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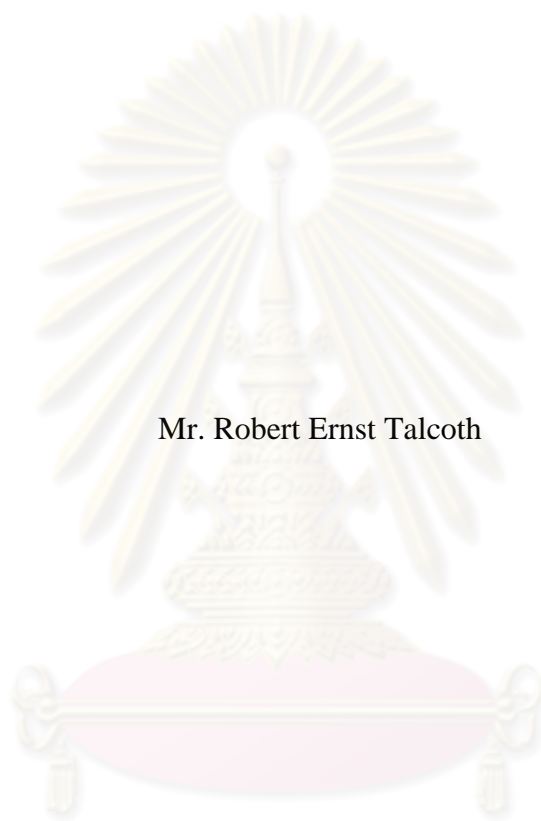
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BUDDHIST MONKS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THAILAND



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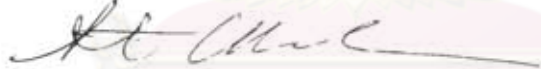
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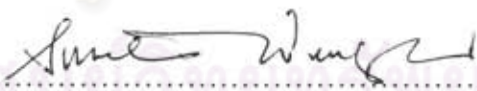
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วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เน้น ไปยังบทบาทของพระสงฆ์ในพุทธศาสนาที่มีส่วนร่วมในงานทางด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมในประเทศไทย นับตั้งแต่ห้าสิบปีที่แล้ว ประเทศไทยได้พบกับยุคแห่งการเติบโตทางเศรษฐกิจอย่างรวดเร็ว การมุ่งเน้นทางการพัฒนาด้านเศรษฐกิจมักจะเกิดขึ้นโดยปราศจากการพิจารณาอย่างถี่ถ้วนต่อทางด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม ซึ่งเป็นเหตุให้มีการทำลายสิ่งแวดล้อมในหลายพื้นที่ของประเทศ ตัวอย่างเช่น การตัดไม้ทำลายป่าได้เพิ่มขึ้นอัตราที่น่าตกใจ เช่นเดียวกับการทำการเกษตรแบบไม่ยั่งยืนที่ได้ก่อให้เกิดปัญหาทางสิ่งแวดล้อมในปัจจุบัน

การศึกษานี้ทำการสำรวจสามกรณี ซึ่งเป็นที่ที่พระสงฆ์ปฏิบัติภารกิจเพื่อส่งเสริมการพัฒนาแบบยั่งยืนและการอนุรักษ์ธรรมชาติในส่วนต่างๆของประเทศไทย เนื่องด้วยเมื่อก่อน การศึกษาในเรื่องการเคลื่อนไหวด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมทางพุทธศาสนาได้เน้นไปทางด้านปรัชญาของการอนุรักษ์สิ่งแวดล้อม ดังนั้นการศึกษานี้จึงมีประสงค์ที่จะเน้นไปในด้านการปฏิบัติผลงานที่ดำเนินการโดยพระสงฆ์ แนวทางมานุษยวิทยาได้ถูกใช้เป็นเครื่องมือหลักในการเก็บข้อมูลและการวิเคราะห์ งานทางด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมของพระสงฆ์ส่วนใหญ่เน้นตั้งอยู่บนความพยายามที่จะเปลี่ยนแนวความคิดของคนในพื้นที่ที่มีต่อสิ่งแวดล้อมและการใช้ประโยชน์จากทรัพยากรธรรมชาติ ซึ่งโดยส่วนใหญ่ถูกดำเนินการ โดยการเชื่อมโยงกันระหว่างพุทธศาสนากับหลักจริยธรรมทางสิ่งแวดล้อม โดยที่พระสงฆ์ได้ปฏิบัติภารกิจเพื่อส่งเสริมภารกิจกรรมทางเศรษฐกิจแบบยั่งยืน อย่างเช่น ฟาร์มออร์แกนิกและการจัดการทรัพยากรธรรมชาติร่วมกัน ดังนั้นการวิจัยมีประสงค์ที่จะสร้างความเข้าใจกับองค์กรที่ใช้ความเชื่อสนับสนุนการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนและการอนุรักษ์สิ่งแวดล้อมโดยการแสดงกลยุทธ์และวิสัยทัศน์ และแนวทางปฏิบัติอย่างไร

ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

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ROBERT ERNST TALCOTH: BUDDHIST MONKS AND
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This thesis looks at the role of Buddhist monks engaged in environmental work in Thailand. Since the 1960's, Thailand has experienced a period of rapid economic growth. Focus on economic development has often occurred without sufficient consideration for the environment, this has resulted in environmental degradation in many parts of the country. Deforestation, has for example taken place at an alarming rate. Unsustainable agricultural practices have also contributed to the country's current environmental problems.

This study examines three cases, where Buddhist monks work to promote sustainable development and environmental conservation in different parts of Thailand. Previous studies on the Buddhist environmental movement have focused on the philosophical aspect of Buddhist environmentalism, this study aim to put focus on the practical aspect of work conducted by the monks. Anthropological approaches are employed as major instruments for data collection and analyzes. The monk's environmental work is primarily based on trying to change the local people's perception of the environment and their usage of natural resources. This is mainly done by interconnecting Buddhism with an environmental ethic. The monks are actively working to promote sustainable economic activity such as organic farming and collective management of natural resources. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of how faith-based organizations promote sustainable development and environmental conservation by identifying their strategies, vision and how they operate.

Field of Study: Southeast Asian Studies

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Student's Signature... 

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ศูนย์วิทยพัทยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background

Since the early 1960s Thailand has undergone a period of rapid modernization. This period started during the rule of military strongman Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat who came into power after staging a coup in the year 1958 (Baker, Pasuk 2005:140). Sarit initiated several development programs with the objective of transforming Thailand into a modern industrialized nation. The military dictatorships close relationship to the United States and the business opportunities created by the Indo-China war, led to an economic boom in Thailand (Thak 2007:227). The Thai government adopted a western orientated development model which included agricultural intensification, a shift to export oriented cash crops and industrialization (Darlington 2003:98). The economy has grown steadily and between the year 1985 and 1995 Thailand experienced the world's highest growth rate. The country is currently considered to be a "newly" industrialized country (Economy Watch: Thailand). Starting from the "modernization" period, deforestation in Thailand has been among the fastest in Asia. In the year 1938 more than 70% of Thailand was covered with forests by 1969 the forests had decreased to around 59% and less than 20 years later the figure had decreased to 29%. Today it is believed that less than 15% of Thailand's total area is covered by forests (Darlington 2003:97). The loss of forests has had a fundamental effect on the country's ecosystems leaving several animal and plant species extinct or close to extinction. Deforestation has also led to land erosion, floods and droughts in several parts of the country.

Agricultural expansion and industrial growth has put increasing pressure on Thailand's natural environment and the country is currently facing a number of environmental problems such as deforestation, pollution of rivers and canals and land erosion (Rigg 1995:3). The exploitation of natural resources in Thailand has in many cases been done without consideration of the long-term effects.

Buddhist environmentalism

Environmentalism in Thailand has developed as a response to environmental degradation caused by modernization and rapid economic growth. Since the 1980's Buddhist monks have actively been engaged in environmental work in Thailand (Darlington 2003:102). Starting from this era there have been numerous cases where Buddhist monks have functioned as leaders of organizations with an environmental ethic as well as promoting projects aimed at conserving the environment. The active participation of Buddhist monks in environmental work is something that has not existed in the past. Buddhism in contemporary Thailand has been drawn into new social contexts and political struggles as a result of the modernization process and this has resulted in monks playing more active roles in secular matters (Esposito 2008:371).

Buddhist monks and organizations engaged in environmental work are critical of capitalism and the growth-oriented development policies promoted by the Thai government. Sulak Sivaraksa, social activist and the founder of the international network of engaged Buddhism, stated "Production on the scale aspired to by most developing nations not only uses up raw materials, but also destroys the environment, poisoning the air and water, the fish and the fields, and damaging the health of the people" (Sulak 1990:170) Monks and organizations with an environmental ethic work to promote environmental-friendly alternatives to government development policy's based on Buddhist principles. In their critic of the economic policies promoted by the Thai state, Buddhist activists are drawing parallels between capitalism, consumerism and environmental destruction. Using Buddhist concepts, monks and lay activists are trying to promote environmental awareness among the Thai population. The work conducted by Buddhist environmentalists includes alternative community based development strategies such as community forests, promotion of sustainable agriculture, strengthening of local self-reliance and providing an understanding of the negative consequences of consumerism. In their rejection of state economic policies and the state definition of development their work can be viewed as counter-hegemonic (Taylor 1997:36).

In this study I will discuss three different cases involving Buddhist monks and laypeople engaged in environmental work in Thailand. The Buddhist environmental

movement in Thailand is not one homogenous movement, it consist of a loosely structured network of monks and lay Buddhists who are working with environmental issues. The experience and success of these different groups in implementing their ideas varies depending on region, I have therefore chosen to do case studies in different regions of Thailand. I am interested in how particular social circumstances affect the formation and agenda of Buddhist environmentalist movements and monks. My research will consist of three case studies.

1. **The Asoke group (often referred to as Santi Asoke);** the Asoke group is a relatively new Buddhist group that operates outside of the state monastic hierarchy (the Thai Sangha). The monks and nuns of the Asoke group are known for their ascetic lifestyle which includes only eating one vegetarian meal per day. Lay followers are encouraged to live a simple and modest lifestyle guided by the Buddhist precepts. Many of the members of the Asoke group live together in self-reliant communities.
2. **Phra Prajak;** Phra Prajak is an environmentalist monk that was active in the northeast of Thailand during the 1990's. His struggle to protect the forest in Buriram province received nationwide attention. I will focus on Phra Prajak's role in the conflict over control of natural resources between the local community and capitalist interests that took place in Buriram.
3. **Huq Muang Nan;** The Huq Muang Nan Foundation (We Love Nan Foundation) was established over 20 years ago by the Buddhist monk Phrakru Pitak Nanthakhun. The organization is working to promote sustainable development and environmental awareness in the Nan province of Northern Thailand. Huq Muang Nan consists of a network of Buddhist monks, academics, activists and villagers from Nan province. The organization follows the principles laid down by Phrakru Pitak. The organization has several community based development programs aimed at promoting sustainable agriculture and local empowerment.

Research objectives

In my thesis I will discuss three cases involving monks and Buddhist movements with an environmental ethic that are engaged in environmental work in Thailand. I will discuss how these monks and movements are promoting environmental awareness and sustainable development by drawing on Buddhist concepts as well as analyzing their interaction with local communities and the Thai authorities. I intend to study the particular vision of the environmentalist monks and what kind of work they do to materialize this vision.

I intent to study the historical development of each case study in order to put their ideas into context. This is important since environmentalism cannot be studied in isolation from the wider social context.

Research questions

1. In what way is Buddhism used to promote environmental awareness and sustainable development?
2. What are the vision, goals and strategies of the monks and movements that are active in environmental work?
3. What is the government's and business interests' response to the work conducted by these organizations/monks?

Conceptual framework

The concept of worldview and the role of religion in shaping a particular worldview are central to understanding the work of the Buddhist environmental movement. Religion can play an important role in shaping a particular perception of the environment that encourages environmental protection. Buddhist environmentalists are actively trying to change people's perception of the environment by drawing on Buddhist concepts. In my analysis of the work conducted by the Buddhist environmentalists the concept of worldview and cosmology will be of central importance.

The understanding of the world around us is shaped by values and belief systems laying the foundation for a specific worldview (Cunningham 2007:45). Depending on our worldview we will perceive reality in different ways and this will have effect on our actions towards people and the natural environment. The individual conception of oneself in relation to nature will determine both actions and thoughts. Cosmology, defined by Fiona Bowie as “a theory or conception of the nature of the universe and its workings, and of the place of human beings and other creatures within that order”, will lead to particular attitudes toward the natural world (Bowie 2006:108). Religious beliefs play a significant part in the formation of a cosmology. Religion also lays the base for ethics, the concept of what is right and what is wrong. Cosmology or worldview is conditioned by various historical, environmental, technological, psychological, and social factors. Different societies will therefore develop different worldviews, cosmologies. The concept of worldview, cosmology is of importance when analyzing the contrasting views on the environment between the capitalist/state interests and the environmentalist monks.

In my analysis of the work conducted by monks and Buddhist groups engaged in environmental work I will also use the conceptual framework of Robert N. Bellah. One of the primary social functions of religion is the maintenance of social stability. Religion tends to be conservative in the sense that it supports tradition. But at the same time as religion can function as a conservative force it can also adjust itself to social change and can even function as a motivator for resistance and change in a social order (Crapo 2003:268)

Robert N. Bellah states that when traditional societies are confronted by the demands of modernity, they often choose between reformist or neo-traditionalist alternatives. The reformist movements often advocate a return to the early teachings and texts and they reject contemporary interpretations of religion. The reformists reinterpret religious traditions in order to make it compatible with modernization. In my study I will argue that the Buddhist environmental movement has reinterpreted certain Buddhist doctrines in order to address the current ecological problems. The reformist movements rely on traditional religious symbols which according to Bellah “furthers change with a minimum of traumatic disturbances” (Bellah 1965:207). Neo-traditionalism is according

to Bellah an “ideology designed to keep change to a minimum and defend the status quo as far as possible” the neo-traditionalists use “modern ideas and methods to defend traditional cultural values, which are held to be superior to those of any other tradition” (Bellah 1965). Neo-traditionalism in Asia developed as a direct response against the outside pressure to modernize. The neo-traditionalist draws support from the masses by using traditional symbols. Their rationale is that “traditional” values and beliefs shall be maintained in the “modernized” society. This theory will be used in my analysis of changes that occur within a specific religion when society goes through rapid change. I will argue that the monks and organizations studied in this thesis share characteristics with both the “reformist” and “neo-traditionalist” movement.

Research methodology

The background information for my study has been acquired through library research based on books, reports and articles. Anthropological approaches are also employed as a major instrument for data collection and analysis. This includes staying at temples engaged in environmental work as well as actively participating in different projects promoted by temples and organizations working on environmental issues. First-hand information was collected by means of observation and interviews with monks and laymen.

I have conducted both structured and semi-structured interviews. My selection of informants consist of leading monks, NGO staff, community leaders and villagers/lay people working closely with the monks or temple.

Information on the Huq Muang Nan foundation was collected during travels to the Nan province. I studied different projects promoted by the Huq Muang Nan foundation; these include community forests, organic farms and cottage industries. I travelled to Nan Province on two occasions. On each trip I stayed in Nan for a period of around one week. During my stay in Nan I was given the opportunity to accompany Phrakhru Pitak, other monks engaged with the Huq Muang Nan Foundation, NGO staff and government officials on a four-day research trip throughout three districts in Nan province. During the

trip we spent the night in villages along the way. This trip was specifically fruitful since it provided me with the opportunity to observe how the monks of Huq Muang Nan foundation interacted with the local community and I got to see different projects supported by the foundation. During the trip I conducted several informal and formal interviews. I also lived at the Wat Aranyawat temple in Nan town, which is the temple where Phrakhru Pitak is the abbot. During my stay in Nan I was also given the opportunity to spend time with government officials associated with the Huq Muang Nan foundations as well as with local activists working with Phrakhru Pitak.

The Asoke group has a number of centers throughout Thailand; in this study I focus on the centers in Bangkok and Nakhonn Pathom. The Bangkok centre, Santi Asoke, is the intellectual center and it serves as the centre of information and communication between the other centers. I visited the Asoke center in Bangkok on several occasions. During my visits I conducted two formal interviews with community leaders and I conducted several informal interviews with other Asoke followers residing in Santi Asoke as well as with children attending the Asoke School. A large portion of the information I apprehended was collected during casual conversations. At the center I also visited the Palang Bun (force of merit) supermarket and inspected the various products they sold at the store. I was also given guided tours of the center which included visits to the school, recycle station, vegetarian restaurants, garden and main temple.

I visited the Asoke center in Nakhon Pathom. During my visit I was guided around the premises and had the opportunity to visit the agricultural fields, factories producing tofu and herbal medicines as well as the Asoke groups Tv and radio stations. During my visit at Pathom Asoke I conducted informal interviews with Asoke followers as well as children attending the local school. I had initially planned to stay at the Pathom Asoke center for a period of a week but due to the Asoke groups involvement in political demonstrations in Bangkok this was unfortunately not possible.

Data on the case of Phra Prajak has mainly been based on academic literature. Data on the Phra Prajak case was also partially collected through interviews. I travelled to Buriram Province and conducted interviews with NGO-staff, village headman and a school official involved in the conflict that took place in the Dongyay forest. I also had

the opportunity to visit the site where Phra Prajak's temple used to be and spend the day in the village where he was active. Phra Prajak currently resides in a temple in Nongkhai province but I met him for an interview in Sa kaew provinces while he was temporarily staying in a forest monastery in the province.

The background information for all of the cases discussed in this study was obtained from previous academic studies. I collected vital information from a number of sources and then tried to fill in the gaps by using data collected during interviews and participant observation.

Limitation of the Study

One limitation of the study was that the researcher, due to the limited time available, had to narrow down the number of respondents interviewed for the study. Difficulties, in terms of contacting and locating key-informants made it more practical to conduct in-depth interviews with a limited amount of informants. The language barrier constituted another problem, many of the monks could not speak English, and a translator was therefore used during some of the interviews. Interviews conducted in Thai, without a translator, were recorded and later translated from Thai to English by a native Thai speaker.

The lack of available academic literature in English constituted a problem during the process of collecting data. The reason I choose these particular cases was partially because previous studies on them were available in English. Other interesting cases that I came into contact with could not be used as case studies since all previous studies on them were only available in Thai language. However, the available academic literature addressing the Huq Muang Nan Foundation and Phra Prajak were also very limited.

A detailed study on economic policies and development in Thailand would contribute to the understanding of Buddhist environmentalism and its development but this was unfortunately beyond the scope of this study.

Literature review

In this section I will give a brief review of some of the existing literature related to my topic. The existing academic literature in English that covers the topic of Buddhism and environmentalism is quite limited. The majority of the existing literature deals mainly with the philosophical aspects of Buddhist environmentalism. In this literature the historical relation between Buddhism and environmental ethics are discussed. Books that include philosophical reasoning about environmental protection and Buddhist ethics are relatively easy to find. But there exist only few published works that describe empirical studies done on the actual work of Buddhist monks or organizations with an environmental ethic.

The book *Buddhism and Nature conservation* by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh provides an overview of the type of ideas that have influenced Buddhist environmentalists (Chatsumarn 1998). The author is of the opinion that there exists a clear connection between Buddhism and environmental conservation. Examples of this connection are given throughout the text. The life of the Buddha is presented as promoting environmental awareness and central Buddhist teachings are described as promoting love and compassion towards all living beings. There are a number of authors that have produced books and articles with similar themes (Henning 2002, Hunt Badiner 1990, Sulak 2005, Gross 2003)

American anthropologist Susan Darlington has published a number of works on the Buddhist environmental movement in Thailand. Her study on the organization FEDRA (Foundation for the Education and Development in Rural Areas) led by the Buddhist monk Phra Thepkavi have been helpful since FEDRA share some similarities with the case studies that I have selected (Darlington 1990). Darlington's work is mainly focused on the villagers and their reaction towards FEDRA's usage of Buddhism as a means of promoting an alternative form of development. Although Darlington states that FEDRA has a strong environmental ethic she does not go into detail on the relations between Buddhism and environmentalism or how Buddhism is used to promote environmental awareness. Darlington's later work is more oriented towards the connection between Buddhism and the environment. She has published a number of

articles in which she describes the conflict between “environmentalist monks” and the state and business interests. Taylor has also produced work that highlights the conflict between environmental monks and capital interest (Taylor 1993). Taylor perceives the environmental monks as part of an “eco-dhammic resistance movement that has questioned the moral basis of the state and market capitalism”. The work of Taylor is in contrast to Darlington more oriented towards providing a socio-political explanation of the emergence of environmentalist monks. He views the monks as part of a form of resistance against both the state and the conservative “elitist” Sangha hierarchy. This approach has also been taken by Sponsel, Ivarsen and Sulak (Ivarsen 2002, Sponsel 1993, Sulak 1999).

These texts all provide good overviews on the opposing views regarding management of natural resources between environmentalist monks and the business interest, but none of the authors provide detailed examples of how Buddhism is used to promote environmental awareness or in what way the monks work with the local community.

While the existing literature on Phra Prajak and Huq Muang Nan (Love Nan foundation) is quite limited there have been extensive studies done on the Santi Asoke group (Mackenzie 2007, Heikkila-Horn 1997, Essen 2005, Swearer 1991). Santi Asoke is generally viewed as a “fundamentalist” movement that is highly critical of mainstream Thai Buddhism. The Santi Asoke group views their interpretation of Buddhism as a “return” to the true teachings of the Buddha (Swearer 1991). Swearer views Santi Asoke as a reaction against the materialistic culture of modern Thailand. An anthropological study on the Santi Asoke group has been done by Juliana Essen. Living as a member of the Asoke community for a long period of time she provides an inside account of the group and its practices (Essen 2005). Heikkila-Horn’s book *Buddhism with open eyes* provides the most extensive account of the Santi Asoke group. Heikkila-Horn focuses on the difference between mainstream Buddhism and the Buddhism practiced by Santi Asoke. She also focuses on the conflict between Santi Asoke and the Thai state. Although the book has a quite political focus it also includes chapters that briefly deals with the environmental aspect of Santi Asoke. Heikkila-Horn describes the Santi Asoke group as a

group that “has a clear ecological message that favors natural agriculture and recycles garbage” (Heikkila-Horn 1997:120). In the article *Buddhist Economics and the Asoke Buddhist Community* Suwida Sangsehanat argues that the Asoke group is an anti-systemic movement (Suwida 2004). According to world-system theory, there are particular systems that constitute a world order or a distinct way of existing. These systems change over time and ultimately get replaced by a new system. The current world system is the capitalist world-economy. The world-system is created through structures intrinsic to capitalism. Allen comments “The worldwide division of labour created through the movement of products and labour from advanced capitalist nations to rising capitalist nations creates relationships of economic dependency and exploitation” (Allen 2006:200). According to Immanuel Wallerstein the capitalist world economy is dominated by these core-peripheral relations between nations in which the core states exploit the periphery states. The world economy is based on the drive for constant accumulation of capital. Protest against the capitalist system is referred to as anti-systemic protest. An example of an anti-systemic movement is according to Wallerstein the social movements consisting of workers, students, peasants emerging in America, France, Italy and Japan during the late 1960s (Robbins 2005:331). Wallerstein argued that these movements emerged out of the rejection of injustices existing in the world-system, the capitalist world-economy (Robbins 2005:335). Suwida views the Asoke group as an anti-systemic group. In her article, the Asoke group is explained as promoting *a new traditional economy*. The *new traditional economy* is an economy where traditional religion or a traditional view of society once again is “embedded” within economic decision making. This “new” economic system is explained by its supporters to be superior both to the new economic system as well as the traditional system. Modern technology is used in the *new traditional economy*, but in contrast to capitalist society it will not be alienating (Suwida 2004:274). In the article Suwida gives several examples that show that Santi Asoke can be viewed as an anti-systemic movement.

The Asoke have created alternative societies. In these communities the Asoke followers have developed their own alternative economic system entitled “bun-niyom” or meritism. Suwida describes bun-niyom as a way for the Asoke community to give back

to society. In contrast to the capitalism, profit is not the objective of the Bun-niyom system, instead the Asoke followers believe that “getting more than giving, as in capitalism, or making a profit, is actually a loss” and it is viewed “an evil that hinders self-development” (Suwida 2004:278). Work conducted in the Asoke community is not done to earn wealth or for status, instead work is regarded as a way of giving to the community. By working hard for little in return people believe that they are eradicating greed. This also contradicts the capitalist system where people mainly work to earn as much money as possible. Consumption in the Asoke community is limited to sustaining life and Asoke followers reject consumerism and materialistic values of mainstream society. Suwida argues that in contrast to other reformist Buddhists that “reinterpret” Buddhism to make it more relevant to contemporary society, the Asoke group “overthrows” contemporary values and social system (Suwida 2004:276). The Asoke group rejects mainstream society and “creates” their own community based on moral values derived from Buddhism. This constitutes an alternative to mainstream capitalist society.

By reading and analyzing the existing literature I gained an understanding of the fundamental ideas of the Buddhist environmental movement, but I did not get a clear picture on how these ideas actually materialize. In my study I intend to not only discuss the philosophical aspect of Buddhist environmentalism which has dominated the existing academic literature, but also provide concrete examples of how religion is used to promote environmental awareness and nature conservation.

Significance of my research

I intend to provide an insight into the role of faith-based organizations and environmentalist monks in sustainable management of natural resources and promoting environmental awareness. This is a field of study that has received limited academic attention. The existing literature is mainly focused on the philosophical aspect of Buddhism and environmentalism. I intend to focus on the actual work conducted by monks and organizations with an environmental ethic. I will give examples on how the monks interact with the local community and in what way they promote environmental awareness.

Chapter outline

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter features an introduction to the study including methodology, literature review etc.

Chapter 2: Background and overview

Chapter 2 features a discussion on the traditional role of Buddhist monks in Thai society and there is an introduction of central Buddhist beliefs that are related to the research. The chapter provides an overview of the gradually changing role of Buddhist monks that occurred during the 1960's and 70's and then discuss the emergence of Buddhist environmentalism. In the chapter, main features of Buddhist environmentalism are outlined and discussed. The chapter also includes an introduction to the Buddhist monk Buddhadasa bikkhu and his ideas regarding dhammic socialism.

Chapter 3: Hug Muang Nan Foundation

The chapter will provide an overview on the philosophy of Hug Muang Nan Foundation and different projects instigated and supported by the Hug Muang Nan Foundation are presented. There will be focus on a four-day research trip the researcher participated in. During the research trip, the founder of Hug Muang Nan, Phrakhru Pitak, NGO workers and government officials travelled throughout several districts within the Nan Province and visited villagers where people were engaged in projects promoted by Hug Muang Nan Foundation. The chapter also introduces the work of Phra Somkit, another influential monk associated with the Foundation, and discusses the role of *community culture* discourse as a mean of strengthening the community in Nan Province.

Chapter 4: Santi Asoke

This fourth chapter focuses on the the Santi Asoke group. The chapter begins with a biography of the Asoke group's founder Samana Bodhirak. The chapter then continues by outlining central beliefs of the Asoke group and then focus on different aspects of their activity that is related to environmental ethics. The Bun-niyom system or meritism which is the Santi Asoke alternative to capitalism is also presented and discussed.

Chapter 5: Phra Prajak

In the chapter, the conflict over control of natural resources between the state and the local community in Buriram Province is discussed. I will investigate the role of environmentalist monk Phra Prajak in legitimizing the environmental struggle of the local community in Buriram and analyze the role of Buddhism in promoting a particular management of natural resources.

Chapter 6: comparison and conclusion

The fifth chapter will include a comparison between the different case studies and a final analysis. The comparison will be on topics such as organizational structure, vision and goals and methods used by monks to protect the environment.

ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

CHAPTER II

Background and overview

In this chapter, I will outline the main features of Buddhist environmentalism, including an overview of the type of ideas and beliefs that have influenced the monks discussed in this study. The chapter begins by introducing central Buddhist beliefs and the role of the *sangha* in Thai society and proceeding to an explanation of the emergence of Buddhist environmentalist monks in Thailand. Also included is a brief discussion regarding engaged Buddhism and the concepts that are central to Buddhist environmentalism. The chapter concludes with an introduction to the ideas of the late Buddhadasa bikkhu a highly revered Thai monk whose teachings in this regard have influenced each monk discussed in this study.

Monks and the Sangha

The majority of the population in Thailand is Buddhist and the monastic community, the *sangha*, is one of the country's largest institutions. Once a man reaches the age of 20, he can be ordained as a monk, and traditionally it has been the ideal that every Thai male should ordain as a monk at least once during their life. Ideally, a man should ordain for a period of three months during the Buddhist lent (Mulder 2000:93). In the past, ordination into the monkhood was regarded as a form of rite of passage and a man that had been ordained into the monkhood was considered to be a "mature" person (*suk*), in contrast to his counterparts who had not yet ordained, who were regarded as "raw" (*dip*) (Darlington 1990:130).

The majority of monks and novices in Thailand live in *wats* (temples) and are supported by the nearby community. The original ideal of the Buddhist monk and nun is a person with a minimum of possessions living a simple life-style, supported by lay donations rather than by the pursuit of any gainful occupation.

Traditionally, the cultural life of people in Thailand has been centered around the wat (Buddhist temple/monastery) (Keyes 1987:137,178). Throughout history, monks have functioned as religious teachers, advisors and community leaders (Darlington 1990:131). The historical role of the monks in Thai society has not been limited to that of a spiritual teacher, in the past, the monks assisted the people in many different ways as-- teachers, advisors and doctors.

In contemporary Thailand, the role of the monk is clearer in the villages of the rural areas than in the country's cities and towns. In an urban environment, the monks have-- in a sense-- lost their traditional role and become cut off from certain segments of society. Outside of the big cities, the temple still function as the centre of cultural life and activity and the people have a strong bond with the monks residing within the temple grounds. In rural areas, parents often send their children to pursue their studies in local temples (Seri 1988:7). The majority of the monks in contemporary Thailand come from a rural background. The sangha has come to function as a mean for people from poorer background to gain access to higher education (Keyes 1989:139).

The monks in the sangha follow the strict rules of conduct laid down in the Vinaya Pitaka. There are 227 rules for men and 311 for woman. The Vinaya Pitaka regulates the monastic life of the monks and nuns alike; the rules involve issues such as the handling of money, ownership, standard of living and intake of food. The formal list of monk's possessions is as follows: an upper-, lower- and over-robe, a belt, a bowl, a razor, a needle, a water-strainer, a staff and a tooth-pick. In practice the possessions of a monk would also include such items as sandals, a shoulder bag and an umbrella (Harvey 2000:203). Because the monks in the sangha follow the strict discipline of the Vinaya Pitaka, which is regarded as having been devised by the Buddha, they receive the highest respect in Thai society (Keyes 1989:35). The monastic life is regarded as being on a higher level of virtue than the life of a layperson. The monks within the sangha have functioned as bearers of tradition, teachers and role-models for the laity. The monks strive for spiritual development and then use their understanding of the dhamma to guide the laity, providing the laity with a model for moral living. The Buddhist monks represent

such moral virtues as generosity, loving kindness and compassion and they serve as both moral and spiritual guides for the laity (Mitchell 2008:94).

Thai people view the sangha as a holy institution that is above the laity (Mulder 2000:104). The Buddhist sangha is a model of ethical, cultural and spiritual life for the laypeople. The sangha represent peace and goodness and it is a contributor of moral and spiritual guidance for the general populace (Mitchell 2008:25). Thai people generally believe that there is a connection between the welfare of the Sangha and the welfare of Thai society at large. If the monks in the sangha follow the rules laid down in the Vinaya Pitaka it is believed that society will prosper but if the monks fail to follow the Vinyana and allow Buddhism to decay, morality and society will also decay. The moral purity of the Sangha is important for the merit-making layperson, while a morally corrupt Sangha is regarded as a threat to the whole society (Heikkila-Horn 1997:94).



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Buddhist teachings

The Buddha taught the middle path between the two extremes of attachment to pleasures of the senses and attachment to extreme forms of asceticism, the notion being that the middle way between these two extremes will lead to enlightenment (Gombrich 2006:61). The Four Noble Truths is Buddhism's central doctrine. The Buddha taught that:

1. The process of body and mind and the experience of life are dukkha, unsatisfactory, frustrating and productive of suffering, whether in a gross or subtle form;
2. This situation is caused by craving, demanding, desires which lay one open to frustration and disappointment, and keep one within the round of rebirths, with its attending ageing, sickening and death;
3. This situation can be transcended by destroying craving, and associated causes such as attachment, hatred and delusion, in the experience of Nirvana. Once this is attained during life, a person will no longer be reborn, but will pass into final Nirvana at death, beyond space, time and dukkha;
4. The way to attain this goal is the middle way consisting of the Noble Eightfold Path (Harvey 2000:32).

The negative cravings that are the root of suffering come from the false understanding that there exist a separate, permanent self. The main moral defilements, greed, anger and delusion are all tied to the self. Buddhism teaches non-self (anatta). The Noble Eightfold Path consists of the following elements:

1. Right view
2. Right thought
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort

7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

The four noble truths of Buddhism state that craving is the root to suffering and that suffering can only end when craving is being eradicated, the way to achieve this being to follow the middle way and the Noble Eightfold Path. According to Phra Rajavaramuni, the practice of following the Noble Eightfold Path can be summarized in the following manner 1. Not to do any evil, 2. To cultivate what is good and 3. To purify the mind. (Phra Rajavaramuni, 1984:7).

According to Thai belief, only monks have the ability to reach the highest level of spiritual development and thereby end the eternal cycle of rebirth (samsara). The majority of the Thai population perceive enlightenment as a goal beyond their capacity. As practiced by laypeople in Thailand, Buddhism is focused mostly on merit-making. Yoneo Ishii describes merit-making as the main pillar of “popular Buddhist doctrine in Thailand” (Ishii 1986:14). According to the Thai Buddhist worldview, the individuals place within society is determined by kamma that has been accumulated in previous lives. At the same time, as the individuals position in society is determined by past kamma, each individual has the possibility to improve their kamma by performing meritorious acts. By performing such acts, people are believed to be able to improve their situation in this life or the next. Merit can be accumulated by making donations to the monkhood, praying, listening to sermons, following the five Buddhist precepts and practicing meditation (Darlington 1990:121). Alms and gifts donated to the Buddhist sangha are believed to accumulate the largest amount of good merit. By accepting donations from the laity, the monks provide the lay population with the opportunity to make merit, thereby improving their lot in life. To ordain as a monk is considered to be very meritorious and it is believed that the man who ordains as a monk transfers good merit to his mother. Many males ordain in order to honour their mother and provide her with merit since she cannot ordain as a monk. There is no obligation for a man to ordain for the rest of their life, instead temporary ordination is very common.

Thais are concerned about performing acts that accumulate good merit since it is believed that merit will affect one's situation in life (Ishii 1986:15).

When Buddhism spread throughout Asia it integrated with local culture and belief systems. The Buddhist teachings were influenced by diverse beliefs and practices and developed specific local characteristics in each region. Spiro states that even though Theravada Buddhism is the overarching religious system in Thailand, many of its doctrines are only rarely internalized by Thai people because they are either ignored or rejected by the faithful (Spiro 1982:10). Buddhism in Thailand is heavily influenced by animistic beliefs and Buddhist rituals are in many cases conducted in order to provide protection from evil forces. Buddhism in Thailand has many faces, there is doctrinal Buddhism and there is popular Buddhism practiced by the majority of the laypeople apart from this there is also new forms of Buddhist developments and interpretation. In this study the focus lies on a "practical" form of Buddhism that to a large extent is based on reinterpretations of Buddhist doctrines aimed at making the teachings more relevant to modern society.

Development monks and environmentalist monks

Beginning from the 1960's onwards, we have seen Buddhist monks becoming directly involved in development issues in Thailand. This started during the rule of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, Thailand's prime minister in the late 1950's, who pushed Thailand into adopting a policy of intensive development based on the western model. In doing so, he used monks as a source of political legitimacy and to promote development projects launched by the state. In 1962, the Sarit government passed a law, often referred to as the 1962 Sangha act, which brought the Sangha under the control of the government. The sangha act of 1962 not only placed the sangha under closer government control, but also placed monks associated with or supportive of Sarit's regime in positions of power (Jackson 2003:28). In consequence, Sarit and his successor actively used the sangha to promote their government's political goals (Somboon 1993:63, Keyes 1989:77). Yoneo Ishii comments:

Sarit thought that national integration must be strengthened to realise national development. To attain this goal he planned to start with fostering the peoples sentiment for national integration through the enhancement of traditional values as represented by the monarchy and Buddhism (Ishii, 1986:8).

Monks were sent out to remote rural areas to promote the development projects adopted by the central government (Keyes 1989:140). Examples of government programs involving Buddhist monks were the thammathud and thammacarik programs. The objective of these programs was to use Buddhism as a means to strengthen national unity, promote development and pacify rural dissent (Swearer 1999:212). Poor areas with low levels of development in the north and north-eastern parts of Thailand, which the government viewed as “vulnerable to communist subversion” were specifically singled out (Darlington 1990:37). At the same time as Sarit used the sangha as a form of political legitimization, he suppressed socially progressive monks that opposed his authoritarian rule. An example of this is the abbot of Wat Mahatat, Phra Phimolatham, who was accused of being a communist and forcibly disrobed by the Sarit government (Peleggi 2007:112).

Many monks opposed the development policies promoted by the central government. In the 1970's, independent “development monks” started to work in local communities promoting alternative development models opposing the growth-oriented development policies adopted by the central government. These monks were working on the local level, directly engaged in addressing local problems and concerns. One of the first so-called “development monks” was Phra Dhammadilok, a monk from an area just outside of Chiang Mai city. Phra Dhammadilok founded an NGO entitled the Foundation for Education and Development of Rural Areas (FEDRA), in 1974. The objective of FEDRA was to develop spirituality and the economy simultaneously within the community. The different projects founded by FEDRA included rice banks, buffalo banks (poor farmers were provided with buffalos to plow their field), credit unions, integrated agriculture projects etc. (Darlington, 2003:100). What characterizes the projects conducted by organizations such as FEDRA is that, in contrast to many of the

governments development programs, they are aimed at responding to the needs of the local community rather than the nation or region. Many of the monks involved in these projects came from the areas that had experienced problems due to rapid economic change.

Starting from the 1980's, Buddhist "development monks" have becoming increasingly engaged in environmental issues in Thailand and have come to play an increasingly important role in the conservation and protection of the environment. Among the first cases in Thailand where monks took a direct environmental position was during the controversy over the construction of a cable-car system up Doi Suthep mountain and through Doi Suthep national park in Chiang Mai. In 1985, a consultant company laid forth a proposal to the local government to erect a cable-car system up Doi Suthep mountain which would cover a distance of 3 km. The consultant company had been hired by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) to identify and promote new tourist destinations in Chiang Mai. The consultant group identified the Buddhist temple Wat Phra Tat, which is located on top of Doi Suthep mountain, as a potential location for tourist development. Traditionally, the temple had mainly been visited by the local population, but the consultant company argued that a growing number of foreign tourists had started to visit the temple. Academics from the University of Chiang Mai opposed the project arguing that the construction of a cable-car system would have negative effects on the environment in the area (Pholpoke 1998:266). Buddhist monks, people's organizations, the media and the majority of the local population joined in the opposition against the construction of the cable-car system. A large portion of the monks involved in the protests against the project was involved in local social and community development efforts in the area. They regarded the proposal of the cable-car project as being "anti-people and anti-nature". They were also against tourist development based on commercial interests in Chiang Mai province (Pholpoke 1998:271). One of the monks opposing the project was Phra Phothisangsi, who argued that there was a link between Buddhism and the preservation of trees and forests. According to Susan Darlington, this was the first time Buddhist monks in Thailand had pointed to the connection between

Buddhism and the environment as a motivation for social and political activism (Darlington 2003:103).

Another example of an early and rather well-organized buddhist network with an environmental ethic is the Phra Sekhiyadhamma network. Phra Sekhiyadhamma is a network of monks and nuns concerned with issues regarding development and conservation. The group, which was founded in 1989, has been involved in various projects aimed at protecting the environment. Its main objective are to co-ordinate the work of monks involved in development, to provide a network of communication and moral support, and to conduct training seminars and workshops (Swearer, 1999:221). An example of their activity is the Songkhla lake dhamma walk, which was organized by Sekhiadhamma together with NGOs and government officials. The dhamma walk was meant to draw attention to the environmental problems the lake was facing. The population of fish and shrimp in the lake had deteriorated due to the introduction of new fishing technologies and the destruction of the fish's spawning ground. The quality of the water in the lake had gotten much worse with increasing pollution from urban areas and chemicals used in agricultural production having seriously affected the quality of the water. Monks, NGO staff and members of the local population participated in the walk (Henning 2002:133).

Engaged Buddhism

In contemporary Thailand we have seen Buddhist monks becoming more actively involved in social and political matters, such as environmental conservation. Buddhist monks that actively engage in social matters are commonly referred to as “socially engaged Buddhists”. These “development monks” and “environmental monks” are part of the “socially engaged Buddhist” movement that has emerged in Thailand. In this part I will outline the main features of engaged Buddhism and include a discussion regarding the origin of this particular movement.

Colonization, the spread of western ideas and the modernization process caused major changes throughout Asia. The introduction of new political and economic structures challenged the traditional Buddhist worldview and the form of life associated with this specific worldview (Swearer 1996:195). Reform of Thai Buddhism can be traced back to King Mongkut, who reigned from 1851 to 1873. Mongkut had spent 27 years as a monk before ascending the throne, during which time he came into contact with a number of westerners who introduced him to new forms of knowledge that questioned the traditional Thai worldview. Inspired by western science, Mongkut intended to reform Buddhism and make it more compatible with western science and rationality. His ambition was to turn Buddhism into a “modern” religion by eliminating practices that were considered too “ritualistic, metaphysical or overly influenced by local or regional culture” (Darlington 2003:97). Mongkut had engaged in an intensive study of the Pali scriptures and believed Thai Buddhism had drifted from the original teachings of the Buddha. Influenced by the strict Mon tradition of Buddhism, Mongkut created his own Buddhist sect, called the Thammayut (those adhering to the doctrine). The Thammayut emphasized study of the Pali scriptures, meditation and improved discipline, while at the same time rejecting superstition and the belief in supernatural powers. Among certain Buddhist groups in Southeast Asia, there has been a will to modernize Buddhism and to make it more relevant to the social, economic and political situation of the modern society (Swearer 1996:196). At the same time, Buddhism in the modern world has been drawn into new social contexts and political struggles, and new social problems arising as a result of the modernization process have inspired Buddhist to take active roles in society.

The term “engaged Buddhism” was coined by Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Thich Nhat Hanh was the chair of the Vietnamese Buddhist peace delegation during the Vietnam war and he is currently the leader of the international “engaged Buddhist” movement. Thich Nhat Hanh used the term to cover three ideas emphasizing 1) awareness in daily life 2) social service and 3) social activism (Prebish, Keown 2006:209).

Thich Nhat Hanh argued that Buddhist that encounter suffering in society shall engage themselves and try to change the social conditions that produce suffering (Queen 1996:2, (Esposito 2008:371).

He advised Buddhists to do the following:

“Not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering by all means, including personal contact and visits, images, sound. By such means awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world” (Queen 2003:2).

For the engaged Buddhist, social service or political activism is believed to be an important part of Buddhism since it deals with suffering and possible reduction of suffering. In this regard, engaged Buddhists address a wide range of social problems such as poverty, discrimination and the destruction of the environment. The term “engaged” Buddhism is presently used to refer to “diverse Buddhist movements that manifest similar qualities, as well as a term to describe a loosely structured global socio-religious phenomenon” (Jeffreys 2003:253).

Such engagement would seem to contradict the more conventional view of Buddhism, which has traditionally been seen as a religion that advocates spiritual development by renouncing society and worldly activity. Involvement in politics or other “worldly” activities has been viewed as spiritually corrupting (Jackson 2003:213). In fact, as Ian Harris points out, Buddhism has traditionally been a “world-denying” religion. Suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*) and insubstantiality has been viewed as characterizing human, “worldly” existence, the role of the monk was therefore thought of as “outside” of the mundane world. In order to free him-self from the suffering of the world, the monks was regarded as having to “escape” from the world. The world was seen as “endless, meaningless and purposeless”, and engagement in worldly matters was therefore regarded as meaningless. Accordingly, escape from the cycle of rebirth was accomplished by renunciation of worldly concerns, and this was the role of the monk

(Harris 2003:172-173). The engaged Buddhists have a different opinion, however, in that they believe it is the responsibility of all Buddhists to address all forms of suffering in society. Instead of renouncing society the “socially engaged Buddhists” believe that they should actively involve themselves in social matters.

The Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and scholar Walpola Rahula argues that the belief that one has to renounce worldly matters in order to follow the teachings of the Buddha is incorrect; instead, he perceives Buddhism to be a way of life, which can be practiced by anyone (Rahula 1988:77). Walpola Rahula does not consider life in the temple secluded from the outside world to be the only form of correct Buddhist practice, he sees Buddhism as a religion that can be practiced in everyday life.

The question regarding the origin of suffering is quite important when discussing the “engaged Buddhist” movement. Traditionally suffering has been viewed as existing within the individual caused by dissatisfaction and frustration and can therefore only be reduced by spiritual practice. Thus, suffering is seen as caused by individual cravings and greed (Jenkins 2003:38). Engaged Buddhists see this somewhat differently, viewing suffering not only as existing within the individual, but also as being caused by social conditions. In their perception, in order to reduce suffering one must also take into account social circumstances and not only focus on inner cultivation. The traditional perception of suffering as a personal and psychological state that can be reduced through individual practice is not denied but additional factors are included to explain the arising of suffering. Similarly, as the sangha provides the monks with the ideal environment for spiritual development, the engaged Buddhists want to provide the lay people with an ideal environment that allow them to develop spiritually.

The engaged Buddhist movement view material well-being as fundamental for spiritual development, and its members are therefore actively working to reduce poverty and social inequalities. Poverty and violent environments are viewed as obstructing people from developing spiritually. Although happiness is believed to come from living a moral life based on spiritual principles, the Buddha himself recognized the difficulty in living such a life when exposed to hardship (Rahula 1988:81). According to this view

Buddhism advocates socially engagement on the basis that it will increase people's ability to understand the Buddha's teachings.

Opinions about the origin of engaged Buddhism differs. Some scholars consider it to be a new form of Buddhism that has not existed in the past. They see it as reaction against the transformation of political and economic systems that took place during the twentieth century. Others see Engaged Buddhism as a direct continuation of the Buddha's teachings. They believe that the origin of engaged Buddhism can be found in the Buddhist teachings of compassion, interdependence and morality (Queen 2002:324). Thomas Freeman Yarnell refers to these two groups as a modernist and traditionalist group (Freeman Yarnell 203:286). The traditionalists does not view engaged Buddhism as a product of recent social circumstances instead they claim that Buddhism has always been engaged. The traditionalists believe that commitment to social engagement is the very essence of Buddhism. In the book *what the Buddha taught* Dr. Walpola Sri Rahula states that "The Buddha did not take life out of context of its social and economic background; he looked at it as a whole, in all its social, economic and political aspects. His teachings on ethical, spiritual, and philosophical problems are fairly well known. But little is known, particularly in the West, about his teaching on social, economic, and political matters. Yet there are numerous discourses dealing with these scattered throughout the ancient Buddhist texts" (Rahula 1988:81). This quote summarizes some of the main ideas that exist within the "engaged Buddhist" movement. They view Buddhism as a religion that promotes social action and social reform.

The "modernist" scholars view engaged Buddhism as a reaction to modernization and the western influence in Asia; they maintain that traditional Buddhism have not been particularly interested in social engagement. Gombrich states that the concern of the Buddha was to reform individuals "and help them leave society forever", not to change the world. According to this view, the goal of the teachings of the Buddha was not to create a just society but to liberate people from suffering (Deitrick 2003:261,264). According to their perception of Buddhism, the form of Buddhist activism that is present in Asia today has never existed in the past. Modern historical conditions are believed to

have engendered this “new” form of Buddhist movements (King 1996:404). The modernists accuse the traditionalists of “reading” contemporary ideas “into” the past and of wanting to present Buddhism as a “rational, humanistic and democratic” religion (Freeman Yarnell 2003:316). Even though the modernists view engaged Buddhism as a product of western influence and social change in Asia, they do admit that the Buddhist teachings contain doctrines and practices that are of socio-political relevance, but they insist that these doctrines and practices have not had the same importance or function in the past as they have in the present (Freeman Yarnell 2003:287).

Buddhism and the environment

The aim of this section of the chapter is to discuss the connection between Buddhism and environmentalism, focusing on some of the central ideas that have influenced the Buddhist environmental movement and discussing how its adherents interpret Buddhism as a religion that promotes an environmental ethic.

In the ancient Buddhist scriptures, there are few direct references to the environment or environmental protection (Gross 2003:164). This does not necessarily mean that Buddhism does not support an environmental concern. During the time of the Buddha, the environmental problems that we face today simply did not exist. Although direct support of environmental conservation is difficult to find in the Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha clearly promoted respect towards animals, plants and other forms of life. This can be interpreted as “advocating” a concern for the environment. Consequently, although Buddha never directly advocated environment conservation, a central theme of his teachings is compassion towards all living things. An example of this is that a monk’s first vow is to abstain from destroying life (Henning 2002:13). It is quite difficult to follow this precept to the fullest, but the main idea is that a Buddhist should try to refrain from hurting any living thing, whether it is a plant or a animal (Harvey 2000:156). The precept of abstaining from destroying life can be interpreted in different

ways. In the book “Buddhism and Deep Ecology”¹, Daniel H. Henning argues that the precept refers to both direct and indirect action that leads to harming or killing animals. By destroying the natural habitat of animals or polluting the water one is indirectly responsible of harming and possibly killing animals and is thereby breaking this all-important precept (Henning 2002:38). In a similar fashion, Henning interprets the second precept, which is refraining from stealing, in such a way as to include “inappropriate, and uncontrolled developments, marketing and consumption” on the basis that it steals from future generations of all life (Henning 2002:39).

The life of the Buddha

Buddhist environmentalists often draw a connection between Buddhism and environmentalism by highlighting particular aspects or events of the Buddha’s life that were associated with nature or forests. Thus, the life of the Buddha is used as a paradigm to show the connection between Buddhism and environmentalism and the importance of preserving nature. It should be noted, however, that there are very few passages in the Buddhist scriptures that actually mention nature or environmental protection. Nevertheless, there are several events in the life of the historical Buddha that shows his view of nature. Buddha lived most of his life close to nature and he preached compassion for all living things. Buddhist environmentalist often highlight the fact that all the major events in Buddha’s life such as his birth, enlightenment, first sermon and ultimately death are all in some way connected to trees and forests. The future Buddha, Siddharta Gautama was born under a Sala tree and, after leaving his life in the palace to seek enlightenment, he reached Nirvana under a Bodhi tree. After reaching enlightenment, Buddha sat down under a Banyan tree and meditated for seven days, after which he meditated another seven days seated under a Bodhi tree. Furthermore, the Buddha gave his first sermon in the forest, and finally, at the age of 80, passed away under a Sala tree

¹ The book a manual for *Buddhism and deep ecology* is written by an American professor but the ideas that are being put forth in the book are shared by Buddhist environmentalists in Thailand. Daniel H. Henning, the author of the book has worked with monks associated with Suan mokkh as well as Sulak Sivaraksa and P.A Payutto.

(Chatsumarn 1998:151,152). For the lord Buddha, the forest represented the ideal place for meditation and he encouraged monks to meditate and learn about the dhamma there (Harvey 2000:174). All the early Buddhist monasteries were located in the forest or close to the forest. The fact that Buddha was born in the forest, reached enlightenment in the forest and the Buddhist religion developed in relation to the forest is interpreted as showing a clear connection between Buddhism and the environment, as Sulak Sivaraksa states ; Buddhism has been concerned with caring for the natural environment for over twenty-five hundred years (Sivaraksa 2005:71).

The Sangha and the environment

There are several rules for the monks in the Sangha that can be interpreted as displaying a concern for the environment. One example of this is the three month retreat during the rainy season which all monks are obliged to undertake. One of the motivations behind the retreat is that monks wandering around during the rainy season might harm plants and small creatures, so by staying within the temple during the rainy season the monks are prevented from unintentionally killing or harming life (Gombrich 2006:98). Another example is the rule that prohibits a monk from cutting down a tree or to ask anyone to cut it down for them (Harvey 2000:175). The Vinaya also contain several examples of the Buddha teaching his disciples not to harm plants.

In the Buddhist texts, the Buddha is described as extending loving kindness towards animals, but Ian Harris argues that, if examined clearly, one can see that the Buddha does this for a specific reason. Essentially, Harris views the Buddhist attitude towards animals as not being guided by a genuine concern for the environment as such. By showing compassion towards animals, the layman is rewarded with good merit and this, according to Harris, is the main motivation underlying benevolent acts towards forests and animals. (Harrins 2003:177) Pragati Sahni shares Harris's interpretation of the Buddhist scriptures, adding that "behavior towards non-humans beings is mostly qualified by some condition, such as the action being done for one's own benefit rather than environmental reasons (Sahni 2008:45).

The practice of compassion and kindness towards animals can be interpreted in two major ways; it can be interpreted as a form of environmental conservation or concern, but can also be interpreted as a selfish act in the sense that the act is motivated by karmic rewards. Compassion is shown towards the animal kingdom because of the personal benefit it brings to the individual. Consequently, this interpretation does not view Buddhism as necessarily promoting conservation of the environment since personal gain is the motivation behind the act.

Dependent origination

The teaching of dependent origination or interdependence is often used by Buddhist environmentalist to show the link between Buddhism and environmentalism (McMahan 2008:152). One of the most important Buddhist teachings is the teaching of Anatta (not self). According to the teachings of the Buddha, there exists no self, no soul. A human is made up out of five aggregates (Khandas in Pali), which can be divided into two classes; physical and mental aggregates. There exist one physical aggregate, which is material form (Rupa), and four mental aggregates which consists of sensation (Vedana), perception (Sanna), mental formations (Samkhara), and consciousness (Vinnana) (Williams 2000:58). These aggregates constitute the person, but none of them can be viewed as a permanent self. The Buddha claimed that the five aggregates are “not self” on the basis that they lead to affliction, they do not obey the person of whom they are a part, and they are impermanent (Williams 2000:58). According to the Buddha, everything in the material and non-material world has one characteristic in common, namely impermanence. Everything is just effects of different causes. It is the human mind that, due to ignorance, attaches meaning to material and non-material things. The teaching of Anatta shows that the law of impermanence also applies to humans, there exist no self or permanent soul in that all phenomena share the same characteristics: impermanence, suffering and lack of soul or essence (Gombrich 2006:64). The teachings of non-self are used by Buddhist activists, including Buddhist environmentalists, to point out that concepts such as material wealth and power are based on ignorance. Since there is no

permanent self, one cannot really own anything and one cannot be anything, it is due to ignorance that people strive for material wealth and status. A parallel is drawn between the striving for riches and status and social problems such as environmental destruction and violence. As P.A Payutto writes, “Dependent on feeling, craving arises, resulting in the variations of human behavior towards both other people and the world around them” (Payutto 1994:73). Sulak Sivaraksa states that “violence has its origin in the three poisons of greed, hatred and ignorance, to act non-violently we must overcome these poisons. We must develop the opposite mental attitude.” (Sulak 2005:4). In this perspective, Buddhism is viewed as the means to develop the mind.

