 1972). Since Wat Dhammakaya's incorporation of Mahayanist teachings had credentials from as respected an institution as Oxford University, few in the mainstream were willing to risk their reputations challenging Dhammakaya teaching despite its Mahayanist origins.

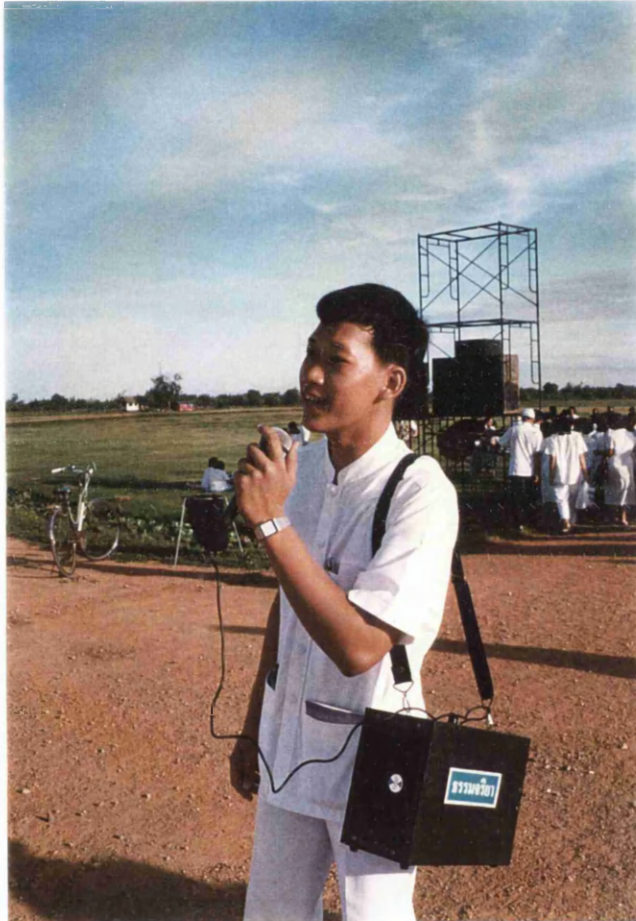


Figure 36: an *ubasok* solicits funds at the *Makha Bucha* festival



Figures 37 and 38: buying food to donate to monks on Maga Buja day, 1989
Top: Khun Pa Tiw choosing packets of ramen noodles.
Bottom: Khun Na Sutee (second right) selecting a roll stuffed with dried pork
for her basket of donations while Dr. Mickey (right) looks on.



Figure 39: monks lining up to accept alms the morning of
Maga Buja day 1989

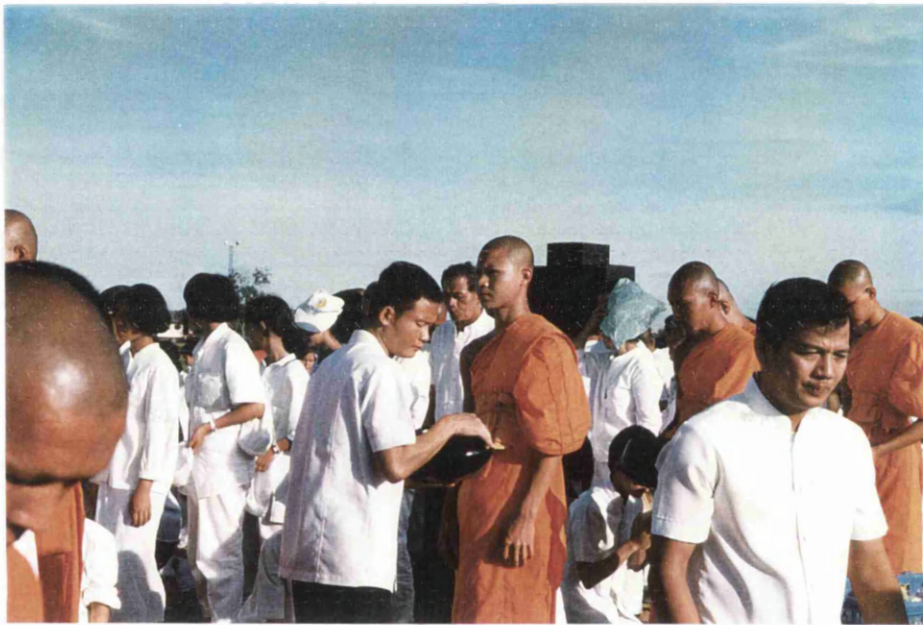


Figure 40: an *ubasok* taking an overflowing alms bowl to be emptied into a waiting lorry on the morning of Maga Buja day 1989.
The black boxes in the centre background are speakers.
The tower in the left background is for lighting.

VII.2.4. ritual: living life with *sati*

Ritual pervades life at Wat Dhammakaya. No matter what one did, it was clear that there was a proper way of doing things and it was possible to tell a seasoned devotee from a novice by the adeptness with which he performed the *wat*'s idiosyncratic formalities. If one did things by the Dhammakaya method, one was doing it mindfully, with *sati*, as I was taught by Luang Phaw Tatta on my first day at the *wat*. However, if one was unfamiliar with the Dhammakaya way of doing things, the members of the *wat* never made one feel like a fool for not knowing. There was somehow the assumption that everyone would know in time.

An example of how a simple religious act was ritualised at Wat Dhammakaya was the *krab*, or the bodily movement used to pay respects, whether it was to the Buddha or to the monks. The Dhammakaya version of the *krab* was as follows: one member of the group of laymen was chosen informally from among the others in order through consensus to lead the rest in paying respects. Those unfamiliar with the process were coached on how to kneel with the feet tucked underneath the backside and to lower the head to the floor with one's hands pressed together. This had to be done in unison to create a harmonious atmosphere.

As with Santi Asoke, the language of Wat Dhammakaya was different from the rest of Thai society. Merit or *bun* was constantly discussed and referred to by the devotees. For example, it was *bun* when traffic was good. It was also *bun* when strangers became friends. In short, personal merit was responsible for all good things. A common phrase heard was “*khaw anumotana bun duay*” which was said in lieu of thanks and meant “may you get benefit for the merit

you are making.” Exaggeration played a large part in day to day speech among many of the lay workers I encountered. I would be told to arrive at a ceremony hours in advance because traffic would be bad from all the people attending or I would be told that more people would attend a certain event than would actually show up. In addition, there were other rituals which characterised Dhammakaya behaviour. Whenever one’s hands are lifted in a *wai* gesture, a chorus of ‘*sadhu*’ (amen) is said by all lay members of the group. Saying *sadhu* after anyone puts his hands together in a gesture of piety was unusual in the mainstream but during my time at Wat Dhammakaya it became second nature to do so to the point that I would occasionally slip up and say it when I was at a mainstream temple. The above were only two examples of how doing everything with *sati* regulated all action at Wat Dhammakaya to the extent that almost all aspects of daily life were ritualised.

VII.2.5. ceremonies out of the ordinary

The religious ceremonies at Wat Dhammakaya were longer and more detailed (in an effort, I believe, to be more complete) than at mainstream temples and, as with all action, placed an emphasis on proper execution and lay participation. The daily ceremonies were actually no different from those practised in many mainstream Bangkok monasteries; they were merely inclusive of prayers which were often left out due to time constraints. I noticed that in general, not only at this temple but at others as well, that laymen preferred hearing longer prayers; it was possibly a factor of feeling that they got more merit.

The special ceremonies at Wat Dhammakaya were radically different

from those of the mainstream temples. The mass Dhammadayada ordinations of up to three hundred monks taking place at Wat Benjamaborpit, the marble temple in Bangkok, were designed to impress with their scale as with any Dhammakaya event. In the lifetime ordination held at Wat Dhammakaya, where one of the ubasoks ordained for life, there were video screens and speakers broadcasting the ceremonies taking place inside the temple to the some ten thousand followers who watched on screens outside (more on this in section VII.2.8). For both of these ordinations, officially recognised monks were invited to officiate in order to ensure that they were legally legitimate and would not suffer the same problems as the Asoke-ordained monks. The programme for the Dhammadayada monks was much more rigorous than the average temporary monk in a mainstream monastery. Unlike others who ordained for only a short period of approximately two weeks, Dhammadayada monks had to observe their vows for a full *phansa*, or three month summer which began with Buddhist Lent (generally during the holiday from university); they also, as part of their vows of asceticism, had to live in tents and walk barefoot the distance of about a hundred kilometres back to the temple from a retreat at Khao Yai national park. At the end of the Dhammadayada monks' journey, there was a foot-washing ceremony for the monks' families held directly outside the temple building. For the most part, large scale ceremonies at Wat Dhammakaya were media events deftly organised and handled. Video cameras were omnipresent and scaffolding always was erected for photographers who wanted a better view. (A more detailed account of the Dhammakaya *wian thian* ceremony follows in section VIII. where it is compared and contrasted to a mainstream version of the same event.)

Many of the Dhammakaya devotees would encourage their relations to

ordain as a Dhammayada monk. At the time of field work, Khun Pa Mali's nephew took such vows and was roundly praised by the Wednesday ladies for it. One of the group who would attend sporadically due to family commitments also had a son who was ordaining for two weeks, but at a mainstream temple. When she attended Khun Pa Mali's nephew's ordination with the Dhammayada programme, she felt disappointed and expressed regret that her son had ordained at a mainstream temple and not with Wat Dhammakaya.

VII.2.6. Wednesdays

The following is an account of a typical Wednesday. The first to arrive were usually Khun Pa Mali and Khun Pa Tiw. They would bring with them whoever they could from the errant members of the Wednesday Group. Often Khun Pa Mali's car would pass mine on the road. She drove very fast and would honk loudly at me and my aunt as she went by. Once at the temple, we would drive past the public relations centre (a large single storey building in the *boriwen nai* which housed the switchboards, a reception area with three glass booths, two multi-media rooms which could show slides and videos, and a meeting room) and go directly to the kitchens. There was a parking space for two cars by the kitchen and we would vie for the one under a tree so that our cars would not heat up in the sun. Some days we would be joined by Acharn Taew, but the last person to arrive was usually Khun Na Sutee who had to stop by one of her restaurants to pick up food. There often were other visitors who would be there with food to donate to the monks as well. They would be cheerfully welcomed and were always invited to join the Wednesday Group on a regular basis.

The kitchen was a hive of activity which was directed by Khun Pa Tiw. If she was making her famous fried rice noodles with soy sauce, she had several of the lay workers washing and cutting up vegetables while she prepared large frying pans for the task. As Khun Pa Tiw was proud to note, the kitchen was always spotless but infested with mosquitoes since the people at Wat Dhammakaya refused to use insecticides. My aunt and Khun Pa Mali, the two senior members of the group, would occasionally help arrange plates on huge, round aluminium trays, but that duty was usually left to the lay workers who were present, Khun Na Sutee and me.

When all the food was ready, a great bell which hung outside the kitchen was rung by one of the lay workers to summon the monks. They would arrive in an orderly procession single file and would sit in small circles on a dais at the end of a nearby pavilion. By this time, the food trays had been put on sideboards on the left of this dining pavilion and plastic covers were placed over them. All the men in the group (generally me and Dr. Mickey) were given the responsibility of presenting the food to the monks since the trays were so heavy. In mainstream mid-morning meal donation ceremonies, women often presented individual plates to monks, but since monks were not allowed to touch a woman's offerings, the plates were placed by the women on a piece of saffron-coloured cloth which was touched by the monk who was to receive the food. At Wat Dhammakaya I would see a woman presenting food which was received by the monks in a manner identical to the mainstream, but this was very rare since the food was always on these large, heavy trays.

As soon as the meal was served to the monks, prayers began. It was a bit like a reversal of the ceremonies that I was used to taking part in because the

laymen chanted while the monks ate their meal. Usually the monks would chant, then they would have their mid-morning meal and then they would chant blessings for the laymen present. When I went to Wat Dhammakaya, it was the first time I had ever seen laymen doing the chanting. It worked the same way as it did for the monks, with one lay person acting as leader. (When a cousin of mine came, however, she knew the ceremony and was unsurprised by it; apparently children did this in school every day.)

My aunt was usually the first in position sitting on her knees at the front of the room, whether or not she was leading the prayers on that particular day. Out of respect for her status, the rest of us would assume places behind her, sitting in the same manner. Khun Pa Tiw generally led the prayers because it was agreed that she was best at doing so. For those like me who were unfamiliar with the ceremony, booklets were distributed with the prayers written phonetically in Thai. A line by line translation into Thai was given beside each line of prayer. Making prayers this accessible was a Dhammakaya innovation. In the mainstream I rarely saw prayer books like this and they were rarely as easy to understand. Usually they were written in Thai script, but in Pali, which had different punctuation marks and different letters and dots signifying vowels and other sounds. This may seem like a minor difference but the Dhammakaya prayer books were much easier to understand than any I had seen in the mainstream. The prayers at Wat Dhammakaya were no different from those chanted in the mainstream, although they were often more complete. After several months of listening to the same prayers said over and over, I occasionally found that some mainstream monks, both urban and rural, would abbreviate the prayers to save time.

To start the prayer ceremony, we would *krab* three times. As with many simple rituals at Wat Dhammakaya, the leader would coach us all through the proper execution if there were any newcomers. This was to impress upon those unfamiliar with the temple that the standards were higher here. The prayer leader would chant a line first and then the others would repeat it. When the prayers were finished, we *krabbed* three times again and sat waiting for the monks to finish their meal. We would usually fall out of the painful kneeling positions we had assumed for the prayers and occasionally there would be conversation between the ladies, but it was always subdued out of respect for the monks. When the monks were finished with their meal, they would chant prayers blessing all who were present. While the monks chanted, everyone would resume the kneeling positions with hands pressed together in prayer at about chest height. Once the monks had finished their blessing, we all would *krab* elaborately again three times.

