

**Aesthetics of Asoke Ascetics: Materializing Morality in the  
Santi Asoke Communities of Thailand**

**A Dissertation**

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I, Robekkah Ritchie, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Dedication:

For my grandfather



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## Notes on Language

For Buddhist terms, Pāli is predominantly used throughout this thesis, unless otherwise specified and diacritical marks are included wherever possible. All foreign words are italicized with the exception of proper names. Quotes from authors that originally omit diacritical marks and contain unitalicized foreign words have been left unaltered. This thesis uses a standardized phoneticization of Thai script, however names that have an established form of transliteration may differ. As it is standard practice for Thai names to be arranged alphabetically by first name, not surname, Thai authors are entered into the text and bibliography accordingly. The names of lay Asoke members have been omitted to preserve anonymity, however the names of ordained Asoke members who have given their permission in interviews have been included.

This thesis employs the abbreviation scheme of the Pāli Text Society (PTS) as given in the *Pāli-English Dictionary*.

A	Aṅguttara-nikāya
D	Dīgha-nikāya
M	Majjhima-nikāya
MV	Mahāvagga of the Vinaya-piṭaka
S	Saṃyutta-nikāya
Th	Theragāthā
Vin	Vinaya-piṭaka
Vism	Visuddhimagga

See the glossary for an extended list of noteworthy terms and abbreviations.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On a dusty, busy, and rather chaotic street in Thailand filled with shops and advertisements, a stream of people, cars, busses, and motorcycles noisily pass by. Seemingly, the only cohesion to the street is the inconsistency to the kinds of buildings, people, or modes of transportation. Walking through the entrance of Asoke, the paved roads become dirt pathways, while trees and plants line the path filtering out the noise from the street, dust, and hot sun.<sup>1</sup> A large statue of a matte silver vulture with outspread wings perched atop a fake tree stump looks over persons entering the community and is accompanied by a sign stating that vultures: 1) are the most peaceful 2) are the most honest 3) do not exploit 4) fly the highest 5) do not bully, and do not steal or take leftover food from others.<sup>2</sup> Moving past the statue and further into the community, a variety of bird squawks and hoots call out from the trees, and reptiles can occasionally be seen wandering down paths and on tree branches. Another statue comes into view—a life-sized matte golden walking Buddha statue with outstretched arms and palms facing outwards. This Buddha strikes me as unusual because of the stance and the flurry of robes as well as the lack of typical characteristics and style often seen in Thailand. I am also a little puzzled because the Asoke group was known to be strictly opposed to Buddha images. Large ponds and streams wind through the community adding a cool moisture to the air, and the water, mosquitoes, and other insects contribute an assortment of babbling, buzzing, and chirping to the scene. Following the dirt path further, clusters of small raised platforms with thatched-rooves appear with mosquito nets hanging within them. Larger buildings are also scattered throughout the community, most are without walls allowing passersby to see the kitchens, Buddha statues or groups of students within them. The community is quiet but not without people, however those present are all wearing a similar uniform—blue peasant clothes with short hair and bare feet—and they smile and bow with palms pressed together when they see me.

It is 3am, the air is cool, the horizon is black, and the community begins to bustle with activity. I rise from a sleepless night thanks to the wooden floor and thin bamboo mat offering little comfort and I join the small parade of bare feet—wishing I had a flashlight or shoes to aid

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on initial experiences in Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke and Ratchathani Asoke and is typical of Asoke communities when there are no special festivals or events happening.

<sup>2</sup> This sign is found under the vulture statue in Santi Asoke, Bangkok, and is a quote from Bodhirak. It should be noted that not all vulture statues are accompanied by this text. The vulture statues are specifically discussed in Chapter 4.4.2.

in avoiding the punctures from the many sharp rocks I seem to be encountering. The lights of the *sala* (main hall) seem especially bright at this time of morning...or night...and members begin their morning routine of chanting and *Dhamma* talks. Lay persons sit quietly on the floor while a group of drowsy students wearing “school uniforms” (blue peasant shirts with sarongs for the girls and pants for the boys) also shuffle into the hall. The morning routine is led by male monastics, called *samanas*, wearing dark brown robes and their female counterparts, called *sikkhamats*, with brown and grey robes.<sup>3</sup> A seated Buddha statue made of a sandstone-looking material is present in the hall—again with unique features unlike any Buddha statue I had seen prior—and paintings illustrating well-known stories from the life of the Buddha and portraits of Bodhirak, the group’s founder, are also present. The tile floor is cold and hard, and my knees and feet hurt from kneeling and sitting on it, but eventually the group disbands, allowing me to finally stretch my legs and surreptitiously adjust my poorly wrapped sarong. I join a few lay women in the kitchen to dutifully chop or peel the foreign-looking fruits and vegetables that have probably been harvested from one of the communal gardens. The smells and tastes are distinct as the group is strictly vegetarian, which is an unusual feature in Thailand. During the main, and for most members, only meal of the day, large pots of fiery curries, mixed vegetables, rice, and platters of fresh greens are passed through the rows of members and students sitting on the ground. The monastics sit on raised platforms and chant some verses in Pāli before we begin to eat while watching a random assortment of programming on a television that has been rolled into the eating area.

I eventually learn that everything I am experiencing—my tender feet, the clothing, the vegetarian food, the dirt pathways, the unexpected television programming, trees, man-made streams and ponds, buildings, Buddha statues and artworks around me—are all meant to teach, remind, and induce certain sensations, which the Asoke members use towards their ultimate goal of spiritual liberation. Not only are Asoke members and communities clothed in layers of non-verbal messages that represent and teach their specific ideology, but their physical spaces act as interactive sensational forms and a “synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk* to be experienced with the entire sensorium.”<sup>4</sup> This thesis sets out to examine how the shaping of senses in Asoke—through their specific interpretation of the *Dhamma*—has formed not only a coherent aesthetic

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<sup>3</sup> These robe colours and titles are in part a result of the imprisonment of Asoke monastics and subsequent trials beginning in the late 1980s. This is further discussed in Chapter 3.3.1.

<sup>4</sup> Nina Ergin uses this phrase in relation to Ottoman mosques in, “The Soundscape of Sixteenth-Century Istanbul Mosques: Architecture and Qur’an Recital,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 2 (2008): 213. She further cites her inspiration from Gülru Necipoğlu, “A Kanun for the State, A Canon for the Arts: Conceptualizing the Classical Synthesis of Ottoman Art and Architecture,” in *Soliman le Magnifique et son Temps*, ed. Gilles Veinstein (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1992), 195.

style and material culture unique to them, but is the underlying structure that allows Asoke to be considered an aesth/ethic formation. Through looking at the non-verbal messages of the appearance of members, artwork, and the physical communities—which is based on my fieldwork—I aim to explore and better understand the interplay between the beliefs, material culture, and aesthetics within Asoke.

### 1.1 Positioning Asoke

Since the group's emergence in the mid-1970s, Asoke has developed into a definitive feature within the Thai religious landscape. In order to introduce Asoke, it is first necessary to understand the context in which this group was created and currently resides. To create a backdrop, this section begins with a wide lens and lays out relevant considerations within Buddhist studies, narrowing into Theravāda, Thai Buddhism, and the emergence of Asoke. This will illustrate some of the complexities within the broader frameworks (of Buddhist studies, Theravāda studies, and anthropological studies in Thailand) which recalls the interconnected and interwoven factors at play when discussing the focus of this thesis: The “Santi Asoke” movement.<sup>5</sup> This section also functions as an overview of relevant literature in both the larger fields discussed and specifically in regard to Asoke.

Within academic contexts, Buddhism is becoming less frequently referred to as a singular entity, and the term “Buddhisms”<sup>6</sup> has emerged to better describe the multifaceted beliefs and traditions that are held by approximately 500 million people.<sup>7</sup> Within this plethora of traditions, there is also a continual state of transformation and translocative movement:

There is no pure substratum, no static and independent core called ‘Buddhism’ – either in the founder’s day or in any later generation. What we have come to call ‘Buddhism’ was always becoming, being made and remade over and over again in contact and exchange, as it was carried along in the flow of things...to study the historical or contemporary expressions of Buddhism is to trace the flow of people, rituals, artifacts, beliefs, and institutions across spatial and temporal boundaries.<sup>8</sup>

Within these pluralisms of Buddhisms, we can further consider a particular sub-set thereof:

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<sup>5</sup> The group is often colloquially called “Santi Asoke” however this is also the name of the main centre in Bangkok (each Asoke community has a specific name). As there are many communities and this thesis is not focusing solely on the Santi Asoke centre in Bangkok, the group is referred to as “Asoke” throughout this work.

<sup>6</sup> For a recent overview see, John S. Strong, *Buddhisms: An Introduction* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> The Pew Research Center estimates 488 million Buddhists. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Major Religious Groups as of 2010* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2012), 31, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf>. Peter Harvey estimates the number of Buddhists to be closer to 535 million in: *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, “Theory and Method in the Study of Buddhism: Toward ‘Translocative’ Analysis,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 12 (2011): 23.

Theravāda.<sup>9</sup> The category of “Theravāda,” translated as the “Doctrine/ School of the Elders” also comes with a variety of challenges, but is the standard term used by scholars and Buddhists to refer to the dominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, which is centred around the teachings within the Pāli Canon.<sup>10</sup> Beneath the confines of the term “Theravāda” is a deep and colourful ocean of beliefs, practices, practitioners, and experiences; such a broad categorization fails to address the multifaceted richness that encompasses the persons, communities, and transformations that have and continue to take place, and at times, it can also be a useful tool for classification purposes. Many works have been produced which delve into specific persons, times, movements, and places, as well as publications that contribute a broad-spectrum approach to the Theravāda world.<sup>11</sup>

Early in the development of Western Buddhist studies, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the Pāli Canon was the central focus for scholars, and many considered these texts to be an accurate and neutral portrayal of early Buddhist conduct and society.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis on

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<sup>9</sup> In recent decades many scholars have rightly become more sensitive to the distinctions between the terms “Theravāda,” “Hīnayāna” and “early Buddhism,” as these are all distinct constructs. Hīnayāna (translated to “smaller/lesser vehicle”) is generally considered a pejorative term which was given to non-Mahāyānaist schools (including Theravāda) within some Mahāyāna (translated as “great vehicle”) contexts. “Early Buddhism” is another contested term generally used to describe the first forms of Buddhism before Mahāyāna developments and can be confused with Theravāda since Theravāda is often considered one of the closest interpretations or descendants from certain forms of early Buddhism. Newell notes that “it is still common for scholars to use the terms Theravada, ‘Early Buddhism’ and Hinayana almost interchangeably, even though extensive research...has now established that these are very different entities.” Catherine Newell, “Approaches to the Study of Buddhism,” in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, ed. B. Turner (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 391. For a discussion on these terms, see: Richard Cohen, “Discontented Categories: Hinayana and Mahayana in Indian History,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995): 1–25; Kate Crosby, “Theravāda,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 836–41.

<sup>10</sup> The term “Theravāda” began to be used in the 1830s within Western scholarship and became more widely accepted in 1951 when the World Fellowship of Buddhists accepted the title. Steven Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8–9. The history of the usage of the term “Theravāda” has been explored more recently in scholarship, and bringing to light the colonial, Western implications as well. See, Todd LeRoy Perreira, “Whence Theravāda? The Modern Genealogy of an Ancient Term,” in *How Theravāda is Theravāda?: Exploring Buddhist Identities*, ed. Peter Skilling, Jason Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza and Santi Pakdeekham (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012), 443–571; Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, *The Ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010); Peter Skilling, “Theravāda in History,” *Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies* 11 (2009): 61–93.

<sup>11</sup> Recent contributions to the broad study of Theravāda include: Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (New York: Albany, 2010); Asanga Tilakaratne, *Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012); Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); John Holt, *Theravada Traditions: Buddhist Ritual Cultures in Contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> The Pāli Canon was taken as ultimate and factual because it was believed that it was passed down through a fixed oral tradition which began shortly after the death of the Buddha before being committed to writing around the first century BCE. Charles Hallisey, “Roads taken and not taken in the study of Theravāda Buddhism,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 34–8; Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 24–8. Further studies of the Pāli Canon have begun to question the assumption of its uniformity, historical accuracy, and content, see: Steven Collins, “On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 15 (1990): 89–126; Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist*

scripture was further entwined with the search for an “original” and “pure” representation of early Buddhism which, Newell notes, essentially divided “Buddhism” into two contrasting extremes between “a rather idealized Buddhism of distant antiquity, reconstructed by scholars from texts in Pāli and Sanskrit, with preference given to older texts,” and “the Buddhists of contemporary Asia, whose practices and preferences were perceived in specific contrast to this ideal.”<sup>13</sup> Further, the impact of western “discourses of modernity” (described by McMahan as “western monotheism; rationalism and scientific naturalism; and Romantic expressivism, along with their successors”) would later have an overarching and lasting influence in Asia, resulting in what is often called “Buddhist modernism” or “Protestant Buddhism.”<sup>14</sup> A search for a “pure” early Buddhism, devoid of superstition, deities and ritual, began to focus on Theravāda Buddhism as it used what was thought to be the original scriptures and was most closely linked to this idealized form of “original” Buddhism; this was in stark contrast to Tibetan Buddhism, which was pejoratively called “Lamaism.”<sup>15</sup> Early scholars often perceived the broad variations of Buddhist practice—especially Tantric Buddhism—as a decline and deterioration of the ideal Buddhism as created by the Buddha.<sup>16</sup> This concept of a linear degradation of Buddhism has spurred a long history of reformist traditions. In Thailand, reformations by King Mongkut (mid nineteenth century) and the Thai Forest Tradition (late nineteenth and early twentieth century) are in this context particularly noteworthy. The focus of this thesis, the Asoke movement, also plays a reformist role as they often state that their goal is to return to what they consider to be

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*Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> This has many reasons, including the general relationship to religion, and in particular Protestantism: “This rational, ritual-free, ‘true’ Christianity, based in scripture rather than tradition, was presented in contrast to Catholicism, which was seen to have moved far away from the original teachings of the Early Church, and to have allowed itself to be sullied by clerical hierarchy, devotionism and excessive ritual. The superiority of Protestantism over the perceived idolatry and ritual of the Catholic Church was well established in the minds of many of the early European scholars of Buddhist Asia, particularly within the Anglo-German strand of scholarship.” Newell, “Approaches to the Study of Buddhism,” 390–1.

<sup>14</sup> David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10. Other important works on Buddhist Modernism include: Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus* (Berlin: Alfred Metzner, 1966); Donald S. Lopez Jr., ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and “the Mystic East”* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Donald S. Lopez Jr., ed., *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon, 2002); Stephen Berkwitz, *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006); David McMahan, *Buddhism in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> “Lamaism” was a term “adopted by Western travelers and scholars of Tibet who routinely viewed Tibetan religion as a debased mingling of indigenous Tibetan animism with ‘pure’ Indian Buddhism, and hence literally unworthy of being called Buddhism. Though usage persists, the term Lamaism is considered offensive by Tibetans and is by and large dropping out of circulation.” Alexander Gardner, “Lama,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 450–1.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Wedemeyer, “Tropes, Typologies and Turnarounds: A Brief Genealogy of the Historiography of Tantric Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 223–59.

the “original” teachings of the Buddha, as they believe that Thai Buddhism has been “corrupted” by superstitious rituals, deity worship, and commercialization for example.

Moving forward in time, and away from a strictly scriptural focus, Buddhist studies began to increase after the second world war due to the development of Area Studies devoted to Asia and Religious Studies.<sup>17</sup> Early anthropological approaches to Theravāda often explored many countries and traditions within this larger context and tended to place an emphasis on Sri Lanka.<sup>18</sup> Because of the diversity found within Theravāda Buddhism, certain authors began an attempt to classify these various expressions. Gellner recognizes main themes in the works of early anthropological studies focusing on Theravāda Buddhism and arranges certain influential scholars along a spectrum according to their approach and understanding of Buddhism.<sup>19</sup> These main approaches are: (1) Modernist “Protestant Buddhist” position: Buddhism as the practice of an elite misunderstood by the masses;<sup>20</sup> (2) Anthropological positions: Buddhism contains a hierarchy of teachings and roles, and coexists with other systems in a structured hierarchy;<sup>21</sup> (3) Populist position: Buddhism as the practice of the people distorted by the middle class.<sup>22</sup> Within the “Anthropological positions” authors have attempted to categorize the various streams of Buddhist practice. One well-known example is Spiro’s approach that describes Theravāda Buddhism as generally “kammatic,” “nibbanic,” or “apotropaic.”<sup>23</sup> The development of

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<sup>17</sup> Donald S. Lopez Jr., “Introduction,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8–10.

<sup>18</sup> Early important works on Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia (that are not mentioned below) include: Manning Nash, ed., *Anthropological Studies in Theravāda Buddhism* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1966); Charles Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula* (New York: Macmillan, 1977); Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus* (Frankfurt: Metzner, 1966).

<sup>19</sup> David N. Gellner, “Introduction: What is the Anthropology of Buddhism About?” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 21, no. 2 (1990): 102.

<sup>20</sup> Terwiel falls within this category, see, B. J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand* (London: Curzon, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> This is exemplified by the work of Spiro, Gombrich, Carrithers, Obeyesekere, Ames and Tambiah. Relevant works from these authors include: Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971); Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988); Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Michael Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Michael M. Ames, “Magical-Animism and Buddhism: A Structural Analysis of the Sinhalese Religious System,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 23 (1964): 21–52; Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>22</sup> Southwold’s work is put in this category: Martin Southwold, *Buddhism in Life: The Anthropological Study of Religion and the Sinhalese Practice of Buddhism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); “True Buddhism and Village Buddhism in Sri Lanka,” in *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, ed. J. Davis (London: Academic Press, 1982), 137–52.

<sup>23</sup> The first two categories encapsulate practitioners and divides laypersons who practice “kammatic” Buddhism to achieve a better rebirth, apart from the monastics who follow “nibbanic” Buddhism which leads to nibbana, free from subsequent rebirth. Apotropaic Buddhism refers to magical practices, including the use of amulets, rituals, and spells. Other subdivisions from Spiro include millennial, normative, eschatological, and esoteric. Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of

categories dividing lay/monastic Buddhism, or rural/urban Buddhism for example, emerged from a long and complex history of anthropological, historical, and canonical studies, which were mixed with Western ideals and often a colonialist paradigm. The flaws and limitations of some of these influential approaches by Spiro and Tambiah have also been discussed as problematic, especially by Prapod.<sup>24</sup> Through these early attempts to understand Buddhism in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, a more nuanced and considered appreciation of the religious complexity has further been developed.

Due to the relative political stability and accessibility of Thailand (in comparison to neighbouring countries) more anthropological studies focusing on Thai Buddhism were published in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>25</sup>

Thailand's population is between 93 and 96 percent Buddhist, and Buddhist institutions have been socially and royally supported for over one thousand years, making Thailand one of the most dynamic places to experience Buddhist practice, interact with Buddhist art, and investigate Buddhist literature and history...Perhaps the greatest contribution from both Thai and non-Thai scholars to Buddhist studies more broadly is in the field of anthropology.<sup>26</sup>

The complexity of Buddhism in Thailand was recognized by scholars and early attempts to untangle it include Anuman (who identified two main components of belief: animism and Buddhism, and Buddhism that included elements of Hinduism)<sup>27</sup> and Kirsch (categorized three separate streams: Theravāda Buddhism, folk Brahmanism, and animism).<sup>28</sup> In the 1990s and

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California Press, 1982), chap. 2–7.

<sup>24</sup> Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, *The Ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), chap. 6.

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of early anthropological works based in Thailand see: Charles Keyes, "Ethnography and Anthropological Interpretation in the Study of Thailand," in *The Study of Thailand: Analyses of Knowledge, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History, and Political Science*, ed. Eliezar Ayal (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, Southeast Asia Program, 1978), 1–60. Other noteworthy early contributions specifically looking at Buddhism in Thailand include: L. M. Hanks Jr., "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order," *American Anthropologist* 65 (1962): 1247–61; Thomas Kirsch, "Phu Thai Religious Syncretism" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1967); Jane Bunnag, *Buddhist monk, Buddhist layman: A Study of Urban Monastic Organization in Central Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); James Brewer Preuss, "Veneration and Merit-Seeking at Sacred Places: Buddhist Pilgrimage in Contemporary Thailand" (PhD Diss., University of Washington, 1974); Somboon Suksamran, *Political Buddhism in Southeast Asia: The Role of the Sangha in the Modernization of Thailand* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976); Stanley Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Thomas Kirsch, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation," *Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 2 (1977): 241–66; Bardwell L. Smith, ed. *Religion and the Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma* (Chambersburg, Pa: Anima, 1978); Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities* (New York: AMS Press, 1982); Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Popular Buddhism in Siam and Other Essays on Thai Studies* (Bangkok: Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> Justin McDaniel, "Thai Buddhism," *Oxford Bibliographies*, last modified December 12, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393521-0110>.

<sup>27</sup> Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore* (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, 1988), 48–9.

<sup>28</sup> Kirsch, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System," 261.

2000s, scholars began more closely investigating the transformations that had begun to take place in the 1960s, and bringing to light the “fragmentation,” “diversification” and “hybridization” of Thai Buddhism.<sup>29</sup>

Visible and rapid social and cultural changes occurred in Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s, which is often attributed to globalization and internal religious and political tensions. At this time, many modern and technological developments became more commonplace in urban centres, the income gap was increasing, farmers were protesting due to unfair treatment, communism threatened to spread over neighbouring borders and student protests against political corruption ended in the infamous Thammasat University massacre in 1976. These tensions from urbanization, modernization and economic migration (sometimes called “the crisis of modernity”) spurred religious change in relation to the existing *saṅgha*, but also in the popularity of spirit cults and the emergence of groups such as Asoke and Dhammakāya as well as increased interest in Buddhist ecology and socially engaged Buddhism (especially by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu).<sup>30</sup> The centrality of the officially sanctioned *saṅgha* began shifting—in part due to a fragmentation and decentralization of Thai Buddhism and shifting attitudes towards the moral authority of the *saṅgha*, which was also associated with media attention of scandals involving monks.<sup>31</sup> Another notable change revolved around the role of women in religious contexts.<sup>32</sup> The only socially acceptable option for women who wish to ordain in Thailand is to become a *mae chi* (they wear white, don a shaven head and follow eight or ten precepts), and increasing opportunities and support are available for women choosing this path. Fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhunī*) are not officially recognized in Thailand, however a few pioneering groups of women are attempting to revive the lineage through becoming ordained in non-Theravādan traditions and establishing small communities in Thailand.

The current diversity of Buddhism in Thailand is in large part due to the changes that

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<sup>29</sup> For example, see discussions by: Jim Taylor “Buddhist Revitalization, Modernization, and Social Change in Contemporary Thailand,” *Sojourn* 8 (1993): 62–91; Charles Keyes, “Moral Authority of the Sangha and Modernity in Thailand: Sexual Scandals, Sectarian Dissent, and Political Resistance,” in *Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium: Essays in Honor of the Ven. Phra Dhammapitaka (Bhikkhu P. A. Payutto) on his 60th Birthday Anniversary*, ed. Sulak Sivaraksa (Bangkok: Sathira-Nagapradipa Foundation and Foundation for Children, 1999), 121–47; Charles Keyes, “Sexy Monks: Sexual Scandals Involving Buddhist Monks in Thailand” (Paper presented at EuroSEAS Conference, Naples, Italy, September 12–15, 2007); Pattana Kitiarsa, “Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 461–87.

<sup>30</sup> Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes, eds., “Introduction,” in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos* (London: Routledge, 2002), 6–25.

<sup>31</sup> Keyes, “Moral Authority of the Sangha and Modernity in Thailand,” 121–47; Peter Jackson, “Withering Centre, Flourishing Margins: Buddhism’s Changing Political Roles,” in *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, ed. Kevin Hewison (London: Routledge, 1997), 75–93; Duncan McCargo, “Buddhism, Democracy and Identity in Thailand,” *Democratization* 11, no. 4 (2004): 155–70.

<sup>32</sup> See Chapter 3.1.1 for a discussion of renunciation for women in Thailand.

occurred in recent decades.

Buddhism in Thailand today is marked by a cacophony of voices, a pluralism that includes a continuation of traditional forms and practices, a new sectarianism, an efflorescence of magical cults, a multifaceted reform movement, and an internationalism attuned to the emergent global community. Today, Thai Buddhist identity extends beyond the borders of a local community and the nation-state to an increasingly globalized world.<sup>33</sup>

The interaction and development of Buddhist (both Theravāda and Mahāyāna), Hindu and animist traditions (with the understanding that these were not syncretic, “pure” or removed traditions) which had melded together in Thailand, provides rich opportunities to understand contemporary mixtures of lived beliefs and practices. Because of the deep cultural and institutional connections in Southeast Asia to Buddhism that have developed beginning in the first millennium CE, there are few aspects of Thai life that are not influenced in some way by these traditions.

Monks (*bhikkhus*) play a central role as representatives of Buddhism, as they disseminate religious teachings, officiate ceremonies and are closely linked to laity through merit-making exchanges, such as the daily giving of food to the monks.<sup>34</sup> The monastic community (*saṅgha*) is regulated by the overarching institutional structure of the Ecclesiastical Council (the *Saṅgha Supreme Council of Thailand, SSC*, or *Mahatherasamakhom*) which is closely tied to government organizations and the king—showing the strong interconnections of the state, monarchy and religion.<sup>35</sup> A wide range of settings and lifestyles are available to monks and there are examples of unofficial, yet distinct lineages and groups within the broader structure of the *saṅgha*, such as the Thai Forest Tradition, the Buddhadāsa Movement and Dhammakāya temples. Monastic environments in Thailand vary greatly—from rural, isolated, forested and rustic, to enormous and intricate complexes of gold and mirrored surfaces, and others have a “carnavalesque” atmosphere with loud music and throngs of people, or a combination of any of these features can be found.<sup>36</sup> The eclectic amalgamation of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhisms, Hindu and animist traditions is found not only in temples in the form of iconographic representations (of popular Hindu or Chinese deities for example), but is also evident in rituals (for protection or to appease spirits for example), popular material culture (as seen through the wildly popular amulet market), and annual celebrations (such as Thai New

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<sup>33</sup> Donald Swearer, “Thailand,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 834.

<sup>34</sup> Merit making activities are thought to influence one’s *kamma* and further have direct worldly benefits (finances, relationships etc.) and impact future rebirths.

<sup>35</sup> An introduction to contemporary Buddhist monasticism in Thailand is further discussed in Chapter 3.1.

<sup>36</sup> The physical spaces of temples and Asoke centres are explored in Chapter 5.

Year or the Festival of Floating Boats). The multifaceted Buddhist landscape in Thailand makes for fertile ground to study hybridities, ritual, political and power interplays, transformations, aesthetics, and material religion. It is within this dynamic microcosm that we find the Asoke group.

Asoke's founder, Bodhirak, was a well-known TV entertainer, singer/songwriter who resigned from his position in 1970 after becoming interested in Buddhist teachings (he had begun simplifying his previously luxurious lifestyle, which included shaving his hair, eating a vegetarian diet and walking barefoot).<sup>37</sup> A few months later he was ordained as a monk at the *Dhammayuttika Nikāya*<sup>38</sup> monastery Wat Asokaram.<sup>39</sup> He left Wat Asokaram and was re-ordained in 1973 at a *Mahā Nikāya* monastery, however Bodhirak explained in an interview that he was dissatisfied with the way *Dhamma* was being practiced and decided to develop his own monastic centre, called Daen Asoke.<sup>40</sup> In 1975, Asoke as an independent group was formally created; the monastics were re-ordained by Bodhirak and they announced that the Asoke community would not conform to or be regulated by the authority of the Thai Ecclesiastical Council.<sup>41</sup> Because of this, Jackson argues that the Asoke movement “effectively

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<sup>37</sup> Bodhirak was born in 1934 as Mongkol Rakpong, he was later known by his artist name, Rak Rakpong, before becoming ordained. Bodhirak, Pothirak or Phothirak are the most common English transliterations from Thai, and this thesis consistently uses “Bodhirak.” Jackson transliterates Bodhirak's Pāli clerical name to Phothirakkhito or Bodhirakkhito. Peter Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 160.

<sup>38</sup> In Thailand there are two recognized lineages: the larger *Mahā Nikāya* (*Mahanikai*) and the *Dhammayuttika Nikāya* (*Thammayutnikai*) which was created in 1833 by King Mongkut, Rama IV.

<sup>39</sup> Wat Asokaram was founded in 1955 by a disciple of the famous ascetic Ajahn Mun (1870–1949), Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo (1906–1961). Ajahn Mun (Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta Thera) created the Thai Forest Tradition with his mentor Ajahn Sao Kantasīlo. The Thai Forest Tradition has spread internationally and is known as a particularly ascetic branch of Theravāda Buddhism, which is one of the main reasons Bodhirak chose to ordain at Wat Asokaram. Pictures of Ajahn Mun hang in many of the Asoke centres.

<sup>40</sup> According to my interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014. There are conflicting accounts by scholars as to why Bodhirak chose to leave the previous monasteries, particularly Wat Asokaram. Apinya writes that Bodhirak left Wat Asokaram after being prohibited by the abbot to stay at the first developing Asoke centre Daen Asoke because monks from the *Mahā Nikāya* (who were interested in Bodhirak's teachings) were in the group. Apinya Fuengfusakul, “Buddhist Reform Movements in Contemporary Thai Urban Context: Thammakai and Santi Asoke” (PhD diss., University of Bielefeld, Germany, 1993), 90. Heikkilä-Horn states similarly that Bodhirak resigned from Asokaram because he was not allowed to organize joint meetings of monks from both the *Dhammayuttika Nikāya* and *Mahā Nikāya*. Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes: Belief and Practice of Santi Asoke* (Bangkok: Fah Apai, Ltd., 1997), 44. Jackson asserts that Bodhirak created schisms in the monastery by criticizing other monks for eating meat, smoking, chewing betel nut, being lazy, and in some cases practicing supernatural rituals and magic. Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 159. Swearer also writes that Bodhirak was “forced to disrobe as a *Thammayut* monk because of his unorthodox activities.” Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (New York: Albany, 2010), 173. In interviews I conducted with Asoke monastics and members, these accounts were said to be false and stated that Bodhirak left of his own accord because he wanted a more ascetic practice.

<sup>41</sup> Re-ordination required the Asoke monastics to receive new identity cards and participate in ordination ceremony presided over by Bodhirak. At the time, Bodhirak did not have the required ten years of seniority as a monk or the permission from the Saṅgha Supreme Council, as is normally required in order to conduct ordinations. This was another factor in seeing the Asoke as subversive and unsanctioned.

represents the formation of a third, although as yet unofficial, *nikaya*<sup>42</sup> or order within the Thai *Sangha*.<sup>43</sup> Bodhirak is quoted in an early article by Santisuda that his intention was not to create a division, but to bring together the best of both by “going back to the fundamental teachings and practices of ancient times,” and that his “mission is to revive Buddhism in Thailand.”<sup>44</sup>

The group emphasized strict moral conduct and an ascetic lifestyle, vegetarianism, and physical work instead of sitting meditation for both monastic and lay members.<sup>45</sup> Bodhirak began ordaining women who undertook ten precepts and wore dark robes similar to their male counterparts.<sup>46</sup> This colour choice further distinguished the group from the typical saffron colour worn by most monks in Thailand.<sup>47</sup> The Asoke monastics also stopped shaving their eyebrows, as is practiced by monks in Thailand.<sup>48</sup> The Asoke communities were rustic, allowing only simple dwellings and were devoid of Buddha images. Bodhirak criticized the mainstream *sangha* for perpetuating what he believed to be an “improper” and distorted interpretation of Buddhism—which included superstitious practices (the use of holy water, or amulets for example) or the worship of Buddha images. Media reports of a few high-profile scandals featuring misbehaving monks and the luxurious lives of some monastics was further used by Bodhirak to justify the moral superiority of Asoke. Due to the choices to create their own community, to visually distinguish the group, and staunch vegetarianism, combined with Bodhirak’s outspoken criticisms of the Thai *sangha*, the Asoke movement began to be seen as controversial by various monastic authorities.<sup>49</sup>

Community membership grew and in 1976, three more centres were established: Santi Asoke in Bangkok, Sisa Asoke in Sri Saket, northeastern Thailand and Sali Asoke in Phai Sali, central Thailand. Daen Asoke also expanded and was then moved to a nearby location in 1980

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<sup>42</sup> In Sanskrit and Pāli, *nikāya* means “group,” “class,” or “assemblage,” most commonly referring to various monastic lineages, or fraternities.

<sup>43</sup> Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 160.

<sup>44</sup> Santisuda Ekachai, “The Man behind Santi Asoke,” *Bangkok Post*, July 22, 1989.

<sup>45</sup> One of the most apparent differences within Asoke compared to many other Buddhist centres is the lack of sitting, closed eye meditation observed in the communities. Asoke members often state that they practice “meditation” with “open eyes” and this central aspect of Asoke is also noted by the title of Heikkilä-Horn’s monograph on Asoke “*Buddhism with Open Eyes*.” The Asoke understanding of concentration and meditation is further discussed in Chapter 2.2.

<sup>46</sup> This is especially noteworthy as the only acceptable form of renunciation for women is to ordain as a white-robed *mae chi*. *Sikkhamats* and their brown robes are discussed in Chapter 3.3.3.

<sup>47</sup> Wearing different robe colours was a point of contention as well, and Chapter 3.3.1 specifically delves into the history, relevance, and repercussions of this choice.

<sup>48</sup> Though this may seem like an inconsequential aspect of Asoke, I argue in Chapter 3.3.2, that it is in fact a significant distinction of Asoke monastics, which signals specific beliefs and aims at further legitimizing the “authenticity” of the group.

<sup>49</sup> The development of Asoke and their tensions with monastic and government authorities are discussed in Chapter 3.3.1.

and renamed Pathom Asoke. Because Bodhirak was first ordained at Wat Asokaram (named after the renowned Indian Buddhist King Ashoka) and had given *Dhamma* talks under Ashoka trees, the group began publishing small booklets under the name “Asoke” and the residents were then referred to “Chao Asoke” or “People of Asoke.”<sup>50</sup>

The group continued to grow throughout the 1980s and became more politically active through their association with General Chamlong Srimuang, which led to the development of the *Phalang Dhamma Party* (Power of the Dhamma or Moral Force).<sup>51</sup> The Phalang Dhamma Party participated in the 1988 federal elections, which brought disappointment for Asoke and Chamlong, and their political involvement gave rise to heightened public and media attention, placing Asoke again under scrutiny.<sup>52</sup> Heikkilä-Horn states that, “the fact remains that Bodhirak’s association with Chamlong seems to be the main cause for the legal problems the Asoke group has faced since Bodhirak rejected the state authority.”<sup>53</sup> A series of charges against Bodhirak and Asoke eventually led the Saṅgha Supreme Council to order Bodhirak to be defrocked, which culminated in his arrest (and the subsequent arrest of all Asoke monastics) in 1989, and a series of lengthy court cases over the following seven years.<sup>54</sup> Apinya emphasizes Bodhirak’s larger goal in that Asoke’s political involvement “should not be viewed as a mere matter of political ambition of a religious leader, but rather a tentative endeavor to establish a new religious-culture.”<sup>55</sup> The group still exists outside of the state-backed *saṅgha* and regardless of the previous controversies, Asoke continues to be politically active, developing their communities, and transformations are still regularly taking place, as this thesis exhibits.

A surge of interest in Asoke occurred after their political involvement and court cases represented by the frequency of publications featuring the group in the 1990s. The first studies

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<sup>50</sup> These reasons were given in an interview with Sikkhamat Rinpha at Sali Asoke, Phai Sali, March 1, 2013. The association with Bodhirak’s place of ordination was previously known, however I have not found the connection to Ashoka trees in any other reports of Asoke. Sikkhamat Rinpha described how the Ashoka tree (*Saraca indica*) blooms with red and orange flowers all at once, “it is modest, and then it gets ‘enlightened’ and whoa! So bright and elegant when it blooms.”

<sup>51</sup> General Chamlong Srimuang is a long-time devout Asoke member who was the Secretary General to Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond in 1980 and was elected twice as Governor of Bangkok in 1985 and 1990. On October 1, 1985 Chamlong was promoted from Colonel to Major General but he decided instead to run for governor of Bangkok and resigned from the army two days later. Door-to-door canvassing, low-cost flyers and dedicating himself to promises of anti-corruption, morality and sincerity were the basis of Chamlong’s campaign and in late 1985, Chamlong won the elections with double the votes of his nearest competitor and became the first independent candidate to be elected governor of the capital. A number of Asoke members formed the core of Chamlong’s support group and created the *Ruam Phalang* [United Force] organization. See Chapter 3.3.1. for more details and relevant literature on Chamlong.

<sup>52</sup> This is explored in more detail within Chapter 3.3.1.

<sup>53</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 204.

<sup>54</sup> The court rulings placed various restrictions on Asoke, and all monastics were ordered to change their attire and wear white to denote their lay status for two years, and monks changed their monastic title to *samana*. These events are further discussed in Chapter 3.3.1.

<sup>55</sup> Apinya, “Buddhist Reform Movements,” 190.

featuring Asoke emerged in the mid and late 1980s and because of the substantial shifts in the religious landscape in Thailand, Asoke was regularly featured alongside other contemporary groups—most notably the Dhammakāya movement (as specifically exemplified by Wat Phra Dhammakāya)<sup>56</sup> and what is sometimes referred to as the “Buddhadāsa movement” or “Suan Mok movement.”<sup>57</sup> Suwanna argues that the Asoke, Dhammakāya and Suan Mok movement can be seen,

each in its own way, as a reaction to the changing socioeconomic conditions of the Buddhist community and also to the inertia of the Buddhist establishment. These three movements all make serious attempts to communicate and to answer the spiritual needs of the Thai people, particularly the urban middle class in the modern context.<sup>58</sup>

Notable authors who contributed to this newly developing discussion, and included Asoke in their studies, included Olson, Prawase, Jackson, Taylor, Suwanna, Swearer, and Schober.<sup>59</sup> Common themes in these works revolved around the complexities of Thai social and religious changes, with a particular focus on newly created groups, urban Buddhism, fundamentalism and the relationship between Buddhist practice, the *Saṅgha* Supreme Council and politics. These publications laid the groundwork for understanding the changes happening within the

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<sup>56</sup> It is standard practice to refer to the Dhammakāya movement as a whole, however it should be noted that it consists of an array of temples with unique characteristics. Further, the term “Dhammakāya movement” is sometimes (inaccurately) used synonymously with the enormous and well-known Dhammakāya temple, Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Relevant works on the Dhammakāya include: Rachele Scott, *Nirvana for Sale? Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakāya Temple in Contemporary Thailand* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2009); Catherine Newell, “Monks, Meditation and Missing Links: Continuity, ‘Orthodoxy’ and the Vijjā Dhammakāya in Thai Buddhism” (PhD diss., University of London, 2008); Martin Seeger, “Die thailändische Wat Phra Thammakai-Bewegung,” in *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Erneuerungsbewegungen* Vol. XI, eds. Klaus-Dieter Mathes and Harald Freese (Hamburg: Asien-Afrika Institut Universität Hamburg, 2006), 121–39; Jeffrey Bowers, *Dhammakaya Meditation in Thai Society* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996). See Chapter 3.1 for further exploration of the Dhammakāya movement.

<sup>57</sup> Suan Mok (Suan Mokkh) is the temple established by Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa in 1932. For an introduction, see, Suchira Payulpitack, “Buddhadāsa’s Movement: An Analysis of Its Origins, Development, and Social Impact” (PhD diss., University of Bielefeld, 1991). Also see Chapter 3.1 for more discussion and references.

<sup>58</sup> Suwanna Satha-Anand, “Religious Movements in Contemporary Thailand: Buddhist Struggles for Modern Relevance,” *Asian Survey* 30, no. 4 (1990): 397.

<sup>59</sup> Grant Olson included a chapter on Asoke entitled “The people of Asoke: Purity Through Strict Discipline and Vegetables” in his master’s thesis. See, Grant Olson, “Sangha reform in Thailand: Limitation, Liberation and the Middle Path” (master’s thesis, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1983); Grant Olson, “Cries over Spilled Holy Water: ‘Complex’ Responses to a Traditional Thai Religious Practice,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22 (1991): 75–85; Prawase Wasi, *Suan Mokh, Dhammakaya, Santi Asoke* [in Thai] (Bangkok: Chao Ban Publishers, 2530 [1987]); Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 350–2; Peter Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 159–222; Jim Taylor, “New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: An Individualistic Revolution, Reform and Political Dissonance,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 21 (1990): 135–54; Jim Taylor “Buddhist Revitalization, Modernization, and Social Change in Contemporary Thailand,” *Sojourn* 8 (1993): 62–91; Donald Swearer, “Fundamentalistic Movements in Theravada Buddhism,” in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 628–90; Donald Swearer, *Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 136–9; Juliane Schober, “The Theravāda Buddhist Engagement with Modernity in Southeast Asia: Whither the Social Paradigm of the Galactic Polity?” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 307–25.

religious sphere in Thailand, however none of these works were extensive studies of Asoke. Sunai, who is one of the main theoretical contributors to Asoke, began writing on the group in 1986, which included his master's thesis on the use of language within Asoke and other publications discussing beliefs within Asoke as well as their economic system.<sup>60</sup> In the mid 1990s more in depth anthropological studies emerged—as seen in publications by Apinya, Fukushima and Phataraphon.<sup>61</sup> Heikkilä-Horn has arguably been the largest contributor to western scholarship on Asoke, beginning with her monograph in 1997 and a series of articles and encyclopedia entries.<sup>62</sup> Her work has predominantly focused on belief and class in Asoke though she has also written on Asoke's political involvement and on the *sikkhamats*, however she has been criticized for inaccuracies and an uncritical approach to Asoke.<sup>63</sup>

The most recent and noteworthy English contributions to literature on Asoke, I would argue, have been from Essen; this includes her PhD thesis, which was also published as a monograph in 2005, and two articles on Asoke in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*.<sup>64</sup> Essen's work is based on her in-depth fieldwork (within the Sisa Asoke centre) and focuses on sustainability, the implementation of the Asoke economic system, community development and ethics. Another recent contribution to Asoke literature is from Mackenzie's PhD thesis and

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<sup>60</sup> Sunai Setbunsang, "How to Apply Wittgenstein's Perception of 'Language Game' with the Explanation of Meaning of Religious Language: Case-Study of Santi Asok" [in Thai] (master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2530 [1987]); *The Social Ideal in Buddhism According to the Ideas of the Santi Asok School* [in Thai] (Bangkok: Fah Apai, 2534 [1991]); "Language Game and the Use of Language of the Asok Followers," [in Thai] *Chulalongkorn University Journal of Buddhist Studies* 1, no. 3 (2537 [1994]), 53–81; *The New Paradigm of Development and Poverty Reduction Based on the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy: A Case Study of the Santi-Asoke Group in Thailand* (Bangkok: Fah Apai, 2007). Sunai is also a long-time lay Asoke member.

<sup>61</sup> Apinya Fuengfusakul, "Buddhist Reform Movements in Contemporary Thai Urban Context: Thammakai and Santi Asoke" (PhD diss., University of Bielefeld, Germany, 1993); Apinya Fuengfusakul, "Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravāda Reform in Thailand," *Sojourn* 8 (1993): 153–83; Masato Fukushima, "Another Meaning of Meditation: On the Santi Asoke Movement in Thailand," *Tai Culture* 4 (1993): 131–52; Phataraphon Sirikancana, *Santi Asok: Its Development and Religious Role in Thai Society* [in Thai] (Bangkok: Center of Buddhist Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2540 [1997]).

<sup>62</sup> Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, "Two Paths to Revivalism in Thai Buddhism: The Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke Movements," *Temenos* 32 (1996): 93–111; *Buddhism with Open Eyes: Belief and Practice of Santi Asoke* (Bangkok: Fah Apai, 1997); "The Status and Values of the Santi Asoke Sikkhamat," in *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 72–83; "Woman Monks: An Anomaly or a Misnomer?" *Akademika* 63 (2003): 31–43; "Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport," *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 3 (2009): 31–47; "Religious Discrimination and Women in the Asoke Buddhist Group in Thailand," in *Enabling Gender Equality: Future Generations of the Global World*, eds. Eunice Rodriguez and Barbara Wejnert (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2015), 181–93; "Santi Asoke," in *Religion in Southeast Asia: An Encyclopedia of Faiths and Cultures*, ed. Jesudas M. Athyal (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 261–3.

<sup>63</sup> See for example the review by Gabaude: Louis Gabaude, review of *Buddhism with Open Eyes: Beliefs and Practice of Santi Asoke*, by Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, *Aséanie* 1 (1998): 198–215.

<sup>64</sup> Juliana Essen, "Self-Dependence and Sacrifice: Development in a Thai Buddhist Community" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2002); *Right Development: The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement in Thailand* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005); "Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement: Building Individuals, Community, and (Thai) Society," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11 (2004): 1–20; "Sufficiency Economy and Santi Asoke: Buddhist Economic Ethics for a Just and Sustainable World," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 17 (2010): 70–99.

subsequent book published in 2007, however this publication received unfavorable reviews due to the quality of scholarship.<sup>65</sup> A chapter in Putsasi's 2009 PhD thesis also briefly features Asoke.<sup>66</sup> Many publications on Asoke since the mid-2000s have focused on specific aspects of the community—for example, Asoke's "*booniyom*" economic system, which is discussed in the work from Suwida, Sunai, Essen, Thamrong, Paunglad, and Bundit.<sup>67</sup> Kanoksak has been a noteworthy contributor to this literature as well, writing at least half a dozen articles on the Asoke economic system, and its implementation, specifically within the Sisa Asoke community.<sup>68</sup> A focus on ecology and Asoke as an "eco village" has been recently considered by Reyland and Meessen.<sup>69</sup> *Sikkhamats* (female monastics in Asoke) have also been featured, or mentioned, in publications discussing renunciation available for Buddhist women in Thailand.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Rory Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke* (New York: Routledge, 2007). Mackenzie's research is problematic for various reasons and I concur with Jackson's review of this book stating that "the book is primarily an extended, poorly edited literature review that compiles secondary sources in a mostly uncritical format." Peter Jackson, review of *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke*, by Rory Mackenzie, *Journal of the Siam Society* 96 (2008): 285. Similar critiques were given by Duncan McCargo, see review of *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke*, by Rory Mackenzie, *Buddhist Studies Review* 25 (2008), 254–6. Mackenzie's work is further problematic due to the many mistakes in the citations (or missing references) and his limited fieldwork.

<sup>66</sup> Putsasi Theerasuvat, "Buddhism as a Factor in Thai Politics, 1963–1992" (PhD diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, 2009), 85–9. The section featuring Asoke is a short general overview.

<sup>67</sup> Suwida Sangsehanat, "Buddhist Economics and the Asoke Buddhist Community," *Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 3, no. 2 (2004): 271–85; Suwida Sangsehanat, "Beyond the 'Capitalist' World – System: Buddhism in Action," *Journal of Population and Social Studies* 16 (2007): 65–78; Sunai Setboonsarng, *The New Paradigm of Development and Poverty Reduction based on the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy: A Case Study of the Santi-Asoke Group in Thailand* (Bangkok: Fah Aphai, 2007); Juliana Essen, "Sufficiency Economy and Santi Asoke: Buddhist Economic Ethics for a Just and Sustainable World," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 17 (2010): 70–99; Thamrong Sangsuriyajan, "Sufficiency Economy as the Model of Thailand's Community Development," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 5 (2011): 74–82; Boonthiwa Paunglad, "The Holistic Principles of Buddhist Communities under 'Bunniyom' System in Thailand," *Silpakorn University Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts* 15, no. 1 (2015): 1–30; Bundit Siriraksophon, "'Noble Market': Asoka's Dhamma Practices and Social Movement," [in Thai] *Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (2559 [2016]): 97–121.

<sup>68</sup> Kanoksak Kaewthep, "From Dhammic Socialism to Buddhist Utopia: A Note," [in Thai] in *Buddhadasa-Buddha Dham*, ed. Bhiddaya Wongkul (Bangkok: Saitharn Publication, 2549 [2006]), 155–77; "A Radical Conservative Buddhist Utopia: The Asoke People Society and Economy," *Society and Economy* 29, no. 2 (2007): 223–33; "The Economics of 'Meritism,'" [in Thai] in *The Economics of Dhammikkaraja*, ed. Kanoksak Kaewthep (Bangkok: Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, 2007), 38–73; "An 'Imagining' Community: A Case of Sisa Asoke Community, Srisaket Province," in *Imagining Communities in Thailand: Ethnographic Approaches*, ed. Shigeharu Tanabe (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2008), 59–82. For a longer discussion of Kanoksak's contributions in Thai, see, Bundit, "Noble Market," 97–121. The Asoke *bunniyom* economic system is further explored in Chapter 2.4 of this thesis.

<sup>69</sup> William Reyland, "Santi Asoke Ecology at the Nexus of Dependent Origination" (master's thesis, Assumption University of Thailand, 2011); William Reyland, "Santi Asoke: A Community of Ecological Practice," *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* 16 (2011): 39–54; Merel Maria Meessen, "The Ecovillage Movement in Transition Partnership with Government, A Multiple Case Study: Thailand, Senegal and Damanzur (Italy)" (master's thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2013).

<sup>70</sup> Robekkah L. Ritchie, "Sikkhamats: The Aesthetics of Asoke Ascetics," in *Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 137–64; Heikkilä-Horn, "Religious

As we can see, Asoke has been regularly featured in publications as part of the changing Buddhist landscape in Thailand, especially in relation to the Dhammakāya and Buddhadāsa movements. More thorough anthropological works have further uncovered the main beliefs and practices of Asoke and mapped out the demographics of members, structure of the group and daily life. It became clear even from early works that the emphasis in Asoke is on practice and embodying beliefs, which has through anthropological work, been further established. As such, it is curious that there have been no studies exploring the aesthetics of Asoke—especially because of Bodhirak’s personal identification as an artist, their interesting history of rejecting Buddha images until 2006, and the distinct material culture of the group.

Heikkilä-Horn states that “when I arrived in Santi Asoke in October 1994, I was surprised to see a huge construction site. The building of a giant-sized temple in concrete at the Santi Asoke centre in Bangkok seems to symbolise the change from an extremely austere and radical Buddhist group into a more socially-oriented one with manifold activities carried out by the fairly diverse membership.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, I was surprised to see Buddha statues in Asoke, as all of the literature I had read on Asoke stated that they strictly reject Buddha images. When the group was first developed, a specific aesthetic profile emerged for the members (lay and ordained) and the communities.<sup>72</sup> Through the subsequent decades, much of this has stayed at the core of Asoke’s expression, however as we can see (with Heikkilä-Horn’s comments of change in 1994 and my own observations of the development of Buddha statues for example) the communities did not remain static but continued to evolve. These changes have come predominantly from within the group, though certain aspects have also been influenced externally—through the court cases of the 1990s for example. It was not my initial intention to investigate the physical components of Asoke, however while staying in the communities, I began to learn the many non-verbal messages that their material culture (clothes, buildings, art, food etc.) was intending to transmit. As the oft-quoted Geertz states, “whatever the level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them.”<sup>73</sup>

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Discrimination and Women,” 181–93; Lai Suat Yan, “Engendering Buddhism: Female Ordination and Women’s ‘Voices’ in Thailand” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2011), 110; Martin Seeger, “The Changing Roles of Thai Buddhist Women: Obscuring Identities and Increasing Charisma,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 3 (2009): 808; Lisa Battaglia, “Women who Have Gone Forth: Gender and Religious Identity Among Buddhist Nuns in Thailand” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2007), 195–6; Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2007), 184–88; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), 60–2; Heikkilä-Horn, “Woman Monks,” 31–43; Heikkilä-Horn, “The Status and Values,” 72–83.

<sup>71</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 210.

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter 1.2 for an explanation of the term “aesthetic profile.”

<sup>73</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 453.

Members would often mention that everything in Asoke had been carefully designed or that Bodhirak had consciously created all aspects; of course, it is impossible to know if “every detail” had in fact been constructed this way by Bodhirak and the Asoke community, or if Asoke-appropriate meanings were later found within material culture that had already been adopted. Regardless of the origin of these meanings, Asoke members and communities see themselves clothed in layers of non-verbal messages which both represent and teach their specific ideology. As such, this thesis explores how Asoke communities act as interactive sensational forms and a “synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*” with didactic functions that aim to support members towards their overarching goals of spiritual liberation and “giving back to society.”<sup>74</sup> The following section will introduce key terms and theoretical underpinnings that are based within the framework of an aesthetics of religion.

## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

The term *aesthetic* is derived from the Greek *aisthēsis*, meaning “sense perception” and is a broad and multifaceted concept integrated into a variety of contexts—most notably philosophy and art. In recent years, the term has been revived within anthropological and religious studies, among others. The early exploration of aesthetics can be found in the works of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), however the modern dialogue was spurred by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>75</sup> Baumgarten used the term aesthetic to mean “the science of what is sensed and imagined” and this became part of a larger dialogue used by several prominent philosophers including Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller.<sup>76</sup> The study of aesthetics developed into an extensive branch of philosophy that revolved around concepts of the nature of art and beauty as well as the critique thereof.

In the end of the twentieth century, what is often called a “sensory turn” emerged across the spectrum of humanities and social science, with special emphasis within history and anthropology—the latter being appropriately called, “anthropology of the senses.”<sup>77</sup> This interest in the senses moved into the study of religion, and in the 1980s in German-language

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<sup>74</sup> The term “synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*” is from Ergin, “The Soundscape of Sixteenth-Century Istanbul Mosques,” 213.

<sup>75</sup> This was introduced in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s doctoral thesis: *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735) and expanded upon in his book *Aesthetica* (1750).

<sup>76</sup> Paul Guyer, “18th Century German Aesthetics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2007), <https://www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aesthetics18th-german>. Also see Silvio Vietta, “Die Ästhetikrevolution um 1800,” *Deutsch-russische Germanistik. Ergebnisse, Perspektiven und Desiderate der Zusammenarbeit*, eds. Dirk Kemper and Iris Bäcker (Moscow: Stimmen der Slavischen Kultur, 2008), 151–60.

<sup>77</sup> An extensive list of literature from the last decade of sensory studies can be found here: “Books of Note,” Sensory Studies, <http://www.sensorystudies.org/books-of-note>.

scholarship, *Religionsästhetik* (aesthetics of religion) began to develop using the original Greek meaning of aesthetics as relating to the senses.<sup>78</sup> One of the seminal discussions, opened by Cancik and Mohr, introduced aesthetics of religion, which explored fields of study that encompassed anthropology of the senses, visual images, symbols and art historical considerations.<sup>79</sup> In the last three decades, scholars interested in aesthetics of religion have explored a wide array of religious traditions, developed research on senses beyond vision (highlighting the previously neglected touch, taste, sound and smell) and have begun solidifying theoretical approaches.<sup>80</sup> In an effort to more systematically discuss core approaches, Grieser and Johnston distinguish between an *aesthetics of religion* approach and *religious aesthetics*: *aesthetics of religion*, “denotes the theoretical background, the systematic questions and the methodology” whereas *religious aesthetics* refers to “the repertoire of practices—ways of seeing or listening, cultivating the body, implementing embodied values and imaginations—and the repertoire of products that developed in the context of religious traditions—images, architecture, texts and dances, and the institutions that teach, traditionalise and evaluate them.”<sup>81</sup> In order to understand the intention and boundaries of an aesthetics of religion approach, it is helpful to introduce key focuses as recently outlined by Mohr:

1. Religious thought and action, actively shaping and receptively experiencing, can only be understood by taking into consideration the fact that participants—believers and the clergy—each have a body, irrespective of how differently it may be constructed, utilized, and perceived. These religious bodies are a part of their respective—naturally as well as culturally constructed—environment; they experience it, are formed by it, and react to it. Religious practice is thus always a bodily practice as well. Religious aesthetics research must therefore place the body, its bio-psychic attributes, its internal mechanisms of information flow, its history, and its connection to the environment into the center of its reflection.
2. It is the sense organs that allow the body to communicate with its environment, to experience and shape it. They belong to the sensory systems that, consciously or not, influence and shape religious behavior and thought. The task of religious aesthetics is to determine (empirically) and, as the case may be, to reconstruct the biological, cultural, and ecological framework of the activity of the senses.

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<sup>78</sup> For current discussions regarding aesthetics of religion in the German language-sphere, see: Arbeitskreis Religionsästhetik, der Deutschen Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft (DVRW), <http://www.religionsaesthetik.de>.

<sup>79</sup> Hubert Cancik and Hubert Mohr, “Religionsästhetik,” in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe: Vol. I*, eds. Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, and Matthias Laubscher (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1988), 121–56.

<sup>80</sup> For an overview within the German language-sphere, see: Inken Prohl, “Religious Aesthetics in the German-speaking World: Central Issues, Research Projects, Research Groups,” *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 6, no. 2 (2010): 237–39.

<sup>81</sup> Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston, “What is an Aesthetics of Religion? From the Senses to Meaning—and Back Again,” in *Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept*, eds. Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 16.

3. Perception, bodily experience, thought, verbal or artistic communication are elements of a processual continuum, which underlies every practice of religion. Hence it is a task of religious aesthetics to closely track the dynamics of the aesthetic processes—such as symbol creation...Or similarly: when does a (perceptive) stimulus turn into (religious) symbol and what does that mean?
4. Religions (and that means: religious actors) create their own environments, i.e. sacral topography, architectural ensembles, places of worship, as well as interior design, images, devotional objects, “soundscapes” or media signals that influence the everyday world of all the members of a society—and not only of the believer.<sup>82</sup>

These facets provide fertile ground for a wide breadth of research and have been used by scholars in diverse contexts, frequently in relation to other disciplines. Grieser and Johnston further emphasize the “connectivity” brought about through the aesthetics of religion lens because it firstly allows for a relational analysis “of sensing, perceiving and sense making,” and secondly, it connects the “modes of academic knowledge we need to provide such an analysis.”<sup>83</sup> As such, aesthetics of religion as a “connective concept” supports the meeting of different fields, modes of knowledge and sources for many variations and opportunities of interdisciplinary work.<sup>84</sup> Six key points of departure for interdisciplinary overlap with aesthetics of religion and other areas of research have been articulated: (1) Perception and sensory organs (aesthetics of religion); (2) Symbols and signs as connecting and communicative tools (semiotics of religion); (3) Forms of action, in their expressions in religious groups and rituals (performance studies); (4) Forms of articulation in religious art, music and literature (art theories); (5) The religious everyday world and material culture (material culture and cultural studies); (6) The stimulation of feelings and moods via staged scenes that can be perceived by the senses (psychology of religion and cognitive science).<sup>85</sup> As is evident, aesthetics of religion covers a wide spectrum of topics; therefore, it is necessary to specify the most relevant aspects for this thesis, and where intersections lay between these key areas and the Asoke group. The following section defines five reoccurring key concepts within this thesis: material culture, sensational forms, aesthetic formations, aesth/ethics and physiomorality.

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<sup>82</sup> Hubert Mohr, “Material Religion/Religious Aesthetics: A Research Program,” *Material Religion* 6, no. 2 (2010): 240–1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s discussion on the embodied subject has been a source of great influence in the study of material culture and the embodiment of religion. See, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (1945; repr., London: Routledge, 1962) and *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. James M. Edie (1955; repr., Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

<sup>83</sup> Grieser and Johnston, “What is an Aesthetics of Religion?” 30.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>85</sup> From the manifesto of the DVRW written after the 2007 workshop “The Aesthetics of Religion” quoted in Annette Wilke and Oliver Moebus, *Sound and Communication: An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 27–8. Grieser and Johnson also list a close theoretical relationship and overlap with Sensory Studies, Material Religion, The Anthropology of the Senses, and the Cognitive Science of Religion (CRS). Grieser and Johnston, “What is an Aesthetics of Religion?” 1.

The study of material culture “centers upon objects, their properties, and the materials that they are made of, and the ways in which these material facets are central to an understanding of culture and social relations.”<sup>86</sup> The role of objects can be particularly salient within a religious context, spurring interest in religious studies—the joining of these aspects is at times called “material religion.”<sup>87</sup>

Die Ansätze der Materialen Religion gehen davon aus, dass Kommunikation nicht allein aus dem Austausch kognitiver Information besteht, sondern dass das als Religion Verstandene sich aus kognitiven, sinnlichen und emotionalen Prozessen konstituiert. Aus diesem Grund richtet sich das Interesse dieses Forschungsansatzes auf das Materiale als Träger nonverbaler Botschaften – sei es in Form von Bildern, Statuen, Gerüchen, Umweltsettings oder akustischen Reizen – sowie auf Rituale als Formationen kognitiver, sinnlicher und emotionaler Stimulation...Es sind diese Objekte, Handlungen und materialen Settings, die religiösen Überzeugungen einen sichtbaren und greifbaren Ausdruck verleihen. Im Umgang mit diesen und in Wechselwirkung mit den kognitiven Botschaften von Religionen bilden sich religiöse Ansichten heraus.<sup>88</sup>

In discussing Chinese Buddhism, Kieschnick further argues that “objects are often the most expressive means for conveying religious ideas and sentiments. In short, material culture is as much part of religion as language, thought or ritual.”<sup>89</sup> In this thesis, the consideration of material culture is brought into the realm of material religion and is narrowly focused in a Buddhist context—and more specifically within Thailand and Asoke communities.<sup>90</sup> Thailand

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<sup>86</sup> Sophie Woodward, “Material Culture,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, last modified May 28, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199766567-0085>. Material culture studies has become an extensive field that weaves through archeology, anthropology, religious studies, history, and museum studies for example. Material culture studies have been especially shaped by works by Claude Levi-Strauss and Clifford Geertz (with a Weberian and new Durkheimian influence). For an introduction and discussion of the development and influences of material culture studies, see Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2–98. Noteworthy contributions to material culture studies include, Daniel Miller, ed., *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (London: University College London Press, 2001); Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (London: SAGE, 2007); Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Kuechler, Mike Rowlands and Patricia Spyer, eds., *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: SAGE, 2006); Victor Buchli, ed., *The Material Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

<sup>87</sup> Also see, *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rfmr20/current>.

<sup>88</sup> Inken Prohl, “Materiale Religion,” *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 380–1. Also see Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, eds. *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (Fordham University, 2012); Brent Plate, ed. *Key Terms in Material Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie, eds., *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>89</sup> John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 23.

<sup>90</sup> The turn towards material culture is especially relevant in regard to Buddhist studies. As discussed in Chapter 1.1, early scholars placed an emphasis on scripture, which not only ignored the people living these beliefs, but also their relationship to religious objects—most notably, Buddha images. For further discussions on Buddhist material culture, see Benjamin J. Fleming and Richard D. Mann, eds., *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3–9; Pamela Winfield and Steven Heine, eds., *Zen and Material Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Klemens Karlsson, “The Formation of Early Buddhist Visual Culture,” *Material Religion* 2 (2006): 68–95; Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism*.

has a complex and unique material culture which is deeply influenced by Buddhism and within this context McDaniel notes that “beliefs are articulated through objects. Objects are not empty signifiers onto which meaning is placed.”<sup>91</sup> As a microcosm within Thailand, Asoke has made a conscious effort to either adopt, reject or adapt certain aspects of Thai material culture in order to articulate Asoke-specific beliefs through these objects. The discussion of the distinctive material culture within Asoke is a central theme throughout this thesis. In Chapter 2, an overview is given of core beliefs within Asoke and how they are manifested physically. The materialization of these beliefs shapes the bodies of members as well as the communities themselves. Chapter 3 focuses specifically on members in Asoke, with an emphasis on their appearance—this is especially important as the bodies of members are carriers of specific meanings, and this ties in with physiomorality and aesth/ethics discussed below. Asoke members renounce and reject many aspects of the worn material culture present in the broader Thai context, such as western clothing or amulets for example; the group has developed their own material culture, where each aspect of their physical appearance (clothing, hairstyle, and bare feet for example) has a specific meaning and is a carrier of non-verbal messages. Chapter 4 explores material culture in Asoke through discussing artworks in the communities—especially as the development of Asoke-specific Buddha statues has signaled a shift in the landscape and identity. Lastly, Chapter 5 looks at the physical spaces of Asoke, the use of water, the types of buildings, and the messages they are transmitting. The distinct material culture in Asoke shapes the sensory experience within the community—through the food, clothes, dirt paths, buildings, and artwork, for example. This has been specifically designed by Asoke to induce certain sensations that represent and support their beliefs and is intended to aid spiritual progression.

As such, I consider the material aspects of Asoke as “sensational forms.” The concept of sensational forms was developed by Meyer to describe

relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking, and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations. Sensational forms are transmitted and shared, they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and play a central role in forming religious subjects.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 162.

<sup>92</sup> Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding,” in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion and the Senses*, ed. Birgit Meyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 9. Also see, Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” in *Religion: Beyond A Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

Sensational forms are similarly discussed and described as “religiöse Medien” by Münster and “Sinneseindrücke als Gewähr von Sinn” by Prohl.<sup>93</sup> These terms cover many aspects of religious communities and activities—for example, Meyer sees collective rituals as “prime examples” of sensational forms, and it can “also be applied to the ways in which material religious objects - such as images, books, or buildings - address and involve beholders.”<sup>94</sup> As such, the importance of the interaction between the material culture mentioned above is emphasized—especially as many of the material aspects of Asoke are specifically designed to induce particular feelings and sensations in order to further spiritual development. The discussion of these theories in relationship to groups of persons leads to concepts of social aesthetics and aesthetic formations.

Heidemann describes social aesthetics as “the principles of everyday perception: they place objects into contexts, connect people to artefacts, and create meaning and totalities,” and he argues that these aspects are particularly potent in “culturally demarcated spaces”—which in this case, are the Asoke communities.<sup>95</sup> I argue that we can consider the aesthetics of the Asoke group as a whole, even though they have many “culturally demarcated spaces” (the physical communities with distinct borders), these spaces share overarching themes, giving them an aesthetic coherence. The beliefs of Bodhirak and the group have driven the creation of a very specific sensory experience within the community, and as such, I argue we can consider Asoke an “aesthetic formation.” Meyer proposes the term “formations” to suggest going beyond the fixed and static idea of communities with rigid borders and rather emphasize the processes and dynamism thereof. The term “aesthetic formations”

highlights the convergence of processes of forming subjects and the making of communities—as social formations. In this sense, ‘aesthetic formations’ captures very well the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense, and which materializes in things.<sup>96</sup>

This concept is relevant within this study as the Asoke communities and members have developed and share a distinctive aesthetic profile which informs their senses. This is a decidedly cyclical process of materialization, sensory contact, and the shaping of communities and bodies, which further materializes beliefs. Discussing Asoke as an aesthetic formation

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<sup>93</sup> Daniel Münster, *Religionsästhetik und Anthropologie der Sinne* (Munich: Akad. Verlag, 2001); Inken Prohl, “Materiale Religion,” in *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 379–92; Inken Prohl, *Religiöse Innovationen: Die Shintō-Organisation World Mate in Japan* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2006).

<sup>94</sup> Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations,” 9.

<sup>95</sup> Frank Heidemann, “Social Aesthetics, Atmosphere and Proprioception,” in *Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept*, eds. Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 457.

<sup>96</sup> Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations,” 7.

highlights this dynamic quality of their lived communities and emphasises the continual changes and developments to the Asoke aesthetic. The Asoke interpretation of morality (*sīla*) is a prominent aspect of their belief structure and as such it is one of the main factors in developing the group as an aesthetic formation.

The overlapping of ethics and aesthetics is also addressed specifically in regard to anthropological practices by Carrithers who states that “a moral aesthetic is already and inevitably built into the conditions of anthropological research simply because that research is constituted in the creation and understanding of social relations.”<sup>97</sup> Further explaining that

this aesthetic standard has come increasingly to the surface in anthropological writings and the archive of anthropological knowledge. Alongside the admission of personal and interpersonal illustration to ethnographic writing, anthropologists have developed explicit professional ethics...Moreover, a general shift in the conditions of anthropological work has meant that those ethnographized are now much more likely to be readers, as well as subjects, of anthropological research.<sup>98</sup>

This is important to note as understanding aesth/ethics moves beyond theoretical application and is in fact deeply embedded in the research methods used within this thesis. The intersection of aesthetics and morality is relevant within many layers of this work, in regard to the beliefs of the Asoke group, the manifestation of those beliefs, and the anthropological approaches used in order to investigate them.

Bergmann considers moral philosophy and sensory perceptions to be deeply and inevitably linked as “the perception of moral problems must be prior to their reflection and solution,” and coined the term aesth/ethic in order to

signal the intention not to leave moral philosophy and ethics to itself but to embed it continuously in perceptions. If ethics is defined as a discursive reflection on moral problems, it becomes difficult to exclude people’s mental capacities and to separate aesthetic competence from moral competence. Ethics must necessarily be embraced by aesthetics.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Michael Carrithers, “Anthropology as a Moral Science of Possibilities,” *Current Anthropology* 46, no. 3 (2005): 438.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 77. Bergmann has written extensively on aesth/ethics, especially in regard to space, architecture and theology. See for example, “Religion in the Built Environment: Aesth/Ethics, Ritual and Memory in Lived Urban Space,” *The Sacred in the City*, eds. Walter Van Herck and Liljana Gómez Popescu (London: Continuum, 2012): 73–95; “Aware of the Spirit: In the Lens of a Trinitarian Aesth/Ethics of Lived Space,” *Ecological Awareness: Exploring Religion, Ethics and Aesthetics*, eds. Sigurd Bergmann and Heather Eaton (Berlin: LIT, 2011): 23–40; *Raum und Geist: Zur Erdung und Beheimatung der Religion: Eine theologische Ästh/Ethik des Raums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); “The Beauty of Speed or the Cross of Mobility? Introductory Reflections on the Aesth/Ethics of Space, Justice and Motion,” *Spaces of Mobility: The Planning, Ethics, Engineering and Religion of Human Motion*, eds. Sigurd Bergmann, Thomas Hoff and Tore Sager (London: Equinox, 2008), 1–30; “Atmospheres of Synergy: Towards an Eco-Theological Aesth/Ethics of Space,” *Ecotheology: The Journal of Religion, Nature and the Environment* 11, no. 3 (2006): 327–57.

This concept is appropriate when studying Asoke as the physical interpretation and manifestation of moral conduct (*sīla*) is the core method used to achieve their overarching goal of spiritual development. The materialization of this foundational Asoke belief is explored, as described above, through three main facets within this thesis: bodies of members, artwork and the physical Asoke communities. The bodies of members signal morality through their clothing, haircuts, and bare feet for example, which in turn, informs their senses, represents their beliefs, and is meant to support their spiritual progress (as explored in Chapter 3). The artwork found in Asoke also represents the joining of aesthetics and ethics. In Bodhirak's concept of art hierarchies, "higher" levels of art must be informed by *Dhamma* and morality—and Bodhirak perceives his development of the Asoke group as aiming at the highest form of art (as discussed in Chapter 4). The physical spaces of Asoke communities engage the senses of members in a variety of ways, with the aim of being conducive to spiritual growth (the focus of Chapter 5). Through the expression of morality via the bodies of members, artwork and the communities, the joining of ethics and the senses (as is represented by the term aesth/ethics) is thoroughly integrated on many levels within Asoke. Similarly, the concept of aesth/ethics can be linked to physiomorality.

Mrozik discusses the "physiomoral discourse" within Buddhist traditions where the body is assigned an important role in the "ethical development of self and other."<sup>100</sup> This can be further tied to aesth/ethics as morality can be expressed by the body: "various forms of bodily inscription such as dress, posture, and movement also serve as physiomoral markers of worth," for Buddhist monastics this is "most obviously constituted as such by shaven head, monastic robes, and the absence of conventional forms of adornment such as jewelry."<sup>101</sup> Similarly, and within a Thai context, Cook also connects these elements stating that "the appearance of the body of the monastic reveals an inner state of moral attainment: others bear witness to moral qualities and virtues in monastic physical performance."<sup>102</sup> Asoke has developed specific physiomoral markers of worth in their appearance not only for monastics, but for lay members as well (as discussed in Chapter 3). Considerations of physiomoral markers touches on a central

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<sup>100</sup> Suzanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63–4. Mrozik's interest is mostly on the effects of morality on the body (such as physical marks associated with the Buddha's body), the karmic conditioning of bodies (the effect of moral action on the body of the Buddha), and how bodies (of the Buddha, *bodhisattas*, *arahants*, and monastics) can influence the ethical transformation of others. Mrozik focuses on scriptural examples, however I find her discussions still relevant regarding the relationship of morality and the body in Asoke.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>102</sup> Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12.

facet of the material culture of Asoke—namely, the communication of non-verbal messages through the appearance of members. These meanings are exchanged between members of Asoke, between Asoke and non-Asoke members or as a personal inner dialogue. Similarly, Adam and Galinsky propose the term “enclothed cognition” to explore if and how “the experience of wearing clothes triggers associated abstract concepts and their symbolic meanings,” and they posit that “wearing clothes causes people to ‘embody’ the clothing and its symbolic meaning.”<sup>103</sup> The results of their study provide support for their initial theory, and this is pertinent regarding the appearance of Asoke members, as their material culture (clothing, hairstyles and removal of adornments for example) has been developed specifically to have “symbolic meaning” and this not only signals their beliefs, but also may allow members to “embody” these meanings. This is especially interesting when considering the visual transition of someone new to Asoke who is adapting themselves into the group through removing makeup, jewelry, fashionable clothes and amulets, or members who are progressing towards ordination.<sup>104</sup> This shaping of the body in Asoke aims at developing morality and spiritual progress, and as such, discourses on physiomorality and aesth/ethics become relevant concepts for the exploration of Asoke.

Mohr outlines the central question of the approach of an aesthetics of religion: “How is the perception of a believer formed, shaped, and directed by its physicality and material natural and social environment, which are partially fashioned by the believer himself?”<sup>105</sup> My aim in this thesis is to explore this question within the context of Asoke through using the underlying tenets of an aesthetics of religion approach in this work to highlight three central aspects of Asoke—appearance of members, artwork, and the physical communities. These aspects of Asoke have not been previously explored in any detail, nor have any authors used this framework to discuss the group. The lens of aesthetics of religion allows a deeper understanding of how Bodhirak’s specific interpretation of the *Dhamma* has shaped a coherent aesthetic profile, or style, and material culture unique to Asoke. In a broad sense, Thyssen states that,

with its choice of aesthetic tools, an organization decides how it will appear to the senses and how it will arrange its meaning...An organization can seek to harmonize its

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<sup>103</sup> Hajo Adam and Adam Galinsky, “Enclothed Cognition,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (2012): 919. Two key aspects to this study were that the clothing had a “symbolic meaning” and they were physically being worn (rather than just envisioned). This is further discussed throughout Chapter 3.

<sup>104</sup> This not only includes people who are newly interested in the group, but I also underwent a similar “transformation” in order to be allowed to live in Asoke communities. This is described in Chapter 1.3. Ordination progression and the associated changes in appearance are outlined in Chapter 3.2.1 and 3.3.1.