The second noble truth states that craving is the root to suffering. The doctrine of dependent origination explains the arising of craving and ultimately the arising of suffering. The teaching is also the Buddhist explanation of the causal process, of how things come into existence. The fundamental idea is that nothing can exist in isolation; all mental and physical aspects of reality are all dependent on other things for their existence. This is the natural law called *Idappaccayata*, which is the law of conditionality corresponding to dependent origination (Varadhammo 1996:57). The principle can be explained as follows;

When there is this, that is.

With the arising of this, that arises.

When this is not, neither is that.

With the cessation of this, that ceases (Payutto 1994:4).

As demonstrated in the teachings, all material and non-material things come into existence and then cease to exist in an ongoing process of dependence. There is nothing in this world that can exist by itself everything is dependent on something else for its existence. If people come to an understanding that everything is interconnected and depends upon other things, selfishness will cease to exist, because a mind that

understands the natural law will not produce selfishness (Buddhadasa:conserving the inner ecology). Furthermore, in the Mahahatthipadopama the Buddha says “One who sees Conditioned Arising, sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees Conditioned Arising” (Webster 2005:146). Thus, dependent origination can be viewed as one of Buddhism’s fundamental teachings.

Dependent origination is seen as a chain containing 12 parts, which consists of ignorance, action, consciousness, name and form, sources, contact, feeling, attachment, grasping, existence, birth, aging and death (Lopez 2001:29, Kabilsingh 1998:15). The chain is viewed as a circle, therefore lacking a beginning or end.

There are different interpretations of dependent origination. In one interpretation, for example, dependent origination is used to explain the connection between three lifetimes, one’s past life, present life and future life. Actions performed by an individual in this life are believed to affect the conditions of his or her future life in the same way as one’s present life is believed to be determined by the karma accumulated in one’s previous life. This can be viewed as the popular or common interpretation of the discipline.

Another interpretation lays focus on how the discipline shows the interconnectedness and dependence of all things. It is this interpretation that has been used by Buddhists dealing with environmental issues. According to this view, everything in this world is connected through dependent origination, all things are interdependent and conditioned upon each other (Henning 2002:11). This view of nature rejects the anthropocentric view that has characterized development policies in Thailand. Sulak Sivaraksa claims that “control and exploitation” of the environment goes against Buddhist teachings since it is based on a view of humans as superior to other creatures and thereby failing to understand the “truths of nature”, which are interconnection and interdependence (Sivaraksa 2005:73). The Thai monk P.A Payutto states that by the means of modern science Man has developed technologies that enable him to manipulate nature, but although manipulation is possible to some extent, Man is still nevertheless dependent on nature for its existence (Payutto 1994:22-23). In the book “Buddhism and

deep ecology”, there is a comparison between the principle of dependent origination and the ecosystems. An ecosystem is made up out of numerous plants and animals with different functions, which together form a complex entity. By removing or harming one part of the ecosystem, the other parts will inevitably be affected (Henning 2002:65). The interpretation of dependent origination as a connection (interdependence) between man and nature can be viewed as something quite modern. In early Buddhist literature, dependent origination is described as the causes and conditions that produce suffering. Dependent origination is the chain that binds people to the cycle of rebirth. Through the realization of the causes that produce suffering, one has the possibility to reach Nirvana and escape samsaric existence. In the Pali scriptures, dependent origination is not described as the interconnection between all living beings (man and nature) but simply “the conditions for dissatisfactory life in the cycle of rebirth” (McMahan 2008:154).

The interpretation used by Thai Buddhists that highlight the connection between man and nature through the co-arising of all natural phenomena is influenced by Mahayana Buddhism. In the Mahayana tradition, the interpretation of dependent origination as the interconnectedness or co-existence of the world is quite widespread. The connection between dependent origination and nature developed in China when Buddhism spread to the region. In China, the concept of Buddha nature, that all living beings have the potential of enlightenment within them, came to include grass, rocks and rivers (McMahan 2008:160). Japanese Zen Buddhism further developed the link between Buddhism and reverence of nature. The adaptation of Mahayana ideas by Thai Buddhist monks such as Buddhadasa Bikkhu can be explained by the Mahayana traditions “flexibility and adaptability” in dealing with contemporary issues in contrast to the somewhat conservative Theravada tradition. The Mahayana interpretation of Buddhist doctrine can in many ways be more useful in the modern world than the conservative “static” Theravada tradition. It is also important to point out that Buddhadasa Bikkhu rejected the distinction between Buddhism into a Theravada and Mahayana tradition. According to Buddhadasa, the essence of the Theravada and Mahayana traditions are the same, the only differences lie in their ceremonies and rituals. For Buddhadasa, any teaching that ends suffering is ultimately a Buddhist teaching (Buddhadasa bikkhu 1997).

Buddhadasa bikkhu

The monks and Buddhist groups that are the focus of this study have all, to some extent, been influenced by the teachings of the late Buddhadasa bhikkhu (1906-1993). The Thai Theravada monk Buddhadasa bikkhu has been viewed as one of the most “prolific” scholar-teacher monks in the history of Theravada Buddhism whose work has come to influence a large number of people both in Thailand and around the world. In addition, Buddhadasa bhikkhu is often referred to as the “senior philosopher of engaged Buddhism” (Queen 1996:3).

This part of the chapter contains a general overview of some of Buddhadasa’s ideas and proceeds to focus on those aspects of his teachings that deal with the environment.

At the age of 20, Buddhadasa bikkhu was ordained in the Mahanikai order, early on, he showed a great talent for religious studies and advanced quickly. Senior monks noticed his gift and suggested that he travelled to Bangkok to pursue his Buddhist studies at a higher level (Santikaro Bikkhu 1996:150). In the year 1928, he travelled to Bangkok for the first time, but shortly after his arrival, he felt disappointed with the education that was being offered. Buddhadasa’s main complaint was that the studies at the temple in Bangkok did not include studies of the Tipitaka itself, but only commentaries on the Tipitaka. After only two months of study in Bangkok, he returned back home to Surat Thani province (Jackson 2003:11). Two years later, he decided to once again travel to Bangkok for further studies. During this time, he took an individualistic approach to the studies, ignoring large parts of the official curriculum. After Buddhadasa had completed his Buddhist studies in Bangkok, he moved to his home province of Surat thani, in southern Thailand. He settled down in an abandoned monastery located in the forest that he named Suan Mokkhabalalarama “The Garden of liberation”. Alone in the forest monastery, he started studying the Pali scriptures (Santikaro Bikkhu 1996:152). Dr. Seri Phongphit has described the founding of Suan Mokh in 1932 as the starting point of the renewal process of Thai Buddhism (Seri 1988:32).

The life of the Buddha had inspired Buddhadasa to start up Suan mokkh. He wanted to live a life close to nature similar to the life of the historical Buddha, believing that a life close to nature would help him to achieve true insight.

When he first moved into the forest monastery, he slept on the ground or sometimes on the beach. He observed the trees and the grass and the rhythm of nature. Life in the forest changed him in a fundamental way; as a result of living close to nature, he would later claim that all the fears he had previously experienced disappeared, leaving his mind in a state of ease and comfort. This resulted in the mind becoming “strong, agile, subtle and refined”. Buddhadasa argued that living in the forest improved his strength and ability and that he now could see things more “clearly” than when he lived in the city (Buddhadasa bikkhu 1996).

When discussing the benefits of living a simple life in the forest, Buddhadasa used the life of the Buddha as an example of how Buddhism promotes a life in simplicity close to nature:

“The Buddha was truly a “comrade” of nature. He was born “on the ground” reached enlightenment on the ground, sat, slept, taught, and died on the ground. Yet his so-called followers seem to prefer more heaven-like surroundings in which to live and die. The Buddha reached enlightenment under a tree at the river’s edge. He walked, talked, and preached while on the ground, and lived in a hut on the ground. How could anyone say that the Buddha was not on the ground, among earthly surroundings? He reached Nibbana and even died on the ground. We, the followers of the Buddha, would do well to follow his example: to remain firmly “grounded” in nature” (Buddhadasa 1986:71).

Buddhadasa further argued that all the monks during the life of the Buddha, as well as the founders of other religions, all “awakened” in forests surrounded by nature. According to Buddhadasa, there is a fundamental difference between living in the city and living close to nature. He believed that life in the city, which is an “unnatural” man-made environment, would not allow the same spiritual development as living close to

nature. His time in Bangkok had convinced him that “purity is not to be found in the big city”. He observed how the monks in the city lived and behaved in a very different way from that of the original Sangha. He believed that it was the urban environment that corrupted these monks. (Buddhadasa bikkhu 1997, Santikaro Bikkhu 1996:151).

Buddhadasa bikkhu was highly critical of mainstream Buddhism in Thailand. He believed that the Buddhist teachings had been corrupted by materialism and superstition. Buddhadasa wanted a return to what he considered to be the true teachings of the Buddha. His reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrines is based on a return to its original source, the Pali Tipitaka (Santikaro 1996:148).

Buddhadasa stated that “Buddhism is a religion based on intelligence, science and knowledge, whose purpose is the destruction of suffering and the source of suffering” (Buddhadasa Bikkhu 1989:2). Rituals and superstition was viewed as non-Buddhist elements that obscured the essential teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhadasa is famous for reinterpreting Buddhist doctrines in a way that make them relevant and meaningful to people in modern-day society. Buddhadasa bikkhu believed that the main purpose of Buddhism is to create a peaceful world. He believed that both political and economic institutions should be based on Buddhist principles.

Dhammic Socialism

It was during the 1970’s that Buddhadasa began giving lectures on his ideas regarding politics and Buddhism. He believed that, in a society that had political and economic institutions based on Buddhist principles, people would be able to develop spiritually. Buddhadasa calls his religio-political philosophy Dhammic socialism.

Buddhadasa viewed a socialist society as a community based on a sense of equality of all beings, a type of society in which sufficient material needs would be guaranteed for everyone. Buddhadasa explained that “ a good way of looking at socialism

is to think of it as not taking more than one's fair share- using only what's necessary so that the rest is available for others to use" (Buddhadasa 1986:56).

Buddhadasa viewed socialism as a type of morality based on religious principles. In a socialist system guided by Buddhist values, people set aside their self-interest and work for the common good. In this type of society, a balance will exist-- in contrast to the modern society where imbalance and confusion rule (Buddhadasa 1986:77) In a society based on the principles of dhammic socialism, the accumulation of private wealth at the expense of others will not be allowed, instead, there will be restraint on selfish and egoistic drives (Buddhadasa 1986:90).

Buddhadasa argued that socialist principles can be found in all of the world's religions in the sense that all religions have encouraged their followers to put aside personal interests and work for the good of the society as a whole. Buddhism is explained to be a particularly socialistic religion since Buddhism emphasizes generosity and contentment. Overconsumption or accumulation of wealth, according to Buddhadasa, is wrong and it accumulates negative merit. In a "true" Buddhist society, people would be satisfied with the basic necessities of life and they would share their property with their fellow human beings (Buddhadasa 1986:56, 57).

According to Buddhadasa, the Buddhist Sangha is an example of dhammic socialism. The monk's behavior is strictly regulated by the rules found in the Vinaya Pitaka which, among other things, prohibits monks from handling money and acquiring wealth. In the Vinaya Pitaka there are rules concerning the monks' standard of living and ownership, as well as rules regarding the intake of food, monks are not allowed to engage in any form of overconsumption (Buddhadasa 1986:91). The fact that the Vinaya Pitaka regulates the behavior of the monks is, according to Buddhadasa, evidence that monastic administration is socialist in nature. The rules in the Vinaya Pitaka that regulate the monks' behavior are interpreted as promoting an environmental ethic and anti-materialistic ideology. The two main "characteristics" of Buddhism, namely those pertaining to concern for all forms of life and non-attachment to material things, are two of the central features of dhammic socialism.

According to Buddhadasa, the origin of Dhammic socialism can be found in nature

“Nature, as I have said time and again, is the embodiment of socialism; its characteristics and direction or “intent” is inherently socialistic. Nothing in Nature exists independently; no creature, no element, or molecule can exist by itself. All aspects of Nature combine in an interdependent relationship.” (Buddhadasa bikkhu 1986:118).

Socialism, in the eyes of Buddhadasa, viewed as the essence of nature, where everything exists interdependently and nothing can exist independently. All species in the eco-system live in dependence of one another. In nature, there exists a natural harmony and balance. This natural harmony and balance are disturbed when people start to consume or collect more than they need. In the natural order, there is socialism, which means dependence and cooperation. When human beings developed methods of accumulating wealth, power and resources, the harmony found in nature was disrupted and conflicts arose. Buddhadasa believed social problems in the modern world are caused by individual greed and that harmony and peace within society can only exist if society returns to its original socialist state (Tavivat 1996:189, Buddhadasa 1986:87).

New technologies developed in the modern era are explained as enabling us to exploit natural resources at an unprecedented pace. The relentless increase in industrial production and the overconsumption found in modern capitalist societies are in Buddhadasa’s social analysis regarded as one of the main roots of human suffering.

Since the 1960’s, successive Thai governments have actively promoted a growth-oriented development policy, the objective being to industrialize and develop the country’s economy. Buddhadasa argues that an increase in the production of food and goods is not the solution to social problems; instead, it makes things worse by increasing greed and selfishness in society (Buddhadasa 1986:72). Capitalist industrialization has destroyed the environment and the balance that had existed in society (Buddhadasa bikkhu 1997).

In the modern society, people have, according to Buddhadasa, abandoned their traditional ways and they behave in a selfish and immoral manner. The morality of the old days has been lost, in the past, people lived their life according to Buddhist principles, but the social changes caused by modernization have changed this. Buddhadasa makes a clear distinction between the “modern” city and the rural areas.

Buddhadasa argued that this type of society existed in the past, during a time when people still lived after Buddhist principles. In the modern-day society, people have lost their sense of morality and are ruled by greed and desires. Selfishness and egoism have led to societies plagued by conflict instead of cooperation. Buddhism, however, is a religion that depends on sharing for its existence. The monks are dependent of the layman to provide them with food and other types of support. In the rural areas, people still practice generosity towards the monks, even though they are poor. According to Buddhadasa, this is because the villagers still live “according to the traditional way”, people living in the city, on the other, hand have forgotten the “traditional way” and are ruled by greed and ignorance (Buddhadasa 1986:62,69). The solution to this problem is a return to the old way of life that was guided by Buddhist principles. Buddhadasa explains that, if one goes back 2000 years, one would find communities based on socialist Buddhist principles. The suffering of today did not exist in these societies, which were governed by righteous rulers who followed Buddhist principles (Buddhadasa 1986:102). According to this worldview, the ideal ruler is the Buddhist king whose rule is based on the ten royal precepts or virtues. Buddhadasa used the Emperor Asoka of India and King Ramkhamhaeng of Thailand as examples of individuals that ruled according to Buddhist principles. In this society, peaceful and morally just social structures would emerge and the teachings of the Buddha flourish. Buddhadasa expressed a view of an idealized past where people lived in harmony with each other and nature in society guided by dhamma and a just moral ruler. The modernization process and the increasing influence of “foreign” elements made the people change their lifestyle and forgot the “traditional” way of life guided by Buddhist principles.

Buddhadasa regarded the modernization process to be at the centre of problems existing in Thailand in that development had focused solely on economic growth without proper consideration for the effects on the environment and culture. In response, Buddhadasa proposed an alternative form of development based on Buddhist principles, a society characterized by the elimination of greed, sharing resources, relieving suffering, and improving the quality of life through greater self-reliance.



ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

CHAPTER III

Huq Muang Nan Foundation

In this chapter, I will discuss the Huq Muang Nan foundation which is an organization that operates in the Nan Province of Northern Thailand. The chapter begins with a brief introduction of the organization and a biography of its founder, the Buddhist monk, Phrakhru Pitak. The chapter proceeds with examples of work conducted by the monks associated with the Huq Muang Nan foundation, this section includes a discussion on the role of rituals in environmental conservation and a description of a research trip in Nan province that I participated in. The chapter continues with a biography of another influential monk associated with the Huq Muang Nan foundation, Phra Somkit. In the final sections of the chapter there is a discussion on the organizations promotion of local culture and tradition and communal management of natural resources.

The Huq Muang Nan group (We Love Nan group) was established in 1991 by the Buddhist monk Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun. In 1998, the group registered as a proper foundation. Huq Muang Nan consists of a network of Buddhist monks, academics, activists and villagers from Nan province in the north of Thailand. During the founding of the Hug Muang Nan group there was three main groups involved, a group of monks, a youth group and a group consisting of local leaders from Nan province. Since its foundation, Huq Muang Nan has worked to incorporate different segments of society into the organization. The foundation consists of a large variety of actors and there are currently around 900 groups connected to the foundation that are linked together in a loosely structured network. Although the different groups in the foundation share a common philosophy and work towards similar goals, however, each group works independently.

According to their own description, the foundation was first established to protect the local community from capitalist exploitation and government injustice. The organization follows the principles laid down by Phrakru Pitak and uses Buddhist teachings and beliefs as a guideline for natural resource management. The organization

has several community-based development programs aimed at promoting sustainable agriculture, environmental conservation and local empowerment in Nan province.

Huq Muang Nan Foundation has three main objectives, the first of which is to strengthen the local communities by promoting local culture and by building relations between different groups within the region. In Nan Province, there are many different ethnic groups with diverse cultures and religious beliefs that Haq Muang Nan is trying to draw together and make them work for the common good of the community. The idea is to transcend cultural and religious differences and strengthen the sense of community in the region. The second objective is to conserve forests, watersheds, rivers and streams. One way of trying to achieve this is to promote organic agriculture and community-based resource management, such as community forests. The third objective is to integrate local knowledge and modern science. The integration of indigenous knowledge regarding farming and forests management with modern science is believed to provide the best way to manage the natural resources in the region (Samruay 2010). Prior to the introduction of industrial agriculture in the province, the economic activities of the villagers had a low impact on the natural environment. Modern agricultural practices, which include monocultures and the usage of chemical fertilizer and pesticide, have caused unprecedented damage to the environment in Nan. It is believed that a return to “traditional”, natural forms of agriculture will re-establish the ecological balance in the region.

Phrakru Pitak

One of the founders and the former leader of Huq Muang Nan Foundation is the monk Phrakru Pitak. Phrakru Pitak was born in the village Giew Muang in Santisoke district located in the forested mountains of Nan province. While growing up, he witnessed the negative effects of deforestation caused by logging companies, slash-and-burn agriculture and unsustainable usage of natural resources by villagers in his home province. His experience of environmental degradation and its effects made him realize the importance of trying to protect the forests and the environment. Both legal and illegal logging took place in Santisoke, the logging activities being carried out by logging

companies and villagers that cut down trees in order to clear land for corn plantations. The villagers in Santisoke had during this time period started to grow corn as a supplementary source of income. The expansion of agricultural land used for planting corn had caused erosion and damage to the soil. Deforestation and the increase in cultivated land in Santisoke district eventually transformed the district into the driest and poorest in the province (Darlington, 1998). Deforestation in Nan Province had taken place at an alarming rate, as witnessed by the fact that in the year 1976 around 73, 6 percent of the province total area was covered by forests, whereas by 1991 the total area covered by forest had declined to 43, 3 percent (Investment plan for Nan province 1994).

Phrakhru Pitak's concern for the environment was developed at a young age. During an interview the researcher conducted with him, he explained that his environmental concern stemmed from the fact that he "was born in the forest, grew up in the forest and ate food that came from the forest", growing up in close relation to the forest made him understand the importance of preserving the environment (Phrakhru Pitak 2011).

Phrakhru Pitak ordained as a novice at the age of twelve, acquiring his religious education in the city and then returned to his village at the age of 17. When he reached 20 years of age, he ordained as a monk. A year later, he moved to stay at Wat Aranyawat, the current centre of Huq Muang Nan Foundation, located in Nan town. At the age of 25, Phrakhru Pitak became the abbot of Wat Aranyawat and, a couple of years after becoming abbot, decided to take up the life of a wondering forest monk and travel through Thailand. He travelled to Chiang Mai, to Burma and later continued his travels down south to Suan Mokh, the forest monastery of Buddhadasa bikkhu. Phrakhru Pitak stayed one month at Buddhadasa's monestary in Surat Thani. He continued his journey by travelling further south to Nakhon Si Thammarat and Koh Samui. After spending some time in the southern part of Thailand, Phrakhru Pitak traveled to the northeast and continued walking through the land. During his travels Phrakhru Pitak also spent one year at Wat Cholaprathan in Nonthaburi, just outside of Bangkok. The abbot of Wat Cholaprathan, Panyanantha was a protégé of Buddhadasa Bikkhu. Panyanantha had been

a supporter of the democracy movement in Thailand and he emphasized the importance of political action. He had allowed pro-democracy groups to hold political rallies at the temple. Panyanantha argued that monks should get involved in political issues. He stated “we should develop the general public’s interest in politics, then the country will survive, because politics is a matter for everyone [to be interested in] including the sangha too...If in any country the public is not interested in national affairs, then the country will not survive, dictators will take over” (Baker, Pasuk 2002:395). Phrakhru Pitak was inspired by progressive monks such as Buddhadasa bikkhu and Panyanantha. At Wat Aranyawat in Nan town, there are several images of Buddhadasa and Phrakhru Pitak has explained that Buddhadasa’s teachings have been a major influence on his work in Nan Province.

During his time as a travelling forest monk, Phrakhru Pitak visited many different parts of Thailand and met a lot of people. He observed the life of the people in various areas and paid close attention to the different kinds of problems they faced, including how people dealt with problems related to environmental degradation. Phrakhru Pitak carefully analyzed the different strategies used by the local communities to solve these problems. When he finally returned back home to Nan province, he used all the experience and knowledge he had gained from the trip to try to improve the life of the people in his community. Based on the experience he had cumulated from his travels, he developed his own strategies of how to protect the environment and work with the community in Nan province (Phrakhru Pitak 2011).

A central aspect of Phrakhru Pitak’s Buddhist teachings is the importance of human responsibility towards nature. PhraKhru Pitak stresses the importance of preserving the forest and wildlife through the teachings of dependent origination and by highlighting parts of the life of the Buddha that deals with nature (Darlington 2003:105).

According to Phrakhru Pitak, the connection between Buddhism and environmental concern is clear since the historical “Buddha was born in the forest, meditated in the forest, learned about the dhamma in the forest, and got an understanding of the world (reached enlightenment) in the forest”. The Buddhist teachings are,

according to this view, a religious teaching developed in close association with the forest. In this regard, Phrakhru Pitak makes the following argument:

“It is easier to gain an understanding of the dhamma in the forest than in the city since the forest is peaceful. When the Buddha reached the highest level of spiritual development he was in the forest, which is why the Buddha encouraged people to learn about religion in the forest. After reaching enlightenment the Buddha held his sermons in the forest. The first Buddhist temples were forest temples and these were the only temples that existed during this time. When the Buddha was 80 years old he passed away, and he did this in the forest” (Phrakhru Pitak 2011) Buddhism and protection of the forest is regarded as being connected since the historical Buddha lived his life in connection to the forest and because the forest provides the ideal environment for spiritual development.

Since Phrakhru Pitak stated that living in the forest or in close relation to the natural environment increased one’s ability to understand dhamma, I was curious about his opinions on Buddhism practiced in the city and why most monks in the city did not discuss environmental issues. Phrakhru Pitak commented on monks in the city and their relation to the environment in this manner:

“The monks in the city do not talk about protecting the forest, but people in cities like Bangkok need forests too. In the city there is pollution, the water is polluted, the air is polluted but still the monks do not talk about the environment”

“The people in the city *should* think about the environment, but they don’t see the value of trees”.

In contrast to their counterparts in the city, people in the provinces are regarded to understand the value of trees and the environment. According to Phrakhru Pitak, this is mainly because people in the country’s rural areas depend economically on the forest. The forest provides them with everything they need. “Water, food, herbs, fire-wood and building materials, all of this is collected from the forest”. People in Bangkok have become increasingly disconnected from the forest and the natural environment and

therefore they don't "understand" the value of the forest. In the provinces, people still understand that trees and the environment are useful and worth preserving and that is why they help protect the environment (Phrakhru pitak 2011). The people in the rural areas are also those who have to face the consequences of environmental degradation. If changes in the environment takes place this will in most cases have direct effect on their livelihood. In the urban areas people are not exposed to environmental degradation to the same extent and they do in most cases not understand how their economic activity affects the environment in other parts of the country.

Phrakhru Pitak's environmental ethic developed through his own personal experiences of environmental degradation in his rural hometown in Nan province. His concern for the environment increased after he had travelled throughout Thailand and seen that people in different parts of the country were experiencing similar problems. Phrakhru Pitak regarded deforestation and commercial agriculture to be the main threats to the environment and the rural economy. Influenced by progressive monks like Buddhadasa bikkhu, who promoted social action, Phrakhru Pitak began working to protect the environment in his native province of Nan.

Tree ordinations as a means of conserving the forest

Phrakhru Pitak and the other monks involved in the Huq Muang Nan Foundation have used certain rituals and ceremonies as a means of conserving the environment in Nan province. The ordination of trees, for example, is one of the strategies used by the monks to prevent further deforestation.

In the late 1980s, Phrakhru Pitak started to work with the monk Phrakhru Manas of Phayao province. Phrakhru Manas is known to be the first monk to perform tree ordinations in Thailand (Ivarsson 2002:404). The objective of a tree ordination is to "sanctify" the trees in order to prevent them from being cut down. During a tree ordination, monks perform a ritual that includes tying saffron-coloured monk robes around trees. The ordination involves chanting, the sprinkling of lustral water and finally

the wrapping of monk's robes around the trees. The ordination of the tree follows a pattern similar to the ordination of monks. Chanting and tying the saffron robes around the tree causes people to respect the tree almost as if it was a real monk (Darlington 2003:96, Tannenbaum 2000:109). The ceremony is used to symbolically remind people that nature should be protected and treated as equal with human beings. Thailand has a long history of ordaining or honouring trees, either by wrapping them in monks' robes or other pieces of cloth. Historically the practice has been done to honour trees that were considered sacred. The trees that were ordained were most often old, large trees believed to be inhabited by local guardian spirits, or Bodhi trees which is the kind of tree were the Buddha is believed to have reached enlightenment (Ivarsson 2002:404). Phrakhru Manas "invented" the ceremony of ordaining ordinary trees in order to save the forest around the monastery where he lived. Through the ordination ordinary trees are "transformed" into something holy. Villagers or logging companies would refrain from cutting down trees wrapped in saffron robes since that would be considered sacrilegious (Ivarsson 2002:405).

The practice of ordaining trees was adopted by Phrakhru Pitak and performed throughout Nan province. During the tree ordination ceremony, the villagers summon the local spirits to protect the forest and its wildlife. Both Phrakhru Pitak and Phrakhru Manas incorporated animistic beliefs into the tree ordination ceremony, thereby combining Buddhism with local beliefs in spirits (Darlington 2003:105, Ivarsson 2002:405). As one travels throughout Nan province, it is common to see ordained trees wrapped in saffron robes.

"Roy Rappaport, has examined the role of ritual, including both language and the use of non-language symbols in ritual. He points out that participation in rituals publicly communicates acceptance of the community morality symbolized by a ritual. Even if participants privately are not truly committed to the rules and values expressed in the ritual, the act of public acceptance obligates him/her to abide by them....Actual participation in the rituals of the religion is, itself, an unambiguous act of support for the values symbolized in those rituals"(Crapo 2003:182).