Once the mid-morning meal was over, the ladies would make light conversation with the monks, asking after their welfare. Usually Luang Phaw Tatta and Luang Phee Metta were present and they would inquire about my research, especially about how Wat Dhammakaya compared to other temples I had been to. After the monks had left, walking off always in single file, we had our meal outside a nearby conference room where the abbot would occasionally meet us to discuss doctrine or to teach meditation. The lessons would take about three hours and were more often conducted by one of the more junior lifetime monks.

At about three in the afternoon, the Wednesday gatherings would end, although other activities often followed. Khun Pa Tiw or Khun Pa Mali would

ask everyone to join them on a trip to visit a prominent monk who was favourably inclined to the movement or they would go to a friend's house to have dinner. Khun Pa Mali and Khun Pa Tiw would often return to the temple on Thursdays for more meditation lessons.

In the ten years which have passed since my fieldwork at Wat Dhammakaya, the Wednesday Group have by and large disbanded. My aunt and Khun Pa Tiw became disillusioned with the temple on separate occasions and became devotees of mainstream monks. For a period of time there was strain between my aunt and the remaining ladies, but lately they have begun to socialise again. Although the remaining members of the Wednesday Group still attend Dhammakaya activities, they do so less and less. Khun Pa Mali was forced to give up driving out of her relatives' concern for her old age. As part of the Dhammakaya efforts to integrate into the mainstream, the senior monks took their meals with the outside monks, much like the morning meal taken during the Dutanga retreat (a description of which follows), and the Wednesdays lost their old intimacy.

VII.2.7. The Dutanga Meditation Retreat

The Dutanga meditation retreat was an effort to imitate forest monks over the course of a week-end. I took part early in the time I spent at Wat Dhammakaya. As an indication of how nervous people in the mainstream were about the temple, when I told them I was going on retreat at Wat Dhammakaya, I was warned about being brainwashed. The retreat took place in the Sapha Dhammakaya, the large thatched marquees in the *boriwen nawk*. I had been told to arrive at five in the afternoon to avoid the crowds of people registering and

arrived at that hour to find the temple a virtual ghost town. This was my first experience with the exaggeration which often took place on the part of the lay workers at the temple. By six o'clock people started arriving and setting up their *klods*, the forest monk umbrella-based tents in which we were to sleep. The temple sold them in the bookshop, but Khun Pa Mali gave me hers as a welcoming present. Registration also took place at the Sapha Dhammakaya, the thatched-roof marquee and those of us who arrived early were allowed to wander about the *boriwen nawk* until the rest arrived. Most of the retreaters actually came at seven via chartered bus from the Victory Monument section of Bangkok. There were about fifty people taking part; approximately 70% of them were women of middle age. Of the men there appeared to be an even mix of ages ranging from boys in their teens to men in their fifties.

While waiting for the rest of the retreaters to arrive, I was given a special lesson on prayers in the Dutanga office. As further deference to my status as my aunt's nephew, I was taken on a bicycle tour of the temple grounds by one of the lay workers. By the time I was back from my tour, one of the older men in the group who had been assigned as the *phee liang*, or lay leader, asked me to call the others from the part of the thatched pavilion where all the *klods* had been set up; it was time to get some *nam mara* — some traditional fruit juice. Afterward, prayers would start. The fruit juice would be our only dinner.

It was a bit past eight fifteen when the ceremony which would mark our leaving the secular world to enter the sacred world of Dutanga started. The evening prayers were led by the lay leader and did not last long. They were similar to the Pali prayers said every morning by the Wednesday Group but referred to the evening rather than the morning. A short prayer said in Thai

followed and stated the aim of the retreat which was to go into the forest and live the life of an ascetic to discover the Buddha's truth. Then we were led in meditation for about an hour. We went to bed at ten or so, but the lights weren't turned off until much later. We were told that we would be woken at 4.30am.

I was awoken by a bright light and some religious music. I had slept rather peacefully, but I just didn't have enough of it and felt dazed. The feeling would not leave me for the rest of the day. The *phoe liang* supervised the wake up and got everyone off to bathe before the morning prayers which started at five. After the morning prayers there was another meditation lesson, after which a monk gave a sermon based on a story from the *Jataka* (fables based on the Buddha's previous lives). Few of the retreaters paid attention primarily, I believe, due to fatigue but also the fact that this particular monk was not a very charismatic orator and could not hold everyone's attention.

After sunrise, there was a donation drive. It began with a story told by one of the lay workers about how rich men had given away their fortunes to the movement then became rich again. There was repeated emphasis on how giving money to help the *wat* would build up merit. A direct correlation was made between how much merit one makes and how much material wealth one acquires from it. Tables manned by lay workers had been set up to accept donations, and tinned food was available for devotees to buy to donate as alms. The food was arranged in convenient packages for this purpose by *wat* workers from food donated by devotees (for example, one package would include tins of tuna fish, vegetables, and milk). As stated earlier, setting up stands to sell food to retreaters in this manner is an example of the fund raising genius of the temple administration. The food had been acquired by the temple free of charge and

they were able to make more money by selling it to people who would immediately give it right back to the temple.

People were on their knees by the side of the road waiting to give food as about two hundred monks walked past in single file. Some of us male retreaters were recruited to empty the alms bowls and to put the food into plastic milk crates as the monks' bowls became full. By the time the monks were finished, there was enough food set aside to feed an army and a lorry was needed to collect it. *Wat* workers gave prepared food to the monks while we were getting our own breakfast ready. Setting up for the retreaters' meal was an act of communal merit making. In order for everybody to receive merit for working towards all participants' mutual benefit, there was a relay line conducting the food to people sitting in small circles. People would pass food, one to the other until everyone had a bowl of gruel. In order to maintain standards of morality, the men were segregated from the women.

Afterwards, the retreaters divided into groups for special chores which included washing dishes. I took on the duty of cleaning the latrines and was praised all around for the superior merit I would get from taking on this unsavoury task. The lay leader was in my group as well as a couple of the other men, among whom was the retreator who slept in the *klod* next to mine. This was a man from Rayong, a province in the east, called Weera. He was a migrant farmer and had travelled for days to take part in the retreat. When we were finished, the lay leader told us we had until nine before we had another commitment, so Weera and I took a walk around the grounds. We walked past the lifetime monks' quarters and saw Khun Yai with Areephan. Weera stopped in his tracks, he was so impressed. He had a look of wonder on his face and

when I asked him about it, he told me he thought it was a wonder that he had a chance to see Khun Yai in the flesh at all. This encounter between Weera and Khun Yai gave me a clue as to the effectiveness of the Dhammakaya lore that was circulated about the senior monastic members of the *wat*. For a man like Weera who had not had a westernised education and was not inclined to question such stories, Khun Yai had become a sacred figure. Upon further questioning, Weera revealed that the temple and its grounds were so beautiful they appeared like something out of a dream and he never thought he would be allowed to wander freely about such a place.

At nine, we had another two hours of meditation in the thatched marquee. We started lunch soon afterward. The monks came out for a mid-morning meal and a similar routine took place as at breakfast. Great care was taken to remind retreaters to observe high standards of decorum because that reflected our moral fibre. The lay leader came and reminded me to sit properly with my feet tucked behind me at one point as we were eating. I had allowed my legs to splay out in front of me because they were sore from sitting cross-legged for long periods on the hard floor.

Later that morning, as Weera and I were beginning to complain to each other about how exhausted we felt, I was reminded of something one of the lay workers told me the night before about the abbot's teaching: eat little, sleep little, meditate a lot. Despite the fatigue, we were inducted into sweeping the floors with traditional Thai brooms made from palm fronds. There is a special technique of sweeping that the people at Wat Dhammakaya use which reflects the emphasis on *sati*, or mindfulness, in all actions. With a broom in each hand, one arm following the other in a sweeping motion, a row of people walk side by

side, their arms moving in unison, as if dancing. Everyone is dressed in white and the effect is amazingly beautiful. I saw some monks sweeping the raised dais where they eat and they were as if out of a dream, all in saffron robes and sweeping gracefully in unison. When we got out of line once, one of the lay workers was there to remind us to get back in place. By twelve forty, the sweeping was done. We emerged from the thatched marquee to find our slippers had been arranged in a neat row at the entrance.

A discussion of meditation took place while we swept the floors. The *phee liang* told us about how one should sit and what one should see during meditation and that these techniques were taught him by Luang Phaw himself. One should sit erect while meditating such that the hairs of the back of the neck should be just about pressed against the shirt collar and the neck should not be bent any further forward than that. Once one has meditated long enough and persistently enough, one will see a flash of light that comes from within.

Weera, sore from the previous day's sitting on the ground for hours on end, asked about the pain of meditation (from the uncomfortable seating position). The *phee liang* admitted that he, too, was often in pain and suggested that it was an integral part of it. Meditation is not easy and one had to concentrate. The *phee liang* likened the pain he felt to a mild one like having to go to the bathroom. Once used to it, however, the pain would subside. The *phee liang* told us he could sit for four or five hours and that he had to when they went to meditate at the *doi*, or the mountain where Wat Dhammakaya also held retreats in Chiang Mai. Dhammakaya meditation, then, was considered a challenge and problems or difficulty involving ones' pursuit of it was often a subject of conversation at many of the lessons.

One o'clock found us heading to a large, open pavilion across from the photography studio. We unfurled straw mats and sat in wait for a monk to arrive. We meditated for about ten minutes and then were given a sermon on '*bucha khon ti khuan bucha*' (worshipping only people who are worthy, a commentary on selecting the proper monks for veneration). This sermon apparently was the third in a series delivered to Dutanga retreaters who came every week. During the sermon, Khun Yai walked past and caused such a stir that the lay leader had to call everyone to order.

We moved back to the Sapha Dhammakaya (the thatched marquee) afterwards. Then a lay worker took over and lectured about how the truth would always emerge and that this was why Wat Dhammakaya was unafraid of opposition and slander. She then mentioned how 'gold would stand the test of fire' (*thong ja su khwam rawn khawng fai*) meaning that we should all give money to the *wat* so it would withstand this test. She began talking about how millionaires had given everything to the *wat* and then made their fortunes over again. Giving to the *wat* would only bring more good fortune because one was making merit.

After this lecture, we were inducted into mopping the floor. After mopping the floors, we unfurled straw mats to cover the floor of the Sapha Dhammakaya in preparation for special ceremonies taking place the following day. As with the sweeping, there was a special technique to unfurling the mats. One grabbed the end of the roll and, with a snap of the arms, the entire mat unfurled. The younger retreaters all vied for this job because it was the most fun. Most people, when asked about how they were enjoying the retreat answered enthusiastically.

Once the floors of the thatched marquee were covered with mats, we were given a chance to rest. About two hours later, I was called to join in the evening ceremonies and to watch to a slide show. A lay worker gave a lecture on donations on Makha Bucha day. She talked about how you could tell that rich people who had friends were those who, in their past lives, had made lavish donations and had asked their friends to give with them. Those who donated alms alone would be rich in subsequent lives, but alone. To have friends in the next life, one would have to encourage friends to donate money to the temple as well. This lecture was followed by another hour of meditation.

Luang Phee Metta arrived after the meditation to give a lecture on the meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Los Angeles. The content of his lecture was extremely detailed and I believe it was this detail that was important. Luang Phee Metta's oratorical skills were exemplary. He made eye contact with his audience and had good voice modulation. Most importantly he had a sense of humour; he made fun of the foreigners and their customs which sounded strange to Thai ears. The content of the lecture was detailed in its report of what Los Angeles is like for a Thai visitor. He not only gave a history of the WFB, but also one of California. He talked about the buses they sat in, about the highways, about the hotel where they stayed, about the food. He compared the temple where the conference was held to Wat Dhammakaya. It was a Taiwanese one (Hua Kung Shane) which had its own university in Taipei. Luang Phee Metta talked about the itinerary of the meeting and how all the good ideas were submitted by the Thai contingent. Everyone was riveted. The slide show began an hour and a half later. Most of the show centred on Luang Phee Metta's visit to Disneyland. Again, there was detail. He spoke about the Haunted House. At

the beginning of each slide carousel there was music. He concluded with how Dhammakaya World could use Disneyland as an example and how this was what they were all aiming for.

We got to bed at about ten quite soon after the slide show ended, all of us exhausted from lack of sleep, lack of food and abundant hard work. The next day we were woken even earlier than the day before. It was the same music and bright light and it struck me as being just as beautiful. I took down my *klod* and went to bathe, now familiar with the routine. At about five the monk who had given the boring lesson interrupted by Khun Yai's appearance came back to give the morning lesson on the power of Buddhism. He told a story of a young boy whose faith was so strong he was able to win all the competitions he took part in and was able to vanquish a demon as well because he said Buddhist prayers before any undertaking. As with this monk's lesson the previous day, very few people paid attention. Most were falling asleep and I noticed that several of the retreaters who came in their own cars had reappeared carrying polystyrene cups of coffee.

After the lesson, we had morning prayers. We meditated for another hour whereupon prayers were said again. The boring monk then gave another lesson. But by this time any pretence of listening was gone and most people just meditated through the lesson. Once the lesson was over, there was a ceremony ending the Dutanga weekend. It consisted of prayers and a repetition of the eight precepts. When that was done there were more appeals for money. The general message was that those who were poor were those who had not preserved their religious property by donating money. Once we were ritually released from our Dutanga vows, monks came and begged for alms again and the retreaters all

bought food to donate before leaving.

VII.2.8. Visakha Bucha — Luang Phee Sudhamo's Ordination

Although most mainstream temples held ceremonies on Visakha Bucha identical to those held on Makha Bucha (discussed in the following section VIII), Wat Dhammakaya usually had little organised that day. Held on the full moon of the sixth month, Visakha Bucha commemorated the Buddha's enlightenment. The year I happened to be doing field work, however, a special event was held at the *wat*. Khun Sudham, a lay worker who had lived at the temple for the requisite five years before ordaining for life entered the order with a grand ceremony which involved the abbot of Wat Paknam Phasijaroen, the mother temple of Wat Dhammakaya and two thousand guest monks. My aunt was asked to act as one of the sponsors for the event and was given a place of honour throughout the ceremony.