<sup>105</sup> Mohr, “Material Religion/Religious Aesthetics,” 240.

aesthetics, so an overall style can permeate both large and small and communicate an overall identity.<sup>106</sup>

This is especially relevant within religious contexts. Grieser and Johnston note that “across a wide variety of local forms, religious traditions can be distinguished by their *aesthetic profiles*.”<sup>107</sup> And it is through this aesthetic profile (which includes attire, architecture, the use of colour, or religious objects for example) that we can “sense,” recognize, and discern between a Thai or Chinese Buddhist aesthetic for example. It is further important to note that

these ensembles change over time and are subject to reinterpretation and adaptation...They reach beyond representing or symbolising religious beliefs and doctrines, because they cultivate perceptual habits that build identity within the group, and determine the mutual perception between groups and within the larger society.<sup>108</sup>

Asoke has developed their own specific aesthetic profile which is explored throughout this thesis; the material culture used within Asoke distinguishes the group and consists of a mixture of symbols adopted (and adapted) by Bodhirak and the group from pre-existing sources (the use of Northeastern peasant clothing, or *Dhamma* wheel representations for example), or are original elements designed by the group (the *sikkhamats* robes, or use of the vulture image for example). The various elements of Asoke material culture come together to typically create an overarching, coherent, and consistently implemented aesthetic, which is designated by the term “aesthetic profile.”<sup>109</sup>

It is lastly important clarify a few other relevant key terms that are present within this thesis, namely, “lived religion” and “ascetic.” The term “lived religion” was developed in German-language scholarship in the 1990s and has become a broad and encompassing concept and approach.<sup>110</sup>

The primary focus of lived religion is on a variety of beliefs and practices, not on propositions and reflections (as nicely expressed in the German play of words ‘*gelebte* versus *gelehrte* Religion’)...The term ‘lived religion’ signifies a shift of focus in order to attend the religiosity of individuals and groups as embedded in the contexts of life-

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<sup>106</sup> Ole Thyssen, *Aesthetic Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 60.

<sup>107</sup> Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston, “What is an Aesthetics of Religion? From the Senses to Meaning—and Back Again,” in *Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept*, eds. Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 19.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Occasionally the terms “aesthetic style” or “aesthetic repertoire” are also used.

<sup>110</sup> This early exploration can be seen in Wolf-Eckart Failing and Hans-Günter Heimbrock, *Gelebte Religion wahrnehmen: Lebenswelt—Alltagskultur—Religionspraxis* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998). Similarly, the understanding of religion as something between theory and practice and embedded within a cultural system is discussed by Geertz. Further, “for an anthropologist, the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive, conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them, on the one hand—its model of aspect—and of rooted, no less distinctive ‘mental’ dispositions—its model for aspect—on the other. From these cultural functions flow, in turn, its social and psychological ones.” See “Religion as a Cultural System” by Geertz, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 123.

worlds and biographies. Thus ‘lived religion’ includes phenomena which are not explicitly—at least not at first sight—interpreted *as* being of a religious nature.<sup>111</sup>

This thesis approaches Asoke as a lived religion, focusing on everyday life, informed by their senses and material culture—which is interwoven with concepts of religious aesthetics. This is especially pertinent as there are many aspects of Asoke that may in other contexts not be recognized as being of a religious nature; for example, the creation of water features in the communities or adhering to a vegetarian/vegan diet. Bergmann further notes that “the concept of lived religion is, however, not a theory or really a concept but rather emancipation from the bonds of reductionist and limited conceptualizations of religion,” especially as it overlaps with and integrates aspects from various areas of study including phenomenology, cultural studies and aesthetics for example.<sup>112</sup> Lastly, Morgan defines lived religion as “religion at work” which is especially appropriate when discussing Asoke and their beliefs due to the emphasis on daily practice and physical labor as a means of spiritual development.<sup>113</sup>

The title of this thesis, *Aesthetics of Asoke Ascetics: Materializing Morality in the Santi Asoke Communities of Thailand*, already designates Asoke members as ascetic. More than just a pleasing alliteration, the term is relevant and fitting for several reasons, but it must also be considered within a wider context as well, as it has a long, nuanced, and multifaceted history.<sup>114</sup> Asceticism is defined by Freiburger as “the enduring performance of practices that affect bodily needs for religious purposes.”<sup>115</sup> As such, the complexity of considering asceticism is also entwined with a larger discussion of the body and somatic practices.<sup>116</sup> Specifically within a

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<sup>111</sup> Heinz Streib, Astrid Dinter, and Kerstin Söderblom, eds., “Introduction,” in *Lived Religion: Conceptual, Empirical and Practical-Theological Approaches—Essays in Honor of Hans-Günter Heimbrock* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), x. For further introductions and explorations of “lived religion” see, Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>112</sup> Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 75.

<sup>113</sup> David Morgan, “The Material Culture of Lived Religion: Visuality and Embodiment,” in *Mind and Matter: Selected Papers of Nordik 2009 Conference for Art Historians*, ed. Johanna Vakkari (Helsinki: Helsinfors, 2010), 18.

<sup>114</sup> For overarching discussions of the term “ascetic” and explorations on asceticism, see: Oliver Freiburger, ed., *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Oliver Freiburger, “Askese als Begriff: Substanzielle, funktionale und diskursive Perspektiven,” *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 32 (2015): 11–33; Christoph Wulf and Jörg Zirfas, eds., “Askese” *Paragrana: Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische* 8 (1999); Almut-Barbara Renger, “Repetition, Training, Exercise: From Plato’s Care of the Soul to the Contemporary Self-Help Industry,” in *Repetition, Recurrence, Returns*, eds. Joan Ramon Resina and Christoph Wulf (London: Lexington, 2019), 51–67.

<sup>115</sup> Oliver Freiburger, “Introduction: The Criticism of Asceticism in Comparative Perspective,” in *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Oliver Freiburger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6–7.

<sup>116</sup> Almut-Barbara Renger and Alexandra Stellmacher, eds., *Übungswissen in Religion und Philosophie: Produktion, Weitergabe, Wandel* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2018); Almut-Barbara Renger and Christoph Wulf, eds., “Körperwissen: Transfer und Innovation,” *Paragrana: Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie* 1 (2016).

Buddhist setting, there are varied discussions to be had, as the well-known narrative describes Siddhārtha Gautama’s ascetic practices before his awakening and development of the “Middle Way;”<sup>117</sup> however Freiburger also notes that “the concept of the Middle Way was a rhetorical tool against severe asceticism; its polemical power was more important than its (varying) contents. Apparently it was created, or at least used, to criticize not only non-Buddhist ascetics but also Buddhist ones.”<sup>118</sup> Even without delving deeply into the matter, the complexity of asceticism in a Buddhist context is evident. Further, we can also approach asceticism from the relationship to virtue and self-restriction as Flood states that,

what is particularly significant about the Buddhist case is that asceticism is seen as integral to the development of virtue, without which there can be no enlightenment. Rather than a mechanical method for eradicating impurity, asceticism becomes a moral endeavour that leads the ascetic self, after long struggle, to see ‘things as they are.’

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The Buddhist path is clearly ascetic in our sense of developing a disciplined life as an act of will, with the ultimate goal of awakening...the Buddhist ascetic, while desisting from the extremes of the Jains, still performs to reverse the flow of the body, still performs to disrupt the socially conditioned *habitus* and still performs to curb sensory desire.<sup>119</sup>

This brings us to considering Asoke—a group that places emphasis on morality, sensorial control, and a lifestyle that includes practices that directly affect the bodily. Even without this deeper investigation, Asoke is regularly described as ascetic—even though the generalized image of meditating monastics is not fulfilled in the group. As Cook notes, “Buddhist monasteries in Thailand vary widely in focus and institutional organization and we must be careful not to assume a necessary correlation between monasticism and asceticism, or indeed between meditation and asceticism, in any given context.”<sup>120</sup> Mackenzie considers Asoke so extreme that he states that “it would appear that the ascetic practices of some Asoke lay members are closer to the excessively rigorous path the Buddha rejected, rather than the ‘Middle-Way’ he taught.”<sup>121</sup> Heikkilä-Horn reports that the results of her study “indicate that

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<sup>117</sup> Also see the discussion on asceticism in Buddhism by Oliver Freiburger and Christoph Kleine, *Buddhismus: Handbuch Und Kritische Einführung* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 245–53.

<sup>118</sup> Freiburger further states that “the politics of the Middle Way have been very successful in several respects...it has determined the way modern scholars tend to present early Buddhists, that is, as strongly opposing severe ascetic practices and sensual pleasure and as following the Middle Way between both extremes. The textual accounts show that this description merely refers to one of several lifestyles in early Buddhism.” Oliver Freiburger “Early Buddhism, Asceticism, and the Politics of the Middle Way,” in *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Oliver Freiburger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 250–1.

<sup>119</sup> Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 119–22. Similarly, Cook notes that “the focus of a study of asceticism rests upon the training involved in becoming virtuous: the personal development of particular virtues, more than adherence to moral laws or the avoidance of vice.” Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism*, 16.

<sup>120</sup> Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism*, 15.

<sup>121</sup> Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 170. This statement is however not taking into account the historical developments and the “politics of the Middle Way” as discussed by Freiburger above.

in several cases minor bending of rules is tolerated nowadays; the Asoke still emphasise very strict ascetic Buddhist practices, but do not force anyone to follow these practices to the extremes.”<sup>122</sup> Specifically in regard to members at Sisa Asoke, Kanoksak notes that “at the ideological level, a rigorous ascetic discipline is a major source of members’ commitment as well as a search for perfection.”<sup>123</sup> Asceticism in Asoke in relation to Weber has also been considered by Heikkilä-Horn, Taylor, and Swearer.<sup>124</sup> Regardless of if we are considering Asoke from the perspective of their daily body-affecting practices (such as eating one meal a day, forgoing shoes, specific clothing for lay members and monastics, or sleeping on straw mats for example), from a Weberian lens, regarding self-discipline or the approach to morality, the term ascetic is appropriate within the context of Asoke.

### 1.3 Methodology

This thesis is based predominantly on my fieldwork undertaken within Asoke communities in Thailand, and this section is an overview of the core techniques used when observing and interacting with the informants within Asoke. Whilst specific considerations will be discussed later within the context of each location and interviewee, broader descriptions of my methods are outlined in this sub-chapter. To set the scene, the sites of the study are described. This section is further divided into the types of data collection techniques and considerations used in the field: participant observation and positionality, interview methods, visual research, and fieldnotes.

#### Sites of the Study

There are nine established Asoke communities as well as numerous gardens, rice fields and smaller projects spread throughout Thailand.<sup>125</sup> During my first field trip from early February to the end of March 2013, I spent nearly two months living in the Asoke’s oldest centre.<sup>126</sup> Pathom Asoke is located outside the city of Nakhon Pathom, some 50 kilometres west of Bangkok. I also had the opportunity to attend one of the largest annual community events:

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<sup>122</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 210.

<sup>123</sup> Kanoksak, “A Radical Conservative Buddhist Utopia,” 229.

<sup>124</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, chap 5; Taylor, “New Buddhist Movements in Thailand,” 137; Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 176–7.

<sup>125</sup> None of my informants were able to give me a concrete number of how many of these small centres and gardens exist, especially as there are many small plots of land used by Asoke in remote areas, and members may or may not live on or near these locations. Heikkilä-Horn reported 27 “Asoke centres” in Thailand in 2007 based on “personal communication” but it is not clear what she designates as an “Asoke centre”—if members live there fulltime or if these are only agricultural areas. Heikkilä-Horn, “Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport,” 32.

<sup>126</sup> Specific aspects of my time within Asoke are described below, especially within the Participant Observation sub-section of this chapter.

Phuttha Phisek at Sali Asoke in Phai Sali in February 2013. The small community of Sali Asoke is located roughly 300 kilometres north of Bangkok and usually has approximately 100 residents however more than 1,000 members gathered for six days of intensive teaching during this time. With such a large number of attendees from around the country, the community was carpeted with tents to accommodate the influx of guests. I had various informants, both from Pathom Asoke (Nakhon Pathom) and Santi Asoke (Bangkok) who were able to guide me through the daily activities during Phuttha Phisek, beginning at 3:00am and ending at 9:00pm. I was able to witness the large-scale production of food and the Asoke style of offering alms to monastics among many other daily activities which are otherwise less visible outside this context.<sup>127</sup> After Phuttha Phisek I organized my time between living in Pathom Asoke and visiting Santi Asoke. Santi Asoke is located in Bangkok and is the organizational hub of activity as well as Bodhirak's main residence. Santi Asoke houses the largest Asoke library and gave me the opportunity to conduct interviews with the resident monastics and lay members. The media and television centre (where I was able to witness behind the scenes broadcasting of one of Bodhirak's lectures) is also located within the Santi Asoke complex.

Upon returning to Thailand in November 2013, my intent was to focus my research in Pathom Asoke and Santi Asoke with the possibility of taking excursions to other Asoke centres around Thailand.<sup>128</sup> However, upon arrival in Thailand, the majority of Asoke members had left their respective communities to participate in the political crisis of 2013–2014 taking place in Bangkok, leaving the Asoke centres nearly empty. A “tent city” was set up in front of the Ministry of Finance where lay and ordained members camped out and I could visit the temporary shelters during the day. When the protests turned violent using tear gas and explosives, it was no longer possible to visit.<sup>129</sup> Despite the political unrest, I was able to travel to and spend time in the most northeastern Asoke centre in Ubon Ratchathani (called Ratchathani Asoke). This included taking excursions to some of Asoke's separate agricultural plots and their vegetarian restaurant in Ubon Ratchathani city.<sup>130</sup> I also had the opportunity to

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<sup>127</sup> This included the experience of Thai style outdoor communal bathing (sex segregated).

<sup>128</sup> This choice was made because I had already developed contacts and a familiarity within these two centres, further, Santi Asoke is the central hub of Asoke activity and Pathom Asoke is the oldest centre, so they are both important communities. Logistically, these two centres are also centrally located in Thailand, making travel to other Asoke communities more accessible. It was also important for me to visit other Asoke locations, especially in regard to the comparative aesthetics of the other centres and distinctive aspects, such as artwork and community layout.

<sup>129</sup> As someone with no experience being around political turmoil, I took the advice of the Asoke members and took a “better safe than sorry” approach, which hindered my ability to collect data, but ensured my safety.

<sup>130</sup> There were very few members present in Ratchathani Asoke, however one member took time to show me these locations. She also took me to the *chedi*, museum, and monastery (Wat Nong Pah Pong) of the influential forest monk Ajahn Chah.

stay briefly at a smaller farm run by Asoke outside of Nakhon Pathom.<sup>131</sup> During this research trip I was able to spend time living in Pathom Asoke and visiting Santi Asoke even though there were few members present and daily schedules were disrupted due to the political turmoil.

The first field trip was intended to develop relationships, collect basic information, and become familiar with the field and communities; my second trip (which overlapped with the political unrest) was meant to focus on a deeper examination of art, aesthetics, and the material culture of Asoke. Because of the political crisis, the quality of data from my second fieldtrip was negatively influenced due to six main factors: (1) Organizing and carrying out interviews proved especially difficult as members were preoccupied with the political situation, (2) the inaccessibility of members caused my planned survey work to be unfeasible,<sup>132</sup> (3) the Asoke communities were left bare and the schedules were disrupted, and as such, there was little to do or observe while staying in Pathom Asoke and Ratchathani Asoke, (4) discussing the topics of this thesis (the aesthetics of the centres, members and artwork) was challenging because members were focused on political topics, and it was inopportune to ask questions about the physical aspects of the Asoke communities (buildings and artworks for example) while not in an Asoke community, (5) technical constraints factored in as I was unable to take voice recordings and photos at the political rallies,<sup>133</sup> (6) my fieldwork was cut short due to the political unrest, and because of financial and health constraints, organizing subsequent trips to Thailand was not possible. Fieldwork is by nature unpredictable and any number of unexpected experiences may befall the researcher, and this is also part of the initial risk of undertaking this kind of work. Having the ability to participate and visit a variety of Asoke communities and contexts, from large active centres, small farm projects and intense spiritual events to political rallies gave me broad experiences and perspectives to the many forms of Asoke, enabling my research and subsequent findings and conclusions.

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<sup>131</sup> A group of about twenty students were living here, presided over by one monk, and a few lay members were present to cook and help care for the students. This is an example of one of the many smaller Asoke centres that is not included in the list of the nine “main” communities.

<sup>132</sup> This inaccessibility was in part due to the situation turning violent and not being able to be present in their camp, but also because members had very little free time and were not centrally located as there were many rallies and marches in other areas of Bangkok happening daily. Further, Asoke members (especially lay residents and non-residents) were mixed into the larger mass of “yellow shirt” protesters and there were overlaps between encampments and supporters from different factions of the anti-Thaksin/anti-Yingluck demonstrators.

<sup>133</sup> This included the inability to voice record because of the noise levels (all recordings were inaudible) and take photos because members said it could be dangerous to bring my camera, especially as a foreign woman.

## Participant Observation and Positionality

Participant observation has been and continues to be widely used in qualitative studies and is a central aspect of ethnographic research; because of the focus of this thesis, participant observation was a necessary and the most valuable form of data collection.<sup>134</sup> The researcher's relationship to their subjects or group of study is often assessed through a scale of varying levels of involvement. For example, Gold's typology of the participant observer encompasses four distinct aspects: (1) complete participant (2) participant as observer (3) observer as participant (4) complete observer.<sup>135</sup> "Participant" in the first two typologies is when the researcher is a member of the group being studied, whereas the "observer as participant" may be involved in group activities, however they retain the main role as researcher, and the group is aware of this. Through ethical considerations and aiming for a high quality of data, observer as participant is the preferred stance for a researcher in the field. Participant observation requires the fieldworker to firstly have access to the area and persons, and in this context, that includes an adherence to community rules, which dictated a specific appearance and lifestyle. As such, a certain level of participation in the community was first required to gain access, however as I am not a member of the group (and because of my ethnicity, I was not mistaken for a group member) my position as a researcher was always clear.

Measures are taken in Asoke to ensure newcomers in the community are willing and able to live harmoniously with Asoke values and way of life. They clearly state that the communities are not a vacation destination and visitors are screened before they are given permission to stay in Asoke. Upon arriving in Pathom Asoke for the first time, having not stayed in an Asoke community before, I was "interviewed" during which a long-time female lay resident inquired into my interest in Asoke and my intentions, as well as my understanding of the precepts and community requirements (as detailed below). After this initial interview, I did

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<sup>134</sup> Five central reasons for the necessity of participant observation for the scientific research of culture groups are listed by Bernard: (1) It opens opportunities to experiencing aspects of life that are inaccessible to strangers; (2) participant observation "reduces the problem of reactivity—of people changing their behavior when they know that they are being studied" through building trust, which in turn increases the validity of the data; (3) through having a familiarity with the local culture, participant observation helps the researcher ask sensible questions in both interviews and questionnaires; (4) participant observation helps the researcher understand the meaning of their observations; (5) "many research problems simply cannot be addressed adequately by anything except participant observation...getting a general understanding of how any social institution or organization works...is best achieved through participant observation." Harvey Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 5th ed. (Plymouth: AltaMira, 2011), 265–7.

<sup>135</sup> Raymond L. Gold, "Roles in sociological field observations," *Social Forces* 36 (1958): 217–23. Similarly, Spradley lists five levels of involvement: (1) nonparticipation, (2) passive participation, (3) moderate participation, (4) active participation, and (5) complete participation. James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 58–62. Adler and Adler use the approach of (1) Peripheral member (2) Active member (3) Complete member. Patricia Adler and Peter Adler, *Membership roles in field research* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1987), chap. 2–4.

not have similar experiences in any of the other communities as Asoke members were in communication with each other and either knew about my arrival, or I was accompanied by other members. Upon arriving in Ratchathani Asoke I was also given an introductory paper with the various community rules.<sup>136</sup> My familiarity with strict monastic environments had given me many appropriate cultural codes and made Asoke communities a relatively familiar environment where I could adhere to their rules and interact with lay members and monastics without too many social faux pas.<sup>137</sup>

In order to have permission to live within Asoke communities, it is a requirement to abide by certain principles and way of life—this includes strictly following (at minimum) five precepts and the abstaining from the “six vices,”<sup>138</sup> being vegetarian,<sup>139</sup> adhering to their daily schedule, giving back to the community through contributing (chores for example), and sleeping on nothing more than a straw mat in whatever sleeping accommodations were offered.<sup>140</sup> It was further necessary to participate visually by wearing Asoke-appropriate attire and abstaining from jewelry and makeup. I did not wear the “Asoke uniform” (as discussed in Chapter 3.4) but I always adhered to the dress code by wearing loose-fitting clothing with long sleeves, high necklines, ankle-length pants, or sarongs and generally being barefooted. Clothing with large logos or that is “fashionable” or bright/patterned, for example, is frowned upon in Asoke and was avoided. During my fieldtrip that overlapped with the political tensions, colours were highly politicized as Asoke were part of the “yellow shirts” who were opposing the Thaksin/Yingluck supporters, or “red shirts,” and I was told it was inappropriate to wear anything red.<sup>141</sup> Participation in the community in these ways was a necessary part of gaining access into Asoke and because of the strict guidelines and lifestyle, undertaking fieldwork in

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<sup>136</sup> See Chapter 2 for further elaboration.

<sup>137</sup> This is thanks to time spent in Thai Forest monasteries in Canada, England, and Germany as well as other monastic environments in Asia, and Europe. Asoke members regularly commented on my mannerisms, mentioning that I act more “Thai” than many young Thai persons—this was a combination of my gestures (frequent *wai*-ing and bowing) and my modest Asoke-appropriate dress, as I endeavoured to be as respectful as possible. Lay members made occasional comments on how young people do not behave appropriately in temples, particularly in regard to young women wearing revealing clothing. This is described in Chapter 2.2 and 3.4.

<sup>138</sup> The “six vices” are, engaging in drinking, smoking (and drugs), gambling, illicit sex, frequenting nighttime entertainment and idleness. Also see Chapter 2.2.

<sup>139</sup> Thailand has a rich food culture, which is largely based on meat dishes, and living as a vegetarian was often considered unusual and challenging (this is an aspect that many Asoke members said they struggled with). I had lived on a vegan/vegetarian diet since adolescence, so this aspect of the Asoke lifestyle was a welcome change from the limited meat-free options available outside of Asoke. I was often praised by Asoke members for being vegetarian, which is linked to morality and is a central aspect of Asoke belief. This congratulating struck me as rather unusual and exaggerated because of the cultural differences from my western upbringing where vegetarianism is more commonplace. This aspect of Asoke is explained further in Chapter 2.2.

<sup>140</sup> Sleeping situations depended on the community, at times I had the entire female dorm to myself, and other times I shared it with up to twenty women. In Sali Asoke, I slept on the ground outside under a mosquito net and during my stay in Ratchathani Asoke, I stayed in a small single room to myself.

<sup>141</sup> Further described in Chapter 3.4.

this setting required a certain level of initial involvement that is not often a prerequisite in other fieldwork settings. Though this active participation was mandatory in order to be able to stay at their centres, potentially requiring more involvement than is deemed appropriate by a fieldworker, I still remained an outsider because of my ethnicity and role as a researcher instead of following their lifestyle out of belief.

Participant observation in Asoke included a range of interactions and involvement in daily life within the communities and temporary camps set up during the political protests. While living in Asoke, I was permitted to observe and join in daily activities such as chores, the daily meal, and sermons. Some aspects of Asoke were not accessible to me as an outsider, or as a lay woman—such as organizational meetings between members, or events only attended by monastics.

Daily activities within the different Asoke centres follow a very similar schedule. Members typically wake up around 3:30am and attend early morning chanting and *Dhamma* talks from monastics or community meetings. Afterwards, members will disband and attend to their chores, I typically went to the kitchen to help chop, peel, and prepare food for the daily meal. The main meal is served around 10:00am and afterwards lay and ordained members return to their work stations, for example, in the communal gardens, making food products (soy sauce, tofu or noodles), teaching students, working in Asoke stores or the recycling centres.<sup>142</sup> Some members tended to family obligations if they have children in the community, or elderly parents.<sup>143</sup> After the main meal, I often spent time with female lay members in their respective stations, or did chores (typically sweeping or cleaning). During my free time in the afternoon, I was permitted access to the Asoke libraries; the libraries in Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke and Ratchathani Asoke were my main sources for archival research in the Asoke communities.<sup>144</sup> Later in the day organizational meetings, group “morality checks,” or activities with the students may take place; occasionally I would teach English to the older students or watching movies with them in the evening.<sup>145</sup> Because members wake up so early, most people retire around 8:00pm.

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<sup>142</sup> This is also dependent on the interests and abilities of individual members as well as the Asoke centre in which they reside. In Santi Asoke members also may work with Asoke media (in publishing or television production for example) and other Asoke centres have areas for making and packaging herbal health products or for organic fertilizer for example.

<sup>143</sup> As was the case with Sikkhamat Boonjin with taking care of her elderly mother in Santi Asoke.

<sup>144</sup> Most Asoke communities house libraries with Asoke publications, news clippings, external and internal research about the group as well as videos, assorted literature on Buddhism, Thai culture, natural farming, vegetarianism, and other books and magazines of interest. Santi Asoke also has a media store with books, CD's, DVD's, and other Asoke media for sale using the Asoke economic “*booniyom*” system of selling items generally at a below-cost price. The Asoke *booniyom* system is explained further in Chapter 2.4.

<sup>145</sup> My ability to participate in certain Asoke activities was constrained due to a chronic illness, however Asoke

During events, such as Phuttha Phisek in Phai Sali, activities differed from daily life because of the special schedule, number of persons, and living arrangements. A full timetable of chanting, cooking, giving alms, *Dhamma* talks, and group workshops filled the days, along with interviewing monastics and members. Other exceptions to the daily schedule occurred when members took me on excursions to visit Asoke agricultural plots (outside of Ratchathani Asoke for example, or to the “experimental” garden at Mahidol University) or other places they thought would be of interest to me (such as the large Buddhādāsa centre in Bangkok, Phutthamonthon park west of Bangkok, Ajahn Chah’s commemorative centre in Ubon Ratchathani or the Phra Pathommachedi in Nakhon Pathom).<sup>146</sup> Daily schedules were especially erratic during the political unrest. I was not permitted to stay overnight in the temporary Asoke camps and during the day (before the situation turned violent with tear gas and explosives) I spent time in the “tent city” with the monastics and members and walked with them in the mass marches and protests. When it was no longer an option to visit the protest sites, my time in Bangkok was often spent in Santi Asoke watching the political coverage on the television with female lay members and *sikkhamats* that had remained behind.

Ethical practices “span the life of every ethnographic research project,” and relevant aspects to this thesis predominantly revolve around informed consent and confidentiality.<sup>147</sup> Informed consent is a central feature of ethical fieldwork and begins with the researcher’s “degree of self-revelation.”<sup>148</sup> During my fieldwork, I was truthful regarding my intentions and interest for being in Asoke—I generally explained that the Asoke communities were the basis for my PhD studies in Germany. It was a frequent request while in the field to discuss my personal beliefs and my interest in Buddhism; when asked, I truthfully explained that I was raised by Buddhist parents in Canada within the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah (which is associated with the renowned monk Ajahn Mun).<sup>149</sup> Reverting to the religious affiliation of my

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members were respectful of my physical limitations and it was not a problem to opt out of manual labor or agricultural work and find other activities.

<sup>146</sup> Hospitality is an important aspect in Thai culture and some Asoke members went out of their way to not only introduce me to their way of life, but also show me nearby cultural sites. The offers from members to take me on excursions was at times uncomfortable to accept, as I did not want them to go out of their way for me and it creates a potentially ethical grey area as a researcher, however on many occasions it seemed as though it would have been considered unpolite to refuse their request to take me somewhere.

<sup>147</sup> Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers* 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2011), 211. For further discussion on ethics in anthropology, see: Linda Whiteford and Robert Trotter, *Ethics for Anthropological Research and Practice* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2008) and Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, “Ethics,” in *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Harvey Russell Bernard (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1998), 173–202.

<sup>148</sup> The “degrees of self-revelation” are discussed in, Greg Guest, Emily E. Namey and Marilyn L. Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research* (London: SAGE, 2013), 88.

<sup>149</sup> Specifically, in connection with Birken Forest Monastery in British Columbia, Canada. Asoke members hold Ajahn Mun in high esteem (pictures of him are found in some Asoke centres) and this connection served at times

parents and upbringing allowed me a certain freedom from taking a direct stance on my personal beliefs and circumventing the question in an appropriate way.<sup>150</sup>

During recorded interviews informed consent is more clearly agreed to, compared to informal conversations with members of the research group. All interviews with monastics in Asoke were recorded (I specifically asked permission to record each interview) and as they are public figures being knowingly recorded, their names have been disclosed in this thesis when they are quoted. Comments by lay members have been treated with greater confidentiality because during informal conversations, there was often no clear consent to use their comments for my research, and they may not have been aware that I made note of what they had said. To protect the integrity and confidentiality of the lay members, their quotes have been anonymized.<sup>151</sup> To give context within the text, I supply basic information—if they are female, male, a long-time resident or non-resident, and in which Asoke community they live for example.

Reflexivity is another important aspect of fieldwork and is generally described as “the process of reflection, which takes itself as the object; in the most basic sense, it refers to reflecting on *oneself* as the *object* of provocative, unrelenting thought and contemplation.”<sup>152</sup> One consideration from Bourdieu calls to go beyond participant observation to “participant objectivation,” which strives towards the “*objectivation of the subject of objectivation*, of the analysing subject – in short, of the researcher herself.”<sup>153</sup> This stresses the importance of critical self-reflection and considerations regarding positionality (how experience is shaped by gender, ethnicity, age etc. but also anthropological approach).<sup>154</sup> Within Asoke, because of the segregation between the sexes and also between monastics and lay members, my positionality becomes a particularly relevant aspect which has shaped my fieldwork. This is further seen in the two monographs that have been written about Asoke, also authored by women, which

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as a bit of an “ice breaker” and in this sense, the positionality of my personal history also influenced my interactions with Asoke members.

<sup>150</sup> Other researchers report Asoke members being welcoming and open regardless of their religious affiliation, and I do not necessarily think I was treated much differently because I was raised around the Thai Forest Tradition, but it did shape certain conversations and may have influenced my relationship with some Asoke members. Essen reflects that being assumed to be Christian did not negatively affect her acceptance in the Asoke community, “since contemporary Buddhism encourages dialogue between all religions, viewing them as having essentially the same purpose—to teach people to be ‘good.’” Essen, “Self-Dependence and Sacrifice,” 11–2.

<sup>151</sup> In the chance that a lay member said something “out of line” with Asoke belief, I would not want that person to potentially receive any backlash from the publication of such comment for example.

<sup>152</sup> Maja Nazaruk, “Reflexivity in Anthropological Discourse Analysis,” *Anthropological Notebooks* 17 (2011): 73.

<sup>153</sup> Original emphasis. Pierre Bourdieu “Participant Objectivation,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9, no. 2 (2003): 282. This approach has been criticized by some scholars, for example see: Kyung-Man Kim, “How Objective Is Bourdieu’s Participant Objectivation?” *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 9 (2010): 747–56.

<sup>154</sup> Bourdieu, “Participant Objectivation,” 283.

featured biographies and explorations of the daily lives of *sikkhamats* and lay women in Asoke more so than the male members.<sup>155</sup> My positionality influenced my fieldwork because with the exception of interviews with *samanas* and male lay residents, I had little to no contact with the men in Asoke. *Samanas* abide by strict rules around contact with women, especially lay women, and because of the sex-segregation of the community, I spent my time with lay women and the *sikkhamats*. This coloured my experience in Asoke and my data collection—my planned survey work was intended to compensate for this imbalance, however, as mentioned above, the political crisis in Thailand at the time of my second field trip made survey work not possible.

Reflecting on one's positionality is helpful as Tedlock mentions the foreseeability that the researcher could unintentionally dominate the fieldwork experience; she sees this in direct connection to “the spatial, temporal, and cultural distance of this individual from the host community at the time of such representation,” and argues that “the farther away, longer ago, and more culturally Other the field experience was, the more probable that the authorial figure will be dominant, while members of the host community will shrink into the background.”<sup>156</sup> Because of the “cultural distance” of where my research takes place in comparison to my western upbringing (though also influenced by Thai Theravāda Buddhism), I am a candidate for Tedlock's reflection on potentially becoming a central figure in my work when a conscientious effort to examine this position is not undertaken. Reflexivity is an important and reoccurring topic in Asoke, as members aim to recognize and reflect on their thoughts and emotions; as this was being regularly discussed, it also brought my own inner processes to the foreground. The seven-month period between my fieldtrips also aided in this reflective process as I convened regularly with the colloquium supervised by Prof. Renger at the Freie Universität to share and discuss my initial findings. This time allowed for further consideration on my positionality and personal biases that may influence my work. During this time my collected data was organized in order to observe themes and meaningful patterns and gave me a wider perspective which allowed me to realize the relevance of aesthetics, material culture, and art in the community. Once these themes were outlined, I returned to Asoke to focus on these topics specifically.

As we can see through this short sub-chapter, there are a wide array of important

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<sup>155</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, features biographies of two *sikkhamats*, one *samana* and one female novice in *Buddhism with Open Eyes*. Essen describes a day in the life of four lay women in *Right Development*. Highlighting lay women and *sikkhamats* in Asoke touches on noteworthy discussions around gender relations and female renunciation in Thailand, which have also been considered in Chapter 3.1.1 and 3.3.3 of this thesis.

<sup>156</sup> Barbara Tedlock, “From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47 (1991): 81.

considerations when undertaking fieldwork and using participant observation as a main tool for data collection. My time in Asoke further stressed flexibility due to the requirements to enter and live in the communities and because of the unexpected political unrest. Regardless of research location, ethical approaches, positionality, and reflectivity play an important role both in and outside of the field. Taking these key aspects into account supports the quality of research since it helps create an ethically sound foundation which is questioned from various perspectives, and the interactions between the researcher and researched are grounded in honesty and openness.

### Interviews

The interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose determined by the one party – the interviewer. It is a professional interaction, which goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation, and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge. The qualitative research interview is a construction site for knowledge.<sup>157</sup>

Ferraro distinguishes three unique aspects to ethnographic interviews (compared to those in other fields such as psychology): (1) “the interviewer and the subject almost always speak different languages;” (2) it “is often much broader in scope because it elicits information on the entire culture;” and lastly, (3) it “cannot be used alone but must be used in conjunction with other data-gathering techniques.”<sup>158</sup> These aspects consider topics of language, translations, communication, understanding foreign cultures and the importance of methodological triangulation. Languages used for interviews were most often a combination of Thai, Pāli and English, and all unstructured and semi-structured interviews were documented by written notations and audio recording; the aid of a translator was used except during interviews conducted in English.<sup>159</sup> Informal interviews were more difficult to record as often conversations occurred in situations where it was not convenient to take written notes or make voice recordings in that moment (during food preparation, chores or in the garden for example).

Because interviewing “elicits information on the entire culture,” and Asoke is a

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<sup>157</sup> Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (London: SAGE, 2007), 7.

<sup>158</sup> Gary Ferraro, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 100.

<sup>159</sup> Many important considerations around language and translations have been explored, for example by, R. C. Berman and V. Tyyskä, “A Critical Reflection on the Use of Translators/Interpreters in a Qualitative Cross-Language Research Project,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 10 (2011): 178–89; Beate Littig and Franz Pöchhacker, “Socio-Translational Collaboration in Qualitative Inquiry: The Case of Expert Interviews,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 20 no. 9 (2014): 1085–95; Katharina Resch and Edith Enzenhofer, “Collecting Data in Other Languages – Strategies for Cross-Language Research in Multilingual Societies,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, ed. Uwe Flick (London: SAGE, 2018), 131–46; Deborah Court and Randa Abbas, “Whose Interview Is It, Anyway? Methodological and Ethical Challenges of Insider–Outsider Research, Multiple Languages, and Dual-Researcher Cooperation,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 19 no. 6 (2013): 480–8.

microcosm within the broader context of Thai society, there were multiple layers of relevant cultural information.<sup>160</sup> This included the customs specific to Asoke (such as their greeting, instead of saying the standard Thai “*sawatdi*” to greet each other, they say “*charoen tham*,” which translates to “may your *Dhamma* progress/prosper”) as well as Asoke’s focus on embracing certain aspects of Thai culture, such as classical music, dance and clothing.

In regard to methodological triangulation (using multiple methods to develop accurate data), interviews were undertaken within the broader framework of participant observation, especially as many interactions were informal “chats” within the field. The different kinds of interviews are frequently arranged on a continuum in relation to the amount of control and “uniformity of stimulus” (the questions) which is presented to the informant.<sup>161</sup> On one end of this spectrum are written questionnaires, which are pre-structured by the researcher and ask identical questions to the subjects, in contrast to this are conversations taking place in which the researcher does not participate directly and only observes; between these two extremes are four common interview methods: informal, unstructured, semi-structured and structured.<sup>162</sup> Informal interviews are closer to casual conversations in the field which are recorded through jottings after the fact. Unstructured interviews usually are guided by a rough plan from the researcher but left open-ended, and are also “characterized by a minimum of control over the people’s responses.”<sup>163</sup> Semi-structured interviews are based on a set of questions or guides to clearly instruct the course of the interview, however open-ended questions are used, and a certain degree of flexibility is still given to respondents. Lastly, structured interviews use a pre-set number of questions that are not deviated from during the interview, similar to oral questionnaires.

Informal, unstructured and semi-structured interviews were my main methods of gaining verbal attitudinal data (what they think) and behavioural data (what they do) from monastic and lay Asoke members. The usefulness and effectiveness of each interview style is case dependent, some using a possible mixture thereof, where the various interests of the researcher and the surveyed participants is weighed. Semi-structured interviews, for example, were necessary when communicating with Asoke monastics (especially *samanas*), as the interactions expected between lay persons and monastics have many formalities.

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<sup>160</sup> Ferraro, *Cultural Anthropology*, 100.

<sup>161</sup> DeWalt and DeWalt, *Participant Observation*, 139. Spradley uses another categorization system which includes Grand Tour and Mini-Tour questions as well as example questions, experience questions, and native language questions. James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 86.

<sup>162</sup> Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, chap. 8. DeWalt and DeWalt further make a distinction between conversation and informal interviews. DeWalt and DeWalt, *Participant Observation*, 138.

<sup>163</sup> Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 157.

I was granted permission to conduct two semi-structured interviews with Bodhirak; I was also able to interview (using the semi-structured format described below) *samanas* and *sikkhamats* in Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke, Ratchathani Asoke and in Sali Asoke.<sup>164</sup> Thanks to the organizational help of lay members, I was able to conduct around twenty in-depth interviews with Asoke monastics, though this was also negatively influenced by the political disruptions. These monastics were involved in Asoke for varying degrees of time from diverse backgrounds and had a wide spectrum of daily activity and types of community involvement. The daily life of each interviewed *samana* or *sikkhamat* varied significantly depending on the Asoke centre in which they lived and their obligations within the community. Their activities ranged from teaching students, managing garbage collection, coordinating publications and printed material, designing websites, sewing or community organization, for example. Residents and students at Pathom Asoke, Santi Asoke, Ratchathani Asoke and participants at Phuttha Phisek were also willing to share their experiences both in informal, and more structured interview settings.

To create an overlying structure to the interviews, I compiled a list of questions to gather both personal information about my interviewee, as well as more specific questions around Asoke beliefs and their understanding thereof. Before interviewing a monastic, I would tailor my questions depending on their interests, background and if they were a *sikkhamat* or *samana*. Opening questions generally focused on having the monastic introduce themselves, which included how long they have been ordained, their lay life before ordaining and how they encountered Asoke. Secondly, their current position within the community and daily activities were explored, which included inquiring into their typical schedule, responsibilities, and interests. Daily schedules were described in detail by many informants which elicited a more thorough understanding of their everyday practices due to the emphasis placed on action or work as a core aspect of spiritual practice and development in Asoke. Depending on the person being interviewed, I focused on various aspects of aesthetics—for example, when interviewing *sikkhamats*, women wearing brown robes was a reoccurring theme, and while interviewing a *samana* who creates fine art in his free time, his relationship and understanding of art was highlighted. Other questions included asking about their health detox centres, vegetarianism, and responsibilities in the community. Though I used a general format for the initial questions, opportunity was given (often during the end of the interview) for my informants to share their understanding of the Asoke beliefs. Because I was interviewing (often senior) monastics and expounding the *Dhamma* is one of their main roles, nearly all of my interviews went much

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<sup>164</sup> As *sikkhamats* were generally more accessible, there were some *sikkhamats* that I was able to interview multiple times.

longer than expected while they explained their beliefs, the Asoke interpretation of Buddhist teachings and their way of life; through their willingness and enthusiasm to share stories and beliefs with me, I found my interviews often answered not only the questions I set out to explore, but also included the experiences and personalities of the Asoke monastics.

With lay members, generally informal and unstructured interview techniques were employed, and interactions were predominantly informal chats, though I was also able to ask them about topics relevant to my thesis and at times, it was possible to record these conversations.<sup>165</sup> The majority of lay informants were women, due to the segregated nature of the community and I had very little contact with male members. This of course shaped the information that I received and is a consequence of my own positionality (as discussed above).

During my first phase of fieldwork, questions revolved around larger themes to develop a broader understanding of Asoke. After returning to Germany between my fieldtrips and analyzing my initial interviews, it became evident that the practice and material culture of Asoke plays a substantial role in the communities. As such, upon returning to the field, many of my questions focused more specifically on various aspects of aesthetics in Asoke, such as senses, material culture, physical appearance, the aesthetics of their living spaces and the art in the communities.

### **Visual Research**

Visual studies has become an extensive field within social sciences as well as anthropology, and has expanded beyond the early methodology of taking photographs while in the field, and now encompasses a wider consideration of all visual material found within a research site as well as senses and methodological approaches to visual data.<sup>166</sup> Pink notes:

What is often now referred to as a ‘sensory turn’ has had a profound impact on the way visual research is currently conceptualised. This has brought about a rethinking of visual culture studies with an acknowledgement of the relationship between the visual and the other senses.<sup>167</sup>

This further links the visual research within this thesis to the previously discussed theoretical lens of aesthetics or religion explored in Chapter 1.2. Within this thesis, visual material includes elements in the Asoke community beyond the use of two-dimensional material, and includes

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<sup>165</sup> As stated above, lay members are anonymized within this thesis.

<sup>166</sup> The large increase of literature and journals dedicated to Visual Studies and methodology is noted by both Luc Pauwels, “Visual Sociology Reframed: An Analytical Synthesis and Discussion of Visual Methods in Social and Cultural Research,” *Sociological Methods & Research* 38, no. 4 (2010): 546, and Sarah Pink, *Advances in Visual Methodology* (London: SAGE, 2012), 3.

<sup>167</sup> Pink, *Advances in Visual Methodology*, 11. Also see, Elizabeth Edwards and Kaushik Bhaumik, eds., *Visual Sense: A Cultural Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2009).

three-dimensional visual data, spaces or “lived visual data,” and “living forms of visual data.”<sup>168</sup> Two-dimensional data includes photos, artworks, posters, and signs for example. Three-dimensional visual data overlaps with material culture and the objects that reflect various aspects of personal and social life. “Lived visual data” encompasses the physical spaces that people inhabit and interact within—this includes the environment, buildings, and spatial considerations, and in this context, refers to the Asoke communities, both permanent and transient (such encampments for political protests). “Living forms of visual data” is the investigation of visual data from persons, their bodies (including gestures and presentation), interactions and non-verbal communications. Further, visual materials can be categorized as either researcher-produced or pre-existing (the author of which may or may not be known).<sup>169</sup>

Researcher-produced images are created for the purpose of “collecting, exploring and representing data,” rather than simply being an interesting visual addition or “compelling illustration” added to a final work.<sup>170</sup> To support the accuracy, recording, and description of my research, I found great benefit from using photographic documentation during my data collection. A photograph can encompass many aspects of an environment that would take a considerable amount of time to describe accurately without this visual assistance.<sup>171</sup> Photographic references assisted my documentation (and recollection) process and was a method I was able to use where situationally appropriate within the Asoke communities. Due to my specific interest in the aesthetic aspects of the Asoke communities, such as their dress, artwork and environments, visual documentation was an integral part of being able to evaluate these elements. Ethical concerns are an important factor when using photographic documentation in the field—as such, verbal consent was firstly given when taking photographs of individuals (compared to images of crowds). With the exception of a few shy students, Asoke members agreed to have their photos taken; Asoke members are often filmed and photographed since sermons, events, and community activities are regularly recorded and broadcast on FMTV (Asoke television channel “For Mankind Television”) and printed in their magazines. Especially during larger gatherings or events, there are many cameras present, and as such, little attention was paid to my camera. If there was a situation where I was unsure if it was appropriate to take photographs, I asked Asoke members firstly.

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<sup>168</sup> Virtual visual data is also included, and these broad categorizations are specifically outlined and explored by Michael Emmison, Philip Smith, and Margery Mayall, *Researching the Visual*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2012), 62–249.

<sup>169</sup> Pauwels, “Visual Sociology Reframed,” 549.

<sup>170</sup> Roman Williams, “Visual Sociology and the Sociology of Religion,” in *Seeing Religion: Toward a Visual Sociology of Religion*, ed. Roman Williams (New York: Routledge, 2015), 7.

<sup>171</sup> Colloquially stated: a picture is worth a thousand words.

Pre-existing two-dimensional visual material included photography and artwork created by Asoke members as well as resources from personal photo albums, covers on print material, paintings, and drawings; because of my interest in the aesthetics of Asoke centres, lay members and monastics, and the representation of their beliefs, it was important to consider this array of visual imagery. Pauwels reflects on the potential problem that researchers can lack “sufficient background knowledge or contextual information” when considering found material and this can materialize itself when there is no knowledge of the images “exact origin, production circumstances, and representative character of the acquired visual data set” which can possibly change the interpretation of what the image represents.<sup>172</sup> This problem can be in part remedied by discussing the found materials with such methods as photo elicitation.

The central aspect of participant-centred approaches to the use of visual materials is that it “involves the research subjects actively participating at some point in the research process rather than remaining as passive objects for the researcher’s camera.”<sup>173</sup> One example thereof is “photo elicitation,”<sup>174</sup> or “photographic interviewing,” which is the use of found images, and/or researcher-produced images within the interview context to aid and assist the researcher and interviewee in discussion, memory recall and additional commentary.<sup>175</sup> Pink considers the term “photo elicitation” problematic and dated in the sense that it assumes the researcher can elicit knowledge from informants and that it assumes the “facts are in the pictures.”<sup>176</sup> Instead of simply gathering information from interviewees that has been elicited from an image, Pink suggests that “ethnographers should be interested in how informants use the content of the images as vessels in which to invest meanings and through which to produce and represent their knowledge, self-identities, experiences and emotions.”<sup>177</sup>

I had the opportunity to use this method within my research in various situations. In one context, I was granted access to old personal photo albums (with images from within Asoke shortly after it was formed) from one of the long-time *sikkhamats* living at Santi Asoke, who discussed the images during an interview. In other contexts, I was able to discuss artworks during interviews with other monastics and members who used visual arts to express their values and beliefs. Within interviews and conversations with members I could also explore

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<sup>172</sup> Luc Pauwels, “An Integrated Conceptual Framework for Visual Social Research,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, eds. Eric Margolis and Luc Pauwels (London: SAGE, 2011), 6.

<sup>173</sup> Emmison, Smith, and Mayall, *Researching the Visual*, 20.

<sup>174</sup> First discussed by John Collier, “Photography in Anthropology: A Report on Two Experiments,” *American Anthropologist* (1957): 843–59.

<sup>175</sup> Marcus Banks, *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE, 2007), 66–7.

<sup>176</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2007), 84.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

aspects of three-dimensional, “lived visual data” and “living visual data” in Asoke. For example, material culture in Asoke was explained to me through the kinds of objects within the communities, and not only the items themselves, but the importance of having few possessions, and that they should fulfill a necessary function (such as tools or items for personal hygiene). Another important aspect of these items is the emphasis on “natural” products and the rejection of many commercial products—especially anything related to beauty, fashion, and other popular objects such as amulets. This also ties in with Asoke’s “living visual data” which was another important aspect that I discussed with members (this is the basis of Chapter 3). I interviewed members asking about their choice of clothing, robes (for monastics), hair, and bare feet—aspects of Asoke that make them distinct and a visually coherent group. Lastly, the “lived visual data” or physical spaces of Asoke is also a central exploration in this thesis. In each of the Asoke communities I visited, I was given an introductory “tour” of the grounds and then during my stay, members would tell me more details about the histories, intentions, and features of the living spaces. The buildings and spaces of Asoke communities—as specifically explored in Chapter 5—are central in expressing their beliefs and have been developed with the intention of being the ideal place for members to progress spiritually.

Because this thesis approaches Asoke through the lens of the aesthetics of religion, methodological considerations from visual studies play a central role within this exploration. Though this thesis focuses predominantly on visual elements within Asoke, it also takes into account the understanding of an embodied perception which includes other sensory information as Morgan notes, “The *embodied eye* means that seeing is never independent of touching, hearing feeling, and the manipulation of the body and environment; and that the study of religious seeing is the study of embodiment.”<sup>178</sup> This returns to the discussion of Asoke as an aesthetic formation and their shared aesthetic profile of the community, which has been methodically grounded through these various aspects of visual studies.<sup>179</sup>

### Fieldnotes

Schwandt notes that, “on a scientific conception of doing qualitative work, field notes are linked to the production of the final report in something resembling a building-block model.”<sup>180</sup> Four kinds of these fieldnote “building-blocks” were used during my fieldwork and

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<sup>178</sup> David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 54. Original emphasis.

<sup>179</sup> Concepts of “aesthetic formation” and “aesthetic profile” are expanded upon in further detail in Chapter 1.2.

<sup>180</sup> Thomas A. Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 116.

will be discussed in this section: Jottings, diary, a log and “field notes proper.”<sup>181</sup> Jottings are everyday notes scrawled often in half-legible hand writing throughout the day on a small note pad which was carried at all times.<sup>182</sup> My notepad collected daily experiences and conversations along with small sketches, insights, and reminders that further served my log and field notes. A diary contains personal reflections and impressions. I used both a physical diary and expressed my personal perceptions in email format to friends and family (though internet access was limited) which helped me to reflect on and process information and emotions (especially as doing fieldwork in a foreign place can be a lonely and isolating experience at times). The log portion of my fieldnotes contained long and short-term time schedules, management of appointments of persons to be interviewed and organizational lists for example. Lastly, “field notes proper” are further divided into three distinct categorizations: methodological notes, descriptive notes and analytic notes.<sup>183</sup> Methodological notes are concerned with conduct in the field and “deal with technique in collecting data” as well as functioning as a tool to aid a researcher’s growth through learning appropriate interactions.<sup>184</sup> This included making notes on Asoke conduct and interactions, for example, the differences in greeting lay persons, monastics and students in the community, or learning how to wash in communal baths with the other women or what dress and colours are appropriate to wear in Asoke.<sup>185</sup> Descriptive notes create the bulk of the collected data and generally stem from observations and interactions—this includes not only the written notes from interviews, and conversations but also visual input in regard to members, body language and the physical spaces, environments, artwork as well as other sensory reflections. Lastly, analytic notes are insights and ideas within the field that reflect on how “you think the culture you are studying is organized.”<sup>186</sup> Emerson et al. discuss how writing “asides” and “commentaries” further develop analytic notes through both informal reflections (asides) and longer, more thoroughly developed considerations and as such, can be both contemplations on large key ideas as well as minor musings.<sup>187</sup> Analytic notes enabled me to find meaningful connections that led me to the larger framework of aesthetics of religion and to consider how the pieces of material culture, senses and Asoke lifestyle are interrelated.

Jotting, log, and field note collection varied due to the different daily schedules

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<sup>181</sup> These four categorizations are expanded upon in, Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 292–300.

<sup>182</sup> Jottings are further explored and connected with participation in, Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 21–40.

<sup>183</sup> Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 297–300.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> My notebook also contained many translations, keywords, and new Thai vocabulary.

<sup>186</sup> Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 316.

<sup>187</sup> Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 79–85.

according to the Asoke centre I was staying at, or if it was an uncommon situation such as Phuttha Phisek or visiting political protest encampments. The regular daily structure in Pathom Asoke and Ratchathani Asoke allowed for more space and time to observe and write more consistently. During Phuttha Phisek the schedule was more hectic, and I was living under a mosquito net, in a “tent city” with no personal light after dark, which did not give much opportunity to write detailed notes until after the festival. The most challenging part of my fieldtrip, as mentioned above, overlapped with the political crisis of 2013–2014 and even before the protests turned violent, attending day-long political protests and marches in the heat did not allow for reflective time, and I had to suffice with scribbled notes.<sup>188</sup> Written notes were taken during unstructured and semi-structured interviews and daily interactions and observations.

Consistent and timely notes of observations and interactions is of central importance for the ease of data analysis as well as for upholding ethical considerations of the researched group. Commitment to one’s notes assures that failing memory, personal interpretations and biases will have a minimal impact on the quality of the collected data.<sup>189</sup> While a certain event at the time of occurrence can appear distinct and impossible to forget, it is necessary for the quality of work and integrity of the subjects to rely on what was recorded at the time, rather than retrieving impressions from memory possibly at a much later date. Upon returning from a research site, typically a researcher only has what she has recorded in the field (notes, photographs, and interviews for example) to rely on, hence, the more thorough the notes taken, the more accurate the final research can be.

#### **1.4 Overview of Dissertation**

This thesis contains one introductory chapter, and four chapters to discuss core Asoke beliefs and their aesthetic manifestations. The first chapter opens with an introduction to Asoke, which includes positioning the group within Thailand and within broader frameworks of Buddhist, Theravāda and anthropological Thai studies; this section also outlines important themes and scholars in relation to these topics, as well as literature specifically on Asoke. Key terms and theoretical underpinnings—particularly in relation to approaching Asoke through the lens of aesthetics of religion—are also outlined. Methodological approaches are a central facet of ethnographic work, and the sites of the study are explained, as well as specific methods used

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<sup>188</sup> This also included a large learning curve, as prior to this trip, I was unfamiliar with the main political actors and debates in Thailand. As such, my notes contained many names of relevant people who were involved in the different political factions.

<sup>189</sup> Murray L. Wax and Rosalie H. Wax, “Fieldwork and the Research Process,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 11 (1980): 32.

in the field, such as participant observation, interviews, visual research and fieldnotes.

In order to explore the material culture of Asoke and the importance of their aesthetics, it is necessary to understand the group's core beliefs, which is the focus of Chapter two. This chapter asks: What are the core beliefs within Asoke? How are these beliefs seen and embodied within the community? How do these core principles influence aesthetics within Asoke? This chapter examines practices and beliefs in Asoke surrounding spiritual attainment, precepts, the noble path(s), and "meritism." Because Asoke has a unique interpretation and expression of certain core Buddhist tenants, this section serves as a foundation to examine specific aesthetic expressions of the Asoke communities in following chapters.

Since the beginning of Asoke, the group has developed a certain appearance for monastic and lay members in an aim to distinguish themselves, represent specific beliefs and legitimize the group. Chapter three begins with a discussion of monasticism in Thailand (in order to better contextualize renunciation and membership within Asoke), and then outlines information on membership, students, and ordination within Asoke. Building from this foundation, the subsequent sections of the chapter examine specific aspects of material culture in relation to the physical appearance of Asoke members. Firstly, the meanings, history, relevance, and ramifications of Asoke's choice of monastic robes are outlined—this is important as monastic appearance has played a role in Asoke being seen as subversive and unsanctioned. Further, aspects of monastic "physiomoral markers of worth" are explored in relation to hair and female renunciants wearing brown robes.<sup>190</sup> Not only do monastics in Asoke signal specific beliefs through their appearance, but this plays a large role in how lay members present themselves, especially as the group has developed a particular "uniform"—the various aspects and meanings of which are discussed in the close of this chapter. Through this chapter I ask: What non-verbal messages are being transmitted through the appearance of Asoke members? And how is this achieved? How have these choices shaped the community as an aesthetic formation?

Artwork and Buddha statues have become prominent features in Asoke communities in recent years, which is an unexpected shift because for the first three decades of their existence Asoke communities were strictly Buddha-less. Chapter four delves deeper into the Buddha images and artwork found within Asoke, asking questions such as: What is Bodhirak's relationship to and understanding of art? What is the symbolism and intention behind their unique Buddha statues and works of art found within the centres? What is the importance and purpose of various symbols (Asoke flag or vulture sculptures for example) found in Asoke

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<sup>190</sup> "Physiomoral markers of worth" are introduced in Chapter 1.2. Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies*, 69.

communities? In order to understand the context of Buddha images in Asoke, this chapter begins with an introduction to Buddhist art in Thailand, and then moves on to focus specifically on the development and intention of art and the Buddha images in Asoke. Artworks representing the community and their leader are also explored as well as a few of the most prominent symbols found in Asoke centres. Various artworks throughout the Asoke centres will be used as examples as to how they represent core beliefs. This chapter investigates the shifting landscape of Asoke in relationship to artwork and Buddha images in order to further understand how artwork reflects and reinforces the Asoke interpretation of the *Dhamma*.

The final chapter examines central aesthetic aspects of the physical Asoke spaces. Asoke communities have a remarkable consistency and for Asoke members, are meant to be the ideal places to develop spiritually. The core of the aesthetic profile which is consistently implemented in all Asoke centres has been carefully developed and refined through recent decades, and contrasts in many ways with what is found in other Thai Buddhist temples. Many aspects of the Asoke communities are intended to induce certain experiences and represent various beliefs which are meant to support and advance the spiritual progression of members. Asoke members have their senses moulded through actively constructing and living in a particular kind of environment, and exploring these spaces gives insight not only into the values that form the group but the physical communities themselves. Key questions include: What are the reoccurring elements or inconsistencies between various Asoke centres? What are the relationships between the style, architecture, and layout of the buildings and Asoke beliefs? What are the influences and importance of “natural environments,” agriculture, and water features within Asoke communities?

Each chapter has a respective conclusion, bringing together key insights and analysis of the chapter’s contents. An overarching conclusion is also found at the end of this thesis that ties together the core themes, ideas, and arguments found throughout the whole of this work.

## CHAPTER 2: MATERIALIZING MORALITY: THE FOUNDATIONS OF ASOKE BELIEF

The aim of this chapter is to explore some of the core principles and beliefs present in Asoke and examine how they are manifested within the communities and shape senses, the daily lives of members, and the material culture of the group. This thesis approaches Asoke as a “lived religion,” focusing on everyday life, informed by their senses and material culture—which is interwoven with concepts of religious aesthetics.<sup>191</sup> Morgan defines lived religion as “religion at work” which is even more appropriate when discussing Asoke and their beliefs.<sup>192</sup> The interest in examining how these views are materialized stems from my fieldwork in which monastics and lay members would often comment on the importance of doing, working and embodying their beliefs, and is reflected in the activities and daily schedules in Asoke.<sup>193</sup> Samana Kayakayan emphasized this by stating:

[Asoke monastics and lay members] practice seriously—we are serious practitioners. When you believe things, you are just believing...the purpose of Asoke is to really behave it—you have to behave it and live it.<sup>194</sup>

This chapter, while not able to span the entirety of Asoke doctrine, will focus on some of the main tenets found within Asoke, those deemed the most relevant through my fieldwork and literature.<sup>195</sup> A long-term resident lists some of the fundamental aspects to Asoke practice:

The Three Jewels: Buddha, *Dhamma*, *Saṅgha*, the Three Practices: *Sīla*, *Samādhi*, *Paññā*, the Three Characteristics: *Dukkha*, *Anicca*, *Anattā*... The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are really very very important for us—we practice and learn a lot about this.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> The concepts of lived religion and aesthetics of religion are introduced in Chapter 1.2.

<sup>192</sup> David Morgan, “The Material Culture of Lived Religion: Visuality and Embodiment,” in *Mind and Matter: Selected Papers of Nordik 2009 Conference for Art Historians*, ed. Johanna Vakkari (Helsinki: Helsinfors, 2010), 18.

<sup>193</sup> This chapter considers Asoke beliefs and their physical manifestations, which in my opinion, has not been done by previous authors. Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn discusses various views found in Asoke throughout her book though this is not explored in regard to the material culture or senses. See, *Buddhism with Open Eyes: Belief and Practice of Santi Asoke* (Bangkok: Fah Apai Co., Ltd., 1997). Juliana Essen, has written the most recent monograph of Asoke, based on her fieldwork in Srisa Asoke and structures her discussion of Asoke beliefs much differently—through “building the individual” and discussing morality, the Asoke slogan “consume little, work hard, and give the rest to society” and Asoke education. See, *Right Development: The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 45–75. Apinya also outlines Asoke’s “interpretation of religiosity and practices” in Apinya Fuengfusakul, “Buddhist Reform Movements in Contemporary Thai Urban Context: Thammakai and Santi Asoke” (PhD diss., University of Bielefeld, Germany, 1993), 146–54. Rory Mackenzie compared Dhammakāya with Asoke and allotted ten pages to discuss “the approach of Santi Asoke to spiritual purification” where he focused mainly on “the Santi Asoke path to *nibbāna*” and relied heavily on Heikkilä-Horn’s work. See, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 174–84.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with Samana Kayakayan in Santi Asoke, March 9, 2013.

<sup>195</sup> This focuses on Buddhist-inspired beliefs and not their political perspectives for example.

<sup>196</sup> Personal communication with older female long-term lay resident member in Pathom Asoke, February 21, 2013.

These are all basic Buddhist principles which are not unique to Asoke, however the interpretation and implementation diverges from mainstream understanding in various ways. The core beliefs in Asoke are communicated through Bodhirak's sermons, media, actions of the members, the physical communities, and artworks for example. These beliefs form the foundation for the Asoke way of life, daily practice, and the subsequent aesthetic features explored throughout this thesis.<sup>197</sup> To understand the implications of these aspects, it is necessary to explore these various core beliefs and how they are unique to the Asoke communities. Certain beliefs are not universal to all lay members and monastics and are influenced by a wide range of factors, including their personal and societal views as well as their length and intensity of involvement within Asoke. The majority of members however have a similar understanding of these basic concepts and are in congruence with what Bodhirak preaches.<sup>198</sup>

This chapter begins with a short exploration of *nibbāna* in relation to Asoke's interpretation thereof and in Chapter 2.2, the basic precepts will be introduced in regard to their content and how they are understood and expressed within Asoke. The Noble Path, as a central part of Buddhist teachings will be discussed, illustrating how the Asoke interpretation is conveyed and its differentiation to a more mainstream and textual understanding thereof. Lastly, one of the central concepts within Asoke, *Bunniyom* (meritism) will be described, including how it relates and intersects with other similar economic concepts, and how it is expressed alongside other Asoke beliefs.

## 2.1 Spiritual Attainments and Nibbāna

The focus of this chapter is to understand the core beliefs within Asoke, all of which are intended to further spiritual progress with the end goal of achieving *nibbāna*.<sup>199</sup> Not only is this the highest spiritual attainment and generally what one strives for within Buddhist practice, but

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<sup>197</sup> Aesthetic in this context refers to an encompassing sensory experience, not confined to concepts of beauty, however with emphasis on the visual culture of Asoke. See Chapter 1.2 for a further discussion of this term.

<sup>198</sup> This is based on reoccurring topics within my own fieldwork and interviews, as well as seen through other studies and interviews of Asoke members. For example, Essen, *Right Development* and Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*. Further, there would also be very few, if any persons who would be interested in being involved with or living in Asoke if they did not agree with or want to follow Bodhirak's basic teachings of the *Dhamma*.

<sup>199</sup> *Nirvāṇa* (Skt.) *Nibbāna* will be used synonymously with the often-translated "attainment" and "awakening" rather than "enlightenment" within this section. An effort has been made to lean away from the use of the term "enlightenment" due to "*bodhi*" being more literally translated as awakening, becoming aware, knowing, or understanding. For a further discussion, see Richard Cohen, *Beyond Enlightenment: Buddhism, Religion, Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Almut-Barbara Renger, "Schwer erleuchtet – Moderner Buddhismus, transkulturelle Verflechtungen und populäre Erzählliteratur," in *Literatur/Religion Bilanz und Perspektiven eines interdisziplinären Forschungsgebietes*, eds. Wolfgang Braungart, Joachim Jacob and Jan-Heiner Tück (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2019), 221–50.

Asoke holds a unique interpretation of it.<sup>200</sup> When asked how frequently Bodhirak addresses it in his sermons, Sikkhamat Rinpah emphasised, “Every day!” illustrating the centrality of this goal within Asoke.<sup>201</sup> In discussions with lay members and monastics, the topic of *nibbāna* was frequently linked with the practice of the precepts. During exchanges with members, the priority seemed to not be on the attainment of a personal spiritual end goal, but on the application and practice of daily diligence surrounding thoughts, emotions and actions—for example, there was much more conversation around releasing oneself from defilements through practicing precepts.<sup>202</sup> This, in combination with reoccurring references to practicing “open eye meditation” shows an emphasis on daily, practical matters rather than intangible future spiritual attainments. The focus on action, working, and embodying their spiritual ideals is central and for this reason, the subchapter considering *nibbāna* will be more abbreviated than the following discussions of how other factors of Asoke belief are practiced and materialized in the community.

The fundamental Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path explain the necessity of reaching *nibbāna*, and the path to achieve it. The third Noble Truth (the cessation of *dukkha*, suffering/unsatisfactoriness through reaching awakening) is often described as the needed remedy to cure the state of living in *samsāra* (the cycle of birth and death). The diagnosis and causes of the “illness” are found in the first and second of the Noble Truths respectively, and the last of the Noble Truths points to the Eightfold Path as the way to overcome and remove oneself from *samsāra*.

The translation of a spiritual event or experience into language has various hurdles, and as such, *nibbāna* is often described through analogy and metaphor.<sup>203</sup> *Nibbāna* is described in

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<sup>200</sup> *Nibbāna* is a complex subject and there are many points of departure for discussions regarding spiritual awakening—for example through exploring scriptural technicalities, translations, terminology, and descriptions thereof, or *nibbāna* as a concept, or narrative. Scholars have produced a plethora of works in recent years looking at these topics, both within Theravāda contexts and in other spheres of belief found in the east and west particularly as concepts of enlightenment and new age have entered the mainstream in many countries. See, Almut-Barbara Renger, “Zur Einführung,” in *Erleuchtung: Kultur- und Religionsgeschichte eines Begriffs*, ed. Almut-Barbara Renger (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 9–48; J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997) 37–94; Soonil Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana* (London: Routledge, 2006); Lily de Silva, *Nibbana as Living Experience* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, Wheel Publication No. 407/408, 1996); Luis O. Gomez, “*Nirvāna*,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert Buswell Jr. (Macmillan: New York: 2004), 600–5.

<sup>201</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Rinpah, Sali Asoke, March 1, 2013.

<sup>202</sup> This can also be due to my position within the community (as a female lay person), whereas conversations between monastics may differ and have more emphasis on specific aspects surrounding *nibbāna*.

<sup>203</sup> Collins reflects that, “it is certainly true that the failure of words to describe nirvana, its inexpressibility or ineffability, is a universal trope.” Steven Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 67. Creating the term *nirvanize* “as an attempt to preserve both the form and the ambiguities of the Pali,” is also suggested in Steven Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193. Thanissaro Bhikkhu suggests using *nirvāna* as a verb: “With no here or there or between the two, you obviously can’t use the verb ‘enter’ or ‘reach’ to describe this realization, even

the Pāli Canon in terms of “cooling” or “extinguishing” using the analogy that the unawakened mind is like a burning fire and the awakened mind an extinguished fire, or a lamp blown out.<sup>204</sup> This metaphor also relates to the extinction or the blowing out of the “three fires” or “three poisons” of *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion).<sup>205</sup> *Nibbāna* is further illustrated as “peace, this is exquisite - the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Nibbāna.”<sup>206</sup> Many descriptions (of what it is and is not) can be found within the Pāli Canon and other important scriptures, often with a variety of synonyms and illustrations.<sup>207</sup>

Within the Pāli Canon and Asoke belief, four levels of awakening are recognized which must be traversed before one can arrive at this state of complete release. Some consider attaining any of these levels to be out of reach for the majority of Buddhists, especially lay and female practitioners.<sup>208</sup> Bodhirak’s teachings diverge from this view and he preaches that spiritual awakening is accessible for serious practitioners in this lifetime.<sup>209</sup> Bodhirak encourages all Asoke members to strive for awakening and uses the undertaking of precepts and dedication to spiritual and moral development to delineate the various stages of the process. To further understand the relationship to *nibbāna* in Asoke, a closer look will be given to the four stages of *nibbāna*: *sotāpanna*, *sakadāgāmi*, *anāgāmi* and *arahant*. These various stages correlate with

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metaphorically. Maybe we should make the word nirvana into a verb itself: ‘When there is no you in connection with that, you nirvana.’” See, “A Verb for Nirvana,” *Purity of Heart: Essays on the Buddhist Path* (2006): 79, <http://www.dhammadata.org/Archive/Writings/PurityOfHeart.pdf>.

<sup>204</sup> De Silva writes that: “It is sometimes conjectured that Nibbana is called cool because the Buddha preached in a warm country, where the cool was appreciated as comfortable. Had he taught in a cold climate, he might have described Nibbana in terms of warmth. But it is certain that the term ‘cool’ was chosen to convey a literal psychological reality. Anger makes us hot and restless. We use expressions such as ‘boiling with anger,’ and they clearly express the intensity of the aggressive emotion. When such negative emotions are completely eradicated, never to arise again, the temperament has to be described as cool.” Lily de Silva, *Nibbana as Living Experience* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, Wheel Publication No. 407/408, 1996), 5.

<sup>205</sup> A 3.68.

<sup>206</sup> A 3.32.

<sup>207</sup> For further exploration of the various synonyms and descriptions of *nibbāna* see Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities*, 188–201.

<sup>208</sup> Scholarship has begun to explore many topics surrounding women in Buddhism—particularly on the ability to achieve various stages of *nibbāna*, ordination and the *Garudhammas*. It remains a common belief in Thailand that a woman must gain more merit for her next life to be reborn as a man before she can practice Buddhism more seriously and attain awakening. A further discussion on women in Buddhism can be found in Chapter 3.1.1 and Chapter 3.3.3.

<sup>209</sup> Though a complex discussion, some connections can also be drawn to the Thai Forest Tradition and the teachings of Buddhadasa regarding the accessibility of spiritual awakening. Swearer mentions that the Thai Forest Tradition (which emphasises a strict monastic practice) holds the view that “nibbana [is] attainable in the present,” and that “most Thais, claims Buddhadasa, believe either that the highest principles of Buddhism demand a separation from the world, or that these principles are too profound to be comprehended by ordinary people. But such is not the case, he argues. The principles of nibbana (i.e., nonattachment) are for everyone, because the state of nonattachment was our original state...While some may regard this teaching as being more appropriate for monks than the laity, just the opposite pertains, says Buddhadasa.” Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (New York: Albany, 2010), 167–70.

the overcoming of the ten fetters (*samyojana*) which turn the wheel of *saṃsāra*, and subsequent rebirths.<sup>210</sup>

The first stage, *sotāpanna* translates as “stream enterer” or “stream winner,” because the practitioner is thought to have entered the “stream” which will lead them towards awakening. One who has attained this level has overcome the first three fetters of self-identity, doubt and grasping at habits and practices. It is taught that becoming a stream enterer guarantees that the practitioner will reach full awakening within seven lifetimes and will not be reborn in any of the lower hell, animal or ghost realms.<sup>211</sup> The four factors listed as leading to stream-entry are: associating with people of integrity, listening to the true *Dhamma*, appropriate attention, and practicing the *Dhamma*.<sup>212</sup> Within Asoke, it is taught that stream entry is achieved through practicing the five precepts, as well as taking refuge in the Triple Gem (*Tiratana*)—the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Śaṅgha*.<sup>213</sup> It is elaborated by Bodhirak that this stage is achievable by all members of the community, not only monastics.<sup>214</sup> Though Asoke beliefs diverge from the mainstream understanding of awakening, there are *suttas* which support their ideologies. For example, the undertaking of precepts for lay persons in regard to achieving *sotāpanna*:

Sariputta, when you know of a householder clothed in white, that he is restrained in terms of the five training rules and that he obtains at will, without difficulty, without hardship, four pleasant mental abidings in the here and now, then if he wants he may state about himself...I am a stream-winner.<sup>215</sup>

The “four pleasant mental abidings” are when the practitioner has verified confidence in the Buddha, *Dhamma*, *Śaṅgha* and is “Endowed with virtues that are appealing to the noble ones: untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, leading to concentration.”<sup>216</sup>

The following stage on the path to *nibbāna* is *sakadāgāmi* or “once-returner” defined as having one last rebirth in the sense realms (this includes human and deva realms) before

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<sup>210</sup> The first five fetters, or lower fetters are: personality-identity (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), doubt (*vicikicchā*), clinging to habits and ritual (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*), sensual craving (*kāmarāga*) and ill-will (*vyāpāda*). The last “higher” fetters are: craving form, or material existence (*rūparāga*), craving the formless or immaterial existence (*arūparāga*), conceit (*māna*), restlessness (*uddhacca*), ignorance (*avijjā*). A 10.13.

<sup>211</sup> A 5.179.

<sup>212</sup> S 55.5.

<sup>213</sup> Heikkilä-Horn also mentions that along with undertaking the five precepts, the six vices must be overcome: drinking, smoking, gambling, illicit sex, frequenting night entertainment, and laziness. See, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 117. Heikkilä-Horn later altered the list to: addiction, roaming at unseemly hours, frequenting shows, gambling, association of bad companions, and idleness. See, “Small is Beautiful in Asoke villages,” in *Insight into Santi Asoke*, eds. Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn and Rassamee Krisanamis (Bangkok: Fah-aphai, 2002): 35.

<sup>214</sup> Whether members themselves believe it however is another matter.

<sup>215</sup> A 5.179.

<sup>216</sup> A 10.92. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Into the Stream: A Study Guide on the First Stage of Awakening,” *Access to Insight* (2012): 44, [http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/into\\_the\\_stream.pdf](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/into_the_stream.pdf).

complete release. Though they will experience one last rebirth in the “sense realm,” *sakadāgāmi* may be reborn up to seven times in the higher realms and are unable to be reborn in any of the “lower” realms (where animals and hungry ghosts are thought to reside for example). The main differentiation between a *sotāpanna* and *sakadāgāmi* is that sensual craving and ill-will have been further dissolved. Within Asoke, achieving this stage is in correlation with holding the eight precepts and reduction of the defilements (*kilesas*).

The third stage of awakening is *anāgāmi* or non-returner—here the practitioner’s rebirths will be in heavenly realms, wherein they will achieve *nibbāna*. The five lower fetters of self-identity, uncertainty and grasping at habits and practices, sensuous craving and ill will must be overcome in order to attain this level (an *anāgāmi* has not gone beyond the fetters of craving form, craving formless phenomena, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance). Within Asoke, this stage is translated by Horn as, “when the person has become free from all worldly affairs, the person feels no temptation to worldly pleasures and worldly events do not have any effect on him or her. The person at this level still has some defilements within his or her mind, but they are not shown outside.”<sup>217</sup> Sensual craving and ill will are often addressed within Asoke, and there is a certain pressure or expectation to live the ideal celibate lifestyle and work hard every day watching and addressing any anger or frustration in one’s mind.

The final rung on the ladder of *nibbāna* is that of an *arahant*.<sup>218</sup> Becoming an *arahant* is the ultimate goal of practice where one has extinguished all of the fetters. This final stage contains the bulk of literature and discussion within the canonical texts and from scholars and is described as having seven factors (*Bojjhaṅga*): Mindfulness (*sati*), investigation of the *Dhamma* (*dhammavicaya*), energy (*virīya*), joy (*pīti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).<sup>219</sup>

This final stage of spiritual attainment is described within Asoke literature as: “A mind that is purified from lust and sensuality, is like water that has been filtered. The purified conscious mind will be able to perceive reality as it is. This entitles the term ‘enlightened’ as if

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<sup>217</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 117.