The ceremony stresses the interconnection of society and nature, and the ordained tree symbolizes this relationship. The morality and values that are communicated through the tree ordination ceremony are linked to environmental conservation. During the ceremony the participants pledge to protect the forest. Buddhist symbols are used throughout the ceremony to show the connection between Buddhism and environmental conservation. Participation in the ritual “obligates” the participant to “accept” the particular values expressed in the ritual, which in this case are environmentalist values. Villagers that participate in the ceremony/ritual are according to Rappaport theory likely to feel obligated to commit to the values expressed in the ritual. Through the ceremony, the participants build a spiritual commitment to conserve and protect the environment. Furthermore, the tree ordination serves clearly political functions in that it is a reminder of the threat of deforestation, it is an opportunity for monks to stress environmental issues and it is an opportunity to teach dhamma and relate it to the modern world (Darlington 2003:104). In this regard, Ted C. Lewellen also notes that religious ritual has important political functions, in that it is through ritual that religion is linked to political action and through religious symbols that a political agenda is promoted (Lewellen 2003:67).

Phrakru Pitak and the other monks working with the Huq Muang Nan foundation also perform other religious ceremonies and rituals aimed at protecting the environment in Nan province.

The Huq Muang Nan Foundation and the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy of King Bhumibol Adulyadej

In this section of the chapter, I will discuss a research trip in Nan province in which I participated. The trip was organized by the local authorities in Nan province as well as the Huq Muang Nan Foundation, and I was invited by Phrakru Pitak to participate. Over a period of four days, we traveled throughout Nan province and visited villages and households involved in projects influenced by the King’s Sufficiency Economy Philosophy. The trip provided me with opportunities to observe how members

of the Huq Muang Nan Foundation interact with the local community in Nan and I was able to talk to villagers involved in projects promoted by Huq Muang Nan Foundation.

During the trip, we visited 29 households in 18 villages in three different districts (amphoe) in Nan province, namely Muang Nan, Bo Kluea and Chaloe Phra Kiat.

Main Participants

1. Phrakru Pitak, monk
2. Anuchar Tanapate, 45, NGO-staff, supervisor of video and audio
3. Manus Kuenkeo, 48, assistant of Phrakru Pitak
4. Sakun Kamon, 60, retired government official
5. Wichean, Wichaiphan, 30, Agricultural Officer, Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operative
6. Phrakru Paiboon, monk

Besides the people stated above there was also two young monks and one temple boy from Wat Aranyawat that came along on the trip. In each district we visited local government officials and community leaders who also participated. Some travelled with us to different villages others only participated in their own village. The villages that we visited were all relatively small with a population between 100-300 people.

Sufficiency Economy Philosophy

The philosophy regarding the Sufficiency Economy is an alternative development model formulated by the King of Thailand; Dr. Suthawan Sathirathai describes the philosophy in the following way:

“The Kings philosophy of the "Sufficiency Economy" (SE), graciously formulated by His Majesty the King is a holistic concept of moderation in consumption and production, while acknowledging interdependency among people as well as between humanity and nature. The SE calls for balanced and sustainable development as its objective” (Suthawan 2004:2).

According to Ivarsson and Isager, the philosophy involves “Drawing on well-known Buddhist philosophical and moral principles”....and aims “create a new economic man who lives a moderate, self-dependant life without greed, uncontrolled cravings and overexploitation” (Isager, Ivarsson 2010:223).

According to Nidhi, the objectives of the Sufficiency Economy are to support people in such a way that they become sufficient in terms of their basic needs, while being sustainable terms of the ecological system and peoples lifestyles. Nidhi argues that the sufficiency economy should be introduced and applied at both national and international levels, since the world is presently dominated by consumerism and the culture of globalization (National economic and Social development board:9). The Sufficiency Economy is an economic alternative to capitalism which is based on Buddhist principle and ideas regarding sustainable development. The projects in Nan province are based on the Kings economic theory, the objective of these projects being to encourage farmers in the region to engage in organic farming-- mainly for their own consumption. By applying the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, the farmers would conserve the environment and reduce their dependence on the market. His Majesty the Kings theory on Sufficiency Economy incorporates diverse issues such as economy, morality and environmental concern. In this study I focus on the environmental aspect of the theory. These projects in Nan province are similar to projects promoted by the Huq Muang Nan Foundation.

As part of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy the King has developed guidelines for management of land and water resources. The King has introduced a “model farm” which is based on his ideas of self-reliance and agricultural sustainability. In the model farm promoted by the King, land is allocated between fish ponds, rice cultivation and crops/fruit. All farming is organic, no chemical fertilizer, pesticide or weed control is used. Livestock such as chicken and pigs are raised mainly for own consumption and the spilling of the livestock is used as natural fertilizer. This is a form of integrated farming. Integrated farming refers to agricultural systems that integrate livestock and crop production. The objective of the model farm is to make farmers self-

sufficient. Once the demands of the household have been met, the farmers can sell the surplus from their production. The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy and agricultural system has three stages:

- 1) Sufficiency at the household level. At this stage, self-reliance and self-sufficiency is created at the household level and reliance for food from outside the household is minimal.
- 2) Sufficiency at the community level. At this stage, cooperative activity between members of the community is established. This can include the sharing of resources and cooperative labour.
- 3) Sufficiency at the national level. At this stage, the community expands its activity outside of the local level and starts collaboration with firms and organizations at the national level (National economic and Social development board:4).

The majority of the households we visited during the trip in Nan had either adopted the King's "model farm" approach or other agricultural methods promoted by the King and the application of the farming techniques promoted by the Sufficiency Economy of the King was inspected. Farms were examined and villagers interviewed, in addition to which farmers provided the team with information regarding the size of the harvested crops, the increase in livestock, and the annual income earned from surplus production. Government officials provided the farmers with advice on how to improve their farming technique and pointed out eventual misunderstandings regarding the practice of integrated farming. The interviews and observations were videotaped and recorded.

Selection of people visited

The households that we visited belonged to people who had reported that they adopted agricultural methods based on the philosophy relating to the Sufficiency Economy. At present time, there are no data regarding the exact percentage of farmers in the region that are engaged in organic farming. The reason for this is that several farmers grow cash-crops simultaneously as they have an organic farm. According to the

government official from the Ministry of Agriculture, a relatively small percentage of the total number of farmers in Nan have engaged in organic farming methods or adopted the “model farm” approach promoted by His Majesty the King. The Huq Muang Nan Foundation and the local government in Nan are actively working to persuade farmers to adopt environmentally sustainable agricultural methods.

Besides visiting households that had reported that they had adopted organic farming methods influenced by the philosophy of His Majesty the King, we also visited two villages that were part of a large-scale government project in Nan province. The names of these two villages are Ban Plai Soo and Ban Namrii Pattana.

Ban Plai Soo

The village Ban Plai Soo is located in Chaloe Phra Kiat, which is a remote mountainous district in the northern part of Nan that borders on Laos. The village is located on top of the mountains. The government has instigated a large-scale project in the village, influenced by the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy of His Majesty the King, which started one year ago and is now into its second year. A key objective of the project is to persuade the local inhabitants to change their agricultural practices, the villagers having traditionally practiced slash-and-burn agriculture on the slopes surrounding the village. Work has been aimed at getting the villagers to start growing their crops in permanent terraces. By growing crops such as rice in terraces, it is according to Mr. Anuchar Tanapate, coordinator of several of the royal projects in Nan, possible to increase the total production of rice per rai. Thus, since the production of rice increases, it is possible to conserve forestland that would otherwise have been cut down and used as agricultural land. (Anuchar 2011).

In the past, when the villagers were practicing slash-and-burn agriculture on the mountain slopes surrounding the village, the fertilizer they used ran down into the rivers below the mountains and contaminated the water. Today, the villagers use natural fertilizer produced from livestock raised in the village. The fertilizer used in the terraced

fields does not run down the slope and contaminate the soil and water in the plains since the terraces hold the water in (Phrakhru Pitak 2011).

People in the village raise livestock for their own consumption; they follow the King's "model farm" approach of raising chickens, fish and pigs. The villagers also practice organic agriculture based on the model promoted by His Majesty the King. As a result, a large portion of the households in the village have achieved a level of complete self-sufficiency. It is important to note, however, that the project conducted in the village is quite famous and has received considerable funding. The success of the project could be related to the fact that the government has chosen to use vast resources to support it. In other villages that we visited during our trip, villagers frequently complained that they did not receive enough support from the government or from other organizations. Many people in Nan province that have adopted the agricultural practices promoted by the King's project lack an understanding of how integrated farming methods actually work. They argued that they had not received enough instructions to manage the farms successfully.

Ban Namri Pattana

Baan Namri Pattana is the name of the last village we visited during our trip. The village is inhabited by people from the Lua minority group, which is a traditionally animist ethnic group. The government had spent a considerable amount of money developing the village. There was a relatively new school and other facilities constructed by the government in the center of the village. The school, which was attended by children from the village and neighboring areas, had a special curriculum that included natural agriculture. On plots of land surrounding the school, children learned natural agriculture methods. The combination of theoretical and practical studies at the school allowed the children to develop an understanding of natural integrated farming methods at a young age.

Buddhism as a means to promote organic farming

Nan province is inhabited by people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The people living in the village of Ban Plai Soo belong to an ethnic minority group that is traditionally animist. Buddhism has been introduced quite recently to the community. In recent years the villagers have begun to incorporate Buddhist practices into their belief system. During my visit, the village did not have a proper Buddhist temple or a monk as a permanent resident. A traditional wooden house with a Buddhist altar placed in front of it functioned as a temple and the monk that was temporarily residing in the “temple” travelled frequently between different villages within the region.

After the sunset, the villagers came back from the fields and they all gathered around the “temple” premises. Phrakru Pitak, Phrakru Paiboon and Mr. Sakun Kamon all took turns in speaking to the villagers. After the monks and government officials had spoken briefly about the village project, Phrakru Pitak, Phrakru Paiboon and the village monk began leading a sermon. After the sermon was completed, all the villagers sang songs in honour of His Majesty the King. Early next morning, the monks held another sermon in a concrete building on the temple premises. The majority of the people attending were woman and children. The sermon ended with a merit-making ceremony where the villagers provided the monks with various gifts, such as rice, curry, instant noodles, beverages, snacks etc.

It was not only the village of Ban Plai Soo that did not have a monk permanently living in the village. None of the villages that we visited during our four-day trip had a proper temple or a monk as permanent resident. In Ban Dan, a village located in a valley surrounded by mountains, the villagers had just begun to construct a temple. When I was there, only the concrete foundation of the temple had been completed. There were a couple of wooden houses built on the premises designated for the future temples. These houses functioned as living quarters for visiting monks. The fact that the villagers had begun constructing a temple might indicate that there could be a monk permanently residing there in the future.

Phra khru Pitak and the other monks that participated in the project held sermons in each of the villages that we spent the night. The sermons followed a similar pattern. In the morning, the majority of the villagers would gather around the “temple” compound. Phrakhru Pitak, Phrakhru Paiboon and the novices from Wat Aranyawat placed themselves on an elevated platform in front of the villagers. The sermon began with the monks chanting in Pali. At every sermon, Phrakhru Pitak began to speak followed by the other monks who took turns in speaking. The interesting aspect of the sermons conducted during the trip is that during his talks Phrakhru Pitak made relatively few references to Buddhist teachings. Instead of talking about dhamma, Phrakhru Pitak spoke to the villagers about agricultural practices and the importance of preserving the environment using a simple and straightforward language.

In the sermons that I attended, Phrakhru Pitak discussed the advantages of engaging in organic agriculture. He warned the villagers that if they continued to use chemicals and grow cash-crops the environment would become degraded and their livelihood would be threatened. Phrakhru Pitak discussed in detail on how the ecosystem functions and how disturbances in one part of the ecosystem will ultimately affect the other parts as well. In the sermon, Phrakhru Pitak explained the interconnectedness between humans and nature and the way in which all living beings are dependent on each other for their survival. The projects inspired by the Sufficiency Economy of His Majesty the King were explained as sustaining the natural balance between the community and the environment, thereby minimizing their negative effect on the environment. Phrakhru Pitak emphasized that the future livelihood of the community would be jeopardized if the villagers did not change agricultural practices. He repeatedly reminded the villagers that the project had been developed by His Majesty the King with their best interest in mind. The monks explained that the Monarchy wanted to help the local community, as a result of which they had developed these projects. According to Phrakhru Pitak’s rationale, it is the duty of the villagers to follow the advice of the King and repay His Majesty for all the work he has done for them by following his advice.

In his sermons, PhraKhru Pitak incorporated ideas regarding environmental protection and the value of nature and the forest. He encouraged villagers to protect the forest, engage in organic farming and to refrain from using chemicals and engaging in monoculture since this has negative effects on the environment. Thus, his sermons mostly consisted of secular matters related to the village economy and conservation of the environment.

This is a clear example of monks engaging in traditionally secular matters. By talking about economic issues during a religious sermon, the monks of Huq Muang Nan connect the secular and the religious spheres. A specific kind of economic activity is associated with being a good Buddhist. Influenced by the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, the projects have been developed by people that have had the requisite academic training in agriculture. The majority of the research during the trip was conducted by the representative of the Ministry of Agriculture, while the role of the monks was mainly to convince the villagers to engage in the projects. The monks explained the details surrounding the project and its importance. According to a participant on the trip, Phrakhru Pitak had been specifically chosen to participate in this project because he is an influential monk who has achieved a high level of religious learning; hence, people will listen to him and follow the advice that he gives. The monks function as a bridge between the government and local communities. Villagers often harbour a profound distrust of the authorities and might question their motives, whereas in contrast the monk is always considered to have good intentions.

Monks are highly respected in Thai society; they are the country's religious leaders and occupy the highest position in the social hierarchy. Not only do they dedicate their life to religion by living a holy life and striving for Nirvana, but they also function as religious teachers for the laity and contribute to the merit and spiritual welfare of society as a whole. It is the monk's dedication to spiritual development and morality that make them the most respected members of Thai society. In the temple, the monks work towards spiritual development by cultivating generosity, non-attachment, loving kindness, compassion and wisdom by following the Noble Eightfold Path. It is the

monks' moral living and dedication to doing good that earns them the trust and respect of the community. It would be harder for the government or any other organization to convince the local population to participate in this project if they did not have the help of the monks.

A government official might be more knowledgeable in the field of agriculture and economics, but he lacks the monk's ability to convince the villagers to adopt the government sponsored program. If the monks did not support the project the villagers might be suspicious of the government's intentions and they might not be willing to engage in the project. In this sense the monk plays a very important role in ensuring the potential success of the project.

Obstacles in applying the Sufficiency Economy in Nan

It is not the objective of this study to evaluate the applicability of the Sufficiency Economy philosophy in Nan province, but I will share some general observations. It seems that one of the major difficulties when it comes to persuading farmers to adopting a self-sufficient approach to agriculture is that the financial reward is very small. The agricultural surplus that the farmers sell at the market is often not big enough to generate a decent income. According to Mr. Wichean Wichaiphon, the farmers engaged in the organic farming projects discussed in this chapter earns an estimated annual income of around 20 000 baht (Wichean 2011). Because of the low amount of money earned, a relatively small amount of farmers have chosen to apply the "model farm", one study conducted on the Sufficiency Economy in northern Thailand showed that it is in most cases only the poorest and most marginalized farmers who depend primarily on subsistence agriculture (Walker 2010:259). The main objective of the sufficiency philosophy is not to increase people's incomes but to promote sustainable usage of natural resources and production aimed at satisfying basic needs. The farmer should for example mainly grow crops to feed his own family and then after the needs of the households are fulfilled the surplus could be sold in the market. By engaging in self-subsistent farming the local people becomes self-reliant and non-dependent on the global market. The sufficiency economy philosophy is based on long-term thinking aimed at

ensuring balanced and sustainable development. One of the problems in applying this philosophy is that farmers often lack long-term thinking. In many cases farmers are more willing to engage in agricultural practices that generate short-term profits but have damaging long-term effects than engaging in farming that provide a lower income but ensure a stable and secure livelihood. The Huq Muang Nan Foundation is experiencing difficulties in trying to convince the local people that subsistence farming is more beneficial in the long-run.

Growing cash-crops might damage the environment but in many cases, it provides the farmers with a decent income. The financial reward from growing cash-crops enables villagers to purchase consumer goods, such as a TV, cellular phone or even a motorbike. Increasing income also allows villagers to gain access to higher education and healthcare.

Another obstacle is the local peoples lack of knowledge regarding how integrated farming works in practice. Many of the villagers that we visited during our trip complained that they were not provided with sufficient assistance on how to manage their farms. It takes time to learn new agricultural techniques and to understand how integrated farming actually works. The villagers wanted to have regular assistance during the projects initial years. Monks from Huq Muang Nan also complained that the authorities had not done proper follow-ups to check that the projects were actually working as they should. The Huq Muang Nan Foundation lacks sufficient funds to regularly assist farmers that need help in applying the organic farming methods inspired by the Sufficiency Economy of His Majesty the King. Generally, the villagers that engage in the Sufficiency Economy receive very little support from the authorities; this makes it hard to persuade them to stop growing cash crops. Business interests are offering villagers fast cash returns if they grow crops for the market. In the short-term, growing cash crops is highly profitable; as long as the market price is high, villagers growing crops for the market will earn good money. The negative aspect of cash crops is reliance on the market, if market prices drop, villagers risk being ruined. From a strictly economic point of view, it is still rational to grow cash crops, it involves the risk of dropping prices but the farmers will earn a higher income than if they grow crops and

raise livestock for their own consumption. Fundamentally the difficulty lies in convincing villagers to engage in organic farming methods even though this will provide them with a lower income.

Phra Somkit

Phra Somkit is another influential monk that works with the Huq Muang Nan Foundation. In the early 1990s, Phra Somkit began working to preserve the forest around his village. He began his work by asking villagers to donate land to the village temple, Wat Boong Kam. On the land donated by the village community, Phra Somkit started an organic farm. Today the organic farm has been around for a number of years and the temple currently grows a variety of plants and vegetables. The products from the organic farm are both consumed locally and sold in the market. The temple is currently in the process of expanding its organic farm, planning to farm various crops in the new area, such as rice, chili and beans. Farmers from villages around the temple come to work on the organic farm; in return they receive a share of the agricultural products produced on the farm. The villagers either consume these products themselves or sell them at the market. The temple also raises pigs and chickens and it has a fish farm. All of this is done in a natural way without the usage of chemical fertilizer or pesticide. Phra Somkit developed the organic farm as a model to show that integrated farming without the usage of chemicals is possible. Farmers from nearby villages, as well as farmers from different provinces, come to Boong Kam temple to study about ecological farming techniques. In 1999 over a 1000 visitors came to Boong Kam temple to see Phra Somkit's organic farm (Darlington 2003:106). Phra Somkit's farm has also attracted the attention of foreign academics and students whom have come to the area and studied the farm.

Besides the organic farm, the temple also has various gardens where they grow plants used for traditional herbal medicine, which are used, among other things, to cure back-pain and headaches. On the temple grounds, there is also a building where they produce organic cotton dyed with natural colours. Elderly women from the nearby villages come to do the weaving and the products, which include scarves, hats, bags and shirts, are both used by the villagers themselves and sold at the market.

Phra Somkit's temple functions as a center of the community. Villagers and monks work together on different projects instigated by the temple. The Bong Kam temple is in a sense a successful example of how the temple can help people and make them cooperate for a common good.

Strengthening the local community

The temple works closely with young people from nearby villages. Phra Somkit believes that by teaching the young generation about the value of preserving nature and taking pride in local culture a more sustainable development can be achieved (Phra Somkit 2010).

As I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the Huq Muang Nan foundations main objectives is to strengthen the local communities in Nan. Huq Muang Nan has adopted the discourse relating to the importance of "Watthanatham chumchon" or "community culture" as a means of strengthening the community. The main idea behind this discourse is that the communities need to promote their own culture and traditions in order to resist the "the destructive forces" or negative aspects of globalization and global capitalism (Baker 2000:196).

The Thai academic Prawase Wasi comments on the community culture discourse in the following way:

"The rural communities must be strengthened (through) subsistence mode of production of integrated agriculture, economic self-reliance and the eradication of external dependence; communal life, the institutions of family and wat, and a common culture of mutual aid. This rural community will develop its knowledge and expertise from original knowledge which is called "popular wisdom"...and combine it with international knowledge...without a moral and ethical base, there can be no real development for the people, because human beings will promote themselves, be selfish, have kilesa (vices) and tanha (desires), which will overshadow wisdom and other virtues" (Baker 2000:196).

The community culture discourse became increasingly popular with Thai NGOs during the 1980's and early 1990's. The main ideas underlying the discourse were the following; the importance of looking inwards in order to solve the current problems caused by globalization, identifying western export-oriented development as a source of environmental destruction, increasing social division, and growing human problems (Baker 2000:200). The community was regarded to be a counterweight against globalization and capitalism.

During one of my discussions with Phrakhru Pitak, he explained to me that one of the main reasons behind his decision to start Huq Muang Nan Foundation was that “people from the outside” had come to Nan province and had influenced the local culture and traditions in a negative way. He argued that they had convinced the people to cut down the trees and pollute the environment. The increasing influence of “foreign culture” brought in by outsiders had made the villagers “forget” their own culture and values. He believed that if he could teach the people in Nan to love their own culture and their own communities, they would also actively work to protect the environment (Phrakhru Pitak 2011). These opinions clearly correspond to the “community culture” discourse. The negative changes in the community are explained as being a result of increasing “foreign” or outside influence. Incorporation into the global capitalist economy has resulted in the local population losing control over resources vital to their livelihood and they have “forgotten” their culture and traditions. The solution to the existing social problems is believed to be the strengthening of local culture and tradition and increasing control of local resources.

Buddhism shall provide people with a sense of moral ethics that will serve as the basis for a more sustainable development paradigm. Decentralization of power is a central feature of this discourse. According to the discourse, people in the community should manage natural resources cooperatively and use the resources in a sustainable manner. The community should work towards self-reliance and minimize their dependency on the market or outsiders. This includes growing crops for local consumption. By growing crops for a local market the villagers will not be affected by

changes in the global marketplace and they will thereby have increasing control of the local economy. The idea is partly based on a somewhat idealized vision of a pre-capitalist Siam where people practiced Buddhism and lived in harmony with each other and the environment. The image corresponds to the picture of the past given by Buddhadasa bikkhu in his discussion on Dhammic socialism. The idea that morality should underlie economic activity is present in Buddhadasa's discussion on dhammic socialism as well as in the community culture discourse and the sufficiency economy philosophy. In all cases, pre-capitalist modes of production and social organization are regarded to be a solution to existing problems. The ideal is the "village" in which local subsistence needs are the primary driver of economic activity and where people manage resources cooperatively in an environmental friendly manner. Buddhadasa argued that the natural balance between humans and nature was disturbed when people started to collect or consume more than they need. The development of methods that enable the accumulation of wealth, power and resources was explained as being the root of the existing "disharmony" and conflict (Chapter II). A solution to existing problems would be a return to a "traditional" society based on Buddhist principles. I would argue that a connection between Buddhadasa's line of thinking and that of Phrakhrū Pitak can be drawn. Similar to Buddhadasa, Phrakhrū Pitak regards environmental degradation and social problems as being caused by the introduction of new technology and new cultural values. This line of thinking can also be found in the discourses of both the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy and Community Culture.

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Strengthening the local community: Boong Kam temple

The Huq Muang Nan foundation has various projects aimed at “strengthening” the local communities in Nan province. Many of these projects are aimed towards young people. The Huq Muang Nan Foundation is trying to encourage young people to learn from the older generation and to make them appreciate and understand the value of local culture and knowledge. The objective is to make young people take pride in their heritage and to actively work to develop the community. During my stay in Nan province, I participated in one of these projects at the Boong Kam temple.

Once or twice per month children from neighbouring districts are invited to the temple where they are taught to understand the importance of strengthening the local community, as well as preserving the environment, and to appreciate the local culture. The talks given to the visiting children were delivered by a group of young volunteers working closely with Phra Somkit at the temple. The volunteers were aged between 20 and 25 and they all came from villages around the temple. During the talks, the volunteers combined fun activities, such as dancing and singing, with education regarding the environment, local customs and moral values. One of the objectives behind this project is to create a sense of togetherness within the province and to strengthen the communal bond between young people. The children are taught that they must work together in an unselfish way to develop the community. They were also informed on the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse, taught not to engage in any criminal activity and to obey their parents. In these quite common moral lessons, there were also teachings on environmental issues. The children were taught not to throw litter in the forest or in the river and to respect nature. A video made by the young volunteers at the temple was about collecting forest products such as mushrooms and different ways of such products in the preparation of food. The children were also taken around the temples organic farm and the other facilities managed by the temple.

I asked the volunteers why they had chosen to work at the temple. They all answered that they started to work with Phra Somkit because they wanted to help their community develop and improve. In this way, the Boong Kam temple functions as a

centre for communal organization and alternative education. Phra Somkit actively works to engage young people in the organization and these young people function as “teachers” and role-models for youth throughout the region. The Boong Kam temple serves as a center for the local community, it is a workplace, a religious center and a place for education. Just like Phrakhru Pitak, Phra Somkit was born in a rural area and has experienced at first hand the negative effects of industrialized agriculture and deforestation. Therefore, he works actively to promote organic agriculture and environmental concern.

Phra Somkit works actively to try to engage young people in environmental issues. One of the problems the village is facing is that young people move out from the community to work and study in urban areas. In many cases, young people that get an education in the city do not return to the village. According to Phra Somkit, they get adjusted to the urban lifestyle and pursue a career in the city instead of returning back home and help develop their community (Phra Somkit 2010). Susan Darlington describes similar events in her study on the Buddhist NGO, FEDRA. Phra Thepkavi, the founder of FEDRA had established a school in Chiang Mai that provided education for boys from the rural area. The motivation behind the founding of the school was to deal with one of the causes of rural poverty which Phra Thepkavi identified as the “lack of villagers opportunity to receive an education and the concomitant lack of appropriate knowledge and leaders”. Many boys from the rural areas received an education at the school, but the problem was that many of them did not return to their village and put the knowledge and skills they had acquired to good use. Instead, they moved to the cities, found employment there and sent money back home to their families (Darlington 1990:197). In interviews I conducted respondents expressed an image of the city as a place dominated by consumerist and materialist culture. It was believed that children that moved out from the local community into the city would be influenced by these negative values. Life in the urban environment would make young people change their values and ways. After living in the city young people would not want to return to live in their communities (Samruay 2010). The community needs educated people to function as community leaders and to

help develop the community. Currently educated people tend to move out of the community and this is considered to be a major problem.

Environmental conservation and Community forests

In the Huq Muang Nan Foundation, they believe that the best way to preserve the environment in Nan Province is to let the local communities manage natural resources themselves, some examples of community-based resource management being community forests and community-based watershed management. In these models, the community works together and manages the resources in a sustainable manner.

Community-forests stem from the idea that the local community should have control of the forest and that its members are the most suitable to manage resources. The community forest ideology developed as a direct response to the Thai government's conservation policies (Pinkaw 2002: 161). The 1989 ban on logging was a turning point regarding state management of the nation's forests. The state created several national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in order to protect the existing forests (Pinkaw 2002:65). These policies came to have a fundamental impact on a large part of the Thai population since a number of the forests turned into national parks and sanctuaries were located in their communities. According to the law, they were no longer allowed to use natural resources they had, in many cases, been using for generations.

Government policies relating to forest protection have been based on the idea that it is the local people that destroy forests and that the only way to protect the forest is to move people out of the forest or prevent them from using the forest altogether. Advocators of increasing local control over resources reject the government claim that it is the local people that cause deforestation or environmental degradation. They argue that people can manage the forest in a sustainable manner and that forest and people *can* co-exist (Santita 1997:263).

According to supporters of the establishment of community forests, the best way to manage resources in a sustainable way is by applying "local/traditional knowledge". Local practices or "traditional knowledge" are said to have developed through the

interaction between the community and nature through centuries. Since the people of the community are dependent on natural resources for their livelihood, they are also believed to have an interest in preserving these resources, and hence considered to be best suited to manage such resources.