I picked up my aunt at six in the morning and drove out to Wat Dhammakaya. We were all rather concerned about her health since she had just been in hospital. We therefore made sure that special arrangements would be made for her. Traffic was so good we arrived at 6.30am. The sky was just breaking into light and the weather was still cool. As I approached I saw row upon row of buses which had brought devotees in from the provinces. They were parked in a makeshift lot outside the *lan tham* where spaces had been marked by making lines out of what appeared to be chalk dust in the ground. Aside from the twenty or thirty buses, about thirty to fifty passenger cars were already there. The organisation was, as always, impeccable. There were lighted signs pointing out where the buses from various parts of the country could be

found. Chartered busses were parked according to town or city of origin. If a devotee got separated in the crowd from his group, he would nevertheless be able to find them at a common meeting point. Lay workers waved us into the parking spaces and others were there to tell us where to go. Beyond, at the *lan tham*, about a thousand people were meditating. I could hear Luang Phaw Tatta's distinctive voice in the microphone chanting. We had made an appointment to meet Khun Pa Tiw at the Ahsom, or Luang Phaw Tatta's office in the *boriwen nawk*, but Khun Pa Mali was not with her when we arrived. Khun Na Sutee had brought Khun Pa Tiw that morning because Khun Pa Mali was coming with her nephew, his wife and daughter. When we went out to the *lan tham* to place food in alms bowls we ran into Dr. Mickey and some people from Chiang Mai who were there as well. They had spent all night on a bus coming down. Everyone was talking about how it was *bun*, or great merit, that we ran into each other in such throngs of people.

The chanting piped over the public address system was over by the time we decided to move off to buy food for alms bowls. Once again, the stands selling tinned food had been set up and there was already a throng of people lined up to buy packages to donate. There were several tables arranged in a square where food was being sold for alms. The voice on the loudspeaker changed from Luang Phaw Tatta's to that of a female lay worker who talked about the good that comes from giving, but how *bun* is acquired from the act not just for the future lives but this one as well. Khun Pa Tiw was buying about five hundred Baht worth of food, picking over the tins for the ones in the best condition. She bought everything from tinned food to rice in individual packets to boxes of ramen noodles. For the first time I had ever seen at Wat

Dhammakaya, things started to get out of control. People were grabbing food everywhere. It was almost like a riot. Beyond I could see monks lining up to collect alms and people kneeling along the path up to the *lan tham*. As we headed to the central section, an *ubasok* spoke in a steady monologue, giving directions as to where to go and what to do.

The monks walked off to the outside monks' quarters, when they finished getting their alms and the lorries full of food drove off. Photographers were everywhere. Armed with a camera myself, I found tough competition looking for a vantage point. The clicking of camera shutters was a sound that became familiar throughout the day as thousands of photographs were taken for the temple's public relations department.

When we were done donating alms, Khun Na Sutee invited us all back to her house for the morning because she felt that we all would be too tired to stay the whole morning. I took it to mean we would only be missing some meditation and that was unimportant compared to giving my aunt a chance to rest before the rigours of the upcoming ceremony. The people from Chiang Mai disappeared, but Dr. Mickey, who was from Chiang Mai, decided to come with us. We had an early lunch amidst the frantic calls from the *wat* to make sure we would get there on time.

Before leaving Khun Na Sutee's house, arrangements had been made to take my aunt to the ceremonies without having to walk too much or too far. It was agreed that Khun Pa Mali's nephew would drive her to the Ahsom and they would stay in Luang Phaw Tatta's air-conditioned office. Parking spaces were arranged for us. I took Khun Pa Tiw and dropped her off at the bookstore. There were people resting in the Sapha Dhammakaya, the big marquees where I had

stayed during my weekend at the Dutanga retreat. As in the parking lot, signs marked off sections according to town and province but this time in the thatched pavilion in case devotees from upcountry got lost. I could hear the abbot's voice over the loudspeaker. Some of the rituals had already taken place, but I assumed they were the insignificant ones Khun Na Sutee felt we could miss.

In the meantime, my aunt had arrived at the Ahsom with Khun Pa Mali's nephew. The entire group who had been at Khun Na Sutee's house sat in Luang Phaw Tatta's office with Nahk Sudham as we now had to call Khun Sudham. He had already shaved his head and was in white robes, signifying the transitional stage between secular and sacred. These were among his final moments before becoming a monk and we took this opportunity to chat with him for the last time. After ordination, he would have to be more formal with the Wednesday ladies and I sensed that while they regretted this change, they were nevertheless very happy for him. One of the most important questions Khun Pa Tiw had for Nahk Sudham was his favourite food. After he became a monk, he would no longer be able to request it and Khun Pa Tiw wanted to know in order to prepare it for him. During the wait, the abbot's voice (which had been piped into the office) was coaching the people outside through meditation.

I left the office for a while to watch the robe donation ceremony taking place in the Sapha Dhammakaya. The robes had been laid over the fence that surrounded the thatch marquee and the monks filed out to accept them. Of course the filing was beautifully in unison. The monks all had newly shaven heads and their robes were immaculately folded. For the ceremony, Luang Phaw Tatta acted as master of ceremonies. My aunt then spoke, blessing Nahk Sudham who then gave her some flowers. When this was over, there was

literally a stampede as everyone rushed to the temple building in the *boriwen nai*. I was separated from my aunt in the crowd and got to the temple to find that the parade started before my aunt arrived. This was a procession where the *nahk*, or novice, walks around the temple building three times with his friends who act as attendants. Khun Na Sutee's son carried an umbrella to shade Nahk Sudham. I was told that this was a great honour. I saw Acharn Taew at the VIP tent and she said they would all arrive shortly. There were literally thousands of people camped out and viewing the rite on television monitors which had been installed outside the temple building. After it was all over, lay workers at the *wat* estimated thirty thousand people attended. *Thai Rath*, a widely-read daily newspaper, estimated twenty and was roundly criticised by the ladies the following Wednesday for minimising the temple's popularity.

My aunt arrived and sat in the VIP tent for a while waiting for the Dhammayada monks to queue up outside the temple to receive the VIP guest monks. The interaction between monks who are affiliated with different temples is a common practice (Bilmes 1976) and the presence of guest monks indicated that Wat Dhammakaya had not cut all ties with the mainstream and lent legitimacy to the ordination. They would only allow guests who had a blue ribbon to enter the temple building and my aunt was able to get me one. When the procession was over, we went inside. I took my place in the back among the photographers.

The ceremony went off without much event. The guest monks entered the temple building in procession and paid their respects to the Buddha image. Afterward, they took their pre-arranged places and chanted prayers. After the monks' prayers, it was time for the *nahk* to recite prayers on his own. Nahk

Sudham fumbled several times, but that was normal. After having been through it myself and having seen others go through it, the words take on monumental importance and nerves take over. I can imagine that it must have been even more nerve-racking for Nahk Sudham since he had a wireless microphone attached to his robes which broadcasted the speech throughout the grounds. When the *nahk* was finished, the abbot of Wat Paknam Phasijaroen gave a sermon on the life of a monk. The *nahk* went outside to don his robes and when he returned a monk, several of the lay guests were moved to tears. Luang Phee Sudhamo, as he was now known, bade farewell to his parents who gave him an alms bowl and a set of robes. The ordination was then over and, unlike the mad rush to get to the ceremony, everyone who attended left in a quiet and orderly fashion.

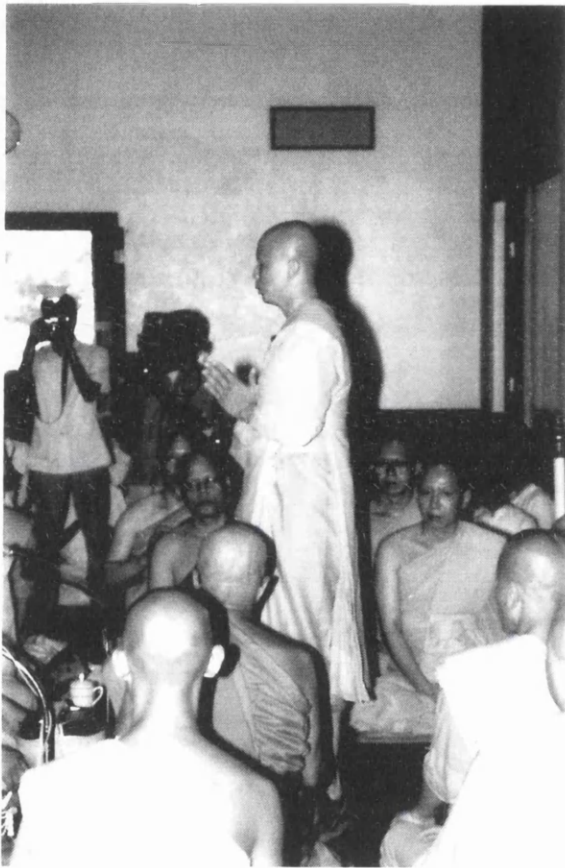


Figure 41: Luang Phee Sudhamo beginning his ordination.
Note the television camera in the background.
Images were broadcast to outdoor screens for those who could not come inside.



Figure 42: monks chanting at Luang Phee Sudhamo's ordination.
Some are guests from mainstream temples.
Note the different coloured robes. The Dhammakaya monks wear lighter robes.



Figure 43: the senior female members Wat Dhammakaya at Luang Phee Sudhamo's ordination. (from left) Luang Phee Sudhamo's mother, Khun Pa Mali (seated behind and between), my aunt, Areephan, Khun Yai's assistant and Khun Yai with shaved head and spectacles.



Figure 44: Luang Phaw Datta (second right) and visiting mainstream monks leaving the ubosot after Luang Phee Sudhamo's ordination



Figure 45: monks leaving the *ubosot* in procession after the Luang Phee Sudhamo's ordination

VII.3. Attraction and the New Movements

This section's discussion of life in the new movements has illustrated that a layman's experience of a monk or a new movement extends beyond not only his one-on-one encounters with a monk but also beyond his encounters with the physical surroundings of a new movement community. Participation in the life of the community was the surest means of communicating the movement's interpretation of the ideals of Buddhism and reinforcing those ideals on an individual layman's experience. Practising on one's own, however, required initiative to participate in activities that set the layman apart from others in society at large and was the most personal aspect of the layman's experience of a monk or new movement.

Whether at Wat Dhammakaya or Santi Asoke, the lay devotees of both movements were given directions resulting in action which led to encounters with the movements' Buddhist ideals on their own, without encountering a monk or the atmosphere of a temple. At both movements, the way to improve society was by improving the individual through the leadership of monastic example. The devotee of both new movements was taught to improve himself through living with mindfulness (*sati*). At Wat Dhammakaya, meditation (*samadhi*) and the mindful performance of daily tasks (*sati*) would encourage the improvement of the individual and, ultimately, society. At Santi Asoke, on the other hand, mindfulness was an outcome of living an ascetic life by gradually restricting appetites more and more by doing with less and less.

My informants among the Chao Asoke continuously strived to do with fewer and fewer material comforts even before they came to live on a *phutthasathan*. In fact, practising on one's own was a requirement of becoming

a member of the movement because it was considered the individual layman's means to prove that Phothirak's teachings worked. Even though I was a regular visitor for an extended period of time, I was not given status in the community because I had not tried living according to the Asoke way of life. My informants who lived on the *phutthasathans* had all been considered members of the movement with status in the community before coming to live in it. They discussed the difficulty of adhering to Phothirak's teachings because they had intimate knowledge of that difficulty through their own struggles. The most extreme case of a Chao Asoke's removing sensory illusion from life was Maenen Yaowalak who, after practising on her own for some time, attended a retreat at Santi Asoke *phutthasathan* and decided never to leave, giving up her husband, despite professing to having felt heartbroken about the decision. Both Wantana and the doctor gave up most social ties in the world outside Pathom Asoke when they went to live there. Such decisions are not considered lightly and could only have made after extended practice of the Asoke way of life. The experience of Asoke life, while predicated by encounters with Phothirak and fortified by the atmosphere of the *phutthasathans*, was based on the individual layman's decision to take part in it.

Meditating according to the Dhammakaya method and donating money to the Dhammakaya Foundation were, like the Chao Asoke's gradual elimination of worldly illusion-based appetites, the individual lay devotee's personal experience of the Dhammakaya life. Despite the fact that not all of my informants were successful at meditating, it was an activity that they all pursued on their own outside the *wat* and beyond the time allotted to meditation lessons on Thursdays. It was this meditation that was considered the means to proving that the

Dhammakaya interpretation of Buddhist ideals were, as Luang Phaw Datta, put it, the ‘truth’. Luang Phee Metta talked about how meditation improved his grades at medical school and Khun Pa Mali’s sister Caterina was comforted by meditation before she died.

In the case of both new movements, it is possible to say that the substance of the teaching was based on mindfulness (*sati*) and, therefore, much the same, but the styles of the teaching were very different leading to laymen pursuing very different lives. Communal activities which I have discussed in this section in terms of life with the new movements reinforced the experience that the devotee already had on his own by giving them an opportunity to pursue their own practice with others. It was for this reason that people like Khun Pa Tiw would talk of wanting to live at Wat Dhammakaya or many of the Chao Asoke had the ultimate goal of moving onto the *phutthasathans*. The ultimate component of experience went beyond monastic performance or landscape; it was the individual’s encounters with the movements’ ideals when he practised on his own, whether outside, on a *phutthasathan* or at Wat Dhammakaya. It was this continual practice that had the greatest impact on the lay devotee’s life.