<sup>218</sup> There are also three kinds of *arahants*: A *sāvaka* (the term *anubuddha*, is also used in *Khuddakapatha*) has attained through following the Buddha’s teachings, a *paccekabuddha* has attained *nibbāna* without the guidance of a Buddha, however is does not teach others and finally, a *sammā sambuddha* has reached awakening through their own means and teaches others. Further, it is interesting to note the term “*arahant*” stems from the verb *arahati*, “to be worthy,” and was used for Indian saints before the time of the Buddha.

<sup>219</sup> For further descriptions of these factors, see: Piyadassi Thera, *The Seven Factors of Enlightenment: Satta Bojjhanga* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1960); Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “The Wings to Awakening: An Anthology from the Pali Canon,” *Access to Insight* (2013), 140, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings.pdf>.

one sees the contents in the water glass just as they really are.”<sup>220</sup> Former Sikkhamat Thipdevi describes *nibbāna* as:

This is the neutral state of the soul of living beings that have reached their perfect equilibrium; no feelings of contentment or discontent, no attachment or aversion, no sense of selfishness; state filled with nothing, state of calm, tranquility and total peace; state of awareness and full knowledge of everything. State of consciousness to exist only to be helpful to all living beings. It is the total end of the ‘me.’<sup>221</sup>

These descriptions are not specific to Asoke, and generally the relationship to advanced states of spiritual awakening are described vaguely by some members as simply, “being free from everything” or “having no more defilements.”<sup>222</sup> What is unique is the relationship to *nibbāna* being somewhat nonchalant, especially in regard to Bodhirak’s attainments.

Bodhirak has openly discussed some of his spiritual experiences and has also stated that he has reached various stages of *nibbāna*.<sup>223</sup> This has been a point of condemnation of Bodhirak as there are rules in the *Vinaya* against claiming spiritual achievement, and is a serious offence when expressed to lay persons or when it is an untrue statement.<sup>224</sup> In an early *Bangkok Post* article by Sanitsuda, Bodhirak is quoted as saying, “I am not showing off. I am actually Phra Sotapanna, Phra Sakadagami. What is wrong with talking about what is true?”<sup>225</sup> According to Sikkhamat Rinpah, Bodhirak stated that he had reached the first two stages of awakening in the context of being asked by a high-ranking monk, however there was backlash that stated he had overclaimed his achievements and was “exposing himself too much” and people were outraged saying, “Oh! Call the police...catch him!”<sup>226</sup> It became evident that many Asoke members are candid in discussing Bodhirak’s spiritual attainments and many consider him an *arahant* and a

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<sup>220</sup> Porn Poompanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke: Part I* (Bangkok: Kittiya Veerapan, 1989), 23.

<sup>221</sup> “C’est l’état neutre de l’âme des êtres vivants qui ont atteint leur équilibre parfait; aucun sentiment de contentement ni de mécontentement, aucun attachement ni repoussement, aucun sens d’égoïsme; état rempli de rien, état de calme, de tranquillité et de paix totale; état de conscience et de connaissance complète de tout. État de conscience de n’exister que pour être utile à tous les êtres vivants. C’est la fin totale du ‘moi.’” Thip d’Asok and Aporn Bukhamana. *Ce que le Bouddha nous enseigne. Introduction au Bouddhisme pour les débutants. [What the Buddha teaches us. Introduction to Buddhism for beginners]* (Bangkok: Dhamma Santi, 1978): 49.

<sup>222</sup> These or similar phrases were used by Asoke members during my fieldwork.

<sup>223</sup> This includes a description of how he had a spiritual awakening as a lay person in the middle of the night while going to the washroom. During an interview, Bodhirak confirmed the description of this experience to be accurate. Interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014.

<sup>224</sup> Deliberately making false claims that one has attained a “superior human state” is a *pārājika* offense with the repercussion of being expelled from the monastic community for life. For a detailed discussion, see, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Monastic Code I* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 1994), 86–98, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/bmc1.pdf>.

<sup>225</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai, “The Man behind Santi Asoke,” *Bangkok Post*, July 22, 1989. Reprinted in *Insight into Santi Asoke*, ed. Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn and Rassamee Krisanamis (Bangkok: Fah-aphai, 2002): 17.

<sup>226</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Rinpah, Sali Asoke, March 1, 2013.

*bodhisatta*.<sup>227</sup> *Bodhisatta* is a term not often found in Theravāda contexts, as it is predominantly a Mahāyāna belief, however it is also present within Asoke and thus warrants mention.<sup>228</sup>

The term was originally found in early Indian Buddhism relating to the past lives of the Buddha,<sup>229</sup> and became a fundamental part of Mahāyāna Buddhism which describes *bodhisattas* as those who dedicate themselves to achieving awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings.<sup>230</sup> This also relates to the Asoke ideal of striving to bring the *Dhamma* to others and that Bodhirak is considered by many members to be a *bodhisatta*. This is expressed in their artworks, as seen in an Asoke painting of smiling images of Bodhirak with a caption stating that “a *Bodhisatta* can smile in every direction/to everyone.”<sup>231</sup>

The Asoke communities are assumed to be the ideal environment for one’s moral and spiritual development, however it is the individual’s personal dedication that will lead them to a higher state of awakening rather than simply living and working in the temples.<sup>232</sup> This is seen as a cyclical progression—the more that members spiritually progress, the more they can give to society, and this action and engaging with the outside world then brings about more spiritual development.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Skt. *Bodhisattva*. This view became obvious through discussions with members during my fieldwork. Other researchers have similar reports by lay members as well as monastics. The Asoke monk, Samana Cittasanto, is cited as saying, “I do believe that Phra Pothirak has reached this level and is an Arahan. I am not sure if anyone else in Thailand has reached it. Phra Phutthathat for instance did not understand the importance of eating vegetarian food. Eating vegetarian food is necessary if one is to keep the first precept, which means not killing by any means, or even allowing other people to kill for you.” Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 110. Also see lay members referring to Bodhirak as a *bodhisatta* in Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 155.

<sup>228</sup> Exploring the concept of *bodhisattas* in Thailand is particularly multifaceted due to the combination of beliefs from large numbers of Chinese Buddhists, influences from Mahāyāna Buddhism prior to the thirteenth century mixing with popular societal beliefs, a fascination for spirits, and the worshiping of revered deceased kings of Thailand as *bodhisattas*—particularly King Rama V, and the recently passed King Rama IX. For further discussions surrounding King Rama V see, Peter Jackson, “Royal Spirits, Chinese gods, and Magic Monks: Thailand’s Boom-Time Religions of Prosperity,” *South East Asia Research* 7, no. 3 (1999): 245–320. This shifting and complex relationship of beliefs and practices is also highlighted in Pattana Kitiarsa, “Beyond syncretism: hybridization of popular religion in contemporary Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 461–87. The relationship between the Thai rulers and Theravāda concepts of the *bodhisatta*-king is a complex series of political, historical and social interactions discussed in depth by Patrick Jory, *Thailand’s Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jātaka and the Idea of the Perfect Man* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

<sup>229</sup> “[The Bodhisattva’s] model is that of the benevolent Sakyamuni who, over the many incarnations... was often a king or prince, aristocrat, or rich merchant, but was always acting to benefit others. Moreover since all agree that a Buddha is superior to an Arhat, so a monarch who is known to be a Bodhisattva may gain a reflected glory allowing him to claim or imply superiority over Buddhists on the path simply to becoming an Arhat, that is, most other Buddhists including the majority of Buddhist monks and nuns.” Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 11.

<sup>230</sup> Another relevant factor is *bodhicitta* (thought of awakening), or the state of the *bodhisatta*’s mind. This includes the intention towards full awakening (the announcement to undertake the path, and the action taken towards it) and recognition that the innate nature of the mind is already enlightened.

<sup>231</sup> See Chapter 4.3.1 for further discussion of this artwork and other images of Bodhirak.

<sup>232</sup> The physical communities are the main theme of Chapter 5.

<sup>233</sup> The *Bunniyom* system is a core concept that Asoke uses to support this cyclical progression which is discussed in Chapter 2.4 and illustrated in Figure 2.6.

## 2.2 Precepts

Undertaking precepts is one of the basic commitments made by lay Buddhists and through the vast array of Buddhist traditions, the householder precepts contain the same content: to refrain from killing, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, and using intoxicants.<sup>234</sup> An additional three precepts are added when one wishes to adhere to a more austere lifestyle or is attending retreats, Buddhist holidays or *uposatha* days.<sup>235</sup> The additional three precepts are to abstain from (1) eating after noon, (2) partaking in dancing/music/entertainment, wearing cosmetics/adornments and, (3) using luxurious places for sitting or sleeping. Further, the third precept of sexual misconduct is expanded to abstaining from all sexual activity when the eight precepts are adhered to. Ten precepts are observed by novice monks and nuns and differ from the eight precepts in that the precept concerning entertainment and adornment is divided into two parts and additionally the use of money is prohibited.<sup>236</sup> In many contexts, white is worn to express that one is observing eight or ten precepts, however in Asoke many members live by eight or ten precepts and wear the standard blue “Asoke uniform.”<sup>237</sup> The Asoke description and embodiment of the eight precepts vary somewhat from the common understanding and as precepts create the foundation for daily practice, this section will elucidate how Asoke interprets, materializes, and integrates these core beliefs.

Though *sīla* or moral behavior is an important aspect in many Theravāda teachings and contexts, it often is accompanied by *paññā* (wisdom) and *samādhi* (concentration) and all three aspects share a balanced importance. As explored throughout this chapter, Asoke places *sīla* in the centre of their beliefs and practices, which is also revealed in discussions of the precepts and the Eightfold Path. Asoke’s strict interpretation and emphasis on *sīla* have been in part a reaction to the perceived laxity and misconduct found in some mainstream monasteries, or the reports of scandals involving monks. Often scandals from past decades have revolved around sex and money and Asoke aims to use their strict moral conduct in an effort to set themselves apart from the mainstream *saṅgha* and legitimize their movement. This is particularly seen in the conservative approach to modesty, sexuality, and possessions, as will be discussed in regard to the precepts.

Understanding and practicing *sīla* is central to daily life in Asoke and some centres give

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<sup>234</sup> A 8.39.

<sup>235</sup> *Uposatha* days are periods of observance occurring two to six days each lunar month depending on the cultural context.

<sup>236</sup> Many female renunciates in Theravāda traditions abide by either eight or ten precepts and are further discussed in Chapter 3.1.1.

<sup>237</sup> The Asoke uniform is expanded upon in Chapter 3.4.

handouts to guests upon arrival which outline the basic precepts and practices. This guideline illustrates many of the core Asoke principles including the basic precepts, and views on vegetarianism, the importance of walking barefoot, cleanliness, environmental care/recycling, and modesty. Though all centres have the same expectations, below is an example of the guidelines which were given to me upon arrival at the Ratchathani Asoke community:

**Lifestyle of Ratchathani Asoke community**

1. We are free of drugs, alcohol, base vices (like gambling etc.), and we practice wholesome actions.
2. We emphasize self-sufficiency and frugality.
3. We work for free and live for free. We have a central fund which we draw on for everything in our lives, from birth to death.
4. We practice Buddhism seriously. Our community is not a tourist spot or a place to relax.
5. Every one of us follows five or more Buddhist precepts, and eats vegetarian, and mostly vegan food. We are oriented towards independence, brotherhood, peace, efficiency, and integrity in order to live together happily.

**Please practice the following while you are here:**

1. Adhere to at least the five precepts.
2. Do not kill or harm any living creature including people animals and insects. Even mosquitoes please.
3. Do not bring in any meat, including prepared foods with meat as an ingredient. This includes all animal flesh, as well sea animals and insects, and does not mean only beef.
4. Try to eat two meals with not snacking between meals.
5. Do not bring addictive substances into the community such as alcohol, cigarettes, betel, coffee, and do not gamble.
6. Do not steal, and don't take or use something if you don't know the owner would be okay with you taking or using it.
7. Try walking barefoot at least part of the time you're here. If you can try, do not wear footwear. This is an awareness practice, and it is good for your health. Consider it foot reflexology with every step.
8. Try not to take naps unless you are ill.
9. Keep your surroundings clean. Your rooms, bathrooms and common areas.
10. Separate garbage into proper recycling bins.
11. Dress modestly. Do not wear tight, revealing clothing. Cover your legs. Short sleeve shirts are okay but no tank tops and, do not show your chest.

The relevance of this community guideline is that it introduces how residents strive to live, and the expectations for visitors while staying in the communities. This list touches on core features in Asoke—from moral practices, vegetarianism, recycling, living and working for free, and ascetic practices such as walking barefoot and eating infrequently. These aspects will be discussed specifically in relation to how they emerge from and are tied to the various precepts.

When undertaking precepts, one strives to go beyond the action described in the precept and to endeavour to cultivate positive attributes rather than avoiding negative actions (for

example, instead of simply not stealing, one practices generosity).<sup>238</sup> Each precept, as will be illustrated, is given an opposite emotion or quality to use to both counteract and replace the destructive emotion or defilement (*kilesa*).<sup>239</sup> The precepts are deeply entwined with spiritual development in Asoke, and *nibbāna* is rarely discussed without mention of the precepts. Dedicated practice of the precepts (according to Asoke), and the number of precepts undertaken, are emphasized as the way to spiritual awakening, and make up the basis for daily life—further shaping the aesthetic of the community. As a core component of Asoke, the precepts are frequently discussed by Bodhirak in sermons, by members in conversation, during “morality checks,” *Dhamma* study, and meetings.<sup>240</sup> For lay members wishing to dedicate themselves further and those intending to ordain, there is a system in place where they can keep a detailed log of their progression and adherence to the precepts.<sup>241</sup> Further, the Asoke interpretation of the precepts are taught and manifested through artwork,<sup>242</sup> the physical communities,<sup>243</sup> and media such as their television (FMTV) station and print media.<sup>244</sup>

The following section is intended to give a deeper insight into the interpretation and use of the precepts within Asoke theoretically, and how they manifest in daily life and physically in the community. Of course, the textual understanding varies from daily practice, and both are interpreted on an individual scale. Though some lay members undertake only five or eight

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<sup>238</sup> The action to avoid (killing, stealing etc.) is called *vāritta* and positive action to counteract it (compassion, honesty, etc.) is called *cāritta* (this duo is also called *cāritta-sīla* and *vāritta-sīla*).

<sup>239</sup> In accordance with other Theravāda teachings, the precepts are paired with various *kilesas*, (afflictions, defilements, destructive emotions) and *pañca nīvaraṇāni/nivāraṇa* (hindrances) which include states of mind such as desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and skeptical doubt.

<sup>240</sup> “Morality checks” are typically weekly gatherings led by a monastic where lay members and students reflect on their actions and can confess and discuss any transgressions of the precepts.

<sup>241</sup> The appropriately titled *Handbook of the Eight Precepts* is used by residents who can then work with a point system according to how well they follow the precepts, which is then supervised on a regular basis by a *samana* or *sikkhamat*. This is also mentioned in Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 198.

<sup>242</sup> Artwork in Asoke is discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>243</sup> See Chapter 5 for an exploration of how the communities express Asoke beliefs.

<sup>244</sup> An interesting example of the Asoke understanding of precepts can be seen in their publication of a section of the *Samaññaphala Sutta: The Fruits of the Contemplative Life*. This *sutta* fragment is relevant because it does not only list the basic precepts undertaken by all Buddhists but focuses on how monks should practice *sīla*. These precepts are expounded with more detail and conclude with a specific mention of *sīla*. For example, the second precept in regard to stealing is further elaborated that one should also, “accept and want only the things which are given by others,” and “not behave like a thief,” and lastly to, “be clean. This is also one of thy SILA.” *Sīla* is placed in capital letters for emphasis and continues to be capitalized in relation to the other precepts in the Asoke publication of this *sutta*. Further, this *sutta* does not discuss only the precepts but also practices that typically only apply to monastics such as eating only once a day, accepting gifts and damaging plant life. This is an interesting example of how Asoke uses various passages to further support their ascetic way of life and that *suttas* specifically directed towards monastics are being expounded for all members. The focus on *suttas* and sections which deal specifically with *sīla* such as *Samaññaphala Sutta*, *Cūlasīla*, *Majjhimasīla*, and *Mahāsīla* further shows the importance of moral practice within Asoke and how that belief is reinforced within the community. This was also published in English, though there is some confusion in the publication, since it lists the *Samaññaphala Sutta* as being the “Cullasila” (Pāli, *Cūlasīla*). The *Cūlasīla Sutta* in D 1 has similarities however does not emphasize *sīla* in the same way the *Samaññaphala Sutta* does. Translated by Paradorn Tanyapan and Porn Poompanna in *Insight into Santi Asoke: Part I* (Bangkok: Kittiya Veerapan, 1989), 27.

precepts, there are others who abide by all ten precepts, as do the *sikkhamats*; for this reason, all ten precepts will be explored.<sup>245</sup>

### **I. I undertake the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures.**

“Herein someone avoids the taking of life and abstains from it. Without stick or sword, conscientious, full of sympathy, he is desirous of the welfare of all sentient beings.”<sup>246</sup> For Asoke members, this precept is expressed in that they will not kill or harm a living being, and they are encouraged to develop feelings of *mettā* (loving-kindness) towards all persons and creatures. The reduction of *dosa*, (anger, aversion, or aggression) and *vyāpāda* (ill-will or resentment) is associated with this precept and Asoke members strive to be free of these and promote *karuṇā* (compassion) and *mettā* in their everyday lives. A central method of manifesting this is through living as strict vegetarians. They generally describe themselves as vegetarians and animal products such as dairy and eggs are often avoided due to the potential harm that the animals have endured, technically making them vegans.<sup>247</sup> Asoke communities also promote vegetarianism through their restaurants, festivals, and food stands during political events at which the Asoke are involved. This precept influences the members daily interactions with sentient beings of all sizes—that no beings should be harmed, including mosquitos or other insects (even spider webs are gently removed as to not harm the spider).<sup>248</sup> It is a general Asoke policy to not feed any stray animals, because this is seen as reinforcing a reliance upon people which could bring harm to the animals if they were to become dependent on them, as such, there are very few stray cats or dogs seen in the vicinity. The development of *mettā* is physically manifested, for example, through organic farming (to not cause harm through chemicals), recycling centres (causing less waste and less consumption), promoting vegetarianism, *Bunniyom* economics and community outreach with programs and schools.<sup>249</sup> As such, this

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<sup>245</sup> The *samanas* abide by the typical 227 rules as prescribed by the *Vinaya*. For further reflections on conduct for lay persons see: Kate Crosby, “A Theravāda Code of Conduct for Good Buddhists: The ‘Upāsakamanussavinaya,’” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126, no. 2 (2006): 177–87.

<sup>246</sup> A 10.176; Mahathera Nyanatiloka, *The Word of the Buddha* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2001), 51.

<sup>247</sup> *Bhikkhus* typically accept all alms offerings without discrimination, however if a monk has reason to believe the animal was slaughtered for their consumption, they may not eat it. Within Asoke, animal meat could be considered acceptable when the animal died from natural causes however because of their serious dedication and identification with being vegetarian, this would be an extremely rare case. Sikkhamat Rinpah describes accepting meat on alms rounds, only to say, “no thank you” and give it back so that they may offer it to someone else—she mentions that whoever had offered it still received merit from the gesture since it was the intention behind the giving that was sincere, even if it was then returned. Interview with Sikkhamat Rinpah, Sali Asoke, March 1, 2013.

<sup>248</sup> During weekly “morality checks” some students and lay members admit to killing the occasional mosquito.

<sup>249</sup> *Bunniyom* economics are explored further in Chapter 2.4 and Asoke educational programs are described briefly in Chapter 3.2.2.

precept shapes the senses of members through altering their actions, the food they consume as well as the physical communities.

## **II. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.**

Further elaborated, “taking that which is not given” includes stealing, robbery (taking what belongs to others openly by force or threats), fraudulence (gaining possession of another’s belongings by falsely claiming them as one’s own), deceit, accepting bribery, exploitation, deliberate destruction of property, or acting as an accomplice among others.<sup>250</sup> The Asoke description of “not taking or using something if you don’t know the owner would be okay with you taking or using it” encompasses many of these aspects.<sup>251</sup> The practice of this precept is intended to prevent *lobha* (greed) and develop *dāna* (charity/alms-giving/generosity). This is materialized in Asoke through having few possessions and consuming little in order to create a surplus for the community, which is then either given away, or sold at or below cost to further propagate *dāna* and to “give back to society.”<sup>252</sup> This precept is further manifested through Asoke’s political presence and activism against what they see as government corruption.<sup>253</sup>

The *kuṭīs* (huts lived in by residents and monastics) in Asoke have no walls, thus leaving the possessions of members and monastics in the open, which demonstrates that this precept is a basic and important principle in the community.<sup>254</sup> The majority of possessions belong to the community, or have been purchased with Asoke funds, and are considered public property available for anyone to use.<sup>255</sup> There are, at times, examples of the students using or taking things from each other but this precept is seriously upheld by adult members of the community. The Asoke motto of “daring to be poor” encourages members to have few possessions and to reduce their attachment to the possessions they do have.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> These are further expanded upon by HRH Prince Vajirañanavarorasa, *The Five Precepts and the Five Ennoblers* (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya Press, 1975), 11–13.

<sup>251</sup> See *Lifestyle of Ratchathani Asoke community* guidelines. This or similar wording was also often used in conversation with members to describe this precept.

<sup>252</sup> This is a brief description of the Asoke *Bunniyom* economics which is explored further in Chapter 2.4

<sup>253</sup> Asoke’s political involvement has a complex and long history which has been largely overlooked by authors (with exception to the Asoke court cases). As some of my fieldwork overlapped with the 2013–2014 Thai political crisis, an entire chapter was written for this dissertation specifically on Asoke and their political involvement through the decades however has been excluded as it did not integrate adequately with the rest of the project. For a short exploration of Asoke and politics, see Chapter 3.3.1.

<sup>254</sup> During my experience within Asoke communities, few doors were locked with the exception of some offices and many of the buildings were open air with no doors/walls. Santi Asoke in Bangkok has considerably more security than the rural communities due to it being in the city as well as containing the media headquarters (where filming for the Asoke television station takes place) and is Bodhirak’s main residence.

<sup>255</sup> This is also within reason however—for example, film and tech equipment are used only by those who are trained to use it.

<sup>256</sup> “Be diligent, take initiative, dare to be poor and endure sarcasm” is another common motto within Asoke.

### III. I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual activity.

When committing to the first five precepts, this principle is to refrain from sexual misconduct, however for those observing eight or more precepts, it is expanded to include all sexual activity.<sup>257</sup> Sexual misconduct is described as sexual involvement with anyone protected by family members, by the *Dhamma*, who has a partner or someone awaiting punishment.<sup>258</sup> This further includes any kind of coercion, deceit, violence or adultery. Lay Buddhists are expected to adhere to the precept of refraining from sexual misconduct, however there is a certain pressure for Asoke members to be celibate because many consider all acts of sex as “illicit” including those between married couples.<sup>259</sup> Some members report that these high expectations can also shame or distance married couples, pregnant women or students who are interested in having relationships.<sup>260</sup> Often when discussing this topic members contrasted Asoke’s strict interpretation and emphasis on celibacy with the reported sex scandals involving mainstream monks; this aims at legitimizing the seriousness and superiority of Asoke compared to what they see as a corrupted Thai *saṅgha*.<sup>261</sup>

Asoke teachings promote reducing feelings of passion, or sensory desire (*kāmacchanda*, or *kāmataṅhā*) and sensual passion (*kāmarāga*) through developing familial connections with others and promoting kinship. Sikkhamat Chinda explains the benefits of having a friendly, familial relationship between men and women:

Men and women can be friends, but to be husband and wife is very different—it is much more of a burden...but women and men can help each other without being husband and wife...because when you are husband and wife, it is impossible that you will not take advantage of each other...but when you are friends you are equal—this friend does not belong to only you—this friend belongs to everyone. Your friends are my friends; my friends are your friends. But when you become husband and wife—what happens?<sup>262</sup>

Compassion is taught as being the highest form of love and sexual love is the lowest, which is often compared to animals, or primal instincts, though this is not unique to Asoke.<sup>263</sup> This

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<sup>257</sup> This is also translated as refraining from illicit sex or wrongdoing in respect of sensuality.

<sup>258</sup> A 10.176.

<sup>259</sup> Chamlong Srimuang, (former mayor of Bangkok and politically influential devout Asoke member) demonstrated the importance of his celibacy through building a separate hut for his wife in Asoke centres where he has his own small dwelling.

<sup>260</sup> Beliefs among members regarding sexuality also vary and some are more conservative than others. During informal discussions, some members would mention that engaging in sexual intercourse was a danger to the spiritual path and others felt it there was nothing wrong in only undertaking five precepts as a lay person.

<sup>261</sup> This was mentioned in various personal communications with lay members. Asoke’s perception of the Thai *saṅgha* is also apparent through their publication *Rao Kit Aray* [What We Think] available online: <https://issuu.com/e-bookboonniyom> and <https://e-bookboonniyom.blogspot.com>.

<sup>262</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Chinda, Santi Asoke, March 9, 2013.

<sup>263</sup> An example can be seen in an early *Dhamma* talk by Bodhirak entitled “Do Not Get Married” which is transcribed on the Asoke website: <https://www.asoke.info/Book/pradhamma/pradhamma41.html>, accessed August 14,

precept is materially expressed through the appearance of members and the layout of the communities. Modesty is an important feature in Asoke and even in the Thai climate, long sleeves and ankle-length sarongs are worn by lay women and *sikkhamats*; lay men may wear shorter sleeves with their pants and *samanas* sometimes have their arms or shoulder exposed while in the confines of the community.<sup>264</sup> Gender segregated dormitories for students and guests are found in all Asoke centres and the guest halls for women were often closer to the area where the female residents and *sikkhamats* lived, whereas the men's area was near the *samana's* *kuṭīs*.<sup>265</sup> Areas for permanent residents and monastics are also divided by gender. As with other ordained members of the *saṅgha*, Asoke monastics abstain completely from any kind of sexual activity and is grounds for expulsion from the monastic community if broken.

#### **IV. I undertake the precept to refrain from false speech.**

This precept includes refraining from various forms of incorrect speech and promotes *sammā vācā*, (right speech) which is also the third principle of the Eightfold Path.<sup>266</sup> Right speech includes: “Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter,”<sup>267</sup> and that it is spoken at the right time, in truth, affectionately, beneficially and with a mind of good-will.<sup>268</sup> Within Asoke, counteracting incorrect speech is seen as increasing the truth, which is also interpreted as sharing and promoting the Asoke understanding of the *Dhamma*, or the teachings of Bodhirak. This precept manifests through the action and spoken word of lay members and monastics, and within the community through libraries as well as stores providing Asoke literature, audio recordings, DVD's, and other media. Right speech is a key component in Asoke because of the centrality of communication and dialogue, as Essen succinctly describes:

Sikkhamat Chinda said it well: “Meeting, meeting. Everything has to come to a meeting.” ...there are daily formal and informal meetings of every kind: national, regional, community, committee, and sub-committee, as well as ad hoc groups of concerned individuals. The meeting is the forum through which Asoke members set goals, resolve conflicts, and make decisions.<sup>269</sup>

For Asoke members dealing with students, emphasis is placed on truthful and open dialogue—

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2019.

<sup>264</sup> The dress of Asoke members is a central aspect of their aesthetic which is explored throughout Chapter 3.

<sup>265</sup> The dorms for female guests were meant to accommodate between five to twenty persons in a room. The number of women staying in the dorm varied depending on location and if there was any kind of special event happening. At times I was the only one in the dorm and at other times, there were up to twenty other women sharing the space. At festivals, the camping areas are sex segregated and members bring tents or mosquito nets.

<sup>266</sup> Discussed further in Chapter 2.3.

<sup>267</sup> S 45.8.

<sup>268</sup> A 5.198.

<sup>269</sup> Essen, *Right Development*, 95.

this is seen in the regular meetings between students and members to discuss any trespasses against the precepts that have occurred, and how to avoid them in the future.<sup>270</sup> As communication is a fundamental aspect of how Asoke functions, right speech plays an important role.<sup>271</sup> Right speech is further elaborated upon as a factor within the Eightfold Path in the following section.

### **V. I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.**

Through avoiding the six vices: drinking, smoking (and drugs), gambling, illicit sex, frequenting nighttime entertainment and idleness, members strive to combat ignorance, delusion and sloth/torpor (*avijjā*, *moha* and *thīna-middha*).<sup>272</sup> Substances such as drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, betel nut and coffee are not permitted within Asoke communities. Alcohol is seen in Asoke as negative not only because of the harmful physical side effects, but also because of the spiritual and mental side effects of losing self-control and harming ones' *sati* (concentration). Drinking alcohol is seen as a waste of time, energy and money, especially when these could be better used in the community for propagating their *Dhamma*. Asoke has also campaigned actively against intoxicants, one example is the 2005 demonstrations outside the Stock Exchange of Thailand condemning Thai Beverages Plc, producer of Chang beer and Mekong whisky, for its plan to list on the stock market.<sup>273</sup> Asoke communities also promoted their "clean lifestyle" to the rural farmers who, in exchange for participating in an instructional five day course at Asoke, received a three-year postponement on paying loans owed to governmental Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC).<sup>274</sup> Horn observed that, "some participating farmers were visibly uncomfortable, not because of the rather simple conditions under which people live in the Asoke centres – those are the same conditions the farmers came

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<sup>270</sup> This includes the weekly "morality check" as well as for conflict management and resolution.

<sup>271</sup> During my fieldtrips which overlapped with political unrest, where Asoke was actively involved in the anti-Taksin, anti-Yinluck rallies, some lay members made negative comments about opposing political leaders or protesters which showed that this is an ideal to be achieved and does not assume that all members embody these aspects without fault.

<sup>272</sup> The six vices are known as *abayamook* (Thai). Ignorance (*avijjā*) and delusion (*moha*) are closely related—in the Pāli texts, "ignorance" is used when referring to the cause of *samsāra*, and when in a psychological context about mental factors, "delusion" is generally used. See, Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path the Way to the End of Suffering* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1999), 126.

<sup>273</sup> This was a large protest attended by a reported 5,000 Thai mainstream monks as well. It was reported that the protests by the prominent politician and Asoke member Chamlong against Thai Beverages "sparked a broader movement among local religious groups and others, including 50 student organisations, Christian organisations and civic groups against liquor and tobacco." Siriporn Chanjindamane, "Clerics say liquor companies should not be permitted to raise funds from the public on local stock exchange," *The Nation*, March 19, 2005.

<sup>274</sup> Based on interviews, Meessen reports that around 300,000 farmers had been trained in these programs. Merel Maria Meessen, "The Ecovillage Movement in Transition Partnership with Government, A Multiple Case Study: Thailand, Senegal and Damanhur (Italy)" (master's thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2013), 47.

from – but because of the lack of alcohol, cigarettes, gambling and other entertainment.”<sup>275</sup> Asoke communities further advocate a healthy lifestyle through their vegetarian diet, pesticide-free agriculture, health and detox centres.

#### **VI. I undertake the precept to refrain from eating at the forbidden time.**

Typically, this precept refers specifically to eating after noon however within Asoke, this precept diverges from the typical “forbidden time” at noon, and instead the precept is to refrain from eating “uncountable” meals. Monastics and many lay members eat only one meal a day before noon; breakfast and a snack in the afternoon (usually leftovers from the main meal) are available for the students and some guests or residents. The Asoke lifestyle revolves around work, therefore the interpretation of this precept leaves flexibility for the non-monastic members of the community if they are unable to eat their main meal before noon.<sup>276</sup> Members are warned not to overindulge at meals and guests are also urged to at most eat two meals a day, without snacking in-between.<sup>277</sup> Ideally, members should not only practice eating less, but also preach to others of the benefits thereof.<sup>278</sup> These practices are meant to combat greed (*lobha*) as well as sloth/torpor (*thīna-middha*). This precept has less obvious or far reaching manifestations within Asoke communities, however it dictates daily schedules and activities as monastics go on early morning alms and the kitchen is busy in the morning and generally vacant in the afternoon.

#### **VII. I undertake the precept to refrain from dancing, singing, music and watching entertainment.**

As described in the previous precepts, ideal practice consists not only of following the precepts, but taking measures to expand and apply them further, however the interpretation and practice concerning entertainment is unique to Asoke. Asoke uses television, music, and entertainment within all the centres and during festivals, technically breaking this precept on a regular basis, however this is explained by Asoke members as a form of *Dhamma* practice in itself. During meals television is often watched with a variety of programming including nature shows, dramas, comedies, and news. The students have occasional film evenings where they

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<sup>275</sup> Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, “Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport,” *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 36.

<sup>276</sup> While undertaking my fieldwork in Asoke, I observed some of the Asoke farmers collecting food in the morning in stackable metal containers to eat later in the fields, gardens, or other workplaces.

<sup>277</sup> This was also mentioned in the *Lifestyle of Ratchathani Asoke Community* handout.

<sup>278</sup> It seems this is generally in regard to frequency rather than quantity since members usually eat very large portions during their meal—however since there is an emphasis on manual labor and only plant-based proteins are consumed this quantity is understandable, and there seems to be no concern or evidence of obesity.

are supervised by a monastic and a discussion takes place afterwards to address the content, messages, and what *Dhamma* lesson can come from it.<sup>279</sup> The Asoke television station, FMTV is also watched daily, where sermons and discussions from Bodhirak and other monastics are aired. During political activity, especially when Asoke is involved, many monastics and members frequently watch the updates and news reports. Interviews with long-term lay members revealed that some members were resistant to the idea of bringing in televisions in the early 1990s, however after a three-decade presence in Asoke, television has become an integral part of education, spiritual practice, and communication in Asoke. The main intention behind the use of television is to practice their understanding of the *Dhamma*, as a tool for spiritual progression. As televisions were introduced, Bodhirak is quoted in an article by Samana Lakkhano as saying, “It is time for us to make a proper use of mass media. We do not watch TV every day, nor will we watch casually. With wisdom, let us learn how to pick up gold from garbage.”<sup>280</sup> In order to do this, a detailed set of principles have been outlined by Bodhirak on how to watch television “properly.”<sup>281</sup>

Music is played on loudspeakers throughout the day in many Asoke communities. Most music is either to call the students to class and is music that had been composed by Bodhirak when he was a songwriter or are songs with moral/Buddhist/Asoke messages. Many other songs from mainstream media can also be heard at various times throughout the month but are first screened by monastics to be deemed appropriate. Singing, dancing, playing instruments, and acting in plays is permitted to an extent within Asoke, and is seen during various festivals when the students and adults arrange small performances. Generally, as a precaution against the possibility of sensual pleasures (*kāmatanḥā*) arising, or causing sexual temptation, anyone between the ages of 14 to 45 years old refrains from dancing.<sup>282</sup>

### **VIII. I undertake the precept to refrain from wearing garlands, using perfumes, and beautifying the body with cosmetics.**

As mentioned above, modesty is an important aspect of Asoke belief and way of life and is promoted through their dress and humble, reserved action. This precept is meant to impede the craving for “sensuality” or “sensual pleasures” (*kāmatanḥā*) which includes craving

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<sup>279</sup> The movies are also screened beforehand by monastics.

<sup>280</sup> Samana Lakkhano, “Practicing Dharma Through Television Instructed by Samana Bhodhirak,” *Bunniyom archives*, accessed August 18, 2019, [https://www.asoke.info/bunniyom/dharma.samana.lakkhano\\_mobi.html](https://www.asoke.info/bunniyom/dharma.samana.lakkhano_mobi.html).

<sup>281</sup> This includes a set of four “basic principles” as well as a longer, more complex list of “ten right views” and is further described in Lakkhano, “Practicing Dharma Through Television.”

<sup>282</sup> Heikkilä-Horn observed exceptions to this rule during her fieldwork in 1994, when students over the age 14 partook in folk dances. See, Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 224.

for sensory pleasures or sense objects which provide pleasant feelings. One member compared attachment to cosmetics and fashion to alcohol, showing that this precept is taken by some members with the same weight as the fifth precept:

This is a basic thing [Bodhirak] talked a lot 30 years ago...about the cosmetic issue and how to get rid of it, it is something that we cling to...it is the cause of ruin...cosmetic is the cause of ruin and decoration is the cause of the ruin...maybe it is worse than drinking alcohol, like, cosmetic for the woman and cosmetic dressing is worse than the man who drinks alcohol...addicted to cosmetics, especially Thai ladies. They spend a lot of money...the wife spends much more money than the husband who drinks alcohol and gets drunk. She is drunk also though, lost and blind, attached.<sup>283</sup>

Many members adopt the “Asoke uniform” consisting of traditional peasant-style long sleeved shirts and pants or sarongs as signs of modesty, among other reasons.<sup>284</sup> This “uniform” also has a specific style of short haircut and includes being barefoot. Perfumes, cosmetics, and jewelry are not worn in Asoke communities, though basic products such as shampoo, face cleanser, deodorants, toothpastes, and moisturizers are made in Asoke and sold in their stores. Because wearing amulets and jewelry is a common social practice in Thailand, giving these up is one of the first ways new guests or members integrate themselves. This precept is materialized in the aesthetic of the members, who dress very plainly and modestly and without any cosmetics or other adornments. This influences the senses of the members themselves and signals adherence to the group. For guests, the recommendation in regard to modest attire (as seen above within the *Lifestyle of Ratchathani Asoke Community* handout) specifies to “dress modestly. Do not wear tight, revealing clothing. Cover your legs. Short sleeve shirts are okay but no tank tops and, do not show your chest.”<sup>285</sup> This approach to modesty is further demonstrated by the Asoke lay members and monastics in their practice of reserved, mindful movements, frequent *waiing*, bowing, kneeling when addressing monastics, and being consciously humble while walking, sitting, or standing.

### **IX. I undertake the precept to refrain from lying on a high or luxurious sleeping place.**

Within Thailand, sitting on the floor is common, especially in temples; with increased westernization in recent decades, many homes and public places use chairs, benches, or chesterfields. This precept aims at preventing pride, arrogance, or conceit (*māna*) and sloth/torpor (*thīna-middha*). Elevating oneself physically could create the basis for

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<sup>283</sup> Informal interview with a long-term female lay resident in Pathom Asoke.

<sup>284</sup> The aesthetic of Asoke members is further discussed in Chapter 3.5.

<sup>285</sup> There are many mainstream temples where it is common to see young lay women wearing shorts and tank tops, this was regularly mentioned by members and frowned upon as not appropriate, especially when visiting a temple. I was often commended for dressing modestly in loose, long-sleeved, and ankle-length (mostly) Thai style clothing. See above for the complete list of the *Lifestyle of Ratchathani Asoke Community* handout.

disrespecting others and comfort can contribute to laziness, which opposes the Asoke principles of community, modesty, and hard work. Also, contentment, being satisfied with little and unostentatious (*appicchatā*) is encouraged through this precept and is a core principle within Asoke. Lay followers sit and sleep on the floor, generally on thin bamboo mats; chairs are rarely used and generally reserved for elderly members or guests. This also reinforces the humble “poor” aesthetic in Asoke as there are no cushions, beds, or comfortable places to sit or sleep. As is typical in many Theravāda contexts the *samanas* and *sikkhamats* sit on elevated platforms while giving talks or for the daily meal. Sitting and sleeping on the stone and wooden floors within Asoke further influences the sensory experience of the members as they practice this precept.

#### **X. I undertake the precept to refrain from accepting gold and silver (money).**

Typically, this precept is reserved for novices and ten-precept nuns, however some lay residents choose to forgo using money. Lay Asoke members have a broad range of involvement and those living with the communities generally abide by more precepts than those living outside of the centre. Some lay members choose to live by this precept to reduce greed (*lobha*) and further their spiritual path, and others may live without money because they are fully supported by the community, and therefore have no need for it. This precept is not followed by all members, however the *samanas* and *sikkhamats* live without using, and generally without touching money as well. The communal support system in Asoke allows lay followers the opportunity to practice living without money if they so choose.

### **2.3 The Noble Path**

Along with the previously discussed ten precepts, the Noble Path is regarded as a central framework of Buddhist beliefs. The Eightfold path is the last of the Four Noble Truths in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, Gautama’s first sermon, allotting it a prominent role in the Buddhist scriptures, and in turn, playing a large part in many forms of Theravāda practice. The Noble Path is taught as the way to the cessation of *dukkha* (often translated as suffering, unease, stress or unsatisfactoriness).<sup>286</sup> The Tenfold Path is a lesser known extension of the Eightfold Path, though it appears in parts of the *Sutta Pitaka* and is described in some passages as being superior to the Eightfold Path.<sup>287</sup> The Noble Path is used similarly within Asoke as in other

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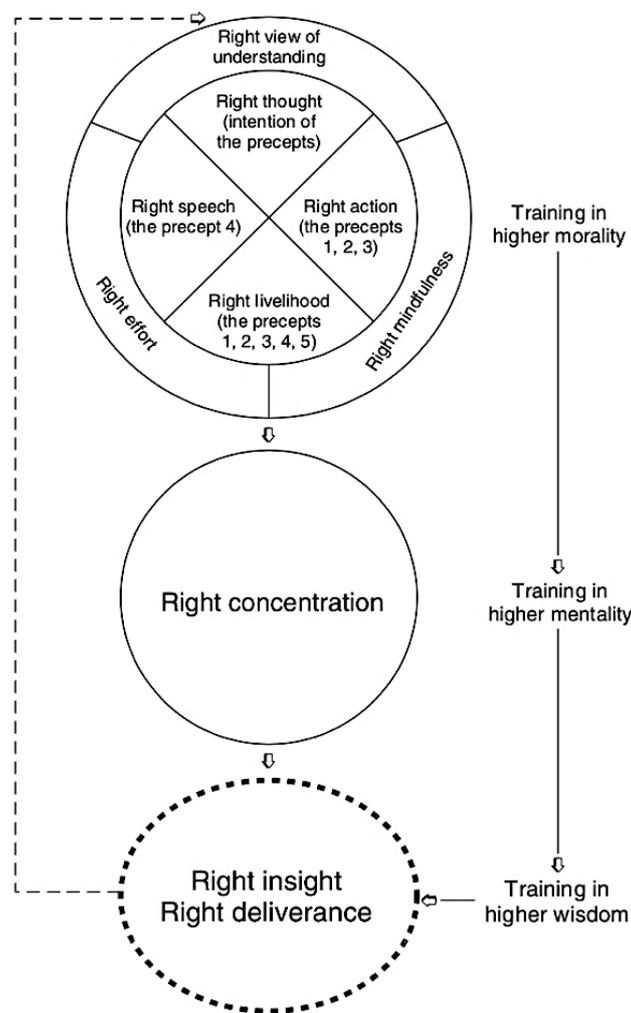
<sup>286</sup> The Four Noble Truths: 1. The truth of suffering (*dukkha*); 2. The truth of the cause of suffering (*samudaya*); 3. The truth of the end of suffering (*nirhodha*); 4. The truth of the path that frees from suffering (*maggā*).

<sup>287</sup> Rod Bucknell, “The Buddhist Path to Liberation: An Analysis of the Listing of Stages,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7, no. 2 (1984): 7–9.

Theravāda contexts and also supports other core values more specific to Asoke. This excerpt from an Asoke publication explains the importance of the Noble Path and how it reinforces Asoke beliefs:

When one has successfully accomplished practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, it is only natural that one will work harder, consume less and share the rest of what one has with society. This noble state of mind appearing automatically and voluntarily is normal for those who have attained the result of the path.<sup>288</sup>

The Asoke understanding of this relationship between the various elements of the Noble Path can be seen in the Asoke-made diagram in Figure 2.1. This is an unorthodox representation since the Noble Path is generally assembled in a list, or a circle in conjunction with the *Dhamma* Wheel and its eight spokes.<sup>289</sup> Further, we can see a redistribution of the factors that make up the Noble Path to emphasize Asoke beliefs, and in particular, the emphasis on moral conduct:



**Figure 2.1** Asoke distribution and arrangement of the factors within the Eight and Tenfold Path.<sup>290</sup>

<sup>288</sup> Poompanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke: Part I*, 24.

<sup>289</sup> Representations of *Dhamma* wheels are discussed further in Chapter 4.4.1.

<sup>290</sup> Poompanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke: Part I*, 25. This diagram was also published in Heikkilä-Horn's book, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 115, and Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements*, 180.

Category	Components of the Eightfold Path	Result
Wisdom ( <i>paññā</i> )	1. Right View ( <i>sammā diṭṭhi</i> ) 2. Right Intention ( <i>sammā saṅkappa</i> )	9. Right Insight ( <i>sammā ñāṇa</i> ) 10. Right Liberation ( <i>sammā vimutti</i> )
Moral conduct ( <i>sīla</i> )	3. Right Speech ( <i>sammā vācā</i> ) 4. Right Action ( <i>sammā kammanta</i> ) 5. Right Livelihood ( <i>sammā ājīva</i> )	
Concentration ( <i>samādhi</i> )	6. Right Effort ( <i>sammā vāyāma</i> ) 7. Right Mindfulness ( <i>sammā sati</i> ) 8. Right Concentration ( <i>sammā samādhi</i> )	

**Figure 2.2** Common distribution of factors within the Eight and Tenfold Path.<sup>291</sup>

Figure 2.2 is an example of a more standard list of the Noble Path which will be used as a basis of comparison to the Asoke model. The Noble Path is typically divided in three categories: wisdom (*paññā*), morality (*sīla*), and concentration (*samādhi*); the Asoke model incorporates these elements, however specifically refers to the “higher” versions thereof: training in higher morality (*adhisīla-sikkhā*), training in higher mentality (*adhicitta-sikkhā*), and training in higher wisdom (*adhipañña-sikkhā*).<sup>292</sup> Further, we can see the redistribution of the factors to emphasize *sīla*. In Figure 2.1, right thought, right speech, right action, and right livelihood are in a centre circle and are joined with relevant precepts.<sup>293</sup> This is surrounded by a ring comprising of right effort, right mindfulness, and right view—all of which are positioned beside “training in higher morality”—as such, seven out of eight aspects of the Eightfold Path have been placed within the sphere of moral conduct. Situated below this is another circle containing right concentration, accompanied by “training in higher mentality.” As mentioned above, the Asoke Eightfold Path model has been expanded to a Tenfold Path with right insight and right deliverance coupled with “training in higher wisdom.” The fact that these two factors are found in Asoke’s illustration (Figure 2.1) also gives insight into scriptural influences on Asoke beliefs and practices, however within interviews and discussion, the more common Eightfold Path, rather than the Tenfold path was generally described by members.

<sup>291</sup> As described in M 117. Variations exist in the sequence of the Noble Path and the categories in which the individual factors are contained. For example, Dhammadinna, a nun in the *Culavedalla Sutta*, explains the Noble Path in terms of these categories, however the first category *paññā*, which includes *sammā diṭṭhi* and *sammā saṅkappa* are moved to the bottom. This sequence is also used by Buddhaghosa in one of the most important Theravāda texts outside of the *Tipiṭaka* (canon of scriptures) called the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification).

<sup>292</sup> Also called the “threefold training” as described in A 3.88.

<sup>293</sup> All of the elements of the Noble Path begin with *sammā* or “right.” *Sammā* is also translated as “skillful,” “wise” and “wholesome.” This can also imply striving for a perfect or ideal practice of each factor.

There is some discussion of if the components of the Noble Path are intended to be sequential, as seen in Figure 2.2.<sup>294</sup> The arrows within the Asoke representation of the Noble Path in Figure 2.1 illustrate movement and a sequential and accumulative system through “training in higher morality,” “training in higher mentality” and “training in higher wisdom” and return to the beginning of the diagram to form a loop. “Dynamic” is a term often found in Asoke especially as it reflects the Asoke ideal of movement, action and working together rather than practices such as meditation. The individual parts of this diagram are described as interacting and supporting each other, which further creates this dynamism and the arrows connecting various parts of the diagram are meant to symbolize the intertwined nature and the movement of the different parts. The necessity of practicing and understanding the relationships between the aspects of the Eightfold Path is explained in an Asoke publication as follows:

Higher Wisdom, which is the ability to perceive reality as it is, will help raise the Right Views of Right Understanding. Higher Wisdom will in turn raise Higher Morality. Higher Morality will raise Higher Mentality which in turn will elevate Higher Wisdom. Each supports to elevate one another. This is the “dynamic” effect of the Noble Eightfold Path.

...

It is, therefore, important for us to achieve insightfully the dynamic effect that each of the eight core constituents have on one another systematically. Most people in mainstream Buddhism today see the Noble Eightfold Path as being mechanics and statistics. This perception leads to inertness or hermitry.<sup>295</sup>

The fundamental principles found within the Noble Path also influence the Asoke aesthetic in various ways, which will be discussed in conjunction with each factor of the Noble Path in sequence.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Asoke Organization of Noble Path Components According to Figure 2.1.</b>
Moral conduct ( <i>sīla</i> )	1. Right View ( <i>sammā diṭṭhi</i> ) 2. Right Intention ( <i>sammā saṅkappa</i> ) 3. Right Speech ( <i>sammā vācā</i> ) 4. Right Action ( <i>sammā kammanta</i> ) 5. Right Livelihood ( <i>sammā ājīva</i> ) 6. Right Effort ( <i>sammā vāyāma</i> ) 7. Right Mindfulness ( <i>sammā sati</i> )

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<sup>294</sup> Bucknell describes the Path as both sequential and cumulative. Bucknell, “The Buddhist Path to Liberation,” 10. Bhikkhu Bodhi describes the Eightfold Path “as components rather than as steps, comparable to the intertwining strands of a single cable that requires the contributions of all the strands for maximum strength.” He also mentions that there will be a certain amount of sequential unfolding until one progresses and can practice all eight factors of the path simultaneously. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994 [1984]), 24.

<sup>295</sup> Poompanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke: Part I*, 23–4.

Concentration ( <i>samādhi</i> )	8. Right Concentration ( <i>sammā samādhi</i> )
Wisdom ( <i>paññā</i> )	9. Right Insight ( <i>sammā ñāṇa</i> ) 10. Right Liberation ( <i>sammā vimutti</i> )

**Figure 2.3** Asoke distribution of the factors within Tenfold Path as shown in Figure 2.1.<sup>296</sup>

“Never lose your *Sīla*, even if it costs you your life” appears engraved on an approximately 2 metre in diameter brown belt buckle on a large structure designed to look like the top portion of blue jeans which emerge from the ground in Ratchathani Asoke.<sup>297</sup> This is one example of how the importance of *sīla* is expressed materially in Asoke, reminding passersby of the centrality of this concept in the community. The distribution of the factors of Figure 2.1 (and Figure 2.3) compared to that in Figure 2.2 shows that *sīla* encompasses a much larger set of factors in the Asoke diagram as all but one component of the Eightfold Path is contained within the *sīla* portion of the Asoke structure. Monastics and lay members emphasize *sīla* and many state it as the most important factor of practice, and as one resident of Pathom Asoke describes, morality, the precepts and the Eightfold path are all joined:

The most important thing is *sīla*. *Sīla* is the path of the Eightfold Path—it is the same thing—if you practice *sīla*, you practice the precepts, you follow the precepts, it means that you walk along the Eightfold Path.<sup>298</sup>

Training in *sīla*, or higher morality is described in Asoke literature as that, “which reduces lust, excessive desires, craving, clinging and attachment. The training helps to purify our mind and free it from the Five Hindrances which are sensual desires, ill-will, sloth and torpor, distraction, doubt and uncertainty.”<sup>299</sup> Essen observes that morality in Asoke, “is not merely an ideal dictated from above, but one shared by individuals throughout the group at every level of practice...they do not adhere to morality out of custom, but consider [it] the results of their practice.”<sup>300</sup> As such, the importance and practical application of *sīla* is communicated through Bodhirak’s sermons and discussions between monastics and members, their actions and

<sup>296</sup> Figure 2.3 shows, for organizational sake, the Asoke diagram found in Figure 2.1 in a linear form. Since this model does not have a clear sequence of the first seven factors, the next section of the description and discussion of each Noble Path factor will be organized according to Figure 2.3. For simplicity, the categories of moral conduct (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) have been used instead of training in higher morality (*adhisīla-sikkhā*), training in higher mentality (*adhicitta-sikkhā*) and training in higher wisdom (*adhipañña-sikkhā*).  
<sup>297</sup> A wooden boat and the name of centre is also prominently displayed on the belt buckle as well. See Chapter 5.2.4 for further discussion of this structure.

<sup>298</sup> Long-time female resident of Pathom Asoke.

<sup>299</sup> Poopanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke: Part I*, 23.

<sup>300</sup> Essen also makes note that sixty percent of her interviewees stated morality as the foremost principal in the Asoke way of life. Essen, *Right Development*, 48. This is a reoccurring finding in Asoke and is also discussed by Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 92–8; and Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 203–6.

Asoke’s social initiatives. Further, messages of morality are present physically in the material culture of the community (clothes, spaces, and artwork for example) as well as in Asoke media—the Asoke run television station (FMTV), audio recordings, and print/online media, among others. The focus on *sīla* is further reinforced through the use of specific *suttas* (or parts thereof) as well.<sup>301</sup> An example being that Asoke members “follow strictly the four core constituents of the Noble Eightfold Path: right thought, right speech, right action and right livelihood,” and “the first four steps of the *Carana 15*,” which are listed in the Asoke publication as: 1. The practice of *sīla* (or precepts), 2. Control of six sensorial delights, 3. Control of personal consumption, 4. Awakening awareness of the environment.<sup>302</sup> The whole list of the fifteen *Caraṇadhammas* consists of:

1. *Sīla* (morality)
2. *Indriyaśamvara* (guarding the sense doors)
3. *Bhojane mattaññutā* (moderation in eating)
4. *Jāgariyānuyoga* (wakefulness)
- 5–11. *Saddhamma* (the seven attributes of good and virtuous people)
- 12–15. Four *jhānas* (meditative absorptions)<sup>303</sup>

Because moral action holds such a prominent place within Asoke belief and daily life, only the first four elements of both the Eightfold Path and the *Caraṇadhamma* are listed. This shows a similar pattern in the Asoke interpretation of the Noble Path as a whole as well, where the majority of the factors have been relocated into the *sīla* category; references to *jhānas* or meditative concentration have been omitted, with the exception of a practice of morality leading to the development of concentration within the Noble Path (Figure 2.1).

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<sup>301</sup> As mentioned above, the use of the *Samaññaphala Sutta* is an interesting example of how Asoke uses selected texts to further support their main ideologies. The part of this *sutta* focuses on how monks should achieve *sīla* however Asoke supports and promotes the contents to all members, again reinforcing the particularly ascetic practices of the group. Other *suttas* used to reinforce the Asoke focus on *sīla* can be seen in their use of the *Cūlasīla*, *Majjhimasīla*, and *Mahāsīla* sections within the *Brahmajāla Sutta*. The *Brahmajāla Sutta* and *Samaññaphala Sutta* are the first and second *suttas* found in the first section (*Dīgha Nikāya*, “Long Collection”) of the *Sutta Pitaka*, one of the three main “baskets” of the Pāli Canon. The *Sutta Pitaka* contains all of the central teachings, and is divided into three subcategories, the first being the *Sīlakkhandha-vagga* (The Division Concerning Morality), which contains the first thirteen *suttas* (this includes the *Brahmajāla Sutta* and *Samaññaphala Sutta* which are the first and second). It is not surprising then, that Asoke focuses on these *suttas* to reinforce their emphasis on moral practice. *Cūlasīla*, *Majjhimasīla* and *Carana 15* are further cited in Asoke communities by monastics and members, this is also seen in Olson’s interview of Aporn Phukaman specifically regarding holy water rituals. Grant Olson, “Cries over Spilled Holy Water: ‘Complex’ Responses to a Traditional Thai Religious Practice,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22 (1991): 80–2.

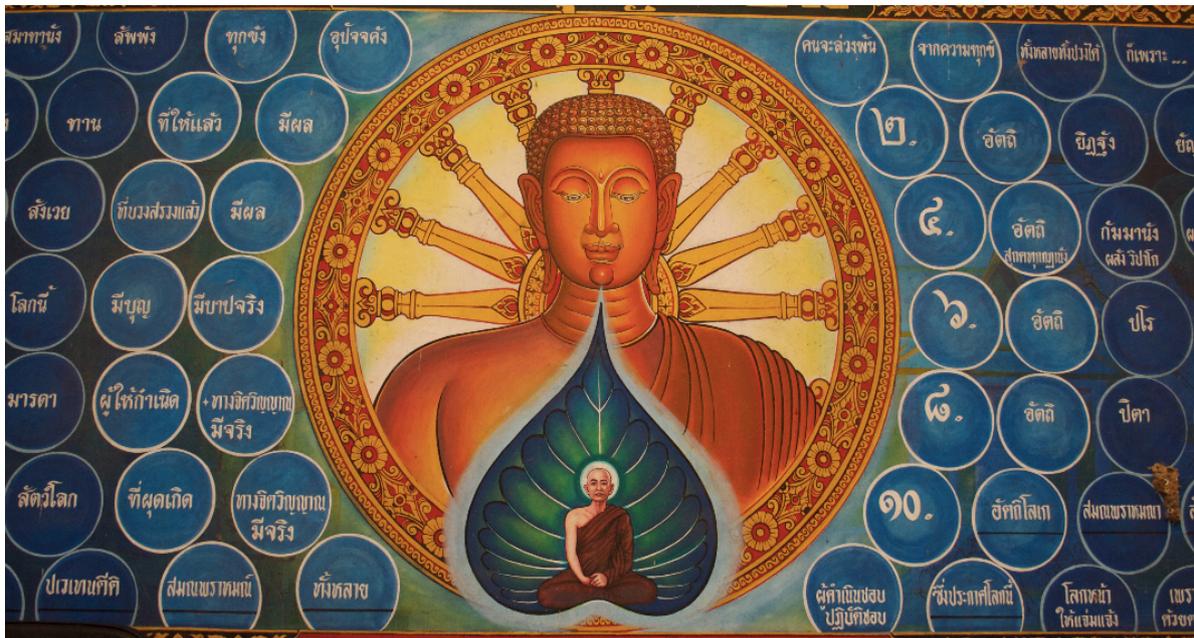
<sup>302</sup> Porn Poompanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke: Part II* (Bangkok: Kittiya Veerapan, 1991), 63–4.

<sup>303</sup> Ledī Sayadaw, *The Requisites of Enlightenment: Bodhipakkhiya Dipani*, trans. Sein Nyo Tun (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2007 [1971]), 11.

## I. Right View/Right Understanding

Bodhirak gives particular importance to developing “right view of understanding” as seen heading the morality segment of Figure 2.1. This aspect of the Noble Path is emphasized due to wrong understanding potentially leading to wrong practice thus affecting other aspects of the path negatively.

As seen in Figure 2.1, right view is flanked by right effort and right mindfulness. Bodhirak describes right effort as the “heart” and right mindfulness as the “brains” in developing right view, which will then direct the practitioner through the entirety of the Noble Path.<sup>304</sup> Artwork representing this factor of the path can be found within Asoke—for example, a large and intricate painting in Ratchathani Asoke describes the *Dasavatthuka Sammā-diṭṭhi* or ten kinds of right understanding. As seen in Figure 2.4, these factors encircle the upper torso of the Buddha in front of a *Dhamma* wheel, and Bodhirak sits in the foreground within a *bodhi* leaf. This is an atypical artwork found within Asoke, generally paintings have little text, a more neutral colour palette and are stylized differently.<sup>305</sup> The existence of this piece further emphasizes the prominence of right understanding within Bodhirak’s teachings and Asoke—especially since I saw no equivalent artworks for any of the other aspects of the Noble Path.



**Figure 2.4** Painting in Ratchathani Asoke in Ubon Ratchathani, Northeastern Thailand listing the ten kinds of right understanding, *Dasavatthuka Sammā-diṭṭhi*.

<sup>304</sup> The idea of right effort as the “heart” and right mindfulness as the “brains” in developing right view was mentioned on more than one occasion in interviews, and the balance between “heart” and “brain” is a reoccurring theme in Asoke in other contexts as well. This example of right view was also noted by Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 178.

<sup>305</sup> Artwork in Asoke is further explored in Chapter 5.

A passage within the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* emphasizes the importance of right view, and its connection to right resolve, the second part of the Noble Path: “And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong resolve as wrong resolve, and right resolve as right resolve.”<sup>306</sup> This pattern continues throughout the Noble Path with each factor, as well as throughout various other aspects of core teachings, such as with the Four Noble Truths,<sup>307</sup> and a great many others.<sup>308</sup> Essentially what this extensive list of *suttas* and categories illustrates is that right view is applied to not only all the other factors within the Noble Path, but also to many aspects within the Pāli Canon. Right view is seen as an essential component to understanding and practicing the path, which in turn, when practiced correctly, will lead to the goal of liberation.<sup>309</sup>

## II. Right Thought/ Right Intention/Right Resolve

Bhikkhu Bodhi makes note that “right thought” is an acceptable translation “if we add the provision that in the present context the word ‘thought’ refers specifically to the purposive or cognitive aspect of mental activity, the cognitive aspect being covered by the first factor, right view.”<sup>310</sup> Bodhirak emphasises this in Figure 2.1 by having the additional parenthesis referring to the “intention of the precepts” and placing right thought directly below right view. Right resolve is defined in *Samyutta Nikāya* as, “being resolved on renunciation, on freedom from ill-will, on harmlessness.”<sup>311</sup> These aspects are also paired with an opposing quality; the intention of renunciation is paired with wrong intention which is governed by desire; the intention of good will contrasts with the intention of ill will and lastly the intention of harmlessness with the intention governed by harmfulness. Further,

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<sup>306</sup> M 117.

<sup>307</sup> Commentary on the Four Noble Truths is also seen in the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta*: “What, now, is right understanding? 1. To understand suffering; 2. to understand the origin of suffering; 3. to understand the extinction of suffering; 4. to understand the path that leads to the extinction of suffering. This is called right understanding.” D 24.

<sup>308</sup> The importance of right view/understanding are further included in the following aspects: Merit and Demerit, The Three Characteristics, Five and Ten Fetters, The Three Characteristics, Dependent Origination, Rebirth-Producing *Kamma*, and Cessation of *Kamma*, among others. See, Nyanatiloka, *The Word of the Buddha*, 30–45. Along with the differentiation between right and wrong understanding in all of these various categories, the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* within the *Majjhima Nikāya* also describes various aspects on right view including skillful/unskillful means, nutriment, stress, aging/death, birth, clinging, craving, six sense media, consciousness, and ignorance for example. M 9.

<sup>309</sup> Right view/understanding is divided into mundane and supramundane. Mundane right view is described as having an intellectual understanding of *kamma* and the Four Noble Truths however it is “accompanied by the taints,” whereas supramundane right view is connected with the Noble Path and the results thereof. Further, supramundane right view is practiced by “Holy Ones” who have turned their minds away from the world and are perusing the holy path. M 117. Also see, Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Introduction to The Discourse on Right View- The Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta and its Commentary* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994).

<sup>310</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, 42.

<sup>311</sup> S 45.8.

One tries to abandon wrong resolve and to enter into right resolve: This is one's right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong resolve and to enter and remain in right resolve: This is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities — right view, right effort, and right mindfulness — run and circle around right resolve.<sup>312</sup>

Bodhirak has rather literally recreated this passage in the Asoke diagram where right view, right effort, and right mindfulness circle around right resolve. Typically, *sīla*, or moral factors, (right speech, right action, right livelihood) are separated from right view and right intention/thought which are categorized under wisdom or *paññā*. Right intention, Bhikkhu Bodhi writes, is placed between right view and right speech, “because the mind’s intentional function forms the crucial link connecting our cognitive perspective with our modes of active engagement in the world.”<sup>313</sup> Bodhirak has used an alternative way of placing right intention in the Asoke model rather than the typical list, however, it still fits the description provided by Bhikkhu Bodhi in that it exists between right view and the other *sīla* factors (right speech, right action and right livelihood).<sup>314</sup> Sikkhamat Chinda reflects on the importance of intention and the relationship to thoughts:

We have to thank Bodhirak that he is a good leader of this group...so I can stay happily in this group and can work. But now it comes that I am getting old, and it is terrible that this body is getting old too quick! So at this moment I am very tired and actually I really want to join in work and all the activities of Asoke, I have no objections anymore! Not like before—before I would object at doing all kinds of things—I just wanted to do sitting meditation, but at this moment I understand that the spiritual path is a thing that you have to face, because it is when you face it that you can see the real actions of your spiritual path.

When you have no obstacles from the outside you just touch your own thoughts. So, if you touch only your own thoughts, you can think a lot of things—thinking that you’re good, thinking that you’re bad—this and that—but all of the things are what you think, and are not the reality in your spiritual path. Thinking is made up—it is a made-up kind of reality. So, if we just think the thoughts or are under thought control—we cannot go to the truth. The truth is the thing that you are facing right now.<sup>315</sup>

There are ways in which this aspect of the Eightfold Path is materialized within Asoke to support members with their resolve, though as the comment above states, it is a very personal commitment. The use of the *Handbook of the Eight Precepts* to keep track of one’s development or challenges is one way in which right resolve is reinforced. Another method is through regular meetings and discussions about difficulties regarding community life, or personal development.

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<sup>312</sup> M 117.

<sup>313</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, 44.

<sup>314</sup> Right thought also is divided into mundane (*lokiya sammā-saṅkappa*) and supramundane (*lokuttara-sammā-saṅkappa*). Mundane right thought is “free from lust, from ill-will, and from cruelty...which yields worldly fruits and brings good results.” Supramundane right thought is when the “verbal operations” of the mind (*vacī-saṅkhaara*) such as thinking, considering, reasoning, thought are holy, or “turned away from the world, and conjoined with the path,” thus transcending it. M 117.

<sup>315</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Chinda, Santi Asoke, March 9, 2013.

Intensive seminars, “development camps” and annual gatherings are also methods for members to receive support and motivation from the community with the goal of intensifying or deepening their practice.

### III. Right speech

This component of the Noble Path relates to the fourth precept: to refrain from lying. Right speech has various facets, as briefly explored in Chapter 2.2.<sup>316</sup> The four core components include abstaining from lying/false speech, tale-bearing/slanderosus speech, harsh speech and idle chatter:

He avoids slanderous speech and abstains from it. What he has heard here he does not repeat there, so as to cause dissension there; and what he has heard there he does not repeat here, so as to cause dissension here.

...

He avoids harsh language and abstains from it. He speaks such words as are gentle, soothing to the ear, loving, such words as go to the heart, and are courteous, friendly, and agreeable to many.

...

He avoids idle chatter and abstains from it. He speaks at the right time, in accordance with facts, speaks what is useful, speaks of the Dhamma and the discipline; his speech is like a treasure, uttered at the right moment, accompanied by reason, moderate and full of sense.<sup>317</sup>

Right speech as a whole is described as accompanying and following the other factors of the Noble Path. Right view is needed to determine what speech is beneficial or not, right effort is used to practice right speech and right mindfulness makes the practitioner attentive to dwelling on right speech in order to overcome wrong speech. This is again described by the Asoke diagram, where right view, right effort, and right mindfulness are grouped together and supporting right speech. One lay resident also connected right action and right speech:

When we are angry, it means we are not on the Eightfold Path, we are not walking directly on the Path... whenever I am angry, it is not right action and if I go and shout, it is not right speech on the Eightfold Path... If we are in the action of hating [then we are] not on the Path, [we are] outside the Eightfold Path.<sup>318</sup>

As mentioned above, this part of the Noble Path is further interpreted in Asoke as promoting and sharing the Asoke understanding of the *Dhamma*, or the teachings of Bodhirak. Truthful and open communication is considered a central component in the functioning of Asoke—this

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<sup>316</sup> As with the other aspects of the path, this factor can be further expanded into two kinds of right speech called “Mundane right speech” (*lokiya-sammā-vācā*), and “supermundane right speech” (*lokuttara-sammā-vācā*). Mundane right speech includes abstaining from lying, from tale-bearing, from harsh language, and from vain talk and “which yields worldly fruits and brings good results.” M 117.

<sup>317</sup> A 10.176; Nyanatiloka, *The Word of the Buddha*, 50–1.

<sup>318</sup> Female lay resident living in Pathom Asoke.

includes the development and harmony of the communities and their numerous projects from education to political activism.

#### IV. Right action

Right action encompasses the neighbouring right speech and right livelihood and in the Asoke model, is closely linked with right thought. This aspect of the Noble Path includes the previously described right speech and right thought as all actions (in mind, speech, and body) should be wholesome and leading towards the *Dhamma*. Right livelihood is also included because it is an action which should be performed nobly; right action is also connected to other factors of the Eightfold Path.<sup>319</sup>

As seen in Figure 2.1, right action is embodied by practicing specifically the first three precepts, to not take life, steal, or engage in “illicit” sex. As discussed in Chapter 2.2, the precepts are used within Asoke to not only fulfill the basic requirements of the precept, but members strive to live strict interpretations of them. Samana Kayakayan Saranyio relates these precepts and right action to the body as well:

According to Buddhism, it is important to not only have a good mind and soul, but one must also have a good body. Good body and good soul. One must also keep the body clean, not just the mind. The precepts relate to the body, that you don’t kill physical beings, don’t steal with your physical self and don’t fool around with sex.<sup>320</sup>

In regard to the taking of life, Asoke members take vegetarianism/veganism very seriously and abstaining from eating meat is seen as one of the first steps towards practicing a moral life and integrating into Asoke. The precept regarding stealing is practiced by participating in an economic system based on merit and giving. As sexual relations are generally frowned upon within Asoke, they promote developing a familial connection with others, rather than intimate relationships.<sup>321</sup> Right action encompasses many aspects of their daily life and is a fundamental aspect to Asoke beliefs especially when considering the emphasis put on active engagement, work and their goal of “striving for and giving back to society.”

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<sup>319</sup> “Now in understanding wrong action as wrong, and right action as right, one practices right Understanding (1st factor); and in making efforts to overcome wrong action, and to arouse right action, one practices right action (6th factor); and in overcoming wrong action with attentive mind and dwelling with attentive mind in possession of right action, one practices right mindfulness (7th factor). Hence, there are three things that accompany and follow upon right action, namely: right Understanding, right action and right mindfulness.” A 10.176; Nyanatiloka, *The Word of the Buddha*, 52.

<sup>320</sup> Interview with Samana Kayakayan Saranyio, Santi Asoke, March 9, 2013.

<sup>321</sup> This is described in more detail in Chapter 2.2.

## V. Right livelihood

As outlined in the Asoke diagram in Figure 2.1, right livelihood encompasses the first five precepts: to not kill, to not steal, engage in “illicit” sex, lie, or consume intoxicants. Right livelihood includes making a living legally, with financial means acquired peacefully, honestly, and in ways which do not entail harm and suffering for others; specific livelihoods which bring direct harm are: dealing in weapons, living beings, meat production/butchery, poisons and intoxicants.<sup>322</sup> Along with coercion and violence, dishonest means of gaining wealth are described as using deceit, treachery, soothsaying, trickery and usury.<sup>323</sup>

Asoke members emphasize right livelihood with “the three national recovery professions project” also called the “three professions to save the nation”: waste management, organic fertilizer production, and organic farming. Though Asoke members have a variety of livelihoods in and outside of the community, these three professions are highlighted and most of the Asoke centres have recycling centres, agricultural land, and/or organic fertilizer farms.<sup>324</sup> Waste management entails reduced consumption and the organization of all remaining waste into a *recycle-reuse-repair-reject* system.<sup>325</sup> Throughout all Asoke centres, multicoloured bins are present for sorting waste. Farming and kitchen wastes are used to make organic fertilizer for the agricultural plots. This is seen as a cyclical process whereby waste is used to create organic fertilizer which aids in food production and the waste produced by farming makes more fertilizer. The waste management and *recycle-reuse-repair-reject* system also contributes socially and economically, as seen in the Asoke Goodwill Markets and recycling centres. A large banner hangs above the entrance to the recycling centre at Santi Asoke in Bangkok, announcing that “Asoke Strives for Mankind” and further expounds the five main goals of their “Heart-felt Garbology Institute”:

- 1) To discard material garbage and spiritual garbage.
- 2) To discard excess items and make the most out of the rest.
- 3) To advocate smart use of natural resources.
- 4) To preserve the environment and nature and to maintain the balance of earth, water, wind, and fire.
- 5) To raise morality (*sīla*), mind (*citta*) and spirit (*viññāṇa*) to a higher level.<sup>326</sup>

Further, Asoke’s self-described mission is to strive to “Uphold the value of those professions that involve waste disposal and agriculture, especially organic farming and to spread the knowledge and encourage discipline among the general public of appropriate waste disposal

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<sup>322</sup> A 5.177.

<sup>323</sup> M 117.

<sup>324</sup> This is largely dependent on the space and resources available within each community.

<sup>325</sup> This waste management system is also described as “reduce, reuse, recycle, and recover.”

<sup>326</sup> This banner was present during my fieldwork in 2013–2014.

and recycling according to the nature of the waste and location for disposal.”<sup>327</sup> This includes providing workshops and teaching farmers the Asoke methods of organic farming and recycling. With these professions, the Asoke community strives to: create awareness around using global resources more efficiently, practice living in harmony with nature, create ideal goals for protecting the environment of the community, and to maintain good physical and mental health of the people in the community.<sup>328</sup>

## VI. Right effort

The sixth aspect of the Noble Path, right effort, is within the Asoke diagram in the bottom left segment, flanked by right understanding and right mindfulness and encircling right thought, right speech, right action, and right livelihood.<sup>329</sup>

The energy (*virīya*) from which right effort emerges, can be expressed as either wholesome (compassion, generosity, self-discipline, concentration, and understanding) or unwholesome (desire, violence, and ambition); as such, right effort is the cultivation of wholesome states and further effort towards “wholesome states of consciousness directed to liberation from suffering.”<sup>330</sup> There are four “great right efforts” described in the Pāli Canon: The effort to prevent or avoid unwholesome states, the effort to overcome these states, the effort to develop wholesome states, and lastly the effort to maintain the wholesome states which have arisen.<sup>331</sup>

Right effort is actualized in Asoke through the emphasis on “hard work” and *Dhamma* outreach through schools, promoting vegetarianism, or through the *Bunniyom* system for example. Because all of the first five precepts form the basis for right effort, it is evident that the emphasis within Asoke is based on what they consider effort though action. Some members explain that it has taken, or still requires much effort to be able to follow the ideal ascetic Asoke way of life. A lay woman residing in Pathom Asoke relates how right resolve is dependent on the individual, and further connects this to effort and mindfulness:

We have to be sincere, because some people, they don’t come here because they want to practice, they don’t want to lower their defilements...this is a good group, a good community, they are safe, they have healthy food, and they have good things to do, but if they don’t want to lower their defilements, they won’t do it, it is up to them...because

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<sup>327</sup> “How Santi Asoke Buddhist Temple was established,” Santi Asoke Website, accessed August 18, 2019, [http://www.asoke.info/01Religion/Santi\\_Asoke.html](http://www.asoke.info/01Religion/Santi_Asoke.html).

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> See Figure 2.1.

<sup>330</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, 84.

<sup>331</sup> Also called the Four Right Excursions (*Sammāpādhāna*) and are listed in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, *Sutta Pitaka*, and *Abhidhamma Pitaka*.

they can be vegetarian, they can be simple, and they feel finished, but for many, many of us [the spiritual work] is not finished, it is not enough, we have a higher thing to practice; but for some people it's enough, they say 'okay' but for me, I am not 'okay'—I still have to try a lot, we have to practice, and it is very difficult to be very mindful for me, but for some people they are very mindful...but I have not completed the eight Noble Path, sometimes I have a wrong thought.<sup>332</sup>

Other members discuss the difficulty of living in a community, eating a strict vegetarian diet, feelings of anger or greed (for example), and communal meetings are aimed at supporting members through these challenges. The efforts of members can also be tracked through the *Handbook of the Eight Precepts* using a point system to reflect on their progression which is supervised by a *samana* or *sikkhamat*. This practice is described as a system for aiding in developing right effort through overcoming unwholesome states and gaining and maintaining wholesome ones.