In a community forest, the local people use the forest in a sustainable manner that benefits the whole community. The community decides together how the forest resources should be used and they collectively “guard” the forest so that it is not used in an unsustainable manner. The organization involved in managing community forest varies depending on the community. In some communities where the forest is threatened by, for example, commercial interest, the local community has organized patrols aimed at protecting the forest.

In order to encourage villagers to conserve the forest and protect the environment Huq Muang Nan draw on Buddhist principles as well as local beliefs. The organization is trying to promote environmental protection by drawing on indigenous beliefs, such as the belief in the “mother of water”, the rice goddess Mai Phosop and Mae Thorani. Mae Thorani, the earth goddess is sometimes associated with Mai Phosop since they are both linked to fertility and the earth. It is believed that maintaining a good “relationship” with Mae Thorani is important in order to get a good harvest (Darlington 1990:158). Some of the traditional beliefs of the community involve respecting and caring for nature so the organization is trying to strengthen these beliefs that have sometimes been weakened in the modern-day society. In order to do this, the organization works close with community leaders (Samruay 2010).

The Thai government has traditionally used laws and policies to conserve and protect forests and watersheds. These laws have often been written without due consideration for the people living in such “protected” areas. Many communities are dependent on resources from the forest for their livelihood and the laws created by the state have often resulted in local people losing access to land that they have been using for generations. Hug Muang Nan is against laws that prevent the local population from access to regional natural resources; instead of creating laws that ban local usage of

resources they believe that it is the local population that should manage the regional natural resources. The argument is that since the local population needs the natural resources for their survival, they will use these resources in a sustainable way. According to Mr. Anuchar Tanapate, Huq Muang Nan is working to help people to become actively involved in the projects regarding economic development in Nan province. He argues that the people must be the “owners” of these projects. If the people feel that they are a part of the project, they are going to actively work to make the project successful. In the past, economic development in Nan was implemented at a government level and the local communities were often excluded from the decision-making process. In many cases, government officials lacked an understanding of the forms of problems that existed in the rural areas and the development projects instigated by the government have therefore in many cases failed (Anuchar 2011). By incorporating the local communities into the decision-making process, it is believed that sustainable solutions to local problems can be achieved. The monks have a central role in pulling the different segments of society in Nan together and making them work for a common good.

Obstacles against promoting organic agriculture in Nan Province

According to the current president of the foundation Mr. Samruay Phadphon, when the Huq Muang Nan foundation started around 20 years ago, it was somewhat difficult to organize people in the province and especially the ethnic minority groups living in the mountains, but it became easier over time. Although the organization has experienced considerably success with its projects in the past, the last 5 years have proved very difficult. The spreading of cash-crops, mainly corn, in Nan Province has undermined the organizations aim at creating sustainable agriculture in the region. Many villages and communities have left the organization and their projects in order to start growing cash-crops. It is difficult for Huq Muang Nan to prevent villagers from growing cash-crops. They have to compete with the agricultural companies over management and usage of land. Representatives of the business interest often travel to the villages and provide the farmers with seeds, fertilizer and even money to persuade them to grow cash-crops. In many cases, farmers who are in need of money change their sustainable

agricultural practices and start growing cash crops provided by powerful business interests. The increasing demand for corn has resulted in an increase in the area of land under cultivation in Nan province and this has resulted in the destruction of previously protected forests. Community forests established by Huq Muang Nan have in many cases been cut down in order to clear the land for monoculture (Samruay 2010).

The monks have tried to persuade community leaders not to grow monocultures such as corn because of the negative affects it has on the environment and local ecosystem but they have so far had limited success. The increasing amount of corn planted in Nan Province has dramatically changed the regions landscape. Today it is estimated that only a small percentage of the total farmers (around 5-10%) are engaging in environmental friendly agricultural practices, the rest are engaged in agriculture relying on chemical pesticide and fertilizer.

Conclusion

Phrakhru Pitak developed his own environmental awareness through personal experience, first by growing up in a rural area near the forest and later by wandering throughout the length and breadth of Thailand as a forest monk. He witnessed the difficulties villagers were facing as a consequence of environmental degradation and decided to actively work to protect the environment. As a monk, he regards it to be his responsibility to engage in work that promotes the well-being of the community.

The monks in Huq Muang Nan actively link Buddhism and environmentalism. This is done through their engagement in secular matters, such as promoting and engaging in organic agriculture and the effective management of natural resources. Buddhist ceremonies such as tree ordination are used to sanctify trees and to create a connection between the people and the forest. Merit-making, a central aspect of lay Buddhist practice is also linked to environmental protection. Planting trees, conserving forests and engaging in organic agriculture are explained as meritorious and on a par with making offerings to the monkhood.

Strategies for dealing with the environmental problems in Nan province have been developed through mutual cooperation between different sectors of society in Nan province. This includes cooperation with the local authorities, professionals and farmers. Huq Muang Nan foundation is not a strictly religious foundation but Buddhism is the underlying philosophy that “guides the organization” and Buddhist values are central to the foundations philosophy. The monk’s role in the foundation is in many cases to function as a link between the local communities and different groups in society. Villagers trust and respect the monk and he is therefore often the most suitable to work as a communicator.

The vision of the monks is to create a peaceful society where people live in harmony with the environment. In this ideal community the “traditional” culture of the area is highly valued and people practice subsistent agriculture. Buddhism is regarded to be a central aspect of the community building process.

In a sense, the conflict in the region is about management of resources and contrasting agricultural practices. Industrial, export-oriented agriculture which relies on chemical fertilizer and pesticides has replaced the “traditional” farming methods in the province. The Huq Muang Nan Foundation is actively working to bring back environmental friendly agricultural practices. The different systems of agriculture are promoted by different groups within society. The question is if small-scale agriculture can survive in a modern capitalist economy.

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CHAPTER IV

SANTI ASOKE

Bodhirak and the founding of the Santi Asoke group

The founder of Santi Asoke, Mongkol Rangpong, was born into a family of six brothers and sisters in the northeastern province of Srisaket in the year 1934. When his mother died, he had to start working in order to help support his family (Heikkila-Horn 1997:43). Despite a hard upbringing, Mongkol managed to enter a College of Arts and Crafts. During his time at college, he changed his name to Rak Mongkol. After graduating in 1958, Rak Mongkol found work at a TV-station in Bangkok, where he soon became famous as a song writer and TV programmer (Mackenzie 2007:115).

During his time at the TV-station, Rak became increasingly interested in black magic and mysticism. At the height of his career, he became a spirit medium and faith healer. Eventually, his interest shifted from black magic to the practice of dhamma. Rak shaved his head, wore plain white clothes and started to walk around barefoot. This new behavior shocked his family and friends (Sanitsuda 2002:11). In the year 1970, at the age of 36, at his ordination as a monk in Wat Asokram in Samut Prakan, Rak was given the name Bodhirak (Mackenzie 2007:116). As a monk, Bodhirak adhered to the Buddhist precepts very strictly, and showed no tolerance for monks whom he felt behaved in a manner that contravened the rules laid forth in the Vinaya Pitaka. In his sermons, he began to publicly criticize other monks for being too lax in their practice. He accused monks in the sangha of being lazy, believing in superstition and smoking. His outspokenness and criticism of the sangha attracted a number of followers (Suwida 2004:277). Laypeople and monks had become increasingly frustrated with what they perceived as the decay of the sangha and they regarded Bodhirak's outspokenness and criticism as something positive. The followers of Bodhirak consisted of laypeople as well as monks from both the Thammayut and the Mahanikai order. Bodhirak's outspokenness

earned him a lot of followers but also enemies, especially within the sangha hierarchy. He was criticized by leading monks of the Thammayut order for holding meetings that were open to members of both the Thammayut and Mahanikai orders. The criticisms led to Bodhirak eventually leaving the Thammayut order and re-ordaining as a Mahanikai monk in 1973. Bodhirak was critical of the split between the Thammayut and Mahanikai orders within the sangha and wanted to unite the two orders -- an idea that was not popular amongst leading monks within the sangha. Bodhirak gathered his followers and set up his own center in Nakhon Pathom, just outside of Bangkok, and started calling his followers the Asoke group.

Conflict with the sangha

In 1975, he declared complete independence from the sangha and Bodhirak formed his own independent Buddhist group. Bodhirak started to ordain monks himself even though only monks that have been in the monkhood for at least 10 years are (according to the vinyana) allowed to ordain others (Heikilla-Horn 1997:44). In 1976, the Asoke group established three new centers in Thailand. One of the centers was the Santi Asoke center in Bangkok and the two other was the Sri-Saket center in northeastern Thailand and the Sali Asoke center in central Thailand. The centers were established on land donated by followers of Bodhirak.

Bodhirak believed that it was his mission to revive Buddhism in Thailand and that he would “bring back” what he considered to be the true teachings of the Buddha (Sanitsuda 2002:8). He argued that “a religious institution should help the society in solving its problems; otherwise; the existence of the religious institution becomes meaningless, which (according to him) had happened to mainstream Buddhist institutions in Thailand” (Essen 2005:16). He took it upon himself to return Buddhism to its original teachings and to make it relevant to modern society. This revitalization of Buddhism would be more focused on practice than theory.

Bodhirak blamed monks in the sangha for being overly concerned with status and rank and for not really understanding the Buddhist teachings (Sanitsuda 2002:16). He

also accused monks of turning religion into business. Monks were criticized for handling money, living in luxurious houses and owning expensive cars (Heikkila-Horn 1997:21). Since the monks, according to Bodhirak, had been corrupted and lacked an understanding of Buddhist teachings they could not help society improve. Bodhirak wanted to reform Thai Buddhism through a return to strict ethical norms based on Buddhist precepts; other characteristics included the non-acceptance of financial donations except from those who knew the movement and had a rationalistic approach to teaching.

Bodhirak's continuous criticism of the sangha and the fact that he continued ordain monks even though he had not been ordained for 10 years angered the sangha hierarchy. In 1979, the sangha council accused Bodhirak of threatening the well-being of Buddhism in Thailand and they laid a number of charges against him and the Asoke group as follows:

1. Many of the monks had been ordained incorrectly
2. Monks wrongly criticized other Buddhist monks for being lax in their practice
3. They disseminated propaganda which promoted a misunderstanding of the vinaya
4. Monks advertised themselves as being disaffiliated from the Thai sangha

(Jackson 1989:169).

Another source of controversy surrounding the Asoke group was its involvement with the Phalang Dharma political party. The party was created by Chamlong Srimunag and a number of core Asoke devotees in 1988. Chamlong, a former general and the mayor of Bangkok had been an Asoke member since the year 1981. He was viewed by fractions of the political elite as an opposition leader that represented different political and economic values. Heikkila-Horn argues that the Asoke groups association with the Phalang Dharma political party is the main reason for the problems they faced during the late 1980s (Heikkila-Horn 1997:204).

The conflict between the sangha hierarchy and the Santi Asoke group dragged on and finally in the year 1989 Bodhirak and 79 of his disciples were forced to defrock after accusations of not following the sangha discipline and the Tripitaka. In the aftermath of the Sangha council's decision to defrock Bodhirak, a number of monks and nuns were arrested and charged with having been "illegally" ordained by Bodhirak (Heikkila-Horn 1997:70, 71). Bodhirak eventually agreed to stop using the title "phra" in front of his name and to stop wearing the robes worn by monks in Thailand. Another court ruling in 1995 banned the Asoke monks from accepting alms (Mackenzie 2007:142). From this point the Asoke group functioned in a way that was completely independent of the sangha, both in terms of its actions and organizational structure. For example, Santi Asoke monks do not wear the saffron robes that are usually worn by monks in Thailand, do not collect alms, do not use the title 'phra' and cannot ordain others. Instead of the word 'Phra', 'Samana' is used for monks and Sikkhamat for nuns in the Asoke communities.

The Asoke Community

The Asoke group has established several communities throughout Thailand in which people live and work together following the Buddhist precepts and teachings of Samana Bodhirak. The Asoke group has tried to create communities with an ideal environment for spiritual development. A simple and modest lifestyle characterizes life within the community, where there is no sign of luxury. People living in the community wear plain blue clothes, men and women wear short hair, the women do not wear makeup or accessories and people in the community walk around barefoot.

Luxury items are viewed as un-Buddhist and as defilements. Personal property is limited and most of the people living in the community have few personal belongings. People living in the community eat one or two vegetarian meals per day and the food is usually prepared in a communal kitchen. The Asoke communities strive for self-sufficiency, working to produce the amount of goods needed to sustain the community,

so there is no overproduction or overconsumption (Suwida 2004:281). The people in the community grow their own vegetables and produce environmentally-friendly consumer products such as soap, shampoo and clothing. Work is considered a form of meditation and people within the community engage in different forms of labor. The results of or gain from one's work is unimportant; instead, it is the performance of the particular task that is of importance. Work conducted in a correct manner is viewed as a form of spiritual practice (Heikkila-Horn 2002: 46). Most of the work is done voluntarily, but some people receive a small salary for the work conducted in the community. The community is structured after cooperative ideals and the welfare of the group or community is prioritized over the individual.

Vegetarianism

Morality (sila) is a central part of Bodhirak's interpretation of Buddhism and all members of the Asoke group are encouraged to strictly follow the Buddhist precepts.

The five Buddhist precepts for the laity are as follows:

- 1) To abstain from taking or injuring life
- 2) To abstain from stealing
- 3) To abstain from sexual misconduct
- 4) To abstain from false and slanderous speech and
- 5) To abstain from using sense-altering substances.

Within the temple grounds, individuals also follow three other precepts, which are:

- 6) To abstain from bodily adornments
- 7) To abstain from taking meals after noon
- 8) To abstain from observing plays and dancing

The monks of the Asoke group must follow the 227 rules of the Vinyana Pitaka (Essen 2005:47). To follow the five precepts is a high ideal for most lay Buddhists, but although Buddhists strive to follow the precepts they are generally regarded as too difficult to keep to the letter. In the Asoke community, people actively follow the precepts and social life is structured in a way that is compatible with the precepts.

The first precept, to abstain from taking or injuring life, is considered to be the most important. The Asoke group interprets this precept as forbidding all consumption of meat or engagement in any activity that causes harm to life. All members of the Asoke group follow a strict vegetarian diet, with tofu, produced by the Asoke group being used as a substitute for meat in their daily diet. Although the Theravada texts do not ban consumption of meat, Samana Bodhirak argues that Buddhists should not eat meat since it causes harm and suffering to animals. In a questionnaire survey done by Rory Mackenzie, 37% of all Asoke members stated that they considered following a vegan diet to be very important in order to progress in their spiritual development and to eventually reach Nirvana (Mackenzie 2007:153). A female member of Pathom Asoke that I interviewed argued that there were two main benefits of being a vegetarian. The first benefit was that a vegetarian diet is healthier than a diet consisting of meat. She stated that hormones and different forms of medicines are injected into the animals while they are raised and that these “poisons” would end up in our bodies if we would consume these animals. The other benefit of being a vegetarian is that you uphold the first precept, thereby accumulating good merit. She continued by explaining that all living beings, both humans and animals, are caught in the cycle of death and rebirth. If we hurt or kill animals in this life we will be punished in the next life. She further clarified her point by stating “if we borrow money now, in the future we have to give back, so If we commit sins in the present (causing harm to living beings) we have to pay for our sins in the future” (Bibuddha 2011). The woman perceived humans and animals as interconnected and sharing the same cycle of suffering and rebirth.

Another woman that I interviewed had a similar story regarding the meritorious benefits of upholding the first precept, but she also added that being a vegetarian had

positive effects on the environment besides not killing animals. “Since we are vegetarian, we don’t have to raise animals. Raising animals puts pressure on the environment; it causes forests to be destroyed. Raising animals destroys the environment to a much larger extent than agriculture since this requires a lot of land¹” (Panpan 2010). According to the Santi Asoke group, Buddhism is a religion that encourages a vegetarian diet on the basis of the first precept. Although the Theravada texts contain no explicit ban on the consumption of meat, Buddhists are nevertheless discouraged from killing animals. Vegetarianism is advocated in a number of Mahayana texts, however, and Samana Bodhirak has admitted that he has been influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, viewing the split between the Mahayana and Theravada schools of Buddhism as a human construct. According to the Asoke group, there existed only one form of Buddhism in the past and the labeling of the teachings is the act of human beings; thus, its members have no problem adopting teachings or ideas associated with Mahayana Buddhism.

¹ The increasing global consumption of meat has led to serious environmental problems. To feed the growing number of livestock destined for the meat industry, huge tracts of land have been cleared, mainly for the cultivation of soybeans and corn that is being grown as animal feed.

The use of modern agricultural technology in the form of fertilizer, pesticides and various chemicals has resulted in the extensive destruction of the environment. Pesticides, for example, often spill into rivers and waterways, causing damage to animal and plant life.

In the industrial production of meat, animals are often treated with antibiotics and growth hormones. In many cases, the animals are reared under cruel conditions in confined spaces, often without access to daylight. Furthermore, the animals produce large quantities of waste (cattle in the United States, for example, produce more than 600 million tonnes of waste per year) (Nierneberg:8), in addition to which industrial livestock production is extremely energy intensive, requiring substantial amounts of water and grain to feed animals. To produce 1 kg of beef requires 11kg of maize, 1 kg of pork requires 7kg maize, 1kg of chicken requires 4kg of maize, and an egg requires 3kg of maize (Takehisa 2005:68). It is mainly in the developing world that the negative impacts of the meat industry can be seen; these include deforestation, pollution and conflicts over land. Thus, the increase in the global consumption of meat causes harm to both animals and the environment.

Agriculture

Agriculture is central to the Asoke practice of self-sufficiency and constitutes the economic base of the Asoke communities. Being a farmer is considered to be a highly esteemed profession and, according to the members of the Asoke group, is the number one choice in terms of “right livelihood” (Heikilla-Horn 2002:37). Samana Bodhirak has explained to his followers that there exist three main professions of specific importance. These professions are often referred to as the “Three Professions to Save the Nation” (from economic and ecological crisis) (Essen 2005:111). The three professions are: natural agriculture, waste management and the production of natural fertilizer.

The Asoke community follows the first precept -- to abstain from taking life -- very strictly. By engaging in organic farming, they minimize negative impacts on the environment. Natural, organic agriculture is regarded as positive since it does not cause harm to animals or damage the soil (Bibuddha 2011). Waste management and recycling are important since it reduces the amount of waste dumped in the environment. It enables people in the community to limit their usage of resources since the latter are recycled and re-used. Leftovers from food and other types of waste are used to produce organic fertilizer. In this way, the community maximizes the utilization of their production, thereby reducing pressure on the natural environment. The Asoke communities not only recycle their own waste; they also operate recycling stations where people from outside the community can come and bring waste, such as plastic bottles.

Members of the Asoke community see a clear connection between Buddhism and organic agriculture.

Sikkhamat Chinda, a nun at the Asoke community in Srisa Asoke explained that agriculture and Buddhism are linked for the following reasons:

- 1) Buddhism supports life and agriculture supports life
- 2) The mind and body go together, and we promote both for a complete life
- 3) Asoke does not use what is harmful for life (Essen 2005:114).

An economy based on organic farming puts minimal pressure on the environment and is a central aspect of the Asoke communities' intention to live in harmony with nature. One of my informants explained to me that there is a clear connection between "Thammachat ti dii" (a good environment) and peace and happiness. Peace and happiness are required for spiritual development and it is believed that this state can be reached in a healthy environment. She then went on to point out that the Buddha had lived his life in close relation to nature. "You see, the lord Buddha was born in the forest, reached enlightenment in the forest and died in the forest, all of his life he walked barefoot.... "He did this to teach people to live in harmony with nature" (Bibuddha 2011). By living in a healthy environment, one is regarded to having better opportunities to develop spiritually. The opposite of "thammachat dii" would be urban centers where people live a life disconnected from the natural environment, or areas affected by pollution or other forms of degradation. The Asoke view of Buddhism as a religion that promotes harmony between humans and nature is displayed in a number of paintings of the Buddha at the Pathom Asoke center. The paintings depict different events in the life of the Buddha such as leaving his life in the palace, reaching enlightenment and giving his first sermon. The paintings share common motifs, but the events are depicted in ways that highlight the connection between Buddhism and harmony with nature. In one of the paintings, the Buddha is sitting under a tree meditating while surrounded by numerous animals such as deer, rabbits, swans, doves and chickens. The images are painted in a way to highlight the connection between Buddhism and the environment.

Organic farming is an ideal economic activity since it corresponds to what the Asoke community interprets as a central theme of Buddhism, namely harmony between humans and the environment. One Asoke follower that was interviewed by Juliana Essen spoke about organic agriculture in the following way: "The first profession is chemical-free agriculture....the soil is not being polluted, and the air is not being polluted; there is no pollution. This is important. It's like we are a big Bodhi tree. It spreads out coolness to cover the world, to help animals of all kind who live under the tree" (Essen 2005:113).

Self-sufficiency in Santi Asoke and Pathom Asoke

The Asoke communities strive to establish self-sufficiency and minimize their dependency on the outside world. Out of the two communities that I have focused on for this study, the Santi Asoke in Bangkok and the Pathom Asoke in Nakhon Pathom, only the Nakhon Pathom community that had reached the goal of complete self-sufficiency. The Bangkok center did not have enough land to engage in large-scale farming and could therefore not produce enough food to feed the whole community. Agriculture on the premises was limited to a garden where people grew herbs, vegetables and spices. The community owns farmland outside of Bangkok in the provinces of Pathum Thani and in Kanchanaburi which they use for agricultural purposes. People from the community regularly travel to these two areas in order to cultivate the land and the agricultural produce is later sent back to the center in Bangkok. Waste from the Santi Asoke community in Bangkok, such as old food and leftovers, is sent to these two places in order to produce “natural” fertilizer. The Santi Asoke community in Bangkok also purchases agricultural products from farmers that are not Asoke followers; nevertheless, all the farmers that sell their crops to the Asoke community engage in organic farming. These farmers also receive natural fertilizer from the Santi Asoke community. All agricultural products that come from the “outside” must be produced in an environmental friendly way that corresponds to the Asoke agricultural methods. This means no usage of chemical fertilizer or pesticides or any other harm done to the environment during production (Panpan 2011).

The Santi Asoke center is located in an urban area and it is therefore not possible for them to cultivate enough food for the whole community. In contrast to Santi Asoke, the center in Nakhon Pathom is located in a less urbanized area of Thailand. The center has managed to become completely self-sufficient. They produce almost all of the food consumed in the community themselves. The Pathom Asoke community owns approximately 100 rai of land in Nakhon Pathom (Mackenzie 2007:131). On this land the community has a mushroom farm, a tofu factory, a charcoal producing station, small centers producing herbal medicines and centers for producing natural fertilizer. All the

inhabitants of the community help each other to work on the different sites. The agricultural surplus is sold for a low price outside of the community.

Asoke Cooperation with the government

The Asoke communities' relationship with the Thai authorities has always been rather strained. The political conflict between the Asoke group and the state sangha ended with mass arrests of Asoke members and forced disrobing of Asoke monks and nuns. The government has been more supportive of the environmental work done by the Asoke group. The Thai government support of the Asoke group increased after the King of Thailand delivered a speech in 1997 where he discussed the importance of sustainable development and environmentally friendly agriculture. Since then, the Asoke communities have often come to function as practical examples of organic agriculture and self-sufficiency (Heikkila-Horn 2002:35).

In the year 2002, a cooperative program between the Asoke group and the government Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), began. The bank offered indebted farmers the opportunity to freeze their loans on the condition that they attended courses on self-sufficiency and organic agriculture at the Asoke communities (Mackenzie 2007:152). Farmers that stayed at the Asoke communities had to follow the rules within the community; this included following the Buddhist precepts, which include abstaining from killing (vegetarian diet) and abstaining from intoxicants (alcohol, drugs). Besides training in organic farming and Buddhist precepts, the farmers were taught how to produce their own everyday consumer products such as soap and shampoo. The project was financed by the health department. Farmers were especially interested in learning how to produce their own fertilizer since this could help them to save considerable amounts of money. After attending the training courses at the Asoke community, farmers were offered the opportunity to sell their agricultural products at markets and stores operated by the Asoke group. Today, the Thai government has ceased active cooperation with the Asoke group. According to one member of the Pathom Asoke community, however, some of the farmers who participated in the Asoke programs are still in contact with -- and visit -- the Asoke center (Bibuddha 2011).

Although government support of Asoke's approach to self-sufficiency and organic farming remains, active cooperation between this group and the government has effectively ended. Officially, the Thai government claims that it supports the Sufficiency Economy promoted by the King of Thailand. Considering the continuation of unsustainable development and exploitation of natural resources in Thailand, however, one cannot help but wonder to what extent the government *actually* supports the sufficiency theory. The Asoke communities are good examples of communities that have succeeded in achieving self-sufficiency in an environmentally sustainable manner. Since the Asoke communities are good examples of functioning self-sufficient communities, it would be logical for the government to actively support them. Besides the short-lived project instigated by the Bank for Agriculture and Cooperation and the health department, support for Asoke's environmentally friendly activities has been limited. In this regard, one informant at the Santi Asoke community in Bangkok stated that she did not really think that the government was interested in their projects. She argued that the government claims to support the Sufficiency Economy but rarely ever does anything to promote the theory (Panpan 2011). Another informant argued that although the overall support from the government was small, it also depended on the region involved. The local government in Ubon for example, provided a great deal of support to the Asoke community in that province (Bibuddha 2011).

Bun-Niyom, the Asoke alternative to capitalism

People in the Asoke community live a simple lifestyle with few material assets. It is believed that a life without material possessions will help the individual develop spiritually. The Asoke community has a clear anti-capitalist and anti-consumerism stance expressed in their simple clothing and modest lifestyle. In the capitalist economic system, people strive to accumulate wealth and material possessions; this contradicts the Asoke follower's aspiration regarding non-attachment. In mainstream society, it is believed that success and happiness can be achieved by being wealthy and having worldly possessions. The Asoke group, on the other hand, views capitalism as a system where people take advantage of others and destroy the environment in order to

accumulate capital (Essen 2005:62). In the Asoke community, accumulation of wealth is instead viewed as increasing the individual's attachment to worldly things.

A woman that I interviewed explained the negative aspects of consumerism in the following way

“I think consumerism is a thing that will destroy our earth, because the more we consume, the more we destroy our world. The way that capitalism tries to encourage people to buy more, to use more, it is very bad to us. The more we get, the more we want, we cannot stop it” (Panpan 2011)

In the above statement, the respondent makes a clear link between the economic activity that takes place in capitalist society and the current ecological crisis.

The Asoke community has developed their own alternative to capitalism which they call Bun-Niyom or ‘Meritism’. The name Bun-Niyom is the Asoke community's Buddhist version of the word Thun-Niyom (capitalism). In contrast to capitalism, the Bun-Niyom system is not based on profit; instead, people work in an unselfish manner for the benefit of others. The Asoke group argues that Bun-Niyom encourages people to do good deeds and to help others; this is believed to yield merit (Mackenzie 2007:149).

The Buddha taught that humans only have four basic needs; these needs are food, clothing, shelter and medicine (Heikkila-Horn 2002:51). In the Asoke community, people are working to satisfy these four needs, with anything above the basic necessities being viewed as unnecessary luxuries. Economic decision-making within the community is not driven by market forces but by a religious framework. Consumption in the Bun-Niyom framework is not for pleasure; the focus is survival and satisfaction of real needs.