VIII. Contrasting Styles

1. *Makha Bucha*

Throughout the majority of this paper I have described Buddhism as practised in Thailand -- by both the mainstream and the new movements -- in an effort to provide a body of data from which it would be possible to understand not only the role a monk plays in Thai society, but also how that role leads to a monk's having power over the layman. To provide a truly comprehensive description of all the monastic practices and traditions would require many more volumes than this single thesis. However, through the preceding descriptions of history, monks, laymen, temples and life in the new movements, I have hoped to provide enough information to examine the mainstream, Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya with a view to comparing and contrasting the three and ultimately learning how monks of any kind, whether the monks of a particular style, a particular new movement or monks in general, have power. While I feel that the preceding descriptions provide the bulk of data for analysis, I also wish to describe a representative event which takes place in the mainstream and at both new movements which would clearly illustrate the differences in style among them and would, in turn, serve to illustrate the differences in perceptions of the true nature of Buddhism. A description of the *wian thian* ritual celebrated during the Makha Bucha festival, an important Buddhist holiday which takes place on the full moon of every February and commemorates the first great assembly of the Buddha's disciples, follows as it is observed (or not) by the mainstream and the new movements.

Bell has pointed out that anthropological analyses of ritual tend to examine it in terms of action as opposed to thought (1992). Asad, in tracing the genealogy of the concept of ritual goes one step further and finds that ritual has

been opposed to emotion, differentiating between the public and the private (1993). While the analysis of ritual can provide valuable insight into the study of a society, I feel this discussion of the different Makha Bucha *wian thians* observances owes more to Goffman's discussion of performance in the sense that they are presentations of information about the movement (1959). Although Rappaport, in a very thorough, insightful and revelatory discussion of ritual, also finds performance a feature of it, he makes a distinction between performers and audiences (1999). Such a division could only apply to one of the cases I discuss below, Wat Dhammakaya. Even then, I would argue that the audience participates in the performance. Rather, I feel that the following comparison is useful because it serves to emphasise the presentation of style, either of the mainstream or one of the new movements, and a discussion of this emphasis shall contribute to my conclusion which follows in section IX. The important point to bear in mind is that the observances of Makha Bucha as described below are but one of many presentations in the overall performance of the mainstream or the new movements.

In this comparison, I offer no description of what takes place at Santi Asoke because nothing happens to celebrate the day. The Chao Asoke consider special rituals or observances frivolous and will do nothing out of the ordinary. To do anything other than to live their lives according to Phothirak's interpretation of the *Vinaya* on a daily basis would be unnecessary because every day is lived on a Buddhist basis and every action is taken with mindfulness or *sati*. A description of that life has already appeared. It is not that the Chao Asoke are unaware of the holiday, they simply do nothing to celebrate it. The complete lack of special observance among the Chao Asoke is as telling as the

mainstream's and Wat Dhammakaya's elaborate *wian thian* ceremony held to observe the holiday. It also makes it difficult for a fieldworker to select a single ritual which would be representative of Asoke society. Living life as taught by Phothirak is, in and of itself, a huge ritual.

VIII.2. *The Mainstream: wian tian at Wat Benjamabopit*

Since Wat Benjamabopit was one of the bigger temples in Bangkok, its pastoral services extended beyond the local community and devotees from all over the city came to take part in the ceremonies held there. *Wian thian* took place twice every year not only on Makha Bucha but Visakha Bucha as well (see Appendix 5). Although there were smaller versions taking place in local temples and a bigger one at the Putthamonthon (a large Buddhist park whose construction began in 1957, the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment), I chose to attend the *Makha Bucha* ceremonies at Wat Benjamabopit for its accessibility to Bangkok at large; Wat Benja (as it was known for short) was in the heart of the city and yet served people beyond the local community. The Putthamonthon was a good hour's drive beyond the city limits.

I was told that the purpose of participating in *wian thian* was to cleanse oneself of demerit, to make wishes, and to commune with the Sangha and fellow Buddhists. The ceremony at Wat Benja started early in the evening and went on late into the night. There were fairly large crowds of people who would come, walk around the temple then leave. By the time the evening was over, several thousand people must have performed the ritual with their candles, flowers and joss sticks. When I arrived, it was already dark and throngs of people were slowly

shuffling on the path that went around the *ubosot*. A strong breeze made sure that people had to keep relighting their candles, although no one seemed to mind the delay of someone's pausing up ahead. By the entrance to the temple compound, a folding card table had been set up to sell candles, joss sticks and lotus blossoms bound together with a rubber band. The going price was ten Baht (about six pence) per set. I could hear the monks chanting inside the temple, but their voices were loud enough that I suspected that the sound was amplified and broadcast through speakers outside. Although a hum of conversation could be heard beneath the monks, it was the collective murmur of about a thousand people who were out for some subdued fun. The atmosphere was that of lightheartedness more than solemnity. There were several surprised looks, however, when my camera's flash went off; at most there were two other people taking photographs. This led me to suspect that there actually were very few tourists.

When finished, some people crossed the line of worshippers walking round and went inside to listen to the monks' chanting. Those who could not fit into the building overflowed onto the verandah outside the portal. There was no suggestion of crowd control whatsoever; it seemed the organisation assumed orderly conduct and, to the degree that people did as they pleased without bothering others, the organisers got it. There was no set time when the ceremony ended and although the monks had walked their rounds earlier in the evening, those who arrived late could join the line going around the temple at their leisure. The line had no definite beginning or end. There were large urns outside where worshippers could stick their candles, joss sticks and flowers when finished; many just chose to place their sets in the flower beds about the grounds. They could either come listen to the chanting, hang about talking to

friends, or they could leave. There was no set programme and people did as they liked. I assume that the important aspect of the evening was that one had performed the spiritual act of lessening one's demerits and inwardly expressed one's hopes for the future.

Despite the large number of people, I got the impression that the ceremony was public only to the extent that the location was open to all. I was actually surprised by the intimacy of the situation. Although there was much conversation, when people talked it was only in hushed tones to acquaintances nearby. I felt that people came to take part in the event at the temple not because of the magnitude of the participation, but because it was a holy activity, perhaps made holier by the significant location. Beyond the fact that I was performing the same acts as everyone else I felt strangely isolated. I did not speak to anybody nor was I spoken to. In fact, the separateness of groups or individual worshippers made it seem that to approach anyone else would have been an encroachment on his private spiritual experience. I wondered whether at a local temple, where all the participants might well know each other, there would have been the same sense of isolation. Nevertheless, I left strangely moved by this sense of simultaneous insularity and communion.

VIII.3. *Wian Thian at Wat Dhammakaya*

The most important event on the Dhammakaya calendar was the Makha Bucha festival. The ceremony at Wat Dhammakaya diverged from the one celebrated in mainstream temples and was a clear effort to establish a new tradition. Wat Dhammakaya made a sincere effort to be pan-Buddhist by inviting as many dignitaries from as many movements as possible to take part.

In this Makha Bucha celebration, the *wat* had asked representatives of Tibetan, Chinese, traditional Japanese, Nichiren Shoshu, and mainstream Thai Buddhists to take part. As usual, the Dhammakaya lay workers were magnifying the numbers of laymen who would attend and warned me to arrive by as early as four in the morning to avoid traffic; they were expecting a hundred thousand people and the traffic would choke the city. I instead chose to arrive with the Wednesday ladies at around six in the morning. Although the number of devotees who came never approached the claim of a hundred thousand, I counted the number of rows of devotees during the evening ceremony and estimated a very respectable thirty thousand.

The Makha Bucha activities started from early morning when monks lined up in the *lan tham* to accept food from devotees. Much like the procession during the Dutanga Retreat, monks walked down the central path in single file so that devotees who lined the path could give alms to every one of the monks. The difference was that there were several hundred people there already at 6.00am and a lorry had to drive beside the line of monks to hold all the food being donated. *Ubasoks* followed the monks and emptied their alms bowls into the lorries as necessary. As with the retreat, tables had been set up in the parking lot of the *lan tham* to sell tinned food to the devotees who wished to donate alms to the monks. Large marquees had been erected to accept cash donations and lay workers spoke into amplified microphones, beckoning devotees to come and give money. The donation drive on Makha Bucha festival days was always extremely successful. Khun Pa Tiw revealed later that they had managed to raise ten million Baht (approximately £167,000) on the day. Once again, the sum was often exaggerated by the lay workers, with some estimating as much as twenty

million.

After donating alms, the Wednesday ladies retired to an air-conditioned VIP room. This was the height of the hot season and by 8.00am the heat was already stifling. There were other rooms which had been set aside for the Chiang Mai contingent and Khun Pa Mali went with Khun Pa Tiw to visit. Acharn Taew was already there with them. Khun Na Sutee, Dr. Mickey and I stayed with my aunt. To relieve the monotony, we went for lunch at one of the country club restaurants run by Khun Na Sutee when the rest of the Wednesday group returned. When we returned by early afternoon, at least twenty thousand people had arrived and more kept coming. For almost as far as the eye could see from the road, chartered buses were parked row upon row in the parking lot (even more than those who attended Luang Pee Sudhamo's ordination) and policemen directed traffic with megaphones. The organisation was so efficient that there were absolutely no traffic jams, despite the large number of private cars which had also begun to fill up another section of the lot. By early evening, another ten thousand people had arrived and the ceremony was ready to begin.

Flags had been raised all along the paths in the *lan tham*. Scaffolding with lights — big spots and more — had been erected around the arch of triumph where photographers were perched with video cameras. At the inner lily pond, lighted fountains had been turned on and the sound of running water blended in with the breeze. For the number of people there it was eerily quiet. Marquees had been erected all over for VIPS, but the Wednesday group had a place of honour close to the hub of the *lan tham* where we would get the best view. To the right of my aunt, foreign monastic dignitaries were invited to sit in large overstuffed sofas. The ground around the *lan tham* had small bamboo poles with

white triangular banners attached to them placed in orderly rows about the concentric circles radiating from the hub. Individuals and groups of up to four or five were sitting around them and I saw Weera, the migrant farmer I met on the Dutanga Retreat sitting at one of the banners with his children. Both men and women were allowed to sit together in the groups. Many families had brought picnic baskets. Khun Pa Tiw had made some delicious egg salad sandwiches and passed them out to each of us.

The hub of the *lan tham* was decorated with saffron fabric and lights. There were some strange-looking white rectangular columns at the centre of the hub which I couldn't quite make out. They were actually hiding spot lights which shone on individual monks. The abbot was sitting at the very base of the meditating Buddha image while the junior Dhammakaya monks sat in a row to the right of him.

At seven it had grown dark and candles and incense were lit at the hub. Because we were so close we could smell the incense carried in the breeze. Powerful spot lights attached to the massive towers made of scaffolding at the very edge of the *lan tham* were turned on and shone directly at the hub, suddenly illuminating the abbot and the rest of the Dhammakaya monks. Then special Dhammakaya prayers started. Unlike a mainstream temple where monks would be chanting unintelligibly in the background, devotees were encouraged to pray as well. The abbot spoke into a microphone and then everyone repeated after him. Although the responses were mere whispers, the sound of thirty thousand people whispering in unison is quite loud and actually drowned out the abbot's voice. Once these prayers were done, taped prayers were played from the huge speakers on either side and people chanted along with the tape. The monks then

lit their candles to walk around the *lan tham* for us (there were too many people to do the walking ourselves). Behind the monks, the *ubasoks* and *ubasikas* lined up with their candles lit up as well. They all went around the hub three times and when everyone was finished, the monks went back to their places in the hub. There were so many people that this took about twenty minutes. More prayers were played over the speakers while the lay workers finished their rounds. When the *ubasoks* and *ubasikas* were finished, the master of ceremonies, a layman, lit a large torch placed in one of the inner rings of the *lan*. The torch was about ten feet across. Music was played over the loudspeakers — two young children singing in harmony. Then the *ubasoks* and the *ubasikas* came out from behind the hub in force and lit the tops of the flagpoles from which the white triangular banners marking places for people to sit had been attached. Suddenly the area was flooded with light. There was a thunderous gasp from everyone there, but no one started talking. Instead, prayers were said for all of us, led by the abbot, including a prayer exclusive to Wat Dhammakaya where a wish was made that all who attended would discover the *dhammakaya* within himself. Then we were coached through a *krab* three times in unison.

Although we were asked to remain in our places for the exit procession, no one did. Khun Pa Tiw called me to see it. I ran over to Weera and tried to get him to come along, but he was busy meditating. All I can say is that the closing of the ceremony was reminiscent of a scene out of a Hollywood extravaganza. The flood lights illuminating the *lan tham* were switched off and the only light remaining was from the thousands of torches which dotted the grounds. Wagnerian music came on over loudspeakers and lights illuminating the central path which led from the hub to the arch of triumph came on. A procession of

monks came out from the hub with the abbot at the lead, walking alone. He was followed by Luang Phaw Datta and then a line of the junior lifetime monks who walked behind him with military precision. After the junior monks had walked past, the Dhammadayada monks went past in a long line, but three abreast. All throughout there was a faint orangeish light trained on the abbot which illuminated him but left him a little blurred by darkness. The path was lined with the faces of the faithful whose mouths were agape in awe of it all. I, too, was stunned.

Once the monks were gone, the flood lights came on again and suddenly the air was abuzz with voices. People filed quietly and politely to their cars or buses. Lighted signs and lay workers with megaphones pointed the proper way out. So that there would be an orderly exit from the temple with no traffic jams or accidents, police directed the traffic all the way out onto the main highway.