## VII. Right mindfulness

The last aspect of moral development within the Asoke diagram is right mindfulness. As discussed earlier, right mindfulness is typically categorized within “wisdom” rather than morality. There are four foundations (*cattaro satipatthana*) of right mindfulness to practice:

Herein the disciple dwells in contemplation of the Body, in contemplation of Feeling, in contemplation of the Mind, in contemplation of the Mind-Objects; ardent, clearly comprehending them and mindful, after putting away worldly greed and grief.<sup>333</sup>

These four aspects—body, feeling, mind, and mind-objects—are focused upon (to varying degrees) throughout many forms of Buddhism, and Asoke. In many Buddhist contexts, contemplation of the body is practiced, for example, through breath meditation (*ānāpānasati*) and remaining mindful during bodily movement or in any of the four postures (sitting, standing, lying, or walking). Other practices include meditations on the body itself, its components (as in the four elements or the thirty-one parts of the body) and its impermanence.<sup>334</sup> Mindfulness surrounding feeling is described as practicing awareness around feelings of aversions or attachments, and labeling them as neutral, pleasant, or unpleasant. Similarly, mindfulness of the mind aims at seeing thoughts “as they are” and being aware of arising mental constructs. Lastly, contemplation of mind objects is done through the Five Hindrances,<sup>335</sup> The Five

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<sup>332</sup> Recorded conversation with long-term female lay resident in Pathom Asoke.

<sup>333</sup> D 22. Nyanatiloka, *The Word of the Buddha*, 58.

<sup>334</sup> This includes contemplating death and the deterioration of the body or the practice of meditating in charnel grounds.

<sup>335</sup> Five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*): Lust (*kāmacchanda*), ill-will (*vyāpāda*), sloth (*thīna-middha*), restlessness (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), and doubt (*vicikiccha*).

Aggregates,<sup>336</sup> The Six Senses,<sup>337</sup> The Seven Factors of Awakening,<sup>338</sup> and the Four Noble Truths.<sup>339</sup>

Some Asoke monastics and lay members report having a personal “quiet time” or short silent sitting meditations, however it is uncommon to see members practicing mindfulness in this way.<sup>340</sup> Sikkhamat Rinpah explains that

it is okay if you want to watch your breath, it is alright, but here Bodhirak doesn’t teach you to do it this way too much. Just know what you are doing in your present... you can do [*ānāpānasati* meditation] before you go to bed...or if you want to keep your mind calm, or if you have some problems and...then you stay alone and think about it to try to solve the problem to focus to make your mind calm.

[Bodhirak] said though, it is not the first thing to do. The first thing is you have your *sati*—your awareness in the present all the time...when you speak or think or do something, you have your awareness, every time, every minute—you practice your *Dhamma*. Instead of just sitting doing *ānāpānasati* meditation [we practice] *sati*, awareness all the time...[During] ordinary life, you have to open your eyes and touch everything with our eyes, ears and nose [and there are] people and work, that means you train your mind...in awareness to get rid of anger, greed or delusion.<sup>341</sup>

It is emphasized within Asoke that their eating, working, and daily life be used as a mindfulness practice—which has some correlation to the above “mindfulness of the body” while moving or in the four postures. Also, in relation to the contemplation on death and the body’s decay, within many Asoke centres there are gazebos or small structures with glass-encased skeletons or semi-preserved cadavers.<sup>342</sup> Sometimes the enclosures will have graphic images of diseased, dismembered, or decomposing bodies. “Mindfulness of feelings” is a central practice in Asoke, and their use of television and “engaging in the world” politically and socially is described as

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<sup>336</sup> The five aggregates (*khandha*): Mental phenomenon (*nāma*), physical phenomenon (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

<sup>337</sup> The six sense-bases (*āyatana*): Eyes/sight, ears/sound, nose/smell, tongue/taste, body/touch, and mind/thoughts.

<sup>338</sup> Seven elements of enlightenment (*bojjhanga*): Mindfulness (*sati*), investigation of *Dhamma* (*dhammavicaya*), determination/energy (*virīya*), joy (*pīti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

<sup>339</sup> As described at the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>340</sup> Meditation is an enormous topic in regard to practice, beliefs, historical development, and many contemporary discussions are now found in secular as well as religious contexts. The term “meditation” is used in this thesis infrequently however it should be noted it is couched within a Thai Buddhist setting. For further explorations of meditation within this field, see: Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), Chap. 6; Andrew Skilton, Kate Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw, “Terms of Engagement: Text, Technique and Experience in Scholarship on Theravada Meditation,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 20 (2019), 1–35. For broader discussions on meditation, see: Miguel Farias, David Brazier, and Mansur Lalljee, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* (Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2019); Almut-Barbara Renger and Christoph Wulf, eds., “Meditation in Religion, Therapie, Ästhetik, Bildung,” *Paragrana: Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie* 2 (2013).

<sup>341</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Rinpah, Sali Asoke, March 1, 2013.

<sup>342</sup> It was explained that the bodies were of deceased Asoke members or their relatives who had donated their remains for contemplation purposes. These spaces are discussed in Chapter 5.2.5.

provoking their emotions to see where they have remaining defilements. Specifically, the four foundations (*cattaro satipatthana*) of right mindfulness are described by Bodhirak in regard to the appropriate ways to watch television: Firstly, the body and media should be contemplated as composites. Secondly, contemplation of sensation should focus on the feelings that arise while watching television. Thirdly, one observes their own consciousness and the reason behind the feelings such as past conceptions and experiences. Lastly, contemplation of the mind-objects points practitioners towards realizing the obstacles that they cannot overcome.<sup>343</sup>

### VIII. Right concentration

The Asoke ideals of the Noble Path are further revealed in the *samādhi* category, as illustrated by it only containing right concentration. It is common in Theravāda contexts to place emphasis on still, closed-eye meditation techniques, whereas this form of meditation is not widely practiced or encouraged in Asoke communities. Figure 2.2 shows that typically the *samādhi* category contains right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Within Asoke, these factors have been regrouped under *sīla* to be practiced as moral conduct. A distinction is made in Asoke between the first seven aspects of the path, and the last, because of their belief that concentration will arise naturally once a foundation of morality has been achieved. This is further linked to the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* which states that

any singleness of mind equipped with these seven factors — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness — is called noble right concentration with its supports and requisite conditions.<sup>344</sup>

This last factor on the Eightfold Path is often thought of as practicing a formal sitting meditation, however *samādhi* more specifically means to be absorbed in a single-pointed wholesome concentration. The two methods to develop *samādhi* are described as serenity practice (*samatha-bhāvanā*) and insight practice (*vipassanā-bhāvanā*). There are also long lists of suggested focal points upon which one can concentrate, including the decomposition of the body, the *khandhas*, various recollections, and developing *mettā* (loving kindness).<sup>345</sup> These practices are intended to lead one towards the four *jhānas*, or four stages of mental absorption.<sup>346</sup>

One of the most obvious differences within Asoke compared to many other Buddhist centres is the lack of sitting meditation observed in the communities. This has been one of the

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<sup>343</sup> Based on the explanation given in Samana Lakkhano, “Practicing Dharma Through Television.”

<sup>344</sup> M 117.

<sup>345</sup> Extensively outlined in Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*.

<sup>346</sup> Described in further detail in A 5.28.

most defining features of Asoke—that they practice with “open eyes.”<sup>347</sup> It is the Asoke belief that:

If you sit and meditate all the time rather than work hard in your daily life to climb the steps of the Eightfold Way, you do not reach Enlightenment, you remain sitting below the first step.

...

“Our eating is a meditation, our teaching is a meditation, and our working is a meditation,” says the wise samana (monk). Buddhist teaching is not just abstract philosophy; Buddhism is people in the service of humanity and meditation as a way of life. With an understanding of dynamic Buddhism not only will we elevate the spiritual state of mind and reduce selfishness, but also we will see human interaction of warmth and kindness among people.

In the village, you do not see a lot of sitting meditation or hear much chanting or quoting of the sacred scriptures. Life here is about Buddhism of the heart growing roots and shoots in everyone and blossoming like a lotus in the lives of family, friends, and community.<sup>348</sup>

The focus on active work is also important as Asoke wishes to distinguish themselves from what they call ‘Hermetic Buddhism’ where ascetics retreat from society to focus on their meditation practices, and though they are consuming little, Asoke still considers it a selfish approach.<sup>349</sup> In Asoke, the mental absorptions or *jhānas* achieved through closed eye meditation are referred to as the ‘*jhānas* of ascetics’ compared to the ‘*jhānas* of the Buddha’, which Asoke believes is developed through interacting with the world.<sup>350</sup> Members also mentioned that they viewed meditation is an “escape” where one can find inner peace, however it is considered unsustainable because the peace can be lost when one comes in contact with the outside world.<sup>351</sup> Another reason for the Asoke approach is described by Samana Lakkhano:

[Bodhirak] emphasizes that the beginners should keep their eyes wide open and practice The Noble Eightfold Path. Through sacrificing and contribution, we can contribute positive values to the society we are in, and meanwhile, train our mind to get rid of our attachments...According to the teaching of Buddha, if we don’t get rid of our rough habits and annoyance before we practice Samadhi, there will be two situations facing

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<sup>347</sup> This is also expressed in the title of Heikkilä-Horn’s book, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*.

<sup>348</sup> “About Sisa Asoke: Community,” Sisa Asoke Blog, 2016, <http://sisaasoke.blogspot.de/p/about-us.html>.

<sup>349</sup> Asoke differentiates between four different kinds of Buddhism in Thailand: Hermetic Buddhism, Occult Buddhism, Capitalistic Buddhism, and Fundamental Buddhism. The first three forms of Buddhism are considered present in mainstream Buddhism, and only Fundamental Buddhism is close to a “true” or “original” interpretation of Buddhism, which Asoke believes they are promoting.

<sup>350</sup> Sunai Setboonsarng, “Language Game and the Use of Language of the Asok Followers,” [in Thai] *Chulalongkorn University Journal of Buddhist Studies* 1, no. 3 (2537 [1994]), 63–6. Sunai Setboonsarng has become known for his theoretical approaches to Asoke beliefs, also writing his master’s thesis on “How to Apply Wittgenstein’s Perception of ‘Language Game’ with the Explanation of Meaning of Religious Language: Case-Study of Santi Asok” [in Thai] (master’s thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2530 [1987]). Also see: *The Social Ideal in Buddhism According to the Ideas of the Santi Asok School* [in Thai] (Bangkok: Fah Apai, 2534 [1991]).

<sup>351</sup> This sentiment was reiterated by members in Pathom Asoke, Ratchathani Asoke and Santi Asoke.

us; we will be trapped in either drowsiness or agitation. In either case, we are wasting our time and contributing no benefit to our society.<sup>352</sup>

Asoke monastics and members often describe their version of meditation to encompass all of their daily activities, though some members did report doing sitting meditation. There was very little discussion surrounding a specific meditation practice however a few monastics mentioned the breath meditation *ānāpānasati*.<sup>353</sup> Sikkhamat Chinda also describes the difference between meditation and developing concentration in Asoke compared to other approaches:

Meditation here is not like meditation other places. Meditation here is not hypnotism, meditation here is...concentration on your real life, and makes you face the reality. Even with your open eyes, you can do meditation. You don't have to take the time to sit alone, you don't have to. Every moment you can give more concentration to your spiritual path—your real spiritual path, and not just forcing it into one spot. No, your real spiritual path is working all the time.

If I am tired and take a longer breath, this awareness means you are consciousness of what is happening...this is the very nice concentration—not to one thing, but to everything that is the reality. This is the way to do concentration. Breathing in and out happens all the time, so at any time you can use your breath, and see [yourself] breathing in and breathing out. Instead of thinking of the other things that are not as real as your breath...at least you have your breathing, that is your reality, so you can concentrate on your reality at any, all the time. No exceptions. It does not mean that [you must] concentrate on this or that...the stone or candle or light...You can use [meditation] as a medicine, like that time I was using the hypnotizing meditation—that is a medicine, but that way is not a way to solve any problems at all.<sup>354</sup>

The Asoke approach to developing concentration through daily practice and work is central to their doctrine and as seen in Figure 2.1, the “training in higher mentality” arises out of practicing morality and the first seven factors of the Noble Path; and the result is the development of wisdom and the last two facets, right insight and right deliverance.

### **IX. Right Insight and X. Right Deliverance**

This final category, *paññā*, is also translated as “insight” or “wisdom” and is where the Eightfold Path becomes the Tenfold Path in the Asoke diagram. Figure 2.2 shows that category of *paññā* typically encompasses right view and right intention, the first two aspects of the Noble Path, however the Asoke interpretation instead lists right insight and right deliverance, which are considered the results of practicing the Eightfold Path. The addition of these two last factors is interesting since the Tenfold Path is not as well-known. The *Mahdcattarisaka Sutta* is listed

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<sup>352</sup> Samana Lakkhano, “Practicing Dharma Through Television.”

<sup>353</sup> Due to my positionality as a visiting researcher, I was excluded from many discussions and it may be that these topics are talked about between monastics. It may be that monastics within Asoke are taught or practice certain concentration techniques however it is not their focus of practice.

<sup>354</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Chinda, Santi Asoke, March 9, 2013.

by Bucknell as the only *sutta* that deals with Tenfold Path at length, and along with the *Maggasamyutta*, states the superiority of the Tenfold Path to the Eightfold Path.<sup>355</sup> This also provides insight into the scriptural influences on Bodhirak and Asoke, however lay and ordained members regularly referred to the Eightfold Path instead of the Tenfold Path, so it is unclear how widespread the understanding of the Tenfold Path is.

As seen in Figure 2.1, these two final aspects are part of “training in higher wisdom” which loops back to the upper “training in morality” segment. Right insight is described as “the clear seeing into reality. Seeing things as they truly are and not as they appear to be, or as we want them to be, but as they truly are.”<sup>356</sup> The importance of experiencing “reality as it is” was often discussed by members in Asoke and they would refer to the daily activities, done with mindfulness, concentration, and “with open eyes” to explain how this is achieved.<sup>357</sup> Being in reality “as it is” and not deluded or caught in thought relates to wisdom as described by an older lay resident in Pathom Asoke:

Because of ignorance, there is the *saṅkhāra*<sup>358</sup>—the mental object or the forms in our minds—because we have ignorance, we have no wisdom, then the forms cross through your mind, because you are not aware of the truth. You have no wisdom because of the forms in your mind, and because of the forms in your mind you have consciousness and sensation. Because of this *nāmarūpa*<sup>359</sup> it causes something in your mind. Because of the ignorance, because we have a form, or mental object inside, *paṭiccasamuppāda*<sup>360</sup> is very important—the cause and effect.<sup>361</sup>

As a result of perceiving with right insight, right deliverance arises. Full spiritual attainment, or “complete self-sacrifice” which comes with right deliverance is the goal of the practice, and when this is achieved, “it is only natural that one will work harder, consume less and share the rest of what one has with society. This noble state of mind appearing automatically and voluntarily is normal for those who have attained the result of the path.”<sup>362</sup> As such, this last segment of the Noble Path is thought to be the result of practicing the previous factors and is connected to the continued development and expression of Asoke ideals.

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<sup>355</sup> Bucknell, “The Buddhist Path to Liberation,” 8.

<sup>356</sup> Ajahn Brahmavamso, “Deep Insight,” transcription of *Dhamma* talk (1999): <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebmed059.htm>.

<sup>357</sup> This was also touched upon in the quote from Sikkhamat Chinda above.

<sup>358</sup> *Saṅkhāra* has various meanings, but typically refers to “formation” and is also the second element in regard to dependent origination.

<sup>359</sup> *Nāmarūpa*: “Mind-and-body” or “mentality and corporeality” is also the fourth element within dependent origination.

<sup>360</sup> *Paṭiccasamuppāda*: “Dependent origination” is the Buddhist law of causality.

<sup>361</sup> Informal interview with female lay resident of Pathom Asoke; this is also an example of how some lay members use Pāli in everyday language.

<sup>362</sup> Poompanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke: Part I*, 23.

## 2.4 Bunniyom

*Bunniyom* is a play on words as *thunniyom* is capitalism, however “*thun*” has been replaced with “*bun*” meaning merit, and thus essentially translating to merit-ism.<sup>363</sup> Exploring *Bunniyom* opens discussions on a multitude of levels, including philosophies and practices of *Buddhist economics*, ethics, and merit systems.<sup>364</sup> *Bunniyom* is a central foundation of Asoke as is also illustrated by Asoke’s past and present homepages: [www.bunniyom.com](http://www.bunniyom.com) and [www.boonniyom.net](http://www.boonniyom.net).

To begin an understanding of the multifaceted *Bunniyom* system, which comprises of belief, economic, and ethical systems, we must first consider merit.<sup>365</sup> *Bun* (Thai) or *puñña* (Pāli) translates to not only “merit” but can include “virtue,” “worth,” and “meritorious action,” which is also tied to *kamma* and the results thereof.<sup>366</sup> Further, it is described as, “the inner sense of well-being that comes from having acted rightly or well and that enables one to continue acting well.”<sup>367</sup> *Bun* is a complex and central part of Buddhism in Thailand and within the Asoke community, where it is often discussed.<sup>368</sup> The three main kinds of meritorious actions (*puñña-kiriya-vatthūni*) are alms-giving/generosity (*dāna*), moral conduct (*sīla*), and cultivation (*bhāvanā*).<sup>369</sup>

*Bunniyom* encompasses many of Asoke’s daily practices and beliefs and has broadened into a unique economic system. Various authors have focused specifically on topics surrounding Asoke’s economic model, a few of which will be discussed in order to give insight into this system, how it is been researched, and relates to other economic models.<sup>370</sup> The relationship

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<sup>363</sup> Also written as “*bun-ni-yom*,” “*bun-niyom*” or “*boonniyom*.”

<sup>364</sup> Addressing these themes fully is unfortunately a scope of study far beyond the reach of this subchapter. The term *Buddhist economics* was created and popularized by Ernst Schumacher, in his book *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, (New York: Harper, 2010 [1973]).

<sup>365</sup> *Bun* was often discussed during my research periods within Asoke. On many occasions Asoke members remarked on the substantial amount of merit I had accumulated because I had the opportunity to encounter Buddhism and learn about their way of life.

<sup>366</sup> Damien Keown further mentions that *kammic* results can include “a heavenly rebirth and a future blissful existence, the enjoyment and duration of which depends of the amount of merit accumulated in a previous life.” “*Puñya*,” in *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), doi: 10.1093/acref/9780198605607.001.0001.

<sup>367</sup> “*Puñña*: A Glossary of Pali and Buddhist Terms,” *Access to Insight*, 2005, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/glossary.html>.

<sup>368</sup> Particularly in Western contexts, merit is often a lesser recognized aspect of Buddhism and Thanissaro Bhikkhu speculates this to be the case, “because the pursuit of merit seems to be a lowly practice, focused on getting and ‘selfing,’ whereas higher Buddhist practice focuses on letting go, particularly of any sense of self...we don’t want to waste our time on lowly practices, and instead want to go straight to the higher levels...one cannot wisely let go of one’s sense of self until one has developed a wise sense of self. The pursuit of merit is the Buddhist way to develop a wise sense of self.” Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Merit: A Study Guide,” *Access to Insight*, 2005, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/study/merit.html>.

<sup>369</sup> A 8.36. There is also a longer list of the “Ten Meritorious Deeds” (*Dasa puñña-kiriya-vatthu*).

<sup>370</sup> It is interesting to note that many of these publications are more recent (having been produced in the last ten years), whereas most other studies surrounding Asoke are from earlier. For an outline of research on Asoke see

between the *sufficiency economy* and the Asoke *Bunniyom* system has been explored by Essen,<sup>371</sup> Thamrong,<sup>372</sup> and Sunai.<sup>373</sup> The sufficiency economy was a policy developed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej in response to the 1997 financial crisis and has become a popular and widespread concept in Thailand.<sup>374</sup> Abhisit Vejjajiva (Thailand's prime minister 2008–2011) described the sufficiency economy and the idea of *moderation society* at a UN General Assembly, stating:

Thailand believes that moderation is the key to sustainability. We want to see moderation instead of excessive greed, which is the cause of the economic crisis. We want to see moderation instead of over consumption which is the cause of environmental degradation. And we want to see moderation instead of extremism and selfishness which is the cause of conflicts around the world. We must therefore curb our excesses, live within our means, and use our resources wisely.<sup>375</sup>

The sufficiency economy has been used as a format to assess progress and create programs, for example in the “Thailand Human Development Report 2007: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development,” from the *United Nations Development Programme*.<sup>376</sup>

Asoke is not an isolated case in having parallels to the sufficiency economy, for example Swearer mentions, “Luang Pu Chan...Phrakhrū Sakhon, Luang Pho Nan, and other Thai monks who continue to develop programs to address the social and economic problems of their communities, exemplify in local and practical ways the philosophy of ‘sufficiency economy.’”<sup>377</sup> Various similarities can be found between the sufficiency economy and the Asoke model, and Asoke has been considered a working example of how certain aspects of the sufficiency economy can be implemented. The intention of Asoke's economic focus is spiritual progression, and Essen states that this emphasis, “is what lends the Asoke Model its explicit social and environmental ethics, not shared by the materially focused Sufficiency Model.”<sup>378</sup>

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#### Chapter 1.1.

<sup>371</sup> Juliana Essen, “Sufficiency Economy and Santi Asoke: Buddhist Economic Ethics for a Just and Sustainable World,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 17 (2010): 70–99.

<sup>372</sup> Thamrong Sangsuriyajan, “Sufficiency Economy as the Model of Thailand's Community Development,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 5 (2011): 74–82.

<sup>373</sup> Sunai Setboonsarng, *The New Paradigm of Development and Poverty Reduction based on the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (A Case Study of Santi-Asoke) Group in Thailand* (Bangkok: Fah Achai, 2007).

<sup>374</sup> “Sufficiency Economy philosophy has now firmly taken root in Thai society,” states Surayud Chulanont (Thailand's prime minister from 2006–2008). United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Thailand Human Development Report 2007: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development,” 2007, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/thailand\\_2007\\_en.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/thailand_2007_en.pdf).

<sup>375</sup> Abhisit Vejjajiva, “Statement by His Excellency Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand at the General Debate of the 64th Session of the UN General Assembly New York,” *Permanent Mission of Thailand to the United Nations*, September 26, 2009, accessed June 04, 2018. [http://www.un.org/ga/64/generaldebate/pdf/TH\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/ga/64/generaldebate/pdf/TH_en.pdf) (page discontinued).

<sup>376</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “Thailand Human Development Report 2007.”

<sup>377</sup> Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 153.

<sup>378</sup> Essen, “Sufficiency Economy and Santi Asoke,” 72.

Other authors, such as Boonthiwa,<sup>379</sup> Kanoksak,<sup>380</sup> and Suwida<sup>381</sup> use the contrast of the capitalist system to explore *Bunniyom*.<sup>382</sup> The juxtaposition between the ascetic Asoke way of life (including their *Bunniyom* principles) and capitalism in Thailand creates an easy point of departure for comparison, as is seen below in Figure 2.5.

	<b><i>Thunniyom (Capitalism)</i></b>	<b><i>Bunniyom (Meritism)</i></b>
1. Characteristic	Endless economic growth	Economic growth in moderation based on religion
2. Objective	Material richness	Spiritual richness
3. Criteria of success	Achieving: - material riches -worldly position -fame -mundane pleasures	Detachment from: - material riches -worldly position -fame -mundane pleasures
4. Ultimate goal	Attachment to material riches	Detachment from material riches
5. Outlook	Big, more, luxurious, selfishness, competition	Small, less, simple, abundance, generosity, community
6. Activities	Work less, take more administer, control	Work more, take less, Manual labour, participation
7. Effect on the environment	Pollution, destruction of the balance of nature	Protection of the ecological system.

**Figure 2.5** Comparing core components of *Thunniyom (Capitalism)* and *Bunniyom (Meritism)*.<sup>383</sup>

Kanoksak suggests that Asoke differs from other NGO's that seek an alternative paradigm for developing self-reliance because, "the Asoke group's entry point is religion rather than economics," and this helps to "reshape and redefine conventional practices of Nirvana."<sup>384</sup> Figure 2.6 demonstrates how the *Bunniyom* system is intertwined with Asoke belief and spiritual practice where right livelihood, leads to accumulated abundance, giving one the

<sup>379</sup> Boonthiwa Paunglad, "The Holistic Principles of Buddhist Communities under 'Bunniyom' System in Thailand," *Silpakorn University Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts* 15, no. 1 (2015): 1–30.

<sup>380</sup> Kanoksak Kaewthep, "A Radical Conservative Buddhist Utopia: The Asoke People Society and Economy," *Society and Economy* 29, no. 2 (2007): 223–33.

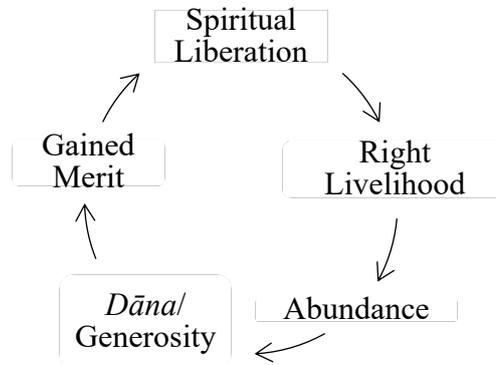
<sup>381</sup> Suwida Sangsehanat, "Beyond the 'Capitalist' World – System: Buddhism in Action," *Journal of Population and Social Studies* 16 (2007): 65–78; Suwida Sangsehanat, "Buddhist Economics and the Asoke Buddhist Community," *Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 3, no. 2 (2004): 271–85.

<sup>382</sup> Brief explanations of *bunniyom* can also be found in: Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 122–5; Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, "Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport," *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 31–47; Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 149–52.

<sup>383</sup> Table adapted from Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 123. Kanoksak also used this table in Kanoksak, "A Radical Conservative Buddhist Utopia," 228. It is unclear if Heikkilä-Horn compiled this table, or if it was originally designed by Asoke, however it is in accordance with other Asoke publications and my own fieldwork.

<sup>384</sup> Kanoksak, "A Radical Conservative Buddhist Utopia," 223.

opportunity to practice generosity, thus gaining more merit and further spiritual progress. There is also a hierarchy of merit relating to profits: giving away products for free will result in the most gained merit and selling below the cost of production will result in high merit, however selling with a high profit margin is considered creating de-merit.



**Figure 2.6** Cycle of the Asoke merit-based economy.<sup>385</sup>

Due to the emphasis on spiritual attainment, the *Bunniyom* system is considered comparable to the concept of *Buddhist economics*. Schumacher reasoned that because “right livelihood” is an integral part of the Noble Path, there must be a form of Buddhist economics and quality of daily life, simplicity, non-violence, and environmental considerations are at the core of Schumacher’s reflections.<sup>386</sup> Because of the focus on spiritual growth, Essen believes that the *Bunniyom* system, “exemplifies the Buddhist economics theory more closely and completely than the Sufficiency Model.”<sup>387</sup>

Another link can be made between the material culture of Asoke and the idea of *sacred economics*. Morgen describes sacred economies in achieving three aspects:

They organize the exchange of goods in which one thing is given for another; they help generate the value of both what is received and the stature of the party giving it in exchange for a promise or pledge, for devotion or adoration, for gratitude or praise; and finally, sacred exchange often operates in competition with a counter-economy, a rival way of producing value.<sup>388</sup>

Taken in the context of *Bunniyom* economics, all these criteria are met in different forms. Not only does Asoke organize the exchange of goods but are also involved in the development of the goods and have created stores to distribute them. The second criterion is slightly modified within Asoke in that the *Bunniyom* system is meant to generate *bun* for those working for

<sup>385</sup> This figure is based on a presentation slide from Bong C.L., “An Empowering Merit-based Buddhist Economy: The Asoke Practice in Thailand” (paper presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Buddhist Business Forum, Taiwan, December 23–24, 2011).

<sup>386</sup> Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, 56.

<sup>387</sup> Essen, “Sufficiency Economy and Santi Asoke,” 86.

<sup>388</sup> David Morgan, “The Materiality of Sacred Economies,” *Material Religion* 11, no. 3 (2015): 388.

Asoke, and “give back to society” rather than for an exchange (promise/pledge, devotion/adoration, gratitude/praise) with those who are consuming the products. Whether consumers of Asoke products are familiar or agree with their doctrines, it is clear within *Bunniyom* stores through the pricing and transparency of costs (overhead and production costs) that they are either earning little or nothing and are spiritually motivated. The last principle appears true for Asoke as they create a counter-economy in which they intend on both gaining spiritual merits and critiquing capitalism.

One of the systems for materializing *Bunniyom* is the *Asoke Goodwill Market*. These markets can be one or multiple buildings, depending on location, and are a central part of most of the main Asoke communities. Markets can consist of a general store or supermarket, vegetarian restaurant or organic produce store, multimedia centre, and the 4R (reduce, reuse, recycle, and recover) second-hand stores. The supermarkets are stocked with a plethora of products, particularly herbal products made within Asoke, such as toiletries, skin creams, shampoo, soap etc., but also organic food, herbs, textiles, handicrafts, household and kitchen items, and health products. The Asoke vegetarian restaurants have buffets, lunches, snacks, and drinks, and are frequented by members, non-members, and tourists. Multimedia stores have a variety of books, magazines, CD’s, and DVD’s, generally focusing on Asoke *Dhamma*, Bodhirak’s lectures, books on vegetarianism, and other Buddhist texts. The 4R store is a second-hand store that exchanges and sells new and used goods which were donated or recycled/repaired/recovered from the Asoke garbology department. Everyone working in the markets is either a volunteer or receiving low wages as donating one’s time and energy is considered to be part of their *Dhamma* practice, generating *bun* and giving back to society. An interesting account of how one of the volunteer managers relates to working at the Santi Asoke vegetarian restaurant gives insight into personal experience and communal decision making:

We practice giving rather than being greedy; to stay calm and not getting annoyed with some greedy customers who often seem to take advantage of the *Bunniyom* (free) meals served in the eatery. As the vegetarian eatery becomes better known and there are more customers, we have to practice to curb our greedy mind to want to make more money and to refrain from increasing the prices of the foods. For example, during the time when Thailand was hit with a huge economic crisis in B.E. 2540 (C.E. 1997), the Asoke vegetarian food eatery became more popular because of the cheaper price of the foods...some Asoke members proposed in their community meeting to raise the food price from 5 Baht to 7 Baht per serving. Many members agreed. There were also many who disagreed. Then, Venerable Bhodhiraksa taught us that we had to practice and step out of the capitalistic mindset of making profit. When the business was good because the customers were in trouble in times of economic crisis, we should have compassion for them, give and help them more than at other times. Even when our cost had also

increased in those economic hard times, our increment in costs was much smaller than the other businesses.<sup>389</sup>

This passage illustrates how members can have varying opinions on communal decisions and the authority of Bodhirak, as the head of the group, giving council also regarding financial resolutions. Considerable freedom is given to those working in the stores, and during group celebrations, retreats, or political events the stores can have reduced hours or close entirely. Another interesting factor of the *Bunniyom* system is what the Asoke call the “Support System” where members holding higher positions and more responsibility receive a smaller salary than the workers below them and are required to invest more of their time and energy.

A related concept in Asoke is *Sādhāraṇābhogī*, which is the fourth factor of the “six ways for practicing living harmoniously.”<sup>390</sup> *Sādhāraṇābhogī* translates to a type of commonwealth, or “sharing of gains...even down to any single lump of food.”<sup>391</sup> This term is used within Asoke to refer to the central funds from which they live, and the “mutually caring and sharing economic system in which money and profiteering play no role.”<sup>392</sup> *Sādhāraṇābhogī* is defined in Asoke as the creation of equality within the community, and the Buddha is referenced as he allowed all castes to join the *saṅgha* and everyone had “equal opportunity to cultivate a spiritual life.”<sup>393</sup> Bodhirak has written on *sādhāraṇābhogī* and within Asoke this term has taken on a multi-faceted meaning, as seen above, though generally it is a lesser known term.<sup>394</sup> The use of the term *sādhāraṇābhogī* is again an interesting reflection on how Asoke uses particular concepts from various *suttas* and interprets them to further support their beliefs.<sup>395</sup> As seen in other areas of this chapter, this one aspect of a particular list or teaching has been singled out and focused upon to describe, validate, and define Asoke practices.

*Bunniyom* economics has been considered a working, sustainable model for rural

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<sup>389</sup> Interview with Tharnrung Khamsokecherk, 2012, quoted in, Bong C. L., Suwida Sangsehanat, “Urban Dhamma: Asoke Goodwill Market, Engaging Urbanities the Asoke Way” (paper presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Lay Buddhist Forum, Spain, October 30, 2012), 5–6.

<sup>390</sup> Listed in A 6.11. The full list is as follows: Friendly behavior, friendly speech, friendly thought, sharing of gains, moral harmony, and harmony in views. A 6.12 also reiterates this list.

<sup>391</sup> David Snyder, *The Complete Book of Buddha's Lists* (Las Vegas: Vipassana Foundation, 2009), 326.

<sup>392</sup> Suwida Sangsehanat, Bong C. L., Sikkhamat Chinda Tangbhao, “Sādhāraṇābhogī: A Buddhist Social System as Practiced in Asoke Communities” (paper presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lay Buddhist Forum: Lay Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism, South Korea, October 22–26, 2009), 28.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>394</sup> Samana Bodhirak, *Sādhāraṇābhogī: Setthakit Janit Mai* [Sādhāraṇābhogī: New Economic System] (Bangkok: Fah Aphai, 2007).

<sup>395</sup> Payutto, a well-known monk (and is a critic of Asoke) also describes these six factors in *A Constitution for Living: Buddhist Principles for a Fruitful and Harmonious Life* and the paper “Sādhāraṇābhogī: A Buddhist Social System as Practiced in Asoke Communities,” cites his work in regard to these factors as well. See, P. A. Payutto, *A Constitution for Living: Buddhist Principles for a Fruitful and Harmonious Life*, trans. Bruce Evans (Tambon Bang Krathuek, Thailand: Wat Nyanavesakavan, 1997), 23.

development, and is part of why Asoke has been described by some authors as “utopian.”<sup>396</sup> During the 1997 financial crisis, it was reported that the Asoke were “relatively unaffected” and even “thrived” in an attempt to illustrate the success of the model.<sup>397</sup> As seen within this brief survey of the Asoke *Bunniyom* system, there are multiple layers of belief tied into their community structures that are based on core principles found within Asoke. Spanning concepts of morality, merit, commonwealth, anti-capitalism/anti-consumerism, working for free or minimal salary, and the Goodwill Markets which promote beliefs surrounding vegetarianism, waste management and *Dhamma* propagation among others, the *Bunniyom* system encapsulates many of the core Asoke values. Boonthiwa’s article considers Asoke “an alternative development based on Buddhist self-reliance and the desire to modify the current discourse of materialistic and capitalist development.”<sup>398</sup> This system creates a unique case study melding Buddhist economics, self-sufficiency, Thai beliefs, and Bodhirak’s views to create a working model that gives possibilities for exploring alternative economic strategies.

## CONCLUSION

Rather than investigating individual and specific material aspects of Asoke—which is done in following chapters regarding appearance, artwork, and physical locations—this chapter has introduced central components of Asoke beliefs and the materialization thereof. This is key as Asoke is actualized and shaped since it is a lived and embodied set of beliefs, which is in direct relationship with the senses.<sup>399</sup> Plate notes that “the reorientation and reproduction of new meanings and identities and communities begins with a transformation of sense perception. Reformation is somehow always about sensual renewal.”<sup>400</sup> As such, it is necessary to first explore the core elements of belief that reform senses and create Asoke as a distinct lived expression of their understanding of Buddhism. This chapter began with the oft-reiterated comment by Asoke monastics and lay members that action and living their interpretation of the *Dhamma* is the most important aspect of being part of Asoke: “[Asoke monastics and lay members] practice seriously—we are serious practitioners. When you believe things, you are

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<sup>396</sup> Apinya Fuengfusakul, “Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravāda Reform in Thailand,” *Sojourn* 8 (1993): 153–83; Kanoksak, “A Radical Conservative Buddhist Utopia,” 223–33; Sombat Chantarawongsa, *Pathom Asoke Community: Buddhist Utopia* [in Thai] (Bangkok: Dhamma Santi Foundation, 1988).

<sup>397</sup> Kanoksak, “A Radical Conservative Buddhist Utopia,” 230; Essen, “Sufficiency Economy and Santi Asoke,” 72.

<sup>398</sup> Boonthiwa, “The Holistic Principles of Buddhist Communities,” 22.

<sup>399</sup> This relates back to Morgan’s discussion of “lived religion,” meaning “religion at work” and “the form of practices – of seeing, speaking, eating, singing, and a broad variety of rituals – formal and informal, corporate and private, prescribed and improvised.” Morgan, “The Material Culture of Lived Religion,” 18.

<sup>400</sup> Brent Plate, “The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred,” *Cross Currents*, 62 (2012): 178.

just believing...the purpose of Asoke is to really behave it—you have to behave it and live it.”<sup>401</sup> This prompted the following questions: what kinds of beliefs are they “living out”? And how do these core principles reveal themselves tangibly? Through exploring how the basic doctrines outlined in this chapter are understood, it becomes possible to see both the actualization of beliefs through the action of monastics and lay members as well as in the material culture of the community—which is fundamental to Asoke as an aesth/ethic formation.<sup>402</sup>

The Asoke conception of *nibbāna* (explored in Chapter 2.1) is at the core of their purpose as individuals and a community and is the underlying motivation for all other subsequent aspects of Asoke. Through promoting the accessibility of *nibbāna* for all members (including lay and female members) as achievable in this lifetime, Asoke departs from the idea that it is a lofty goal only attained by monastics or in distant lifetimes. Though this is not inherently unique to Asoke, the combination of beliefs and practices chosen and developed by Bodhirak and the group, have created a distinct approach to their understanding of Buddhism.

As seen throughout this chapter, *sīla* (morality) is taught in Asoke as the most prominent tool for spiritual development and though much of the materiality discussed focuses solely on *sīla*, it is inevitably tied to the overarching goal of spiritual attainment. The strict interpretation and emphasis on *sīla* are, in part, a reaction to Asoke’s perception of the laxity and misconduct found in some mainstream monasteries and reports of scandals involving monks. Many of the scandals in past decades have revolved around sex and money, and though only a small fraction of monks are reported for “bad behaviour” Asoke uses these examples (and compares it to their stringent moral conduct) in an effort to set themselves apart, to legitimize their group, and as a critique of the Thai *saṅgha*. As such, the use of *sīla* in Asoke is seen particularly in the conservative approach to modesty, sexuality, and possessions, as is laid out in the Asoke interpretation of the precepts.

The predominant method towards spiritual development is through an Asoke-specific application of the precepts and Noble Path, which have been modified to suit Asoke values and encompass new aspects, such as vegetarianism, and their economic system. As explored in this chapter, the majority of the basic ten precepts have been modified to emphasize an austere moral practice, which forms a large part of Asoke identity—especially as lay residents (as well as some lay members) often follow eight to ten precepts in their daily lives.<sup>403</sup> For example, the

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<sup>401</sup> Interview with Samana Kayakayan in Santi Asoke, Bangkok, March 9, 2013.

<sup>402</sup> Refer to Chapter 1.2 for a closer exploration of these terms.

<sup>403</sup> The seventh precept (to refrain from entertainment) is the only one that does not fit the pattern as Asoke uses

first precept “not taking life” is interpreted as abiding by a strict vegetarian diet and the eighth precept of refraining from beautification is further embraced through the adoption of the “Asoke uniform” (which in itself transmits many non-verbal messages as explored in Chapter 3). Not only are these drastic statements in the meat-laden and beauty-conscious Thai culture, but the precepts directly influence and retrain the senses of members.

Through the precepts, members strive to go beyond the action described in the precept and endeavour to cultivate positive attributes rather than avoiding negative actions (for example, instead of not stealing, one practices generosity).<sup>404</sup> The precepts and the Noble Path are deeply intertwined in Asoke, with a continuing emphasis on *sīla*, which in the Asoke interpretation, encompasses all aspects of the Eightfold Path, except right concentration (*sammā samādhi*).<sup>405</sup> This relationship is described by a resident member: “*Sīla* is the path of the Eightfold Path—it is the same thing—if you practice *sīla*, you practice the precepts, you follow the precepts, it means that you walk along the Eightfold Path.”<sup>406</sup> The precepts and the Noble Path are materialized within Asoke which informs the senses of members in a wide variety of ways. This includes the sensory input stimulated by the physical communities (discussed in Chapter 5), the embodiment of these beliefs influences the aesthetic of members (through their attire, bare feet, bodily composure etc. as explored in Chapter 3) and other aspects, such as their specific diet and food choices.

According to Asoke, the *Bunniyom* system cyclically links right livelihood with creating “abundance,” *dāna* (alms-giving/generosity), and gaining merit which then leads to spiritual liberation (and returns to right livelihood).<sup>407</sup> Multiple layers of Asoke principles are touched on through this system and concepts of morality, commonwealth, anti-capitalism/anti-consumerism, hard work, and “giving back to society” are also encompassed. The implementation of *Bunniyom* is a central aspect of how Asoke expresses and materializes these beliefs as seen through the Goodwill stores and markets which promote Asoke principles concerning vegetarianism, waste management, and *Dhamma* propagation among others. Not only does this system influence Asoke internally, it “reshapes and redefines” conventional

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television, music, and entertainment within all the centres and during festivals, technically breaking this precept on a regular basis. This is justified in Asoke as they consider it a form of *Dhamma* practice in itself.

<sup>404</sup> The action to avoid (killing, stealing etc.) is called *vāritta* and positive action to counteract it (compassion, honesty, etc.) is called *cāritta*. This is meant to both counteract and replace the destructive emotion or defilement (*kilesa*).

<sup>405</sup> Whereas typically *sīla* only encompasses right speech (*sammā vācā*), right action (*sammā kammanta*), and right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*).

<sup>406</sup> Female long term lay resident in Pathom Asoke.

<sup>407</sup> As illustrated in Figure 2.6.

understandings of spiritual development.<sup>408</sup>

A nebula of several central beliefs—many relating to *sīla*—revolve around the core nucleus of spiritual attainment; these individual principles are not isolated but create a network of interacting beliefs which then materialize in a variety of forms. For example, the Asoke vegetarian restaurants bring together their understanding of the first precept, *Bunniyom*, right livelihood (“Three Professions to Save the Nation”), health, and environmental consciousness as well as way to “give back to society” all while striving for spiritual liberation. As such, I would argue that vegetarian restaurants, along with other material aspects of Asoke, are much more than what meets the eye, and are the manifestation of a plethora of interwoven beliefs, which in turn inform the senses of Asoke members. Exploring the core tenets of Asoke is a fundamental part of understanding their material culture and a necessary foundation in order to frame the following chapters of this thesis, where the appearance of members, artwork, and the physical communities are examined. Previous authors have also included discussions on core beliefs within the community, however they have not approached Asoke through an aesthetics of religion lens.<sup>409</sup> This framework, as argued in Chapter 1.2, is especially relevant because of the emphasis in Asoke on practice and living their understanding of the *Dhamma*, where the spiritual development is largely achieved through action and the manifestation of values, as was touched upon throughout this chapter. Again aspects of Asoke as a “lived religion” re-emerge; this emphasis in Asoke was frequently highlighted during my fieldwork, and this led me to further take note of the material culture and sensory aspects of the communities—as such, the approach of an aesthetics of religion was prompted by the group. Because of this, I maintain that examining the materialization of beliefs in Asoke highlights aspects of the group that members consider most important and approaches Asoke from a perspective that has not yet been explored. The focus on *sīla* and the materialization thereof—which creates a specific sensory experience—introduces important concepts that will run through this dissertation to lay the foundation for my argument that the reformation of senses in Asoke, through their specific interpretation of the *Dhamma*, has shaped not only a coherent aesthetic style but has been the underlying structure that creates Asoke as an aesth/ethic formation.

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<sup>408</sup> Kanoksak, “A Radical Conservative Buddhist Utopia,” 223.

<sup>409</sup> An overview of beliefs and practises were largely the focus of the monographs by Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, and Essen, *Right Development*. Also see, Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 174–85. Other works on Asoke often focus on one aspect of the community or belief, such as *Bunniyom* or their ecological practices, see Chapter 1.1 for further literature on Asoke.

### CHAPTER 3: ASOKE MONASTICS, LAY MEMBERS, AND PHYSIOMORALITY

The first half of this chapter opens with contextualizing Asoke members within Thailand and their own community—particularly the role of monastics in Thailand and membership within Asoke. This lays the foundation to further understand the significance and nuance embedded within the appearance of Asoke members, which is discussed in the second half of this chapter.

Approaching the Asoke members through the lens of religious aesthetics (“viewing the body of the believer as a vehicle of perception and world orientation”) I hope to explore how Asoke uses “cultural sign systems” to express their beliefs and adherence to the group.<sup>410</sup> The non-verbal communication through the physical appearance of Asoke members also underscores the importance of seeing and being seen within the community.

To belong to the community means to *look* a certain way...in the first instance, one bears certain characteristics in appearance—style of dress, accoutrements, behavior, gesture, color of skin. In the second instance, one regards others and the world about one with a characteristic look. In the first sense one is seen; in the second one does the looking.<sup>411</sup>

These two considerations from Morgan give pause as I understand Asoke as a self-reflective aesthetic formation. I would further like to suggest that the appearance of Asoke members is an important way of creating and exchanging non-verbal meanings—through what Meyer has called “sensational forms.”<sup>412</sup> “Sensational forms” are similarly discussed and described as “Sinneseindrücke als Gewähr von Sinn” by Prohl<sup>413</sup> and “religiöse Medien” by Münster.<sup>414</sup> As with Meyer, these authors focus on aspects such as rituals, images, statues, smells, environmental settings or acoustic stimuli.

Across a wide variety of local forms, religious traditions can be distinguished by their *aesthetic profiles*. Without knowing much about religions, we can “sense” and identify a Buddhist or an Islamic aesthetic because religions distinguish themselves through clothes, colours, hairstyles, buildings and artefacts. These ensembles change over time

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<sup>410</sup> Hubert Mohr, “Material Religion/Religious Aesthetics: A Research Program,” *Material Religion* 6, no. 2 (2010): 240.

<sup>411</sup> David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 5–6.

<sup>412</sup> Sensational forms are discussed in more depth in Chapter 1.2. Also see, Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” in *Religion: Beyond A Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding,” in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>413</sup> Inken Prohl, “Materiale Religion,” *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 379–92; Inken Prohl, *Religiöse Innovationen: Die Shintō-Organisation World Mate in Japan* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2006).

<sup>414</sup> Daniel Münster, *Religionsästhetik und Anthropologie der Sinne* (Munich: Akad. Verlag, 2001).

and are subject to reinterpretation and adaptation... They reach beyond representing or symbolising religious beliefs and doctrines, because they cultivate perceptual habits that build identity within the group, and determine the mutual perception between groups and within the larger society.<sup>415</sup>

I would like to return to the body of the members, both lay and ordained, to understand how Asoke-specific beliefs are transmitted through their choice of attire and hairstyle, for example, as well as forgoing adornments such as makeup, jewelry, and amulets. This also brings us to the consideration of how morality is specifically communicated through physical appearance.

Morality expressed through the body, (Mrozik uses the term “physiomoral”) is signaled through, “various forms of bodily inscription such as dress, posture, and movement,” that also function as “physiomoral markers of worth,”—which for Buddhist monastics are “most obviously constituted as such by shaven head, monastic robes, and the absence of conventional forms of adornment such as jewelry.”<sup>416</sup> This is noteworthy as the composition, autonomy and perceived purity of the bodies of Buddhist renunciants can give lay persons immediate access to a “sacred, immaterial, and undying Truth.”<sup>417</sup> The potency of a monastic image is particularly significant in Buddhist countries, and in Asoke, upholding their “ideal” portrayal of a renunciant is entwined with the aim to validate their group as a more moral, austere and “true” Buddhism in comparison to mainstream traditions. This is sought after, for example, using robe colour and not shaving their eyebrows. Signalling a renunciate status is especially relevant in regard to the Asoke *sikkhamats* who wear brown and grey robes, compared to other female mendicants in Thailand who wear white, which denotes lay status. The sensational forms of a monastic body are intertwined with their attire and certain visual cues connected with renunciation, however lay members in Asoke use similar methods for signaling physiomorality through dress, hairstyle, bare feet and not wearing amulets, jewelry, or makeup.

Adam and Galinsky propose the term “enclothed cognition” to explore if and how “the experience of wearing clothes triggers associated abstract concepts and their symbolic meanings,” and they posit that “wearing clothes causes people to ‘embody’ the clothing and its symbolic meaning.”<sup>418</sup> The results of their study provide support for their initial theory,

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<sup>415</sup> Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston, “What is an Aesthetics of Religion? From the Senses to Meaning—and Back Again,” in *Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept*, eds. Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 19.

<sup>416</sup> Suzanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 69.

<sup>417</sup> Steven Collins, “The Body in Theravāda Buddhist Monasticism,” in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 203. Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations,” 7.

<sup>418</sup> Hajo Adam and Adam Galinsky, “Enclothed Cognition,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (2012): 919.

however two necessary features were that the clothing needed a “symbolic meaning” and it must be physically worn (rather than just envisioned).<sup>419</sup> This adds another layer of reflection regarding the appearance of Asoke members as their material culture (clothing, hairstyles and removal of adornments for example) has been developed specifically to have “symbolic meaning” and this not only signals their beliefs, but also may allow members to “embody” these meanings.

This brings us to the last consideration when approaching Asoke members: aesthetic formation. Meyers’ development of the term aesthetic formation,

highlights the convergence of processes of forming subjects and the making of communities—as social formations. In this sense, ‘aesthetic formations’ captures very well the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense, and which materializes in things.<sup>420</sup>

As such, not only has Asoke created their own material culture in relation to their appearance, but I understand these aspects as sensational forms which develop and underpin the aesthetic formation of Asoke as a group.<sup>421</sup>

Asoke expresses many core beliefs through the appearance of monastics and members and this chapter aims at further understanding the implications and non-verbal communication thereof. The development of this particular image deepens the Asoke identity and separates them as a distinct entity from mainstream Thai Buddhism. These values, which include dedication to their political beliefs, has in turn influenced their current aesthetic as is examined in Chapter 3.3.1. To begin this exploration however, it is beneficial to begin with an introduction to monasticism in Thailand as well as basic information on membership in Asoke in order to contextualize the later discussions on the specific aspects of Asoke aesthetic expression.

### **3.1 Introduction to Contemporary Monasticism in Thailand**

Monks play an important role in Thailand, officiating ceremonies, sustaining, and teaching the *Dhamma* to laity, and acting as representatives of Thai Buddhism. Monks are highly regarded in Thailand and are meant to symbolize those who have gone into

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 922. Other relevant works discussing “enclothed cognition” include, Mehlika Orakcioglu, Ismail Orakcioglu and Ben Fletcher, “Enclothed Cognition and Hidden Meanings in Important Ottoman Textiles,” *TEXTILE* 14, no. 3 (2016): 360–75; Laurence Douny, “Silk-Embroidered Garments as Transformative Processes: Layering, Inscribing and Displaying Hausa Material Identities,” *Journal of Material Culture* 16, no. 4 (2011): 401–15.

<sup>420</sup> Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations,” 7.

<sup>421</sup> Meyer, “Religious Sensations,” 707–8.

homelessness, ideally for spiritual purification, where their energy and time is focused on study and meditation.

Within Thailand there are two main recognized denominations, the larger and older *Mahā Nikāya*, (*Mahanikai*) and the *Dhammayuttika Nikāya* (*Thammayutnikai*), which was created in 1833 by King Mongkut, or Rama IV during his time as a monk. A Council of Elders (called the *Saṅgha Supreme Council of Thailand*, *SSC*, or *Mahatherasamakhom*), assisted by the Department of Religious Affairs regulates and governs the *saṅgha*.<sup>422</sup> The distinction between the “worldly” life of a lay person and monkhood is emphasized through regulations which are presided over by the Council of Elders; and restrictions on political activity, such as voting, and other laws are further outlined in a series of *Saṅgha Acts*.<sup>423</sup>

A discussion surrounding monasticism in Thailand involves the contrast between the theoretical and practical application of Theravāda practices as Swearer explains:

All too often a textbook picture of Theravada Buddhism bears little resemblance to the actual practice of Buddhism in Southeast Asia...The observer enters a Theravada Buddhist culture to discover that ordination into the monastic order (*saṅgha*) may be motivated more by cultural convention or a young man’s sense of social obligation to his parents rather than the pursuit of transforming wisdom; that the peace and quiet sought by a meditating monk may be overwhelmed by the amplified rock music of a temple festival; that somewhat unkempt village temples outnumber tidy, well-organized monasteries; and that the Buddha...is venerated more in the hope of gaining privilege and prestige, material gain, and protection on journeys than in the hope of nibbana.<sup>424</sup>

There are numerous variations to monastic experience and practice, depending on the monks age, location, and personal interests. Rural and urban monasteries have differing activities, levels of canonical study and kinds of rituals performed.<sup>425</sup> There is less variability in Asoke as their communities are more standardized, however monastics also have a wide spectrum of activities. The daily schedule of *samanas* and *sikkhamats* differs depending on the Asoke centre in which they live and their obligations within the community. For example, activities can range

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<sup>422</sup> Throughout this chapter, “*Saṅgha*” (capitalized) refers to the ecclesiastic hierarchy (*Mahatherasamakhom*), and “*saṅgha*” (lower case) refers to the wider monastic community. For a closer examination of the management and organization of the *saṅgha* and Council of Elders, see: Sunthorn Na-Rangsi, “Administration of The Thai Sangha: Past, Present and Future,” *The Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 2 (2002): 59–74.

<sup>423</sup> For a further discussion on legalities surrounding the Thai *Saṅgha*, see: Thomas Larsson, “Keeping Monks in Their Place?” *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 3 (2016): 17–28.

<sup>424</sup> Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed. (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>425</sup> Erick White notes a certain stagnation within scholarship surrounding the *saṅgha* and sheds light on many areas lacking attention, or gaps in literature which shows the expansive depth exploring monastics and their structures in Thailand. See: Erick White, “The Institutional Dynamics of the Contemporary Thai Sangha—A New Research Agenda,” *Sojourn* 31, no. 3 (2016): 967–82.

from teaching or supervising students, managing garbage collection, designing websites, writing, sewing, coordinating publications and printed material, or community organization.<sup>426</sup>

Temples were previously the most accessible, or the only place for early school education before the spread of primary schools.<sup>427</sup> The number of temple boys has dropped since state-run education is accessible for many children, though in rural areas, this is sometimes provided at the local temple. Boys over eight years old can become “temple boys” living in monasteries to receive free education, while observing ten precepts and their duties generally include carrying the monk’s bowls during alms rounds, cleaning chores, and food preparation. Some temple boys continue their monastic training and become novices or fully ordained *bhikkhus* at the age of twenty. Though a distinctly different approach, grades 1–12 are taught in Asoke communities and a specific Asoke-styled curriculum has been developed.<sup>428</sup>

Within the mainstream lineages in Thailand, temporary ordination is quite common, particularly as a rite of passage for young men before getting married, since those who have not ordained for a period of time are often thought of as “unripe.”<sup>429</sup> Becoming a monk is often considered the most fruitful form of gaining merit; for women, this means having a son ordained. Entering the robes and disrobing is usually a simple procedure and many young men ordain for a three-month period, but some stay in the robes up to three years and only a small percentage will decide to stay life-long.<sup>430</sup> When returning to lay life, a ceremony will take place whereby the 227 rules followed by monks are replaced with the five basic Buddhist precepts. Some men in mainstream traditions may ordain several times throughout life, however within the Asoke communities, ordination is assumed to be a lifelong undertaking, and since the process is lengthy and demanding, few Asoke monks and nuns disrobe.<sup>431</sup>

Rules for monastics are intentionally created to keep them in regular contact with lay persons, who must provide for the material needs of the monks. Monks go on alms rounds

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<sup>426</sup> Not only do individual Asoke monastics have different activities, but their jobs can also change—some monastics reported having many different jobs through their time in the community. Also see Chapter 3.3.3 for specific examples from *sikkhamats*.

<sup>427</sup> King Rama V (1868–1910) shaped the formation of early schools and in the 1960s government programs constructed many schools nation-wide; in the 1990s more education reforms took place and currently compulsory education is mandated for children between 6–14 years of age, however basic education is provided without charge until 17 years old. For current reports and statistics on education in Thailand see, OECD/UNESCO, *Education in Thailand: An OECD-UNESCO Perspective, Reviews of National Policies for Education*, (Paris: OECD publishing, 2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264259119-en>.

<sup>428</sup> Asoke students and schooling are expanded upon in Chapter 3.2.2.

<sup>429</sup> Holt estimates around 80% of Thai Buddhist men will ordain for a period of time. John Clifford Holt, *Theravada Traditions: Buddhist Ritual Cultures in Contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 131.

<sup>430</sup> For a closer examination of ordination ceremonies see, Holt, *Theravada Traditions*, 131–88.

<sup>431</sup> Further discussed in Chapter 3.2.1.

(*piṇḍapāta*) in the early morning to collect food offerings, since the code of conduct for monks only allows them to eat what is donated and it must be consumed before noon. Lay persons give the monks packages of rice, savory and sweet foods, but flowers, money, and other offerings are also donated.<sup>432</sup> Ceremonies for receiving robes and larger donations are done after the annual rains retreat in October. These activities are mutually beneficial for the monastics and lay persons, where the monks are materially provided for, and in return the lay person makes merit in their favour, which is believed to then influence their *kamma*. This accumulated merit is thought to have direct worldly benefits (finances, relationships etc.) and also impact the donor's future rebirths; further, the amount of merit the donor will receive is determined by what is being donated, and to whom.<sup>433</sup> These kinds of rituals benefit the relationship of both the donor and donee in a “reciprocal exchange”—this is in contrast to rituals that are based more on the appropriation of sacred power.<sup>434</sup> As I will explore further, Asoke participates regularly in reciprocal exchanges, however denounces rituals and objects that use appropriation.

Monastics perform diverse functions, especially presiding over rituals, festivals, and important occasions. Rituals connected to rites of passage such as ordinations, weddings, life-extension ceremonies, and funerals punctuate the lives of many Thais, as do annual rituals and celebrations such as New Years, Buddha's Day (*Visakha Puja*), and the festival of the floating boats (*Loi Krathong*). Some celebrations and rituals are amalgamations of various beliefs, encompassing animist and Brahmanical religious elements as well as integrating other forms of Buddhism and may use the appropriation of sacred power. A discussion of rituals that use the appropriation of sacred power touches on the complexity of popular beliefs in Thai Buddhism. These beliefs and practices include an overlap with animism, Hinduism, and various Buddhist influences. This complexity is further increased with the discrepancy between a textual understanding of canonical Buddhism, in comparison to what is practiced in daily life. Pattana describes Popular Buddhism in Thailand as:

A large-scale, cross-social spectrum of beliefs and practices—incorporating the supernatural powers of spirits, deities and magic—that have emerged out of the

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<sup>432</sup> What is given also depends on region, but according to the *Vinaya*, monks are technically not allowed to use money.

<sup>433</sup> For further investigations on merit making practices in Thailand, see: James Egge, *Religious Giving and the Invention of Karma in Theravada Buddhism* (Surrey: Curzon, 2002); Katherine Bowie, “The Alchemy of Charity: Of Class and Buddhism in Northern Thailand,” *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 2 (1998): 469–81; Charles Keyes, “Merit-Transference in the Kammic Theory of Popular Theravāda Buddhism,” in *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry* ed. Charles Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 261–86; Niels Mulder, *Monks, Merit and Motivation: An Exploratory Study of the Social Functions of Buddhism in Thailand in Processes of Guided Social Change* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1969).

<sup>434</sup> These themes are discussed further by Swearer, “Ritual Occasions, Merit and the Appropriation of Power,” in *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 17–69.

interplay between animism, supernaturalism, folk Brahmanism, the worship of Chinese deities and state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism... Popular Buddhism is different from its scriptural or canonical counterpart due to its loosely organized and pragmatic nature.<sup>435</sup>

Each of these described influences has multifaceted exchanges with what is often called Popular Buddhism. This is a diverse field in which literature has begun to explore some of the nuances surrounding rituals, daily practice, and the material culture of popular religious objects such as relics and amulets. Examples of power appropriating rituals include invoking spirits, giving offerings to deities, the use of amulets, Sak Yant tattoos or the sprinkling of holy water.<sup>436</sup> These rituals call on the power within the statue, tattoo, amulet or other sacred object for a variety of purposes—these range, for example, from requesting love, protection, health or material possessions to expressing gratitude for pregnancies or at times of significant life stages (birth, marriage, death).

Amulets play a prominent role in the material culture of sacred objects within Thai monasticism and greater society; they are also a relevant example to explore themes of power appropriation, particularly because Asoke regularly denounces the use amulets and their rejection thereof further defines and distances Asoke from many common mainstream practices.<sup>437</sup> Amulets are typically made of plaster, metal, wood and sometimes bone, and depict the Buddha, famous monks, meaningful Buddhist symbols or text, and are often housed in a hard glass or plastic sheath to protect it while being worn.<sup>438</sup> Monasteries create amulets and often the proceeds from the sales will contribute to the upkeep of the temples or other projects, adding another layer of monastics/lay interactions and economic exchange.<sup>439</sup> Amulets have an overwhelming presence in Thailand, however McDaniel reflects that scholars have been unappreciative of their prominence saying:

The popularity of amulets has been generally approached by scholars as a reflection of a growing crisis in Thai Buddhism and the rise of religious commercialism. Most of these critics have very little appreciation for the history of Buddhist material culture and so are surprised by its apparent growth now. Critics are shocked by the prices of amulets,

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<sup>435</sup> Pattana Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>436</sup> Swearer describes a similar list in *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 22.

<sup>437</sup> Other important aspects of sacred material culture include relics, images, icons, and palm leaf manuscripts.

<sup>438</sup> Amulets can also contain materials considered magically potent, such as ashes from incense, fibers from monk's robes, pieces of old temples, or relics from famous monks.

<sup>439</sup> For economic and social considerations of amulets, see Justin McDaniel, "Liberation Materiality: Thai Buddhist Amulets and the Benefits of Selling Sacred Stuff," *Material Religion* 11, no. 3 (2015): 402.

the excessive trading, the prominent display, the miracle stories, and the crime caused by the economics of the trade.<sup>440</sup>

The discussion of amulets touches on the material culture of Thai Buddhism as well as superstitious beliefs and economics; there are huge numbers of lay Thais and monastics who own or wear amulets, and the enormity of the amulet market is staggering.<sup>441</sup> As seen with the example of amulets, power appropriation has a complex network of beliefs and customs found throughout Thailand, however Asoke departs from this popular practice and denounces the use of amulets and superstitious rituals or objects. Asoke communities are further shaped through this rejection as well, as one of the first steps to assimilating into Asoke is to give up wearing amulets.<sup>442</sup> Asoke sees the use of amulets, rituals, and superstitions as not “true” or “real” Buddhism and they actively use this distinction in an attempt to separate themselves from mainstream practices and state their legitimacy as a group striving towards a more “authentic” and “original” Buddhism. Asoke has created events and festivals more in line with their values, which often include intensive spiritual work and study or promoting vegetarian food for example.<sup>443</sup>

A last consideration in the juxtaposed world of monasticism in Thailand are the scandals involving monks in recent decades that have permeated Thai, and occasionally western media. Stories of monks caught gambling, money laundering and involved with prostitutes, among other instances, have peppered the news and in some cases negatively influenced the image of the monastic community as well as the authority of the *Saṅgha*.<sup>444</sup> In Thailand, monks can legally accumulate private property through a law allowing them to write wills, and because temples are considered separate legal entities, they can own different categories of property. Because of this, and a lack of financial transparency, stories have surfaced of monks owning private jets, lavish cars, and being involved with tax evasion and/or embezzlement. Though

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<sup>440</sup> Justin McDaniel, “The Material Turn: An Introduction to Thai Sources for the Study of Buddhist Amulets,” *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object*, ed. Benjamin Fleming and Richard Mann (New York: Routledge, 2014), 135.

<sup>441</sup> For further discussion on amulets, see: Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 189–212; Pattaratorn Chirapavati, *Votive Tablets in Thailand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>442</sup> Further discussed in Chapter 3.4.

<sup>443</sup> Interestingly, for one of these events, Asoke has appropriated the term “*Pluksek*” (which typically refers to the consecration of amulets and similar items) to refer to an annual week-long intensive spiritual development festival.

<sup>444</sup> Charles Keyes, “Moral Authority of the Saṅgha and Modernity in Thailand: Sexual Scandals, Sectarian Dissent, and Political Resistance,” in *Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium: Essays in Honor of the Ven. Phra Dhammapitaka (Bhikkhu P. A. Payutto) on his 60th Birthday Anniversary*, ed. Sulak Sivaraksa (Bangkok: Sathira-Nagapradipa Foundation and Foundation for Children, 1999), 121–47; Charles Keyes, “Sexy Monks: Sexual Scandals Involving Buddhist Monks in Thailand” (Paper presented at EuroSEAS Conference, Naples, Italy, September 12–15, 2007).

these cases are by no means the norm, the amount of media and attention surrounding scandals has played a role in shifting attitudes, authority, and laws surrounding the *saṅgha*; the strictness and austerity specifically regarding celibacy and money in Asoke is also a reaction to the perceived “lax” practices and scandals surrounding certain mainstream monks or temples.<sup>445</sup> Asoke members regularly mentioned how mainstream practice has strayed from the “true” or “pure” Buddhism—which they believe they are reviving; these views are further expressed on the covers of certain Asoke publications or as cartoons highlighting the consumerism and corruption present in some areas of mainstream Thai monasticism.

Though there are only two official branches of the *saṅgha*, a range of settings and lifestyles are available to monastics and there are also examples of unofficial, yet distinct branches that have varying degrees of acceptance by the *Saṅgha*. Though there are many smaller groups or lineages from well-known monks, this section briefly touches on three relevant groups: the Thai Forest Tradition, the Buddhadāsa, and the Dhammakāya movements.

Monks from both official lineages can be part of the Thai Forest Tradition, which is known as a particularly strict branch with emphasis on closely following the *Vinaya*, meditation, and ascetic practices.<sup>446</sup> Swearer notes that, “various permutations of the Theravada forest tradition considered to be closer to the ideals of ‘pure’ Buddhism have influenced the shape of Buddhist reformism and revitalization in Southeast Asia.”<sup>447</sup> Also, the renowned monk Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906–1993), has a distinct group and large following of monks often referred to as the “Buddhadāsa Movement.”<sup>448</sup> Both the Thai Forest Tradition and Buddhadāsa have influenced Bodhirak and Asoke in a variety of ways and though monks from these

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<sup>445</sup> Some of these themes were also mentioned by authors focusing on Asoke: Juliana Essen, *Right Development: The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement in Thailand* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 9; Rory Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 4, 70, 75; Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes: Belief and Practice of Santi Asoke* (Bangkok: Fah Apai Co., Ltd., 1997), 106, 157, 205.

<sup>446</sup> The relationship between Asoke and the Thai Forest Tradition are discussed further in Chapter 5.1.1. Relevant works on the Thai Forest Tradition include: Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*; Kamala Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); Jim Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-state: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

<sup>447</sup> Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 164.

<sup>448</sup> Selected works on Buddhadāsa include: Tomomi Ito, *Modern Buddhism and Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: A Social History* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012); Hans-Bernd Zöllner, *Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906–1993): Buddhismus im Garten der Befreiung* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2006); Peter Jackson, *Buddhadāsa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003); Tomomi Ito, “Discussions in the Buddhist Public Sphere in Twentieth-century Thailand: Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and His World” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2001); Suchira Payulpitack, “Buddhadāsa’s Movement: An Analysis of Its Origins, Development and Social Impact” (PhD diss., Bielefeld University, 1991); Louis Gabaude, *Une Herméneutique Bouddhique Contemporaine de Thaïlande: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1988).

branches are generally held in high regards, Asoke still considers their teachings lacking.<sup>449</sup> The Dhammakāya is an example of a network of temples with a distinct approach to Buddhist ideologies and practice, and has grown into a large-scale movement.<sup>450</sup> The label of “Dhammakāya movement” is sometimes incorrectly used synonymously with the enormous and well-known Dhammakāya temple, Wat Phra Dhammakāya north of Bangkok. Asoke has often been compared to the Dhammakāya, as they are both new religious movements emerging in the 1970s and take contrasting approaches to their understanding of Buddhism.<sup>451</sup> Asoke has regularly voiced criticism and disapproval of the Dhammakāya group, especially in reference to Wat Phra Dhammakāya and the display of wealth, monumental size, reports of corruption, and their ideology.<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> An example of this is that Asoke believes that forest monks are not socially active enough and are too cloistered away with a focus on meditation, calling this approach ‘Hermetic Buddhism’: “This way of teaching decreases the excessive desires in life. Unfortunately, people’s efficiency, productivity and creativity, all of which are beneficial to society, decrease with the desires. This teaching emphasizes the isolation from society and encourages solitude in the forest or on the mountains. Though one may even become ascetic, consuming very little, it is still considered a selfish way for oneself.” A. Poompanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke-Part I* (Bangkok: Kittiya Veerapan, 1989), 21. Another example is that Buddhādāsa’s teachings are thought to be lacking because he did not promote vegetarianism, “I do believe that Phra Pothirak has reached this level and is an Arahan. I am not sure if anyone else in Thailand has reached it. Phra Phutthathat for instance did not understand the importance of eating vegetarian food. Eating vegetarian food is necessary if one is to keep the first precept, which means not killing by any means, or even allowing other people to kill for you.” Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 110.

<sup>450</sup> Relevant works on the Dhammakāya include: Rachele Scott, *Nirvana for Sale? Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakāya Temple in Contemporary Thailand* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2009); Catherine Newell, “Monks, Meditation and Missing Links: Continuity, ‘Orthodoxy’ and the Vijjā Dhammakāya in Thai Buddhism” (PhD diss., University of London, 2008); Martin Seeger, “Die thailändische Wat Phra Thammakai-Bewegung,” in *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Erneuerungsbewegungen* Vol. XI, eds. Klaus-Dieter Mathes and Harald Freese (Hamburg: Asien-Afrika Institut Universität Hamburg, 2006), 121–39; Jeffrey Bowers, *Dhammakaya Meditation in Thai Society* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996).

<sup>451</sup> Examples of authors discussing Asoke alongside the Dhammakāya include: Putsasi Theerasuvat, “Buddhism as a Factor in Thai Politics, 1963–1992” (PhD diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, 2009), 49–89; Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*; Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, “Two Paths to Revivalism in Thai Buddhism: The Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke Movements,” *Temenos* 32 (1996): 93–111; Juliane Schober, “The Theravāda Buddhist Engagement with Modernity in Southeast Asia: Whither the Social Paradigm of the Galactic Polity?” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 307–25; Apinya Fuengfusakul, “Buddhist Reform Movements in Contemporary Thai Urban Context: Thammakai and Santi Asoke” (PhD diss., University of Bielefeld, Germany, 1993); Apinya Fuengfusakul, “Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravāda Reform in Thailand,” *Sojourn* 8 (1993): 153–83; Peter Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989); Suwanna Satha-Anand, “Religious Movements in Contemporary Thailand: Buddhist Struggles for Modern Relevance,” *Asian Survey* 30, no. 4 (1990): 395–408; James Taylor, “New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: An Individualistic Revolution, Reform and Political Dissonance,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 21 (1990): 135–54.

<sup>452</sup> Criticism of practices and scandals at Wat Phra Dhammakāya were also voiced in the Asoke publication *Rao Kit Aray* [What We Think] which are also available online: <https://issuu.com/e-bookboonnyom> and <https://e-bookboonnyom.blogspot.com>. I had the impression that Asoke members I was in contact with felt a certain amount of sympathy for the Dhammakāya since many considered the group to be “led astray” or on the “wrong path.” Other members joked comparing Dhammakāya to a swan, and Asoke to the vulture (the use of vulture imagery in Asoke is further discussed in Chapter 4.4.2) saying “oh how beautiful—they just float along” referring to the perception that the Dhammakāya is occupied with their image and lacking substance and “truth.” Personal communications with lay residents in Sali Asoke and Pathom Asoke.

The Thai Forest Tradition, the Buddhādāsa Movement and the Dhammakāya are still included within the larger structure of the state-sanctioned *saṅgha*, whereas Asoke has been expelled from the institution.<sup>453</sup> All of these movements can be seen as emerging from, as well as reactions to and against various cultural and Buddhist developments in Thailand. As such, a long and complex history entwining political, social, religious, and multicultural influences has further deepened the complexity of Buddhist expressions and groups within Thailand. This brief introduction to monasticism in Thailand and some of the relevant topics and actors has endeavored to give a basic setting to position the Asoke group within—and in particular the Asoke monastics.

### 3.1.1 Female Monasticism in Theravāda Contexts

As the previous section introduced monks and sketched out foundational information about Buddhism in Thailand, it is further significant to understand the place of female renunciants in this setting as well. This portion aims at giving a brief description of some recent and relevant discourses surrounding female renunciation in Theravāda countries, with emphasis on Thailand.<sup>454</sup> I will also give a short introduction to various forms of ordination available for women in Theravāda countries, particularly eight and ten precept nuns who are visually represented as having an ordained status through wearing coloured robes, rather than white which signals lay status.<sup>455</sup> Exploring female renunciants in a Theravāda context is a useful foundation to better understand the how the Asoke *sikkhamats* fit within this setting.

Discussions surrounding ordination and the ability for women to wear saffron robes is significant since the only socially acceptable option for women who wish to ordain in Thailand is to become a *mae chi*. *Mae chis* wear white, don a shaven head, follow eight or ten precepts, and are often caught in limbo between recognition as a renunciant and lay person.<sup>456</sup> Through

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<sup>453</sup> The legal action and disrobing of Bodhirak and Asoke is discussed in Chapter 3.3.1.

<sup>454</sup> Some sections of this sub-chapter have been discussed in Robekkah L. Ritchie, “Sikkhamats: The Aesthetics of Asoke Ascetics,” in *Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 137–64.

<sup>455</sup> This subject has received increased attention in recent years and spans through many different disciplines, can be approached from various angles (textual, cultural, theoretical) and thus far surpasses the space allotted within this subchapter for an in-depth exploration.

<sup>456</sup> Discussions on Buddhist women and renunciation in Thailand include: Martin Seeger, *Gender and the Path to Awakening: Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2018); Lai Suat Yan, “Engendering Buddhism: Female Ordination and Women’s ‘Voices’ in Thailand” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2011); Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel, “Buddhist ‘Nuns’ (Mae Chi) and the Teaching of Pali in Contemporary Thailand,” *Modern Asian Studies* 44 (2010): 1373–408; Monica Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2007); Lisa Battaglia, “Women who Have Gone Forth: Gender and Religious Identity Among Buddhist Nuns in Thailand” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2007); Monica Falk, “Do Buddhist ‘Nuns’ Need the Thai Sangha?” in *Buddhism, Modernity, and the State in Asia: Forms of Engagement*, ed. John Whalen-

the last several decades, the status of *mae chis* has begun to improve as they gain more access to resources; still many live in poverty, and can be expected to dedicate their time and energy to washing, cooking, and cleaning for monks. White is the symbol for a lay renunciant, and is worn by *mae chis* and novices, whereas brown and saffron are reserved for the fully ordained, giving social cues as to how they should be treated in and outside of their communities. Thailand has a long tradition of colour association for the days of the week, for the representation of royal figures, and to determine the status of religious persons—this also includes a sensitivity to the various colour hues worn by monks.<sup>457</sup> In a country that has such strong ties with colour cues and monasticism, women wearing the colours of an ordained renunciate—rather than the white of a lay practitioner—has been a sensitive and relevant discussion. As *sikkhamats* also wear brown robes, it is worth endeavouring to understand what this represents within Theravāda and Thai contexts.