Samana Bodhirak criticizes capitalists for using advanced technology in their industrial production, thereby destroying the environment. The destruction of the environment is taking place in order to produce products that, according to the Asoke group, often do not serve a purpose. This includes the numerous consumer products that are mass-produced in factories around the world that, shortly after being used, turn into waste. In the Asoke community, people live in a simple and modest way and have no

need for the numerous consumer products that can be found in shopping centers and department stores. Their lifestyle, which is characterized by minimal consumption, has a minimal impact on the environment. In contrast to capitalist societies, which through industrial production and mass-consumption cause damage to the environment, the Asoke communities try to live in harmony with their surroundings. Within the Asoke community, the production process is directly linked to the consumption process. The community does not produce anything that is not needed. They aspire to produce whatever is needed to sustain life within the community and imported goods are usually not regarded with favor. The fact that production is limited to satisfying basic needs means that the environmental impact is minimal.

Capitalism is regarded as an immoral system since it promotes greed and is, to a certain extent, based on exploitation, either of labor or of the environment. In contrast to capitalism, Bun-Niyom is based on sila (morality). By acting in accordance with Bun-Niyom, Asoke members believe that they develop spiritually and that they accumulate merit. Samana Bodhirak argues that to follow the system of Bun-Niyom is to develop “Buddha mind” which, in turn, will lead to enlightenment (Heikilla-Horn 1997:22). The objective of Bun-Niyom is to free oneself from attachment and egoism by acting in an unselfish manner.

In the Asoke community, private ownership is limited. Within the community, there is cooperative ownership in that its members own and utilize property in a cooperative manner and any potential earnings are given to the center. These earnings are used for the benefit of the community. Cooperative management of resources is believed to help people within the community to feel free from cravings and needs (Panpan 2011). Giving away surplus and sharing one’s possessions is believed to help develop non-attachment to material things. It should be noted, however, that even though the people living in the Asoke communities live simple lives free from material possessions, they still have access to modern technology. At the center in Nakhon Pathom, the community has its own TV and radio stations where both children and adults work together on producing TV and radio programs. The center also has an air-conditioned computer room

with internet access. Factories on the premises are also modern. The Santi Asoke center in Bangkok also has modern facilities and uses technology. The Asoke community does not reject modern technology per se; rather, its members choose to use technology that they regard as beneficial and that does not have a negative impact on the environment.

The use of resources and management of financial funds in the Asoke communities are significantly different from mainstream capitalist society. In the capitalist economic system, the means of production are privately owned and operated for profit. Goods and services in the capitalist economy are provided for markets at the local, national and global level. Capitalism encourages economic growth, which is regarded as a goal within itself. Increasing production of goods and services and the increasing consumption of these products are viewed as positive in terms of the national economy. In the Asoke community, there is no marketplace that equals the “market” in the capitalist economy. Production is limited to what the Asoke group considers to conform to actual human needs. Since the means of production is owned and operated cooperatively, there is no/or limited private ownership within the community; consumption and usage of natural resources is kept to the minimum. According to Richard H. Robbins, consumption constitutes the main factor in environmental alteration—in the use of raw materials, the use of nonhuman energy, and the production of waste (Robbins 2005:207). When discussing Man’s impact on the earth’s ecosystem, the term ‘ecological footprint’ is often used. The term refers to the total area of biologically productive land and sea needed to regenerate the resources a human population consumes and to absorb and render harmless the corresponding waste. Although advanced industrialized capitalist societies clearly have a larger ecological footprint than developing countries, there is also a huge difference between the different industrialized countries. Statistics from the end of the 20th century showed that the U.S alone used 25% of the world’s energy and accounted for 25% of the world’s carbon emissions, which are responsible for global warming. (Robbins 2005:208). The usage of energy is naturally related to consumption patterns in the U.S. My point is that by reducing consumption and saving energy one contributes to the well-being of the environment. One of the Asoke group’s main objections to mainstream society is the excessive waste of natural resources

and the lack of responsibility towards the consequences of their economic actions. Production in the Bun-Niyom system takes into consideration the total effect on the environment.

Bun-niyom shops and businesses

Outside the temple compound, there are several shops belonging to the Asoke group. One of the biggest shops is the Palang Bun (force of merit) supermarket that sells merchandise produced in an ecologically friendly manner such as clothes, food, shampoo, toothpaste, soap and medicine. Products sold in the store include products produced by the Asoke communities and products produced elsewhere, its customers consisting of both Asoke followers as well as outsiders. On each product sold in the store, there is a price tag containing two prices. The first price is the cost of producing the particular product and the second price is the selling price. When examining the price tags, one notices that the profit made on each product is very small. The reason for this is that the objective of the Asoke community is not financial profit. The stores are part of the Bun-Niyom system whereby the Asoke community offers people the opportunity to purchase products produced by ecologically friendly means that are of good quality at a low price. By operating these stores, they encourage people to purchase products that are produced in an environmentally friendly way and that do not contain the kind of chemicals usually found in everyday consumer products. At the stores, there are no plastic bags available in which to put the merchandise. Customers that purchase large quantities must bring their own bags to the store. This is another way in which the Asoke community tries to limit waste and the use of precious resources.

Trade in the Bun-Niyom system is not conducted for profit as in the mainstream economic system. The motivation behind the Bun-Niyom system is to cultivate what is good by giving back to society. The Bun-Niyom shops sell environmentally friendly products that have been produced in a way that is free from the exploitation of workers or the environment. There are four main principles that guide the Bun-Niyom economy, namely:

- Selling for low profit
- Changing for an equal price
- Changing for a lower price
- Giving away for free

(Heikkila-Horn 2002:48)

The Bun-Niyom business is centered in the Santi Asoke community in Bangkok. The first branch of the Asoke group's business was founded in 1979. This business started with five million baht in registered capital. The businesses have expanded and today the five main companies possess assets worth over 100 million baht (Sunai 2007:41).

The five main companies are as follows:

- 1) Palang Bun (Power of Merit), Co, Ltd. , which is the major retail store for Asoke products
- 2) Dae Chivit (For Life) Co. Ltd. is also a retail store selling a variety of environmentally friendly consumer products.
- 3) Kob Koon (Thank You) Co. Ltd., which distributes a variety of products produced in the Asoke communities. The products range from herbal medicines to herbal shampoo etc.
- 4) Fah Apai (Heaven Forgiving) Co. Ltd. is a printing and publishing house that publishes Asoke publications.
- 5) Toi Lang Kaow Kanlong (Step Back to Righteousness) Co. Ltd. operates a satellite television station called FETV (For the Earth Television).

(Setboonsarng 2007:42, 43)

The Asoke communities also operate numerous vegetarian restaurants, production plants that produce organic fertilizer, rice mills, production plants that produce herbal medicine and factories producing a wide variety of consumer products. All these businesses are operated according to the same principles, the economic system guiding life in the Asoke community being based on their perception of Buddhist moral values and ethics. The belief in karma and in unselfish action, which generates positive karma, underlies the economic system of Bun-Niyom.

The majority of the people working in these different businesses are either volunteers or work for a minimum salary. The work is not conducted in order to earn money; instead, it is regarded as a form of spiritual development. One Asoke member explained that the work conducted within the community benefits others and at the same time benefits oneself (Panpan 2011). The salary earned by working at businesses run by the Asoke communities usually does not exceed 3000 baht per month (Suwida 2004:280). The low salary earned through hard work is believed to eradicate greed and attachment.

Work: Right Livelihood

Samana Bodhirak argues that there are three professions that are of specific importance. These professions are: natural agriculture, waste management and the production of natural fertilizer. In mainstream society, none of these three professions are associated with status or accorded particular importance. Asoke followers are using different criteria from mainstream society when they determine importance and value of work -- criteria based on Buddhist values.

Right livelihood, an integral part of the Noble Eightfold Path, refers to livelihood that is not dishonest or causes harm to other living beings. Examples of livelihood that is “wrong” would be working in the arms industry, being a hunter or engaging in the sale and production of drugs and alcohol (Henning 2000:188). For the Asoke followers who practice a strict form of Buddhism, right livelihood is naturally very important. They try to avoid any activity that is perceived as increasing attachment or causing suffering to

any form of life. In mainstream society, on the other hand, livelihood is often determined by the amount of wealth it produces, while in the Asoke community, accumulation of wealth is insignificant; instead, livelihood is determined by the well-being it generates.

Participation in economic activity that involves destruction of the environment or harm to any form of life is considered to be incompatible with Buddhism. Actions that cause harm to life, whether it be human, animal or plant life, are viewed by the Asoke group as being motivated by craving and attachment. Their interpretation of right livelihood is one that benefits human beings and does not cause harm to any form of life. In this sense, Asoke followers differ from mainstream Thai Buddhists. It is, for example, highly unlikely that the owner of a factory that pollutes the surrounding environment would be accused of being a “bad” Buddhist or that he is engaging in practices that are incompatible with Buddhist doctrine. According to the Asoke community’s interpretation of Buddhism, on the other hand, the factory owner would be acting in an immoral manner since he is polluting the environment in order to satisfy his personal greed. From this perspective, a number of occupations are considered incompatible with Buddhist doctrine.

Consider an occupation in the advertising industry from this perspective. Advertising is meant to persuade an audience (potential consumers) to purchase or take action with regard to certain products, ideas, or services. Commercial advertisements generally try to increase the consumption of their product or service through advertising. The Asoke group draws a parallel between consumption and environmental destruction; hence, an occupation that promotes increasing consumption cannot, in their opinion, be compatible with the Buddhist definition of right livelihood. One of the factors underlying the ecological problems that society is currently facing is changing consumption patterns and consumerism. In the Asoke community, economic activity is not judged by the profit it generates; it is judged by the social good it produces. The main idea behind the Bun-Niyom system is to establish an economic system that is compatible with Buddhism and enables people to develop spiritually. Overcoming greed and attachment is necessary to

develop spiritually; in the Asoke community, people try to overcome greed and attachment by practicing generosity and sharing.

When judging any kind of economic activity, the Asoke community takes into consideration the effect that particular activity has on the individual, society and the environment. From this perspective, therefore, engaging in natural farming is a wholesome form of livelihood. The farmer sustains life and does so by causing very limited harm to the environment. In comparison, an individual working in the field of advertising is trying to maximize the production and consumption of goods. From this perspective, therefore, a career in advertising can be regarded as a line of work that is incompatible with Buddhism. From a Buddhist perspective, consumption motivated by the desire to satisfy cravings is harmful in that such cravings can never be satisfied; new ones will always appear. This is not specific to the Asoke group, however; Prayud Payutto also comments on advertisement and consumption in the following way:

“The vast majority of ads imbue the public with a predilection for selfish indulgence; they condition us into being perfect consumers who have no higher purpose in life than to consume the products of modern industry. In the process, we are transformed into ‘hungry ghosts’, striving to feed an everlasting craving, and society becomes a seething mass of conflicting interests” (Payutto 1994:25).

The significant difference between the members of the Asoke group and the majority of mainstream lay Buddhists is that Asoke followers not only agree with this statement but also actively choose *not* to be a part of consumer society.

Economic activity is judged by the overall good it produces. Environmental destruction and the exploitation of labor cannot be justified by economic growth. The mode of production in the global capitalist economy follows a specific pattern. Every part of this system of production, whether it is the production of textiles, technology or meat, follows similar principles. It is all about maximizing production and minimizing the cost of production, while at the same time getting consumers to increase their consumption. Low production costs are often at the expense of people and the environment. In

industrial societies, however, the majority of consumers are unaware of the mode of production and the impact industrial production has on the environment. Members of the Asoke group, in contrast, judge the mode of production from a moralistic perspective based on Buddhist values and consider it their responsibility as Buddhists to reflect on how their consumption affects the environment.

Asoke educational system

Our particular worldview will shape our perception of the world and our actions. Values and belief systems provide the foundation for our worldview and conception of the world. In the educational system, accumulated knowledge, skills and values are transmitted from one generation to the next. Thus, the individual's experiences in the educational system have a formative effect on his or her mind and character.

Members of the Asoke group have developed their own school system which they call the Samma sikkha schools, the name being a reference to the Noble Eightfold Path and its steps pertaining to right understanding, thought etc (Heikkila-Horn 2002:55). The school system is completely free of charge and as of 2007, there were around 600 students in the various schools run by the Asoke group around Thailand (Mackenzie 2007:136). The majority of the students that attend these schools live in the Asoke community. At both Pathom Asoke and Santi Asoke, several of the students came from provinces outside of Bangkok and had been sent to the Asoke community by their parents. The teachers working at the schools are all volunteers and consist of both monks and laypeople. The schools adopt a holistic approach to education; practical skills such as gardening, cooking and other forms of manual labor are combined with theoretical knowledge. Besides regular subjects, children are taught about dhamma, the importance of following the five precepts, natural agriculture and Bun-Niyom (Asoketragoon 2011). The school system place a strong emphasis on morality and approximately 40% of the curriculum is dedicated to the teaching of the five precepts, which are considered to be the basis of morality. Every day, the students must take notes on how well they have managed to follow the five precepts. At the end of the week, the students show their notes to a monk and they discuss the notes with the monk (Savanyakul 2011). The Asoke

educational system has been recognized by Thailand's Ministry of Education and approximately 20% of the curriculum at the Asoke School is the same as the standard curriculum in government schools; the rest of the curriculum has been developed by the Asoke group itself (Essen 2005:64).

The motivation for starting their own educational system was that members of the Asoke communities felt that the traditional government educational system did not provide children with the type of knowledge needed in their community. An engineer who had joined Asoke explained this in the following way:

“The old system of education teaches children that they must study a lot and then strive towards earning lots of money”

This quote expresses the feeling that the mainstream educational system promotes values that do not correspond to the Asoke value system. Many Asoke followers felt that the existing system “stole” the children away from the community. After a child had completed his studies at an ordinary school, he or she would not be interested in living within the community anymore.

The mainstream educational system is regarded as producing greedy, materialistic individuals, materialism being viewed as the social preference of the old system. Since the mainstream educational system was regarded having a negative influence on children, the Asoke group decided that they “ought to organize teachings that allow children to know new things, let them know a new way of sustaining life” (Essen 2005:62,63). The Asoke community wanted to establish a school system based on their principles and worldview that did not reproduce what they consider to be the destructive values that exist in the mainstream educational system.

In modern societies, there is a relation between the educational system and the economy. The educational system is, in a sense, the reflection of the state of the economic system or the direct expression of the value system of “society as a whole” (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990:178). This means that the educational systems in modern societies to an extent serve the needs of the economic sector and promote prevailing

social values. The Asoke group is critical of both the capitalist economic system and of mainstream Thai society. They believe that the mainstream educational system does not provide students with sufficient teachings regarding morals and that negative values such as materialism are promoted. The objective of their educational system is to produce moral individuals, not economically productive workers and technocrats for the economy. The Asoke educational system is important in order to provide young people of the community with wholesome values.

Bibuddha explained the difference between the Asoke educational system and the traditional Thai educational system in the following way. In the Thai school system, 100% of the curriculum is dedicated to the study of various subjects. When the school day is over, the students are free to leave the school and do whatever they please. The children “waste their time playing online games or get into different forms of trouble.” In the Asoke educational system, things function differently. When the school day is over, the children still stay in their communities and have duties that they have to fulfill. These afterschool duties are also considered part of the educational system. In the Asoke educational system, approximately 25% of the time is spent on teaching subjects, 40% of the time is spent on teaching the precepts (morality), and 35% of the time is spent on practical work. After finishing school and doing their homework, the students must do different types of work within the community (Asoketragoon 2011). This will help the children to stay out of trouble and grow up to be good hardworking citizens. The school system provides the children with an education based on Buddhist principles that will develop the children’s morality, as well as their compassion towards other people and the environment. In the educational system, the Asoke worldview is transmitted to the children, who are taught not to strive for wealth and power but to always work in an unselfish manner with the interests of society as a whole in mind. Organic farming and environmental ethics are the central aspects of this system of education. Children learn how to cultivate the land in an environmentally friendly manner, they learn about recycling and waste management and the teachers educate them about the importance of not wasting resources. Children in the school are not allowed to carry money; everything they need the community provides for them. If a child has some specific need, all he or

she has to do is ask an adult and the adult will see to their needs. The children are not allowed to carry money in order to prevent them from spending the money on useless items. From an early age, children are taught not to engage in overconsumption; they are taught to be satisfied with less.

Conclusion

The Asoke group's interpretation of Buddhism clearly links the religion to environmental ethics. This is expressed both in interviews that I conducted, as well in the lifestyle of the people in the Asoke communities. Episodes in the life of the historical Buddha are used to show the connection between Buddhism and the environment. Consequently, the Buddhism practiced by the Asoke group involves showing compassion and respect towards all living beings. To kill or even eat animals is considered to be a violation of the Buddhist precepts. In this sense, the Asoke group interprets the precepts in a stricter way than mainstream Thai Buddhists. In order not to violate the precepts, the Asoke members follow a strict vegan diet and practice organic agriculture. Pesticides and chemical fertilizer are not used since they cause harm to animals and the environment. To uphold the precepts and to preserve the environment is believed to accumulate good merit for the practitioner. The forest and the natural environment are regarded as places that increase the individual's ability to achieve spiritual development. In each Asoke center, therefore, there are plenty of trees and plants. Even in the Santi Asoke center located in Bangkok, they have planted trees and constructed an artificial waterfall to recreate a natural environment.

The Asoke group strives towards living in harmony with nature, which includes leading a "simple and modest" lifestyle. Adopting a lifestyle with few material possessions and minimal usage of resources is valued because of the low impact it has on the environment. The Asoke group practices a form of applied Buddhism where Buddhist principles guide everyday activities. A characteristic of the Asoke group is that even laypeople follow the Buddhist precepts strictly. Both monks and laypeople strive to

eradicate cravings by following the Noble Eightfold Path. In contrast to mainstream Thai Buddhists, the Asoke followers do not regard enlightenment as unattainable; instead, they regard their lifestyle to be part and parcel of their path towards enlightenment, their vision being to create a society which provides the ideal environment for spiritual development.

The Asoke group views capitalism and consumerism as destructive both for human beings and the environment. They have therefore developed their own alternative to capitalism. Central to the Bun-niyom system is an environmentally friendly mode of production and sustainable management of resources. Production corresponds to the needs of the community; thus, no overproduction takes place. Consumption within the community is mainly limited to sustaining life. Modes of production and economic activity are judged according to moral principles. All economic activity is viewed from a holistic perspective that includes considerations of both motives as well as consequences of the individual's actions. From their perspective, organic farming is the ideal occupation since it sustains life and cause little harm to the natural environment. They also sell food and consumer products that is produced in an ecologically friendly manner at their stores and in markets. By operating their Bun-Niyom stores, the Asoke group offers the public cheap and environmentally friendly products. The Asoke community has developed their own educational system, one that corresponds to the Asoke interpretation of Buddhism. Thus, morality is a central aspect not only of their education system, but also underlies economic activity and everyday life within the community.

ศูนย์วิทยุโทรพยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

CHAPTER V

Phra Prajak

This chapter discusses the conflict between the authorities and local communities over land rights and the management of natural resources in the Dongyay forest reserve in Buriram Province. The conflict involves the government's controversial Khor Jor Kor program, which would involve the resettlement of 6 million people and the establishment of eucalyptus plantations on land inhabited by local farmers. The environmentalist monk Phra Prajak led local resistance against the spread of eucalyptus and government resettlement plans. The chapter contains an outline of the Khor Jor Kor project, a discussion of the increase in eucalyptus plantation in the area, and the effect this has had on the natural environment. This will lead to a discussion of Phra Prajak's role in leading local resistance against the authorities and powerful business interests.

Phra Prajak was born in Saraburi Province in central Thailand. When Phra Prajak entered the monkhood, the monk that ordained him explained the importance of practicing meditation in order to understand dhamma and advised him to meditate in quiet places such as cemeteries and on the top of mountains. Phra Prajak explained that meditating on the impermanence of the human body and the interconnectedness of all living beings had helped him "calm" his mind (Phra Prajak 2011).

After his ordination, he did not stay at the temple; instead he took up the life of a wandering forest monk. For a number of years, he travelled throughout Thailand and spent considerable time wandering through the forests of the north-east and meditating. A forest monk lives a difficult life since he lacks the support monks residing in temples receive; instead, he relies on alms provided by people living in the villages he passes through. Forest monks encounter various dangers and difficulties in their travels and since they don't have a permanent residence, some monks have spent long periods of time living in caves or other locations in the forest (Sulak 1999:205).

By spending time in the forest, Phra Prajak, developed a deep compassion towards the forest and the environment. In 1989, he reached the Dongyai forest reserve in Buriram province, located in the northeastern part of Thailand. In the Dongyai forest, Phra Prajak witnessed a conflict between villagers and the local authorities over land rights. The authorities wanted to give the land inhabited and cultivated by the local population to commercial firms engaged in growing eucalyptus for the woodchip and paper pulp industry. Phra Prajak decided to stay in Dongyai to help the villagers and protect the forest (Phra Prajak 2011).

Eucalyptus and land conflicts in Thailand

The state control over forest land was consolidated in the 1941 Forestry Act, which defined forest in political rather than biological terms, as land that no one except the state has the right to occupy or use (Danaiya Usher, 2009:61). As mentioned earlier, deforestation in Thailand has taken place at an alarming rate, since 1964, the Thai government has tried to control deforestation in Thailand through the use of the National Forestry Act by creating National Forestry Reserves. This gave the Royal Forestry Department the right to designate land without a legal owner as a reserve. Unfortunately, a large portion of the land declared to be National Forestry Reserves was inhabited and cultivated by people who did not have legal documents proving land ownership (Dixon 1999:179). According to Larry Lohmann, up to 15 percent of the Thai population lived in areas that were classified as forest reserves and this land made up almost one-third of all Thai farmland (Lohmann 1991:3). Beginning in the 1980s, the Royal Forestry Department initiated a reforestation plan in areas classified as degraded forest land. People living in these areas was forced to move out. The reforestation was, in many cases, carried out by private companies planting eucalyptus for the paper and pulp industry. According to the state's definition, an area planted with eucalyptus trees was classified as a forest even though it lacked the characteristics of the indigenous forests and did not have a "natural" ecosystem. At times, the people living in areas designated for reforestation refused to leave their land and the Royal Forestry Department had to call upon the military and the agriculture firms to help them evict these local residents (Baker

2002:84). During the 1980s, Thailand experienced a eucalyptus boom fuelled by the growing demand for wood chips and paper pulp in the Taiwanese, South Korean, and particularly Japanese markets. Corporations such as Oji, Jujo, Mitsubishi, Marubeni, Nissho-Awai, Mitsui, and Sumitomo were seeking new sources of raw materials for new paper factories being built at home and abroad (Lohmann 1991:10). Consequently, by 1985 the total area of eucalyptus planted by private companies in Thailand had reached almost 5000 hectares.

Eucalyptus farming was supported by the Thai government and several political parties were directly linked to eucalyptus firms. A leading member of the Democrat party, as well as a former Minister of Agriculture responsible for approving leases of national reserve land, were both directly linked to commercial interests involved in the eucalyptus industry (Lohmann 1991:11). The government had developed plans for growing eucalyptus trees on a large amount of land throughout Thailand. In 1987 the Ministry of Agriculture had estimated that there existed 28,800 sq km of “degraded” land where eucalyptus could be planted. The main obstacle facing the authorities in carrying out their vision was the people living on the land (Danaiya Usher 2009:29).

Among the various eucalyptus species, *E. camaldulensis* is considered the most suitable for Thailand's climate. Eucalyptus trees can grow in almost any kind of soil and the tree's extensive and deep root system allows it to use all available water. Eucalyptus grows fast and it is well adapted to dry conditions. In order to produce the maximum amount of timber, the eucalyptus trees are planted close together. The optimum planting regime for eucalyptus in Thailand is tightly spaced; intensive, large-scale monoculture stands (Danaiya Usher 2009:113-114). Opposition to the spread of eucalyptus plantations started almost immediately amongst the local population, with farmers complaining that the eucalyptus plantations had negative impacts on their fields. They reported: “water shortage, soil degradation, reductions in the productivity of adjacent crops, replacement of existing natural forest, and conversion of rice paddies to tree farms” (Danaiya Usher 2009:116).

Eucalyptus planted outside of its natural habitat tends to dominate the environment and disrupt the local ecosystem. Farmers often refer to the plant as “selfish” since the eucalyptus tree takes the nutrients out of the soil, thereby preventing other plant species from “growing”. The eucalyptus tree has a negative effect on the environment since it consumes a lot of groundwater; it also has a weak root structure and it increases the risk of erosion (Taylor 1993:9).

Local resistance against the spread of eucalyptus took place in different parts of Thailand. In the north-eastern province of Srisaket, 2000 villagers dug up eucalyptus saplings and burned down nurseries. In 1988, around 2000 people in Nongkhai cut down hundreds of eucalyptus trees and burned nurseries and saplings. A couple of months later, enraged villagers in Prachin Buri burned down the house of a forestry official. In Roi-et, villagers attacked bulldozers clearing the land for plantation. In other parts of the country, villagers demonstrated, held rallies and petitioned government officials (Danaiya Usher 2009:116,130, Baker 2003:408).

National Forest Reserves reserved for logging activities was under the jurisdiction of the Royal Forestry Department. In 1989, logging was officially banned in Thailand, however, even though logging activities were no longer allowed, the areas remained under the Forest Reserve Category. These areas, which were populated by an estimated 10 million people were targeted for commercial reforestation, mainly eucalyptus planted by the private sector (Danaiya Usher 2009:21). Even though the expansion of eucalyptus plantations throughout Thailand had resulted in local protests the authorities, still had plans to increase the amount of land designated for commercial reforestation.

Historical background to the conflict in the Dongyay forest

The Dongyay forest reserve is located in Buriram province in the northeastern part of Thailand. The reserve covers 101 000 hectares and extends into Buriram's neighboring provinces of Nakhon Ratchasima and Prachin Buri. Upon his arrival to Buriram, Phra Prajak settled in Pakham district which is a district located in the area around the Cambodian border. This area contained one of the last primary forests in Isarn and an important watershed that served as a water resource for nearby villages (Taylor 1993:5-6).

Phra Prajak arrived at the Dongyay forest in 1989, but there had been conflict in the area long before that. In 1952, the government of Prime Minister Luang Phibunsongkhram gave a private company the concession to extract timber from the Dongyay forest. The company extracted the valuable timber and left large areas cleared of trees. In the cleared areas, settlers seeking new land moved in from neighboring districts. The settlers built up a small community in connection with the forest. In the year 1964, the Thai government designated the area a forest reserve and they forced the villagers living in the area during that time to move out. According to the Forest Reserve Act, which was passed in 1964 the settlers were classified as illegal occupants of government land.

During the end of the 1960's, when the Indochina war intensified and communism started to spread in Thailand, the government encouraged people to move back into the area in order to "protect" it from communist influence. During this time, the district of Pakham was a stronghold of the communist insurgents. The government encouraged settlers to clear land and build homes in the forest. Settlers that moved into the area and helped the government fight the communists were promised land allocations by the government (Baker, 2002: 84). The military trained the villagers in the use of firearms and advised them to report any communist activity in the region. In the 1980's, when the threat of a communist insurgency had almost disappeared, the government once again ordered the villagers to leave the forest (Taylor, 1993:6). Villagers that had helped the government to fight against the communist insurgents felt that they had been cheated

since they did not receive the land allocations they were promised and now faced expulsion from the forest.

In the year 1980, the military government tried to relocate twelve villages consisting of 1200 families from the Dongyay forest reserve. Only 300 out of the 1200 families were offered the opportunity to settle at an alternative site outside of the forest. The people of Dongyay who, in many cases, had helped the government defeat the communist insurgency, felt that they were being treated unfairly and they protested to the provincial governor and the Prime Minister's Office (Baker 2002:84). In 1984, the Thai government allowed a private company to plant eucalyptus on land belonging to the 300 families that had been resettled from the forest reserve. The villagers tried to issue complaints regarding infringement on their land to the local authorities, but nothing was done to help them. Boonmee Sopawet, a villager in Dongyay that planted cassava was one of those who had been ordered to leave the area in 1984. Since he did not receive any compensation land, he decided to stay in Dongyay. The authorities eventually granted him permission to stay and continue planting cassava in between eucalyptus rows. Since the eucalyptus trees consume the water and nutrients in the soil, Boonmee's annual income dropped from 320 U.S. dollars to 80 dollars per year (Lohmann 1991:13). Boonmee was just one of many examples of how the expansion of eucalyptus in Dongyay threatened the livelihood of local residents.