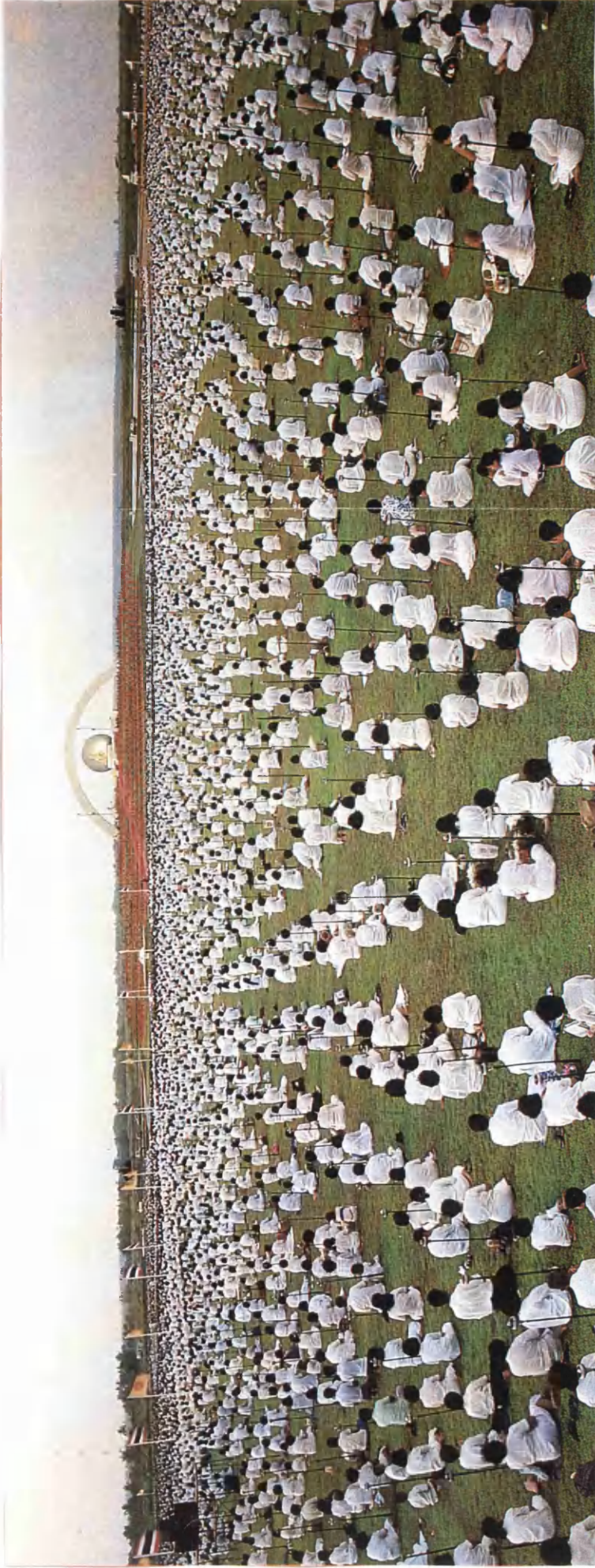


Figure 46: celebrating the *Makha Bucha* festival at Wat Dhammakaya

VIII.4. *The Content of Style*: monastic performance and presentation

The above descriptions of Makha Bucha festivities are a perfect example of how the mainstream and each new movement responded to calls for religious reform by creating an event that would be the representative of the lay devotee's Buddhist experience. The mainstream took a conservative attitude and changed little, if anything at all. With the exception of using loudspeakers to broadcast the monks' chanting, the Makha Bucha festival at Wat Benjamabopit was representative of the *wian thian* ceremonies held in temples across Thailand. The individual came to the temple, heard the monks, took part in the ritual and then left. His personal *kamma* was improved by having made merit but performing the ritual at the temple was nevertheless a communal act and represented his experience as an adherent to mainstream Buddhism.

The style with which each of the new movements observed Makha Bucha was a reaction to the traditional *wian thian* ceremony held by the mainstream and was a declaration of their interpretation of the Buddha's teaching. In an effort to return to basics, Santi Asoke chose to eliminate all ritual observance completely, focusing attention on mindfulness in daily life. For the Chao Asoke, the most important aspect of being a Buddhist was to eliminate worldly appetites and any ceremonies or festivities only served to satisfy such human cravings and were better left unobserved.

Wat Dhammakaya, however, put on a gargantuan, mediagenic display which, quite frankly, dazzled. The object was to bring together as many of the world's Buddhists as possible in order to create an atmosphere of worldly peace to encourage inner peace. Visual harmony and tranquillity were created using the most innovative and technologically sophisticated stage management

possible. In recent years, the number of participants in the Dhammakaya *wian thian* festival continued to grow through the use of public relations in modern telecommunications and print media. All the Dhammakaya efforts were meant to appeal to a generation of Thais who grew used to images of Hollywood-style glamour and who became indifferent to the traditional style of the mainstream.

IX. Conclusion: Presentations of Buddhism

As stated earlier in section I.7., the monastic events which took place during my field research were unique in modern Thai history. At no other time had monks been as prominent socially, politically and religiously during a general election. I do not feel, however, that the events gave rise to abnormal relationships between monks and laymen nor between Buddhism and politics in such a way that my data reflected an abnormal situation. This is due to the fact that I was concerned primarily with monastic efforts to realise Buddhist ideals rather than efforts to influence secular politics. The primary reason my informants followed a new movement was religious teaching, not political philosophy; their devotion was tested but not created by events at the time.

The vast majority of my monastic informants, however, did have opinions on the general election and often expressed them. Nevertheless, they weren't trying to influence the direct outcome of the election as much as they were trying to further the improvement of society by propagating social philosophies based on their interpretation of the true nature of Buddhism. Phothirak was the only monk I studied who openly supported a political party but I never saw even him instruct a lay follower to act politically. This is because he didn't need to. Through prolonged experience with the Asoke life, the Chao Asoke followed Phothirak's interpretation of Buddhism and tried to carry out his teachings day to day. Their political views grew from Phothirak's vision of a Buddhist utopian society. Although this example illustrates that a monk, as a teacher of Buddhism, could influence laymen in a secular arena such as politics, what needs to be discussed is how that monk's influence, or power, came into being or how it worked. In section I.5, I brought up several concepts which would help to

explain how a monk could acquire power and the nature of that power.

During field work I found that the most important quality a monk needed to gain a lay following was to be *keng*, meaning that he had to have a charismatic proficiency at monkhood. When laymen recognised a monk as being *keng*, they initially experienced an attraction, a feeling of *leuamsai* which, upon further acquaintance, would become a feeling of *sattha*, or attraction that elicited devotion. Such devotion would bring a layman to follow a monk's leadership, even in secular situations. I was told that a monk would be able to plant *sattha* (*plook sattha*) among his lay congregation by cultivating the following qualities: appearance (*na ta*), voice (*siang*), becoming a source of reliance (*pen thi pheung*) and knowledge (*khwam ru*). From this initial point, I came to the conclusion that there were two major components of monastic attractiveness which would lead to *sattha* and a monk's having power over laymen: style and experience.

By style I meant a monk's personal presentation or performance (Goffman 1959) which encompassed the four qualities described above and the way he chose to cultivate them. By experience I did not mean the monk's own past or the individual layman's cumulative interaction with that monk, but the different encounters the layman had with the monk, the monk's teachings and the monk's movement which had impact not only on the layman's own vision of ideal Buddhism but also his daily encounters with a monk's or movement's teaching through his own practice of that teaching. The factors contributing to a layman's experience of a monk or his movement were: personal interaction with the monk, with other devotees, with the monk's or movement's ideal environment or landscape. and with repeated exposure to and practice of that monk's teachings and vision of Buddhism through communal events. From the

discussion in this thesis of historical monastic antecedents, different monastic styles, demands of the devotees and interaction between them, temples as ideal communities and the life in such communities. I have described the layman's experience of what the mainstream and the new movements considered to be the true nature of Buddhism. This will lead to an understanding of Thai monastic power, its source and its limits.

IX.1. Summary: images of the ideal

1.1. history

Throughout Thailand's history, the Sangha has been periodically reformed through state sponsorship aimed at making the religion more pure or more relevant to society which, in turn, legitimised the administration in power through illustrating the righteous rule of the state. Reforms would include not only the acquisition, preservation and restoration of holy relics but also the construction of new temples and foreign monastic exchange between Thailand and other Theravadin Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka and Burma. The most significant innovation to Thai Buddhism in recent times took place in the mid-nineteenth century, however, when rationalism and western science, incorporated into Buddhist teaching by King Rama IV, influenced the Thai intellectual approach to Buddhist thought. The contemporary need for proof that a vision of Buddhism works is a direct outcome of this intellectual change. There has been discontinuity, then, in the Sangha ever since Buddhism was introduced to Thailand.

While it would seem that a shift in intellectual focus would prompt many Thais to study religious texts for themselves, I found my informants still relied on monks as teachers of Buddhism due to the fact that there was little of the Pali

Canon directly accessible to the Thai layman although there were many interpretative teachings from monks available in the form of books, taped sermons and media broadcasts. The continuity in Thai Buddhism amidst the discontinuity, then, was that monks were the main teachers of religion to the lay public. The discontinuities, however, involved what they taught and how they practised.

At the time of my field work, support of the Sangha had begun to shift from the state to lay devotees. A new middle class had been created by economic prosperity. Although the state remained the primary sponsor of the Sangha, this middle class' continuing need to make merit prompted substantial private donations to temples and new movements, allowing for an alternative source of financial support for monks. New movements could survive and become increasingly popular independently of the state by initiating reforms which responded directly to lay public demand. This independence allowed the new movements to deviate from mainstream Thai Buddhist practice. The innovations I observed in the field, however, were not revolutions with the intention to overthrow mainstream Buddhism. Rather, they were efforts by new movements to recapture the essence of Buddhism by appealing to the layman and his modern, rational demands. For all their innovation, the new movements drew on such historical antecedents as ascetic standards and mindfulness (*sati*) for a basis of conduct and teaching.

IX.1.2. monks

The primary relationship between monks and laymen seemed to me not one of patron and client where monks received lay material support for pastoral

duties but one of exchange where the layman gave alms (predominantly in the form of financial contributions) to the monk and the monk gave the layman an opportunity to make merit. I found, however, that most informants were not interested in attaining *nibbana*, but were more interested in meritorious acts as a guide to coping with life in the present existence. The repercussions of this interest was that religious practice focussed on monks, as religious specialists, who could teach laymen about life. A monk's behaviour and the purity of his ascetic standards were not only indicators of his understanding of Buddhism but also his qualifications to teach laymen about it.

Due to the *Tipitaka*-based nature of Theravada Buddhism, Thai monks were judged in their ability to teach from non-action, or how well they adhered to the *Vinaya*'s religious prohibitions which gave no instructions for them to follow other than a set of restrictions on behaviour. Lay devotees, however, demanded some noteworthy action as a means of judging monks. This created a contradiction: a monk had to be active in the community for laymen to know him and his ascetic strictness. However, the more strict a monk was, the less involved in the community he had to be. In fact, the more free from pastoral undertakings a monk was, the more he was revered by laymen. If adherence to the precepts was to be conspicuously manifested in any way, it had to be obvious enough to influence public perceptions, either through visible appearance or remarkable activity. A monk distinguished himself, then, through showing the layman he was a strict ascetic. This left the nature of proper monastic activities open to the layman's interpretation.

The tension between a monk's ascetic prohibitions and the demands of the lay community resulted in compromises in the behaviour of each monk which

formed the basis of his style. A monk's power depended on whether his style attracted enough laymen to make him popular and resulted from the following factors: duration of ordination, type of pastoral speciality and four qualities which could be observed by laymen and could be cultivated in order to plant *sattha*: appearance, voice, becoming a source of reliance and knowledge.

IX.1.2.A. appearance (*na ta*)

While the concept of a monk's appearance included his facial features and physical build, I believe that it also involved performance or the transmission of information about the monk to laymen who were his audience (Goffman 1959). Although physical appeal played a large part in a monk's attractiveness, it was also the way a monk comported himself, including his body language and his personal habits. For example, the author monk's serenity communicated information (section IV.3.1) as did the irrepressible monk's enthusiasm (section IV.4.2). The *nakleng* monk and Phothirak both were highly confrontational in their comportment, especially Phothirak who would punctuate his sermons with stares and pointing (section IV.5.2). The abbot of Wat Dhammakaya's *sai* demeanour also could be considered a vital part of his appearance (section IV.4.1).

A monk's robes, their colour and their cleanliness were equally important to his appearance because they often indicated not only the order or movement with which the monk was associated, but also indicated his contextual association. When the Mahatherasamakhom banned Phothirak and the *samana-phrahms* of the Santi Asoke movement from wearing the same types of robes as mainstream Buddhist monks, they were removing the monastic members of the

new movement from any visual associations with a Thai Buddhist context (section II.8.2). Within the three contextual shifts of Thai society — the forest, the village and the city (Taylor, 1993b) — informants had differing opinions as to which association would best allow monks to come to know the true ideals of Buddhism. Some considered city monks the best educated and therefore the best at discussing religious intellectual dilemmas. Others felt that a village monk, while the most active in pastoral duties of the three, was one who worked the hardest for the welfare of his community and was therefore the best. A great majority of my informants believed, however, that the most ascetically strict monks were those associated with the forest because they lived by an additional set of rules (the thirteen *dutangas* which did prescribe specific actions, section I.3.3.C) and did not perform pastoral services for a community on a regular basis and were therefore untainted by worldly associations.

IX.1.2.B. voice (*siang*)

Although a monk's personal appearance was a means of presenting himself to laymen, his voice was his primary means of directly communicating the intricate details of his teaching. Whatever knowledge the monk had, giving lessons and sermons was his means of transmitting it. If a monk was a good orator as was Luang Phee Metta, he would be able to hold the attention of an audience more easily than others. Other monks with distinctive voices and vocal delivery discussed in this thesis were Phothirak, the irrepressible monk and Luang Phaw Tatta. In all of the cases, their voices were recognisable from a distance, even when broadcast over loudspeakers. Not only was a distinctive voice a valuable quality for a monk, so was oratorical style. Phothirak's

oratorical style was enough to startle many Chao Asoke on first encounter and was often referred to by my Asoke informants as a source of attraction (section V.I). Luang Phee Metta's wry sense of humour characterised his slide show on the meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists delivered at the Dutanga Retreat (section VII.2.7).

A recent innovation to Thai Buddhist monks' activities is the use of the print, recording and broadcast media to transmit a monk's voice and appearance. The most prominent monk to use television was Phra Phayom but other monks in the mainstream and the new movements used the media as well. Most notable was Phothirak's releasing a recording of songs he had written in an album titled *Abhai*, or forgiveness (section IV.5.2). Others were the numerous books and pamphlets churned out by the Asoke press and by the public relations division at Wat Dhammakaya. Wat Dhammakaya also produced videotaped documentaries of the various programmes run by the movement.