The equivalent to a fully ordained monk or *bhikkhu*, is a *bhikkhunī*, however there are few opportunities for women to receive this ordination in Theravāda countries, and in some cases, it is outlawed.<sup>458</sup> Evidence suggests *bhikkhunīs* existed in India and Sri Lanka until the end of the first millennium CE, however it is unclear if and where there were nuns in Southeast Asia.<sup>459</sup> A slow revival of *bhikkhunīs* in the Theravāda tradition has begun in recent decades and they are now recognized in Sri Lanka and have a few international communities in western countries. Thailand continues to struggle with accepting fully ordained nuns and has a variety of legal, cultural and political hurdles, vocal opponents, and methods to deter monks from ordaining or supporting the ordination of *bhikkhunīs*.<sup>460</sup> Estimates suggest that there are around

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Bridge and Pattana Kitiarsa (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 229–44; Martin Seeger, “The Changing Roles of Thai Buddhist Women: Obscuring Identities and Increasing Charisma,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 3 (2009): 806–22; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991).

<sup>457</sup> This is relevant in relation to Asoke and their choice to wear darker robes. See Chapter 3.3.1 for further exploration of this topic. Tien-Rein considers how colour codes define and communicate messages not accessible to persons not familiar to the customs: “A foreigner who is not familiar with Thai tradition will not understand when Thai people wear yellow clothes to praise their king. The Thai people find color identification through conscious color symbolism, whereas the foreigner relates to the level of unconscious color recognition. Anybody not involved in the local color experience won’t be able to understand its encoded color messages, or decode and share the color coded information.” Tien-Rein Lee, “The Color We Use in Our Daily Life - Communicating with Color” (Paper presented at the Asia Color Association Conference, Thanyaburi, Thailand, December 11–14, 2013), 22.

<sup>458</sup> *Bhikkhunīs* undertake 311 precepts (in comparison to the 227 for monks) and the controversial Eight Garudhammas, which cause the nuns to be reliant upon and subordinate to the community of monks.

<sup>459</sup> Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel, “Buddhist ‘Nuns’ (Mae Chi) and the Teaching of Pali in Contemporary Thailand,” *Modern Asian Studies* 44 (2010): 1383.

<sup>460</sup> For further discussions on *bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand see, Kakanang Yavaprabhas, “The Values of Ordination: The Bhikkhuni, Gender, and Thai Society” (PhD diss., University College London, 2018); Ayako Itoh, “The Emergence of the Bhikkhuni-Saṅgha in Thailand: Contexts, Strategies and Challenges” (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2013); Tomomi Ito, “Questions of Ordination Legitimacy for Newly Ordained Theravāda Bhikkhunī in Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43 (2012): 55–76; Martin Seeger, “The

100–270 fully ordained *bhikkhunīs* residing in Thailand; this is compared to the estimated 200,000 monks in the country over the course of a calendar year.<sup>461</sup> Dhammananda is an internationally known scholar, and since 2003, a fully ordained *bhikkhunī*, however she and other *bhikkhunīs* still face challenges as they are not recognized as members of the *saṅgha* and can face charges for impersonating monks.<sup>462</sup> In January 2017, a group of over seventy *bhikkhunīs*, *mae chis*, and female novices were not permitted to pay their respects to the late king’s urn through the gate for monastics; Dhammananda is quoted saying that, “this current situation just creates a space for discrimination...still, it’s up to each one’s preference whether to exploit it or not.”<sup>463</sup> In Thailand, there have been pioneering women with *bhikkhunī* ordination as well as *mae chis* and these contemporary examples show some of the transformations taking place locally and globally.

In recent years, the topic of ordination has come into the forefront of many discussions in academia and within a wide array of Buddhist traditions. In the Theravāda context, fully ordained *bhikkhunīs* around the world, *mae chis* in Thailand, *dasa sil mātā* of Sri Lanka and *thilashin* of Burma, among others, are gaining more exposure with this increase of literature and dialogue. *Sikkhamats* are unusual in Thailand as they are ten precept nuns who wear coloured robes—though there are other examples found in Sri Lanka and Burma. These groups of women have an array of differences between them, however they are all examples of nuns being visually contrasted against the white attire of lay persons. This section seeks to further contextualize the Asoke *sikkhamats* within the larger frame of Theravāda Buddhism through the exploration of other groups of ten precept nuns in Sri Lanka and Burma who also signal their renunciation through attire.

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Bhikkhuni-Ordination Controversy in Thailand,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 29 (2006 [2008]): 155–83; Varaporn Chamsanit, “Reconnecting the Lost Lineage: Challenges to Institutional Denial of Buddhist Women’s Monasticism in Thailand” (PhD diss., Australia National University, 2006); Emma Tomalin, “The Thai Bhikkhuni Movement and Women’s Empowerment,” *Gender and Development* 14, no. 3 (2006): 385–97; Tomomi Ito, “Ordained Women in Yellow Robes: An Unfamiliar ‘Tradition’ in Contemporary Thailand,” in *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 2006), 168–71.

<sup>461</sup> Dhammananda estimates that there around 100 *bhikkhunīs* in Thailand in Melalin Mahavongtrakul, “Monks of a Different Gender: Why are the Bhikkhuni Experiencing so much Discrimination in Thailand?” *Bangkok Post*, January 18, 2017, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/lifestyle/social-and-lifestyle/1182233/monks-of-a-different-gender>. Kakanang reports 270 “long-term bhikkhuni and novices” in Thailand in 2018. “The Values of Ordination,” 39.

<sup>462</sup> Voramai Kabilsingh (mother of Dhammananda) received *bhikkhunī* ordination in Taiwan in the 1970s and wore light yellow robes and though her ordination was not accepted or validated within Thailand, she was able to avoid charges, or forceful disrobing. The first attempt to ordain *bhikkhunīs* in Thailand was in 1928 by two sisters who were jailed and disrobed. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), 45–8.

<sup>463</sup> Melalin, “Monks of a Different Gender.”

In Sri Lanka, nearly all *dasa sil mātās* wear yellow/orange robes, though “heated debates” have occurred regarding wearing coloured attire.<sup>464</sup> Harris comments that, “all *dasa sil mātās* risk being accused of wearing the orange robe falsely,” and cites an example of a prominent monk who condemned nuns for wearing anything other than white, since he believed “they are no more than lay-people.”<sup>465</sup> Similarly, a monk interviewed by Salgado stated that the nuns who wear yellow “have no right to wear the yellow color...it is a great wrong that they are doing by wearing this color.”<sup>466</sup> The differentiation between lay and ordained visual cues is reflected in Salgado’s observation that in Sri Lanka, “a renunciant in white is usually thought of differently from one wearing attire that is yellow orange, or brown—colors that are used by *dasa sil mātās*, and by *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*, who are generally considered to practice a stricter form of renunciation.”<sup>467</sup>

The ten precept nuns of Burma known as *thilashin*, wear pink robes, with an orange or brown shawl. *Thilashin* have considerably larger communities and more support than their Thai counterparts—they can receive similar scriptural and meditation training as monks, are able to take the same examinations, and can receive national honours for their Pāli studies. For these reasons among others, *thilashin* are considered to have a higher social status than *mae chis*. Jordt reflects that the current attire of the *thilashin* was also met with a “controversy [that] raged” in the early 19th century regarding renunciant women wearing something other than white.<sup>468</sup> According to Jordt, *thilashin* are currently seen wearing only coloured robes, “and never the white, which is the mark of the lay practitioner,” and she concludes that this, “has further served to blur the role of *thilashin* in the religious structure by symbolically juxtaposing them with the monk’s order.”<sup>469</sup>

This “symbolic juxtaposition” is an important aspect in Asoke as the community emphasises the necessity of a “balanced” four-fold *saṅgha* and as such, the *sikkhamats* have visually complimented the male renunciates since the early formation of the group.<sup>470</sup> This brief

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<sup>464</sup> According to Nirmala Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 113.

<sup>465</sup> Elizabeth Harris, “Reclaiming the Sacred: Buddhist Women in Sri Lanka,” *Nivedini: Women’s Education and Research Centre* 8 (2000): 15.

<sup>466</sup> Nirmala Salgado, “Religious Identities of Buddhist Nuns: Training Precepts, Renunciant Attire, and Nomenclature in Theravada Buddhism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 4 (2004): 945.

<sup>467</sup> Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 114.

<sup>468</sup> The controversy was resolved when the official head of the *Saṅgha* at the time, following the request of the king, ruled that white and red robes are equally appropriate. Ingrid Jordt, “Bhikkhuni, Thilashin, Mae-chii: Women Who Renounce the World in Burma, Thailand, and the Classical Pali Buddhist Texts,” *Crossroads* 4 (1988): 37.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>470</sup> Four-fold *saṅgha* includes monks and nuns as well as female and male lay members. These themes are discussed further in Chapter 3.3.3.

overview of relevant discourses concerning female renunciation in Theravāda countries illustrates the many considerations surrounding ordination for women which exist in relation to cultural, political, and religious spheres. Though this is a very limited description of eight and ten precept nuns, evidence of changes and shifts can be seen in what may seem from afar as an old, scripturally fixed, unchanging tradition. Individuals and communities have been influencing and reshaping the landscape of possibilities and renunciation possibilities for women through finding and creating conducive opportunities for spiritual practice. This dynamism is seen especially in the last few decades as women create communities and search out alternative forms of expression, identification, and ordination. Buddhism in Thailand has undergone its own changes in recent decades, which includes the development of various paths for Buddhist women, as seen for example, with women pursuing *bhikkhunī* ordination, evolving *mae chi* communities, the *Dhammamātā* program developed by Buddhadāsa, involved female lay practitioners within the Dhammakāya movement, and the *sikkhamats* living within Asoke.

### 3.2 Asoke Membership

This section introduces lay and monastic members of Asoke, involvement in the community, ordination process as well as the students who live in Asoke centres. There is a wide scope of participation from lay members—ranging from persons who occasionally take part in an Asoke event to those who are regularly active or who live within an Asoke community. Lay residents outnumber monastics and some also choose to progress towards ordination or undertake extra precepts or austerities. The male and female monastics play an integral role within Asoke, representing the group and embodying their beliefs, acting as teachers, mediators, and the foundation from which the Asoke group is based. The Asoke group can be considered monastic-oriented in various aspects—not only are the ordained members at the centre of the group’s moral and organizational hierarchy, but the ascetic practices of the monastics are adopted by many residents as well. Students are discussed separately, where their lifestyle and school curriculum are outlined.

Asoke members are not homogenous in their backgrounds, level of participation, beliefs or reasons for being involved with the group.<sup>471</sup> Bodhirak has attracted a wide range of members, some of whom are not only interested in his spiritual teachings; this was also

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<sup>471</sup> This was made evident not only through my own fieldwork, but was also discussed by Juliana Essen, *Right Development: The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement in Thailand* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), and was a focus of Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn’s monograph, *Buddhism with Open Eyes: Belief and Practice of Santi Asoke* (Bangkok: Fah Apai Co., Ltd., 1997). Also see, Apinya Fuengfusakul, “Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravāda Reform in Thailand,” *Sojourn* 8 (1993): 153–83.

observed by Heikkilä-Horn who states:

It could be argued that the Asoke group consists predominantly of a network of four major wings engaged in spiritual, agricultural, social and political activities. What unites the wings is their self-identification as disciples of Bodhiraksa.<sup>472</sup>

In my own fieldwork, this was made evident through the interests and involvement of lay members; for example, some members were drawn to Asoke through an interest in ecological aspects (organic farming, waste reduction) and were working in garden projects or others were supporters of the prominent Asoke member and previous governor of Bangkok, Chamlong Srimuang (who has played an influential role in Asoke's political involvement). Asoke has a wide range of social projects and teaching activities which further broadens the scope of persons reached. Membership also varies in regard to participation as well, from those attending only special events, to highly involved or permanent residents. The number of visitors fluctuated in the Asoke centres I stayed in as people came for festivals, special events, agricultural training, courses on morality or *Dhamma* talks. Generally, visitors stay for an afternoon or a few days, and to stay longer than a week requires approval from the resident abbot (each community has a respective abbot who is responsible for general organization and spiritual council of the particular centre). Outside some of the larger centres, such as Santi Asoke and Pathom Asoke, there can also be considerable traffic as people—both members and persons who are not affiliated with Asoke—come to shop at the array of Asoke stores or to eat at the vegetarian restaurants for example. It is difficult to estimate the number of members, particularly those who do not live within or close to one of the Asoke centres and may just attend festivals or use Asoke media. Recent estimates put the number of residents within all communities from between 800–1000, and non-resident members from 7000–10,000.<sup>473</sup> A larger group of Asoke sympathizers can be counted when involvement with Asoke also includes those who are associated with political activities, agricultural farming programs, the Vegetarian Society, and the Dharma Practitioner Society.<sup>474</sup>

In order to be able to donate financially or otherwise to the Asoke group, they state that one must have had at least seven previous interactions with Asoke through events, the communities, informational resources (books/audio/FMTV) or members. This was a rather vague rule and it was unclear if and how it is enforced, but it is intended to filter donors and

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<sup>472</sup> Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, "Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport," *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 3 (2009): 40.

<sup>473</sup> These estimates are based from my fieldwork from 2013–2014. Essen also has similar reports from 2005: Essen, *Right Development*, 17.

<sup>474</sup> Heikkilä-Horn estimates up to 100,000 Asoke sympathizers because of their association with the Vegetarian society. Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 62.

only allow financial support from persons who understand and believe in the Asoke movement and Bodhirak's teachings.<sup>475</sup> Some lay and ordained members of Asoke report that they were immediately drawn to Bodhirak or the Asoke way of life and within a short period of time were heavily involved, or had moved to one of the communities, whereas others describe having a more gradual process of involvement, from being a periodic supporter, to a more active member or resident.<sup>476</sup> To live as a resident one must firstly become a temporary guest, and then a permanent guest—a process which takes over two years. In order to apply for ordination, the candidate must already be a resident of an Asoke community.

Ordained members have diverse responsibilities and daily activities depending on which community they live in and their personal interests or talents. Monastics rise around 3:00 am for morning *Dhamma* talks and chanting and will go on alms rounds and consume their only meal of the day before noon. Other daily tasks can include organizational meetings, counseling lay persons, giving sermons, involvement with media (Asoke television station, website or publishing for example), *Dhamma* studies, teaching or supervising students, overseeing building projects, and sewing among other things. These daily routines are disrupted when the group is involved in political activity; for example, during the Thai political crisis of 2013–2014 lay members and monastics relocated to downtown Bangkok to participate in the anti-Taksin/anti-Yingluck rallies.<sup>477</sup> For months, Asoke members lived in a makeshift community where they slept on cement under tarps and had their own stage where Bodhirak, other monastics and prominent lay persons in Asoke (such as Chamlong) gave speeches.<sup>478</sup> The relocation of people and resources, disruption of daily schedules and duties while enduring tear-gas and bomb threats exhibits their dedication to their political ideals.<sup>479</sup>

Asoke membership includes a variety of commitment, some attending occasional events, or encountering Asoke media, and others visit regularly, live nearby or within a

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<sup>475</sup> Through conversations with Asoke lay persons, I also understood that this “rule” was in place to reaffirm that Asoke beliefs or support could not be influenced or “bought” from outside donors.

<sup>476</sup> This was not only seen in my own fieldwork but is evident in the biographies of monastics and members recorded by Essen, *Right Development* and Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*.

<sup>477</sup> I experienced the height of the political crisis during one of my fieldtrips from November 2013 to February 2014 and spent time at the Asoke “tent city” before the situation became unsafe. Some Asoke centres at this time were nearly vacant with only a few persons to oversee the community (I personally observed this at Pathom Asoke and Ratchathani Asoke and heard reports of this being the case in other centres as well); the exception to this was Santi Asoke in Bangkok which seemed to still have some traffic and a few of the older or physically unwell monastics stayed behind.

<sup>478</sup> Some of these spaces and events were also documented by Asoke in their publications, notably, *Rao Kit Aray* [What We Think] which is also available online: <https://issuu.com/e-bookboonniyom> and <https://e-bookboonniyom.blogspot.com>.

<sup>479</sup> The violence escalated to the point where I was not allowed to visit the rally site for my own safety and I instead observed the situation on television from either Santi Asoke or at the home of an Asoke member in Bangkok.

community. A wide range of daily activities and experiences are found throughout Asoke, depending on if the member is lay, ordained or a student and in which community they live, their personal interests, age, and political involvement, among other factors. This following section outlines the progression of involvement if members choose to live or ordain within Asoke.<sup>480</sup>

### 3.2.1 Becoming a Lay Member and Monastic

If a visitor has no prior experience living in Asoke, a resident or monastic may interview or discuss with the guest upon their arrival to gauge their intention and commitment to following the Asoke way of life since all guests are required to adhere to at least five precepts as well as strict vegetarianism. This was the case when I arrived for the first time in Pathom Asoke; I was interviewed by a long-term resident who was interested to know why I was there, to make sure I had the right intentions, and that I knew the expectations of living in the community.<sup>481</sup> After developing relationships within Pathom Asoke, I was not interviewed again in other centres because I was either chaperoned by an Asoke member/group, or members had been in contact with persons in the other centre and knew of my arrival. Living as a temporary guest (*akhantuka chon*) requires permission from the residing abbot of the community in which the guest is staying and permission to stay must be renewed every seven days.

In some Asoke communities, a handout is provided for new guests with basic information and expected behaviour and dress.<sup>482</sup> Modest dress is one of the foundations to the aesthetic of members in Asoke, and guests are given instructions for appropriate attire, or are informed when wearing something unsuitable.<sup>483</sup> Another aspect of visual integration into Asoke is that new members remove jewelry and in particular amulets; further, the typical “Asoke uniform” is often adopted which is a central feature of the material culture as we will explore in Chapter

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<sup>480</sup> Some of the basic ordination progression presented here was also outlined by Heikkilä-Horn and has also been restated by Mackenzie. The steps towards residency and ordination in Asoke since Heikkilä-Horn fieldwork in 1994–1995 seems to have not changed since this format is still the standard rule for advancement in Asoke. Though these two authors have mentioned this, it is basic and useful information about Asoke which I feel should not be excluded and is also relevant to contextualize the discussion of Asoke aesthetics further in this chapter. Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 195–7; Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 148–9.

<sup>481</sup> I observed this to be the case with other visitors during my stay, in Pathom Asoke where two western backpackers chose to stay for a few nights, or two western men at Sali Asoke. Members and introductory literature on Asoke clearly state that they are not interested in being a tourist location and visitors must have a genuine interest in living and practicing in the Asoke way.

<sup>482</sup> An example of one of these handouts is discussed in Chapter 2.2.

<sup>483</sup> This also included the suggestion during the political turmoil to not wear any red colours since Asoke was siding with the “yellow shirts” who were protesting against the “red shirts.” The aesthetics of the lay members is further discussed in Chapter 3.4.

### 3.4.

After a minimum of three months, the temporary guests can then ask to become a permanent guest (*akhantuka pracham*). Being a permanent guest has the same requirements as a temporary guest, though many may begin to take on more active roles in the communities. Again, permission to stay is renewed every week, however it can be less formal, and permanent guests can also ask a *sikkhamat* or *samana* rather than the abbot for this confirmation.

A permanent guest who has lived for a minimum of six months in the community can then apply to be a resident. Female residents are known as *aramika*, and male residents are referred to as *aramik*. Residents can choose to move into their own standard Asoke style thatched hut—the female residents are located near the *sikkhamats*, and the male residents are closer to the *samana*'s vicinity.<sup>484</sup> Residents have a broad range of activities, not only do they organize and run various factories (tofu, soy sauce, rice, herbal products, fertilizer etc.), they also do much of the agricultural work, kitchen work, teaching in the schools, and running the local Asoke medical centres and stores.

Some residents wish to ordain as a *samana* or *sikkhamat*, and once a resident has lived within the community for a minimum of eighteen months, they may apply to begin the process towards ordination.<sup>485</sup> The first step for both male and female residents is to ordain as a *pa*, which is an abbreviation of *patibat* (Thai) or *paṭipatti* (Pāli) which means to practice, conduct, or the 'pursuance' of Buddhist teachings. For female aspirants, once the candidate has been living as a *pa* for at least six months, she is eligible to continue to the next stage of ordination and become a *krak*. These stages require diligent and active participation, and group meetings take place to evaluate the readiness of the candidate. Both the *pa* and *krak* have similar duties in assisting the *sikkhamats* with daily activities more so than residents, which includes serving food to monastics or washing robes. There are also constraints as to how many aspirants may be in a community, and a ratio is based on the number of *sikkhamats* able to give them guidance.

After living as a *krak* for eighteen months, the candidate may apply for full ordination as a *sikkhamat* and undertake ten precepts. This is dependent on if the community feels she is ready to progress to the highest ordination for women within the Asoke hierarchy, but also on the one-to-four monk-nun ratio.<sup>486</sup> When one ordains in the Asoke community, it is assumed to be a lifetime commitment, and often is, particularly because the stages towards ordination are

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<sup>484</sup> For a discussion of these Asoke dwellings, see Chapter 5.2.

<sup>485</sup> Each of these steps correlates with a change in appearance to help distinguish which stage the aspirant is at. This is explored in Chapter 3.3.1.

<sup>486</sup> Further discussed in Chapter 3.3.3.

lengthy, and the vetting process is multi-tiered and thorough. The number of *sikkhamats* has fluctuated minimally in past decades, typically there are between nineteen to twenty-five, as well as a number of female novices and aspirants on various levels. Few *sikkhamats* disrobe, and often have done so for personal or family related reasons and often continue to be active contributors within the Asoke communities.<sup>487</sup>

A similar system is in place for men within Asoke wishing to live as a *samana*, though it takes less time to reach ordination. A male resident may also progress to *pa* after living within an Asoke community for a minimum of eighteen months. After living for at least four months as a *pa*, the candidate can begin living as a *nak*. The progression through these stages requires the same approval from the *samanas* as for female candidates. While living as a *pa* or *nak*, duties change to interacting and assisting the *samanas* more with daily activities, some may assist in the publishing house, or with serving and laundry duties.

A minimum of four months is required before the *nak* can become a novice or *samanutthet*. A *samanutthet* can receive full ordination after four months. Technically, the entire ordination process from a guest to an ordained *samana* would take a little over three years, and through the ordination process, the male candidates take on increasingly more precepts from eight to ten precepts and then when reaching full ordination, the standard 227 monastic rules of the *Vinaya* are undertaken.

### 3.2.2 Asoke Schooling and Students

Asoke communities have primary and secondary boarding schools as well as occupational schools for mature students. The large presence of school children within Asoke centres influences the aesthetic of the communities as well. Originally the Asoke school system was created to supply basic education to adult members and then was later extended to their children as weekend classes; in the 1990s it developed into a full-time boarding program for elementary and secondary schooling. Gradually the numbers of students increased, and more formal classes were implemented. Asoke schools are now recognized by the Thai Ministry of Education and students partake in national tests.<sup>488</sup> The schooling program was first developed

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<sup>487</sup> It was unclear exactly how many had disrobed however a few examples were described to me during my fieldwork. In the 1990s, it was mentioned by Heikkilä-Horn that at the time of her writing, only approximately ten *sikkhamats* had disrobed, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 46.

<sup>488</sup> According to Jones, “The Ministry of Education has approved the Asoke curriculum and is closely watching the new Asoke curriculum...as a possible alternative curriculum for rural public schools instead of the current Western curriculum. However, the problem in test runs in public schools is that the teachers cannot reproduce the success of Asoke due to lack of past experience and current training, incongruent/unsupportive environment, and lack of motivation among other problems.” Michael Jones, “The Social Movement of Spiritually Engaged

in Srisa Asoke and now the major Asoke centres have an accompanying school and some of the smaller Asoke complexes such as rural rice farms, have groups of students. It was estimated that approximately 700–800 students were enrolled in Asoke schools during my research trips in 2013–2014.<sup>489</sup> This is a substantial increase from the 1990s, when Heikkilä-Horn reported just over 200 students were living in Asoke centres.<sup>490</sup> Children may come from nearby villages but also are sent by parents who are active in Asoke or sceptical of public schools and wanting a more “hands-on” education for their children; further, parents who are unable to afford other schools may also opt for Asoke schools as they are free of charge.<sup>491</sup>

Public schools are seen by some Asoke members as fostering consumeristic and immoral tendencies in students, causing them to be lazy and “big-headed” because of the emphasis on academic work and lack of manual skills.<sup>492</sup> Members who were apprehensive about the influence of public school (representing mainstream beliefs and an attachment to material things) on children have developed an education system based on Asoke beliefs. As such, the curriculum focuses strongly on moral development, hands-on learning as well as subject studies. The students are trained in morality through being exposed to the Asoke understanding of *sīla*, and this includes regular meetings and discussions on moral transgressions as well as upholding the basic five precepts and living as a vegetarian.<sup>493</sup> Students are taught hands-on learning through having active roles in the communities, working for around two hours a day in Asoke restaurants, factories, farms, and stores and are at times also responsible for these stations.<sup>494</sup> They are able to request their desired job to the facilitators, however if a student is having difficulty or not performing, they may be transferred to a different position. Lastly, the students have academic requirements so that the Asoke schools may be

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Alternative Education in Thailand Against the Background of Reform and Globalization” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2008), 162.

<sup>489</sup> These estimates came from long term Asoke members and *sikkhamats*, however I was unable to verify these numbers with the official enrollment records of each centre. In 2002 Mackenzie reported nearly 600 students, however he only included five of the main Asoke centres. Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 140.

<sup>490</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 63.

<sup>491</sup> This was explained by lay Asoke members, but also is described within Suwida Sangsehanat and Bong C. L., “Right Education – The Srisa Asoke Model” (Paper presented at the Lay Buddhist Forum 2010: Buddhism for a New Generation, South Korea, September 30–October 4, 2010), 4.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. Essen also reports this in interviews with Asoke members in Sisa Asoke: Essen, *Right Development*, 63–4.

<sup>493</sup> Refer to Chapter 2.2 for an explanation of the Asoke understanding of *sīla* and the precepts. Also see, Kanoksak Kaewthep. “Alternative Education: ‘Bun-Niyom’ (Meritism) Education of Asoke Community.” [In Thai.] *Bodhi Research Journal, Srinakharinwirot University* 1, (2010): 111–42.

<sup>494</sup> I observed a wide range of engagement from students, some of whom seemed to work diligently at their stations and others dilly-dallied and spent their time chatting and playing. The amount of supervision was likely a factor and students seemed to return to their work (or at least pretend to) when I or other adults were present. Some students enjoyed showing me their work stations and would take me on tours of the gardens for example and were eager to learn English from me and others were indifferent to my presence.

recognized by the Ministry of Education, however this comprises only about 20–25% of the Asoke curriculum. Typical subjects such as language, history, math, and science are taught in classrooms and around the Asoke communities in the gardens or workplaces when applicable (teaching biology in the fertilizer plant for example). Regarding grades and the student’s assessments,

priority and greater emphases are given to conduct and their amicability in human interactions (the values of brahmavihara – compassion, loving-kindness, appreciative joy and equanimity). Such values as diligence in work, a good sense of morality and maintenance of ethical conduct, and emotional stability that contribute to character building and right living are underscored...It is through purification of the mind reflected in keeping of moral disciplines that wisdom for right living arises.<sup>495</sup>

Because of the emphasis on moral development, students may receive a failing grade regardless of their academic performance if they are, for example, unable to live in accordance with the five basic precepts.<sup>496</sup> Asoke students are subject to the same National Tests and according to Jones, they have the same failure rate (50%) yet apparently, “100% of the Asoke students who have taken the university entrance exams have passed—and this is phenomenal when one considers that the national average is only 1 or 2%.”<sup>497</sup> There continues to be a demand for Asoke schooling as seen through the waiting lists for enrollment in some communities.<sup>498</sup>

Teachers are comprised of lay members, volunteers from nearby towns, *samanas*, and *sikkhamats*. Because the students live in Asoke communities, they are monitored by the monastics and designated members who are responsible for their wellbeing and reprimanding improper behavior. If behaving inappropriately, the student(s) will be given a lecture or warning and they may face consequences, depending on the offense—usually added work or removed privileges and in extreme or repeat cases, spanking or expulsion.<sup>499</sup> The demographic of many Asoke communities is balanced only because of the large number of young students, whereas most lay residents and monastics are middle-aged or older. With such large groups of students living in Asoke (up to 200 in some communities) there have been discussions of a lack of supervision and mentorship. Essen further questions if it is not just a lack of adults available

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<sup>495</sup> Suwida and Bong, “Right Education – The Srisa Asoke Model,” 7.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> He further states that Asoke graduates are “highly sought after and they usually are offered top positions. They characteristically stand out – their manners, their demeanor, the way they dress – all very well-mannered and modest.” Jones’ information comes from a discussion with a *samana*, *sikkhamat* and lay person who oversee Santi Asoke’s education program and may have a biased view of their success rates. Jones, “The Social Movement,” 163.

<sup>498</sup> It is unclear how many centres have waiting lists and how long they are.

<sup>499</sup> Public spanking and expulsion from Asoke seem to happen in very rare cases—Essen witnessed the spanking of a student who after a discussion surrounding her misbehaving, received “three solid whacks with a strip of bamboo on her behind over her thick cotton skirt” after which the student and teacher bowed to each other and hugged. Essen, *Right Development*, 65.

for supervision, or enough members with teaching skills, but if the group has overextended itself in some communities, creating too much work for the adults—especially when the students graduate and leave, which nearly all of them do.<sup>500</sup> The Asoke schooling system has received praise and skepticism, and a deeper look at the experience of current and former students would prove to be a worthwhile exploration for a future study.

### 3.3 Aesthetics and Physiomorality of Asoke Monastics

Physiomorality, or morality communicated through the body, is expressed through an array of “bodily inscriptions” (attire or movement for example) which function as “physiomoral markers of worth,” which for Buddhist monastics are, “most obviously constituted as such by shaven head, monastic robes, and the absence of conventional forms of adornment such as jewelry.”<sup>501</sup> For Asoke, the development of their “ideal” portrayal of a renunciant is in direct relationship with a validation of their group as a more true, austere, and moral interpretation of Buddhism. Further, perceiving the symbolism of a monastic body is intertwined with their attire, and certain visual cues connected with renunciation, and layers of nuance are present through details—such as robe colour or fabric for example. These subtleties of monastic material culture are used in a specific way within Asoke to promote a particular image of the group as well as signal various beliefs. This chapter endeavors to further explore the aesthetics of the Asoke renunciates and the relevance thereof through an examination of their robes, hair (shaven heads and unshaven eyebrows), and the implications of the *sikkhamats* wearing brown.

#### 3.3.1 The Monastic Image and Political Robe Colours

Cloth as a visual symbol reveals and communicates a great deal especially because it can be shaped, formed, and is flexible—thus is able to transmit a variety of messages. Textiles, and in this case, cloth which is configured to be identified as monastic robes has an, “intimate association with the body [which] is especially salient, putting it in a metonymic relationship to the self. Signifying rank, status, sexuality, power, ideals, it individuates the person. But it can also dissolve a person’s social identity as in uniforms and sackcloth.”<sup>502</sup> Monastic robes are a central piece of Buddhist material culture and have a particular potency as signals of piousness, morality, and the sacred. Robes can be considered a kind of uniform which aid in creating the division between monastic and lay worlds, uniting renunciates as a distinct group

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>501</sup> Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies*, 69.

<sup>502</sup> Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner, “Cloth and the Organization of Human Experience,” *Current Anthropology* 27, no. 2 (1986): 178.

and separating them from secular life. Wearing monastic attire further shapes the identity of those wearing it, but it also dissolves and engulfs the individual into the larger group.<sup>503</sup> Robes are one of, if not the most, visually defining characteristic of the monastic community—and the appearance of a monk is arguably just as important to their identity as their beliefs are, in turn while the robes also reflect their beliefs.

The results from Adam and Galinsky's study on "enclothed cognition" provides initial support for their theory that "wearing clothes causes people to 'embody' the clothing and its symbolic meaning."<sup>504</sup> As such, this suggests that the monastic robe, as it is rich with symbolism, influences the wearers mental state. As robes signal renunciation and strict moral action, according to "enclothed cognition" the clothing—fabric, style, and colour— may also play a role in upholding and embodying these messages.

Monastics are visually distant to most any lay person, perhaps increasingly so with modern clothes using synthetic fabrics, a wide variety of colours, styles to accentuate or reveal the body, and are often emblazed with large prints, slogans, or logos. This is visually juxtaposed to the draped, unfitted, and monochromatic robes, which allow monastics to be recognized immediately and from a distance. Further, outside religious contexts, it is rare to see a man wearing a sarong, or a woman with a shaven head.

The creation, use, and distribution of robes play an important role in the *Vinaya*, with much attention to detail as Kieschnick notes:

The fact that monks studied the composition of the robes with such intense scrutiny tells us that for them these matters were far from trivial. The impetus behind all of this meticulous attention to detail was more than a need for distinction. Nor can it be explained by an even more nebulous 'force of tradition.' To understand the full significance of the robe, we must appreciate its symbolism.<sup>505</sup>

Monk's robes are a deeply imbedded and important aspect of material culture and conveyor of meaning not just for the monastic themselves, but in wider social contexts as well. The wearing of robes touches on many interconnected factors including the creation and visual linking of communities, the relationship to rituals as well as more subtle aspects regarding the colour and the style in which they are worn. This is seen in Thailand where the saffron colour signals monasticism (even when it is not being worn by monks) or the significance of rituals and ceremonies surrounding offering robes to monks. The importance of monastic-coloured cloth

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<sup>503</sup> These are common attributes of uniforms, also discussed in Chapter 3.4. Also see, Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex, "The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective," *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (1972): 719–30.

<sup>504</sup> Hajo Adam and Adam Galinsky, "Enclothed Cognition," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (2012): 919.

<sup>505</sup> John Kieschnick, "The Symbolism of the Monk's Robe in China," *Asia Major* 12 (1999): 14.

as part of material culture is seen not only as robes are worn on the bodies of ordained persons, but also when used to clothe Buddha statues or ‘ordain’ trees for example.<sup>506</sup>

Monastic robes as outlined in the Pāli Canon consist of three pieces of rectangular cloth for men, and five for women, which are made up of smaller panels that have been sewn together.<sup>507</sup> These smaller panels are arranged in a pattern resembling a rice-paddy field and had been originally created from rags or cloth found in cemeteries before monastics were able to receive robes as an offering from lay persons.<sup>508</sup> The *antaravāsaka* or inner robe, covers the lower half of the body from above the navel to below the knees, and is secured through folding, and a cord or belt.<sup>509</sup> The *uttarāsāṅga* wraps around the torso covering the majority of the inner robe and can be worn to either leave the right shoulder bare or cover both shoulders (as is often the case when monastics leave the monastery grounds).<sup>510</sup> Lastly, the *saṅghāṭi* is an extra outer robe that is worn folded across the left shoulder, wrapped around the body, or can be used for warmth, especially because it is made of two layers of cloth. Nuns have two additional robes, the *saṅkaccika* which is worn under the *uttarāsāṅga* as a bodice and the *udakasātikā* which is used as a bathing cloth.<sup>511</sup> For monks, it has become custom in Thailand to wear an *angsa* (Thai), a one-shouldered sleeveless vest/undershirt fastened (often with ties) at the waist and is worn under the *uttarāsāṅga*. There is considerably more flexibility when monastics are within monastery confines and monks are often seen, particularly when working, wearing an *antaravāsaka* and *angsa*.

As previously mentioned, Thailand is a country with deep ties to colour cues and they play an important role in identifying and representing monastics. Saffron, ochre, and brown tones are the typical colours for monk’s robes, and the dyeing of the robes was thought to help recognize followers of the Buddha as well as further diminished the value of the cloth.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> For a discussion on tree ordination, see Susan Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012); Jim Taylor, “Social Activism and Resistance on the Thai Frontier: The Case of Phra Prajak Khuttajitto,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 25 (1993): 3–16; Nicola Tannenbaum, “Protest, Tree Ordination, and the Changing Context of Political Ritual,” *Ethnology* 39, no. 2 (2000): 109–27; Lotte Isager and Søren Ivarsson, “Contesting Landscapes in Thailand: Tree Ordination as Counter-Territorialization,” *Critical Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 395–417; Kevin Brown, “Spectacle as Resistance: Performing Tree Ordination in Thailand,” *The Journal of Religion and Theatre* 5, no.2 (2006): 91–103.

<sup>507</sup> Vin 1.94. The sewing together of smaller panels of cloth is further to diminish the value of a monastic robe.

<sup>508</sup> Wearing rag robes is also one of the thirteen ascetic *dhutaṅga* practices, Th 16.7, M 113. For further discussion on monastic rag robes and rituals see, Rita Langer, “From Riches to Rags: How New Clothes for the Dead Become Old Robes for Monks,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3, no. 24 (2014): 125–44.

<sup>509</sup> The *antaravāsaka* is made to be 2 by 1 metre long.

<sup>510</sup> The *uttarāsāṅga* and *saṅghāṭi* both measure 2.7 by 1.8 metres.

<sup>511</sup> Vin 2.272.

<sup>512</sup> Colours not permitted for robes include black, blue, and crimson or any fabrics which are multi-coloured or patterned, MV 8.29. Thanissaro Bhikkhu further elaborates that other forbidden colours include “blue (or green...), entirely yellow, entirely blood-red...entirely orange, or entirely beige (according to the Commentary, this last is

Saffron and ochre have a range of tones dependent on the kind and saturation of the dye being used. Roots, bark, leaves, flowers and stalks are permitted for creating dye, and often the inner wood of the Jackfruit tree was used to obtain the bright oranges found in Thailand, however with widespread deforestation, chemical dyes are used more frequently.<sup>513</sup> There are also specific guidelines for dyeing, drying, and creating appropriate robe colours.<sup>514</sup>

In Thailand, monastic attire is most often a bright orange/saffron colour, however some wear darker hues—though not a rule, often monks within the *Dhammayuttika Nikāya* wear a darker ochre robe and *Mahā Nikāya* monks wear a brighter orange.<sup>515</sup> Monks of the Thai Forest Tradition typically wear darker brown or more muted ochre tones, colours which have also become associated with an austere monastic practice. When Bodhirak first began Asoke, monastics wore darker brown robes and the *sikkhamats* had slightly lighter brown/ochre outer robes and long sleeves to distinguish them from their male counterparts (Figure 3.1). An account from a *samana* who has lived in Asoke since 1981 further exemplifies the importance and association of monastic robe colour in Thailand.<sup>516</sup> Before knowing about the existence of the Asoke group, Samana Tissa had ordained within the mainstream *saṅgha*, however he did not consider the typical bright orange colour appropriate for a serious monastic practice and chose on his own accord to dye his robes a darker hue. Because of the appearance of his darker robe, he was approached by lay persons asking if he was a member of Asoke, and this eventually led to contact with Bodhirak and joining the group. This brief account illustrates the nuances and importance of colour within Thailand and shows how Asoke uses darker robes to further symbolize an austere and dedicated practice which aims at authenticating and visually emphasizing the seriousness of the group. This choice further distinguishes them as a separate group and reinforces a material culture distinct to Asoke.

Robe style also varies within Thailand, typically depending on if the monk is going on alms rounds, participating in ceremonies, or working within the monastery confines for

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the ‘color of withered leaves’). Apparently, pale versions of these colors—gray under ‘black,’ and purple, pink, or magenta under ‘crimson’—would also be forbidden. As white is a standard color for lay people’s garments, and as a bhikkhu is forbidden from dressing like a lay person, white robes are forbidden as well.” Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Monastic Code II*, 3rd ed. (California: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013), 25.

<sup>513</sup> Materials permitted to make dye are described in Vin I.281.

<sup>514</sup> For further discussion on washing and dyeing robes, see: Ann Heirman, “Washing and Dyeing Buddhist Monastic Robes,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 67, no. 4 (2014): 467–88; Thanissaro, *The Buddhist Monastic Code II*, 25–36; Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life: According to the Texts of the Theravada Tradition*, trans. Claude Grangier and Steven Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 32–9.

<sup>515</sup> As described above, in Thailand there are two recognized lineages: the larger *Mahā Nikāya* (*Mahanikai*) and the *Dhammayuttika Nikāya* (*Thammayutnikai*) which was created in 1833 by King Mongkut, Rama IV.

<sup>516</sup> As described in an interview with Samana Tissa in Santi Asoke, Bangkok, December 6, 2013.

example. When leaving their residence, monks will often wear one of two styles—with the *uttarāsāṅga* covering both shoulders and secured under the left arm, or with the *uttarāsāṅga* wrapped around the torso leaving the right shoulder exposed. Often Thai monks also wear an extra belt on the outside of the robes to secure the *uttarāsāṅga* and *saṅghāṭī* which is folded over the shoulder, however this style is not worn by Asoke monastics.<sup>517</sup> Further, robes worn in Asoke are often not made from the typical patchwork pattern and instead made of solid panels of fabric.<sup>518</sup> If a monk from the mainstream *saṅgha* wishes to join Asoke, they will undergo a two-year trial period and will change their robes to the Asoke colour and style.<sup>519</sup> Due to the imprisonments of Bodhirak and Asoke monastics and the subsequent trials, the *samanas* and *sikkhamats* have undergone a change in their robes which also served to further distance them visually from the mainstream *saṅgha*; because of this, the appearance of the Asoke monastics has been influenced not only by their religious beliefs, but through their political involvement and the repercussions thereof. To further understand the current appearance (and material culture) of the *samanas* and *sikkhamats*, a brief overview and consideration of the legal action against Asoke will be reviewed.<sup>520</sup>

The choice to wear visually distinct brown robes in Asoke was a source of differentiation from the beginning of the group, and was specifically noted by early

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<sup>517</sup> A photograph of Bodhirak from 1975 pictured him wearing saffron coloured robes in a typical Thai style, with the belt included. It is not clear when exactly he changed, though images from the early 1980s portray him with darker robes with the belt excluded.

<sup>518</sup> This is true of the *sikkhamat*'s outer robes and the robes of many of the *samanas*, however I did see a few *samanas* wearing patchwork robes.

<sup>519</sup> This was explained to me by long-term lay residents and a visiting monk in Pathom Asoke.

<sup>520</sup> I have attempted to be concise in the reiteration of the political involvement and court cases, focusing on relevant issues regarding monastic robes, as these events are not the main focus of this chapter and have already been discussed by other authors, namely Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes* and Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*. These legal and political events were a complex series of interactions, I have endeavoured to include some of the details in the notes. Parts of this section uses dates and reports from the *Bangkok Post*'s archives on Asoke, accessed in 2014 in Bangkok. There are also short mentions of Asoke and their political participation in the following publications: David Ambuel, "New Karma: Buddhism and Democratization in Thailand," in *Religious Organizations and Democratization: Case Studies from Contemporary Asia*, ed. Tun-jen Cheng and Deborah Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 91–4; Juliana Essen, *Right Development: The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement Of Thailand* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 16–9; Monica Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2007), 184–8; N. Ganesan, "Worsening Schisms in Thai Domestic Politics," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 11 (2010): 136, 143; Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, "Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport," *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 3 (2010): 31–47; Peter Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 159–98; Michael Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (Oxford University Press: 2011), 97–8; Duncan McCargo, "Thai Buddhism, Thai Buddhists and the Southern Conflict," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40 (2009): 7; Duncan McCargo, "Buddhism, Democracy and Identity in Thailand," *Democratization* 11, no. 4 (2004): 155–70; Boonthiwa Paunglad, "The Holistic Principles of Buddhist Communities under 'Bunniyom' System in Thailand," *Silpakorn University Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts* 15 (2015): 16–7; Suwanna Satha-Anand, "Religious Movements in Contemporary Thailand: Buddhist Struggles for Modern Relevance," *Asian Survey* 30, no. 4 (1990): 405; Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 174–5.

researchers.<sup>521</sup> The first Asoke centre, Daen Asoke, was founded in 1973 in Nakhon Pathom province, however the Council of Elders ordered Bodhirak to dismantle the dwellings, change the colour of their attire and cease their “unorthodox activities.”<sup>522</sup> Other factors which contributed to Asoke being seen as controversial were the ordaining of women (and them wearing ochre/brown robes), their strict vegetarian diet, not shaving their eyebrows, and on August 6, 1975, the announcement to not conform to or be regulated by the authority of the *Mahatherasamakhom*.<sup>523</sup> In November 1979, the Council of Elders compiled a list of offences against Bodhirak and the Asoke communities, which according to Jackson, were intended to undermine Bodhirak’s credibility, rather than restrict his activities.<sup>524</sup> The accusations from the *Mahatherasamakhom* stated that Asoke members were: 1) incorrectly ordained;<sup>525</sup> 2) advertising themselves as being disaffiliated from the Thai *saṅgha*; 3) disseminating propaganda which promoted misunderstanding of the *Vinaya*; 4) criticizing monks who practise according to the *Vinaya* and the regulations of the Thai *Saṅgha*; 5) establishing themselves into groups with branches in various locations.<sup>526</sup>

Though there are many factors leading to the disputed status of the Asoke group, Suwanna considers that, “much of the controversy focuses on the issue of the legality of Pra Bodhiraksa who openly denied the authority of the Council of Elders.”<sup>527</sup> Heikkilä-Horn however believes this was just the beginning and states that, “the fact remains that Bodhirak’s

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<sup>521</sup> Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 160; Swearer, “Fundamentalistic Movements in Theravada Buddhism,” 670; Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 44.

<sup>522</sup> Swearer, “Fundamentalistic Movements in Theravada Buddhism,” 670. Mackenzie further claims that the “*Sangha* governor of Nakhon Pathom province pressurised the abbot of Nong Kratum temple (who was well respected by the Asoke and local communities), to force Asoke monastics to wear the normal saffron robes, rather than the brown robes they had adopted...The abbot of Nong Kratum temple was reprimanded by the provincial *Sangha* governor for not dealing effectively with Santi Asoke, and when the abbot subsequently fell ill, this was viewed by the local community as being the indirect fault of Asoke.” However, the source of this information is not given. Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 117.

<sup>523</sup> In 1976, Santi Asoke in the outskirts of Bangkok, Sri Saket in Northeastern Thailand, and Sali Asoke in Phai Sali, Central Thailand were established. The creation of these centres in a short period of time also signals the rapid expansion of the group in these early years. Also, in 1976 during the student uprising, there were allegations that weapons were being hidden in Pathom Asoke and the community was searched though no weapons were found (Daen Asoke had been moved to a nearby location and was renamed Pathom Asoke).

<sup>524</sup> Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 169.

<sup>525</sup> This refers to the monks that Bodhirak had ordained, as he did not have the required 10 years of monastic seniority, or the allowance from the *Mahatherasamakhom* to undertake ordinations.

<sup>526</sup> Jackson uses Anan Senakhan’s book *Bodhiraksa - The Highly Dangerous Prophet (Phothirak - Saatsadaa Mahaaphay)* which, it should be noted, is a biased source. Jackson further states that in response, “Phothirak accused the *Mahatherasamakhom* of cowardice, saying they could not respond to his accusations that members of the Council of Elders were interested only in competing for monasteries (between the Mahanikay and Thammayut Orders), appointing clerical titles and spending their private lives in chanting, eating, fawning upon lay people in order to collect money, and officiating at the opening of commercial establishments, for which they received substantial donations.” Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 169–70.

<sup>527</sup> Suwanna, “Religious Movements in Contemporary Thailand,” 395–408.

association with Chamlong seems to be the main cause for the legal problems the Asoke group has faced since Bodhirak rejected the state authority.”<sup>528</sup>

In 1979, Major General Chamlong Srimuang, a devout Buddhist, was introduced to Bodhirak after being attracted to the austere Asoke lifestyle.<sup>529</sup> A year after coming in contact with Asoke, Chamlong developed into a high-profile figure in Thai politics with his appointment in 1980 as Secretary General to Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond.<sup>530</sup> In 1985 he was elected as Governor of Bangkok.<sup>531</sup> LoGerfo describes Chamlong as the first example of the middle class supporting “clean politics”—meaning: “politics in which electoral outcomes and policy decisions are determined by the merits of competing choices rather than the amount of cash spent on buying votes and offering bribes.”<sup>532</sup> In 1988, the *Phalang Dhamma* [*Power of the Dhamma* or *Moral Force*] political party was founded by Chamlong, which required its members to uphold moral principles within the political arena, and that they may under no circumstances buy votes, compete for positions, speak impolitely, or cheat.<sup>533</sup> The *Phalang Dhamma Party*, or *PDP*, had high hopes for the 1988 federal elections and aimed for a majority government. Asoke’s involvement throughout the country was widespread and the party’s membership grew, however they faced much opposition as Heikkilä-Horn describes:

[When Chamlong] showed interest in joining national politics (1988), the stage was set for a systematic campaign against and demonization of “Santi Asoke”...Chamlong was extremely popular as a Governor, regarded as a “Mr Clean,” who lived modestly according to the Asoke teachings, ate one vegetarian meal a day, rejected tobacco and alcohol, and did not gamble or visit night-clubs. In other words, Chamlong was an eye-catching exception among his contemporaries in Thai politics.

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There were obvious reasons to assume that as a Prime Minister, Chamlong would not

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<sup>528</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 204.

<sup>529</sup> Relevant works on Chamlong Srimuang include, Duncan McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang and the New Thai Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), and Duncan McCargo, “The Three Paths of Major-General Chamlong Srimuang,” *South East Asia Research* (1993).

<sup>530</sup> Chamlong’s first major political campaign attempted to defeat a bill proposed to legalize abortion—and he was considered “the most significant figure in the anti-abortion lobby in Thailand.” Andrea Whittaker, *Abortion, Sin and the State in Thailand* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 48. Supported by Asoke affiliates, he campaigned nationwide, organizing pro-life meetings on the position that according to Buddhism, life begins when an ovum mixes with sperm. In these terms, abortion breaks the first precept to not kill, and contradicts the second precept which prohibits theft because abortion “is tantamount to stealing the life of a baby.” *Bangkok Post*, May 25, 1988. After the bill legalizing abortion was passed in 1981, Chamlong resigned his position as Secretary General and he and his wife Sirilak continued to be active in the Asoke movement.

<sup>531</sup> On October 1st, 1985 Chamlong was promoted from Colonel to Major General but he decided instead to run for governor of Bangkok and resigned from the army two days later. Door-to-door canvassing, low-cost flyers, and dedicating himself to promises of anti-corruption, morality and sincerity were the basis of Chamlong’s campaign and in late 1985, Chamlong won the elections with double the votes of his nearest competitor and became the first independent candidate to be elected governor of the capital. A number of Asoke members formed the core of Chamlong’s support group and created the *Ruam Phalang* [United Force] organization.

<sup>532</sup> James LoGerfo, “Beyond Bangkok - The Provincial Middle Class in the 1992 Protests,” *Money & Power in Provincial Thailand*, ed. Ruth McVey (Copenhagen: NIAS Publishing, 2000), 227.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*

have been positive towards the various lucrative but shady business deals that the military politicians and the Sino-Thai business elite were involved in. In order to prevent Chamlong from taking to the national stage in politics, his Buddhist affiliations needed to be declared illegal.<sup>534</sup>

As such, many attacks on Chamlong highlighted his association with Asoke, or his austere lifestyle.<sup>535</sup> The 1988 federal elections brought disappointment for Asoke and Chamlong as they only won ten seats in Bangkok, and four in the provinces (3.9% of available seats) and only one Asoke member was elected.<sup>536</sup> Consequences from the involvement in the elections continued afterwards with criticisms from public figures such as the well-known monk Prayudh Payutto<sup>537</sup> and Major Anan Senakhan.<sup>538</sup> In September 1988 the Council of Elders reviewed the “Asoke case” and came to a consensus in asking Bodhirak and Asoke to conform to *Saṅgha* regulations.<sup>539</sup> Bodhirak and Asoke members declined to comply with these proposals and in

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<sup>534</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, “Santi Asoke Buddhism,” 34.

<sup>535</sup> The opposition displayed slogans which attacked Chamlong’s celibate lifestyle and association with Asoke saying, “Choose Phalang Santi Asoke to be MP’s and get a sexually abnormal [celibate] person for prime minister and Bodhirak Bhikkhu as head of a new Buddhist order” and five thousand booklets were circulated by the opposing Prachakorn Thai Party, headed by Samak Sundaravej in which Asoke, Bodhirak and their association with Phalang Dhamma were denounced. McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang and the New Thai Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 91. The President of the Parian Dhamma Association, Sangwian Poorahong pledged to work against Asoke after Bodhirak had announced support for Chamlong and the PDP. Sangwian included that he would request an interrogation by the police and interior ministry department to investigate Bodhirak and his followers for “allegedly wearing Buddhist robes without authorization” and with the fear that “other monks worldwide would also renounce the Ecclesiastical Council and stop shaving their eyebrows” and if Asoke is not stopped, “trouble will reign in Sanga society” or they “could become a threat to the stability of Buddhism in Thailand.” *Bangkok Post*, July 18, 1988.

<sup>536</sup> In 1990 Chamlong again won a landslide victory for governor of Bangkok and he would go on to receive the Magsaysay Award for Government Service in 1992 saying, “I never expected to become a reputable politician or to pursue popularity and fame. I work with the sense of responsibility of an ordinary man being a member of the community...to serve the public with great honesty and devotion in order to create a better society for the future.” “Chamlong Srimuang,” Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, <http://rmaward.asia/awardees/srimuang-chamlong>.

<sup>537</sup> After the polling closed for the 1988 elections, a publication was distributed by the well-known monk Prayudh Payutto called *Karani Santi Asoke* [The Santi Asoke Case] (Bangkok: Amarin, 1988). The book criticized Bodhirak and Asoke, their involvement in the PDP and political participation, and emphasized the importance of the existing *saṅgha* regulations. Olson mentions that there have been many monks who have been influenced by the publication in how they perceive Asoke and that it also “provided the major underlying research” against Bodhirak and Asoke. Grant Olson, “Introduction,” in *Buddhadhamma: Natural Laws and Values for Life*, by Phra Prayudh Payutto, ed. and trans. Grant Olson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>538</sup> Major Anan Senakhan, a police officer and former Thammayut monk initiated his first campaign against Asoke in 1982 when he was still ordained and known as Phra Anan Chayananto. Anan published a book through his Organization to Protect Buddhist Teachings of Thailand entitled, *Bodhirak – The Dangerous Prophet* [*Phothirak – Saatsadaa Mahaaphay*] where he attacked Bodhirak for divorcing himself from the *Saṅgha* and not conforming to traditional practice. An article on February 21st, 1982 in the *Bangkok Post* reported that Anan’s Organization to Protect Buddhist Teachings of Thailand would file charges with the Crime Suppression Division Police against Bodhirak and Asoke, “for illegally setting up a Buddhist centre, cheating the public and illegally using monks robes.” *Bangkok Post*, February 21, 1982. Continuing to voice his disapproval a few days later, Anan added that Bodhirak should also be arrested for “violating the Constitution” and “the Buddhist Order Act.” *Bangkok Post*, February 24, 1982.

<sup>539</sup> *Bangkok Post*, September 1, 1988. Various requirements were proposed to Bodhirak and the Asoke communities in order that charges not be pressed against them: Asoke/Bodhirak must firstly come under the control of the *Mahatherasamakhom* and must be legally registered with the Department of Religious Affairs, Bodhirak must stop criticizing the *Mahatherasamakhom*, and finally the group must discontinue their [subversive] activities.

May 1989 it was officially announced that the Council of Elders had ordered the defrocking of Bodhirak and his ordained disciples within seven days for “defying monastic discipline followed by mainstream Thai Buddhist monks.”<sup>540</sup> Bodhirak refused to disrobe, which resulted in another meeting of senior monks on June 7, where the allegations against Bodhirak were expanded.<sup>541</sup> Meanwhile, Bodhirak and the Asoke community, continued their daily activities with the addition of being observed by “hundreds of press photographers, TV-cameramen and journalists who were practically camping in the Santi Asoke compound.”<sup>542</sup> On June 9, Bodhirak agreed to change their monastic titles,<sup>543</sup> as well as their robe style and colour and to not identify or describe his “institutional activities” with the word “Buddha.”<sup>544</sup> In Thailand, it is illegal to wrongfully dress or use symbols (such as a monk’s bowl) to suggest being a monk, priest or novice of any religion and is punishable by imprisonment and/or a fine—this includes dressing like or imitating Buddhist monks without an ordination which is recognized by the ecclesiastic council. Conversely, it is also not permitted for fully ordained monks to wear white robes.<sup>545</sup> As explored throughout this chapter, monastic robe style and colour are highly charged with meaning in Thailand, as such, much of the discussion surrounding Bodhirak returns to the topic of his robes. The *Bangkok Post* reported a consensus stating that:

Bodhirak has taken into account the public interest by agreeing to change his saffron robe. Chaipak Siriwat confirmed that Bodhirak would no longer be a Buddhist monk now that he had shed the saffron robe and changed to wearing a ‘new long-sleeved uniform similar to the robes worn by Mahanayan or Annam sects in China, Tibet and Mongolia.’<sup>546</sup>

Bodhirak further stated that, “We [Asoke] have no attachment towards uniform or name” and the council had no objection to the new uniform because they would no longer be Buddhist

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Further elaborated upon in Apinya, “Buddhist Reform Movements in Contemporary Thai Urban Context,” 180–5.  
<sup>540</sup> *Bangkok Post*, May 30, 1989. According to the *Bangkok Post*, on May 31, Bodhirak responded by saying that the ecclesiastical council’s action was “severe and provocative, but that he and his group would show mercy towards the council because it does not know what it is doing.” Bodhirak continued saying, “that monks who pass judgement should be monks who do not break the monastic code of conduct imposed by the Buddha,” because, “according to Buddhist law, monks with sins cannot judge other monks,” and then continued to directly question how many of the senior monks in the ecclesiastical council practice all the precepts. *Bangkok Post*, May 31, 1989.

<sup>541</sup> Charges included: violation of Buddhist disciplines; declaration of opposition to the Buddhist disciplines that prohibit monks from claiming superiority; violation of the country’s laws; subversion of Buddhism and national security; declaring involvement in politics publicly; distortion of Buddhist disciplines; declaring his independence from the Thai *saṅgha*. *Bangkok Post*, July 7, 1989.

<sup>542</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 70.

<sup>543</sup> Bodhirak agreed to not use the title *phra* (venerable) which all Buddhist monks in Thailand use and instead refer to themselves as *samana*, a Pāli term for ascetic monks though quite close to *samanen*, the Thai word for novice.

<sup>544</sup> Poompanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke-Part II*, 23.

<sup>545</sup> “As white is a standard color for lay people’s garments, and as a bhikkhu is forbidden from dressing like a lay person, white robes are forbidden as well.” Thanissaro, *The Buddhist Monastic Code II*, 25.

<sup>546</sup> *Bangkok Post*, June 10, 1989.

monks.<sup>547</sup> The Asoke monastics had changed their robe colour and applied for ID cards with their original lay names, however these measures proved unsuccessful.<sup>548</sup> On June 19, 1989, after building tensions and various exchanges between Asoke, Thai authorities, and the ecclesiastic council, Bodhirak was detained and defrocked, having his dark brown robe exchanged with a white one to further represent his removal from the *saṅgha* and back to the status of a layman.<sup>549</sup> This change in attire was reported to have caused “shock and confusion” among the Asoke members.<sup>550</sup> After three days in detention, Bodhirak was released on bail.<sup>551</sup>

Police investigations were conducted over the next two months and on August 8, Bodhirak was again arrested, this time with all 106 Asoke monastics. According to Heikkilä-Horn, the *samanas* and *sikkhamats* changed into black sarongs “as a rumour was circulating that the change of the colour of their sarong would reduce the charges.”<sup>552</sup> Twenty-six *samanas* were released because they had been previously ordained within mainstream monasteries before joining Asoke; the remaining monastics (including all twenty *sikkhamats*) were issued white robes while in custody to visually represent the invalidity of their ordinations. Bodhirak, the *samanas* and *sikkhamats* were detained overnight and then released on bail.<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

<sup>548</sup> There was hope that applying for ID cards would settle the dispute because of an official document from the late 19th century signed by the Supreme Patriarch which states when the title “Mr.” is used before a monk’s name, it implies that he has left monkhood. Poompanna, *Insight into Santi Asoke-Part II*, 24. With the newly issued temporary identity card in the name of Rak Rakpong, the *Bangkok Post* printed the headline *Santi Asoke Leader is Now a Layman* and Chaipak Siriwat, secretary to the Minister of Education stated that “Bodhirak’s application for an ID card was sufficient to signify departure from the monkhood and he hoped the Ecclesiastical Council would be satisfied.” *Bangkok Post*, June 16, 1989.

<sup>549</sup> Bodhirak was officially charged with violating Article 27 of the *Saṅgha Act* of 1962 in failing to disrobe within seven days of receiving the order from the Council of Elders, which has criminal charges of up to six months in prison. *Bangkok Post*, June 20, 1989.

<sup>550</sup> According to Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 71.

<sup>551</sup> *Bangkok Post*, June 22, 1989. This *Bangkok Post* article further mentions that the police refused to grant bail to Bodhirak because his release “could cause confusion and might trigger a confrontation between mainstream Buddhists and Santi Asoke followers,” which prompted a response letter from the Civil Liberties Union president, Professor Samphan Hunpayon who “claimed the reasons for the police denying bail to Bodhirak were unconstitutional and violated the UN Human Rights Charter,” and that “Bodhirak should be fairly treated and granted bail like other suspects facing similar penalties.” The Union also called on Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhaven to revoke the banning of radio and television news reports saying, “the order denied the people of their basic right to be informed and was also unconstitutional, such an order should not be issued under a democratic system.” On the day of Bodhirak’s release, a renowned human rights lawyer, Thongbai Thongpao, agreed to defend the Asoke leader. For further reflections on Asoke and human rights see, Martin Seeger, “Theravada Buddhism and Human Rights: Perspectives from Thai Buddhism,” in *Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights: Dissonances and Resonances*, eds. Carmen Meinert and Hans-Bernd Zöllner (Bielefeld: Transcript Publishers, 2010), 63–92.

<sup>552</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 70.

<sup>553</sup> Interestingly, the 2008 U.S. “Human Rights Report: Thailand” from the *Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor* report included a small segment on Asoke under “Freedom of Religion” stating that “Followers of the Santi Asoke sect of Buddhism were unable legally to refer to themselves as Buddhists because of theological disagreements with the Sangha Council, but they were able to practice their faith without restriction.” “Human Rights Report: Thailand,” *Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor*, February 25, 2009, <http://go.usa.gov/3pEyJ>.

After the arrests, court cases drew out through the 1990s, lasting nearly seven years and during this time, “there was plenty of confusion of who was and who was not accused,” though since the *sikkhamats* only live by 10 precepts and are not fully ordained *bhikkhunīs*, charges against them were dropped.<sup>554</sup> Heikkilä-Horn further noted that “since their arrest, the Asoke monastics were required to wear a white robe to signify having lay status, however in 1998 after the two-year period of suspended sentence was over they switched back to brown robes.”<sup>555</sup> After this probation period, the *sikkhamats* chose to change the colour and style of their robes and designed a new uniform for themselves, which they still wear.<sup>556</sup>

As we can see through this brief discussion, the importance of monastic robe colour and style regularly resurface—especially when robes differ to the mainstream *saṅgha*. Asoke has used a dark brown robe colour and alternative style to differentiate themselves as separate from the mainstream *saṅgha*, and as such, this change in “uniform” also links them aesthetically as a group, contributing to their distinct material culture. As political involvement and the legal action against Asoke has directly influenced their aesthetic, the current robes have developed from a variety of beliefs and interactions. This series of events further shows how loaded with meaning and significance saffron robes are within Thailand, and the importance of differentiating between white as “lay” and saffron as “ordained.” Within Asoke, the white/saffron, lay/ordained juxtaposition does not apply in the same way it does in mainstream contexts, as most Asoke members wear blue, since white is seen as impractical for the Asoke lifestyle. Sikkhamat Boonjin further described that white is inappropriate for female renunciants and lay persons in Asoke as it represents cleanliness and is a “fancy, pretty colour” also associated with Brahmanism.<sup>557</sup>

A series of transformations signal increased renunciation and not all members who wear monastic-looking attire and don a shaven head are fully ordained—some are on the path towards ordination, and others, such as *upasikas*, are devout lay persons.<sup>558</sup> Another unique feature within Asoke is how the visual progression and aesthetic of an Asoke monastic is created, and thus warrants a short investigation. There is a long process towards ordination, as is described in Chapter 3.2.1, and visual markers are used to represent each stage. Having specific changes in appearance further reinforces the power of visual cues to identify how

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<sup>554</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, “Santi Asoke Buddhism,” 34.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid. Interestingly, Heikkilä-Horn mentioned previously that the monastics were “forced to wear white robes above their brown clothes in order to indicate that they are mere laypeople in the Buddhist hierarchy of Thailand.” Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 189.

<sup>556</sup> Discussed further in Chapter 3.3.3.

<sup>557</sup> Personal communication with Sikkhamat Boonjin, Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 2014.

<sup>558</sup> *Upasikas* are further considered in Chapter 3.4.

certain members are recognized and their roles within the community. A shift of outward appearance and an arguably drastic change such as shaving one's head or wearing an unfamiliar kind of clothing also alters the aesthetic experience of the aspirant. This is further important in the light of "enclothed cognition" where wearing a particular kind of symbolically potent clothing can cause "people to 'embody' the clothing and its symbolic meaning."<sup>559</sup> This can shape the wearers perception, which is especially relevant when undergoing these changes towards increased renunciation, as the clothing and shaving of hair may also play a role in the upholding and embodying of these messages. This returns us to concepts of using "physiomoral markers of worth," as a member changes their clothing, hair, and physical movements in progressing toward ordination.<sup>560</sup> Each stage is signaled by a change in physiomoral markers, which represent the increased renunciation of the aspirant—this is relevant for both the aspirant and the community around them, as the connection between personal identity, physical appearance, and position within the group changes.

For the first stage towards ordination, a *pa* will change out of the standard blue Asoke "uniform" and begin to wear brown tones—a brown sarong and lighter blouse for the female aspirants, and brown pants and tunic for the male aspirants. As previously discussed, the use of brown is important because it signals the colour of a renunciant, however at this stage, the style of clothing stays similar to the aspirant's previous lay clothes. It is not a requirement to shave one's head at this stage, however hair must be shorter than ten centimetres, though lay Asoke members generally have short hairstyles.<sup>561</sup>

When the *pa* progresses to living as a *krak* (female) or *nak* (male), hair must be renounced and shaven regularly. Along with the visual distinction of a shaved head, the *krak* may also wear a brown shawl for more formal settings and the *nak*'s uniform stays similar, with a slight variation of the tunic. The shaving of the head and use of outer robes signal again a progression towards a more monastic appearance and this physiomorality begins to shape the aspirant's lifestyle further as they now begin integrating the ritual of head shaving and learn to wrap and wear their shawl. Wearing a shawl for meals, ceremonies and other important events also begins to mirror the use of robes by monastics. Between the shaved head and outer robe, the aspirants begin to visually occupy a space bridging the lay and monastic community.

For a woman, living as a *krak* is the last stage before ordaining as a *sikkhamat*. If all requirements are met, an ordination ceremony takes place where the *krak* undertakes the ten

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<sup>559</sup> Adam and Galinsky, "Enclothed Cognition," 919.

<sup>560</sup> Mroziak, *Virtuous Bodies*, 69.

<sup>561</sup> Monastic hair is discussed further in Chapter 3.3.2 and the hair of lay members is explored Chapter 3.4.

precepts and is given robes and a bowl to become a *sikkhamat*. The robes she receives are brown with a grey outer robe and are further discussed in Chapter 3.3.3. This last shift in colour and style is accompanied by learning to how appropriately fold, wrap and wear the robes which also influences the physiomorality of the *sikkhamat*, in that the new *sikkhamat* would begin to interact with her robes in a way that the aspirants did not. As the theory of “enclothed cognition” suggests, these aesthetic changes would also impact the wearer’s mental perception as well.

Men living as a *nak* will alter their attire when they progress to living as a *samanutthet*, which is the last stage before full ordination. The *samanutthet* is distinguished by his white outer robe worn during more formal occasions, as his long brown tunic and a brown sarong are similar to the *samanas*.<sup>562</sup> When not wearing the outer robe, a stripe on the collar of his tunic sets him apart from the *samanas*. Again, this change of clothing style signals a movement towards monkhood and a *samanutthet* without the white outer robe is nearly indistinguishable to the fully ordained *samanas*. Because of this transition, persons in and outside of the community will begin to interact with the novice differently, as they are gestured to with increased respect by lay persons and the *sikkhamats* also bow to the *samanutthets*. Further, the novices join the *samanas* in proximity, sitting next to them on a raised platform for meals and sermons. Emphasis is placed on the importance of well-folded and well-worn robes, and that the mendicant has an orderly and clean appearance—which the *samanutthet* can learn in this stage due to having the same style of robe as the *samanas*, while remaining distinct because of their white outer robe. Upon completing all requirements, an ordination ceremony will take place where the *samana* receives his robes and bowl and will begin following the 227 rules of the monastic code of conduct. These changes in attire for both *sikkhamats* and *samanas* represent increased renunciation with each step, which signals their physiomorality and level of dedication to their spiritual path and the Asoke community. In this way, attire and visual cues (such as head shaving) represent and communicate virtuousness, and give the monastics a certain authority, respect, and position within the community.

Robes for the *samanas* consist of an *angsa*, (one-shouldered vest/undershirt fastened often with ties at the waist and is worn under the outer robes), *antaravāsaka* (inner robe,

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<sup>562</sup> As Asoke is strictly sex-segregated, and there are very few *samanutthets*, I had no contact to male novices and was unable to interview any. I had the impression that the Asoke members who were helping me organize interviews believed that it would be inappropriate for me to interview a novice as they would not know as much as the *samanas* and me being a western woman may have played a role as well. This section is based mainly on discussions with lay members, *sikkhamats* and observing the few *samanutthets* I saw—according to interviews there were only five novices at the time of my research (three in Santi Asoke, one in Pathom Asoke and two in Ratchathani Asoke). Once novices ordain, they spend their first few years at Lana Asoke, Phu Pha Fa Nam in Chiang Mai.

covering the lower half of the body), *uttarāsaṅga* (which wraps around the body and either leaves the right shoulder bare or covers both), and the *saṅghāṭī* (outer robe folded across the left shoulder, or used for warmth). The *samanas* will wear a different combination of robes depending on the occasion—for receiving alms, the *uttarāsaṅga* is wrapped around the body covering both shoulders (Figure 3.3), and for festivals, sermons, or group photos, the right shoulder is bare (Figure 3.1 and 3.2). During informal activities within the community, such as working and cleaning, the *angsa* and *antaravāsaka* are worn (Figure 3.4) or in winter months long-sleeved tunics (Figure 3.5), and other items such as socks are also worn for warmth. As mentioned above, robes worn by *samanas* are often made of solid panels of fabric rather than the typical patchwork/rice paddy pattern.

*Sikkhamats* wear a variation of the *samana*'s robes, however instead of a *uttarāsaṅga*, they wear a long-sleeved tunic. A communal decision was made by the *sikkhamats* as to what style and colour of robe they would adopt after the probation period of wearing white as was ordered by the court cases in the 1990s. *Sikkhamats* explained in interviews that their brown tunics were designed to be an amalgamation of uniforms similar to the robes worn in China, Tibet, and Mongolia, as well as incorporating Indian elements. The upper garment is wrist and knee-length, has an approximately 4cm wide collar which folds across the chest and ties on the left side to secure it and has large slits in the lower side seams for ease of movement. The lower inner robe is a simple brown ankle-length sarong. The outer robe or *saṅghāṭī* is a single piece of grey double-layered fabric with a wide border. Apparently, there were four “appropriate” colours for monastics that the *sikkhamats* chose from after the court cases (including a light yellow or white) however grey was chosen because it looks “humble” and it distinguishes them visually from *mae chis*.<sup>563</sup> The finished ensemble is a modest, functional and monastic-looking set of robes. During my fieldwork, as the communities are sex segregated, I spent the majority of my time with lay women and *sikkhamats* and was able to observe how the *sikkhamats* engaged with their robes. For informal situations (around the community, involved with work or in their personal areas) they do not wear their outer robe wrapped around them; however during alms rounds, while in public, teaching, during their daily meal, giving *Dhamma* talks, and festivals, the outer robe is neatly folded and wrapped to cover their left arm, torso, and legs (Figure 3.8). The *sikkhamats* would fold and arrange their robes generally in privacy so that they already looked well composed and orderly, and in interviews, many of the *sikkhamats* mentioned the importance of a “proper” monastic appearance.

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<sup>563</sup> Personal communication with Sikkhamat Boonjin in Santi Asoke, January 2014.

This exploration has endeavoured to show the complex layers of communication and symbolism of monastic robes and how Asoke has used this system to develop a particular image of themselves. Lee notes that “the Thai people find color identification through conscious color symbolism” and further that, “human color perception has led to a great cultural variety of color interpretations and applications worldwide, grown from habitual practice towards conscious well-known patterns of identity.”<sup>564</sup> As we can see through the conscious use of colour by Bodhirak and Asoke, they have used this aspect of collective symbolism to set themselves apart from the mainstream *saṅgha* and also with the aim of legitimizing their piousness through visual association with the Thai Forest Tradition. As explored above, since Asoke’s inception, the choice to visually distinguish themselves has played a part in the group being seen as subversive, and this along with other factors, namely their political involvement, has led to another shift in appearance. Further, the use of white to denote lay status has been used during the detentions, trial, and probation period to signal the invalidation of the group. Monastic robes are a central aspect of Buddhist material culture and are potent signals of piousness, morality, and the sacred which further divide lay and monastic communities. Robes worn in Asoke do not only separate monastic from lay clothing, but also create a visual distinction to the mainstream *saṅgha* and have helped create a material culture specific to the group.



**Figure 3.1** *Cropped image of Asoke samanās and sikkhamatās at an annual Pluksek festival, 1989.*<sup>565</sup>  
Printed with permission from Sikkhamat Boonjin’s personal photo archives.

<sup>564</sup> Tien-Rein Lee, “The Color We Use in Our Daily Life - Communicating with Color” (Paper presented at the Asia Color Association Conference, Thanyaburi, Thailand, December 11–14, 2013), 24–5.

<sup>565</sup> “*Pluksek*” typically refers to the consecration of amulets and similar items, however Asoke uses the term to refer to their rejection of magical practices and instead imbuing themselves with spiritual intentions.



*Figure 3.2 Bodhirak in Sali Asoke, 2013.*



*Figure 3.3 Samana receiving food in Sali Asoke, 2013.*



*Figure 3.4 Samana working at the publishing house in Santi Asoke, 2013.*



*Figure 3.5 Samana supervising students at a garden project outside of Nakhon Pathom, 2014.*



**Figure 3.6** Sikkhamat with her bowl, Ratchathani Asoke, 2014.



**Figure 3.7** Sikkhamat on a winter morning, Ratchathani Asoke, 2014.



**Figure 3.8** Sikkhamat with formally wrapped outer robe, Ratchathani Asoke, 2014.

### 3.3.2 Renouncing Hair

Hair is an important cultural marker (influenced by length and style, among other factors) and has a wide range of personal and social communications. Within the monastic context, the shaven head and face of the mendicant, along with their robes, are the primary symbols that signal their association with the *saṅgha*. As such, a discussion of hair again returns us to the importance of physiomoral markers in relation to renunciation and the bodies of monastics.<sup>566</sup> This section explores the relationships and meanings behind not only the shaved head of monastics, but the relevance of the unshaved eyebrows of Asoke renunciants.