Kor Jor Kor

Since the war against the communist insurgency, the Thai army had become increasingly involved in the economy and politics of the forest in rural areas. In 1991, the Thai military with the assistance of the Forestry Department draw up a massive resettlement plan. Under the "Land Resettlement Program for the Poor Living in Degraded Forest Reserves"- whose Thai acronym is Khor Jor Kor- 970 000 families, or around 6 million people, living illegally inside National Forest Reserves was to be resettled. The people were to be resettled in "orderly villages under military control."

Since the ban on logging in 1989, the Thai government had begun a campaign of reforestation. The goal set forth by the government was to have 40% of Thailand's total area covered with forest. Out of this 40%, 25% was supposed to be commercial forest and 15% forest allocated for conservation. The Khor Jor Kor's stated purpose was to resolve land issues in order to reach the government's reforestation goals, which included giving grants to private firms growing eucalyptus; the government viewed the planting of eucalyptus by private interests to be a cheap way of reaching those goals (Lohmann 1991:14). Since the 1980's, the private sector has been encouraged by the Thai government to subscribe to replanting programs to produce softwood for pulp and woodchips, particularly from fast-maturing eucalyptus.

It was estimated that villagers were living on 22900 sq km of agricultural land. They were to be resettled on 7680 sq km of land, which means that the land available for agriculture decreased by more than 60% (Danaiya Usher 2009:31).

The Khor Jor Kor policy was to be carried out in all four regions in Thailand and the government began the program by resettling 250,000 families in the northeast. The families that were forced to leave their land were promised access to land outside of the reserve. The land given to these families was in many cases already inhabited and this caused conflict between the "newcomers" and the original owners of the land. In other cases, the villagers were given no land at all. In many cases, the authorities clearly did not consider the well-being of the local population while carrying out the resettlement plan. As Mr. Niran Kultanan, a lecturer at Buriram University, who was conducting research on the Khor Jor Kor program during that time, points out, "The villagers were taken away from their homes and given 15 rai of land in a new area". In their old village, they had their friends and relatives; in the new area, they were often separated from their relatives" (Niran 2010) The resettlement meant that people in many cases were separated from family and friends and had to start a new life in a new area, as a result of which communities that had formed over decades were torn apart.

Resistance in the Dongyay forest

The conflict in the Dongyay forest intensified after the military started to carry out the Kor Jor Kor project. Phra Prajak was against the government's resettlement scheme and their plan of increasing the amount of land containing eucalyptus in the area. He believed that the establishment of eucalyptus plantations in Dongyay would destroy the ecosystem and ultimately threaten the livelihood of the local population. Phra Prajak had spent years wandering through the forests of the northeast, but when he eventually reached Dongyay and witnessed the conflict that was taking place in the area, he felt obligated to stay and protect the local people. Within a week of Phra Prajak's arrival in the area, twelve villages in the area were ordered to relocate. The villagers asked Phra Prajak to stay with them and help them protect the forest (Sulak 1999:205). Since he considered protecting the forest to be his duty as a monk, he believed that he had no other option but to stay and fight to protect the forest and the people living there. His reasoning regarding his duties as a monk follows the rationale of the "engaged Buddhist" who argues that Buddhists that encounter suffering in society should become engaged and try to change the social conditions that produce suffering. Phra Prajak interpreted the actions of the authorities and business interests in the area to be motivated by greed.

People in the area saw Phra Prajak as a potential leader who, since he was monk, could protect them from local authorities and the business interests that wanted their land. Phra Prajak began speaking to villagers about environmental issues, about the importance of protecting the forest and of protesting against government plans of expanding eucalyptus plantations in the area. In his struggle to protect the forest Phra Prajak started to work with environmental activist Kham Buttsii. Kham Buttsii was a leading figure in the local conservation movement and he had been one of the founders of the conservation group of Hua-Naam Phut Mountain (Taylor 1993:10). Kham Buttsii had previously worked with the government to fight the communist insurgents within the area, but had now joined forces with his former "enemies" to fight for the local population's right to land. In 1989, he was forced to go into hiding after having received several death threats

from local officials due to his participation in the local resistance against commercial tree plantations in the area (Lohmann 1991:13).

The local community, supported by Phra Prajak, wanted to preserve the forest and use it collectively as a “community forest”. They wanted to continue using the forest as a source of various natural products. Thus, the forest would be preserved and serve as a sustainable source of water, mushrooms, vegetables, small game, honey, resins, fruit, firewood, fodder, herbal medicines, frogs, edible insects and insect eggs. The preservation of the community forest, in the eyes of the villagers, would be an environmentally friendly alternative to commercial reforestation. Forest products such as edible insects, herbs used for medicines, and mushrooms were collected by the villagers for everyday subsistence and these could not be found in the eucalyptus plantations (Lohmann 1991:7).

Using Dhamma teachings, Phra Prajak put local environmental problems into a Buddhist context, convincing the villagers of the importance of protecting the forest and the environment. He educated villagers regarding the negative effects of logging and ordained trees in order to prevent them from being cut down (Sulak 1999:205). In his attempt to stop logging in the Dongyai forest, Phra Prajak organized groups of people to patrol the forest looking for loggers. The villagers also built roadblocks to prevent illegal loggers from being able to transport the trees out of the forest (Sulak 1999:205). Phra Prajak also invited young “monk-activists” from Bangkok to the Dongyai forest to help villagers in the various program he had initiated (Taylor 1993:7). Phra Prajak made several attempts at contacting government officials in order to try to persuade them to solve the conflict. He wrote letters explaining the conflict in detail and arranged meetings with the authorities.

The situation in Dongyay involves a monk using his traditional role as a community leader to organize and advise people in the local community to engage in political action in order to protect the environment. Local resistance in the area had existed prior to Phra Prajak’s arrival, but the organization of villagers and protests against the authorities and business interests had increased under the leadership of the monk. The

motivation behind Phra Prajak's actions was his conviction that, as a Buddhist monk, he had a responsibility to help people that suffer. This would be achieved by helping the local community gain control of the land and conserve the forest. During the interviews that I conducted with him, he emphasized the fact that, if he had not helped the people, no-one would have helped them and that he had no choice but to stay and fight for the forest (Phra Prajak 2011).

The conflict in Dongyay received nationwide attention and members of various Thai NGOs came to the area to visit Phra Prajak. Members of the Union for Civil Liberty (UCL), a human rights advocacy organization, visited Phra Prajak in Dongyay. UCL is a Thai NGO working on issues regarding human rights in Thailand that focuses on protecting underprivileged groups in Thailand. It operates in all four regions of the country and consists of local activists, lawyers, teachers, villagers and monks. UCL has a history of helping villagers in land conflicts with the government, educating them about the law and about human rights. Thus, the local branch of UCL in Buriram, the Association of Peoples Rights and Freedom, became involved in the conflict that took place in the Dongyay area. Members of UCL, together with an environmental committee, conducted research on the Khor Jor Kor program. They brought students from the environmental club at Buriram University to Dongyai and set up a camp in the forest to survey the village wildlife and to support Phra Prajak. Members of various NGOs and activists also came to the Dongyay forest to visit Phra Prajak. Several foreign academics and activists also took interest in the conflict and visited the area (Niran 2010). A loose network of NGOs, villagers and activists came together to work towards a common goal. The conflict is about management of natural resources and Phra Prajak and the NGOs that supported him believed that resources should be used in a way that benefits the local community. Local farming practices generated little income for the farmers but it provides them with a stable livelihood. Commercial forestry on the other hand is a form of economic activity that generates more money than small-scale farming and contributes to the growth of the national economy. But although commercial forestry such as eucalyptus plantations benefits the national economy it has negative effects on the natural environment and the livelihood of the local population. Phra Prajak's heavily criticized

the authorities for prioritizing economic growth over human well-being and the environment.

The conflict that took place in Dongyay was not only between the local community and the authorities; there was also conflict between villagers regarding how the forest and land should be managed. Not all villagers were against the authorities' reforestation plans. Although a large portion of the people living in the area supported Phra Prajak, not everyone shared his ideas as to how the land should be managed. Phra Prajak wanted the local community to gain ownership of the land, to engage in organic agriculture and to preserve the forest. Although some of the villagers shared his vision, however, others wanted to use the land for commercial agriculture. Their objective was not to preserve the forest but to obtain ownership rights so that they could cultivate the land. The conflict in the area is quite complex since it is not only between the villagers and "outsiders", but also the local inhabitants within the village. Several people that I interviewed in Dongyay were negative towards Phra Prajak's involvement in the conflict. According to them, they were initially positive towards Phra Prajak's involvement but argued that, over time, he had become increasingly "extreme". Some people in the village thought that Phra Prajak's ideas regarding conservation and management of natural resources in Dongyay were unrealistic. This part of the population wanted to use the land to grow commercial crops and they were not specifically interested in conservation. The motivation behind Phra Prajak's decision to stay in the village also came into question, with some villagers believing that he was not actually concerned about the environment but had other underlying motives for taking up residence there. When looking at the conflict, it is important to note that not everyone in the village shared Phra Prajak's vision and ideas. Some villagers argued that it was good to protect the environment but at the same time, they had to consider their livelihood. Phra Prajak's ideas of environmental protection and sustainable management of resources, according to them, would not enable them to earn enough money to support their families.

It should be noted that not all people in the local community were negative towards the planting of eucalyptus in the area. Some villagers that I interviewed expressed a positive attitude towards the Khor Jor Kor program, which they considered to be a program intended to develop the region.

Forest and merit

Phra Prajak regarded Buddhism to be a religion that promotes environmental conservation. He viewed acts aimed at conserving the environment to be meritorious. His motivation for staying in Dongyay and getting involved in the conflict was that, as a monk, he had an obligation to do what was “right”. He believed that there was a connection between the environment and humans and that this connection legitimized his struggle to protect the environment. When he spoke to the villagers, he linked Buddhism to environmental protection. Merit-making, which is a central aspect of Buddhism in Thailand, was used to develop the villagers’ environmental ethic. Phra Prajak explained that people who protect the environment and conserve the forest accumulate merit and by planting trees they would receive good karma. He convinced the local people that, instead of providing the monks with food and money as a means of earning merit, they should perform acts that help protect the environment. According to his interpretation, the practice of tam-bun (merit-making) became closely related to environmental activism. All forms of work done to protect the environment in Dongyay were explained by Phra Prajak in terms of practicing dhamma. This dhamma practice would provide the practitioner with merit equaling that acquired through meditation or providing monks with alms. Work aimed at protecting the environment was according to this interpretation of Buddhism viewed as a form of spiritual practice. Phra Prajak’s interpretation of Buddhism is influenced by the teachings of Buddhadasa bhikkhu, who viewed work as integrating both social and spiritual activity. Buddhadasa regarded work conducted with a “freed-mind”, free of the attachment to ego, without the self-centered attitude of “I” and “mine”, to be dhamma practice. Work conducting with a non-self-centered attitude would

allow the individual to develop spiritually. Buddhadasa defines the integration of work and spiritual activity in the following manner:

“The word “working” [kan tham ngan] is Thai. If it were rendered in Pali, it would be *sammakammanto*, which translates as “having right work”, which is an essential component of the Noble Path’s set of practices for advancing towards the blessed state of nibbana” (Jackson 2003:173).

The definition of “right work” is work that is not dishonest or otherwise cause suffering to other living beings. In this interpretation “correct” work is regarded to be a form of spiritual practice which can help the individual’s path to enlightenment. The opposite of this would be work done with bad intentions, such as being motivated by greed or hatred. This type of work would accumulate negative karma. Phra Prajak explained to the villagers that people who destroyed the forest would receive bad karma. He argued that a livelihood that causes harm to other living beings is not consistent with the first Buddhist precept, to abstain from taking life. People that were engaged in these types of livelihood were described as being ruled by greed, hatred and delusion.

Meditation

Phra Prachak taught meditation to villagers and activists as a means to make them understand the “law of impermanence”. He stated that;” Meditation, the process of self-examination, teaches us the natural law of impermanence. It teaches us about the inter-relatedness of all things”. According to him, this realization would make people view the forest and nature in a different way. Through meditation, people could begin to understand the interconnectedness between people and nature and how the eco-system functions. Phra Prajak regarded the environment and humans to be inseparable entities, stating that “when we destroy or harm the forest, we are doing the same to ourselves” (Henning 2002:142). Phra Prajak argued that by practicing meditation the villagers would calm their mind and would reach an understanding of the importance of protecting the forest.

Phra Prajak organized treks through the Dongyay forest as a means of developing the participant's environmental ethic. On the treks, the participants would practice "walking meditation", which was meant to help them increase their knowledge of the forest and how it functions. During these forest walks, Phra Prajak instructed the villagers to be aware of their breathing. He explained to them that the carbon dioxide they were breathing out would be absorbed by the trees that will release oxygen. The purpose of the exercise was to show the interconnection between the people and the forest (Henning 2002:47-48). Phra Prajak's perception of the forest and his belief that one can learn about the forest by "wandering and meditating" in the forest is expressed in the following quote: "Tudong (wandering and meditating in the forest) teaches us the natural law of interdependence and the interrelatedness of all things. When we truly see and understand this in our hearts, we see the forest as more than a resource or something that needs to be protected for our benefit. The forest is life itself. It is us and we are it. When we destroy or harm the forest, we are doing the same to ourselves. Without the forests it will not be possible for us ever fully to understand our proper place in the world. We simply will not survive."

Dhamma walk

A woman named Susan Offrer described a weeklong trip throughout Dongyay forest that was organized by Phra Prajak and in which she participated. The group that would walk through the forest consisted of 30 people; besides Phra Prajak several monks and nuns participated, eight villagers from Dongyay and 13 participants from the International Conference of Engaged Buddhists took part in the walk.

Phra Prajak instructed the participants in walking meditation and advised them to try to clear their minds, focus on their breath and focus on their inner self. During the walk through the forest, Phra Prajak showed the participants the destruction that had taken place and explained his campaign to try to protect the forest. In this regard, Susan Offrer makes the following comment:

“Luang Phor used the forest, the trees, the leaves and rocks as objects of lessons in his frequent Dhamma talks. These were short teachings by analogy and implication. “I am a leaf,” he said. “We are all leaves. We share life needs and life processes. We become alive, grow, wither and die. We are dependent on each other in one interconnected system” (Henning 2002:101).

Phra Prajak led the group through the Dongyay forest, in which they walked several kilometers and witnessed how the spread of eucalyptus plantations had destroyed the forest. Throughout the walk, Phra Prajak taught meditation as a means of gaining an understanding of the forest and ecosystem. By spending time in the forest and observing the trees and the animals. Phra Prajak believed people would understand the importance of preserving the environment and develop an environmental ethic.

Raising environmental awareness

Phra Prajak tried to raise environmental awareness amongst the villagers of Dongyay by using meditation and complicated Buddhist teachings. The villagers had a limited knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, and Prajak’s teachings on quite complicated matters, such as interdependence and meditation, were at times beyond their grasp. Meditation and complicated Buddhist philosophy is generally something that is only studied by monks. Phra Prajak tried to develop the local communities’ understanding of Buddhism and the environment. This new understanding would influence the community’s management of resources. This would include environmentally friendly agricultural practices and conservation of the natural environment. During my interview with Phra Prajak, he expressed some frustration over the fact that a large portion of the people in the community did not understand his teachings. Phra Prajak explained that he had tried to educate the villagers about Buddhism and the environment but had not been able to teach them much. He experienced problems convincing them to conserve the forest and he argued that this was because they were “selfish and it was difficult to change their minds”. According to Phra Prajak, the villagers were too concerned with material things and lacked a genuine interest in conserving the environment. He tried to explain to them the importance of preserving the forest but many simply did not

understand him. Phra Prajak had spent a considerable amount of time practicing meditation and contemplating on the metaphysical aspects of Buddhism. Consequently, his understanding of Buddhism was, in many ways very different, from that of the villagers.

Phra Prajak tried to convince the villagers that they should practice subsistence farming and that they should not strive towards acquiring material wealth. From his perspective, as a Buddhist monk, this would be favorable for the local community since they would then preserve the environment as well as be living a “simple” life in harmony with nature. Phra Prajak’s vision of an ideal community, where people cooperate, live in harmony with nature and do not strive for accumulation of wealth share similarities with the type of community discussed by Buddhadasa bhikkhu. In this ideal society, Buddhism serves as a moral base that prevents people in the community from engaging in immoral activity.

During my interview with Phra Prajak, he emphasized that simply speaking about a topic was not enough to convince people. Thus, in order to get the communities’ attention, he used imagery and rituals as a means to get people involved in environmental conservation. One example of this is the tree ordination. Through the ordination of trees, Buddhism and environmental conservation are symbolically interconnected and a spiritual bond between the community and the forest is established. This connection would increase the villagers’ readiness to conserve the forest. Religious ceremonies and symbolism were frequently used by Phra Prajak in order to develop concern for the environment amongst the local people. Phra Prajak argued that if people saw a Buddha image or something they could link to their beliefs, or if they participated in ceremonies or ritual, they would be more likely to follow up on their commitment to conserve the forest (Phra Prajak 2011)

Confrontation

Phra Prajak gave a number of public speeches in which he accused influential politicians and businessmen of destroying the forests and the livelihood of the villagers (Darlington 2005:11). His opposition to the authorities and military programs made him highly unpopular amongst regional power holders. During his time of activism, a number of villagers were murdered and Phra Prajak received several threats. Both he and Kham Butsii lived under constant threat to their lives. Kham Butsii had previously been forced to go into hiding after receiving death threats, and it is believed that if Phra Prajak hadn't been a monk, he would have "disappeared" a long time ago (Taylor 1993:10). Phra Prajak was constantly harassed by the local authorities and on one occasion, someone fired a machinegun into the monastery where he was residing. Threats came from the army and the police, as well as from goons hired by the eucalyptus company (Tyler, J. 1993:6). As the conflict became increasingly violent, people within the community and outsiders became reluctant to actively support Phra Prajak. It became obvious to them that if they sided with the monk, they risked being imprisoned or even murdered.

The police filed several charges against Phra Prajak, ranging from destroying the forest to assaulting police officers. Phra Prajak was arrested for the first time during a protest in 1990 and several arrests would follow. In September 1991, the army moved into Dongyay, took down the village houses, forced the 'settlers' out of the forest, and ploughed over their fields. Nevertheless, the villagers refused to move to the resettlement site; instead, they set up a camp at a nearby temple. Their camp was attacked by police and loggers and bombs and grenades were thrown around the wat (Pasuk, Baker 2002:84). The villagers spent several months living in tents until a couple of hundred of them defied the authorities and moved back to the area where they used to live. The attacks on the villagers' camp ended with the arrest of a number of villagers and Phra Prajak himself.

In 1991, he was arrested twice; the first time he was accused of "encroaching on forest land" and the second time he participated in a large protest attended by 400 villagers supporting a neighboring village that the army had ordered to move. The protest

ended with Phra Prajak and a number of protestors being beaten and arrested by the police. In 1992, he received two jail sentences due to his participation in demonstrations in Dongyay, both of which were eventually suspended. In 1993, he was once again arrested and sentenced to six months in jail for “encroachment on the forest”, though these sentences were also suspended (Sulak 1999:207).

Due to the status of monks in Thai society, it is very rare for a monk to be arrested by the police. In this case, Phra Prajak was both arrested and beaten by the police. This is something that is highly uncommon and it’s also one of the reasons that the conflict in Dongyay received so much attention. During this whole time of turmoil, Phra Prajak did not receive official support from the Sangha. Instead the support came from civil society and advocates of human rights in Thailand (Darlington 2005:11). The authorities tried various tactics to discredit Phra Prajak and his struggle; the media, which was controlled by the military, called him a “Russian monk” and a “communist” and he was generally portrayed as a renegade monk trying to instigate a peasant uprising (Taylor 1993:10). These tactics of defamation used by the authorities can be seen as attempts to legitimize their usage of violence against a monk. If they managed to portray him as a communist or “fake” monk, their violent actions towards him might not be considered unjust.

By 1992, rallies and petitions against the Khor Jor Kor program were held throughout Isarn. In June, 4500 landless farmers from different northeastern provinces met in the regional capital of Khon Kaen and threatened to march to Bangkok if the Khor Jor Kor were not revoked. The protests startled the government, which began negotiations with the protestors to prevent them from marching on the capital. A month later the Khor Jor Kor program was suspended (Pasuk, Baker 2002:85).

Bangkok Post journalist Sanitsuda Ekachai commented afterwards that “the...defiance of the Nong yay [a village in the area] villagers against this Khor Jor Kor scheme has brought many hidden issues out in the open. It has shown that the bureaucracy is still the main of the military to suppress democracy. It has also highlighted the danger of environmental destruction under military dictatorship (Ekachai 1992).”

Due to public protests in 1992, the military government had been forced to resign and allow democratic elections to be held. With the end of military rule and the suspension of the Khor Jor Kor program, Phra Prajak hoped the situation in Dongyay would improve. The conflict in the area had calmed down, that is until 1994 when Phra Prajak once again was arrested by the police accused of illegal logging. According to the authorities, Phra Prajak had cut down a tree in the forest conservation area and used the timber to build a sala in the forest. Phra Prajak argued that the tree that he used to build the sala was a dead tree that he had been given permission to cut down. When publishing the story in the newspapers, journalists used old images of Phra Prajak taken at a logging camp, combined with the story this made it seem as if the monk were engaged in logging activities. While I was conducting interviews in the village, opinions of what had really happened differed. Some villagers agreed with the authorities' story, claiming that Phra Prajak had actually been cutting down trees in order to construct the sala, while others argued that this was just another one of the authorities' tricks to try to discredit the monk.

In the mid-1990's, Phra Prajak eventually decided to disrobe and leave the monkhood. According to Sulak Sivaraksa, there were two events which led up to his decision. The first was Phra Prajak's decision to participate in the demonstration against the Pak Moon Dam. He was active during the protests and spoke to the crowd.

Construction of the Pak Moon Dam in Ubonrachathani, which had started in the 1990s, and was designed to produce 136 megawatts of electricity for the northeastern province when completed. The construction of the dam would have severe effects on life in the river. In that 3950 families that depended on fish from the river were threatened with the loss of their livelihood. A large number of local people also lost their homes due to the construction of the dam. Protests against the Pak Moon Dam quickly escalated and ended in violent confrontations (Siriyausak 2008:2). Similar to the Khor Jor Kor program, the Pak Moon Dam was a case of authorities implementing large-scale projects without proper consideration for the environment or the effect it would have on the local population. The other event mentioned by Sivaraksa was Phra Prajak's decision to travel to Japan with another "conservation and environmentalist" monk and speak at Japanese

universities about environmental problems. According to Sulak Sivaraksa, the authorities' pressure on Phra Prajak increased immensely after these two events. The pressure was ultimately too much and Phra Prajak decided to disrobe. His monastery in the forest was set to be destroyed and the monks and villagers in the area where eventually too scared to say anything if loggers entered the forest (Sulak 1999:2006-207).

According to Sulak Sivaraksa, it was the authorities' never-ending prosecutions and accusations against Phra Prajak that finally broke him down and forced him into making the decision to disrobe. Sulak argues that Phra Prajak's long period in the monkhood practicing meditation in the forest had made him "almost entirely" unsuitable to deal with the kind of political and legal issues he was exposed to (Sulak 1999:207).

Aftermath

Phra Prajak re-ordained a couple of years after leaving the monkhood. He is currently residing at a temple in Nongkai Province and is still engaged in environmental issues in Thailand. When I met him to conduct an interview for this study, he was staying temporarily at a forest monastery in Sakaew province at which several monks that had worked with Phra Prajak in Buriram province were living. Phra Prajak talked about the current political situation in Thailand and explained that he thought that things had improved significantly since the incidents in Dongyay forest. He had received funding from the government to continue his conservation work and felt that the current government, in contrast to its predecessors, actually supported his work. The transition from dictatorship to more democratic forms of government that took place in the mid-nineties has provided the public with greater opportunities to protest against social injustice. Nevertheless, as Pasuk Phongpaichit points out, democratization has in some cases failed to provide a formal channel for the resolution of grievances because parliament and local government were still often dominated by business interests which often formed part of the threat (Pasuk 2002:408).

Conclusion

Phra Prajak saw a clear connection between the forest and human beings. He argued that an understanding of this connection could be developed through meditative practice in that by practicing meditation and spending time in the forest, people would gain an understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. When Phra Prajak came across the conflict in the Dongyay forest, he regarded it to be his duty as a monk to stay and protect the people and the forest from what he perceived as unjust treatment follows the rationale of engaged Buddhists, who argue that one should face suffering and try to reduce it. By siding with the villagers in their struggle against the centralized state's economic policies, Phra Prajak added a moral factor to their cause. The conflict in the Dongyay forest reserve raises interesting questions regarding how natural resources in a region should be managed. Should resources be managed by the local community in a way that benefits them, or should resources be managed by the state? Who has the right to land? Is it the centralized government or the local communities who actually live on the land? Through his struggle Phra Prajak tried to add a moral element to the debate, arguing that policies based on economic profit that threaten to harm local ecosystems are wrong and that the local community should have power over the resources where they live. His vision was to establish a community that practiced subsistence farming and lived in harmony with the environment. This sustainable usage of natural resources was, in the eyes of Phra Prajak, more compatible with Buddhism than the commercial agricultural practices promoted by the government.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Comparative Discussion

This chapter begins with a discussion on the various differences and similarities between the three cases discussed in the study.

Structure/Organization

Huq Muang Nan Foundation, which was discussed in the third chapter, is a NGO that consists of a network of groups, ranging from monk groups, to activists, academics, professionals and villagers. The foundation consists of both religious and secular groups working together in a loosely structured network. In comparison, the Asoke group is a religious group that, in contrast to Huq Muang Nan Foundation consists exclusively of devoted Buddhists. Another major difference is that the Asoke members share a common lifestyle and in many cases live together in their own communities and that their interpretation of Buddhism functions as a guideline for social life. The Huq Muang Nan Foundation consists of people from various stands of life, who might not share a common worldview or beliefs regarding religion and politics. What brings people associated with the Huq Muang Nan Foundation together is not their belief in Buddhism but a common concern for the well-being of people and the environment in Nan province.

In terms of organization and structure, the case of Phra Prajak clearly stands out from the other two cases. Phra Prajak functioned as a leader of what can be defined as an informal network of people in the Dongyay forest. There was never any formal organization similar to that of Huq Muang Nan Foundation or the Asoke group; instead, a number of people with common beliefs temporarily joined forces. The “network” operating in Buriram, consisted of NGO staff, activists, monks and local villagers that shared common ideas regarding community rights and management of natural resources. Similarities with the Huq Muang Nan case could possibly be that Phra Prajak just as Phrakru Pitak and the other monks of Huq Muang Nan worked closely with academics

and attracted the attention of groups working on issues related to civil society whereby the Asoke group mostly works with people within their own community.

Locality

The particular forms of environmental work the different groups are involved in differ greatly. One way of looking at the work conducted by the monks is in terms of locality.