IX.1.2.C. becoming a source of reliance (*pen thi pheung*)

Informants would rely on monks for many reasons but I took their declarations of reliance to mean making use of a monk's pastoral activities. As discussed in section I.6, I found that informants would classify a monk in the following categories: development, scholarship, meditation, practice, or magic. Despite the fact that there was no scriptural basis for such activity as a basis of monastic standards, my informants would declare that a monk was a specialist at one particular category even if his pastoral activities seemed to vary between several of them. I believe this is due to the primary means that laymen would rely on the monk. The abbot of Wat Dhammakaya, for example, taught

meditation to the Wednesday Group and the irrepressible monk taught meditation to the participants in his seminar. Phothirak practised asceticism and was able to teach his followers to do the same. The forest monk devoted his energy to developing his village. Although there was no question that all of the above monks lived according to the monastic restrictions detailed in the *Vinaya*, it was the matter of emphasis that was important to the lay classifications of the monks. Even those who seemed to fit into many different categories like Luang Phaw Datta, who gave me a lesson on Buddhism and meditated as did all Dhammakaya monks was considered a development monk for the means in which the devotees of the movement saw him working. Luang Phee Metta was considered a scholar monk, even though he also worked in the Dhammakaya international relations centre to expand the movement's activities beyond Thailand and even though he also meditated.

IX.1.2.D. knowledge (*khwaam ru*)

A monk's knowledge was perhaps the most important of his qualities because it was the underlying foundation of all of his communication to lay devotees, whether through appearance, voice or activity. It was the monk's vision of Buddhism that formed the basis of his knowledge. More importantly, however, knowledge was the monk's credential to justifying his vision. Proof of knowledge was imparted through the monk's performance, but could also be displayed through degrees, through books, taped sermons, interviews and video presentations. Age and duration of ordination were factors in such credentials as well. The most important proof of knowledge was such qualifications as Luang Phee Metta's graduate degree from Oxford University, the numerous books

written by the author monk and a layman's experience teaching through his own practice. The Chao Asoke felt that Phothirak had great knowledge because, after having practised his teachings themselves, they had proof that his example was effective.

IX.1.2.E. Conclusion

The above discussion of the four qualities a monk can cultivate in order to plant *sattva* illustrates the means a monk or movement have to impress the layman with their style and how that style contributes to a layman's overall experience of Buddhist ideals. The important factors in the monk's personal performance are the qualities discussed above which give the individual layman exposure to the experience of that monk's teachings, allowing him to assess a monk before deciding whether or not he wants to put the teachings into practice for himself.

IX.1.3. devotees

The devotees of new movements felt greater benefit from their religious affiliation than from one with the mainstream due to their perceptions of the superiority of new movement monks. Not only did they feel that there was more opportunity to make merit through supporting the new movements, there was also the opportunity to improve the present life by following the example set by new movement monks. This religious focus on the present existence was directed at the need for understanding a Buddhist theory of human life. Modern, foreign-influenced educations of middle-class informants emphasised rationalism and a western. scientific need for proof. Although Wat Dhammakaya's

Wednesday Group did believe to some degree in the magical benefits of meditation, they, like their counterparts at Santi Asoke, were looking for evidence that a monk's teachings succeeded in making life better.

Both new movements appealed primarily to the middle class and to women who were the majority of their members. All of my informants regardless of affiliation to the mainstream or the new movements — in fact, all self-professed Buddhists in Thailand — believed they were practising the same religion. The scriptural basis for their varied approaches to Buddhist practice was the same: the *Tipitaka*. Their conceptual separation between sacred and profane were the same: monks vis à vis laymen, temple vis à vis the city, village or forest. Their religious goal also departed from the Buddha's teaching in the same way: to make life more liveable rather than to achieve *nibbana* or a better life in the next incarnation. If they were so much the same, how, then, did the various foci of their religious practices become so different? Zehner, in his observation of the Dhammakaya Makha Bucha *wian thian* noted that the *wat* embodied many middle class values such as cleanliness, orderliness, modernity and quiet (1990). I would argue that Santi Asoke also embodied middle class ideals but different ones such as hard work and thrift. In short, although the emphasis of their religious practice often seemed diametrically opposed, as in the case of Santi Asoke's doing nothing on Makha Bucha day and Wat Dhammakaya's elaborate extravaganza, what they believed they practised was essentially the same. In fact, both new movements felt their teachings diverged from the mainstream in the same way as well: by modernisation. It was their efforts at achieving a modern focus that was the key to each new movement's vision of the true nature of Buddhism and what their followers interpreted as

modern.

Keyes points out that the 'variety and intensity of religious activities in Asia today should . . . not be taken as indicative . . . of the incompleteness of modernising and nation-building projects undertaken in these societies. On the contrary, these activities point to a crisis of authority that has been created by the very success of these projects' (Keyes 1994, p15). It is modernisation, then, that has created a public need for the new movements. Barker asserts that new religious movements are a perspective for understanding society (1982). She examines whether new movements are indicators or reflectors of society and how they represent not only the relationship between the individual and society but also how a society is influenced by other societies (Barker 1989).

But what are the origins of modern concepts of the true nature of Buddhism? As has been discussed in section I.2., there is an interaction between scripture and practice that influences public perceptions of what is really Buddhist. The adoption of new scriptures or texts such as Phra Rajavaramuni's *Buddhadhamma* (1995) is an example of how text is adapting to the demands of context. Similarly, Santi Asoke's focus on the *Vinaya* as a source of interpretation is an effort to be more ascetically rigorous in response to lay disillusionment with lax behaviour among monks in the mainstream. Furthermore, there appear to be other influences from foreign cultures on Thai Buddhism aside from western rationality. A work ethic characterises Santi Asoke and may be the outcome of Phothirak's Christian childhood or the demands of Chinese immigrant society. Technology and modern theatrical forms have clearly had impact on the Makha Bucha ceremony at Wat Dhammakaya. Lay practice has been influenced by new interpretations of

religious texts and, in turn, the nature of religious texts has responded to the demands of lay priorities.

Aside from appealing to the middle class in general, the new movements appealed specifically to middle class women. As in the case of female adherents to new religious movements in Japan (Hardacre 1984, 1986), Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya, although practising discriminatory policies against women, nevertheless provided more opportunities for recognition and advancement for women than the mainstream. For example, women were allowed to petition for the right to ordain at Santi Asoke and one of the two highest ranking members of Wat Dhammakaya was a nun who had been the meditation teacher of the movement's abbot.

IX.1.4. temples

By providing the layman with an atmosphere which realised ideals of the monk or movement's view of Buddhism, the temples or movements were able to provide a layman with experience which went beyond a one-on-one interaction between devotee and monk. The Santi Asoke *phutthasathans* and Wat Dhammakaya were both idealised forests. I believe that this self-conscious effort at mimicking the forest was due to the reputation of forest monks as the most ascetically rigorous and therefore the most remarkably proficient at monkhood. The ideals upon which each movement's forest was modelled were different, however. Informants described the Dhammakaya grounds as orderly, well-kept, beautiful and modern looking. While the Chao Asoke seemed to have no expressed opinions about their communities, the *phutthasathans* were purposely rustic and reflected the teachings of their leader Phothirak. The radical

differences between the temples of the two new movements illustrated the different interpretations possible from the same Buddhist ideal.

IX.1.5. life

The claim of both new movements to combine the best of innovative and traditional Buddhism was, much like their like desire to create idealised forests, the same but with drastically different interpretations. The utopian life of the Chao Asoke was a combination of rustic asceticism punctuated by the occasional use of modern technology for the purposes of propagating the movement's practices and for the purposes of food production. Strict rules governed the community according to Phothirak's interpretation of the *Vinaya* and a highly intricate system of status indicated the level of a member's ascetic achievement. The Asoke ideal was to gradually lessen one's material needs to the point of nothingness whereupon one found liberation.

The meditative existence at Wat Dhammakaya, however, had a completely different focus altogether. Dhammakaya life revolved around meditation as a means to understanding the Buddha's teaching and to achieving peace of mind. Although the meditation method was not as easy as the one taught in mainstream temples, material comfort was not frowned upon as it was with the Chao Asoke. In fact, beautiful and orderly surroundings were meant to contribute to one's peace of mind by aiding meditation. Financial contributions were solicited in order to gain merit to benefit the present existence rather than future incarnations.

By providing a communal events or alternative lifestyles for devotees, the new movements were able to extend the layman's experience from interaction

with other people and landscapes to his own personal behaviour through practice. Both Santi Asoke and Wat Dhammakaya encouraged devotees to practice their teachings in order to prove that their vision of Buddhism was the truth. The Chao Asoke would constantly challenge me to try their style of life. When I saw a bright flash during a meditation lesson at Wat Dhammakaya, it was considered proof that their teachings were true (section VII.2.2). It was possible to gain experience of a Buddhist ideal through interaction with a monk or through visiting a community, but the truest possible experience was through practising what one was taught.

IX.2. *Examples of Power*

As discussed in section I.5.2.C, there are different terms for power in Thailand which describe the way it is exercised. Those previously discussed were: *amnat*, *phalang*, *itthiphon*, *abhiñña* and *barami*. A discussion of their occurrence in this thesis follows below. I will illustrate that while there are sacred types of power there are also types of power which are considered profane. Although it is acceptable for a monk to exercise sacred power, he is corrupted when he exercises or is perceived to have the capability to exercise profane power. It is the converse for a layman, however. A layman's reputation is enhanced by an association with the sacred (Tanabe 1984). When Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang was perceived as an ascetic in government office, he became 'Mahachamlong'.

IX.2.1. *Amnat*

Amnat is considered a profane type of power and connotes coercion or

mobilising others to do one's bidding. A perfect example is an armed forces officer commanding troops to invade a country. In this thesis there was only one instance when *amnat* was mentioned and it was by the abbot of Wat Dhammakaya, placing it in opposition to *abhiñña*, the magical power derived from Dhammakaya meditation (section IV.4.1). The assistant abbot used the English term 'black magic' to describe the magical use of *amnat*, meaning that, in this case, one used magic to command spirits to do one's bidding (section IV.2.2). Critics of Wat Dhammakaya felt that the movement's vast financial resources corrupted them and I suspect this was due partially to the fact that the movement was able to use those resources to develop the property extensively with the use of hired workers and partially due to the blatant solicitation of financial contributions.

IX.2.2. *Phalang*

The most prominent use of the term *phalang* described in this thesis is the Phalang Dhamma Party, meaning the physical power of the Buddha's *dhamma* (section II.8.2). The blending of sacred and profane in this political party's name is unmistakable. By associating the two, Chamlong was clearly making an effort to enhance the reputation of his party by using the sacred inference. Unlike *amnat*, which involves the command of others, *phalang* is personal and physical. For example, Phothirak's voice had *phalang* meaning his voice was powerful and could be projected across a room or a forest clearing (see section IV.5.2). The *nakleng* monk appeared unlike a monk to me not only due to his powerful physique which was much like a rugby player but also his readiness to mimic boxers on television (section IV.3.2). In this way, the *nakleng* monk had

phalang.

IX.2.3. *Itthiphon*

Itthiphon was occasionally used to suggest magical power which was associated with monks. Turton mentions *iddhividha* and defines it as magical power derived from meditation (1991b). *Iddhividha* is the first in Phra Rajavaramuni's list of the categories in the definition of *abhiñña* (1985). Randall also discussed the concept of *iddhi*, the root word of both *itthiphon* and *iddhividha* (1990). However, he felt that *iddhi* was different from the abilities acquired from meditation (ibid).

In the course of field work I more frequently heard *itthiphon* translated as 'influence'. This term was considered appropriate for monks whereas *amnat* was not. I believe this is due to the fact that there was no coercion or mobilisation of others nor was there any physical strength used in the exercise of *itthiphon*. There was, rather, suggestion or social pressure. For example, Luang Phaw Datta spoke of the abbot's and Khun Yai's *itthiphon* in his decision to ordain (section IV.2.2) The irrepressible monk exercised *itthiphon* when he suggested I use the term in my thesis title to discuss the influence of Buddhism on society (section IV.4.2). Although my informants at Pathom Asoke never put it in such terms, I believe that the pressure the community placed on the doctor to take a leadership role in the *putthasathan* could be described as *itthiphon* as well (section VII.1.1). I also feel that when the abbot of Pathom Asoke would mediate in dispute settlements, it would be considered *itthiphon* (section VII.1.1.A) and that the forest monk exercised *itthiphon* as well when carrying out his local development programmes (section IV.2.1.A). In each of the above

cases, there was no force involved, but there was influence derived from a position of respect or group demand to satisfy the need for consensus.

IX.2.4. *Abhiñña*

The term *abhiñña* is very specific, referring to power derived from meditation and has six different categories (section IV.4.1), of which the first is *iddhividha* mentioned by Turton (1991b). While this type of power was not exclusive to monks, it was considered sacred because it was derived from religious practice. For example, Khun Yai of Wat Dhammakaya exercised *abhiñña* when she reputedly changed the site of the first nuclear attack from Thailand to Japan (section V.2.4.E). Luang Phaw Wat Paknam, the originator of the Dhammakaya meditation technique, exercised *abhiñña* when he made a novice create an earthquake (section IV.4.1). It is important to note that *abhiñña* is derived not from commanding others, but from oneself and one's own practice of meditation. Luang Phaw Dhamma's opposition of *abhiñña* to *amnat* supports this conclusion (section IV.4.1).