Olivelle examines hair as a *condensed symbol*: “a symbol so powerful that it encapsulates all the diverse aspects of the symbolized, which under normal circumstances would require separate symbolic expressions.”<sup>567</sup> In the context of renunciation, the permanent removal of hair or “ascetic separation” can be seen as a condensed symbol as it links the mendicants to a particular group and practices, and removes them from secular freedoms.<sup>568</sup> The shaving of hair is an important aspect of the ordination ceremony and it signals the shift

<sup>566</sup> Suzanne Mroczek, *Virtuous Bodies*, 69.

<sup>567</sup> Olivelle gives further examples of “condensed symbols” such as national anthems, flags or practices that “signify the essence” of a certain group. Patrick Olivelle, “Hair and Society: Social Significance of Hair in South Asian Traditions,” in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, eds. Alf Hiltebeitel and Barbara Miller (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 40–1.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–1.

away from lay life while binding them to the monastic community, and is also closely related to sexuality and celibacy.<sup>569</sup>

Not just ascetics, but all people ritually shaven are forbidden to engage in sex. For most this is a temporary condition required by a rite of passage or necessitated by ritual pollution, but for the ascetic (and often also for the widow) it is permanent, and therein lies the difference between ascetic and other forms of ritual shaving. Social control, after all, is primarily sexual control, and the controlled hair of social individuals symbolizes their participation in the socially sanctioned structures for sexual expression, especially marriage. Removal of hair separates the individual from that structure and from the legitimate exercise of sexual activity.<sup>570</sup>

Keyes (who is agreeing with Tambiah in this context) posits that the shaving of the head at the beginning of an ordination ceremony ritually symbolizes the renunciation of not only the lay life, but specifically male sexuality.<sup>571</sup> Keyes further suggests that these rituals signal:

(primarily to the initiates themselves) a break with the unconscious maleness of childhood and the beginning of a self-consciousness about male sexuality... The act of shaving the head once a month symbolizes a renewal of one's commitment to the discipline of the sangha. Just as one's hair can regrow, so can one's sexual desire reemerge.<sup>572</sup>

Themes of sexuality also merge with the role hair plays as symbol of sensuality, especially as it is one of the most attractive or arousing aspects of a woman's appearance. Lang disagrees with Obeyesekere's position that, "the primary psychological meaning of the symbol of a shaven head is castration; its further cultural meaning is chastity; its extended message is renunciation," because unlike castration, hair continues to regrow.<sup>573</sup> Lang sees hair instead as a "secular symbol of sexual attractiveness, and the nun by shaving off her hair renders herself sexually unattractive and unavailable, thus removing herself as a potential threat to her male counterpart's spiritual practice."<sup>574</sup> The nun in this case is withdrawing from being sexually available and attractive for the sake of the monks around her; as women (and their hair) are deeply tied with sensuality and beauty in secular life, hair shaving can be a challenging personal

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<sup>569</sup> Another interesting connection to permanent ascetic separation is the relationship to food as Olivelle notes, "People who are either in a permanent or a prolonged state of ritual separation, including ascetics, vedic students, widows, and criminals, do not own food; they have to obtain their food from people in society. During shorter periods of separation, people either fast or eat food cooked and given to them by people within society. There is a parallel between the restrictions with regard to food and sex, both being derived from their removal from social structures and roles." Patrick Olivelle, "Hair and Society," 22.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid., 20–1.

<sup>571</sup> Charles Keyes, "Ambiguous Gender: Male Initiation in a Northern Thai Buddhist Society," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, eds. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon, 1986), 73.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid.

<sup>573</sup> Karen Christina Lang, "Shaven Heads and Loose Hair: Buddhist Attitudes toward Hair and Sexuality," in *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, eds. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 46.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

renunciation as well. In Thailand, hair is a significant facet of beauty and femininity and for many Thai women this is a core aspect of their appearance, and as such, the removal of a woman's hair can be a drastic and emotional undertaking.

First, mothers and other family members cut off long wisps of hair. Next they chop it as short as the scissors will manage. And then come the razors. White clad 'Mae Chi' laywomen bow over the heads of the nuns-to-be, softly working from front to neck, from side to side and behind ears until there is nothing black left. They silently scrape eyebrows, dab off occasional drops of blood, wipe off soap from wet faces – and some tears, too.<sup>575</sup>

Renouncing hair and beauty are common themes for lay and ordained women in and outside of Asoke. The well-known Thai *bhikkhunī* and scholar Dhammananda is quoted as saying, "The hair is the beauty of the woman. But now we let go of the beauty."<sup>576</sup> These words were often mirrored in Asoke, particularly by lay women and *sikkhamats* when discussing beauty, or physical appearances. In this light, Sikkhamat Chinda stated that when one follows a spiritual path, they will see the meaninglessness in striving towards beauty and instead, they will see the spiritual path as "more precious or valuable than that" and then, "you understand, you know [the importance] to study on the spiritual path and be with spiritual path and manage the spiritual path – it is much, much better."<sup>577</sup> These examples again demonstrate how hair is a multi-faceted condensed symbol that connects beauty, sexuality, ritual, and renunciation. Adding to this plethora of meaning, another aspect of hair relevant to monasticism is the contemplation on the repulsiveness the body.

One of the two commonly prescribed meditations to overcome lust is to reflect on the repulsiveness of the body, where a mendicant will contemplate the thirty-two parts of the body, beginning with "head hairs" and "body hairs."<sup>578</sup> Hildebeitel uses Buddhaghosa's commentary on this meditation in the "The Path of Purification" (*Visuddhimagga*) to examine the relationship to hair when discussing mindfulness of the body and repulsiveness.<sup>579</sup> Hildebeitel connects Buddhaghosa's descriptions of hair as having shock value (which can aid introspection) and that it is analogous with plant life—which is then contextualized to represent the repulsive, and because head hair is proximate with all other aspects of the body, this disgust

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<sup>575</sup> Katja Dombrowski, "Buddhist Nuns in Thailand: Fighting for Equality," *Awaken*, February 10, 2013, <http://www.awaken.com/2013/02/buddhist-nuns-in-thailand-fighting-for-equality>.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid.

<sup>577</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Chinda, Santi Asoke, March 9, 2013.

<sup>578</sup> The second kind of contemplation on repulsiveness refers to cemetery meditations.

<sup>579</sup> "The Path of Purification" written around the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Sri Lanka is one of the most important Theravāda texts outside the *Tipiṭaka*.

reaches to not only other parts of the physical self, but the entire surrounding and habitat.<sup>580</sup>

Through this, Hildebeitel concludes that:

Buddhaghosa is thus troping with hair. That he does so very well is what makes his discussion theoretically interesting, even though he begins with a foregone conclusion: hair is repulsive. What is interesting lies not in this conclusion, which is rather forced, but in his “thick description,” his metaphorical lenses, and his further troping through synecdoche, metonymy, and probably irony.<sup>581</sup>

Hildebeitel concludes by saying that “what is further instructive is that such troping with hair is rather ordinary,” in that cultures and even scholars engage in finding these reoccurring themes with this common yet complex subject.<sup>582</sup> As such, the universal themes of hair touch on broader tropes, or metaphorical associations, as seen through the many meanings and signals especially in relation to gender and renunciation, and also that the contemplation of hair is further specifically used in a response to overcoming lust in a monastic context.

This short introduction to some of the implications of permanent ascetic hair separation attempts at further contextualizing and reflecting on the bodies of the monastics in Asoke. All monastics in Thailand shave their hair regularly, as do Asoke monastics. One aspect of hair where the Asoke monastics are visually distinguished is due to their unshaven eyebrows. Though a topic such as eyebrows may sound seemingly unimportant and superficial, within the Thai monastic context, it becomes a relevant and obvious difference. Sikkhamat Rinpah explains that Thai monks apparently shave their eyebrows due to a more recent historical event rather than it being scripturally dictated:

Lord Buddha said you have to shave your hair, beard and moustache...because, if not, your hair will get longer and longer...but, your eyebrows will never grow longer than this [gestures to her eyebrows]. That is reasonable—the Lord Buddha never does anything unreasonable. But then why do Thai monks shave their eyebrows? Because in Ancient times, Ayutthaya was the capital of Thailand—the Burmese, enemies of Thailand, [laughs] came to Thailand to fight in Ayutthaya. They sent people who snuck into Thailand wearing robes like Thai monks. So, we know this, and the Thai monks said if you are a Thai monk, shave your eyebrows so we can catch the Burmese monks...so after that the Thai monks have no eyebrows...now only monks in Thailand have shaved eyebrows.<sup>583</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> Alf Hildebeitel, “Introduction: Hair Tropes,” in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, eds. Alf Hildebeitel and Barbara Miller (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 3–5.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>583</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Rinpah at Sali Asoke, Phai Sali, March 1, 2013. Lehr also reports this commonly told reason of why monks in Thailand shave their eyebrows stating that “this non-doctrinal habit was introduced during one of those wars (it is difficult to establish with any degree of precision which one) in order to better tell the ‘good’ Thai monks from the spying ‘bad’ Burmese monks.” Peter Lehr, “It Is Time to Arm Thai Buddhists,” in *Militant Buddhism the Rise of Religious Violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand*, ed. Peter Lehr (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 198. His only two sources for this however are from personal accounts of westerners who had ordained in Thailand: Phra Peter Pannapadipo, *Phra Farang: An English Monk in Thailand*

Though a simple gesture, Asoke monastics keeping their eyebrows is another aspect of their appearance that further separates them from members of the Thai *saṅgha*. The practice of the Asoke monastics growing out their eyebrows has not gone unnoticed and has been a point of criticism against them as well. In 1988, Sangwian Poorahong, the President of the Parian Dhamma Association, criticized Asoke monks because they, “did not shave their eyebrows and had renounced the Ecclesiastical Council,” with the fear that, “other monks worldwide would also renounce the Ecclesiastical Council and stop shaving their eyebrows,” and if Asoke is not stopped, “trouble will reign in Sanga society.”<sup>584</sup> This is an interesting reflection when comparing unshaven eyebrows to renouncing the Council of Elders—they are of seemingly unequal gravity and yet, the focus of Sangwian’s comment points to the importance of visual conformity. The devout Asoke member and former Governor of Bangkok, Chamlong defended the appearance of Asoke monastics by saying, “the centre follows the teachings of the Buddha and is in no way out of line,” and that, “people who wonder why the monks at the centre did not shave their eyebrows, wear robes of a different colour and eat no meat should go there and make up their own mind.”<sup>585</sup>

Another complaint was made to police in 2006 from a group called the *Buddhist Network* stating that Bodhirak was imitating a Buddhist monk—to which Bodhirak replied, “I have changed the colour of my robe and stopped shaving my eyebrows. So, I don’t have anything more to say and it’s up to them if they still view me as a monk impersonator.”<sup>586</sup> This is an interesting comment since it implies that Bodhirak and Asoke monastics stopped shaving their eyebrows to further distinguish themselves from the Thai *saṅgha* rather than because of their own conviction to adhere to the scriptural basis. Regardless of the original intent, unshaven eyebrows fulfill a double purpose: to express Asoke’s dedication to what they see as a more scripturally based “original Buddhism,” and also to visually distinguish themselves from the members of the Thai *saṅgha*. This is again illustrating the nuances and importance of the appearance of monastics within Thailand and shows how Asoke aims to use their eyebrows to further validate their group in connecting them with what they believe to be an “original” concept of Buddhism, while pointing to mainstream monastics as practicing an “inauthentic” and “distorted” version. The following passage further illustrates the creation of communities

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(London: Arrow Books, 2005); Palmisano, “How to Become a Thai Monk: Preparation, Part 2,” Thai Language Blog, October 26, 2013, <https://blogs.transparent.com/thai/how-to-become-a-thai-monk-preparation-part-2>. Even if this reasoning of why monks shave their eyebrows is not historically factual, it still shapes and plays a role in the contemporary relationship to this practice.

<sup>584</sup> *Bangkok Post*, July 18, 1988.

<sup>585</sup> *Bangkok Post*, August 19, 1988.

<sup>586</sup> Ampa Santimatnedol, “Thailand: Santi Asoke Leader Faces Complaint,” *Bangkok Post*, March 9, 2006.

through ritual shaving, and though it refers specifically only to head hair, the use of eyebrows in Asoke is also applicable in regard to the delineation of communities:

Once a particular social meaning has been assigned to a form of hair manipulation within a specific institutional or ritual setting — shaving as ascetic separation, for example — that same symbol may acquire new meanings for the participants, meanings that may go beyond, and thereby transform the earlier meaning. Thus ascetic shaving has acquired the meaning of “belonging” to a particular community as opposed to separation from society...In this way hair becomes a symbol that demarcates new boundaries.<sup>587</sup>

We can see that the meaning behind eyebrow shaving as a symbol has shifted in a Thai monastic context (potentially through the account described above or similar historical circumstances), because of this, the newly acquired meaning behind eyebrow shaving is now the norm in Thailand. Asoke demarcates new group boundaries through rejecting this aspect of contemporary Thai monasticism. Further, because Seneviratne reported that some Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka were allowing their hair to grow to the “length of a crew cut” to signal their “independence from monastic authority and their modernist outlook,” Olivelle argues that, “hair thus remains both a means of strong institutional control and an instrument of liberation from and critique of social and institutional controls.”<sup>588</sup> As we can see, hair is loaded with meaning and touches on various central tenants of monastic belief and practice including the relationship to beauty, gender, sexuality, and the body in regard to the “repulsive” aspects of hair as well as the separation from secular life. In the case of Asoke, hair is also being used to (1) impart messages that reaffirm their beliefs, (2) form a distinct aesthetic and physiomoral feature of the group (3) criticize the practices of non-Asoke monastics to further aim at legitimizing the “authenticity” of their interpretation and implementation of Buddhism.

### 3.3.3 Brown-Robed Sikkhamats

The previous two sub-chapters have explored the main signifiers relating to monastic aesthetics in Asoke. This chapter examines the appearance of the *sikkhamats* and how it relates to their unique contribution to the development of new systems which allow women to have active and respected roles in monastic communities in Thailand.

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<sup>587</sup> Olivelle, “Hair and Society,” 40.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid., 41. In a similar light, however much different context, the shaving of one’s hair in Confucian China was in conflict with the belief that the body was given from one’s parents and as such, to willingly shave one’s hair, “could be viewed as an act of filial disrespect.” Ann Heirman and Mathieu Torck, *A Pure Mind in a Clean Body: Bodily Care in the Buddhist Monasteries of Ancient India and China* (Gent: Ginko Academic Press, 2012), 19. This again shows the potential for hair in certain cultural contexts to be used as a method of defying societal structures or beliefs—in one case, by monastics growing their hair, and in another, through shaving it.

Before much discussion had taken place on the status of women monastics in Thailand, Bodhirak began creating a new category of female clergy by ordaining *sikkhamats* in the mid-1970s.<sup>589</sup> Upon ordination, the *sikkhamats* would undertake ten precepts and were given dark brown robes that matched their male counterparts, with the exception of having long sleeves and an outer robe of a lighter brown/ochre colour. Herein lies an interesting development when considering the significance of a small group of women wearing robes which signify something other than a lay status, and who have active roles within their communities and lifestyles that mirror their male counterparts.

Bodhirak emphasizes the importance of having a four-fold *saṅgha*—with male and female clergy, lay women and lay men. The necessity of a four-fold *saṅgha* was often cited by lay members as well, saying that Buddhism without female clergy is “unbalanced” or “incomplete” because, according to the canonical texts, it is the system that the Buddha designed. This point is used as a critique of the Thai *saṅgha* as Asoke sees their group as more “authentic” because they believe that they follow a closer community structure as described in the Pāli Canon. It seems to be a non-issue that the *sikkhamats* do not fulfill the role of the *bhikkhunī*, as it is more important that they are renunciants in appearance, action, and role within the community. The significance of the visual representation of female clergy is further apparent in the depiction of the four-fold *saṅgha* in artworks within Asoke communities.<sup>590</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 3.1.1, a distinctive transition occurred when the previously white-clad renunciants (*dasa sil mātās* in Sri Lanka and *thilashin* in Burma) changed to coloured robes—signaling their status as a member of the clergy, rather than a pious lay person. This visual cue distinguishes them from lay practitioners, and as a physiomoral marker, represents a more serious, dedicated practice. The “symbolic juxtaposition” of female renunciants wearing coloured robes against the backdrop of saffron/ochre clad monks allows nuns who are not fully ordained as a *bhikkhunī* to be perceived differently by lay persons, and their male counterparts.<sup>591</sup> The *sikkhamats* present an unusual case, for a variety of reasons, as the following section outlines.

As explained previously, the only socially acceptable form of renunciation for women in Thailand is to be ordained as a white-clad *mae chi*, and the few *bhikkhunīs* in Thailand face

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<sup>589</sup> The *sikkhamats* had been previously called *chikrak* and then later *maenen*. *Maenen* translates to Novice-Mother and according to Sikkhamat Boonjin, they chose to change the name because critics of Asoke had said something to the effect of “If these are Novice-Mothers, where are their Novice-Children?” and changing the name also further distanced and differentiated them to *mae chis*. Interview with Sikkhamat Boonjin, Santi Asoke, January 6, 2014.

<sup>590</sup> Further discussion of artwork depicting the four-fold *saṅgha* takes place in Chapter 4.3.2.

<sup>591</sup> To borrow the term from Jordt, “Bhikkhuni, Thilashin, Mae-chii,” 37.

a variety of difficulties, in part due to their visual representation as fully ordained monastics.<sup>592</sup> As considered in Chapter 3.3.1, female clergy wearing the non-white robes of a renunciate is an important aspect of both Asoke and *sikkhamat* identity. Wearing white, as discussed above, signals lay status and it is significant that the *sikkhamats* visually represent their position in the community as a renunciate.<sup>593</sup> These are not the only reasons white is not worn in Asoke, however. Sikkhamat Boonjin states that white is not worn in Asoke as it is associated with Brahmanism and Asoke does not see it as a Buddhist colour.<sup>594</sup> This comment may be connected to canonical references which describe lay person who wear white as *brahmacāri* which “might be understood to be celibate householders or householders who follow the Brahma (religious) path (or both).”<sup>595</sup> The relationship of white cloth to Brahmanism is also noted by Lefferts in a discussion with Phra Phanomsak (a monk who practiced natural medicine at Wat Naakkhawichai in northeastern Thailand): “he wrapped this medicine in white cloth because

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<sup>592</sup> Literature on the legitimacy of *bhikkhunī* ordinations and controversies in Thailand includes: Ayako Itoh, “The Emergence of the Bhikkhunī-Saṅgha in Thailand: Contexts, Strategies and Challenges” (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2013); Tomomi Ito, “Questions of Ordination Legitimacy for Newly Ordained Theravāda Bhikkhunī in Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43 (2012): 55–76; Martin Seeger, “Theravada Buddhism and Human Rights: Perspectives from Thai Buddhism,” in *Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights: Dissonances and Resonances*, eds. Carmen Meinert and Hans-Bernd Zöllner (Bielefeld: Transcript Publishers, 2010), 63–92; Martin Seeger, “The Bhikkhuni-Ordination Controversy in Thailand,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 29 (2006 [2008]): 155–83; Varaporn Chamsanit, “Reconnecting the Lost Lineage: Challenges to Institutional Denial of Buddhist Women’s Monasticism in Thailand” (PhD diss., Australia National University, 2006); Emma Tomalin, “The Thai Bhikkhuni Movement and Women’s Empowerment,” *Gender and Development* 14, no. 3 (2006): 385–97; Ito, “Ordained Women in Yellow Robes,” 168–71.

<sup>593</sup> Mian Parnchand or Luang Por Yai (1910–1970) is an unusual example of a female renunciate wearing brown robes in Thailand and though a decidedly different case from *bhikkhunīs* and *sikkhamats*, she deserves a short mention. With her two nephews (Luang Por Chamroon and Luang Por Charoen), Luang Por Yai founded Wat Tham Krabok, which has become internationally known for their drug treatment program. Though Luang Por Yai was technically ordained as a *mae chi*, Baird writes that “Luang Por Chamroon...claimed that Luang Por Yai was ‘like a monk’ and later lived as a monk. According to him, ‘she didn’t feel like she was a woman.’ Eventually, she announced that she was a female monk named ‘Luang Por Yai Khetmarajja,’ although she was not accepted in the Thai Buddhist hierarchy.” Baird further states that, “It appears that people just started treating her as a monk, and she started wearing brown robes like monks, and doing long walks (*thu dong*) like male monks...Achan Boonsong said that is not important if she is known as a *phra* or a *mae chi*. It depends how people think of her. But to them she was equivalent to a male monk.” Iain Baird “Monks and the Hmong: The Special Relationship between the Chao Fa and the Tham Krabok Buddhism Temple in Saraburi Province, Thailand,” in *Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia* ed. Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke (New York: Routledge, 2013), 123–4. The website of Wat Tham Krabok states that Luang Por Yai was “a revered Buddhist lay nun, who because of her devotion and wisdom was treated as a senior monk,” and that she, “had earned by her sanctity and prophetic powers the deference accorded monks and the title Luang Poh Yai (senior father).” “The First Abbot of Thamkrabok Monastery,” <https://wat-thamkrabok.org/the-first-abbot/>. Luang Por Yai was around 50 years old when Wat Tham Krabok was founded and began treating addicts. Though it is unclear how long she lived and dressed as a monk, her age, strong jawline, rather androgynous features and thin body, combined with wearing brown robes on one shoulder (*bhikkhunīs* cover both shoulders) would have not signaled her biological sex. Luang Por Yai’s ability to live as a monk seems to be an interesting mixture of her choosing to present herself as such (through title and robes) and the status being granted to her from followers because of her perceived spiritual attainments and teachings. It is also perhaps interesting to consider if and how much her androgynous appearance and lack of typical feminine features supported and allowed her transition into “monkhood.”

<sup>594</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Boonjin, Santi Asoke, January 6, 2014.

<sup>595</sup> Salgado, “Religious Identities of Buddhist Nuns,” 943.

the cloth, and the medicine enclosed, represented Brahmanism...he continued that this was the purest cloth; it had sacred power.”<sup>596</sup> Lefferts compiles the various uses and relevance of white cloth in Thai contexts saying that,

white cloth is of importance not only because of its cleanliness and purity, but also because it represents a conceptual time before Buddhism. White cloth connects several segments of different rituals—the status of the dead, whether they be king or layperson; the status of *maw phraam*,<sup>597</sup> *mae chii*, and layman prior to ordination; natural medicine; and the weaving and presentation of white cloth to monks—to produce a counterpoint temporal reference to the modern world of Buddhism.<sup>598</sup>

As Asoke aims for their interpretation of an “original” Buddhism, this omits and rejects many aspects of Brahmanism that are commonly found in Thailand and this association with white cloth is another aspect of how Asoke visually represents their beliefs. Sikkhamat Boonjin states that “white is associated with cleanliness and is a fancy colour, a pretty colour...imagine she [female renunciate in white] has to leave home and sleep in a field...it wouldn’t last long to stay clean!”<sup>599</sup> As work is a central aspect of Asoke, the choice to not wear white, also for pious lay persons, is practical matter. Sikkhamat Boonjin emphasizes that, “more importantly, white will make her [female renunciate] a target that shows that she is a woman whereas brown camouflages her with the monks and she will survive, and it will give her mobility.”<sup>600</sup> As such, the lack of white attire in Asoke—for the *sikkhamats* as well as pious lay persons—has been adopted for various reasons: practicality, their dedication to physical labor, because they associate it with Brahmanism, and for the *sikkhamats*, wearing brown robes offers them a certain amount of safety and mobility. The *sikkhamats* occupy a space which bends various identities and finds a unique place, because of their visual representation and as they are members of a group which is no longer a part of the Thai *saṅgha*. As such, their physiomoral markers symbolize a fully ordained Buddhist mendicant—however they are neither fully ordained as *bhikkhunīs*, nor are they officially part of the Thai Buddhist community.

*Sikkhamats*, similar to *mae chis*, occupy an undefined space between laity and clergy, and perhaps a more convoluted one since they are not considered “Buddhist” by the state, and yet are seen as monastic enough to not always be permitted to vote.<sup>601</sup> Themes surrounding this

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<sup>596</sup> Lefferts, “The Ritual Importance of the Mundane,” 49.

<sup>597</sup> Described by Lefferts as a “ritual Brahmin specialist who initiates Theravada Buddhist rituals by asking monks to give their blessings and who also officiates at other, non-Buddhist rituals.” Lefferts, “The Ritual Importance of the Mundane,” 49. Also see Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>598</sup> Lefferts, “The Ritual Importance of the Mundane,” 49.

<sup>599</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Boonjin, Santi Asoke, January 6, 2014.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid.

<sup>601</sup> The issue of *sikkhamats* being unable to vote in 2012 was reported by Matichon, accessed April 22, 2017, [https://www.matichon.co.th/news\\_detail.php?newsid=1362295307&grpId=01&catid=01](https://www.matichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1362295307&grpId=01&catid=01) (site discontinued).

group of women encompass discussions of gender, identity, social norms, and individual as well as collective beliefs. Female lay members, aspirants, and clergy in Asoke have a diverse range of beliefs also in relation to their physicality as women. Some members may believe they were born as a woman due to negative past karma and can hold the relatively common Thai belief that it is more difficult for women to practice Buddhism due to having additional defilements than men; I personally did not encounter any members, lay or ordained with this perspective during my fieldwork, however Essen recounts her interactions with a female lay member working in the Santi Asoke library:

The librarian...gave the following reasons why she believes men are superior to women: According to the Buddha, women have five kinds of suffering that men do not have: menstruation, serving their husbands, moving to be with the husband's family, pregnancy and birth, and raising children. She also informed me that according to Buddhist scripture, I was born a woman because in my past life as a man, I broke the third precept with adultery; if I had been a woman, I would have been reborn as a dog. The librarian also asserted that women are naturally weaker than men both physically and in self-control...As I told Sikkhamat Chinda about this conversation, she made a sour face. She does not support the librarian's perspective...Sikkhamat Chinda recalled Pau Than [Bodhirak] saying publicly that women and both can end suffering and work for society and that all people equally must die.<sup>602</sup>

Though the librarian's perspective seems to be a belief not held by many members, especially not Asoke monastics, this report points to the diversity of beliefs held within the community. When asked in interviews, *sikkhamats* often restated the equal ability for women to also achieve spiritual attainments, which is a line often heard from Bodhirak as well. Some *sikkhamats* stressed the importance of being able to practice within Asoke and reflected on the other alternatives in Thailand available to women—particularly *mae chis*, commenting on the *mae chi*'s unappealing lifestyle and low status. Sikkhamat Boonjin related the story that before she came in contact with Asoke, she went to Wat Pak Nam (a well-known temple in Bangkok with a large *mae chi* community) with the intention of ordaining and living as a *mae chi*.<sup>603</sup> She was dismayed to see the routine in which it seemed “the *mae chis* were engaging with food all day long—food, food, and more food, and food to serve monks—and as a servant, always serving everyone, doing this and that and arranging flowers and cleaning and then where is the time for *patibat tham* [practicing the *Dhamma*]?”<sup>604</sup> She further stated that because the *mae chis* wear

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<sup>602</sup> Essen, *Right Development*, 126.

<sup>603</sup> Also known as Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen (or Phasi Charoen) the temple is well known, as it is the origin of the Dhammakāya Movement. According to Falk at the time of her research, there were around 200 *mae chis* living in Wat Pak Nam and they have close ties to the national *Thai Mae Chiis' Institute*. Falk, *Making Fields of Merit*, 14.

<sup>604</sup> *Patibat Tham* (Thai) or *paṭipatti* (Pāli) typically translates as the practice; conduct or ‘pursuance’ of the Buddhist teachings—in contrast to theoretical knowledge *pariyat* (Thai) or *pariyatti* (Pāli). *Patibat tham* is a key phrase in Asoke as they focus on active practice and work as their spiritual path, rather than study or meditation.

white and live with a low status, serving the monks and looking after all the cleaning, she does not believe this is the right way, or proper way to practice as they have no time to *patibat tham* whereas she said she wanted to study and it was important to have time to practice and study the *Dhamma*. She also believes that:

Once monks ordain they should live a life of sacrifice with no one to serve them because they should be able to do it themselves—but look at these *mae chi*, the *mae chis* serve and even to *tham bun* [to make merit]—the *mae chi* has to *tham bun* through the monks! If this is the way I would have to live, I would rather marry and only serve one man rather than a whole bunch of monks, but look at the *mae chi*, she serves everyone, all around, with no status or time to *patibat tham*.<sup>605</sup>

After this experience, Sikkhamat Boonjin left Wat Pak Nam and said she was amazed when she later found the Asoke group and the “ordained women with brown robes who did not touch money—because as a *mae chi* you work for the *wat* (temple) but you also need to earn money from somewhere else—this is not what it means to be a renunciate.”<sup>606</sup> Only one month after meeting Asoke, Sikkhamat Boonjin resolved to ordain within the group and has now been a *sikkhamat* for over 40 years.

In contrast, Sikkhamat Rinpah mentioned that “Some *mae chis* come [to Asoke communities] too, but it is hard for them, so they don’t stay long.”<sup>607</sup> And when asked why this is the case she replied:

I don’t know, vegetarian food, getting up early, working all the time. In most of the temples there is nothing to do, only walking, meditating, listening to the preaching, that’s all, but here we have activities, school and many things to do... And [it is difficult for *mae chis*] here because we also do not use money and no one here would give them money, maybe they are not happy and some of them became lay people here instead of wearing white—so they change. It’s easier to work [in the Asoke “uniform”] because the white uniform you know, gets dirty easily.<sup>608</sup>

Interestingly, these two *sikkhamats* have differing experiences and conceptions of what it is to be a *mae chi*, as shown in these two short passages, Sikkhamat Boonjin associates the life of a *mae chi* with serving monks, preparing food, and cleaning whereas Sikkhamat Rinpah sees their lifestyle as one of quiet, meditation, and *Dhamma*. Though living as a *sikkhamat* typically affords more privileges, community involvement, and more visibility than *mae chis*, they are still not on equal footing with their male counterparts.

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Interview with Sikkhamat Boonjin, Santi Asoke, January 6, 2014.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid. *Tham bun* (Thai) “to make merit” is a central concept within Thai Buddhist practice and was touched upon in Chapter 2.

<sup>606</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Boonjin, Santi Asoke, January 6, 2014.

<sup>607</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Rinpah, Sali Asoke, February 25, 2013.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid.

Though *sikkhamats* only live by ten precepts, and the *samanas* undertake the full 227 rules of the *Vinaya* monastic code, it takes longer for the female aspirants to reach ordination.<sup>609</sup> It can be a lengthy process to become a *sikkhamat* and though there are guidelines as to the duration of each step, aspirants can advance either in the standard amount of time, or more slowly as the community of *sikkhamats* assess their readiness. An aspirant may only ordain as a *sikkhamat* if there is space for her in the community, as there is a set ratio of four *samanas* to one *sikkhamat*, and when the number of *samana* reaches over one hundred, the ratio is three to one.<sup>610</sup> If the number of *sikkhamats* already meets the ratio to *samana*, the *krak* (female aspirant) must either wait for more *samana* to ordain, or for there to be fewer *sikkhamats* (either through passing away or disrobing).<sup>611</sup> Various speculations have been proposed as to why this ratio exists. Heikkilä-Horn suggests this rule is in place so that the number of the *sikkhamats* does not exceed the number of *samana*, which would “most certainly be the case” if all lay women chose to strive for ordination and this could “further infuriate the mainstream monks who do not promote the position of ‘ordained’ women.”<sup>612</sup> Sunai believes that the ratio may be reflective of the scriptural comment that the ordination of women may affect the longevity of the Buddhist teachings, which Seeger links to a passage in *Cullavagga* in which the acceptance of women into monasticism shortens this longevity by five hundred years.<sup>613</sup> Essen further reports that Sikkhamat Chinda has stated that the ratio is in place because the socialization of women in Thailand makes it harder to control their behavior, though this was not fully explained.<sup>614</sup> Despite the various theories as to why this ratio exists, Bodhirak stated (somewhat vaguely and simply) in an interview that he felt the ratio was simply an appropriate balance for their community.<sup>615</sup>

As is typical, the monastic hierarchy in Asoke is based on seniority (whoever has been ordained the longest). Regardless of the length of time ordained, *sikkhamats* are at the bottom of the monastic hierarchy and must bow to both novices and *samanas*. Monastics sit on raised platforms for meals and sermons and the *sikkhamats* sit on a separate, slightly lower platform than their male counterparts. Lay members seem to treat *sikkhamats*, *samanas*, and novices all

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<sup>609</sup> See Chapter 3.2.1 on the process of ordination.

<sup>610</sup> Interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014.

<sup>611</sup> As previously mentioned, there are few reports of *sikkhamats* disrobing.

<sup>612</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 46.

<sup>613</sup> Seeger, “The Changing Roles of Thai Buddhist Women,” 808; Sunai Setbunsang, *The Social Ideals in Buddhism according to the Ideas of the Santi Asok School* [in Thai] (Bangkok: Fa-Aphai, 1990), 336.

<sup>614</sup> Essen further mentions that this difference in socialization is seen when “Boys must be brave and not cry; if a girl cries, the adults let her carry on as if it is natural. Furthermore, if a girl has much confidence in something, they say ‘too much,’ and if she follows, they applaud.” The connection to Sikkhamat Chinda’s comment on how it is harder to control women’s behaviour is not completely clear. Essen, *Right Development*, 127.

<sup>615</sup> Interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014.

with the same level of respect, bowing and kneeling on the ground when interacting with them.<sup>616</sup> From what I observed and through interviews, the *samanas* have a positive and respectful relationship with the *sikkhamats* as well—this was also found by Lear as he states that, “Numerous times, monks went out of their way to express the respect they had for the *Sikkhamats*, quite openly stating that their achieving the title was far more difficult than their own achieving of the status of a monk, given the much smaller opportunity.”<sup>617</sup> The extent of the relationship between the *samanas* and *sikkhamats* was unclear, though I had the impression that they do not spend considerable time with each other as the communities are sex-segregated and while I had the opportunity to spend time with the *sikkhamats*, I had very little contact with *samanas* outside of formal interviews. This may not be the case for some of the *sikkhamats* who work more closely with *samanas* or for organizational purposes or meetings, and though the *sikkhamats* are largely autonomous they will also refer to Bodhirak or the abbot of the community for advice or clarification.

The *sikkhamats* within the individual Asoke communities hold bi-monthly meetings amongst themselves to discuss any arising problems or difficulties as well as to “check in,” reaffirm their precepts, and declare/confess any transgressions. A meeting of all Asoke *sikkhamats* occurs twice yearly around June and November, following the large annual Asoke gatherings; at this time the *sikkhamats* can discuss if they would prefer to live in another Asoke centre or may raise other concerns.<sup>618</sup> There are only three Asoke communities where *sikkhamats* live: Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke, and Ratchathani Asoke. The senior *sikkhamats* within each of these communities oversee the other *sikkhamats* as well as lay and novice women. There are four *sikkhamats* who head an Asoke-wide “congressional committee” to take care of the needs of the group (and more broadly female aspirants and female lay members) and this committee further represents the *sikkhamats* in larger meetings with the *samanas* and outside of Asoke.<sup>619</sup> These meetings point to not only the organization and management of

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<sup>616</sup> Lay members often kneel on the ground when greeting a monastic (this includes informal situations such as meeting on a road for example) and sometimes will stay kneeling during the entire interaction. It is also common that lay members will sit on the floor while monastics will sit on a raised platform in private settings as well.

<sup>617</sup> Howard Barry Lear, “Global Alienation and Community System Response” (PhD diss., Tufts University, 1999), 135.

<sup>618</sup> This can include health issues or if the *sikkhamat* has any special needs. The *samanas* also have these discussions at this time. Interview with Sikkhamat Don Kao, Santi Asoke, January 28, 2014.

<sup>619</sup> Election of these committee members was described as democratic where the committee is reelected through a process of proposing, selecting and appointment by others and Sikkhamat Don Kao mentioned that the committee has had little fluctuation and generally consists of the most senior *sikkhamats*. Interview with Sikkhamat Don Kao, Santi Asoke, January 28, 2014. Heikkilä-Horn described similar meetings however reported only three committee members in 1997, see Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 66.

Asoke affairs but also the importance of independence and self-sufficiency for the *sikkhamats*, or as Sikkhamat Boonjin states that they are able to “stand on [their] own two legs.”<sup>620</sup>

*Sikkhamats* are highly respected and engaged members of the community, taking on a range of activities and duties. Responsibilities are distributed throughout the communities, and many of the *sikkhamats* have teaching roles in the schools, for visiting groups and other educational functions. The *sikkhamats* act as integral members of the Asoke communities, they give council to lay persons and are responsible for female aspirants and residents, they give *Dhamma* talks and some appear regularly on the Asoke television network.<sup>621</sup> These are examples of how the *sikkhamats* contribute as respected spiritual teachers and highly visible members both inside the community and through Asoke media. The way of life for individual *sikkhamats* varies according to their personal skills, interests, and community duties, and this is dependent on if Asoke is engaged with any political activity as well as their health. Interviews revealed the wide range of activities that *sikkhamats* undertake—Sikkhamat Don Kao for example worked in a publishing house in Santi Asoke in the late 1970s and then later developed the first soy sauce and soy bean paste factory in Pathom Asoke; in 1989 she moved to Ratchathani Asoke and worked developing packaging systems for food (pressing and conserving sesame oil for example), other agricultural processing and for detergents and other substances as well.<sup>622</sup> In 2006, she returned to Santi Asoke and worked in the waste management sector and then three years later returned to Pathom Asoke to manage and supervise soy sauce production again. Other examples of work done by *sikkhamats* includes teaching schoolchildren and vocational training or college classes, appearing on FMTV, sewing robes/uniforms and designing patches, or with personal matters—for example, Sikkhamat Boonjin spent a large portion of her days caring for her elderly mother who lived in Santi Asoke with her. A *sikkhamat*'s personal health also impacts her daily activities, as does any political involvement—for example, during the political protests of 2013–2014, most of the *sikkhamats* lived in the Asoke “tent city” and when not there, they spent much time following the political situation through radio and television in Santi Asoke in their small communal building.

The background of Asoke members is widely varied and a number of the *sikkhamats* are well-educated, some speaking many languages.<sup>623</sup> The multi-lingual *sikkhamats* spend time

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<sup>620</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Boonjin, Santi Asoke, January 6, 2014.

<sup>621</sup> FMTV often features a discussion panel of a few monastics, including *sikkhamats*.

<sup>622</sup> While in Pathom Asoke and Ratchathani Asoke, she also taught these skills to the students. Interview with Sikkhamat Don Kao, Santi Asoke, January 28, 2014.

<sup>623</sup> Though I did not conduct a formal survey of the background and education of all *sikkhamats*, these differences were made apparent through interviews and discussions. This was also found in a previous examination of the

with a variety of visitors, and in many ways become the connection to other parts of the world. Through their frequent engagement with visitors, both from Thailand and abroad, and presence on the Asoke television station, the *sikkhamats* have gained considerable public exposure. This exposure can also in part be attributed to the number of female researchers which have done research in Asoke, (such as Essen, Heikkilä-Horn, and Apinya) and the sex-segregated communities makes the *sikkhamats* a much closer and accessible resource.

The creation of the unique visual appearance of this small group of renunciate women in Thailand has helped form an alternative status and lifestyle and can be seen as an example of developing new systems which allow women to have active and respected roles in monastic communities. Asoke values are embodied by monastics and members, shaping how the *sikkhamats* engage with each other and other community members. These values, which include dedication to their political beliefs, has in turn influenced their current aesthetic—if Asoke had not been as outspoken or politically engaged, they may have avoided imprisonment and the subsequent trials, which has led to their current appearance. Because white is the status of a lay person in Thailand, the *sikkhamats* have helped redefine renunciation through their visual representation of wearing brown robes and being presented as ordained members of their community. Through being visually depicted as renunciates, with involved and respected roles within their communities, the *sikkhamats* further demonstrate the importance of and potential for engaged women within a monastic context. Sikkhamat Boonjin states that as a female renunciate of Asoke, it is important to “stand on your own two legs” and their independence is enabling them to have a certain level of self-sufficiency: “we have no money and don’t have to pay for anything, we are able to go out on *piṇḍapāta* [alms collection], we don’t wear shoes, we are homeless—it is practical—and it is possible—and beautiful!”<sup>624</sup>

### 3.4 Aesthetics of Lay Members and Students

Due to their standard blue uniforms, lay Asoke members were endearingly referred to as “the smurfs” by one non-resident lay Asoke member—though it is not only their monochromatic peasant clothes that creates their distinct uniform; short haircuts, bare feet, and forgoing adornments further adds to the standard lay Asoke aesthetic.<sup>625</sup> Uniforms were touched upon in relation to robes, however I would argue that the monastic uniform and the lay

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demographic of Asoke, however these reports are also now rather dated, see Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 179–93.

<sup>624</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Boonjin, Santi Asoke, January 6, 2014.

<sup>625</sup> Though this lay member used the term endearingly and did not use it in front of other members. She had the tendency to be rather humorous and also referred to Bodhirak in English as “daddy guru.”

Asoke uniforms differ in ways beyond their appearance and symbolism. Monastic robes are a well-defined and historical aspect of Buddhism in Thailand and represent an established community—the *sangha*; the Asoke “uniform” however was developed with the conception of Asoke and is unique to their community. The style and colour of the Asoke uniform is based on the clothing of northeastern agricultural workers or peasants where, “in the national Thai imagination...rural villagers conduct ‘traditional’ life trajectories, working mainly in rice fields and dedicating their free time to traditional practices like weaving and indigo-dyeing.”<sup>626</sup> Similarly, Lefferts notes that, “today some urban Thai wear the indigo-dyed ‘farmer’s’ shirt as a political symbol to express their allegiance with ‘folk.’”<sup>627</sup> Wearing clothing that signals this represents and reinforces various beliefs present in Asoke (modesty, striving to be poor, hardworking, simple, and dedicated to traditional beliefs) and Asoke has taken this image and further defined and constrained it (through adopting specific haircuts for example) to develop an Asoke-specific “look” or aesthetic profile. Another distinction to monastic attire is that robes follow the same shape, pattern and style with very little variation, whereas the lay uniform is more accurately a quasi-uniform as there is some fluctuation—as such, it becomes useful to further consider the role of uniforms in this context.

Craik notes that wearing uniforms, or quasi-uniforms informs the shaping of a person’s identity as well as their performance thereof, but also:

Uniforms are all about control not only of the social self but also of the inner self and its formation...Wearing a uniform properly – understanding and obeying rules about the uniform-in-practice and turning the garments into communicative statements – is more important than the items of clothing and decoration themselves.<sup>628</sup>

As communicative statements, uniforms have various purposes and functions, not only for the individual, but for groups as well. Joseph and Alex identify some of these aspects:

The uniform is viewed as a device to resolve certain dilemmas of complex organizations—namely, to define their boundaries, to assure that members will conform to their goals, and to eliminate conflicts in the status sets of their members. The uniform serves several functions: it acts as a totem, reveals and conceals statuses, certifies legitimacy, and suppresses individuality.<sup>629</sup>

Further as a religious group, through their clothing and conformity they are also voicing their dedication to Asoke, stating non-verbally that, “this is what I believe and I am living in harmony

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<sup>626</sup> Chanjittra Chanorn, “Self-transformation Strategies of Development: The Emergence of Indigo-dyed Textile Entrepreneurs in Sakon Nakhon, Thailand,” *Thammasat Review* 19, no. 2 (2016): 2.

<sup>627</sup> Leedom Lefferts, “The Ritual Importance of the Mundane: White Cloth Among the Tai of Southeast Asia,” *Expedition* 38, no. 1 (1996): 40.

<sup>628</sup> Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*, 4.

<sup>629</sup> Joseph and Alex, “The Uniform,” 719.

with those who believe as I do.”<sup>630</sup> These are all aspects which relate to the lay Asoke uniform, however in a different way and context than typically explored with more commonly used uniforms.<sup>631</sup> As previously mentioned, the lay Asoke uniform goes beyond their clothing and includes haircuts, walking barefoot, and forgoing wearing amulets, jewelry and makeup. These aspects allow members to recognize each other as part of the group and further legitimizes members and the degree of their dedication to Asoke. As such, this appearance becomes a totem for lay Asoke members as it conceals the status and background of the members and generates a collective image which dissolves individual markers.

Much of what distinguishes the Asoke aesthetic profile is the absence of certain aspects common to mainstream Thai culture, such as wearing fashionable clothes, shoes, styled hair, makeup and adornments of jewelry, amulets or perfume.<sup>632</sup> The removal of these features is in stark contrast to many Thais, especially those living in the city, and members in Santi Asoke, Bangkok, have a noticeably differing appearance to persons going about their daily lives a few blocks away from the centre. The choice to adopt these physiomoral signals within Asoke indicates and reinforces a communal aesthetic profile as well as the values within the group, as we will see through the exploration of the relationship to beauty, fashion and the clothing of lay members and students, haircuts, and the absence of shoes and adornments. Residents and lay members seen within Asoke communities (for festivals, workshops or visiting) are the focus of this study since Asoke members who do not live in the community may or may not continue to wear typical Asoke attire when they return to their homes.<sup>633</sup>

Clear, light coloured skin, glossy hair and fashionable, flattering clothing are some of the common beauty standards in Thailand. Van Esterik comments on the common perception of beauty in Thailand:

As beauty is interpreted less as a natural attribute existing within the body and radiating outward, and more as something that can be purchased, placed on the surface, and enhanced, it becomes the responsibility of women to develop their own beauty potential

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<sup>630</sup> Joanne Bubolz Eicher, Sandra Lee Evenson and Hazel A. Lutz, *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fairchild, 2000), 337.

<sup>631</sup> Uniforms are typically connected to the military, healthcare providers or policing, and have a very different relationship to notions of status for example. Joseph and Alex, “The Uniform,” 720–24.

<sup>632</sup> McAleer and Mao suggest that “the purchasing motivation of Thai consumers is still different compared with consumers from traditional luxury markets,” however conclude that “the beliefs of Buddhism do not seem to have a significant impact on Thai luxury fashion consumption.” Michael McAleer and Ning Mao, “Theravada Buddhism and Thai Luxury Fashion Consumption,” *Journal of Reviews on Global Economics* 6 (2017): 58–67.

<sup>633</sup> The amount of involvement and commitment to Asoke may influence lay members who reside outside of the communities as to if they dress similarly in their daily life. Former Bangkok mayor and devout Asoke follower, Chamlong Srimuang for example does not live full time within an Asoke community, however he is almost always seen wearing his blue *mo hom* shirt.

rather than assume responsibility for meritorious acts that will result in inner beauty.<sup>634</sup> The cosmetic industry has boomed in recent decades and malls are often teeming with young Thais shopping for clothes, jewelry and makeup.<sup>635</sup> Light skin is promoted through ads for a wide range of skin whitening products and shows evidence of the importance of not doing outdoor manual labor.<sup>636</sup> Asoke members often shook their heads, telling me of the waste of resources, and energy to upkeep a superficial appearance and warned of the dangers thereof. One long-term female resident in Pathom Asoke compared the attachment to cosmetics and fashion to that of alcohol, showing that this subject, which is tied with the eighth precept (refrain from wearing garlands, using perfumes, and beautifying the body with cosmetics), is considered very serious by some members:

This is a basic thing [Bodhirak] talked a lot 30 years ago...about the cosmetic issue and how to get rid of it, it is something that we cling to...it is the cause of ruin...cosmetic is the cause of ruin and decoration is the cause of the ruin...maybe it is worse than drinking alcohol, like, cosmetic for the woman and cosmetic dressing is worse than the man who drinks alcohol...[people are] addicted to cosmetic, especially Thai ladies. They spend a lot of money...the wife spends much more money than the husband who drinks alcohol and gets drunk. She is drunk also though, lost and blind, attached.<sup>637</sup>

As consuming alcohol and intoxicants are prohibited by the fifth precept, the use of this analogy signals the severity of being “drunk” on the need to appear a certain way through the use of fashion or cosmetics. The large number of women who use beautifying products and procedures is further contextualised through understanding some of the social constructs which can influence this behaviour. Thailand is often described as being overly conscious of surfaces and being very visually based, which also has societal impacts as Van Esterik describes:

Appearance matters. Beautiful appearances matter even more. In Thailand, beauty can override family connections, money or class, as well as other ascribed and achieved attributes of women, and to a lesser degree, men...the potential for ranking individuals on the basis of their appearance is very strong in Thailand.<sup>638</sup>

Individuals in Asoke communities are not ranked with this beauty standard, instead markers of renunciation, modesty and hard work are sought after. These factors can include clothing, lack of accessories and hairstyle as well as having a clean and ordered appearance—for example

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<sup>634</sup> Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 154.

<sup>635</sup> “Thailand is Asean’s biggest beauty-product market, the world’s largest exporter of haircare products and also the world’s 12th-biggest exporter of skincare products...Thailand’s beauty industry is growing rapidly thanks to its increasingly sophisticated consumers, and men’s growing interest in the way they look.” Petchanet Pratuangkrai, “Thai Beauty Sector Looks Set for Rosy Future,” *The Nation*, April 13, 2015, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/news/business/EconomyAndTourism/30257934>.

<sup>636</sup> The daughter of one non-resident Asoke member was at the time of my research working as an editor at one of Thailand’s largest beauty magazines and found it rather humorous that women in the west attempted to tan and brown themselves, whereas Thai women aimed at being as light-skinned as possible.

<sup>637</sup> Interview with long-term female resident in Pathom Asoke, February 20, 2013.

<sup>638</sup> Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 129.

regarding hair and personal hygiene. In order to further understand how Asoke members embody their beliefs through their appearance and form a cohesive aesthetic profile, adornments will be explored, followed by clothing and hairstyle.

As noted in the above comment by the long-term Asoke member comparing the use of cosmetics to alcohol, the eighth precept—in which one abstains from wearing garlands, using perfumes, and beautifying the body with cosmetics—is taken seriously in Asoke. Many lay residents live by eight or ten precepts and the appearance of lay persons in the community reflects this. Forgoing beautifying products further reinforces the Asoke members' dedication to a "pure" and "natural" lifestyle and constitutes another physiomoral marker used by lay members to express their beliefs. Members do not wear makeup, jewelry, or other adornments such as amulets, and because these are common social practices in Thailand, giving these up is one of the first ways new guests or members integrate themselves into Asoke, as explored through the following sections.

Amulets play a sizable role in Thai Buddhism and many Thais own and wear amulets. This goes beyond the personal use of amulets as McDaniel describes that,

On a more abstract level, the Thai Buddhist amulet economy creates communities. Stories about amulets become the subject of sermons, rumors, and short magazine stories. These relate miracles, the heroic acts of famous nuns and monks. The rituals, catalogs, detailed material analyses, stamps, photographs, and museum displays not only help collectors, but they also attract amateurs to the field, and inspire pilgrims. Conversations about amulets are a way of "breaking the ice"...One can see it as energizing local interest in religious history, art, ethical teachings, and local healing and protective technologies.<sup>639</sup>

Amulets touch many areas of life for Thais, and as McDaniel describes, I would also argue that the lack of amulets, and the opposition to them, helps form Asoke communities. It was explained to me by lay members that discussions on why the Asoke do not wear amulets can be a way of introducing new members or non-members to their ideals and "breaking the ice" in a similar way to what McDaniel describes, however to the opposite effect. Because amulets are so common and do not require an in-depth knowledge of complex Buddhist teachings, conversing about them seemed to be an accessible and practical segue into understanding basic Asoke beliefs; members often used the topic of amulets to explain the differences between Asoke and popular Thai Buddhism to me, as well as the importance of denouncing other power appropriating rituals and superstitious practices.<sup>640</sup> Asoke's vocal opposition of using and

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<sup>639</sup> McDaniel, "Liberation Materiality," 402.

<sup>640</sup> Though Asoke is not the only vocal opponent of amulets and power appropriating rituals in Thailand, it is a defining feature within the community. Power appropriating rituals are discussed further by Swearer, "Ritual Occasions, Merit and the Appropriation of Power," in *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 17–69.

wearing amulets is also a further critique of popular practices and is another method of how they aim to validate their beliefs as being in line with what they believe to be the “true” or “original” Buddhist teachings.<sup>641</sup>

Another unifying aesthetic element to Asoke members is their choice of hairstyles. As Obeyesekere observes, “hair is just there as a product of our biological inheritance; but it cannot be just left there. Hair must be dealt with; thus everywhere there is cultural control of hair and this includes those groups who let their hair down or keep it in a culturally defined ‘natural’ state.”<sup>642</sup> As seen in the discussion of monastics shaving their heads, hair is an important contributor to signaling physiomorality and communicating beliefs, and as with other aspects of the Asoke aesthetic, simplicity, practicality, and modesty are sought after.<sup>643</sup> The fact that Asoke has standard haircuts for lay members also signals the overarching reach that their beliefs have on their physical selves and the importance of conforming and creating a consistent aesthetic profile that points to certain views and moral structures. Lay men often have a military style crew cut and women often have a short bob, pixie cut or at times, a short, simple ponytail. In recent years, public schools in Thailand have received criticism for the haircut regulations, i.e. crew cuts for the boys and an ear-lobe-length bob for girls, and now in many schools, students have more freedom regarding hairstyle.<sup>644</sup> The loosening of public-school regulations has not impacted Asoke, and all students have standard-issue haircuts.

These practical and simple hairstyles represent another aspect of the Asoke aesthetic—again underscoring modesty and a disinterest with beauty or style. Expectations around good personal hygiene and keeping a clean, tidy appearance also influences hair in that it should be washed, clean cut, and brushed. Hairdressers, who are also lay Asoke members, have certain days/times where they are regularly available within the communities to ensure the upkeep of the short hairstyles for men, women, and students.<sup>645</sup> The use of hair fits within the reoccurring themes in Asoke which aim to include practicality (due to the emphasis on hard work) as well as asceticism, while taking care to be well-kempt, orderly and clean. I may also suggest that the previously discussed relationship between the shaven hair of a monastic and sexuality is also at

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<sup>641</sup> *Suttas* admonishing superstitious practices are cited by Asoke members and publications—for example, D 1.

<sup>642</sup> Gananath Obeyesekere, “Forward,” in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, eds. Alf Hildebeitel and Barbara Miller (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), xii.

<sup>643</sup> Monastic hair is discussed in Chapter 3.3.2.

<sup>644</sup> James Hookway, “Shear Defiance: Thai Students Rebel Against Mandatory Haircuts,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/shear-follicle-thai-students-rebel-against-mandatory-haircuts-1466711841>; Kaewmala, “Thailand: What Has Hair Got to Do with Children’s Rights?” *Asian Correspondent*, January 13, 2013, <http://www.asiancorrespondent.com/2013/01/thailand-whats-hair-got-to-do-with-childrens-rights/#turXT7a25u7g3dKU.99>.

<sup>645</sup> It was a common occurrence to see lay members and students getting their hair cut and like most Asoke services, was done free of cost.

play, albeit a lesser extent with lay members. All lay members are encouraged to live celibate lives and sexual abstinence is required in Asoke communities, and as hair has many ties to sexuality, the short, controlled haircuts of Asoke members may also be linked to this sexual restraint as well. These hairstyles, though not found only in Asoke, are a defining part of how the group is presented and also how they envision themselves, as seen in the representations of lay members in artwork which specifically depict these kinds of haircuts.<sup>646</sup> In combination with the characteristic Asoke attire, a cohesive image of the typical aesthetic profile of Asoke members begins to form.

Modest dress, one of the foundations to the Asoke aesthetic, is required within the Asoke communities and guests are given instructions for appropriate attire. An example of these guidelines can be seen in the handout given to new guests upon arrival at the Ratchathani Asoke community which advises to, “Dress modestly. Do not wear tight, revealing clothing. Cover your legs. Short sleeve shirts are okay but no tank tops and do not show your chest.”<sup>647</sup> Lay members adhere to the ascetic Asoke lifestyle, which includes “unfashionable” clothes that are not revealing or form fitting, which reflects their views on sexuality and the importance of modesty.<sup>648</sup> The lay “uniform” is not only modest, but practical and comfortable for agricultural and other manual labor work while also signalling a variety of Asoke beliefs.<sup>649</sup> The *mo hom* shirt, or farmer/peasant shirt is seen mostly in rural Northeastern Thailand and has a high collar and distinctive indigo dyed blue colour reminiscent of denim. While blue is standard, some lay members may wear grey, browns or other muted or neutral colours. Women typically wear ankle-length sarongs and long-sleeved shirts and men wear long pants and either a long or short sleeved shirt (as seen in Figure 3.9). Early reports of Asoke suggested that the movement was made up of mostly rural farmers, which is most likely due to their dress, though Asoke members have a wide range of backgrounds.<sup>650</sup> Wearing typical Thai peasant attire reinforces various beliefs present in Asoke—striving to be poor, hardworking, modest, simple, and dedicated to traditional beliefs. The Asoke uniform aesthetically link members to their belief of the importance of hard agricultural work since these uniforms are worn by rural farmers. As such,

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<sup>646</sup> See a discussion of Asoke members represented in art within Chapter 4.3.2.

<sup>647</sup> Other aspects of the “Lifestyle of Ratchathani Asoke community” handout are further discussed in Chapter 2.2.

<sup>648</sup> Comments were occasionally made by lay members regarding how many young women who visit mainstream temples are inappropriately dressed (as they wear shorts and tank tops).

<sup>649</sup> Interestingly, the connection to the communist “Mao suit” has been asked about or mentioned on more than one occasion, often while giving presentations on Asoke. Mao suits are based off of Chinese peasant dress and the parallels between the Asoke clothing and the Mao suit are visible in the cut, and often colour of the uniforms. For the history and exploration of the Mao suit, see Sean Metzger, *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 161–233.

<sup>650</sup> Heikkilä-Horn collected demographic data to explore this claim, see Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 179–93.

it is not only the visual resemblance tying Asoke the agricultural workers, but the fabrics used also produces “a quality that can be perceived through the skin. The figurative texture of fabric, the *feeling* it evokes,” which Rovine further connects to the method of and nuance of manufacture.<sup>651</sup> We can see the various beliefs that are signaled, embodied, and reinforced through the wearing of the Asoke uniform—from associations with the “rural,” “simple,” “traditional” lifestyle, a critique of the consumerist mainstream interest in the “material world,” views on modesty and sexuality, the blurring of personal identity and status as well as dedication to the group.

A sense of community and belonging are further created by having this unified aesthetic profile—which reflects their shared beliefs. Lastly, as many of the guiding principles within Asoke aim at “going back to the fundamentals” or “basics,” their clothing visually communicates their belief that they are embodying a true interpretation of a more “pure” and “original” Buddhism. This is also connected to and exhibited by Asoke’s rejection of wearing white due to the Brahminic associations. By using a traditional style of clothing, they reinforce this belief as the “poor” aesthetic of rural, simple clothes, bare footedness and short hair further reflects the Asoke economic principles and represents their strict interpretation of the eighth precept. As members manifest their beliefs through their appearance, a distinct material culture within Asoke has developed.

All school children also wear blue uniforms, with *bodhi* leaf patches on the breast pocket to identify them. Uniforms in Thailand are used in many contexts, however one of the most prominent is school uniforms for children through to university students.<sup>652</sup> Asoke students have uniforms quite unlike those worn in other schools but are akin to what the lay members wear. Student uniforms are sewn by *sikkhamats* and lay members and consist of long-sleeved shirts and sarongs for the girls, and short sleeved shirts and pants for the boys. The thick cotton

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<sup>651</sup> Victoria Rovine, “Handmade Textiles: Global Markets and Authenticity,” in *Dress Sense: Emotional and Sensory Experiences of the Body and Clothes*, eds. Donald Clay Johnson, and Helen Bradley Foster (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 133–4.

<sup>652</sup> The relationship between university students and their uniforms was explored by Bunyawanich, Järvelä and Ghaffar and their conclusion states that: “Through the analysis, it was found that the student uniform clearly functions on symbolic level. Therefore, it plays an important part in power relations by constructing hierarchy in Thailand’s universities and entire society. In the university sphere, the top-down hierarchy consists of lecturers, senior students, and first-year students. In the social setting, the students wearing uniform of top universities consist of the upper class while the others are members of the lower class. As for personal development, the uniform neither implants qualifications of punctuality nor responsibility among the students. Moreover, the uniform promotes neither academic performance nor professional skills of students as widely claimed, but it rather creates unnecessary stress to them. The study discloses an unexpected viewpoint in educational practice, that is, a rigid practice of uniform is likely to imply that the universities prioritize perfection of dress code over academic performance.” Sasanun Bunyawanich, Maria-Liisa Järvelä and Abdul Ghaffar “The Influence of Uniform in Establishing Unity, Hierarchy, and Conformity at Thai Universities,” *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 6, no. 7 (2018): 35.

used for students is a brighter colour than the traditionally indigo dyed *mo hom* shirts—and is closer to a cobalt or Persian blue. The use of this attire is also intended to inform the education of the students as well:

Students are taught traditional values, traditional cultures, and skills in traditional arts and crafts. They are skilled in making traditional clothes and playing traditional music instruments. They apply what they learn in daily life, wearing clothes of traditional design to reflect their appreciation of traditional cultures instead of aping blindly or mindlessly the consumerist ‘modern fashion trends’ (which really don’t mean anything significant to them, culturally or otherwise).<sup>653</sup>

As seen from this passage, the student uniforms are more than just modest practical attire for them, but signal Asoke beliefs around the importance of “traditional” customs as well as the active rejection and critique of the mainstream approach to clothing as fashion. Even in their free time, the students wear their uniforms rather than western clothing, however in some instances—such as colder weather, the students may wear sweaters or scarves of different colours on top of their uniforms.<sup>654</sup> During larger festivals and yearly gatherings with Asoke schools from multiple communities, thinly rolled coloured neck scarves are added to the student’s uniforms to represent the centre at which they study. Another aspect to the student uniform is the embroidered *bodhi* leaf patch sewn onto the left breast pocket of their shirt. The patch includes the Asoke school/community the student studies at and the student’s name. For lay adult Asoke members the use of patches is optional if they choose to identify which community they reside at, or if they have done further studies. For example, if a lay member does series of additional *Dhamma* training and exams, they are given a patch with an embroidered vulture.<sup>655</sup>

Some lay women in Thailand choose to live as an *upasika* (derived from “to sit close” or “to attend to”) and though it technically refers to any lay woman, the meaning has shifted to represent one who is particularly devout.<sup>656</sup> There are a variety of platforms available to practice or live as a *upasika*, and some wear all white, and may shave their hair.<sup>657</sup> Scott concludes

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<sup>653</sup> Suwida and Bong, “Right Education – the Srisa Asoke Model,” 7.

<sup>654</sup> This refers to their free time within Asoke, it is unclear how many students wear the uniforms while for example, visiting their families outside of the community.

<sup>655</sup> The significance of the vulture is explored in Chapter 4.4.2.

<sup>656</sup> The less common *upasaka* is the male equivalent, however I am unaware of any residing within Asoke as I did not see any during my time in the communities. This perhaps is the case because in Thailand a clear path of ordination is available for men and alternative renunciate lifestyles seem to not be popular for lay men.

<sup>657</sup> For example, the Dhammakāya organized a “100,000 mass Upasika Kaew training program” described as: The ladies who take part in this program will learn about disciplines and learn to keep their body and their mind pure and bright... The aim is not only to improve ethical conduct of Thai ladies to be good citizens of the society they belong, but also to help revive the morality of the world. “The 100,000 Upasika Kaew Mass Ordination Program,” Dhammakāya Foundation, accessed August 18, 2019, <http://www.dhammadakaya.net/en/docs/100000-upasika-kaew-mass-ordination>.

through examining one *upasika*'s beliefs and lifestyle that her religiosity “challenges us to rethink our assumptions about lay practice in contemporary Thailand.”<sup>658</sup> There are a few women who choose to live as *upasika* within Asoke, signifying this by shaving their hair and wearing a black sarong with a white blouse. As they are still lay women, there is no particular requirement or ordination ceremony, though they will need permission from Bodhirak or the community abbot firstly. As lay persons, they take on the same duties as others in the community and though they are few in number, they further broaden the number of lay persons within Asoke exhibiting a pious appearance and semi-renunciant aesthetic.

Walking barefoot is typical for monastics and lay followers—it is unusual to see anyone wearing footwear in and outside of the communities. This is partially due to the emphasis on an ascetic lifestyle and that they believe there are great health benefits in walking barefoot, on more than one occasion I was told that it is like receiving “natural reflexology” or a “foot massage” throughout the day.<sup>659</sup> From an outside perspective forgoing shoes is a distinguishing feature of Asoke—for example, they were referred to by the *Bangkok Post* as “The PAD’s barefoot enforcers.”<sup>660</sup> Heirman considers the monastic ideal in regard to shoes reflecting that, “Shoes must always be simple to symbolize the humble life of a monk. In fact, wearing no shoes at all would be an even stronger sign of a modest life.”<sup>661</sup> This rings true for Asoke members and monastics who are very rarely seen wearing footwear.

In sum, shoes are no more than practical items of clothing, and they should be avoided as much as possible...footwear, irrespective of its negative connotations, is sometimes unavoidable. In such circumstances, the shoes must be very modest, and they should be removed in any situation that calls for respect to be paid.<sup>662</sup>

Few occasions warrant flip flops or sandals in Asoke—however in northern regions during winter socks and sandals can be worn and are then removed before entering buildings. There are visitors and some members who will wear simple sandals; however, all persons are encouraged to live without footwear. Not only does this practice touch on modesty, and the “poor” aesthetic but also refers to Asoke’s interest in health practices, reflexology, and alternative medicines.

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<sup>658</sup> Rachele M. Scott, “Pawinee Bunkhun: The Life of a Thai Buddhist Upasika,” in *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism Through the Lives of Practitioners*, ed. Todd Lewis (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 155.

<sup>659</sup> The idea of receiving a “foot massage throughout the day” seemed to me slightly far-fetched, especially since many areas in Asoke communities consist of sharp gravel, for which my feet were unaccustomed and unappreciative.

<sup>660</sup> Suthep Chaviwan, “The PAD’s Barefoot Enforcers: The Santi Asoke religious sect, supported by Chamlong Srimuang, brings the same fervour to the anti-Thaksin movement that it does to the pursuit of enlightenment,” *Bangkok Post*, November 2, 2008.

<sup>661</sup> Ann Heirman, “Shoes in Buddhist Monasteries from India to China: From Practical Attire to Symbol,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 69, no. 4 (2016): 415.

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

The last exploration regarding lay Asoke members is the relationship between attire and their political affiliations. As discussed in Chapter 3.3.1, Major General Chamlong Srimuang has played a central role in Asoke, he has been the most public of the lay Asoke members and has brought his dedication to the “Asoke uniform” with him. Chamlong is most always seen wearing a blue *mo hom* shirt with pants and with his short crew cut, he has brought the lay Asoke aesthetic into more public view. The other Asoke members, lay and ordained joined Bodhirak and Chamlong during the 2013–2014 political crisis in Thailand; one of my fieldtrips overlapped with the unrest and the use of colour and importance thereof was further highlighted in Asoke at this time.<sup>663</sup> The divide saw the Red Shirts, who were in support of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra was Prime Minister at the time of the protests) against the Yellow Shirts, who were anti-Thaksin/anti-Yingluck, in protests that turned violent at times. Asoke supported the Yellow Shirts—who had chosen the colour to associate with the monarchy and the (now late) king, who is symbolized by yellow.<sup>664</sup> The anti-government protesters also embraced using the blue, white, and red stripes of the Thai flag. As well, it is important to recognize the nuances within such strongly visually coded groups:

But these colors do not adequately represent the variety of divisions within the colored assemblage...A chromatic politics of identity thereby falls prey to the aesthetics of the state body which demands a coherent “we-self” to fix a unified regime of citizenship. Its moral coherence reproduces the very enmities it seeks to eliminate.<sup>665</sup>

Upon arrival in Thailand in November 2013, the political tensions had begun to rise and long-term lay members informed me that it was inappropriate to wear any red colours (as I had a dark red shirt with me, though the pro-Thaksin supports were typically wearing bright red) in Asoke communities or at the protest sites.<sup>666</sup> It was unclear if this request was to aid with my relationship with Asoke members, that I not visually (albeit unknowingly) signal support for their opponents, and/or if it was for my own safety, particularly while outside the community. As a foreigner, members said I could be a potential “target” at the political rallies and they often

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<sup>663</sup> For an overview of some of the political and social forces that led to the 2013–2014 political crisis, see, Watcharabon Buddharaksa, “The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: Organic Crisis, Social Forces and the Thai State, 1997–2010” (PhD diss., University of York, 2014).

<sup>664</sup> As mentioned previous, the days of the week are associated with certain colours in Thailand and because the king was born on a Monday, which is associated with yellow, it symbolized the Thai monarchy and decorations around his image often used yellow fabrics or flowers for example. The queen is similarly represented by a light blue colour as she was born on a Friday. The colours associated with the days of the weeks are based on Indian astrological connections between the planets and their representative deity.

<sup>665</sup> Noah Viernes, “The Aesthetics of Protest: Street Politics and Urban Physiology in Bangkok,” *New Political Science* 37 (2015):139.

<sup>666</sup> I experienced suggestions to avoid certain colours outside the context of Asoke as Thai friends would tell me the colour I was wearing on a certain day of the week was considered unlucky for example.

gave me clothing and accessories to blend in with the group, however as the violence escalated, it was no longer safe to visit the protest sites.

Interestingly, many lay Asoke members underwent a visual shift and merged symbols from their affiliated political faction, at times wearing yellow and accessorizing with the colours of the Thai flag as well as developing their own clothing with Asoke specific messages and images. Asoke had printed political slogans or pictures of Chamlong on dark blue t-shirts for example and white, red, and blue striped accessories (whistles, hats, headbands for example) and paraphernalia to represent the Thai flag were also being frequently, if not excessively worn. This shows the flexibility of members to embrace the visual markers of the groups that they adhere to politically. As explored above, physical appearance is used to express certain beliefs while within Asoke communities, and through the example of the 2013–2014 Thai political crisis, we can further observe the expression of political beliefs through changes in attire and how political engagement thus influences the aesthetic of lay members. The choice to adopt the markers of the larger political movement also shows the willingness to physically and visually join larger groups which they support. Of course, as Viernes observes, the red and yellow shirts “are pliable signs, as temporary as any order of images in the visual economy of the global city,” however I believe it worth noting the *aesthetic formations* which utilize these pliable signs to express a sense of unity and social knowledge of colour cues to point to certain associations or beliefs.<sup>667</sup> Said differently, though the colours of the 2013–2014 Thai political crisis were temporary signs, their use and development can give insight into Asoke as an aesthetic formation, as this term specifically refers to the “convergence of processes of forming subjects and the making of communities” which then develops material things.<sup>668</sup> The Asoke-made media during this time also assimilated symbols (yellow shirts and Thai flag accessories for example) from their political allies, exhibiting how Asoke is shaped and chooses to shape itself.<sup>669</sup> As such, we can see in this example an aesthetic formation in the process of forming and adapting to certain stimuli.

As seen in this sub-chapter, many Asoke beliefs are communicated, embodied, and reinforced through the wearing of the “Asoke uniform.” This includes views on modesty and sexuality, associations with the “traditional” agricultural lifestyle, a critique of consumerism and materialism, rejection of wearing white (as a rejection of Brahmanist influences as well),

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<sup>667</sup> Viernes, “The Aesthetics of Protest,” 139. Concepts of *aesthetic formations* are further discussed in Chapter 1.2.

<sup>668</sup> Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations,” 7.

<sup>669</sup> This media included the creation of clothing and environments, as well as television programming, online and print media.

as well as indicating a dedication to the group and renunciation of personal status and history. Individual aspects such as hair, clothing, and bare feet as well as the lack of adornments each have a variety of signifiers and layers of meaning that also represent specific Asoke beliefs. These features together create a quasi-uniform which bonds the community together as a whole, develops a distinct material culture, and distances them from persons in mainstream society. Concepts of “enclotted cognition” can also be considered in this context as physical changes may further influence lay member’s perception as they alter their appearance and behaviour to integrate themselves into the community and signal group adherence.



*Figure 3.9 Lay members prepare food for alms at Phuttha Phisek in Sali Asoke, 2013.*



*Figure 3.10 Students waiting with the resident samana before mealtime at a small Asoke garden centre outside of Nakhom Pathom, 2014.*

## CONCLUSION

The appearance of both lay and ordained Asoke members has been consciously constructed by Bodhirak and community members, however it has also been influenced by their political involvement and subsequent court cases (as discussed in Chapter 3.3). Bodhirak describes himself as an artist, and Asoke as his “artwork” stating that he has paid attention to “each detail” and that every decision has been a deliberate one towards expressing his understanding of the *Dhamma*.<sup>670</sup> As seen in Chapter 2, his interpretation of Buddhist teachings centres predominantly around *sīla* (moral conduct) which ties in with concepts of physiomorality as it is in this context, embodied and worn.

The distinctive appearance of Asoke monastics and members is a well-known feature of the group, however this aspect has only been stated briefly in existing literature. The robes of Asoke monastics have been previously mentioned in the context of the court cases, regarding the required transition to white for a period of time, and their choice of a darker shade of brown attire.<sup>671</sup> Similarly, the distinctive appearance of lay members has been occasionally described in passing by authors who may refer to the “Asoke uniform,” however no further consideration of this aspect of the group has been explored.<sup>672</sup> The materialization of beliefs is central within Asoke, and as such, I see this as an important discussion that sheds light on an overlooked facet of the community.

The study results from Adam and Galinsky on “enclothed cognition” provides initial support for their theory that “wearing clothes causes people to ‘embody’ the clothing and its symbolic meaning.”<sup>673</sup> This adds another layer of meaning to the aesthetics of Asoke members as clothing is not only signaling renunciation and strict moral action, but according to the theory of “enclothed cognition” the clothing may also play a role in the upholding and embodying of these messages. Adding to these aspects in regard to a monastic image, Collins proposes that the composition and perceived purity of the bodies of Buddhist renunciants can give lay persons immediate access to a “sacred, immaterial, and underlying Truth.”<sup>674</sup> The embodiment of the *Dhamma* is further explored by Mroziak as “physiomorality” and the connections between the

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<sup>670</sup> Interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014. This is further discussed in Chapter 4.1.2.

<sup>671</sup> For mentions regarding the robes of monastics, see, Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 44, 71, 189; Essen, “Self-Dependence and Sacrifice,” 39; Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 117, 127, 141–2, 164; Apinya, “Buddhist Reform Movements,” 183–4; Taylor, “New Buddhist Movements in Thailand,” 150; Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 160.

<sup>672</sup> The lay Asoke clothes were touched upon in the following: Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 52, 195; Essen, “Self-Dependence and Sacrifice,” 78, 130; Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 133–4, 163, 187; Apinya, “Buddhist Reform Movements,” 149, 162, 202; Apinya, “Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune,” 175; Taylor, “New Buddhist Movements in Thailand,” 150.

<sup>673</sup> Adam and Galinsky, “Enclothed Cognition,” 919.