When examining the cases of the Huq Muang Nan Foundation and Phra Prajak one can see that the cases involve local struggles over management of land and natural resources. Both the problems they are facing as well as their solutions can be seen as local. The strategies developed by Huq Muang Nan, are for example based on the culture and traditional management of resources that has existed in the region in the past. Another example of the foundation using local solutions is their attempts to use the *community culture* discourse as a means of bringing forth social harmony and sustainable development in the province. Huq Muang Nan foundation also works exclusively in Nan province, although the Foundation occasionally cooperates with groups outside of Nan occasionally the focus of their activity is Nan province. Phra Prajak on the other hand have worked on environmental issues in various areas of Thailand, but the network formed in the Dongyay forest and the strategies that they used to deal with regional problems were mainly local. The Asoke group is not as localized as Huq Muang Nan Foundation or the struggle of Phra Prajak. They are operating on a national level with centers all over Thailand and their environmental work is not focused on a particular issue or conflict. While Phra Prajak and the monks of Huq Muang Nan Foundation are mainly addressing local problems such as the expansion of eucalyptus plantations or deforestation, the Asoke group is addressing environmental issues on a more national level. They are aiming direct critic towards the mainstream economic system which they identify as the cause of the existing environmental problems in Thailand. Another main difference between the Asoke group and the two other cases is that they are originally an urban movement that was founded in opposition to mainstream Thai Buddhism and not

as an environmental movement. The environmentalist aspect of the group was developed at a later stage.

Who are they addressing?

Who are the monks addressing, what group of people is primarily involved with the monks? The monks of the Huq Muang Nan Foundation¹ and Phra Prajak mainly address villagers/farmers in a specific region. These villagers are in most cases not members of the foundation or network. The Huq Muang Nan Foundation for example, works to promote organic agricultural practices amongst farmers in Nan and they also support farmers in various ways by organizing projects aimed at “improving” communal life. Phra Prajak also tried to convince or influence the local population to manage resources in a specific manner. The Asoke group on the other hand, is not working to actively influence people living outside of their communities; instead they operate their own communities in an environmentally sustainable manner and thereby function as an example for the outside world. Members of the Asoke group are in most cases not farmers; they have chosen to engage in farming while joining the community. A study conducted by Marja-Lena Heikkila-Horn in 1997 showed that the majority of the people associated with the Pathom Asoke center were “predominantly educated urbanites” (Heikkila-Horn 1997:180). People associated with the Asoke group are in most cases willing to make the required “sacrifices” that need to be made in order to establish an environmentally sustainable community. I would argue that one of the biggest challenges in promoting sustainable agriculture and environmental conservation in both Nan and Buriram province is convincing people to change their attitudes and actions towards the environment. This problem does not exist within the Asoke communities since all members have already agreed to live their life according to specific principles that follows an environmental ethic.

¹ Other groups in the Foundation is involved in various forms of work in the province but the focus of the monks is the promotion of sustainable management of natural resources

Religious practice: Monk-lay distinctions

In the first chapter of my study I introduced the theory of Robert N. Bellah. Bellah argued that as traditional societies are confronted by the demands of modernity, they often chose between reformist and neo-traditionalist alternatives. All of the monks examined in this study can be seen as reformers. Their reformism includes incorporating Buddhism with an environmental ethic, making religion serve as a base for economic decision-making and placing the monk in a “political” role.

The monks/groups discussed in this study all show great concern over the effects of societal change. This social change, whether it is changes in the economic system or agricultural methods is a consequence of the modernization process. The changes taking place in contemporary Thailand are perceived as having an overall negative effect on society, and these monks/groups have therefore in a sense “constructed” a new form of Buddhism aimed at bringing about a “desired” social change. All the monks discussed in this study regard Buddhism to be a religion that should influence the secular spheres of society. In a sense their reform, “abolishes” or at least minimizes the monk-lay distinction or the separation between what has traditionally been associated with the secular and religious spheres. It is important to note that the definition of “religion” and “secular” are fluid and in a sense problematic. O’Leary defines the “religious” and “secular” in the following manner, “religion is widely held to be a matter of belief, to have something to do with the supernatural or otherworldly, to be generally institutionalized, and to be a primarily personal affair. Just so, secularism is generally conceived of at least as the exclusion of religious institutions from the business of government” (O’Leary 2010). My usage of the terms is mainly concerned with religious practices that are associated with monks and the secular sphere associated with laypeople. The distinction between the monks and the laity can be regarded as being crossed, since monks actively participate in matters that traditionally have been viewed as secular, and since laypeople engage in practices that traditionally have been associated with monks. Examples of this are the monk’s increasing involvement in political and economic

matters and the laypeople's study of Buddhist doctrine and meditative practice, which traditionally have been associated with monks.

The "abolishing" of the monk-lay distinction can most clearly be seen in the case of the Asoke group; where we have laypeople living a life very similar to that of monks and who actively strive towards spiritual development, and possible enlightenment. The Asoke followers strictly uphold the Buddhist precepts and similar to monks, living in monasteries, their life is regulated by rules. The Huq Muang Nan and Phra Prajak cases are different from the Asoke case. Since, in these two cases, it is not so much the laity that cross over to the religious spheres but instead the monks that has gotten increasingly engaged in "secular" matters.

Phra Prajak, for example functioned not only as a religious leader, but also as a "political" leader that actively worked to organize the people; gave speeches and in a sense also challenged the local authorities. Phra Prajak tried to use Buddhism as a mean to develop the local people's awareness of the environment and the importance of preserving it. He taught the villagers Buddhist doctrine such as interdependent origination and he also educated them on meditation techniques. Buddhist doctrine and meditation have traditionally mainly been of concern for monks, but here we have a situation where the monk is using these teachings in order to develop "awareness" amongst people. Phra Prajak also tried to teach the local people to practice Buddhism in their everyday life. He argued that all forms of work done with the "right" intention were considered to be dhamma-work and therefore provided the practitioner with good merit.

The monks do not see their Buddhist practice or teaching as something new, instead they argue that Buddhism is a religion that justify social action and that they simply carry on the work of the Buddha. Examples of this line of thinking are of course, the perceived connection between Buddhism and environmental action. Phra Prajak stated that he had a "responsibility" as a monk to take action against environmental destruction in the Dongyay forest. Phrakhru Pitak and Phra Somkit expressed similar ideas regarding their involvement in environmental work in the Nan province. According to them, the Buddha had always been concerned of the environment and it is therefore

natural that they as monks take action to protect the environment. Their choice to actively engage in matters concerning the welfare of the community corresponds to the rationale of the “engaged” Buddhist movement who actively work to reduce social suffering. In the cases discussed in the study, particular forms of economic practice are identified as causing hardship for people within the community. This include, commercial export-oriented agriculture as well as consumerism, the monks are therefore working to change these economic practices. Phrakhru Pitak and the other monks associated with the Huq Muang Nan Foundation have all acquired specialized knowledge on different agricultural systems and educate the local people on the benefits of particular forms of agriculture. A practical example of this is Phra Somkit’s temple’s function as a model for integrated farming. Similarly, the Asoke group also clearly links the temple with economic activity, all of their centers strive to be self-reliant and the production of food and commodities that take place in their community all follow their perception of the Buddhist concept of right livelihood.

The Past and the present, Buddhadasa’s ideas on Dhammic Socialism

The monks discussed in this study all share a common belief that certain aspects of the modernization and development process have had negative effects on Thai society. Encountering various problems caused by rapid social change, the monks are trying to shape society-in economic and political spheres-in a manner that corresponds to their interpretation of Buddhism. The late Buddhadasa bikkhu, discussed the realization of an ideal Buddhist society in his writings on dhammic socialism. In these writings Buddhadasa frequently made comparisons between the societies of the past and the society of the present. He argued that in the past, people lived in harmony with nature. During these times the usage of natural resources was done in a manner that sustained life and the people did not consume or collect more than they needed. According to Buddhadasa, social problems began “when human intelligence was applied to methods of accumulating wealth, power, and resources in order to take advantage of each other”. Social harmony in the past is explained to have existed because people had “not begun to

hoard resources” (Buddhadasa 1986:86). The societies of the past were regarded to be guided by Buddhist values and Buddhadasa writes that the laymen and women in the past lived a moderate life and contributed their excess to the benefit of society. The introduction of new technology and ideas (used to “hoard resources”) is not only associated with environmental degradation but also with the decline of morality. This is expressed in Buddhadasa’s depiction of the past and present states of society as well as his description of the difference between people in the rural areas, who are described as still living according to the “traditional ways” and people living in the “modern” urban areas. Inhabitants of urban areas are described as being wealthy but still unwilling to share their riches. In contrast, the villagers are explained to be willing to share with others, despite their poverty. This is, according to Buddhadasa, because they have not forgotten their tradition. The people in the city are viewed as being influenced by selfish desires associated with modernization, while the rural people still follow the “traditional” Buddhist ways. Buddhadasa argued that members of a Buddhist community are “taught and required to consume no more than their share of material goods and that excessive consumption is wrong and demeritorious”. These kinds of societies existed in the past, before people started hoarding resources (Buddhadasa 1986:57). Buddhadasa associates Buddhism with sharing resources and living modestly.

I would argue that some of Buddhadasa’s ideas regarding dhammic socialism and the origin of social problems have influenced the monks discussed in this study. I believe that the influence can mainly be seen in ideals regarding communal and social structures which according to the discourse on dhammic socialism should be based on cooperation and the idea of the common good, another major influence is the idea that morality, stemming from Buddhism should serve as a guideline for economic and political activity. Buddhadasa’s somewhat “idealized” vision of the past can be seen in the ideology of the monks discussed in this study. It can be seen most clearly in the case of Santi Asoke, whom completely rejects “modern” society by creating their own communities shaped after the “traditional village”. In these communities people have strong social bonds, live in dependence on one another and manage resources cooperatively. Consumption is mainly limited to sustaining life and everyday activity is guided by Buddhist principles.

Similarly, the monks of the Huq Muang Nan Foundation regard “traditional” culture and economic practices as the solution to modern problems. The Huq Muang Nan foundation do not advocate a separation from society as in the case of the Asoke group, instead they promote a return to environmental friendly agricultural practices and the strengthening of local culture and values. Cooperative ownership and management of resources is regarded as a means to solve the current ecological crisis. Phrakhru Pitak identified foreign or outside influence as one of the roots of the local problems in Nan province. It is believed that the changes in the political and socio-economic spheres have changed individuals and ultimately transformed the world. The governments focus on economic growth as a measurement on development is regarded to be too narrow and an insufficient indicator of social welfare and “happiness”. It should be noted that Buddhadasa is not the only Buddhist monk that have discussed similar ideas, but since Buddhadasa is regarded as one of the main influences of the engaged Buddhist movement and each of the monks in this study have stated that they have been influenced by his teachings I believe that certain aspects of their ideology and belief can be traced back to Buddhadasa’s teachings.

Buddhist environmentalism, an anti-systemic movement?

In the literature review section of the first chapter of this study I briefly introduced the world-system theory. In the article *Buddhist economics and the Asoke community*, Suwida Sangsehanat argues that the Asoke group can be regarded as an anti-systemic movement and she presents facts that support this conclusion. But can Buddhist environmentalism represented by the other two cases discussed in this study also be viewed as a form of antisystemic protest?

The World system theory was developed by Immanuel Wallerstein and it examines relations between societies and the subsequent changes that occur in them. Different nations are viewed as functioning and existing together as a system. In the world-system, nations influence each other and it is above all the strongest and most

dominant countries that will influence the weaker nations. According to the world-system theory, today's global society began to evolve in Western Europe during the second half of the 15th century. It expanded through conquest, until it engulfed the entire earth. The system is capitalistic and capital accumulation is its ultimate goal. Within this system there is an unequal system of capitalists and producers, as well as centers and peripheries. At the center are the most powerful states, these “core-states”, export exploitation, have a relatively light taxation, have a free, well-paid labour force; and constitute a large consumer market. In the periphery states, labour is forced, this means that the occupational choice is limited and the worker is provided with limited protection. According to the theory, all nations are incorporated in a global capitalist economy dominated by the “core-states”. These states have a major influence on the economy and culture of the states in the periphery.

Rebellion or protest against the culture of capitalism and the expansion of the capitalist world system is referred to as anti-systemic protest. These protests often come from groups that are economically marginalized or who have experienced hardship as a consequence of capitalist expansion. The antisystemic movements does not have to be associated with a particular political ideology, instead antisystemic movements have emerged on both the right and left sides of the political spectrum. The basis of the participation is a common objective, namely the struggle against “social ills” caused by economic policies.

Richard H. Robbins points out that the antisystemic protest is often not aimed directly at the capitalist system but towards conditions that are linked to the “globalization” of the capitalist economy and the resulting transformations in the social and economic sphere (Robbins 2005:335). Examples of this kind of protest are worker movements, feminist movements and environmental movements. The environmental movements started in the 1960s, many activists in these movements linked environmental destruction to “an ideology associated with capitalism”. This “ideology” would include consumerism, commoditization and the focus on economic growth.

Sangsehanat discussed the Asoke group as an antisystemic movement in terms of them advocating a so-called *new traditional economy*. Within this system, economic decision-making is embedded within a socio-cultural framework so that a majority of decisions are determined by rules or traditions derived from that framework. Rosser, writes, “Such an economic system simultaneously seeks to have economic decision making embedded within a traditional socio-cultural framework, most frequently one associated with a traditional religion, while at the same time seeking to use modern technology and to be integrated into the modern world economy to some degree” (Rosser 1999).

Rosser states that within the *new traditional economic* movement’s concept of “right” economic activity “there is a harking back to a mythic past of the old traditional economy and the early period of the religion when all were supposedly righteous. This is to be revived within a modern context in which technology will not be alienating but will enforce the harmony of the family and the group in a supposedly humane yet efficient socio-economic order determined by the rules and values of the traditional religion or culture” (Rosser 1999).

These characteristics can be found amongst the monks discussed in this study. First of all, their activity is a reaction towards recent social change. The monks all identify changes in economic activity as the main reason behind environmental degradation. As a consequence of Thailand’s incorporation into the world-economy, the agricultural sector has been heavily commercialized and food has turned into a commodity which can be produced, bought and sold for profit. This has affected the activity of local farmers who have increasingly switched from subsistent farming to production aimed mainly for the market. The increasing usage of chemical fertilizer and pesticide and the expansion of agricultural land have had negative effects on the environment. As a solution to the existing problems, alternative management of resources influenced by Buddhist values such as non-self and compassion is promoted.

The monks discussed in this study advocate a return to the “traditional” modes of production. This includes subsistence farming, which was practiced by Thai farmers prior

to the expansion of capitalism into the rural areas. Along with a return to economic practices of the past, the monks also strive to preserve and promote other positive qualities of the “traditional” village community. In this community people had a deep religious faith, they managed resources in a sustainable manner and the bonds between family and neighbours were strong. Buddhist environmentalists have similarities with so-called antisystemic movements mainly because they reject central aspects of capitalist culture. This include consumerism, materialism, growth-oriented economic policies and to a certain extent industrial production aimed at maximizing output. The general objection against capitalist culture is the inherent belief that ownership and consumption of goods and services is synonymous with happiness. It should be noted that it is only the Asoke group that completely reject capitalism, the other monks discussed in this study are mainly critical of certain aspects of capitalist modes of production and expansion. They advocate a change in economic structures; this would consist of management of resources in a manner that benefits the whole community rather than being focused on profit.

Buddhadasa bikkhu, who to various degrees have influenced the monks, expressed clear anti-capitalist sentiments. He identified capitalism as a system that promotes selfishness and egoistic drives and does therefore not correspond with Buddhism. Buddhadasa argued that a solution to contemporary problems is a return to the “old way” of life, guided by Buddhist principles.

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Conclusion

The objective of this study was, firstly to examine how monks use Buddhism to promote environmental awareness and how they interact with the local community and the authorities, and secondly, to identify the monk's particular vision and goals, and what kind of strategies they use to achieve these goals.

I began this study by asking three questions.

1. In what way is Buddhism used to promote environmental awareness and sustainable development?
2. What are the visions, goals and the strategies of the monks and movements that are active in environmental work?
3. What is the governments and business interests' response to the work conducted by these monks/organizations?

In order to answer the first question I think it is necessary to understand the belief system of the monks discussed in the study. I wanted to gain an understanding of the monk's particular view on Buddhism and how they see the religion as related to environmental ethics. To do this I conducted interviews with monks and laymen associated with the monks, attended sermons and read publications. I also conducted a historical study on each of the monks in order to identify specific influences that might have shaped their perception of the Buddhist teachings. The collected data was then compared to findings acquired through research on Buddhist environmentalism. My findings show that the monks share common beliefs regarding Buddhism and its connection to an environmental ethic and that their belief-system related to environmental issues corresponds to the main ideas found in the discourse of Buddhist environmentalism.

The second question that I raised was related to the vision, goals and the strategies used by the monks to "achieve" their particular agenda or vision. To answer this question I first analyzed the stated objectives and goals of the monks and then compared it to the

actual work that they had done, both in the past and in the present. My findings show that all cases involve engagement at the grass-root level and that their engagement and activities vary depending on resources and social context. My findings also indicate that the vision of the monks corresponds to some of the ideas found in Buddhadasa bikkhus theory on dhammic socialism and that the monks are to different extents trying to put various aspects of this theory into practice. I also argue that the Buddhist environmentalist “movement” can be regarded as an anti-systemic movement in the sense that it rejects central aspects of capitalist culture and that the monks promote economic policies that can be regarded as anti-capitalist.

The third question that I raised was about the authorities and business interest response to the work conducted by the monks and their associates. To answer this question I examined the relationship between the monks and the authorities and I tried to identify the nature of their relationship. I then examined the monk’s relations and connections to economic interests in their community. I specifically looked for aspects of their work or ideology that could be regarded in a negative manner by either the authorities or the business interests.

The answers to the questions that I raised are given in the following section.

Huq Muang Nan Foundation

The monks of Huq Muang Nan “use” Buddhism to promote environmentalism by linking the teaching of the Buddha to environmental concern. This is done through rituals such as tree ordinations and by incorporating environmental issues into dhamma talks. The monk’s view Buddhism as a religion that promotes an environmental ethic; this is based mainly on episodes of the Buddha’s life that involves forests and the natural environment and the view of the forest as an ideal place for spiritual development.

The vision of the monks associated with the Huq Muang Nan Foundation is to create a society where people work together for a common good and use natural resources in a sustainable manner. In this ideal society local tradition and culture is revered and Buddhism has a central place in community life. The monks identify changes

in agricultural practices as one of the main causes of environmental degradation in the province. A large portion of the work conducted by the foundation is therefore aimed at promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Part of this includes raising an awareness of the long-term consequences of monoculture farming and the usage of chemical pesticide and fertilizer.

The Huq Muang Nan foundation employs various strategies to accomplish their goals. The monks are part of a network that consists of a variety of groups operating on different levels of society. Strengthening the bonds between people from different segments of society is regarded as an essential part of the work conducted by the foundation. The monks use their position as community leaders and highly respected members of society to pull these different factions together and encourage them to work towards a common good.

Part of their environmental work consists of the monks becoming increasingly involved in civic affairs. This includes functioning as “teachers” on matters such as organic agriculture and environmental conservation. The activities of the monks are not limited to their specific temple or community, instead they travel frequently around the province to meet people, give speeches and lectures and establish relationships with community leaders. As respected leaders of the community, the monks have the ability to influence the local people’s perception of the environment and thus alter their usage of natural resources. The organic farm located on the temple grounds of Wat Boong Kam is another example of how the monks in the foundation are working to encourage people to change their agricultural practices. The farm functions as a practical example of how organic farming can be applied and by placing the farm on temple ground, managed by monks, a link between Buddhism and a particular form of economic activity is established.

When studying the environmental work conducted by the monks of Huq Muang Nan Foundation one finds that it has many similarities to work conducted by secular environmental organizations. There are clear similarities but the difference is that the

monks are religious leaders and that they interpret environmental issues from a religious perspective.

Regarding the Foundations relationship with the government I found that they have a good relationship with the local government and they frequently work together on projects in the region. The project influenced by the Sufficiency Economy of His Majesty the King that was presented in this study is an example of this. But, although the foundation receives funding from the government and collaborates with them on various projects respondents still expressed an opinion that the authorities did not really support them as much as they could.

The relationship with business interests operating in Nan province is not as good. The main reason for this is most likely that the economic practices promoted by the Huq Muang Nan Foundation are not economically profitable. Huq Muang Nan Foundation and business interests operating in the province have in many cases very different views on how resources in the region should be used. While the business interests, advocate a usage of resources in a manner that provides maximum profit, the Huq Muang Nan foundation priorities community welfare above profit. Economists might argue that the expansion of cash-crops and monocultures will develop the region since it ensures profit and increases wealth, but Huq Muang Nan insists that “capitalist” agriculture is one of the main sources of environmental and social disharmony. They promote agricultural practices that provide the farmers with a stable livelihood but not necessarily with large cash-incomes. A central aspect of the work conducted by the organization is trying to convince farmers to not only base their economic decision-making on financial gain but also consider the long-term effects of their actions.

Santi Asoke

The first question I raised in this study was how Buddhism is used to promote environmental awareness and sustainable development. When discussing the Asoke group it is significant to note that they represent a “new” form of Buddhism and that they

operate completely outside of the Sangha hierarchy. The Asoke followers believe that their interpretation of Buddhism is a return to the “true” teachings of the Buddha. Buddhism practiced by the Asoke group is a form of applied Buddhism that serves as a guideline for every aspect of life within their community. The Asoke members that are living within these communities have dedicated their life to follow the teachings of the Buddha, and similar to monks residing in monasteries, they follow strict rules. In their interpretation of Buddhism there is a clear link between Buddhism and environmental awareness and the group’s environmental ethic derives mainly from Buddhist values such as loving kindness, compassion and non-self.

Samana Bodhirak argued that a religious institution should help society in solving its problems and that mainstream Buddhist institutions in Thailand have failed in doing this. He therefore regarded it to be his duty to advocate a return to the “true” teachings of the Buddha, which according to him is more focused on practice than theory. The aim of the community is to help people to decrease their selfishness, attachment and cravings and thereby develop spiritually. This is achieved by having a modest lifestyle, consuming little and conducting work in a manner that is beneficial for society. Strategies used by the Asoke group while establishing their communities is to take full control over the community’s production of food and consumer goods.

Economic activity within the Asoke community is mainly focused on satisfying basic needs and production is directly linked to consumption. Thereby, usage of resources is strictly limited. Modesty and simplicity is the guidelines for life in the community, these values are expressed in the plain clothing worn by the Asoke followers and the limitation on private ownership within the community. Communal ownership of property is regarded as another means to reduce attachment and greed.

To actively work to preserve the environment is regarded to be an act of compassion, which accumulates merit. According to this view engaging in organic farming, having a vegan diet and using a limited amount of resources leads to spiritual development. Organic farming is regarded as linked to Buddhism since it is an economic activity that sustains life in a manner that has a minimal impact on the natural

environment. Being a farmer is therefore a highly valued profession by the Asoke group. The Asoke groups' lifestyle and economic activity is based primarily on a moral line of thinking regarding the relationship to the outside world. This particular morality is in turn rooted in Buddhist values. To act in a manner consistent with this morality is believed to generate good karma. According to this logic, environmental work can be considered as a means to develop spiritually.

It can be argued that all the monks discussed in this study have advocated a sustainable usage of natural resources. When it comes to achieving this, the Asoke group is by far the most successful. There may be many reasons behind their success, but I would argue that the main reason is the fact that the members of the Asoke group have all agreed to make the specific sacrifices that are required in order to establish an environmentally sustainable community. They have voluntarily chosen to adapt to a lifestyle which is characterized by an environmental ethic.

Since the Asoke group has founded their own communities separated from mainstream society they are not involved in conflicts with business interests or the government regarding management of resources or land rights. The authorities have supported the Asoke groups' environmental activity in the past and their organic farming practices and environmentally sustainable production of consumer goods is generally viewed in a positive manner.

Phra Prajak

Regarding the case of Phra Prajak, it is important to point out that he is a monk from the forest monk tradition. This is a tradition that emphasizes meditation and uses wilderness and forests as training grounds for spiritual practice. Phra Prajak's environmental ethic can be seen as developed through his meditative practice in natural surroundings. The reverence for nature comes mainly from the belief that forests serve as an ideal place for spiritual development, as well as Phra Prajak's view on interdependence between all forms of life. The doctrine of interdependent origination was

discussed in the second chapter of this study, in the chapter different interpretations of the doctrine was presented. Phra Prajak interpreted the doctrine in a manner that emphasizes the interconnection between humans and the natural environment.

The motivation behind Phra Prajak's involvement in the conflict in the Dongyay forest reserve was to help the local people and to protect the forest. He argued that resources in the region must be managed in a manner that benefits the local community. The idea of wholesome and unwholesome actions is of importance to understand Phra Prajak's involvement in the conflict. His resistance against government policies in the region is based on the belief that they were motivated by greed, and would cause suffering to the local people. He advocated a usage of resources that would not cause suffering and would contribute to spiritual development. Phra Prajak regarded acts aimed at conserving the environment to be meritorious, a sustainable management of forests and land in the region would therefore be karmically fruitful for the community.

Phra Prajak taught meditation and Buddhist doctrine to the local people in order to develop their environmental awareness; he also used rituals as a means to enhance the spiritual connection between the community and the forest. The local people practiced a form of "popular Buddhism", which is very different from the Buddhism of the forest monk tradition; they had therefore difficulties in grasping Phra Prajak's teachings. Meditation was taught as a means to help people gain an understanding of themselves and their interconnection to the environment. Traditionally meditation has mostly been practiced by monks, and it is only in recent years that laypeople have increasingly started to practice meditation training. This might be a factor that contributed to the difficulties Phra Prajak experienced when he taught the local people about Buddhism and environmental issues.

Phra Prajak was actively engaged in political matters in the region. He functioned as a leader and educator; he gave speeches and organized the local community. Out of the cases discussed in this study, the case of Phra Prajak and the conflict in the Dongyay forest is by far the most serious. This conflict involved direct confrontation between the local population and the authorities, which led to the death of protestors and arrests of

villagers. The central issue in the dispute is the question regarding rights to land and resources. The authority used the legal system to claim ownership over land in the region, the local population in cooperation with Phra Prajak and NGOs questioned this notion. They argued that the local population should have the right to land, and be able to manage natural resources. From a strictly economic perspective the change from small-scale farming to industrial eucalyptus plantations might seem logical, since it is more profitable, but the monks do not value economic activity in terms of profit, but by the well-being it generates.

Phra Prajak had a grass-root oriented philosophy and he tried to organize the villagers against the interest of the authorities and powerful business interests. His involvement in the protests provided the local community with moral legitimacy. His alliance was with local farmers, which is a group that traditionally have had very limited political and economic power. The NGOs that supported Phra Prajak also operated in opposition against the government. Together they were not strong enough to challenge the power of the military and business interests. Although the Khor Jor Kor program was eventually cancelled, Phra Prajak was still forced from the area in Dongyay and his vision of forest conservation and sustainable agriculture never materialized.

Recommendations

I would recommend that the Thai government increases its support for environmental work conducted in Thailand. The nation is facing several environmental problems and an increasing support for environmentalist grass-roots movements could possible help solve these problems. Farmers engaging in organic farming should also be supported by the government. Government subsidies on organically produced food could be one method of increasing the number of farmers engaged in sustainable agriculture. This would help decrease environmental degradation in Thailand.

The monks discussed in this study are committed to work that does not only benefit their own communities but ultimately all of Thailand, they therefore deserve

recognition. Both the local and central government could increase their cooperation with these groups and together they can develop ideas on how resources could be managed in a more sustainable manner.

I believe that the monks would benefit from increasing their cooperation with other groups working on similar issues outside of their particular community or province. Currently the cooperation between monks engaged in environmental issues in different parts of Thailand is quite limited. The creation of a nationwide network of people involved in environmental work would be beneficial for all parties. By creating a nationwide network they would most likely improve their chances of reaching their goals.



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Robert first travelled to Thailand in 2003 and has since then been interested in the region's politics, history and culture. He has travelled extensively throughout Southeast Asia and spent considerable time studying local culture and languages.



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