IX.2.5. *Barami*

Of the five words for power encountered in the field, I feel that the one which seemed to fall most into Houtman's 'Pali trap' (1990), where a term's popular usage diverged from its Pali meaning, was *barami*. Although this term was defined by Sirindhorn (1981) and Phra Rajavaramuni (1985) as ten sacred qualities of perfection derived not from meditation but from ascetic practices (see section I.5.C), Van Esterik (1977) and Khun Na Sutee (section V.2.4.C) used it to refer to accumulated merit. Of all the terms referring to monastic power.

however, this one, even more than *itthiphon* or *abhiñña*, was used in reference to monks. As discussed in section I.5.C, the exercise of *barami* was passive, rather than active, differentiating it from other types of power. A monk never exerted *barami*, rather he relied on it. When informants used the term, the implicit meaning was that those with *barami* also had much accumulated merit; only someone with great merit could have this type of power. A monk would exercise his *barami* not by declaring his wishes, but by setting an example; laymen who wished to acquire merit would follow the monk's example or they would attempt to anticipate his wishes and fulfil them. For instance, the Chao Asoke lived strict, ascetic lives not because Phothirak commanded them to, but because they wished to follow his example. The decision of Dhammakaya devotees to meditate according to the Dhammakaya technique was in order to emulate the abbot's being *sai*. Khun Pa Tiw's asking Nahk Sudham his favourite food before he ordained was in order to anticipate his craving for it and to prepare it as an offering when he became a monk (section VII.2.8). The large financial contributions made to Wat Dhammakaya were made by laymen wishing to gain merit. Despite the vigorous fund raising by lay workers, the decision to donate money to Wat Dhammakaya and not another temple or movement was due to the *barami* of the entire movement.

IX.2.6. the limits of power

In comparing the exercise of *amnat* to that of *barami*, it becomes clear that sacred power (*barami*, *abhiñña*) is focussed on the mental, spiritual and ascetic qualities of the person who possesses it whereas profane power (*amnat*, *phalang*) is focussed on either using one's own physical and magical strength or

that of others. The sacred and profane overlap with *itthiphon* which can apply both to the sacred and the profane, meaning influencing without the use of force or strength. The point is that power is categorised according to the way it is exercised and that the profane can be enhanced with an association with the sacred (as in the case of Chamlong and the Phalang Dhamma Party) but that the sacred can be corrupted by the profane when a monk appears to use his physical strength (as in the cases of Phothirak with his loud, penetrating voice and the *nakleng* monk who pretended he was boxing) or when a movement mobilises people with profane force (as in the case of Wat Dhammakaya's hiring construction workers). As power becomes more active from either one's own or someone else's physical exertion, then, it becomes more profane.

While *abhiñña* was indeed considered sacred, few monks claimed to possess this type of power due to the fact that claiming magical powers was grounds for expulsion from the order of monkhood (Ingersoll 1966). It is perhaps for this reason that Randall (1990) separated *iddhi* from abilities derived from meditation although Turton (1991b) points out that *iddhividha* could be attained through meditation and Phra Rajavaramuni lists *iddhividha* as a quality of *abhiñña* (1985). After all, the monks at Wat Dhammakaya opposed *abhiñña* to black magic because it was an exertion of spiritual rather than physical strength.

When discussing monastic power, informants tended to use *itthiphon* when referring to situations when monks actively influenced others through direct requests or direct pressure. By virtue of the way it is exercised, *itthiphon* is more profane than *barami* because it was more active, making *barami* the most sacred type of power. Paradoxically, I believe that *barami* has greater potential

to reach people and is the basis for a monk's political power because it relies on the monk's example and not direct interaction with him. When a layman follows a monk's example, he does not need to be acquainted with the monk on a one-on-one basis; he merely needs to have experienced the monk in one way or another enough to feel that the monk is a good example of the Buddhist ideal and should be emulated. A perfect illustration of the exercise of *barami* is the case of Phra Phimontham (section II.5.3) where a monk endured persecution and expulsion from the monastic order by the government but, nevertheless, managed to maintain the public's high opinion. His ultimate reinstatement was due to a public outcry. In this instance, Phra Phimontham was able to exercise power through public opinion and petitioning although he himself did nothing but maintain his ascetic discipline.

Barami has a limit, however, and it is action. The more passive a monk is, the more sacred he appears and therefore the more *barami* he has. But once he makes requests or begins to pressure others, he begins exercising *itthiphon*, *amnat* or even *phalang* which are profane or, at least in the case of *itthiphon*, less sacred. It is this corruption by the profane that made it impossible for Phothirak to exercise *barami* when he was persecuted by the government. Although there is a strong argument that the case against Phothirak was a political manoeuvre to discredit Chamlong, Phothirak damaged his sacred image among those beyond his immediate devotees by making profane statements in support of the Phalang Dhamma Party (see Appendix 4, 21 July 1988). As has been discussed in sections IV.5.2 and V.1, Phothirak's voice was profane because it had *phalang*. Although the Chao Asoke found Phothirak's voice a source of attraction, his statements and the way he made them were too profane for him to retain his

barami. While the Chao Asoke still supported him, Phothirak had been too corrupted in the eyes of society at large for there to be an outcry of the same magnitude as that of Phra Phimontham.

IX.3. *The Experience of Thai Buddhism*

3.1. transmission

From the above discussion of *barami*, it is clear that a monk's source of power is the layman's experience of him, whether through direct interaction, media exposure, the atmosphere of a temple or the layman's own practice. The advent of modern print, broadcast and recording media has had great impact on a layman's experience of a monk (Hamilton 1991). However, as Hamilton points out, the media, until recently, was subject to state censorship and only state approved subjects could be broadcast (*ibid*). How then, did a monk like Phra Phimontham, who opposed the government, manage to rally the public in his favour in those times? The answer is that before there was a broadcast or print media, there was word of mouth. Highly respected forest monks moved throughout the countryside and yet laymen and student monks were able to seek them out due to strong word of mouth communication about a monk's knowledge and location (Kamala 1997, J.L. Taylor 1993b). It was through word of mouth that such monks were able to gain reputations, even if they did not seek one out.

A strong part of a layman's experience, then, is spreading the word and reputation of a monastic teacher whom he considers to be good and who understands the true nature of Buddhism. Although modern media allows a wider audience for initial encounters which can take the place of word of mouth communication, influential groups such as Wat Dhammakaya's Wednesday

Group, Chiang Mai Group and university student organisations proselytise for a monk and help to increase his following by introducing more laymen to the experience. The devotion of the influential groups grows through direct interaction with the monk, further exposure to the monk's knowledge through the print, broadcast and recording media and finally the layman's continued practice and increased personal religious proficiency. It is this activity of the individual layman that gives the monk greater *barami*. The monk's *barami* can continue to grow so long as he maintains his sacredness in the eyes of the public. If that monk's sacredness becomes corrupted, even those who are already devotees may abandon him for another monk.

IX.3.2. life cycles of a movement

B.R. Wilson states that there are six factors that contribute to the failure of new movements (1990). They are: ideology, leadership, organisation, constituency, institutionalisation and external considerations. It is believed that new movements tend to have cycle of existence which, if they don't end in failure, results in assimilation (B.R. Wilson 1970) or domesticisation (Carrithers 1979, Weber 1948b). While this appears to be case with Santi Asoke, I believe that Wat Dhammakaya will survive and yet retain its innovative practices. This is due to what I find adaptive experience, when the experience created by the movement continues to change according to the demands of the lay public. A case in point is Wat Dhammakaya's abandoning the idea of Dhammakaya World in favour of the World Dhammakaya Centre as its members became more cosmopolitan and preferred the development of a university to an amusement park. Another example is the concessions made to the Mahatherasamakhom

when the movement gave up certain practices but retained their most important teaching, meditation.

In an effort to avoid persecution, Santi Asoke offered to make concessions to the Mahatherasamakhom but was unsuccessful due to their close association with Chamlong. Although the Chao Asoke remained loyal, the movement has been marginalised due to Phothirak's popular image of having been corrupted by a profane involvement in politics. Unlike Santi Asoke which revolves around the leadership of Phothirak, Wat Dhammakaya is charismatic as a movement. The organisation does not rely on a single monk but on a unified vision of Buddhism taught by many monks. If one monk loses his *barami*, the movement can still survive. Despite the dispute with Luang Phee Metta, the movement continued to grow. The strength of Wat Dhammakaya is that the administration is adaptive, strong and efficient, with younger monks groomed to take on older monks' duties. The abbot has been intentionally sequestered in order to enhance his reputation among lay devotees by keeping him from becoming corrupted by profane associations (Sanitsuda 1998). At the time of my writing this thesis, Wat Dhammakaya encountered renewed opposition focussed on the movement's financial wealth. There is the possibility that the movement may, like Santi Asoke, be pronounced heretical and become marginalised. In such a case, like Santi Asoke, loyal members will remain; it is unlikely that the movement will be disbanded. Collapse would only occur if the movement's lay devotees perceive that it has become too corrupt and withdraw their support. If the movement continues to adapt in a way that is perceived as remaining sacred, however, it will continue to grow and so will its power.

Appendix 1: Introductory Letter to Informants (the English translation follows on the next page)

25 สิงหาคม 2531

เรื่อง ขอคำแนะนำและสัมภาษณ์

กราบเรียน

ที่นับถือ

สิ่งที่ส่งมาด้วย แนววิทยานิพนธ์

กระผมชื่อ นายปริญญา ฒ สงขลา ขณะกำลังศึกษาปริญญาเอก ทางมนุษยวิทยา สาขาสังคมศาสตร์ ที่มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น และกำลังศึกษาค้นคว้ารวบรวมข้อมูลต่าง ๆ เพื่อเขียนวิทยานิพนธ์ กระผมได้รับทราบการตอบอย่างสูงจาก คุณสมพร เทพสิทธิ์า รองประธานสภาสังคมสงเคราะห์ ว่าท่านเป็นผู้ทรงคุณวุฒิอย่างดีที่จะให้ความรู้ และข้อคิดแก่กระผมได้ จึงขอให้กระผมได้มีโอกาสสัมภาษณ์ท่านเป็นส่วนตัวด้วย หรือมี กระผมได้ เสนอหัวข้อต่าง ๆ ที่จะ เจาะ-เขยุดำเนินมาจากท่านด้วย

ในการค้นคว้าศึกษาหลักฐานและข้อมูล ดังกล่าวนี้ กระผมจะต้องกระทำให้เสร็จภายในเวลา 6 เดือน กระผมจึงหวังว่าจะได้มีโอกาสติดต่อกับท่านในเร็ววัน หากท่านจะกรุณาให้กระผมได้มีโอกาสเข้าพบตามข้อ ขอ ได้โปรดติดต่อกระผมตามที่อยู่ข้างบนนี้ นอกจากนี้ คุณสมพร เทพสิทธิ์า ประธานของ สภาสังคมสงเคราะห์ซึ่งกรุณาเป็นที่ปรึกษาของกระผม ได้กรุณาใช้เวลามาช่วยกระผมอยู่ด้วย ฉะนั้น ท่านอาจจะติดต่อผ่านคุณสมพร ก็ได้

กระผมหวังว่าจะได้รับความกรุณาจากท่านให้มีโอกาสได้ติดต่อและพบท่านในเร็ววัน

ขอแสดงความนับถืออย่างสูง

ปริญญา ฒ สงขลา

25 August 1988

re: requesting an interview

Dear —,

Please note the enclosed statement of purpose pertaining to field research for a Ph.D. thesis.

My name is Natayada na Songkhla. At the moment I am conducting field research for a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology at the University of London, United Kingdom. Khun Somporn Thepsitta of the National Council on Social Welfare has kindly suggested that you are knowledgeable and that I would gain much from interviewing you. To that order I have enclosed a statement of purpose in order to ask for your suggestions.

I must complete my research within six months. Therefore I hope to hear from you in the near future. Should you grant my request to meet you, please contact me at the above address or through Khun Somkuan Laolapha who has kindly agreed to act as my advisor.

I hope to hear favourable from you soon.

Sincerely Yours,

Natayada na Songkhla

Appendix 2: Statement of Purpose Sent to Informants (the English translation follows on the next page)

แนววิทยานิพนธ์

ในระยะ เวลาไม่กี่ปีที่ผ่านมา ศาสนาพุทธถูกนำมาใช้เป็นแม่แบบในการพัฒนาสังคมไทยโดยอาศัย ศาสนสัมพันธ์ซึ่งสามารถก้าวข้ามข้อขัดแย้งทั้งทางสังคม เศรษฐกิจ และภูมิประเทศ ศาสนาพุทธได้ ถูกยกมาใช้ เป็นหลักในการพัฒนาส่วนต่างๆ ของสังคมไทยยุคใหม่ อันหมายรวมถึงแต่ประสิทธิภาพ ในความคิดอ่านของประชาชนโดยส่วนตัว จนถึงของสังคมเองในส่วนรวม ในประเทศนี้ซึ่งประชาชน กำลัง เริ่มต้นพบความสามารถของตนเองที่พร้อมจะอุทิศเพื่ออนาคต ความสนใจของข้าพเจ้าจึงมุ่งสู่ ผลกระทบของศาสนาพุทธต่อประชาชน ในส่วนที่เกี่ยวกับความหมายของสังคมในอุดมคติของพวกเขา แม่แบบจากศาสนาพุทธชี้แนะอะไร และสามารถนำมาพัฒนาสังคมได้อย่างไร

ข้าพเจ้าปรารถนาจะสัมภาษณ์บุคคลที่นั่นับถือหลายท่านในเรื่องของศาสนาพุทธ รวมถึงบรรดาลูกศิษย์ ของท่านเหล่านั้น เพื่อจะได้ค้นพบผลกระทบของแม่แบบนี้ต่อความหวังของสังคมไทย

หัวใจของการค้นคว้าของข้าพเจ้าก็คือคำถามที่ว่า "ศาสนาจารย์เหล่านั้นสามารถใช้ศาสนาพุทธกระตุ้น เตือนความสนใจของประชาชนต่อสังคมได้อย่างไร"

Statement of Purpose

In the past few years, Buddhism has been a model for the development of society which surpasses social, economical, and national boundaries. It has been used as the basis of development for modern Thailand not only for the personal development of individuals but also for society as a whole. I am interested in the effect of Buddhism on the populace, particularly in the ideal meaning of religion for them and the suggested ideals to be derived from a Buddhist model and how this might effect the development of society.