<sup>674</sup> Collins, “The Body in Theravāda Buddhist Monasticism,” 203.

physical bodies of members and their representations of *sīla* have been explored piece by piece throughout this chapter.<sup>675</sup> Similarly, and within a Thai context, Cook also connects these elements stating that “the appearance of the body of the monastic reveals an inner state of moral attainment: others bear witness to moral qualities and virtues in monastic physical performance.”<sup>676</sup>

Asoke *samanas* and *sikkhamats* use common “physiomoral markers of worth” such as wearing robes and a shaven head to link themselves to other Buddhist mendicants, however their dark robes and eyebrows set them apart from mainstream Thai monastics. These distinguishing features are meant to signal the portrayal of an “ideal” renunciant, which is entwined with the sought-after validation of their group as a more moral, austere, and “true” Buddhism. This is particularly relevant in regard to the Asoke *sikkhamats* who wear brown and grey robes instead of white; because white denotes lay status in Thailand, I argued in this chapter that the *sikkhamats* have helped redefine renunciation through their visual representation of wearing coloured robes and being presented as ordained members of their community. Furthermore, the use of darker brown robes is meant to signal austerity and authenticity, as it visually connects Asoke monastics to renowned practitioners of the Thai Forest Tradition. Leaving their eyebrows unshaven is a way to set themselves apart visually from the mainstream monks but also functions as a critique of the Thai *saṅgha* and a way to indicate Asoke’s belief that they are observing a more “authentic” interpretation of Buddhism. Moreover, “physiomoral markers of worth” are used by not only monastics but by lay members as well.

Lay members in Asoke use similar methods for signaling physiomorality through dress, hairstyle, bare feet and not wearing amulets, jewelry, or makeup. The style and colour of the Asoke uniform is based on the clothing of northeastern agricultural workers or peasants where, “in the national Thai imagination...rural villagers conduct ‘traditional’ life trajectories”<sup>677</sup> Lastly, as many guiding principles within Asoke aim at “going back to the fundamentals” or “basics,” their clothing further reinforces the association with their belief that they are embodying a true interpretation of a more “pure” and “original” Buddhism. Their traditional style of attire, bare feet and short hair reflects the Asoke economic principles and represents their strict interpretation regarding the eighth precept and modesty/sexuality. This is also

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<sup>675</sup> Mroziak, *Virtuous Bodies*, 69.

<sup>676</sup> Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>677</sup> Chanjitra, “Self-transformation Strategies of Development,” 2.

important in relationship to the students in Asoke as these uniforms are used as a didactic tool and “to reflect their appreciation of traditional cultures instead of aping blindly or mindlessly the consumerist ‘modern fashion trends.’”<sup>678</sup>

As members manifest their beliefs through their appearance, a distinct material culture within Asoke has developed. The use of the Asoke uniform thus communicates core Asoke tenants of hard work, renunciation, modesty/morality, rural/village attire, and functions as a unifying feature of the group. Further, this unified appearance binds the community visually and signals adherence to the group. Morgan considers how social relationships are perpetuated through vision as persons are connected to larger groups that constitute society.<sup>679</sup> This applies within Asoke as the use of the “Asoke uniform” allows members to recognize each other as part of the group and pronounces their degree of dedication. As such, this appearance becomes a totem for lay Asoke members as it also conceals an individual’s status and background while generating a collective image where distinctive markers are dissolved.

To belong to the community means to *look* a certain way...in the first instance, one bears certain characteristics in appearance—style of dress, accoutrements, behavior, gesture, color of skin. In the second instance, one regards others and the world about one with a characteristic look. In the first sense one is seen; in the second one does the looking.<sup>680</sup>

This is particularly relevant in a self-reflective community which emphasizes *sīla* as members continually observe and reflect on their own composure and behavior and have regular community gatherings to discuss any trespasses. There is also a certain amount of peer pressure present in Asoke to adopt physiomoral markers as a lay person and to not only respect the moral parameters of the group (not wearing tight or revealing clothing), but additionally because it represents one’s own spiritual progress in giving up fashionable clothes, adornments, amulets and styled hair for example.

I would argue that the adoption of the lay “Asoke uniform” and specific monastic appearance is a kind of “sensory renewal” which has not only set Asoke apart as a distinct group but has furthermore been a foundation in developing Asoke as an aesthetic formation. Meyers’ development of the term aesthetic formation emphasizes the process of continual development and the shaping of subjects and communities which highlights shared aesthetics, and is evident within Asoke as shown throughout this chapter; we can see how members have tuned their senses, prompted experiences, shaped their bodies, and created a concrete material culture

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<sup>678</sup> Suwida and Bong, “Right Education – the Srisa Asoke Model,” 7.

<sup>679</sup> Morgan gives the examples of these larger groups as class, kin, tribe, ethos, folk, nation, monastic order, elect, redeemed, and damned. Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 3.

<sup>680</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

consisting of specific features that represent various Asoke beliefs.<sup>681</sup> The expression of these principles through the appearance of monastics and members has further deepened Asoke's communal identity and separated themselves as a distinct group apart from mainstream Buddhism. These values, which include the dedication to their political beliefs, has in turn influenced their current aesthetic profile, particularly in regard to the Asoke monastics. As such, Asoke has created their own distinct material culture in relation to their appearance, and as these aspects represent religious beliefs, I understand these various aspects as "sensational forms" which develop and underpin Asoke as an aesthetic formation.<sup>682</sup> Further, the communication of beliefs, and in particular the signaling of morality, ties in with discussions of physiomorality and underpins my argument to view Asoke as an aesth/ethic formation.

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<sup>681</sup> Meyer, "Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations," 7.

<sup>682</sup> Meyer, "Religious Sensations," 707–8.

## CHAPTER 4: AESTHETICS OF ASOKE ART

This chapter explores the artwork found in Asoke communities, the intention behind their creation, and the transformations of spaces through the recent additions of images—most importantly, Buddha statues. Asoke was previously well-known for their rejection of Buddha images and the veneration thereof, which makes this shift a particularly significant one.

This enquiry begins by considering how Asoke images are placed within a wider lens of art discussions and classifications in religious and Thai contexts. This leads into questioning the networks of agency present between not only the creators of art objects and the relationship to the larger community, but also the Buddha image itself. Further, the development and objective behind the artworks in Asoke will be explored in regard to Bodhirak's interest in art and his understanding of how art relates to Buddhist teachings. Buddha images will be considered within a wider context in Thailand to give a foundation for those found in Asoke. The Asoke group developed their first Buddha sculpture in 2006; Buddha images are now found in all main communities, and the various expressions and implications thereof will be examined. Paintings and statues of Bodhirak are placed throughout Asoke centres and will be discussed as well as images of the Asoke community, which exhibit how they see and represent themselves. A variety of other symbols are also found within Asoke artwork—such as *Dhamma* wheels, art to promote anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist views, the vulture, sun/circles (used on the Asoke flag), deities, and mythological creatures.

The term “aesthetic” has been explored throughout previous chapters in reference to the sensorial experience, or sensuous knowledge of the world, rather than focusing on ideas around beauty or art.<sup>683</sup> Through discussing artwork, this chapter focuses predominantly on visual elements within Asoke, however with the understanding that an embodied perception thereof also includes other sensory information: “The *embodied eye* means that seeing is never independent of touching, hearing feeling, and the manipulation of the body and environment; and that the study of religious seeing is the study of embodiment.”<sup>684</sup> This further overlaps with considerations of Asoke as an aesthetic formation, and the shared aesthetic profile of the community.<sup>685</sup> The concept of aesthetic formations aims at encompassing the shaping of subjects through collective aesthetics, the physiological and sensorial implications as well as

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<sup>683</sup> See Chapter 1.2 for further detail.

<sup>684</sup> David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 54. Original emphasis.

<sup>685</sup> The terms “aesthetic formation” and “aesthetic profile” are expanded upon in further detail in Chapter 1.2.

the materialized objects that emerge through this process.<sup>686</sup> The materialized things in this chapter are the sculptures, paintings, reliefs, and other artistic creations found in Asoke which develop and articulate not only the aesthetic profile of the community, but their held and propagated beliefs. These images arise from particular notions of art held by Bodhirak, which is concerned with using style, medium, and symbolism to express his understanding of Buddhist teachings, and aim at what he believes to be the “highest” form of art and spiritual awakening. Through looking at these developments, I hope to give insight into the breadth of artwork within Asoke, the changing visual landscape of the communities and the messages transmitted through these images.

## 4.1 Framing Asoke Artwork

### 4.1.1 Buddhist Art in Thailand and Asoke

There are many considerations when exploring images in Asoke, and before focusing specifically on the use of artwork, and particularly Buddhist images, it is important to garner a larger context in which these images are found. Asoke does not exist in isolation and has been shaped by a plethora of social, religious, and economic factors, and was developed as a reaction to what Bodhirak perceived as the incorrect interpretation and practice of Buddhism in Thailand. As such, this section uses various lenses to frame Asoke artwork in connection to broader structures before exploring details. This short introduction will begin with basic discussions of Buddhist art, iconographies, copying as well as the social relationships and the significance of these images in Thailand. The second half of this section will use Gell’s concepts of art in conjunction with McDaniel and Chiu who also both use this specific lens to discuss Thai images and material culture. This aims at not only a deeper insight into the art and interactions within Asoke, but how they relate to the geographical and cultural context in which they reside.

The beginning of Western scholarship within Buddhist studies focused heavily on literature and scriptural works, however in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, an interest in images and art began to increase.<sup>687</sup> The study of Buddhist art was often undertaken

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<sup>686</sup> Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding,” in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion and the Senses*, ed. Birgit Meyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 7.

<sup>687</sup> Also see Pattaratorn Chirapavati, “Buddhism and Thai Art,” *Religion Compass* 3/4 (2009): 566–79. For explorations on the history of Western Buddhist scholarship see, Catherine Newell, “Approaches to the Study of Buddhism,” in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Bryan Turner (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 388–406; Charles Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald Lopez (Chicago: University of

by art historians where a removed analysis of style and iconographic representations of Buddhist imagery was emphasized, rather than exploring the dynamics between images and living, practicing Buddhists with agency. Interest in rituals and material culture has brought about further research on the interactions and implications that images can have within lived religion—in Thailand, this includes the diverse streams of Buddhist practice, encompassing popular Buddhism and divergent movements.<sup>688</sup>

Buddhist art is typically described in terms of aniconic and iconic representations—art depicting images that symbolize the Buddha (examples include the *Dhamma* wheel, *Bodhi* tree or footprints), whereas iconic art portrays the physical body of the Buddha.<sup>689</sup> Debates and speculation have emerged, particularly surrounding the development of the iconic Buddha image—where and when it came into being, and the relationship to aniconic imagery—to which there is no clear consensus, and much is still unknown.<sup>690</sup> Though there are unanswered questions regarding the historical development of Buddha images, a variety of distinguishing features emerged, making him identifiable in a wide variety of contexts and geographic locations. Not only is the Buddha recognizable, but a carrier of meaning and a potent symbol, icon, and agent in Buddhist countries. As such, Buddha images play a prominent role in the visual landscape and Swearer notes that, “observers of Thai Buddhism are inevitably impressed by the ubiquitousness of the Buddha image.”<sup>691</sup>

Skilling suggests considering Buddhist art in terms of two bodies of the Buddha—his “form body” and his “*dharma* body”: the former is represented by iconographic images and the latter is representative of all of the teachings and written material.<sup>692</sup> Skilling explains that, “these two corpora constitute both the materiality and the spirituality of Buddhism: they are

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Chicago Press, 1995), 31–61; Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); J.W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1987). Some of these developments are also outlined within Chapter 1.1.

<sup>688</sup> Examples include: Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Benjamin Fleming and Richard Mann, eds., *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Justin McDaniel, “Liberation Materiality: Thai Buddhist Amulets and the Benefits of Selling Sacred Stuff,” *Material Religion* 11, no. 3 (2015): 401–3; Justin McDaniel, “The Agency Between Images: The Relationships Among Ghosts, Corpses, Monks, and Deities at a Buddhist Monastery in Thailand,” *Material Religion* 7, no. 2 (2011): 242–67. Thai art and material culture outside of Thailand is considered by Sandra Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

<sup>689</sup> Buddha images in this context and throughout this thesis and chapter are referring specifically to representations of Siddhārtha Gautama.

<sup>690</sup> For these discussions, see, Ashley Thompson, “In the Absence of the Buddha: ‘Aniconism’ and the Contentions of Buddhist Art History,” in *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, eds. Rebecca Brown and Deborah Hutton (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), 398–420. Also see, Klemens Karlsson, “Face to Face with the Absent Buddha: The Formation of Buddhist Aniconic Art” (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 1999).

<sup>691</sup> Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (New York: SUNY Press 2010), 12.

<sup>692</sup> Peter Skilling, “The Aesthetics of Devotion: Buddhist Arts of Thailand,” in *Enlightened Ways: The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand*, eds. Heidi Tan and Alan Chong (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012), 18.

inseparable traces of the same coin.”<sup>693</sup> He further describes the interactions and relationships to images, saying: “Buddhist art was not made to be viewed in a museum. The devotee’s gaze is never disinterested; he or she physically engages with the sacred objects by praying, supplicating, thanking and rewarding.”<sup>694</sup> The representation of Buddhist imagery symbolizing beliefs and practices is deeply significant as it connects people, ideologies, traditions, and shapes aesthetic formations. Collins argues that, “images are the primary vehicle for remembering the traditional,” especially for the many people in cultural-civilizational traditions who are unable or uninterested in conceptual articulation.<sup>695</sup> Thailand overflows with images that reinforce these traditions—from Buddhas and other Buddhist imagery (Theravāda and Mahāyāna), as well as Hindu and animist symbols, mythological creatures, deities, and pictures of the royal family for example. Not only is there a large repertoire of images, but the number of them is also impressive, and it is necessary to place them in the social context in which they reside, as they are of central importance in the lives and societies in which they exist—particularly when considering representations of the Buddha. The Buddha image, and especially statues, carry not only religious meaning, but are hugely culturally significant in Thailand—a country which is approximately 94% Buddhist.<sup>696</sup>

Considerations of the proliferation and enormous quantity of images of the Buddha in Thailand also touch on the copying and reproduction thereof as well. We could ask: “How does a viewer look at an image and recognize him as the Buddha?”<sup>697</sup> Morgan’s response is that, “the image is part of a concatenation of images, a long chain of visual references that eventually vanishes in the past. Visual traditions are sources that inform or condition what the viewer sees.”<sup>698</sup> The passing along of visual information, particularly the image of the Buddha, opens many discussions, however this aspect has often been omitted by art historical perspectives. Griswold notes that,

both magic and common sense require every image of the Buddha to be a copy of an older one, itself copied from a still older image, and so tracing back through no matter how many intermediaries to one of the perfect likenesses supposed to have been made...How else could an acceptable likeness be made, and some fraction of the Buddha’s protective power be transmitted to stone or bronze? If in actual fact his Person

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<sup>693</sup> Ibid.

<sup>694</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>695</sup> Steven Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 188.

<sup>696</sup> According to the Government’s National Statistics Office.

<sup>697</sup> Morgan asks this question about Jesus, however the considerations surrounding images and the recreation thereof are relevant within this context as well. Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 59.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid.

was not represented in art until half a millennium after his death, certain images... must have been deemed by later generations to be the legendary archetypes.<sup>699</sup>

Even to the untrained eye, Buddha images have many recognizable similarities and often persons unfamiliar with Buddhism can recognize him. Typically, these images are considered in regard to both style and the iconography. *Style* refers to the form of design, and Griswold mentions that this includes aspects such as “facial expression, canons of proportion, and conventions for representing drapery,” which, “would depend much more on the artist’s training than on the model.”<sup>700</sup> *Iconography* however refers to the likeness being represented and aims at capturing what Griswold describes as the “essence” of the original and is what, “travels from one place to another whenever an image makes the trip and inspires a copy.”<sup>701</sup> Styles have varied greatly in different times and places, however many characteristics have remained strikingly similar—it is this continuation of “essences” that allow the image to be perceived as the Buddha, and further Freedberg also notes that, “a religious image or photograph is not merely a copy of original; it is an ontological communion with the original.”<sup>702</sup> The purpose of recreating images with such a strong likeness is to be certain that the power transmitted by the image remains intact—the closer the likeness, the more authentic and potentially valuable it is. Chiu states that,

the patron may have wanted to sponsor a “magical device” to achieve his own ends, but the appearance of an image was also influenced by the materials, craftsmen, and monks. The visual form of a Buddha image is the result of the integration of these different agencies, whose influences may have varying degrees of strength; copying is the result of a process of collaboration, conflict, and compromise. An image that is seen as magically powerful and thereby attracts a large following of devotees is basically an image in which agencies have been integrated and channelled in a way to which devotees have been receptive.<sup>703</sup>

Within Thailand, these styles and iconographies converge into an easily recognizable Buddha image, however, as we can see in certain cases, deviations occur from the Buddha’s standard iconography.

Images of the Buddha that diverge from the standard styles and iconographies can be found in what Taylor calls “cultural counter-sites” that “ideologically and symbolically contest

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<sup>699</sup> A. B. Griswold, “Imported Images and the Nature of Copying in the Art of Siam,” *Artibus Asiae Supplementum* 23 (1966): 37.

<sup>700</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>701</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>702</sup> David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 234.

<sup>703</sup> Angela Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna: Art, Lineage, Power, and Place in Northern Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 184.

and potentially invert existing arrangements in the wider social order.”<sup>704</sup> Taylor examines statues at Wat Sanam Chan and Wat Phra Dhammakāya, which he says, “both in differing ways open to imaginative ‘Other’ (or ‘Othering’) local possibilities.”<sup>705</sup> With the creation of Buddha images in Asoke, another example of this “othering” is further developed in the Thai Buddhist landscape. Taylor further compares the creation of these new images in the different locations:

Dhammakāya claim an earlier unpolluted authority that antedates the mechanical production of modern state sanctioned art forms. It is a position of power that is hard to challenge outside of tradition and simultaneously it is hardly incontestable. Wat Sanam Chan, on the other hand, makes no such precession of order claims and even throws a glove to the state over its right to reproduce its own artistic representations as pure visual consumption.<sup>706</sup>

As such, Asoke Buddhas are similar in intention to that of the Dhammakāya Buddhas, as both are striving to represent the “real” or “original” Buddha which were both made from their “own imagining rather than from conventional, normative iconography.”<sup>707</sup> The intention behind the creation of Asoke’s Buddha was not only to reinforce certain Asoke beliefs (and potentially express the spiritual advancement of the group), but also was a way to materialize their critique of the use and depiction of mainstream Buddha images as well.<sup>708</sup>

Dhammakāya and Wat Sanam Chan through their production of sacra, especially in representations of the Buddha, may be considered subversive, as they generate marginality through difference and exclusion from the centre...Although, as marginal hybrid religious practices, these monastic centers indicate a sense of exclusion and simultaneously a position of critique and power of the status quo.<sup>709</sup>

Though the described sites are considerably different from Asoke in regard to belief and aesthetic, this description has parallels to the development of the Asoke Buddha. The image of Asoke as a subversive group was already developing in the 1980s, long before their first Buddha statue—as such, by virtue of Asoke being considered subversive, their Buddha images could fall under this category as well. The development of the Asoke Buddha further “others” the community, however as we will explore below, their Buddha statues are only one of the many aesthetic differences found in the Asoke centres compared to other *wats* (temples) in Thailand.

To develop the geographic and cultural context of Asoke, the next section will consider theories from Gell, which have also been used in relation to Thai Buddhism by McDaniel and

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<sup>704</sup> Jim Taylor, “Buddhism, Copying, and the Art of the Imagination in Thailand,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 8 (2007): 2. These themes are also discussed in, James Taylor, *Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand: The Religiosity of Urban Space* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>705</sup> Ibid.

<sup>706</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>707</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>708</sup> The development of the Buddha in Asoke is further discussed in Chapter 4.2.1.

<sup>709</sup> Taylor, “Buddhism, Copying, and the Art of the Imagination,” 13.

Chiu.<sup>710</sup> McDaniel has used Gell's theories surrounding art and agency to frame a chapter in his book as well as an article to explore the "vernacular" material culture in Thai temples, with a focus on a popular temple in Bangkok, which has an array of features, such as the shrine of the famous ghost Mae Nak and a conglomeration Buddhist, animist, and Hindu elements.<sup>711</sup> Chiu's book focuses on Buddha images in Lanna art, especially in regard to stories from *tamnan* (chronicles), monastic histories and legends from northern Thailand, and considers Gell's theories as a basis for understanding the anthropological importance of these images.<sup>712</sup> Certain aspects of Gell's theories in this context are relevant as they strive to unravel the complex interactions between art objects, the persons creating and receiving them, and the social lives of the images.<sup>713</sup> This section uses these differing perspectives, framed with Gell's approach to an anthropology of art to better conceptualize the art objects found within Asoke.

Gell uses the terms index, artist, recipient and prototype; each of these facets can be considered "social agents of different kinds," and are able to act as "agents" or "patients" in relation to one another.<sup>714</sup>

To be an 'agent' one must act with respect to the 'patient'; the patient is the object which is causally affected by the agent's action. For the purposes of the theory being developed here, it will be assumed that in any given transaction in which agency is manifested, there is a 'patient' who or which is *another 'potential' agent*, capable of acting as an agent or being the locus of agency.<sup>715</sup>

The index is the image or art object which is "seen as an outcome, and/or the instrument of, social agency."<sup>716</sup> The artist is responsible for the index's characteristics and is the creator or immediate cause of the index. Indexes then exert agency on recipients (or the recipients exert agency via the index). Lastly, a prototype is the representation of a certain entity (objects or persons) within the index, "often by virtue of visual resemblance, but not necessarily."<sup>717</sup> This

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<sup>710</sup> Gell's theories are complex and only a relevant, limited portion will be discussed in this section which are based on: Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Gell has received much praise as well as criticism, for further perspectives, see: Liana Chua and Mark Elliott eds. *Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell* (New York: Berghahn, 2013).

<sup>711</sup> Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 161–221; Justin McDaniel, "The Agency Between Images: The Relationships Among Ghosts, Corpses, Monks, and Deities at a Buddhist Monastery in Thailand," *Material Religion* 7, no. 2 (2011): 248.

<sup>712</sup> Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna*, 13–7.

<sup>713</sup> The "social lives" of objects are discussed by Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>714</sup> Gell, *Art and Agency*, 28.

<sup>715</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. Original emphasis.

<sup>716</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>717</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

combination of interactions stresses that art objects are not inactive as they exert agency and allow a form of communication between persons.

Firstly, the creation of an index is of central importance to the process of agency being exerted by persons to develop an image which will then contribute to this agency, as Chiu explores,

the patron as agent acts on the artist, who picks up his tools in order to meet the patron's wish. The artist also attempts to channel the agency of the Buddha in forming the image in his likeness. The Buddha's agency is channelled again via monks during rites to consecrate—or ritually make worthy of devotion—the statue. Because the ceremony is also executed by the sponsor and the temple's lay congregation, their agency also acts upon the image as patient. After its consecration and establishment in a hall, the image brings merit to the initial patron and enables him to achieve his goal. The image may continue to act as an agent by drawing further devotees to venerate it. These new devotees may be moved to donate flowers, to speak to the image, to become more faithful, or even to start a war to seize possession of it. As these devotees are drawn to the statue, they may inspire other patients to follow them. Thus the chain of agency is continued. The creation and worship of a Tai Buddha image exemplify Gell's proposal that art is a "system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it."<sup>718</sup>

The creation of Buddha sculptures in Asoke has been a collaboration between Bodhirak and resident artists, particularly with producing larger stone statues, a team of people work together to make not only the Buddha image, but the foundation and environment in which it is located. Because Bodhirak has chosen to exhibit specific characteristics on the Asoke Buddha, a collaboration occurs between the agency of the Buddha's typical likeness and Bodhirak's agency, imposing his ideals and opinions of how the Buddha should be represented. As such, Asoke is shaped not only by the agency of the Buddha image, and Bodhirak, but also the members and artists who all collectively come together in transforming the community through the addition of these images. Bodhirak has developed a kind of "consecration ceremony" for the Buddha statues in Asoke as well, this is again an example, as Chiu points out, of the Buddha's agency being exerted, and relics also come into play adding another layer of interaction into the nexus.

The relationship between Buddha statues and Asoke members are acted out in a much different way compared to that of mainstream temples. McDaniel illustrates how indexes undergo constant modification through the participation of the patients (after the artist had created it):

In Thai Buddhist monasteries in general, patrons do not merely look at or prostrate to images, but also affix gold, insert relics, draw holy water, request audiences, as well as

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<sup>718</sup> Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna*, 14–5.

comfort images with robes, pillows, food, and flowers. There are not simply things to see, but things to do. Images exist in a social and ritual atmosphere.<sup>719</sup>

These interactions drastically alter the indexes as “often so much gold is affixed to the face, feet and chest of each image that the facial features disappear with all the layers added...Candle and incense smoke darken the images, garlands of flowers are hung around their necks, and money is placed in their hands.”<sup>720</sup> Within Asoke, there are no “active” shrines—gold leaves are not adhered to Buddha statues, there are no candles, incense or money offerings within Asoke communities. The Asoke community is certainly shaped by residents and visiting members, however in a drastically different way than what McDaniel describes. Transformations occur at a much slower pace in Asoke because members do not bring offerings for the statues, there is generally less traffic in Asoke, images such as statues reliefs and paintings are often permanently situated within the community and any substantial changes to the centre are discussed communally. This being said, there seems to have been many developments, additional artworks, and renovations since my fieldwork in 2013–2014.

Two more important aspects to consider regarding the indexes present in Thai religious contexts, are the placement of the images and the activities that happen around them. The indexes found in Asoke contrast to a typical Thai *wat*, and the aesthetic of Asoke communities and the visual cues used are a dramatic departure from what McDaniel describes: “Monasteries are often lively and stimulating and this atmosphere is created by placing a number of different images in relationship with each other so that instead of having a single altar with a central focus, there are multiple poles forming a network of visual cues.”<sup>721</sup> Within Asoke however, with the exception of special events or groups of school children, Asoke communities are typically quiet and sparsely populated, further, there are no altars comparable to what McDaniel describes. The network of visual cues is supplied by other aspects of the community, such as their ever-present recycling stations, gardens, dirt roads, barefoot members, and the rustic aesthetic to remind members of their beliefs surrounding modesty, nature/natural living, working hard, using little, and giving back to society.<sup>722</sup> This also speaks to the location of the indexes in Asoke, as the Buddha statues are not always centrally placed. In Ratchathani Asoke for example, the first and largest stone Buddha was placed behind the *sala* on an open grassy

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<sup>719</sup> McDaniel, “The Agency Between Images,” 265.

<sup>720</sup> *Ibid.*, 248. There is of course a wide range of aesthetic variation within Buddhist contexts in Thailand, depending on the lineage, personal taste of the abbot (or previous abbots), location, influence of patrons, and the available resources.

<sup>721</sup> McDaniel, “The Agency Between Images,” 265–6.

<sup>722</sup> See Chapter 2 for a discussion of these beliefs.

area flanked by plants which was surrounded by vegetable gardens.<sup>723</sup> This area seemed only to be used for the occasional festival with the large Buddha as a backdrop, and the surrounding area has in recent years been turned into a kind of water attraction. Another example can be seen in Sali Asoke, where a sitting Buddha statue was placed along a wall within an open building that contains the kitchen and an eating area.<sup>724</sup> In Pathom Asoke, a walking Buddha statue is present near the entrance of the community and in Santi Asoke, another is situated near the base of the waterfall in the centre of the community.<sup>725</sup> Further, all of the *salas* I visited also had at least one sitting Buddha, and some have multiple.<sup>726</sup> A walking Buddha was often placed in the *sala*, though there was only ever one in each Asoke centre I visited. As such, there are Buddha statues present when members gather to listen to daily sermons (through FMTV or from the resident monastics), have communal meetings, for meals or for events and festivals, however they are not necessarily gathering around or for the statue. In this sense, Asoke recipients engage with the index in a much different way than in typical *wat* setting, where visitors will go to the temple to pay their respects and give offerings specifically to a Buddha image.

Not only will patrons go to a temple to visit a particular Buddha image or statue (such as Mae Nak in McDaniel's example) but "they often have very particular and personal relationships with the images and address them with specific words, at specific times."<sup>727</sup> The recipients of the images in Asoke do not have the same kind of personal relationships as McDaniel describes, and instead, have a more passive, impersonal approach to the indexes around them. This is illustrated as Asoke members do not give offerings, bathe, or clothe the statue or address the statues personally or specifically. It is important in Asoke to not venerate the Buddha as a deity or see the statue as a supernatural, or magical entity that will respond to requests, prayers, or offerings. The statues in Asoke are interacted with individually only for cleaning and up-keep purposes, but the group may bow collectively towards a Buddha image before and after *Dhamma* talks given by *samanas* for example. It should be noted though that this was custom before the development of the Asoke Buddhas, as related by Heikkilä-Horn: "While chanting, all the monks and the lay people face in the same direction, as if there was a

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<sup>723</sup> See Figure 4.3.

<sup>724</sup> See Figure 4.1.

<sup>725</sup> See Figure 4.4.

<sup>726</sup> Pathom Asoke for example has seven seated Buddhas—five of which are next to each other on a platform that has been made to look like rock and the other two flank the group and have individual podiums. All of the seated Buddhas have the same *mudrā* and posture. See Chapter 4.2.1 for a discussion of the postures.

<sup>727</sup> McDaniel, "The Agency Between Images," 249. Popular deities found in Thai temples include Kuan Yin, Phra Sangkachai (Indian *arahant* Kaccayana), Brahma, and Ganesha (the Indian elephant-headed god) among others.

statue of Buddha in front. After the chanting session the monks turn around to face the lay people and Bodhiraksa starts to preach around 4 a.m.”<sup>728</sup> Commonly in Thai temples, individuals visit, prostrate, place incense, flowers, and offerings on their own time and typically not coordinated with other visitors, whereas in Asoke, bowing and veneration in front of a statue only occurs in group formats. Also, it seems that not all Asoke members felt it was appropriate to include Buddha statues in the community; Seeger and Parnwell reported that in 2007 in Santi Asoke, “Buddha images are now more in evidence, a tendency with which some of the followers of Santi Asok seem not to be happy at all.”<sup>729</sup> This account was shortly after the creation of the first Buddha images in Asoke, and during my fieldtrips in 2013–2014, I did not encounter any members that disapproved of the statues, however this is not to say that some still do not disagree with this development.

Regarding prototypes, or who/what is depicted in the index, McDaniel notes that because “images/indexes are often believed to be inhabited by different spirits...the ‘prototype’ doesn’t merely inspire the creation of an image; it resides within the image, constantly empowering it.”<sup>730</sup> The majority of prototypes in Asoke represent the Buddha, or Bodhirak and these indexes may be useful reminders for Asoke members to inspire dedication to their path, however statues and images are not considered to have spirits or an inner essence as it is communally frowned upon to worship supernatural phenomena.<sup>731</sup>

Another factor to consider is how ritual power is developed through the number of interacting indexes in a space and their relationship:

While a museum display might accentuate the beauty, material, and craftsmanship of a single image, the image is ritually powerful only when lost among a forest of other images from which it draws concomitant associative power. Certainly a person might not be able to see a single image as well when it shares space with many other images, incense sticks, candles, and the like.<sup>732</sup>

This again represents a vastly different aesthetic compared to the Asoke communities, especially because the images are not developed or arranged to have ritual power. Further, in Asoke, the number and diversity of indexes are limited, filtered, and generally have a certain stylistic consistency. There fewer indexes in Asoke and they are often arranged with a coherent intention—such as a series of paintings hung in sequence to illustrate stories from the life of

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<sup>728</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 127.

<sup>729</sup> Martin Seeger and Michael Parnwell, “The Relocalization of Buddhism in Thailand,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 29 (2008): 157.

<sup>730</sup> McDaniel, “The Agency Between Images,” 248.

<sup>731</sup> See Chapter 2 for a discussion of Asoke beliefs.

<sup>732</sup> McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 165.

the Buddha or a grouping of identical Buddha statues for example.<sup>733</sup> Typically, halls and larger meeting spaces are sparsely decorated, and the Buddha images are also often not centrally placed and may sit to one side of the monk's platform. There are cases of an Asoke statue being close, and in relationship to a larger assortment of images—such as in Sali Asoke where a Buddha statue sits before a wall in a common area, adjoined to the kitchen and the wall hosts pictures of the royal family, images of the Buddha, Bodhirak or revered monks, such as Ajahn Mun, and other practical aspects such as a calendar and a clock (see Figure 4.1). Even with the large wall of assorted images, none of them are obscured or lost in a “forest of images” nor are they accompanied by incense, candles, or similar ritual objects. As such, the “associative” power of grouping images is not developed in Asoke in the same manner, and even if images share the same space, it is (with few exceptions) done in a controlled and curated way. The rejection of a haphazard collection of images signals specific intentions and beliefs within Asoke, which has been an important feature in the aesthetic development of the community.

Asoke's distinct aesthetic style is further influenced by the materials they use for their artworks and buildings.<sup>734</sup> The material of an index plays an important role which influences the aesthetic style, its reception and agency, however there are a series of underlying factors that will contribute to the popularity and/or power of the image.

While certain images in Thai Buddhism are lauded for their age or precious materials, most are honored for their connection to certain powerful monks, their relics, their power to heal, or their power to protect. Many of these highly revered and powerful images are made of resin or wood, crudely and mass-produced bronze, plastic, copper, resin, or clay.<sup>735</sup>

Though Buddha statues in Thailand are made from many kinds of materials, gold plays a large role not only in relation to many statues but also the *wat* itself. Not only are many Buddhas, temples, and ornamentations painted gold, but as previously noted, devotees come to adhere gold leaf to statues, and at times, have the gold leaf placed on them by a monk.<sup>736</sup> Asoke on the other hand, uses no gold in the architecture of their centres, and natural materials are used (or materials that “appear natural”) and nearly all of the sitting Buddha statues in Asoke have a sandstone appearance. The choice to use natural-looking materials further underscores the intention to display (and interact with) their Buddha statue as a non-deity and set it apart from Buddha statues in other temples. Some statues in Asoke are painted with a matte gold, such as

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<sup>733</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4.2.2.

<sup>734</sup> The aesthetic aspects of the community and buildings will be considered further in Chapter 5.

<sup>735</sup> McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 163.

<sup>736</sup> I observed this ritual at Wat Bang Phra (a temple famous for “magical” *Sak Yant* tattoos) and it was accompanied by the sprinkling of holy water and chanting.

most of the walking Buddhas (Figure 4.4), sculptures of Bodhirak as a youth (Figure 4.10), and the vulture (Figure 4.18).<sup>737</sup> As an interesting development, in 2016 an example of a standing and sitting Buddha painted with a glossier metallic finish can be observed in Santi Asoke, Bangkok; these new sculptures also exhibit new artistic expansions and is a sign of further aesthetic change within the communities.

In regard to artists, McDaniel considers that, “in Buddhist monastic art, the artist is rarely identified, known, or even acknowledged. The artist’s agency is further marginalized because each image is a possession of the sangha...even though they are made and presented by the laity.”<sup>738</sup> Because Asoke consists of smaller, more regular groupings of persons, it is less difficult to find the creator of an image or statue, and some paintings are signed. I was able to interview one lay resident artist who was creating a large number of the statues and reliefs in Santi Asoke as well as drawings, paintings, and cartoons for print material. There are a few prolific artists in Asoke who work closely with Bodhirak, but there are also examples of original artworks that were donated by unidentified persons or externally commissioned.<sup>739</sup> Because there are few people making the main images in Asoke, there is a certain stylistic consistency to many of the artworks and it allows more control and input from Bodhirak as to his desired end product. This is again in contrast to McDaniel’s observation that “there are no official curators, docents, conservators, patrons, trustees, consulting scholars, and the like assigned to monastic objects.”<sup>740</sup> The indexes within Asoke are curated by Bodhirak, or the abbot of the community, or through a communal decision, which means there is little haphazard modification to the community, or to the indexes within it.

The development of the indexes in Asoke has not only shifted the aesthetic of the community, but includes another dimension of agency, as Morgan notes,

rather than regarding an image as principally a visual code or iconographical message, scholars of lived religion are inclined to refocus on what the image does in terms of the relationships it mediates...the image is less signifier (though it certainly remains one) than it is agent in constructing and negotiating relations among different parties.<sup>741</sup>

These constructed and negotiated relations influence the Asoke community, and members as individuals in a few ways. The inclusion of Buddha sculptures has shaped the physical

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<sup>737</sup> Buddha statues are expanded upon in Chapter 4.2.1, artwork depicting Bodhirak is discussed in Chapter 4.3.1 and the vulture is considered in Chapter 4.4.2.

<sup>738</sup> McDaniel, “The Agency Between Images,” 248.

<sup>739</sup> Two artists that have contributed significantly to Asoke include Saeng Sinn and “Mairom Thammachat Asoke” both of whom are discussed further below.

<sup>740</sup> McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 164.

<sup>741</sup> David Morgan, “The Look of the Sacred,” in *Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 299.

landscape of the centres but has also contributed to a new structuring of the group's identity, as being Buddha-less was a significant aspect of Asoke's previous image and distinctiveness. Further, it signals Bodhirak's assessment of the "spiritual progress" of the group, which could consequently influence individual and group identity.<sup>742</sup> Also, the Buddha sculptures have inspired new group events, as a kind of "consecration ceremony" for new statues has been developed. This interplay of exchanged agencies signals how "art objects instigate action, create new communities, mediate relations between people, or create new contexts for interaction among people," and further that these "art objects may not only evidence cultural understandings but may also contribute to the development of new directions in society and history."<sup>743</sup> In the microcosm of Asoke, the development of artworks and a particular aesthetic thereof style has not only shaped the communities, but the fundamental expression how they envision and represent themselves as a group.

#### 4.1.2 The Development and Intention of the Asoke Aesthetic

Images, stupas, painted scrolls, illuminated manuscripts—are all part of the spiritual, social, ritual fabric of Thai society. All participate in materiality; at the same time, they are produced by spirituality and inspire spirituality. They follow their own aesthetics and their own philosophy—aesthetics of devotion, rather than fine art for art's sake, and a philosophy of perfection rather than a philosophy of realism or abstraction.<sup>744</sup>

Since the beginning of Asoke, Bodhirak has promoted a vision of what he believes is the appropriate practice and interpretation of Buddhist teachings; the development of art and a particular aesthetic also are ways in which Bodhirak and the community have created and helped form their identity and express their beliefs. Bodhirak has had a longstanding interest and relationship with the arts, as seen with his early studies at Poh Chang Art College in Bangkok, and his time as a musician and entertainer. Though Bodhirak's focus shifted from popular art to religious themes, he still describes himself as an artist; however instead of painting or sculpting, he states that his "element, or medium are the happenings of life, catching every detail and composing them into a living art."<sup>745</sup> Even Bodhirak's Facebook page lists him as an "artist" rather than a monastic or spiritual leader for example.<sup>746</sup> Bodhirak's interest in art and a certain aesthetic profile and can be seen throughout the Asoke communities with the abundance of murals, statues, paintings, carvings, and reliefs.<sup>747</sup>

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<sup>742</sup> The development of Buddha images in Asoke is further discussed in Chapter 4.2.1.

<sup>743</sup> Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna*, 16.

<sup>744</sup> Skilling, "The Aesthetics of Devotion," 31.

<sup>745</sup> Interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014.

<sup>746</sup> As seen on Bodhirak's personal facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/pg/Photirak/>.

<sup>747</sup> The aesthetic profile of the community is also seen in the buildings, structure of the Asoke centres and other

Bodhirak's notion of aesthetics and the importance of artworks to convey meaning and to further one along the spiritual path, gives purpose and significance to the art found within Asoke communities. The images and sculptures have a wide range of mediums and styles and are found throughout the Asoke buildings and communities. Particularly at the main centres, artworks are readily found in the main *sala*, dining halls, schools, and dorms, while an array of sculptures are also often displayed along paths and outside entrances; examples of reliefs and carvings can also be found in the architectural structures on beams, gables, pillars, and walls. The purpose of exploring the kinds of artwork within Asoke is also aimed at better understanding how the group represents their beliefs, and how those beliefs are further reinforced by coming in regular contact with such images. During interviews with Bodhirak and Asoke members, there was an emphasis that Bodhirak is deliberate with what is created in the communities, and the consistency of images (such as the use of the same statues and paintings in multiple centres) and his relationship with lay artists also signals this intentionality. These images, as we will explore, generally exhibit not only a certain stylistic uniformity but illustrate specific ideas and moralities to be embodied; for Bodhirak, it is central that persons in the Asoke community commit to the quality of action that contains the spirit of *Dhamma*.<sup>748</sup> Outlining the five levels or kinds of art as described by Bodhirak is intended to give further insight into the Asoke aesthetic profile in regards to art, ideals for the members, and centres as whole.<sup>749</sup>

The first stage, or kind of art, is described by Bodhirak as the “lowest” and is comprised of lustful art that contains or insinuates erotica or depictions of violence, including those implied by color, that may arouse passions in the viewer. This stage of art is described as very raw and superficially based.<sup>750</sup>

The second level of art is explained by Bodhirak as being less raw than the first stage, however more persuasive. This kind of art is described as utilizing color or something appealing to cover up the bitter intention of the art; Bodhirak used the metaphor of bitter medicine with a sweet coating. This art is primarily seen as persuading the viewer toward luxury, sensuality, anger, and other defilements, and though this stage is less graphic than the first, Bodhirak explained that viewing it would eventually lead to indulgence. He described how these kinds

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elements, discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>748</sup> See Chapter 2 for a discussion on Asoke beliefs.

<sup>749</sup> Parts of this sub-chapter were also reiterated within Robekkah L. Ritchie, “Sikkhamats: The Aesthetics of Asoke Ascetics,” in *Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 137–164.

<sup>750</sup> The following content within this section is from an interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014.

of artists realize that humans are always affected by the defilements (*kilesas*), so they learn how to selectively mix them into their artwork.<sup>751</sup> Without this kind of beautification, the content would be too dryly documented. Bodhirak described the need for literature or painting to add color and “sweetness” to what might otherwise be bitter or unpleasant.

The third level of art still attempts to coat the messages within it, and the artist continues to understand that viewers will find the essential meaning of the art too dry, without using the persuasion of the *kilesas*. Because the artists in this third stage believe that the essential part, the pure look of the art, will not interest people, they turn to more technical methods, such as composition, harmony, interest point and focus, among others.

The fourth kind of art incorporates *Dhamma* (the teachings of the Buddha and representations of him, but also in this context, Bodhirak’s interpretation thereof). This stage is reached when the artist adds aspects of *Dhamma* to the work. Because it contains the essence of *Dhamma* within it, Bodhirak states that this art form benefits those who encounter it, making the artwork inherently meritorious on various levels.

The last stage, the fifth, was described as transcendent, supramundane (*lokuttara*) art and Bodhirak’s definition of this kind of art goes beyond just traditional mediums of painting and sculpture for example. Bodhirak mentions that he has not yet seen any art of this kind and stated that he doubts it is possible to reach this fifth level in the West because of different perceptions of art, but the fourth stage is still possible. It was unclear if this kind of art must be made by “transcendent” people or experiences, or if the art itself would lead to these states (or both). Bodhirak states that it is his mission to achieve this supramundane artwork. “Every day, I am living and working on the art,” he says, however, “few people understand that I am an artist, painting the world and painting life.”<sup>752</sup> Integrating the spirit, or spiritual, and mindful qualities into his “art” is the essential key, he says. Thus, for Bodhirak and Asoke, these stages are not only descriptors for physical artworks, but reflect the foundation of aesthetic and moral intention, which are interwoven with a living expression of Asoke *Dhamma*. This is integrated, represented, and communicated into Asoke through the appearance of the members, as well as in the physical communities for example. These teachings are reinforced in the daily lives of monastics, lay members and students through Bodhirak’s daily sermons, Asoke literature and media (for example, Asoke Television station FMTV), and active *Dhamma* study, practice, and discussion.

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<sup>751</sup> The *kilesas* are defilements or negative emotions, such as passion (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*).

<sup>752</sup> Interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014.

## 4.2 No Longer “Buddha-less”

This section firstly discusses the relevance of Buddha sculptures in Asoke, considering the lack of Buddha imagery during the first few decades of the group’s existence, and secondly, the various stylistic and iconographic variations of the Asoke Buddha will be explored.<sup>753</sup>

### 4.2.1 Buddha Sculptures in Asoke

The Buddha image is an object arising from the wishes and needs of individuals and produced through a process of craft as well as through social and institutional practices. The Buddha image is an object that not only represents the Buddha himself but also channels the interests of the monks and lay devotees who build, consecrate, and venerate it... The image has a “life” in which it continues to be subject to the sometimes divergent interests of lay devotees and monks. The history of the Buddha image is, thus, intertwined with the history of its community.<sup>754</sup>

Indeed, the creation of the Buddha images in Asoke channels the interests of Bodhirak and his group. Likewise, the history of Asoke is reflected in their Buddha images—as well as their rejection thereof until 2006. Asoke was well known for their choice to not include Buddha images within their communities, and this distinction further distanced and contrasted Asoke to the typically Buddha-laden temples.<sup>755</sup> Heikkilä-Horn comments that,

Another significant deviation from the mainstream is that the temples of the Asoke group do not have any statues of Buddha. Therefore the group has been accused of not worshipping Buddha. Their own explanation is that only *Dhamma* i.e. the doctrine can represent Buddha, not images or statues of him. *Dhamma* cannot be “moulded out of brick, stone, clay or cement into charms, lockets, amulets or other adornments sold to the ignorant people.”<sup>756</sup>

This is however only part of the reasoning behind Asoke’s choice to not include Buddha images in their centres, and it was a decision which touched on their beliefs regarding icon worship as well as their determination to recreate what they believe to be an “authentic” representation of Buddhism as practiced by the Buddha himself. As Swearer further describes,

From the beginning Santi Asok adopted an iconoclastic position vis-à-vis conventional Thai Buddhist practices, in particular, icon veneration. It rejects the ritualistic use of

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<sup>753</sup> Because of the 2013–2014 political crisis at the time of my fieldwork, I was unable to investigate the role of artwork as fully as hoped. Artwork has become a prominent aspect of Asoke that has not been discussed by previous authors, and as such, I feel it is important to explore these images even if many questions remain, especially around the reception of works and member’s relationship to it.

<sup>754</sup> Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna*, 3.

<sup>755</sup> The absence of Buddha statues was mentioned by, Donald Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 246–8; Masato Fukushima, “Another Meaning of Meditation: On the Santi Asoke Movement in Thailand,” *Tai Culture* 4 (1993): 136; Rory Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 131; Juliana Essen, “Self-Dependence and Sacrifice: Development in a Thai Buddhist Community” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2002), 24; Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 119–21.

<sup>756</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 119.

Buddha images, the widespread custom of wearing amulets, and the commerce in religious artifacts...Santi Asok's rejection of the veneration of images grows out of its broad socio-cultural iconoclasm legitimated by its interpretation of early Buddhism. Santi Asok rejects the use of Buddha images and amulets on the grounds that early Buddhism was essentially and ethical religion devoted to observance of the precepts (*sīla*) and the pursuit of the *dhamma*.<sup>757</sup>

Swearer cites an Asoke publication from 1989 in which an anonymous author discusses the belief that Buddha images developed because of the influence of Greek theism in northwest India a few hundred years after the Buddha's lifetime and further "appealing to the authority of the Pāli *suttas*, the article states that the Buddha forbade images to be made of himself primarily because he was not to be venerated in the same manner that theistic religions worship gods and angels."<sup>758</sup> The relationship to the Buddha image in Thailand is complex and as mentioned in the previous chapter, some statues are thought to be imbued with special powers or inhabited by spirits and visitors can develop personal relationships with them, bringing the statue's "favourite" offerings, and asking for a wide array of spiritual, emotional or material help. As such, Essen also comments that:

Asoke temples and communities have no Buddha images that are so common throughout Thailand since the image has been sullied by popular ideas about its supernatural powers (an extension of the "spirit cult").<sup>759</sup>

Though this is a broad and (in my opinion) not entirely accurate description of the wider reception of Buddha images in Thailand, this belief seems to be present in Asoke, especially as there is an emphasis on denouncing magical, superstitious, and animist practices. Further, this was combined with the motivation to not engage or create more Buddha images as well, as Heikkilä-Horn states:

There are already so many statues of Buddha in Thailand that, according to Bodhiraksa, there is no need to encourage the people to build more statues. Bodhiraksa emphasises that he does not want to prevent the Thais from 'worshiping the Buddha image', but he would like to encourage the people to worship the ideas behind the image. It is, however, a misconception to believe that the Buddha images themselves have supernatural powers.<sup>760</sup>

In a similar light, Mackenzie mentions that "a number of Buddha images donated to the temple are housed in the dome as Bodhirak did not wish Asokans to develop a dependence on images. Indeed, he did not donate these images to other temples as he believed they already had too many images."<sup>761</sup> Apinya notes that through the lack of inner and outer decoration in the *sala*,

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<sup>757</sup> Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha*, 247.

<sup>758</sup> Ibid.

<sup>759</sup> Essen, "Self-Dependence and Sacrifice," 24.

<sup>760</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 121.

<sup>761</sup> Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 131.

Asoke “challenges the mainstream tradition...Asoke goes further so as to refuse even Theravada’s sacred symbol, the Buddha image,” and “this negation of idolatry is one of Asoke’s most outstanding characteristics.”<sup>762</sup> She further links this to the emphasis in Asoke on the “essence” or “core” of each individual practitioner’s “religiosity” and personal “spiritual capacity rather than any outer and objectified symbols.”<sup>763</sup>

Bodhirak further expands on reasons for not having Buddha images, also emphasizing the importance of focusing on the spiritual work of the community:

At first we did not promote the possession of Buddha statue because at the beginning we ourselves needed to concentrate on our own strict disciplinary practice, to reduce the *kilesa* and to become pure. Thus we were not in a position to extend our work to have any influence on society at large. We focused on practicing the *Dhamma* the way Buddha had originally taught and on strictly observing the precepts. At the beginning I wanted to...first ensure that we are strong enough, are sufficiently immune in the heart and have sufficient understanding of how to rightly respect and worship the Buddha in a non-deity like way. Then we can reverse the process and go back to worshipping Buddha statues in order to teach and lead others to respect the Buddha in a non-deity manner.<sup>764</sup>

As we can see from these various excerpts, there were a variety of overlapping reasons for excluding Buddha images from the community. Through this exclusion, Bodhirak was able to simultaneously (1) teach his notion of the ideal relationship to the Buddha to his followers (2) criticize common uses of Buddha images (by lay persons as well as monastics) and (3) aim at legitimizing his group through referencing (his interpretation) of early Buddhism and the emphasis on moral practice. I would argue that these previous authors did not emphasize or explore the importance of the exclusion of Buddha images (with perhaps the exception of Swearer) as this feature was often briefly mentioned as an aside. Within Thailand, the ubiquitousness of Buddha images is a central aspect of the country’s material culture and for Asoke to reject this image from the beginning of the formation of the group is a drastic statement.

In 2006 Asoke developed their first Buddha statue which signaled a shift not only in the landscape of the communities themselves, but also a transformation in how they represent themselves, as being Buddha-less was a well-known aspect of the group, as well as one of their defining features. A 2007 report from Mackenzie states that “indeed, it is difficult to find an

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<sup>762</sup> Apinya Fuengfusakul, “Buddhist Reform Movements in Contemporary Thai Urban Context: Thammakai and Santi Asoke” (PhD diss., University of Bielefeld, Germany, 1993), 81.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid.

<sup>764</sup> “Phra Buddha Bhithammit,” Santi Asoke Booniyom Community, accessed August 18, 2019, [http://www.asoke.info/Book/santi\\_history/santiasoke\\_history.html](http://www.asoke.info/Book/santi_history/santiasoke_history.html).

image of the Buddha in Asoke communities.”<sup>765</sup> Though the images may have been difficult to find in 2007, this still signaled a shift from the previously Buddha-less communities.

Images, whether they are fine art or devotional pictures, build and maintain our sense of what is real... These images envision what is there or not, allowing people to interact with it in the visual space of their worlds. And when something changes in those worlds, their images and their way of regarding them may change in order to stabilize or re-envision what they take to be real. Images, all images, are visual technologies that enable the interface with everything that is or that people want to be.<sup>766</sup>

The Buddha image as a specific form of visual technology has many layers of imbedded meaning, and the choice to integrate it into Asoke—with Asoke-specific characteristics—both signals and catalyzes change. I believe it is worth asking, why did Asoke choose to integrate Buddha statues at all? Bodhirak’s above quote refers to the moral progress of the group and their own dedication to not only practicing what they believe to be the “way Buddha had originally taught” but also bringing about wider societal change. Stating that Asoke did not have Buddha statues because they needed to focus on their “strict disciplinary practice, to reduce the *kilesa* and to become pure” implies that Bodhirak believes that the group has reached a certain level of spiritual progress since the communities now contain Buddha images.<sup>767</sup> The vague answer that was frequently given to me when I asked members why Asoke developed Buddha statues, is that Bodhirak deemed the group “ready.”<sup>768</sup> As such, I would argue that the development of Buddha images in Asoke works as a physically manifested symbol of the group’s spiritual progress (as perceived by Bodhirak and members). “Spiritual progress” is not only a challenging concept to define, but also is intangible and ethereal by nature—especially when referring to a group of individuals rather than the specific persons who are experiencing the “progress.” Bodhirak viewing Asoke as “ready” for the inclusion of Buddha images can be seen as a way to mark or legitimize the group’s collective development, or stability. This relates to the above quote from Morgan and the ability of the creation of Buddha images to shape the reality of Asoke members. This includes a turn in the relationship to the physical spaces in the communities and visual landscape but can also shape identities as this shift signals both spiritual progress and is a loss of the previous distinction as the “Buddha-less” group.

Bodhirak’s age may also have played a role in choosing to integrate Buddha statues, as he states, his wider goal is to teach others to “properly” respect and worship the Buddha in a non-deity way, which must be achieved while he is alive and healthy enough to teach. Lastly,

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<sup>765</sup> Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 170.

<sup>766</sup> David Morgan, “Art and the Devotional Image: Visual Cultures of the Sacred,” (Paper presented at Kunst-Religion-Aktualität, Kunstsammlung, Düsseldorf, Germany, November 2015), 12.

<sup>767</sup> Santi Asoke Boonniyom Community, “Phra Buddha Bhithamnimit.”

<sup>768</sup> Lay members and the monastics I asked, gave similar answers along these lines.

the relationship to artists in the community may have influenced the timing and development of the Buddha statues. We can thus see that there are many possible interweaving factors that spurred the creation and integration of Buddha images in Asoke. It is unclear if something in particular was the catalyst for this change, however the reshaping of the communities since the introduction of the first statue has been widespread, and now all Asoke centres are home to multiple Buddha images.

Five examples of Buddha sculptures from four different centres will be used to explore Asoke-specific iconography and style found within the communities. Two of the smaller sitting Buddha images have been included to reveal the subtle variations of face and setting for example. The first and largest seated Buddha from Ubon Ratchathani, exhibits placement and use of size as well. A seated Buddha image from Santi Asoke is more appropriately a relief and differs in regard to style and material in comparison to the other standard seated Buddha images found in Asoke. Lastly one example of a walking Buddha has been included as they were at the time of my research, uniformly made.<sup>769</sup> This is intended to explore some of the characteristics of the Asoke Buddha, discuss why and how it is unique and how it expresses Asoke beliefs.

The seated Buddha in Asoke is referred to as “Phra Phutthaphithamnit” which translates as, “great mark of Buddha-*Dhamma*” or “great mark of the *Dhamma* teachings of Lord Buddha.” Further, the Asoke Buddha is referred to as being in the “*tilakkhaṇa* pose” and this is not only the posture but is also cited as the larger meaning of the Buddha sculptures:

[Bodhirak] actually did not want to have a Buddha image before because people didn’t have the right thoughts about respecting the Buddha image. They probably like to ask for something at the temple like a good girlfriend, money, higher rank, something like that, and nowadays, about thirty years after teaching *Dhamma*, most people in Asoke understand [the proper relationship to] the Buddha...So now we have a Buddha image, but different from the others, that means the main purpose of the [Asoke] Buddha is: *Lokuttara*, *lokavidu*, and *lokānukampā*.<sup>770</sup>

*Tilakkhaṇa* typically represents the three marks of existence (*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*) however the three characteristics that are cited in Asoke are: *Lokuttara*, *lokavidu*, and *lokānukampā*. *Lokuttara* or the “supramundane” referring to the highest state of the enlightened mind was often mentioned in Asoke, this is also seen in Bodhirak’s discussion of the highest form of art creation in Chapter 4.1.2. *Lokavidu* is generally translated as “knower of the cosmos” which usually refers to the Buddha but in Asoke it also means “real knowledge and

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<sup>769</sup> The landscape of Asoke has undergone many changes in recent years and the number of walking Buddha sculptures has also increased substantially, and new variations in the color and size of the walking Buddha have also emerged since 2015.

<sup>770</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Rinpah at Sali Asoke, February 25, 2013.

understanding of the sensual pleasures to which one has been enslaved” and to transcend beyond this to the supramundane.<sup>771</sup> Lastly, *lokānukampā* is having sympathy with the human condition and world, and Asoke emphasises further striving to help others be relieved of their suffering. This also can relate to the integration of ideas of *bodhisattas* in Asoke, as discussed in Chapter 2.1.

Typically, the Buddha is represented in four postures, or *īryāpatha*—sitting, standing, walking, or reclining. The most common of which is the seated Buddha image, though many examples of these other postures are found in Thailand. Asoke has developed both seated and walking Buddha statues which are found throughout the communities. Though rare, a few examples of other postures exist in Asoke, such as two standing Buddhas (one relief and one statue in Santi Asoke) and a small reclining Buddha relief in Ratchathani Asoke.<sup>772</sup> The walking Buddha was developed around 2012 and the Asoke landscape continues to change—even since 2015, many communities have renovated large areas and new statues, particularly walking Buddha sculptures, have been installed. There are subtle differences between the various sitting Buddha statues in Asoke, however they generally follow a prescribed pattern, style, and size (approximately a metre high and are a tan/sandstone colour). The walking Buddhas are around two metres tall and painted in a matte gold colour. Though as mentioned above, there are exceptions in both cases.

Even at first glance, the Buddha developed in Asoke has certain unique characteristics, some more obvious than others. Many of the common physical features of Buddha sculptures are based on the list of the “Thirty-Two Characteristics of a Great Man.”<sup>773</sup> These characteristics cover a number of intricate details using similes, and though not all are present

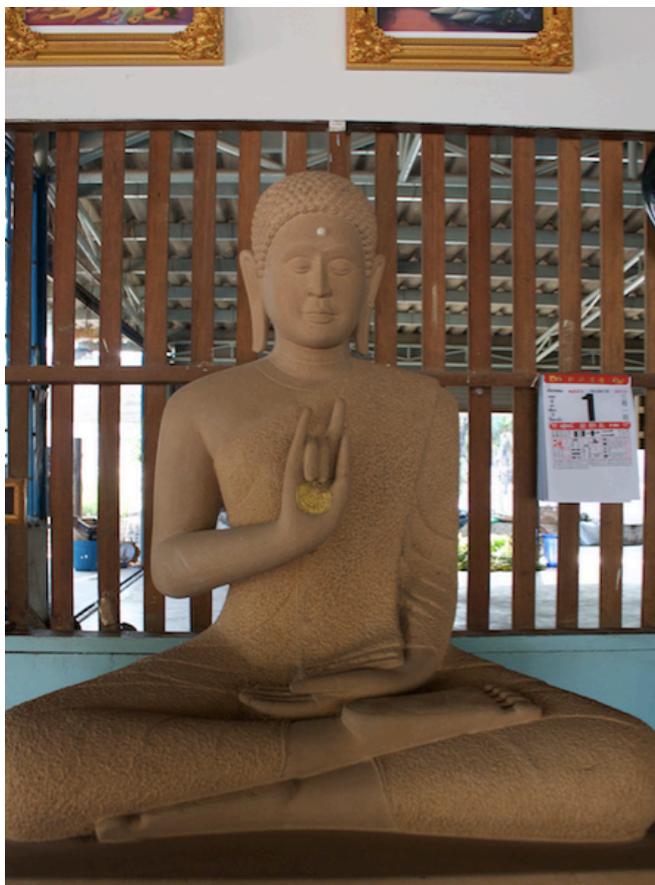
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<sup>771</sup> Santi Asoke Boonniyom Community, “Phra Buddha Bhithamnimit.”

<sup>772</sup> The relief of the standing Buddha was present during my fieldwork in 2014, but the sculpture of the standing Buddha seems to have been developed around 2017. There are most likely other exceptions as the communities have developed new images in recent years.

<sup>773</sup> The “Thirty-Two Characteristics of a Great Man” or *mahāpuruṣa lakṣaṇa* are listed in D 30 and M 91. The complete list: 1. feet with level tread; 2. soles of the feet marked with wheels with a thousand spokes; 3. projecting heels; 4. long fingers and toes; 5. soft and tender hands and feet; 6. net-like (webbed) hands and feet; 7. high-raised ankles; 8. legs like an antelope’s; 9. the ability to touch one’s knees with either hand without bending; 10. male organs enclosed in a sheath; 11. a bright complexion, the color of gold; 12. skin so delicate and smooth that dust cannot adhere to it; 13. separate body hairs, one to each pore; 14. bluish-black (like collyrium) body hairs that grow upwards and curl in rings to the right; 15. a divinely straight body; 16. A body with seven convex surfaces; 17. torso like a lion; 18. no hollow space between the shoulders; 19. a proportionate body like a banyan tree: the height of his body is the same as the span of his outstretched arms, and conversely; 20. an evenly rounded bust; 21. a perfect sense of taste; 22. jaw like a lion’s; 23. forty teeth; 24. even teeth; 25. no spaces between his teeth; 26. very white and bright teeth; 27. a longue tongue; 28. a divine voice, like that of the karavika bird; 29. deep blue eyes; 30. eyelashes like a cow’s; 31. a soft and white tuft of hair between his eyes; 32. a head like a royal turban, meaning a protuberance on the top of the head. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, trans. Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 441–2.

in representations of the Buddha, some aspects have become prominent features.<sup>774</sup> Stratton identifies the most important of these in Thailand to be the *ushnisha* (cranial protuberance), coiled hair curls, elongated earlobes, long arms and projecting heels.<sup>775</sup> As we will see, Bodhirak has chosen to keep some of these aspects and remove others to represent or affirm distinct Asoke beliefs. There are a few aspects that make the Asoke Buddha an interesting amalgamation of typical attributes, and specifically designed Asoke flare. The two most distinguishing features of the Asoke Buddha, I would argue, are the missing *ushnisha* and the unusual *mudrā*, or hand gestures.<sup>776</sup> Stylistically, these Buddha images have minimal traditional Thai influence, though Figure 4.5 shows a stronger use of more common Thai ornamentation and style.



**Figure 4.1** Buddha sculpture in Sali Asoke.



**Figure 4.2** Buddha sculpture in Pathom Asoke.

<sup>774</sup> For a further examination also see: Nathan McGovern, “On the Origins of the 32 Marks of a Great Man,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 39 (2016): 207–47; Kenneth G. Zysk, *The Indian System of Human Marks* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 160–72.

<sup>775</sup> Carol Stratton, *Buddhist Sculpture of Northern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2004), 47.

<sup>776</sup> The Sanskrit term *mudrā* will be used here as it is more common than the Pāli *muddikā*, and *muddā*. Also, in some contexts, *mudrā* refers to the whole-body posture.

Buddha sculptures can have a wide range of stylistic factors in Thailand, and Stratton observes that, “other anatomical conventions such as the shape of the finial and how the fingers are modeled, seem to depend more on the Buddha image copied or the type than on prescribed details from the commentaries,” further stating that “actually, a great variety of anatomical conventions and stylistic preferences are found on Buddha images made in Northern Thailand.”<sup>777</sup> Thus it is not uncommon for different artists to create varying styles or unique flare, however the Asoke Buddha differentiates itself from these further as the iconography is changed as well. Working top down, we will explore these elements exhibited by the Asoke Buddha.

Beginning at the crown, two of the first obvious differences of the Asoke Buddha are the lack of finial and cranial protuberance or *ushnisha*. Thai Buddha statues most often have a finial resembling a flame or drop-shaped spire emerging from the *ushnisha*, which is a half-spherical mound atop the Buddha’s head. Most often it is assumed that the *ushnisha* is a mound of hair, but according to the “Thirty-Two Characteristics of a Great Man” it is a feature of the Buddha’s cranial anatomy. The *ushnisha* is one aspect of the Buddha image that can be found in a great number of Buddhist contexts and it can vary in size and style greatly, from low, subtle mounds to large conical or dome-shaped protuberances, which are often covered in hair curls. Brown mentions that not all signs from the “Thirty-Two Characteristics of a Great Man” were visually replicable (such as voice) and that, “the extent to which the artists attempted to reproduce the *lakṣaṇa* varied according to place and time, but the cranial bump became standard for most images.”<sup>778</sup> The Asoke Buddha has no *ushnisha*, because according to Bodhirak it is an unrealistic representation of the Buddha, since he was a human.<sup>779</sup> This aims at reinforcing the Buddha as a non-deity and reminding members that he should not be worshipped as such.

Many kinds of hair curls are found on Thai Buddhas, from small tightly packed, to low flat rings or large conical spirals and at times, arranged in neat grids. The Asoke Buddha consistently has longitudinal rows of flat spiral curls (turning to the right) and the commonly seen band which separates the hair and face has also been excluded. The hairline can vary slightly between Buddha sculptures in Asoke, some have more rounded hairlines (seen in Figure 4.1) or more squarely defined (Figure 4.2) or with a slight widow’s peak (Figure 4.5).

The *urna*, or mark on the forehead between the eyebrows, according to the “Thirty-Two

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<sup>777</sup> Stratton, *Buddhist Sculpture*, 47.

<sup>778</sup> Robert Brown, “Buddha Images,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert Buswell Jr. (Macmillan: New York: 2004), 81.

<sup>779</sup> Interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014.

Characteristics of a Great Man” is meant to represent a single strand of white hair curled into a small mound. In Asoke, the Buddha’s *urna* is often a lighter shade or white colour and resembles a marble inset in the statue. The first and largest Buddha erected in 2006 in Ratchathani Asoke apparently had the *urna* hollowed out in order to hold “151 Buddha’s relics” within the statue (see Figure 4.3).<sup>780</sup> On this Buddha, ornamental detail was added to the *urna* and it is a lighter color than the rest of the sculpture, besides this, there is no indication that “relics” have been placed inside. Asoke has developed their own kind of “consecration ceremony” and there are images of Bodhirak interacting with the *urna*, and as such, it is unclear if all Buddha sculptures in Asoke contain “relics” or only especially large or important statues.<sup>781</sup> The inclusion of the *urna* in Asoke statues is interesting considering the *ushnisha* was excluded due to supernatural association.



**Figure 4.3** First Buddha sculpture in Asoke, erected in 2006, Ratchathani Asoke.<sup>782</sup>

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<sup>780</sup> Santi Asoke Boonniyom Community, “Phra Buddha Bhithamnimit.”

<sup>781</sup> I was unable to attend any consecration ceremonies during my field work as they only happen very occasionally, and the communities were generally preoccupied with political activities during the time of my research. There are only a few images and reports of the Buddha consecration and as such, there is little information surrounding these events.

<sup>782</sup> In 2017 this area was developed into a large water feature, including more statues, and the gardens have been relocated. Photograph taken in 2014.

The Buddha's facial features have diverse variations, one aspect thereof can be illustrated through the array of eyebrows shapes, some as subtle peaks and others with double ridges, and can also have strongly defined, rounded, broad or narrow curves, or may flare out by the temples. The bridge of the nose and width between the eyebrows can also vary—some have eyebrows joining at a peak, and others leave space for the lines of the nose to emerge from. The Buddha found in Asoke consistently has rounded eyebrows with a single defined ridge which meet in the middle in a soft point. The eyes are half closed under rounded eyelids and some statues have more defined irises and pupils than others. Unlike many Thai Buddhas, which feature more rigid geometrical shapes, particularly regarding the nose, the Asoke Buddha attempts to convey more realistic features with a rounded nose and nasolabial folds. The mouth is softened in a subtle smile with defined edges to the upper and lower lips. The chin and jawline are soft, and the face is generally the same shape, but some may be either squarer or more oval (this subtle difference is seen in Figure 4.1 and 4.2). Buddha images often feature long earlobes though they are not part of the “Thirty-Two Characteristics of a Great Man.” According to Bodhirak, the Asoke Buddha has retained elongated earlobes as it signals the heavy jewelry worn by Siddhārtha during his princely life, and the subsequent renunciation of the material life. The Asoke Buddha also has the typical three rounded lines around his neck. The shoulders of the Asoke Buddha are broad and angular and lead to unarticulated, rather cylindrical arms. This brings us to one of the most striking features of the Asoke Buddha: his *mudrā*, or hand posture.

A Buddha's *mudrā* is a particularly important aspect of the sculpture, expressing a variety of meanings depending on the positions of the arms and hands.<sup>783</sup> Both the seated and walking Asoke Buddhas have unusual hand gestures. The seated Buddha rests the left hand in his lap, and has the right arm bent with the right hand in front of the torso, palm facing outwards and with the index, little finger and thumb extended upwards while the middle and ring finger touch the palm.<sup>784</sup> This gesture is similar to the *Karana Mudrā* which is described as a gesture to ward off evil or as a sign to heed dangers.<sup>785</sup> The posture of Asoke Buddha was explained in regard to the previously discussed *Tilakkhaṇa* pose (representing *lokuttara*, *lokavidu* and *lokānukampā*) as well as meaning “I love you.” It was unclear how exactly these two meanings intermingled or if they were developed in relation to each other. This hand gesture was

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<sup>783</sup> Common *mudrās* include the “earth-witness” posture of (*Bhūmisparśa Mudrā*) which features the left-hand palm up, resting in the lap and the right hand touching the ground or the meditative posture with the hands resting on the lap with palms facing upwards (*Dhyāna Mudrā*).

<sup>784</sup> As seen in Figures 4.1–4.3 and 4.5.

<sup>785</sup> Examples of the *Karana Mudrā* are more frequently found in Tibetan contexts. See Jürgen Schick, *Bilder aus einer anderen Welt: Die Götterwelt des Tibetischen Buddhismus* (Reute: Meister Verlag, 2006).

described in Asoke as a Chinese sign to represent “I love you” however it seems to have originated from combining letters I, L and Y (I Love You) from American Sign Language and later became a more mainstream symbol.<sup>786</sup> Sikkhamat Rinpah further explains this hand gesture and says that it represents what “the lord buddha has done—like a *bodhisatta*...you help the others and you help the world too, so everyone will have happiness...not only [having happiness for] yourself. ‘I love you’ [also means] I love you because I love to help you, without anything more [without expectations for reciprocity].”<sup>787</sup> A seated Buddha developed in 2017 in Santi Asoke shows a different *mudrā* with interlaced fingers and the hands placed palm down on his lap; another distinction is that this seated Buddha is also painted gold, unlike the other seated versions.<sup>788</sup> The walking Buddha in Asoke displays a variation of the *Abhaya Mudrā* which commonly represents fearlessness, peace or protection. Typically, this posture is seen on standing or walking Buddhas in Thailand with either one or both hands raised, palms outwards with the elbows close to the body and bent around ninety degrees.<sup>789</sup> The difference with the Asoke walking Buddha can be seen with the outstretched arms and that the hands are not parallel with each other. The *Abhaya Mudrā* is also associated with the story of an assassination attempt on the Buddha as he subdued an angry elephant with the gesture. In Santi Asoke, this scene is alluded to with a walking Buddha adjacent to a large stone elephant statue. Another interesting feature on the hands is the inclusion of mandalas on the palms of both Asoke Buddhas, and they are often painted gold on the seated Buddhas (as seen in Figure 4.1 and 4.2).<sup>790</sup>

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<sup>786</sup> ASL or American Sign Language sign for: ILY (I love you). Examples can be found at <http://www.hand speak .com/word/search/index.php?id =1098>.

<sup>787</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Rinpah at Sali Asoke, March 1, 2013.

<sup>788</sup> A visitor had posted an image online of this new addition, however the meaning and intention behind this statue is unclear.

<sup>789</sup> For a short overview of walking Buddha images in Thailand, see John Listopad, “The Walking Buddha in Thailand,” in *Enlightened Ways: The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand*, ed. Heidi Tan and Alan Chong (Singapore: Asian Civilizations Museum, 2012), 32–9.

<sup>790</sup> The large Buddha sculpture found in Ratchathani Asoke is an exception where the palms are left unpainted seen in Figure 4.3.



Figure 4.4 Walking Buddha statue in Santi Asoke.

The Buddha's torso shape, depending on region and era, can have many variations from angular to curved with rounded pectorals and/or stomach. The torso of the seated Buddha in Asoke tapers from the broad shoulders to a slender waist and the chest is relatively flat. On many statues in Thailand, the Buddha's nipples are visible through his robe cloth or his right nipple is exposed as the robe leaves the right shoulder and arm bare. In Asoke, all of the seated and walking Buddhas are covered with thick-looking robes (see Figure 4.1–4.3) that obscure his torso and cover his nipples. The Buddha relief in Santi Asoke (Figure 4.5) is an exception to this and has an exposed nipple. The style of robes worn by Thai Buddha statues is predictable, with the right shoulder exposed, and only in some instances both shoulders are covered by the upper robe.<sup>791</sup> Stratton notes that "it has been the custom in Thailand to depict the material of the robes as a sheer or transparent sheet which, when draped across the body, allows the superhuman nature of the Buddha's body to shine through."<sup>792</sup> The Buddha images in Asoke do not follow this trend (with one exception) and instead wear robes that conceal the body. The seated Buddha within Asoke is covered in cloth with minimal draping, the *sanghati* or outer robe lays folded on the left shoulder and fabric creases are evident on the left arm and over the

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<sup>791</sup> The components of monastic robes are discussed in Chapter 3.3.1.

<sup>792</sup> Stratton, *Buddhist Sculpture of Northern Thailand*, 53.

legs. On the smaller statues in Asoke (Figure 4.1 and 4.2) the fabric is textured to contrast with the Buddha's skin. The seated Buddha relief in Santi Asoke (Figure 4.5) differs as his robe is a transparent-looking cloth with a slender folded ribbon of *sanghati* fabric (in the style of Northern Sukhothai and Thai Ping type Buddha statues) a waistline is apparent however marks on the wrist and below the knees are very faint. The seated Buddhas in Asoke also do not have additional draping details where the robes meet the platform and instead the fabric is tucked under his legs. In contrast, the Asoke walking Buddha is amidst a flurry of moving fabric; the upper and lower robes are visible, with the lower robe falling generously on the ground, exposing only the front part of the Buddha's feet (Figure 4.4). For walking or standing Buddha images, this is quite unusual as the fabric is typically body-forming with the robe only flaring out to the sides or back in a flat, controlled manner. This further exhibits the artistic licence used by Bodhirak and resident artists to imbue their statues with specific characteristics.

The seated Asoke Buddhas are all portrayed in a half-lotus position with the right foot resting on the left thigh.<sup>793</sup> The soles of sitting and reclining Buddhas in Thailand are often embellished with a multitude of auspicious symbols.<sup>794</sup> In Asoke, the seated Buddhas have simple spiral patterns on the soles of their feet, with the exception of the Buddha in Santi Asoke (Figure 4.5) which has no markings.