I would like to interview many people who are respected in the field of Buddhism, including your lay devotees, in order to discover the effect of a Buddhist model for development on the hopes of Thai society.

At the heart of my project is this question: How can teachers of religion use Buddhism to arouse interest in the improvement of society?

Appendix 3: Interview Questions Sent to Informants (the English translation follows on the next page)

คำสัมภาษณ์

1. ท่านได้รับความรู้เรื่องศาสนาจากไหน
2. พระสงฆ์ที่ดีควรมีคุณสมบัติอะไร
3. พระสงฆ์สามารถช่วยสังคมไทยได้อย่างไร
4. ท่านมีความเห็นอย่างไรต่อข้อพิพาทในกรณีสันติอโศก
5. ในขณะที่พระสงฆ์ในประเทศไทยกำลังหันตัวเองเข้าไปยุ่งเกี่ยวกับการเมือง (ซึ่งพระสงฆ์พม่าและไทยสังกัดนิกายเดียวกัน)
 - การกระทำอย่างนี้ผิดหรือไม่

Interview Questions Sent to Informants

1. Where did you learn about religion?
2. What qualities should a good member of the Sangha have?
3. How can the Sangha help Thai society?
4. How do you feel about the Santi Asoke conflict?
5. At the moment the Sangha in Burma (who are also Theravadins) have been getting involved in politics. Is this wrong?

Appendix 4: Chronology of Events Relevant to Field Work

Note: up to 1970, this list is derived from Somboon (1982), Tambiah (1976), Keyes (1987) and Wyatt (1984). After 1970, information is derived from interviews experience during field work, Prawase (1987) and articles in Bangkok's two local English-language newspapers: the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*.

1782:

The Chakri dynasty is founded by Rama I

1851:

Rama IV ascends the Siamese throne and establishes the Thammayut sect.

1902:

Rama V passes the Sangha Act of 1902 which integrates Buddhist practices in Thailand.

1941:

Under the Sangha Act of 1941, the Thai Sangha is placed under the jurisdiction of the Department of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Education.

1963:

The Sangha Act of 1963 is passed, re-organising the Sangha authority under one ruling body, the Mahatheerasamakom.

1970:

20 February: the Dhammakaya Meditation Centre is established at Pathum Thani.

11 August: Rak Rakpong requests permission to build a personal retreat at Wat Asokaram.

7 November: Rakpong ordains as a Thammayut monk, taking the monastic name Potirak

1975:

6 August: Phra Potirak renounces ties with the Mahatheerasamakom.

1976:

January-August: Santi Asoke, Sisa Asoke and Sali Asoke *putthasatans* are established.

1977:

December: the foundation stone for the Wat Dhammakaya *ubosot* is laid by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

1980:

28 July: Pathom Asoke *putthasatan* is established.

1982:

The *ubosot* of Wat Dhammakaya is completed.

1988:

30 April: the Thai Parliament is dissolved and a general election is scheduled. I leave London to begin field work.

1-3 May: Maj Gen Chamlong Srimuang establishes the Palang Dhamma Party.

7 May: Phra Potirak declares he will back 'good' candidates.

13 June: Palang Dhamma Party wins by-election with a landslide.

18 June: Chamlong denies he supports Santi Asoke.

9 July: I begin interviewing monks contacted through the National Council on Social Welfare.

15 July: villagers in Chiang Rai attack a branch of Wat Dhammakaya in a land dispute.

18 July: Parian Dhamma, a lay conservative Buddhist association, presses charges against Santi Asoke for involvement in politics.

20 July: an official of Parian Dhamma resigns over the decision to condemn Chamlong without others' consent.

21 July: Santi Asoke admits supporting Chamlong.

24 July: the Palang Dhamma Party wins fourteen seats in the general election.

23 August: talks are held on the status of Santi Asoke. An early compromise is ruled out.

25 August: Santi Asoke indicates a willingness to submit to the Mahatheerasamakom.

27 August: Santi Asoke foes continue opposition.

1989:

1 February: I begin field work at Wat Dhammakaya

24 May: the Mahatheerasamakom, backed by the new Supreme Patriarch, moves to defrock Phra Potirak.

26 May: the Santi Asoke issue is raised in Parliament.

27 May: the police keep vigil on Santi Asoke amidst fears of unrest.

29 May: in a meeting with the Mahatheerasamakom, Phra Potirak and his followers are ordered to defrock.

2 June: the press is warned on giving Santi Asoke favourable coverage.

11 June: the Mahatheerasamakom gives Phra Potirak an ultimatum to defrock or face arrest.

13 June: the Palang Dhamma Party denies receiving financial support from Santi Asoke.

14 June: Santi Asoke make an unsuccessful bid to end the dispute through compromise.

- 20 June: Phra Potirak is arrested and forced to defrock but faces further charges on sacrilege.
- 21 June: Wat Dhammakaya is targeted as the religious probe widens.
- 22 June: Potirak is freed on 20,000 Baht bail.
- 23 June: Thongbai Thongbao, the human rights lawyer takes on Potirak's defence.
- 25 June: I begin field work at Santi Asoke.
- 9 August: Santi Asoke members are detained. The movement's legal battles continue.
- 27 September: I return to London.

Appendix 5: Thai Buddhist Calendrical Holidays (Wells 1960)

Wan Phra: (holy days) observed throughout the year every 8th, 14th or 15th days of the waxing or waning moons

New Year's Day: 1 January

Makha Bucha: (commemorating the first conference of the Buddha's disciples) the day of the full moon in February

Chakri Day: (celebrating the present royal dynasty's ascension to the throne) 6 April

Songkran: (the Thai New Year) 12-16 April

Peut Mongkhol: (the agricultural festival) 1 May

Raek Na: (the ploughing ceremony) 2 May

Chat Mongkhol: (coronation day) 5 May

Visakha Bucha: (commemorating the Buddha's enlightenment) the day of the full moon in May

Khao Phansa: (the beginning of the rainy season and Buddhist Lent, when monks must refrain from wandering) the day after the full moon of July

The Queen's Birthday: (mother's day) 12 August

Awk Phansa: (the end of the rainy season and when monks may begin to wander from their temples) the 15th day of the waxing moon in October

Piya Maharaj: (Chulalongkorn Day) 23 October

Thawt Kathin: (individuals, groups and organisations present robes to monks, three per monk) celebrated on the days between the full moons of October and November.

Loi Krathong: (the water festival) celebrated on the full moon of November

The King's Birthday: (father's day) 5 December

Constitution Day: 10 December



Glossary of Thai Terms

Note: If there is a difference, Thai Buddhist entries are followed by the Pali which appears in italics in parentheses and Pali entries are followed by the Thai pronunciation in parentheses.

A

abhai: (*abhaya*) forgiveness
abhiñña: (*aphinya*) magical powers
(see section IV.4.1)
ajahn: teacher, professor
Ah: younger paternal uncle or aunt
ahsom: (*ashram*) refuge: the location of Luang Por Tatta's office
akhantuka: guest (generally used to refer to monks or religious figures)
amnat: power (see sections I.5.3 and IX.3.1)
aramik: Asoke hierarchical rank (masculine) see section IV.1.1
aramika: Asoke hierarchical rank (feminine) see section IV.1.1
Ariya Sangha: special order of forest monks (see section I.3.3)
avijja: (*awicha*) ignorance

B

ban: house, also village
bahp: demerit
Baht: the Thai unit of currency (approximately 1.6p)
barami: (*parami*) power (see sections I.5.3 and IX.3.1)
bhikkhu: (*phikkhu*) monk
bhikkhuni: (*phikkhuni*) female monk
boriwen: area, section; boriwen nai: inner section; boriwen nawk: outer section
Bodhisatta: saint, one on the verge of attaining *nibbana*, but waits to help mankind to attain *nibbana* as well

buat: ordination, to ordain
bun: merit

C

chao: people; chao ban: villagers; Chao Asoke: Asoke people (Asoke term)
communit: communist (but usually a blanket term referring to anyone opposing the status quo)

D

dawk mai ngarm: beautiful flowers, collection of worldly atrocities (Asoke term)
dek wat: children of the temple, a temple's unordained residents (mainstream term, see **ubasok**)
dhamma: (*tham*) the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha's law
Dhammadayada: (*thammathaiyat*) heirs of Dhamma
dhammakaya: (*thammakai*) the physical embodiment of the Buddha's teaching
dohn tha: challenged
doi: mountain
dutanga: (*tudong*) monastic forest retreat, rules restricting behaviour (see section I.3.3.C) Dutanga Retreat (Dhammakaya week-end event, see section VII.2.7.)

H

hi-so: high society (Thai slang)

I

itthiphon: power (see sections I.5.3 and IX.3.1)

J

jai awn: soft heart, weaker spirits

jao awat: abbot

jaroen tham: greeting and farewell, may your adherence to the dhamma prosper (Asoke term)

K

kamma: (kam) record or merit or demerit effecting one's future incarnations

keng: to have charisma, to have great prowess

kham pud: rhetoric; kham pud run rang: violent rhetoric

khamphi: important text

khana: a group people

khaw anumothana bun duay: may you get the benefit of your merit, thank-you (Wat Dhammakaya term)

khreng pai: too serious, extreme

khwam jing: truth

khwam ru: knowledge

khwam sukh: peace of mind

Khun: honourific title (both masculine and feminine)

kilet: appetites (*kilesa*)

klod: umbrella-tent

klum kla pae: group unafraid of defeat

krab: the bodily movement used to pay respect, sitting on one's knees, putting hands together at the face as if in prayer and bringing the head down to the floor

krak: Asoke hierarchical rank (feminine) see section IV.1.1

kuti: monk's quarters

L

lan tham: field of dhamma (in the outside section of Wat Dhammakaya)

lahn: niece, nephew, grandchild
leuamsai: to recognise charisma (see section I.5.2.B)

look: child, offspring

look sit: student

lohp: (*lopa*) greed

Luang Phaw: informal title for senior monk (Wat Dhammakaya term)

Luang Phee: informal title for junior monk (Wat Dhammakaya term)

M

maha: prefix meaning great

Mahanikai: the larger order of Thai Buddhist monks

Mahatherasamakhom: the Sangha supreme council

mon: prayer (mantra)

meuang: city, state

N

Na: younger maternal aunt

na ta: appearance

nahk: Asoke hierarchical rank (masculine) see section IV.1.1

nai: inside, inner

nak: prefix equivalent to the English suffix 'ist', meaning practitioner of

nakleng: gangster

nam mara: brewed fruit juice

nawk: outside, outer

nen: novice monk, Asoke hierarchical rank (masculine) see section IV.1.1

nibbana: (*niphan*) freedom from reincarnation

P

Pa: older aunt (both maternal and paternal)

pa: Asoke hierarchical rank (both masculine and feminine) see **phu patibat** and section IV.1.1

patibat: to practice

P

patibat tham: to practice the *dhamma*, to meditate (Wat Dhammakaya term)
pen thi pueng: to be a source of reliance
phalang: power (see sections I.5.3 and IX.3.1)
pharadoraphabb: fraternity (Asoke term)
pha jiworn: a monk's robes
phak fuen: recuperation
Phaen Din Dhamma Phaen Din Thong: a development programme in association with the Mahathera-samakhom (see section IV.1.1.B)
phansa: rainy season (May-August)
phatthana: develop, development
phaw: father
Phaw Than: father monk, reverend father (Asoke term)
phoe liang: nanny, lay leader (Wat Dhammakaya term)
phi bun: millenarian leader, one with merit
phid satsana: against religion, heresy
phisut: proof, to prove
phra: monk, Buddha image
phu dee: good person, aristocrat
phu mi bun: millenarian leader, one with merit, see **phi bun**
phu patibat: one who practises, Asoke hierarchical rank (both masculine and feminine) see **pa** and section IV.1.1
Phutthamonthon: (*Buddha mandala*) a large park with a central section the shape of concentric circles built in commemoration of the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment (1957)
putthasathan: (*Buddha stan*) realm of the Buddha. Asoke community

plaek: weird
plook: to plant; plook sattha: to cultivate charisma
prajam: steady, regular

R

rabiab winai: rules of the Vinaya, the *silas*
run raeng: violent

S

sathu: amen (*sadhu*)
sai: clear, a compliment (Wat Dhammakaya term, see section IV.4.1)
saiyasat: mystical, magical
samathi: concentration (*samadhi*)
samana-phrahm: Asoke monk
samruam: to be serene, composed
samsara: (songsahn) the cycle of reincarnation
Sangha: the Buddhist church
sapha: council
sati: awareness
siang: voice
sikhamat: Asoke nun
sila: (sin) precept (see section I.2.1)
simam: leaf-shaped stones demarcating temple ground
sit: student
soi: lane
sompharn: village abbot, monastic leader of a *putthasatan* (Asoke term)
sattha: the recognition of charisma

T

thammachak: the wheel of Dhamma
Thammatut: ambassadors of Dhamma
Thammajarik: travelling Dhamma
Thammayut: the smaller, more ascetic order of Thai monks (see section II.3)
Than: honourific title for monks, royalty
thunniyom: capitalism as the basis for judging all value

U

ubasika: lay female monastic attendant (mainstream), female lay worker (Wat Dhammakaya, see section V.2.1), Asoke hierarchical rank (feminine) see section IV.1.1

ubasok: lay male monastic attendant (mainstream) see **dek wat**, male lay worker (Wat Dhammakaya, see section V.2.1), Asoke hierarchical rank (masculine) see section IV.1.1

ubosot: ordination hall (*upasatha*)

V

Vinaya: (Winai) the code restricting conduct (see section I.2.1)

vijja: (wicha) knowledge

W

wai: a gesture of respect, putting the hands together as if in prayer in front of the face

wan phra: holy day

wat: temple compound

wian thian: triple circumnavigation of a temple to ritually cleanse one of sin, to make merit (see section VIII)

wichakarn: scholarly pursuit

wiharn: lay temple building (*vihara*)

winyan: soul (*vijnaya*)

wipatsana: meditation (*vipasana*)

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