Often Buddha statues in Thailand are seated on a large lotus or raised, multi-tier embellished pedestals. Most seated and walking Buddhas in Asoke either have no base and are seated directly on a rock or flat surface or have a very simple platform (as seen in Figure 4.1 and 4.3). The choice to have no elaborate pedestals again illustrates the importance of the Buddha being represented as a non-deity and the nature-based aesthetic in Asoke communities. The seated Buddha relief in Santi Asoke (Figure 4.5) is an exception to this and is seated on a lotus atop the coiled tail of the *nāga* king, Muchalinda with his seven serpent heads emerging from behind the Buddha's shoulders.<sup>795</sup> This also serves a practical purpose as this relief is outdoors and exposed to the elements; the colour variation between the Buddha's head and chest compared to the lower body reflects the effects of the weather.

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<sup>793</sup> Seated Buddhas are often portrayed in a full lotus posture where the soles of both feet are visible. Some examples of Buddhas seated on a raised platform with their feet and knees together as though sitting on a chair are also seen.

<sup>794</sup> For elaboration see, Claudio Cicuzza, *A Mirror Reflecting the Entire World: The Pāli Buddhapādamāṅgala or "Auspicious Signs on the Buddha's Feet"* (Bangkok: Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation, 2011).

<sup>795</sup> *Nāgas* are a prominent aspect of Buddhist mythology and in Thailand can be seen throughout temple architecture as well. The Buddha sheltered by the *nāga* illustrates the story of when Muchalinda (the *nāga* king) protected the Buddha from rain for a week.



*Figure 4.5 Buddha sheltered by seven-headed nāga in the Millenial Vihāra in Santi Asoke.<sup>796</sup>*

The material of the Buddha statues in Asoke is another interesting consideration. Quite often in Thailand Buddha images are painted gold or gilded and applying gold leaf to Buddha statues is practiced in many temples. Some statues in Asoke are painted with a matte gold, including the walking Buddha, however all the seated Buddhas were a neutral sandy color apart from two examples in Santi Asoke.<sup>797</sup> Using neutral tones instead of gold for the seated Buddha statues is meant to further illustrate the “down to earth” unostentatious ideal, and striving towards a rustic, earthy appearance in Asoke, as well as reinforcing the Buddha as a non-deity. In contrast with the serene earth-toned sitting Buddha, the walking Buddha statue in Asoke is typically painted in matte gold; an example of a walking Buddha in Santi Asoke in two-tone gold (with the robes painted a darker shade than the skin) was also documented in 2017. In recent years, the walking Buddha has also been developed in the same sandy colour, but in a

<sup>796</sup> The multi-story building in Santi Asoke topped with a dome made of silver beams is officially called the *Millennial Vihara - Buddha's Relics Chedi* and is the most artistically diverse spaces within Asoke and is unusual for a variety of reasons which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.4.5 and 5.2.2. *Vihāra*: translates to “abode” or “dwelling place” and refers to both physical locations where monastics live as well as the heavenly abode (*dibba-vihāra*), the divine abode (*brahma-vihāra*), the noble abode (*ariya-vihāra*). *Chedis* (Thai) are common features in Buddhist countries, and outside of Thailand are typically called *stūpas* (Sanskrit; Pāli: *thūpa, cetiya*).

<sup>797</sup> These exceptions are the Buddha in Figure 4.5, which is grey and gold, and a new version of the seated Buddha, made in 2017 was painted gold, and has his fingers interlaced in his lap. Other statues painted gold in Asoke include the sculpture of Bodhirak as a young man (Chapter 4.3.1) and depictions of the vulture (Chapter 4.4.2).

larger format than the gold statues of the same form. In Pathom Asoke a walking Buddha carved from stone was consecrated as “holy Buddha relics” were placed in the *urna* in 2014 during Bodhirak’s ordination anniversary celebration.<sup>798</sup> This statue is also unusually large, and scaffolding was built around it for Bodhirak to reach the forehead of the Buddha. Another large light-coloured walking Buddha was documented at Sali Asoke.<sup>799</sup>

Seated Buddha statues are generally found in the *sala*, however there are exceptions to this, as Sali Asoke has a Buddha in a large kitchen/common area (Figure 4.1) and the large Buddha in Ratchathani Asoke (Figure 4.3) is placed in an open outdoor space. There are examples of the rather artistic placement of Buddha statues as well, as seen with a sitting Buddha statue which is positioned within the large waterfall at Santi Asoke, and only his hand and glimpse of his body can be seen through the water.<sup>800</sup> Walking Buddha sculptures have been placed in the *sala* in some centres, on pathways or near entrances to the community. As the inclusion of Buddha statues has only occurred in a little over a decade, many Asoke centres seem to still be creating spaces and finding locations for the new additions. An interesting use of the walking Buddha statue can be seen during the 2013–2014 Thai political crisis, when it was placed on the back of a truck for marches or on the stage where the Asoke camps were located. This not only brought the Asoke Buddha into a public space but was prominently displayed and used as a distinct marker of Asoke and their intertwining of Buddhism and political involvement.

Exploring the features of the Buddha sculptures in Asoke illustrates how various aspects of Asoke belief have been manifested into their own interpretation and creation of Buddha images. Having Buddha images uniquely suited to Asoke does not only reinforce their interpretation of Buddhism but further builds on the certain aesthetic profile which has become a unifying feature of the communities. Through creating their own Buddha statues, Asoke has further shown their rejection of mainstream Thai images and practices associated with it, such as worshiping the Buddha as a deity. As we can see through the development of these sculptures, Asoke is not a static group focused on preserving a particular image, and their spaces, relationship to the Buddha, and creation of statues continues to evolve. The changing of the Asoke landscape to include Buddha sculptures signals a shift not only in the physical

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<sup>798</sup> According to a now inaccessible blog post on <http://www.boonniyom.net>, accessed May 10, 2018.

<sup>799</sup> Details of the installation of the Buddha in Sali Asoke were documented on a now discontinued Asoke webpage: <http://www.boonniyom.net/สร้างสรร-งานศิลป์-ฐานพระ/>, accessed June 14, 2018. Mention of the relics placed inside this statue were also mentioned on a discontinued webpage: [http://www.boonniyom.net/580301\\_รายงานกิจกรรม-งานพุทธา-2/](http://www.boonniyom.net/580301_รายงานกิจกรรม-งานพุทธา-2/), accessed June 14, 2018.

<sup>800</sup> The waterfall in Santi Asoke can be seen in Figure 5.10 and is discussed in Chapter 5.3.2.

spaces of the community, but also a transformation in identity as the previous notion of Asoke being a Buddha-less group for the first thirty years, has fallen away.

#### 4.2.2 Paintings of the Buddha in Asoke

Along with three dimensional depictions of the Buddha, paintings are also seen in Asoke communities. The most frequently occurring images are a series of reproduced prints (of paintings) depicting various scenes from stories of the Buddha's life. These images are placed sequentially next to each other in a row, most often in the *sala*. For example, in Sali Asoke, the paintings are placed in an octagonal opening within the main *sala*, and in Ratchathani Asoke, they are hung on the wall behind where the monks sit. These images are placed together to represent the chronology of the Buddha's life and engage the viewer in remembrance of the stories and lessons to be gleaned from it. I observed up to sixteen images that created this sequence—though not every centre displays all the scenes. The first painting depicts Maya, the Buddha's mother, in a pink sari and gold jewelry, grasping the branches of a tree while an attendant holds the newly born child and they are surrounded by women in colourful saris. The following image portrays Siddhārtha in his life of luxury, surrounded by sleeping women with instruments and his wife and child. Siddhārtha's flight from home is shown as he takes a sword to his hair and leaves his royal clothing behind with his attendant and horse. The story continues with depictions of his time with the ascetics in the forest (Figure 4.6), defeating Māra's daughters and army, and then reaching *nibbāna* under the *Bodhi* tree. During and after the encounter with Māra, Siddhārtha is represented with a large emanating yellow halo, as seen in Figure 4.7. After his awakening, the Buddha is shown teaching his first disciples, and in another image, meditating by a serene pond full of plant and animal life. Other stories from the Buddha's life are depicted, such as murder attempts on the Buddha and his other-worldly journeys to visit the *nāga* king and *devas*.<sup>801</sup> The series of paintings concludes with the Buddha teaching a large gathering of followers (Figure 4.7), and his death. These are all well-known stories and serve as didactic tools, especially when arranged sequentially.

The Buddha is given a realistic human appearance, with no superhuman markings (apart from his halo) such as the *urna*, *ushnisha* or signs on the feet or palms. We can also see how the transformation of Siddhārtha's body is also depicted, from topless and muscular, to the emaciated body of an ascetic, and then to the draping brown robes which for the most part, obscure his figure. Siddhārtha, and most all other persons in the paintings are depicted with

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<sup>801</sup> *Deva*: heavenly being or deity.

downcast eyes, to the point where it is difficult to discern if they are open at all. Another feature of these images is that all paintings, apart from the scene of the young prince among the sleeping women, are all in naturalistic settings with an abundance of flora and fauna. The representation of the Buddha in this series is not particularly Asoke-specific, and the paintings have aimed at a realistic and modern style (with shading and perspective) compared to traditional Thai murals or manuscript paintings.

The size and placement of these images differs depending on the community, in Ratchathani Asoke for example, the paintings were placed prominently at the front of the *sala* and were around a metre in width with large, elaborate silver and gold frames. In other centres, the paintings are a much smaller size, and copies are also seen in common halls. Also, the number of images present in the series also fluctuates and some centres may only have the most important aspects of the Buddha's life, without the additional stories of the Buddha visiting the *nāga* king for example. This signals the versatility of how these paintings are used, varying in the number of paintings of in the series, the size, frame, and location within the centre. Further, the images in this series are stylistically consistent with each other, however deviate slightly from the previously described aesthetic of Asoke centres which uses predominantly neutral colours and natural materials. These are not the only painted images of the Buddha in Asoke, but they are the most frequently found and most prominently displayed. Other examples can be found in the “gallery spaces” in Santi Asoke, (see Chapter 4.4.5) or occasionally, smaller paintings of the head of the Buddha are also displayed in the common areas.

As mentioned previously, in relation to McDaniel, monastic settings typically have a broad range of artworks with very little consistency regarding style, medium and content. Asoke however has taken a much different approach and the spaces in the community are highly curated, leading to a uniform aesthetic profile throughout all of the communities. These paintings were commissioned to be made by the same artist, and as such, they are visually consistent, which aids in the continuity and “readability” of the artworks. This is important as the images are meant to be didactic as they relate the stories of the Buddha's life. There are other paintings that are donated by various individuals, however they are displayed in a specific area of the community (see Chapter 4.4.5). This is noteworthy because it signals the degree to which the communities are consciously shaped and that a certain amount of uniformity is sought after—not just by having consistent paintings, but also allocating unrelated paintings to a specific area. As such, this further underlines my argument that the material culture within Asoke, and especially the artwork, has become an important aspect of the unified aesthetic of the community.



*Figure 4.6 Painting of Siddhārtha meditating with ascetics.*



*Figure 4.7 Painting of the Buddha teaching a group of monks.*

### **4.3 Imagining the Asoke Community and its Leader**

#### **4.3.1 Images of Bodhirak**

As the creator and leader of Asoke, Bodhirak plays an important role in the daily life of members and within the artwork found in the communities, as a variety of images depicting Bodhirak can be seen throughout Asoke centres. Paintings and sculptures are most common, though reliefs and photographs are also present in some communities. Television also plays a prominent role in Asoke for communication and spiritual development and Bodhirak gives daily sermons on the Asoke television station, so his image is broadcast in the centres and homes of

Asoke members—this section however is more concerned with static images and artworks.<sup>802</sup> Because paintings and sculptures are most prevalent, they will be discussed more in depth in that order; photographs of Bodhirak are often small and found in dormitories, workspaces or in homes, rather than the larger scale paintings and sculptures which are placed in more open areas.

The authority on which such religious figures thrive has important aesthetic dimensions: their multisensory appeal – in media and performances – often plays a vital role in persuading people of religious truths and linking religious forms/knowledge and followers.<sup>803</sup>

This is true for Asoke as Bodhirak’s image (and images of Bodhirak) has been a prominent aspect in the creation, and expansion of Asoke, connecting their beliefs, members, and their identities.<sup>804</sup> McDaniel reflects that, “photographs can produce murals and murals can produce photographs. Images can create, legitimize, and even usurp monastic lineages through uses of material, decoration, and positioning or staging.”<sup>805</sup> This is especially relevant in Asoke as they have created their own “lineage” outside of the Thai *saṅgha*. Often in monastic settings, many images of well-known monks or abbots are given a prominent position within the community to connect and legitimize their lineage and temple. In Thailand, well known monks contribute to the visual landscape through the statues, amulets, photographs, paintings, and stickers for example. McDaniel notes that, “images of famous monks rival the sales of Buddha images.”<sup>806</sup> In some cases (examples are found in Pathom Asoke and Sali Asoke) there are images of celebrated Thai monks that Bodhirak has drawn inspiration from, such as Ajahn Sao Kantasīlo, Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Chah, and Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa. These images are not present in the main *sala*, nor do they have a prominent position within the community, however their inclusion in Asoke is nonetheless noteworthy.<sup>807</sup> This also may be a newer development as during my fieldwork, I observed only one instance of a small photograph of Ajahn Mun in the dining hall in Pathom Asoke, a resident member was impressed that I knew who he was, and she mentioned what an important figure he is in Thailand and that many people have great respect for him. Even though Bodhirak criticizes the Thai Forest Tradition for being too “hermetic” and not engaged enough with helping society, Bodhirak has also drawn from their teachings and

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<sup>802</sup> See Chapter 2.2 for comments regarding the Asoke approach to television.

<sup>803</sup> Marleen de Witte, Martijn de Koning and Thijl Sunier, “Aesthetics of Religious Authority: Introduction,” *Culture and Religion* 16 (2015): 2.

<sup>804</sup> For further discussions on the relationship to spiritual leaders, see: Almut-Barbara Renger and Markus Witte, eds., *Sukzession in Religionen: Autorisierung, Legitimierung, Wissenstransfer* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017); Victoria Kennick and Arvind Sharma, eds., *Spiritual Masters of the World’s Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012); Almut-Barbara Renger, “The Allure of the ‘Master’: Critical Assessments of a Term and Narrative,” *Diskus: The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 14 (2013): 95–125.

<sup>805</sup> McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 165.

<sup>806</sup> *Ibid.*, 168–9.

<sup>807</sup> As seen in a photo that was uploaded to Pathom Asoke on google maps.

aesthetic (as discussed in Chapter 5.1.1).<sup>808</sup> These monks are highly revered as saints in Thailand and a visual link is created through incorporating their photographs in Asoke, which may aim to further legitimize Asoke through association with such revered figures.<sup>809</sup>

Considering the images of religious leaders or authority figures in a Buddhist context also opens a discussion that includes the relationships and identities created around these images and the broader historical and cultural contexts.<sup>810</sup> For example, Thailand has a long history of portraying prominent monks, especially once deceased; these images connect lineages, lay and ordained persons and inform the physical space as well as the activities taking place within it. And as Morgan considers:

To see is to enter a long history of seeing, to submit to the discipline of visual structures that mediate the authority of a teacher, ruler, institution, or saint. The sacred, in this way of thinking, is constructed within particular configurations of image, viewers, archive, and setting. Each of these elements form varying networks of relations. The archive plays a social role in the recognition of the sacred by linking the viewer to the tradition, which the image updates or brings to life.<sup>811</sup>

The relationship between the settings, viewers, and the images of Bodhirak, for example, show how his depiction links Asoke members to their “tradition.” Regular contact with images of Bodhirak reminds and reinforces the common identity between members, who perhaps have different interests or roles in Asoke. Heikkilä-Horn observes that the “self-identification as disciples of Bodhirak” is the main uniting factor between the four major engagements of Asoke: spiritual, agricultural, social and political activities.<sup>812</sup> Having images of Bodhirak present in the communities reinforces this common connection, and also is a way of re-invoking the shared history of the group. This history is also expressed through statues of Bodhirak as a youth (Figure 4.10) and paintings which show a progression of his Bodhirak’s previous and current identities (Figure 4.8).

There are a few painted images of Bodhirak that have been reproduced and can be found in nearly all Asoke centres; photographs of Bodhirak also hang throughout the communities, but they are less frequent and less obvious. In Asoke, Bodhirak’s life is often likened to

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<sup>808</sup> The Asoke conception of the four different kinds of Buddhism are mentioned briefly in Chapter 2.3.

<sup>809</sup> As the addition of these photographs is a newer development, I have been unable to interview members regarding their purpose and reception in the community.

<sup>810</sup> For an overarching discussion of these themes, see: Almut-Barbara Renger, ed., *Meister und Schüler in Geschichte und Gegenwart: von Religionen der Antike bis zur modernen Esoterik* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2012); Almut-Barbara Renger and Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch, eds., *Meister und Schüler - Master and Disciple: Tradition, Transfer, Transformation* (Weimar: VDG 2016); Almut-Barbara Renger, “Meister-Jünger-und Lehrer-Schüler-Verhältnisse in der Religionsgeschichte,” in *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 311–23.

<sup>811</sup> Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 59.

<sup>812</sup> Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, “Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport,” *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* (2009): 40.

following a similar path as the Buddha’s—experiencing a life of luxury, then turning onto a spiritual path, and renouncing fame and wealth. The most frequently seen image of Bodhirak (Figure 4.8) portrays scenes from his life in succession from a young man on the right-hand side, to his renunciate life on the left, and a large portrait in the centre. On the right side of the painting, seven depictions of Bodhirak show him as a youth on a bicycle, a young man smoking, as an entertainer in costume, topless, and wearing a suit. The central picture is of Bodhirak in white robes after the court cases and probation period in the 1990s, and all images on the left half of the painting show him in robes while going for alms, carrying water or *waiing* (pressing the palms of the hands together).<sup>813</sup> Interestingly, Bodhirak is depicted wearing three different colours of robes in this painting—bright saffron (based off of an early photograph of Bodhirak when he was still wearing the typical Thai style of robe with the additional outer belt as well), dark brown (after he had decided to create his own centre), and white (as was necessary during the probation period after his imprisonment). The top left also features a drawing of an unidentified torso clothed in layered robes with handcuffs on the wrist; this part of the image was described as symbolizing the attempted silencing of Asoke, the imprisonment of Asoke monastics, and expulsion from the Thai *Saṅgha*. The smaller images described within this painting are faded together into a collage representing important aspects of Bodhirak’s life and activities while emphasizing the divide and transformation between his life as a lay person and as a monastic. This painting is significant because it links the community to its founder, but also documents Bodhirak’s personal history as well as the history of the group and represents the deeply embedded symbolism of the path from wealth and fame to renunciation. Reproductions of this painting are displayed throughout Asoke, for example, in the *sala*, common halls or in dorms and is seen in a variety of sizes—but typically ranging from half a metre to a metre in width.

Other paintings of Bodhirak are found throughout different communities—as seen in the gallery areas in Santi Asoke, or images portraying him within the Asoke community (as discussed in Chapter 4.3.2), or in combination with other symbols and pictures; however, these works have not been reproduced as frequently, if at all.<sup>814</sup> Figure 4.9 is another example in a similar collage style and depicts five drawn portraits of Bodhirak smiling. The caption below describes how *bodhisattas* are inclusive of all peoples and places as they can “smile in every

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<sup>813</sup> Also known as the *Añjali Mudrā* (Sanskrit) the action of putting one’s hands together in front of the chest or head, is often used as a greeting or sign of respect and is an important aspect of Thai culture.

<sup>814</sup> An example of Bodhirak with other symbols can be seen in the Buddha/*Dhamma* wheel/*Bodhi* leaf painting seen in Figure 2.4 in Chapter 2.2.

direction”—this text again reiterates the adoption of the idea of *bodhisattas* within Asoke, and that Bodhirak is one.<sup>815</sup> In recent years, an image of Bodhirak’s upper body has also been painted on a beam at Ratchathani Asoke in a common area with a banner below that states: “Achieve doing/working through teamwork. Achieve Buddhist teachings through teamwork.”<sup>816</sup> This reinforces not only the importance of work, action, and “doing” in Asoke while developing their Buddhist principles through this practice, but also the necessity to do so in a community format with others. These examples point to the variety of artworks, mediums, and placements within the community as well as the use of text in the images.



**Figure 4.8** Frequently reproduced painting of Bodhirak.<sup>817</sup>

<sup>815</sup> Further discussed in Chapter 2.1.

<sup>816</sup> As seen in a photo from early 2018 that was posted online to Ratchathani Asoke on google maps. This inscription features poetic word-play as “doing/working” in Thai sounds very similar to “*Dhamma*”; this kind of language use is common in Asoke, also see: Sunai Setbunsang, “How to apply Wittgenstein’s perception of ‘Language Game’ with the explanation of meaning of religious language: case-study of Santi Asok” [in Thai] (master’s thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2530 [1987]); Sunai Setbunsang, “Language Game and the Use of Language of the Asok Followers,” [in Thai] *Chulalongkorn University Journal of Buddhist Studies* 1, no. 3 (2537 [1994]): 53–81.

<sup>817</sup> This painting has no date or artist (it is unsigned) however it was thought to be developed in the early 1990s as Bodhirak is wearing the white robes because of his imprisonment and subsequent court proceedings.



**Figure 4.9** Portraits of Bodhirak with the caption: “A Bodhisatta can smile in every direction/to everyone.”

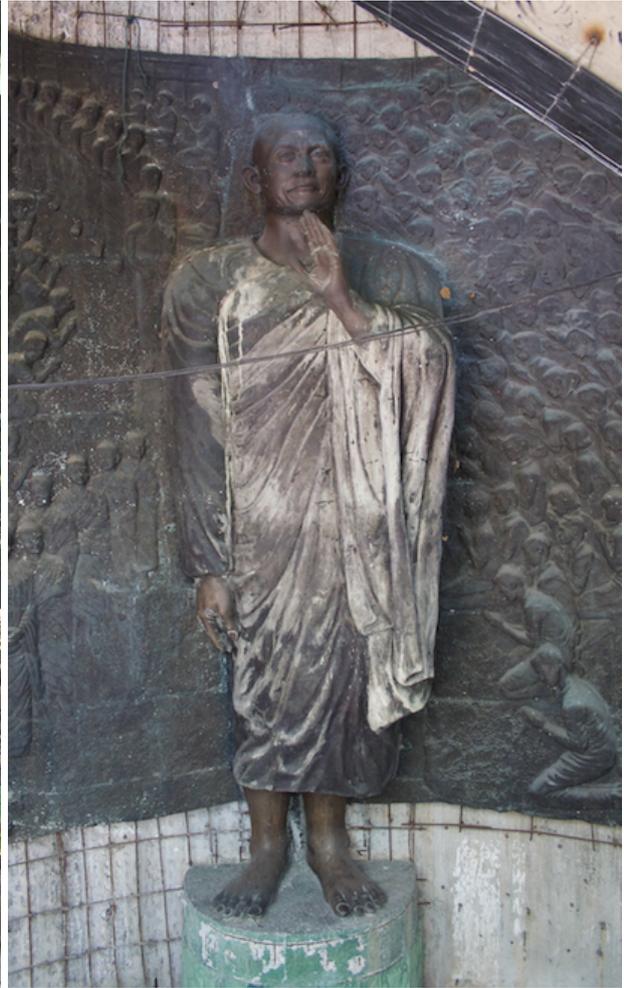
Statues of Bodhirak are also found in Asoke and though it is common to see statues of well-known monks in Thailand, the use of Bodhirak’s images are slightly different to what is typically found in other temples. Monks are most often depicted as older men, sitting cross legged with hands in their lap, wearing robes that expose their right shoulder. In Asoke, statues of Bodhirak mostly depict him as a youth (Figure 4.10), the exception is in Santi Asoke (Figure 4.11) where he is portrayed in a relief as a grown man standing with his robes wrapped around both shoulders. I would predict that with time, and especially after Bodhirak passes away, many more statues of him as an older man will emerge throughout the Asoke communities.

The statues of Bodhirak as a youth, around the age of sixteen, are all painted in matte gold and are all nearly identical showing no discernable variation in size or posture. These statues are placed along pathways or around the community, but generally not in the buildings themselves. There is a copy of this statue (along with a few others, such as the Asoke vulture) at the very top of the Santi Asoke *Millennial Vihāra* directly under the large silver dome. Figure 4.11 is more accurately a relief and since the time of the photograph in 2014, this image has undergone some interesting additions. Shackles and chains have been attached to both ankles and the left wrist and two small signs have been positioned on the base stating: “He who doesn’t have any obstacles is out of luck,” and, “Humans despise, Heaven doesn’t despise.”<sup>818</sup> The relief has also been painted to give Bodhirak a slightly gold-hued skin colour and brown robes.

<sup>818</sup> Since this was a new addition, any interpretations of these signs would be uninformed. A photo of these additions was posted by a visitor to Santi Asoke in 2016.



**Figure 4.10** Sculpture of Bodhirak as a youth in Ratchathani Asoke.



**Figure 4.11** Unfinished relief of Bodhirak in the Millennial Vihāra Santi Asoke.

The various depictions of Bodhirak as seen through paintings and statues in Asoke develop a specific and consistent image of him, both before and after ordination. Common threads throughout these images portray Bodhirak as strong and charismatic with an emphasis on his strict monastic practice and spiritual advancement.<sup>819</sup> Strength is not only represented physically as a young muscular man, or through depictions of him engaging in physical labour, but the use of shackles is meant to underline his steadfastness and resilience against what Asoke sees as unjust persecution. Charisma is illustrated through the many images of Bodhirak smiling, laughing, or surrounded by followers. Bodhirak's spiritual authority and achievements are represented in images through his monastic appearance, his physical postures, use of *mudrās*, and that he is at times depicted with a halo or light behind him. This is further seen through the use of accompanying text, such as with Figure 4.9 which is meant to refer to his (as perceived

<sup>819</sup> For discussions on charisma in religious settings, see: Charles Lindholm, ed., *The Anthropology of Religious Charisma: Ecstasies and Institutions* (New York: Palgrave, 2013).

by members) spiritual attainments and status as a *bodhisatta*. These three aspects of being portrayed as charismatic, strong, and spiritually adept are not uncommon for leaders of religious communities, however because of Asoke's particular history, specific elements are incorporated to achieve the representation of these qualities. The images of Bodhirak placed throughout the Asoke communities further reinforce a common identity between members, and artworks of their shared history of the group links Asoke members to their "tradition" and teacher/leader. These connections continue to be strengthened with the additions of new artworks of Bodhirak, and most likely depictions of him will only increase with time, and particularly after he passes away.

#### 4.3.2 Images of the Asoke Community

Artworks which depict Asoke as a community are also found in some centres and though they were not central images, they still give insight as to how Asoke imagines and represents itself. Some of the images of Asoke as a community portray a particular centre and feature distinctive architecture or elements making a specific community recognizable, for example the silver dome in Santi Asoke or boats from Ratchathani Asoke. Other paintings or reliefs of Asoke leave out any particularly discernable features and recreate the *kutis* or certain scenes that are present in all centres. The few paintings of the Asoke communities have many similarities both in regard to style and content, suggesting that they were either created by the same artist, or one painting was referenced for the production of subsequent artworks.<sup>820</sup> Some of the noteworthy and reoccurring aspects of these images are the various "scenes" portrayed, as well as the general structure, layout, and Asoke-specific details.

There was only one example of a relief depicting Asoke as a group, found in Pathom Asoke, and as such, paintings will feature more prominently in this discussion.<sup>821</sup> Images of Asoke members and community scenes are also used on large banners for events, or on the covers of Asoke publications and in various online settings; because these are either only present in the community for a short period of time, or only found in media stores, libraries or online, these depictions of Asoke will not be discussed in this section.

One reoccurring theme in these paintings is the placement of Bodhirak in the centre of the image, and community (as seen in Figure 4.12 and Figure 4.14). He is often surrounded by a circle of monastics and a larger group of lay members further away. Some images include a

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<sup>820</sup> Many of these images appeared to be older and are unsigned, so it is unclear who the artist(s) are.

<sup>821</sup> As mentioned previously, in recent years Asoke centres have undergone many changes in regard to artworks and it may be that more reliefs are now present.

circle or mandala behind Bodhirak's head and body as a kind of halo. Bodhirak is depicted wearing brown robes (or in a more neutral tan color in Figure 4.14) which contrasts to the bright saffron often worn by monks in Thailand.<sup>822</sup> In Figure 4.12, Bodhirak holds one hand with the palm facing outwards and the other reaching down to touch the earth; from afar, the combination of this *mudrā*, brown robes and the halo makes Bodhirak almost indistinguishable from a Buddha figure. I would argue that this depiction is intentional and represents the beliefs of members that Bodhirak has attained higher states of awakening.<sup>823</sup> In a similar painting of the group found in Sali Asoke, Bodhirak has his hands in a meditative posture on his lap and is flanked by two large *Dhamma* wheels. The positioning of Bodhirak in the centre of the image with the addition of signs to indicate spiritual attainment, illustrate his centrality within the community, his spiritual authority and also the esteem to which members hold him.



**Figure 4.12** Painting of Asoke community in Ubon Ratchathani “Spread the warmth.”

The Asoke monastics are also pictured in brown robes and can be seen in an orderly circle or semicircle in front or around Bodhirak in this image (Figure 4.12) and others. Some of the ordained figures wear their robes to expose their right shoulder, and others are shown with long sleeves or their robes wrapped covering both shoulders, as is typical for receiving alms. The monastics pictured with bare shoulders exclusively represent the *samanas*, as *sikkhamats* only

<sup>822</sup> The significance of monastic robe colour is explored in Chapter 3.3.1.

<sup>823</sup> Discussed further in Chapter 2.1.

wear long sleeves. It is unclear if the *sikkhamats* are also within the groups of figures with covered shoulders because the facial features and shaven hair leave the figures androgynous. The monastics featured in artworks representing the Asoke community are depicted going on alms rounds in single file with their bowls, giving council to lay persons and *Dhamma* talks. This further displays the roles and interactions of the monastics as well as their central position within the community. Communication and interactions with lay members are emphasized as the monastics are illustrated as teachers that are actively engaging with the lay members—this is particularly highlighted in Asoke because of their emphasis on active participation and community work rather than sitting meditation practices. As such, it is not surprising to see that in a painting of the community, monastics are pictured in a forest setting underneath mosquito nets, however instead of meditating (as would be typical in this scenario), they are giving individual council to lay persons.

The Asoke lay members make up the majority of figures depicted in community images, and they are shown engaging in core aspects of Asoke, such as agricultural work, schools, giving alms, community gatherings, and meetings. Other more specific activities are also illustrated, such as their dish-washing technique of using multiple buckets of water. Students are also included in some of these images and can be seen in a school setting as well as swimming and playing. Most lay members are shown wearing the blue *mo hom* shirts and either pants or sarongs, which (as discussed in Chapter 3.4) signals various Asoke beliefs. The use of this kind of clothing visually connects Asoke with their ideal “rural,” “simple,” and “traditional” lifestyle while also functioning as a critique of mainstream consumerism and materialism. Views on modesty and sexuality are further expressed through the Asoke “uniform” as well as dedication to the group. The reproduction of this dress in Asoke artwork reflects the integral nature and importance of this clothing as a symbol for the group. Hair can be considered in the same manner as the artists have given the men crew cuts and the women short or covered hair—it is also because of these haircuts that the separation between men and women sitting facing Bodhirak can be observed.<sup>824</sup> The wearing of uniforms blurs personal identity and status and the emphasis on the community as a whole, rather than individual members is evident in these images.

Another important and reoccurring theme to these images is the use of nature and natural settings. The communities are represented as small rural tree-filled villages with winding pathways, and the buildings are simple thatched roof structures and wooden houses. The Asoke

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<sup>824</sup> Hair of lay Asoke members is discussed in Chapter 3.4.

centres are visualised in these images as self-contained “utopias” where members engage in all the important aspects of their lifestyle and spiritual practice.<sup>825</sup> This is relevant as it gives insight into the “lived visual data” especially as “the built environment – the buildings, locales and physical spaces that we inhabit – constitute a form of ‘lived text’ which can be investigated to uncover insights into cultural values and norms, insights which are generally not available to social researchers through more conventional forms of data.”<sup>826</sup> These images are part of the “lived text” within Asoke as they hang within the centres, however they go beyond explorations of the physical buildings—these images represent how the artists within the community imagine the physical spaces of Asoke and create a uniform expression of their ideals.



Figure 4.13 “Ariya (Noble)Market” Detail of community painting hung in Sali Asoke.



Figure 4.14 Painting of Bodhirak and Ratchathani Asoke community in the Asoke vegetarian restaurant, Ubon Ratchathani city. “Our ultimate goal is to be happy, live modestly, behave politely, live peacefully, be free of greed and consumerism. Doing good is a good asset, doing evil is an evil asset, and both of them are carried with you to the afterlife.”

<sup>825</sup> “Utopia” has been used by various authors in relation to Asoke. See for example, Apinya Fuengfusakul, “Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravāda Reform in Thailand,” *Sojourn* 8 (1993): 153–83; Kanoksak Kaewthep, “From Dhammic Socialism to Buddhist Utopia: A Note,” [in Thai] in *Buddhadasa-Buddha Dham*, ed. Bhiddaya Wongkul (Bangkok: Saitharn Publication, 2006), 155–77; Kanoksak Kaewthep, “A Radical Conservative Buddhist Utopia: The Asoke People Society and Economy,” *Society and Economy* 29, no. 2 (2007): 223–33; Sombat Chantornwong: *The Pathom Asoke Community. A Study of Buddhist Utopia* [in Thai] (Bangkok: Dhammasanti Foundation, 1988); Donald Swearer, “Fundamentalistic Movements in Theravada Buddhism,” in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 677.

<sup>826</sup> Michael Emmison, Philip Smith and Margery Mayall, *Researching the Visual*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SAGE, 2012), 5.

Text is also often present these images—in Figure 4.12, the banner in the middle reads “spread the warmth”; Figure 4.13 announces Asoke’s “*Ariya* (Noble) Market”; Figure 4.14 gives a more detailed description of the Asoke beliefs saying: “Our ultimate goal is to be happy, live modestly, behave politely, live peacefully, be free of greed and consumerism... Doing good is a good asset, doing evil is an evil asset, and both of them are carried with you to the afterlife.” These beliefs are also represented pictorially through the depictions of smiling, modestly dressed members working together, exhibiting a simple way of life and connection to nature. Figure 4.14 is hung in the Asoke vegetarian restaurant in Ubon Ratchathani city, showing that artworks are not solely displayed within the confines of the communities, but also within spaces frequented by the public.

Other examples of images of the Asoke community and members can be found in other contexts with didactic messages of how to appropriately practice *sīla*, for example. A series of paintings within a school in Pathom Asoke depicts older members in *mo hom* shirts and students tending fields and smiling in juxtaposition with persons who are distressed and poor because of wasting money on smoking, alcohol and gambling, extravagant spending on one’s appearance or laziness. These images are flanked by text saying: “Go back to our old path; Grab a spade and a shovel to prepare for saving the nation.” These have a didactic function showing other forms of poverty, but proclaiming that chosen poverty, and the Asoke lifestyle is the most moral and best path.

These paintings express the ideal “utopian” image of Asoke, portraying the community as a coherent, orderly, and homogenous group striving together towards their “back to basics” approach in an attempt to recreate the Asoke interpretation of early Buddhist life and practice. These depictions omit activities outside of Asoke communities, such as political involvement and also have excluded their use of technology, such as televisions, farming equipment, and modern buildings. As such, artworks representing the community are specifically choosing to include and exclude certain features to convey an ideal, consistent, and unified image of the group.

Images such as these exhibit how Asoke members can see or picture themselves as part of the larger community structure, and as with other artworks in Asoke, these are intended to inspire, remind, and teach the members who come in daily contact with them. They also help build and reinforce a certain aesthetic profile and represent their quintessential community. Naturally, the group is made of members with individual beliefs, and a certain amount of diversity and heterogeneity exist however these images portray the community as coherent and cohesive. Through considering artworks representing the Asoke group as an “ideal whole,” their

beliefs can be seen in regard to community priorities, spiritual practice, work (agricultural for example), and their interest in representing themselves as a homogenous, organized group with a shared aesthetic and purpose.

#### 4.4 Symbols in Asoke

This section features common symbols seen within Asoke which fall outside the discussion of Buddha images, Bodhirak or the Asoke community, as was previously explored throughout this chapter. These symbols represent an array of ideas and reinforce core beliefs, as well as integrate cultural elements into the centres. Not all of these symbols are unique to Asoke, however they are worthy of exploration because they are placed within the community as communicative and reinforcing tools to act as reminders of their spiritual path, but also exhibit elements of overlap with mythologies found in a wider cultural context. These images also further express the diversity of mediums (sculpture, painting, reliefs, and cloth flags for example) and styles found within Asoke artwork, ranging from abstract to highly detailed and realistic with intricate designs.

Some of these examples also illustrate how artwork is integrated into buildings. Rather than stand-alone paintings or sculptures, these reliefs are carved or incorporated directly onto the beams or other areas of structures or buildings. When buildings themselves are canvases and couriers of meaning, this further shows the importance of artworks in the community. Buildings and architectural aesthetics will be further discussed in Chapter 5.2.

##### 4.4.1 “Moving the Dhamma Wheel”

As seen from the discussion in Chapter 2.3, the Noble Path is a core aspect of Asoke belief and practice. The standard visual representation of the Eightfold Path is an eight-spoked wheel, known as the *Dhamma* wheel or *Dhammacakka*.<sup>827</sup> The Buddha’s first sermon is referred to as *The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dhamma*, or *Turning the Wheel of Law* and when the *Dhamma* wheel is flanked by two deer, it specifically refers to this first sermon given at the Deer Park in Varanasi.<sup>828</sup> In other aniconic interpretations, the *Dhamma* wheel represents not only the presence of the Buddha, but more specifically his teachings, or *Dhamma*. The *Dhammacakka* is found with variations of the number of spokes, with eight being the most common, and the representative symbol of Buddhism (as the cross represents Christianity) with each of the eight spokes correlating to a factor in the Eightfold Path. In Thailand, the

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<sup>827</sup> Sanskrit: *Dharmachakra*.

<sup>828</sup> *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* in S 56.11.

*Dhammacakka* is a prominent symbol in Buddhist art, with a long history of in sculpture and in architecture.<sup>829</sup> A twelve-spoked red *Dhamma* wheel is also frequently seen in Thai temples flying on a yellow flag.<sup>830</sup> As such, the *Dhammacakka* is an important symbol in representing Buddhist teachings as well as a prominent feature within the Thai visual landscape.

The examples of *Dhammacakkas* found within Asoke centres, as we will explore, have a unique flare. *Dhamma* wheels within Asoke communities are almost always shown engaging with figures in some way, or are incorporated into a larger scene, unlike most images of *Dhammacakkas* found elsewhere, which stand alone. The following examples from Asoke display human figures actively involved in pushing or pulling the *Dhamma* wheel and these three images also exhibit a wide range of styles and mediums: Figure 4.15 shows abstract figures roughly carved out of wood pushing and pulling a simplistic *Dhamma* wheel; Figure 4.16 has more detail, the monastics and residents have clothing and faces, and the *Dhamma* wheel is more embellished, however still has a rustic unpolished appearance; Figure 4.17 is highly detailed, with realistic depictions of monks and an intricate multi-spoked *Dhamma* wheel and is a metal cast relief. These images were described as representing the Asoke beliefs surrounding their “*Dhamma* work,” literally moving, striving and being active participants in the propagation of their teachings.

There are few examples of “static” *Dhamma* wheels in Asoke—that is, without the accompaniment of figures moving or pushing the *Dhammacakka*, however a reoccurring theme is that these *Dhamma* wheels are a small detail or element in a larger image or structure. One such example is seen in a painting of the Asoke community (similar to Figure 4.12) where Bodhirak sits in the centre of the picture flanked by two *Dhamma* wheels. In other instances, small static *Dhamma* wheels can be seen in the *Millenial Vihāra* building in Santi Asoke, Bangkok, as part of the large relief, or as details on the *torāṇa* s (discussed further in Chapter 4.4.5). Though a few examples of solitary *Dhamma* wheels can be found, images of figures interacting with the *Dhamma* wheel (pushing or pulling) are more prominently displayed and are more frequently found in the communities.

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<sup>829</sup> For an in-depth historical consideration of early *Dhamma* wheel sculptures in Thailand, see Robert Brown, *The Dvāravatī Wheels of the Law and the Indianization of Southeast Asia* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

<sup>830</sup> The Thai sangha designated this as the official Buddhist flag in 1958. “What is the Meaning of the Buddhist Flag?” *Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization*, accessed August 10, 2019, <http://www.seameo.org/v1/buddhistII/q&a1.htm>.



*Figure 4.15 Wood carved relief in beam, Ratchathani Asoke.*



*Figure 4.16 Relief on the sala entrance at Ratchathani Asoke.*

*Dhamma* wheels with more than eight spokes are also present in Asoke. A large painting in Ratchathani Asoke (discussed in Chapter 2.3, Figure 2.4) has a multi-spoked *Dhamma* wheel as the background to an orange/golden Buddha and Bodhirak sits within a *bodhi* leaf in the foreground. Another multi-spoked wheel can be seen in Santi Asoke in the large relief above the central waterfall as seen in Figure 4.17.

The *Dhammacakka* is one of the most central images in Buddhism, and the use and adaptation of this symbol into Asoke is a telling example of Bodhirak's interpretation and expression of certain core aspects of Buddhism. Bodhirak has designed artwork that represents Asoke-specific themes and has connected them with this central Buddhist symbol. As seen with the Buddha statues in Asoke (discussed in Chapter 4.2.1), traditional Buddhist imagery has been modified to better represent Asoke specific beliefs, and the *Dhammacakka* shows a similar transformation in regard to aniconic Buddhist imagery. The integration of figures emphasises the community itself, as well as symbolizes the purpose of the group—to move and spread the Asoke *Dhamma*. These images express both the importance of the community but also the action and involvement required to fulfill their ultimate goal of spreading the Asoke interpretation of Buddhism.



*Figure 4.17 A detail of the relief in the Millennial Vihāra Santi Asoke.*

#### 4.4.2 The Vulture

The vulture is a prominent figure within Asoke, most often found in statue form, but is also seen in reliefs and on patches or pins worn by some members.<sup>831</sup> It is a symbol that Bodhirak has used since the early 1980s to represent various Asoke beliefs.<sup>832</sup> Because recycling and ecological concern play central roles within the Asoke communities, the vulture is seen as the animal that cleans up what is left behind and is associated with being self-sufficient and honourable. Sikkhamat Rinpah describes how the vulture only consumes dead bodies, they do not take lives, and instead are helping clean up the world, saying that, “Bodhirak is cleaning up this world, cleaning up minds.”<sup>833</sup> She further relates the vulture to the Bodhirak and Asoke in saying:

This kind of bird has to wait for the leader to come, even a thousand birds will wait until the leader comes, and then when the leader comes, and starts eating, then they all eat...that is their tradition or doctrine...First the leader eats and everybody joins, then in a few minutes it’s all gone, the body is all gone, they clean up everything.

[Bodhirak says] he is that kind of bird because the people in Thailand, even the mainstream monks dislike him...[the vulture] smells bad, [is an] outcast, ugly and eats dead bodies; [people say] go, go, go away! [Bodhirak says] “Okay, whatever you say, whatever you think.” He says he is that kind of bird—he never said he is an eagle, or

<sup>831</sup> Patches are given to members who have taken further Buddhist study courses and exams. See Chapter 3.4.

<sup>832</sup> Interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, January 30, 2014.

<sup>833</sup> Interview with Sikkhamat Rinpah at Sali Asoke, March 1, 2013.

the emperor, no... We are the Asoke, we are modest, we are that kind of bird that no one likes...he proudly presents that he is the buzzard come to clean up the world.<sup>834</sup>

This description reinforces the centrality of Bodhirak as the group's leader and that the actions of the group hinge on his direction, but also points to how his character is perceived as he is not concerned with the opinions of others—including the Thai *saṅgha*. This passage comes with the possible contradiction that Bodhirak and the Asoke are “modest” and at the same time “proudly” taking on the (not so small task) mission of “cleaning up the world.” Not only is Bodhirak compared to the buzzard, but the whole of the group identifies itself with it, which also positions them against other groups, in this case, the Dhammakāya:

You can compare our Asoke group with the Dhammakāya group, the Asoke group is like [the vulture] not bright, doesn't look so nice...but we are modest, truthful, straightforward, more active and committed and helping, we believe in social activism...not like Dhammakāya who are like the clean, white swan, they are beautiful, floating.<sup>835</sup>

A distinction is made here between Asoke and the Dhammakāya group, suggesting that the Dhammakāya is beautiful but superficial and not helping society. Wat Phra Dhammakāya is well known for their enormous, highly synchronized, and visually attractive spaces and events, which achieve an almost other-worldly quality from the scale and precision of their productions. This emphasis on purity, modernity, spaciousness, and cleanliness contrasts with Asoke's focus on a rustic, “down to earth” and natural aesthetic. As we can see from the quote from Sikkhamat Rinpah, these features of Asoke are tied with morality—which includes modesty (in regard to being humble, virtuous, poor, and chaste), honesty (which includes the fourth precept as well as spreading what Asoke believes to be “true” Buddhism), and their commitment to social activism. This statement thus implies that Asoke focuses on substance rather than appearance, whereas the Dhammakāya's priorities are reversed, which is only one of many criticisms of the Dhammakāya from Asoke.<sup>836</sup>

Two versions of the vulture statues are consistently found in Asoke—one with outstretched wings (as seen in Figure 4.18) as well as one with folded wings.<sup>837</sup> The vulture pictured with spread wings is the most commonly seen and there was at least one in each centre

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<sup>834</sup> Ibid.

<sup>835</sup> Ibid. It was unclear if she was referring to all associated Dhammakāya temples, or more specifically the main centre Wat Phra Dhammakāya in Pathum Thani province north of Bangkok.

<sup>836</sup> Asoke members I spoke to did not differentiate between the various Dhammakāya temples and referred to the “movement” as a whole, though emphasis was placed on criticizing the large events that take place at Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

<sup>837</sup> There are a few exceptions to these consistent replications. For example, a smaller more modernly styled grey vulture with folded wings also has been seen in some centres and in Sima Asoke, a large grey vulture statue was erected in 2014.

I visited. These statues are generally painted a matte gold, though in some instances are more bronze, or in the case of a vulture in Santi Asoke, silver in colour. The vulture also sports ornamental embellishments around the neck and this, along with the metallic colours, suggests a mythical quality to the image, rather than opting for a more rough, realistic interpretation which is often favoured in Asoke. The statues sit outside buildings or are incorporated into larger structures, such as the vulture atop the entrance to Pathom Asoke, or in Santi Asoke the vulture is part of a larger display with plants and a sign below it quoting Bodhirak which states: “Vultures are the best as noted by the points below: 1) The most peaceful, 2) The most honest 3) Does not exploit 4) Flies the highest 5) Does not bully, does not steal or take other leftovers for food.”

Vultures do not feature prominently in other mediums such as paintings or reliefs, though in Ratchathani Asoke, a carved wooden relief depicts Bodhirak as a vulture with a golden halo and rejoicing figures below with floating eyes above them representing their “sight” or ability to see the “*Dhamma* truth.” The use of eyes in this image as well in an adjacent carved relief are an interesting addition and is strikingly similar to the themes present in the large mosaic found on the outside of the “Spiritual Theater” at Buddhādāsa’s monastery, Suan Mokkh.<sup>838</sup> The reproduction of this imagery signals associations and connections with other Thai lineages, however the style and symbols (the vulture) have been altered to be distinct to Asoke and fit their own aesthetic profile. This is an interesting form of subtle artistic and conceptual appropriation as it references Buddhādāsa’s imagery and ideas through an Asoke lens—which also mirrors Bodhirak’s inspiration from, and alteration of, Buddhādāsa’s teachings.

The use of the vulture in Asoke is an interesting example of creating a kind of mascot and is certainly an atypical animal to choose. Many Asoke members showed pride in being associated with the vulture, they see it as a symbol of resourcefulness, strength, and modesty. The vulture also represents being an outcast and misunderstood, and because Asoke are not part of the *saṅgha*, they have further embraced it as a fitting symbol. As is the case with many of the Asoke creations, the vulture has multiple layers of meaning, which are reinforced daily in

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<sup>838</sup> This image in Suan Mokkh is called “Distributing the *Dhamma* Eye” and was designed by Thai monk Kovit Khemanantha in a distinctly Egyptian style and it shows a main figure with a large eye in place of a head, distributing eyes to small, previously headless followers. For further explorations of this work and Suan Mokkh, see, Lawrence Chua, “Contemporary Buddhist Architecture: from Reliquary to Theme Park,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael K. Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 436–52; Lawrence Chua “The Garden of Liberation: Emptiness and Engagement at Suan Mokkh, Chaiya,” in *The Routledge Companion to Architecture and Social Engagement*, ed. Farhan Karim (New York: Routledge, 2018), 201–14; Kovit Khemananda, *A Sandy Path Near the Lake: In search of the Illusory Khemananda*, trans. Grant Olson and Chalermsee Olson (Newcastle: Cambridge, 2015).

the lives of members through images in the communities, seen on FMTV or worn on patches or pins.



*Figure 4.18 Vulture with spread wings in Ratchathani Asoke.*

#### **4.4.3 Representing Anti-capitalism**

Anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist views can be difficult and complex ideas to represent visually; this section discusses how Asoke depicts and advocates their economic ideas and the positives of being “poor” through artwork, and through the same medium, criticizes capitalism and consumerism. Within Asoke centres these images are limited and as explored throughout this chapter, most images are of the Buddha, Bodhirak or the Asoke community. This being said, the presence of these images is still worth noting, because the emphasis on “daring to be poor” while criticizing the accumulation of wealth and the capitalist system is a reoccurring topic in Asoke, and these artworks contribute to the diversity of symbolism and themes in the communities. There are three main forms of artwork on anti-capitalism/consumerism that I encountered during my fieldwork. One kind is more descriptive and didactic, using text and images of suffering or what Asoke views as “immoral” actions and consequences in juxtaposition with the ideal Asoke practice and lifestyle. The second form is more symbolic, using images to portray ideas around consumerism as seen in Figure 4.19 and 4.20. Lastly, artwork on the covers of the Asoke publications *Rao Kit Aray* [What we think] use both of these methods as well as images of specific people and places (politicians, monastics and groups that Asoke disagrees with) to express their political beliefs and criticisms of capitalism and consumerism. A short exploration of these artworks in Asoke will discuss these

three aspects in order.

An example of the first kind of this art can be found in Pathom Asoke, in which a series of paintings depict persons who are poor due to consuming alcohol, cigarettes, fashionable clothes, from gambling, and being lazy. Writing within the paintings also clarifies the downfall of each character in the series, and the last panel juxtaposes the unfortunate figures with smiling Asoke members who are shown as living simple, “poor” but fulfilling lives. These images serve a didactic function showing various forms of poverty and the trappings of overindulgence and the repercussions of consumerism while proclaiming that chosen poverty is the most moral path—which is in direct connection with their emphasis on morality as the central aspect of what they believe to be “original” Buddhism.

The second kind of more symbolic representation of Asoke’s stance against capitalism and consumerism can, for example, be seen in Figure 4.19 where a “block-headed” figure dangles a gold brick, or golden coloured bills in front a line of small figures who are pulling a cart piled with more golden currency. Figures pulling the wagon are shown being crushed under the wheel of the wagon and left strewn on the ground. It is interesting to note that the artist has chosen to depict the figure commanding the cart differently than the ones pulling it, with a large square-head. Another symbolic expression of the “dog-eat-dog” view of the capitalist system uses a chain of aquatic creatures consuming each other. The cycle of “endless consumption” is further represented in some cases with the creature eating the tail of the animal consuming it. In regard to the style and content, Figure 4.20 is a more complex and detailed image, not only showing the chain of sea creatures eating each other, but also a tangle of struggling figures from which a *nāga*-human emerges and a four-faced Brahma holds a scale shaped as a human torso with an earth on one side, and a *Dhamma* wheel on the other.<sup>839</sup> This image has various layers of meaning and detail, but is generally intended to depict rising out of *samsāra* and finding the middle way, or balance through the Buddhist teachings, as represented by the *Dhamma* wheel and earth. These images convey broad messages to the viewer that point to non-specific aspects of the “evils” of capitalism without an explicit didactic message or situation/characters.

Partaking in consumerism is frowned upon in Asoke, and consuming things such as makeup and fashionable clothes is likened to using drugs and alcohol by some members.<sup>840</sup> Many images criticizing capitalism and consumerism are found on the Asoke magazine covers

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<sup>839</sup> Hindu elements which have become intertwined with Thai Buddhism can be seen in Santi Asoke, particularly within the large circular relief which this image is part of and the *torānas*, or ornamental gates. Brahma is found in some Thai shrines—the most well-known is the “Brahma Erawan Shrine” in Bangkok, having a huge number of visitors and devotees. Hindu elements in Asoke are further discussed in Chapter 4.4.5.

<sup>840</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2.2.

of their publication *Rao Kit Aray* [What we think]. This publication is a collection of Asoke ideology and their comments on corruption and greed in politics, corporations, and the Thai *saṅgha*, as well as discussions on capitalism and consumerism. This also extends to condemning the luxurious lives of some abbots and reported scandals around money laundering, gambling, and sexual misconduct by some monks, or criticizing specific groups such as the Dhammakāya. The covers often depict gruesome images which include demons, hell scenes, corrupt politicians, or businesspeople (including many identifiable persons in Thai or world politics). For example, one cover depicts an obese man in a suit with dollar bills spilling out of his mouth while he carries an overstuffed bag of money on his back, and others illustrate former Thai Prime Ministers Thaksin Shinawatra and Yingluck Shinawatra, and more recently, Donald Trump as well. Another common aspect to these images is that the dark scenes are juxtaposed with depictions of the Buddha, Asoke monastics or positive, Buddhist messages. For example, one cover shows a face split down the middle, with features of a Buddha on the right side, and a demon on the left with a dollar sign in its eye; another illustrates an Asoke-styled walking Buddha facing off against charging demons and animals. Since 2016, some of the paintings which were made for the magazine covers of *Rao Kit Aray* are exhibited on the second floor of the *Millennial Vihāra* in Santi Asoke. The development of this space creates more access to images which comment on and depict the Asoke stance on these topics. Before this gallery existed, the reach of these images was limited to the covers of the magazines and older, archived copies would have had little to no exposure. The artist Saeng Sinn has painted the covers of *Rao Kit Aray* for many years and this space dedicated to his artwork showcases the evolution of not only his own art, but the various political involvements and topics of interest for Bodhirak and Asoke. The creation of this exhibition is another example of Bodhirak's interest in art and curating spaces in Asoke to artistically express his beliefs.

As we can see from this brief survey of art relating to anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist views, most of the art on display in Asoke can be generally classified as didactic or symbolic. The magazine covers of *Rao Kit Aray* differ from these depictions as they often use specific cases and descriptive, often gruesome images—and the now open exhibition in Santi Asoke further changes the landscape to include these more extreme expressions.<sup>841</sup> The artworks in Asoke which criticize capitalism do so in a more generic way in comparison to the magazines because they are more permanent features in the community, overall images depicting these themes are still a minority as the emphasis of Asoke artwork focuses on images which inspire

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<sup>841</sup> As the creation of this space is a new development, I did not have the opportunity to interview members and visitors on their impression and opinions of the exhibition.

the cultivation of their spiritual path, which is more in line with Bodhirak’s “higher” levels of *Dhamma* art.<sup>842</sup>



**Figure 4.19** Wooden relief of figures crushed by the “capitalist” wagon in Ratchathani Asoke.



**Figure 4.20** Four-faced Brahma with scales, figures, and serpents—a detail of the large relief in Santi Asoke.<sup>843</sup>

#### 4.4.4 Circle, Sun, and Asoke Flag

The circle and sun are reoccurring themes in many Asoke artworks, publications, and logos. They are used as both part of larger artworks, and as a stand-alone image as seen in the Asoke flag. The circle is described as representing *suñña* or *suññatā* which refers not only to the literal translation of “void/voidness” or “empty/emptiness” but also to concepts of *anattā*.<sup>844</sup> The circle in Asoke often has flames, lines or squiggles and dots emanating outwards, transforming it into what looks like a sun. This is an interesting combination of symbols,

<sup>842</sup> As described in Chapter 4.1.2.

<sup>843</sup> This image had also been reproduced in Ratchathani Asoke however instead of a cast metal relief, it had been carved directly into a large wooden panel (approximately 3 metres high) that appears to have previously been part of a ship hull or something similar.

<sup>844</sup> *Suñña* (adjective) is less common than *suññatā* (noun, “emptiness” or “voidness”). *Anattā*: no-self or non-self.

because as Revire states, “in Buddhist terms, the splendor of the Sun could often be used as an allegory for the most resplendent Buddha and the embodiment of the eternal Dharma...On almost every page, early biographies of the Buddha are replete with references to sun and light symbolism,” and “the primary function of a Buddha, as with the Sun, was to drive away darkness and demons and to illuminate the whole earth with his teachings.”<sup>845</sup> The sun design appears in different forms and mediums, for example it is seen in some artworks, is part of the FMTV logo (Asoke television channel) and it is found on the covers of some Asoke publications. A description of this Asoke “logo” by Samana Sandin states that this symbol does not only represent the sun, but also the universe as a whole, and all the elements included within it.<sup>846</sup> The importance of the perfect circle is emphasized, comparing it to an unbalanced oval, which does not have a central point, and the circle is further related to *suññatā* and *anattā* through describing how a student of the *Dhamma* should reduce their ego to zero, which is also represented by the circular shape.<sup>847</sup>

Asoke has thus far developed two flags to represent the group. The first flag has a white ring in the middle of dark brown fabric. This older flag was not particularly present during my fieldwork in 2013–2014, though an example was found in Santi Asoke and is featured in some artworks as well, such as in the left-hand side of the “Spread the warmth” painting of the Ratchathani Asoke community (Figure 4.12). The simple white ring in the centre of the original Asoke flag was also described by Sikkhamat Boonjin as representing an empty, pure mind free from attachments.<sup>848</sup>

In 2015–2016 Asoke began to use a new image for their flag, which further demonstrates how Asoke’s representation of themselves transforms with time, and in turn informs the aesthetic of the community. The new flag uses gold instead of white, but the outer edge of the ring expands into a burst of squiggles and dots, and on the bottom righthand side is stylize text simply stating “Asoke.” The two aspects representing emptiness and the sun are combined in the recently developed Asoke flag. This new flag has been more widely displayed, and many more examples can be seen on the top of the *torāṇas* in the *Millenial Vihāra* in Santi Asoke, at the entrance to various centres, hanging behind Bodhirak during televised sermons or in artworks. Both new and old flags use a similar dark brown fabric to the robes that the

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<sup>845</sup> Nicholas Revire, “Solar Symbolism in Early Buddhist Literature,” *Berlin Indological Studies* 23 (2017): 143, 145.

<sup>846</sup> Samana Sandin, “The Origin and Meaning of the Asoke Logo (Suñña),” September 2015, <http://www.boonnayom.net/ที่มาและความหมายของ-โลโก้>.

<sup>847</sup> Ibid.

<sup>848</sup> As described by Sikkhamat Boonjin in an informal conversation in March 2013.

Asoke monastics wear, which ties back to the discussion in Chapter 3.3.1 on the significance and use of robe colour.

The transformation of the Asoke flag from a circle into a sun form is an example of not only developments of the Asoke aesthetic but how various concepts can be joined into a single symbol. The use of this image as a flag is also relevant as the community uses it to unify and signify their connectivity and purpose under one literal banner.

#### 4.4.5 Abstract, Mythological, and Miscellaneous Images

These next examples show a diversity of styles and figures which point to an intermingling and integration regarding Thai culture as well as modern art. Abstract and cultural images, mythical creatures, and Hindu deities are not central features within Asoke artworks, but their use in certain contexts exhibits how Asoke has assimilated imagery from outside of their “official” belief system. Other images found in Asoke which will be discussed in this subchapter include pictures of the royal family and original artworks displayed in Santi Asoke.

The most aesthetically diverse centre in Asoke is Santi Asoke in Bangkok, which includes a large central structure with huge gleaming silver beams forming a dome above the community and is officially called the *Millennial Vihāra - Buddha’s Relics Chedi*.<sup>849</sup> The building is cylindrical with a hollow centre, allowing one standing below the dome to view the reliefs that rim the inner balconies.<sup>850</sup> The uppermost ring features gold interweaving abstract shapes and figures which are embellished with glass and silver spheres as seen in Figure 4.21. This abstract relief was designed by a lay artist named Viroj Nuibut who goes by the alias “Mairom Thammachat Asoke” and he is an active member who is occasionally featured in Asoke media (YouTube videos and blog posts for example).<sup>851</sup> Though vague shapes and figures can be discerned in this piece, its highly abstracted to the point where it is unclear if a particular message is meant to be transmitted to an uninformed viewer. All other art found in Asoke communities clearly represents specific ideas or symbols (such as the Buddha, vulture or *Dhamma* wheel) whereas this piece seems to be art for art’s sake. This abstract addition is

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<sup>849</sup> This building will be simply referred to as the *Millennial Vihāra* and will be discussed further in Chapter 5.2.2 and is depicted in Figure 5.3 and 5.10.

<sup>850</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, the bottommost wall was bare, though there were many artworks underway for other areas in the building, and more images have most likely added.

<sup>851</sup> Mairom’s emphasis is on living with and in nature (as his name “*thammachat*” indicates as it translates to “nature”) and he generally only uses natural materials (charcoal or candles for example) to create his artworks. Mairom is an unusual-looking older man with a long white beard and homemade clothing and appears to be well-known outside Asoke as well (he was interviewed by JSL Global Media in early 2017 and the YouTube video has garnered over 3.9 million views: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSH6EzILL-k>. He also appears on other television shows, and there are numerous articles written about him). He is often seen with his wife, who dresses similarly, and is forty-five years younger than him.

juxtaposed with the highly detailed relief of religious imagery on the balcony directly below it, some of which has been discussed within this chapter.<sup>852</sup> This second relief contains many mythical creatures, Hindu deities such as Brahma, and Rāhu, mixed with Buddhist and Asoke symbols and large Buddha images. The top of the main “shrine” building holds various statues—of Bodhirak as a youth, a vulture, a boat, and a large lotus surrounded by four smaller vultures with outstretched wings.



*Figure 4.21* Detail of gold abstract relief on the upper floor of the Millennial Vihāra in Santi Asoke, Bangkok, designed by Mairom.

Around 2015, three large and intricate *torāṇas* (free-standing arched or ornamental gateway) have also been completed and added to the upper floor of the temple building; these are an interesting addition to the building, as they embrace a wide array of symbols and styles.<sup>853</sup> The shape is based quite closely on the *torāṇas* from Sanchi Stūpa that was commissioned in the second century BCE by the renowned Buddhist King Ashoka and is one of the most important Buddhist monuments in India.<sup>854</sup> The temple where Bodhirak was ordained, Wat Asokaram, also derives its name from King Ashoka, and influenced the naming of Asoke. Patterson connects the Asoke *torāṇas* to a “renewed emphasis on early Indian imagery and architecture” and states that, “ancient forms are being used in new contexts and associations, a characteristic feature of contemporary Buddhist art.”<sup>855</sup> The use of early Indian imagery is

<sup>852</sup> See Figures 4.5, 4.17, and 4.20.

<sup>853</sup> For explorations on *torāṇas*, see: Parul Pandya Dhar, *The Torāṇa in Indian and Southeast Asian Architecture* (New Delhi: D K Printworld, 2010).

<sup>854</sup> Though these structures are not functioning as gates and thus potentially not technically “*torāṇas*” in a strict sense, this section refers to these structures as such for simplicity, as they are mirrored after those found at the Sanchi Stūpa.

<sup>855</sup> Jessica Lee Patterson, “Contemporary Buddhism and Iconography,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael K. Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 466.

unsurprising within the context of Asoke as recreating what they believe to be “original” Buddhism is a core motivation, as well as their connection to King Ashoka. The *torāṇas* in Santi Asoke are complicated by the breadth of cultural images added to the structures, which is not only uncharacteristic of Asoke imagery, but also is in direct opposition to their previous statements that denounce supernatural, mythological, and Brahmic influences on what they see as an early “pure” Buddhism.

The Asoke version of *torāṇas* differ in shape from the Sanchi Stūpa in a few ways, not only are the constructions considerably smaller but they use rounded pillars, there are no supports between the architraves, each structure is topped with a large central image and instead of functioning as a gate, large bells are suspended between the pillars. Each *torāṇa* has a discernable theme, namely Chinese, “early” Indian, and Thai. These “themes” use well-known imagery as imagined by Bodhirak and his artists to represent each of these overarching concepts.

The first *torāṇa* has a portrait of Bodhirak on the top portion and uses well-known Thai imagery which includes a wide range of mythical beasts (such as *nāgas*, *hamsas*, *singhs* and three headed elephants), figures (Rāhu, Hindu deities, and monastics and lay persons) and symbols (*bodhi* leaves, *Dhamma* wheels and ornamental embellishments).<sup>856</sup> The bell hanging from this structure is glossy and black with detailed gold bands of intricate Thai patterns. At the time of my research this structure was mostly gold with a dark background (apart from the green *nāgas* at the base) however images from 2018 show that it has been painted and is now multi-coloured.<sup>857</sup>

The second *torāṇa* uses Chinese iconography and has a portrait of the late King Rama IX on the top; other images used include colourful Chinese guardian lions, dragons, peacocks, Chinese temple architecture, *baguas* (Taoist cosmological symbols) and *yīng-yang* symbols (Figure 4.22). Large depictions of Guan Gong (also known as Guan Yu) and Bao Gong (also known as Bao Qingtian and Bao Zheng) are also seen on this *torāṇa*; these two figures feature prominently in Chinese legends and overlap with Chinese folk religion, Taoism, Chinese Buddhism and Confucianism. The bell is cast bronze with a traditional pattern and Chinese inscriptions on the surface in gold.

The last *torāṇa* depicts early Indian iconography, inspired by Sanchi Stūpa as seen with the lion pillar capitals and features many elephants and narrative scenes with an array of

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<sup>856</sup> Elephants facing four directions are featured on the northern gateway at Sanchi Stūpa. The Asoke gate places them between the upper architraves and has only included one pair of legs transforming it into a three headed elephant, or Erawan, as they are commonly found in Thailand (and can be seen for example at Wat Arun “Temple of Dawn” in Bangkok and on royal emblems).

<sup>857</sup> As seen in a photo that was posted online to Santi Asoke on google maps.

figures.<sup>858</sup> A large standing Buddha statue is placed on the top and the structure is flanked by large gold-coloured statues of Hanuman on the left and Rama on the right. The bell is considerably smaller, with a flared shape and an internal striker—in comparison to the two other bells which curve inwards and are hit with a wooden post to produce sound.

These structures illustrate the inclusion of a wide array of religious and cultural symbols layered onto the base structure of King Ashoka's famous *toranas*, which greatly diversifies the visual landscape of Santi Asoke, and the broader community. The density and variety of images featured on the *toranas* meld into general representations of Thai, Chinese, and early Indian culture and religion—which are the three major branches of influence that have shaped the Asoke group. These structures are an unusual addition to the Asoke landscape, not only because of the images present (Hindu and Chinese deities for example), but there are no other *toranas*, or comparable large ornate structures present in Asoke communities—in fact these ornamental constructions are dramatically juxtaposed in appearance compared to the simple, rustic aesthetic which is often sought after. The inclusion of such a wide range of symbols and figures indicates a softening of the previously strict approach regarding non-Asoke images within the communities. Not only were Buddha images previously rejected, but Asoke was critical of the fusion and inclusion of folk religions, animism, and other religious and cultural influences with what they consider to be “pure” early Buddhism. As such, the creation of a *torana* as a representation of early Buddhism is understandable in Asoke, however the addition of the plethora of mixed religious and cultural symbols is quite unexpected. It seems as though artistic expression has, at least in the Santi Asoke *Millennial Vihāra*, taken precedent over the group's previous dedication to a certain kind of visual purity which was an expression of their interpretation of what they consider to be “original” Buddhism. This also relates back to Bodhirak's comments that he believes the Asoke group is spiritually advanced enough to be able to appropriately respond to Buddha images—and an extension of this is may be their ability to relate “properly” to other images as well.<sup>859</sup>

It should be also noted that the *Millennial Vihāra* is, or was at the time of my fieldwork, mostly a symbolic structure with very little daily functionality for the lives of the members. Sermons, meetings, and other social events were not held in the temple building—indeed, the space is not particularly practical for gatherings, but this may change when construction is finally completed. Because of this, and the multi-story climb to the top of the temple where the

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<sup>858</sup> The pillars of the southern *torana* at Sanchi Stūpa feature lions, which are also often found on pillars erected by King Ashoka.

<sup>859</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4.1.2.

*toranas* are located, they may not play a large role in the daily life or visual landscape for residents and may be more likely to be seen by visitors. It will be interesting to observe if this broadening of visual material will continue in future artworks and/or architectural additions within Santi Asoke and other centres, as well as the reception of these changes by members.



**Figure 4.22** Sikkhamat with “Chinese” torana in the Millennium Vihāra in Santi Asoke, Bangkok.

The three most common creatures found in Thai temples would arguably be the *nāga* (serpent), the *siṅgh* (lion), and the *hong* or *hamsa* (aquatic bird). *Nāgas* are important figures in Buddhist folklore, art, and architecture. In Southeast Asia, *nāgas* typically take the form of great mythical cobras with one or multiple heads (often five or seven heads). *Nāgas* are found in many places within Thai temples, they are often large, embellished, and are regularly seen winding along entrance banisters, eaves, windows, and pillars. Though a beloved figure in Thai temples, very few *nāgas* are seen in Asoke, and none were integrated into the buildings. The few *nāgas* that are found in Asoke, are generally connected with images of the Buddha; this is seen in the central Buddha image within the large relief in the *Millennial Vihāra* in Santi Asoke (Figure 4.5) or a painting in the series which depicts the Buddha meeting the *nāga* king. A few exceptions to these depictions can be seen with the smaller *nāgas* within the relief scene in the *Millennial Vihāra*, and original artworks in the small gallery areas. *Nāgas* have also been included on the pillars of one of the *toranas* discussed above.

The mythical lion or *singh/singha* is also an important symbol throughout many Asian regions and is prominently featured in ancient Indian, Hindu, and Thai stories. The lion plays a significant role in many Asian cultural and religious contexts and has a long history and connection with Buddhism. Not only was the Buddha called the “Lion of the Sakyas,” and had various characteristics often compared to lions, but lions feature in an array of Buddhist sculpture and architecture. The *singh* is often found in pairs flanking entrances in front of Thai and Chinese Buddhist temples throughout Thailand.<sup>860</sup> The *singh* is sometimes paired with a *gajasīha*, a mythological creature with the body of a lion and the head of an elephant.<sup>861</sup> Geer mentions that the *gajasīha* was a common image that came to represent a lion-elephant fight.<sup>862</sup> In many Asoke centres, large sculptures of the *singh* and *gajasīha* are found, and their intricate and embellished style contrasts with the surrounding community, architecture, and general rustic aesthetic. Typically, they are found at entrances or gateways, for example the statue pictured in Figures 4.23 sits outside the pathway to the *sala* in Ratchathani Asoke, and Pathom Asoke, they flank the main entrance gate. Other depictions of the *singh* and *gajasīha* can be seen in the Santi Asoke relief offering lotus flowers to a standing Buddha; in this image they also have wings and the *gajasīha* sports a reptilian tail. There are also small representations found in one of the previously described the *torāṇas*.



**Figure 4.23** *Gajasīha* in Ratchathani Asoke.

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<sup>860</sup> The *singh* is also used in non-religious contexts for example one of the most popular beer brands in Thailand is called “Singha” with a golden lion logo.

<sup>861</sup> In Pāli, *gajasīha* literally *gaja* (elephant) and *sīha* (lion); Sanskrit, *gajasimha*; Thai, *khochasi*. This pairing is also seen on the royal emblem of Cambodia.

<sup>862</sup> Alexandra van der Geer, *Animals in Stone: Indian Mammals Sculptured Through Time* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 221.

The *hamsa* is described as an aquatic bird, thought to most likely represent a swan or goose. The *hamsa* has a long history intertwined with literature and folklore in certain Hindu and Buddhist traditions. These popular slender mythological birds are found in many temples throughout Thailand and are often placed on rooftops, a high ledge or pole. They can also be depicted with a multi-tiered umbrella emerging from their back and often hold a lamp, bell, or *bodhi* leaf in their beak. A few examples of *hamsas* can be found in Asoke. For example, an ornate golden *hamsa* in Ratchathani Asoke can be seen, which is quite similarly styled to others seen in mainstream temples, though is not integrated with a building and stands alone. The *hamsa* is also featured within the Santi Asoke relief flying with a *bodhi* tree branch in its beak, a *hamsa* shaped boat carries Shiva and a tree with a *Dhamma* wheel within it and smaller *hamsas* fly in the background. On the top of the *toraṇa* featuring Bodhirak's portrait, two *hamsas* are also perched on either side of the top architrave.

Other mythical figures also occasionally appear in the Asoke landscape. *Garuda* is a large legendary bird, used as Thailand's national symbol and is featured on currency or on the front of royal boats. In Asoke, *Garuda* has been featured on the front of a large gold boat sculpture in Santi Asoke which was developed in 2016. *Kinnaree* and *kinnon* are popular half human, half bird hybrids and can be found in many contexts throughout Thailand. In Asoke, they are also featured in the Santi Asoke relief.

Well known Hindu deities are also added into the Santi Asoke relief (four-faced Brahma and Shiva) and on the *torāṇas* (Hanuman and Rama). Rāhu is another popular figure seen in various locations and temples within Thailand.<sup>863</sup> Often depicted as a fearsome demon head with black coloration, he holds a sphere, representing the moon or sun in his jaws. Generally, he is shown with just a head and arms, but also can be occasionally seen with a lower body as well. Mythology surrounding Rāhu is connected with eclipses, however Rāhu images are approached for a variety of requests, with a range of offerings given to the statues.<sup>864</sup> Though Rāhu is mostly associated with Hindu and animist beliefs, he also appears in the Pāli Canon within the *Candimā Sutta* and the *Suriya Sutta*. The two *suttas* are nearly identical where, Candimā (the moon deity) and respectively Suriya (the sun deity), take refuge in the Buddha

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<sup>863</sup> Thai: Phra Rahu.

<sup>864</sup> Since Rāhu is thought of to be the god of darkness and associated with the color black, offerings are usually of black items. A sign Wat Srisathong, a Rāhu temple in Nakhon Pathom, describes the meanings of the various black offerings: Black grapes for business success, black liqueur to support investments, black coffee to get what you wish for, black jelly for patience and careful thought, black beans for progress, black sticky rice for wealth and familial love, black cake for rewards, success and good luck, and black fermented eggs for successful contacts or errands. "The Meanings of Eight Kinds of Black Foods," accessed August 14, 2019, <http://www.thaiworldview.com/bouddha/jpg/img282.jpg>.

after being seized by Rāhu, after which Rāhu retreats in fear, not wanting his head to split into seven pieces.<sup>865</sup> Rāhu is featured prominently in the relief in the *Millennial Vihara* and on one of the *toranas*. The upper teeth with outer fangs are also seen in other artworks and contexts as well (as seen in Figure 4.20).

As we can see, some common mythological creatures and deities found in Thai temples have been added to the Asoke landscape in recent years—predominantly within the *Millennial Vihara*. The diversity of these images is concentrated within the detailed relief and the *toranas* in Santi Asoke. The exception to this is the *singh* and *gajasītha*, as statues have been placed in many centres and it is unclear why exactly the *singh* and *gajasītha* have developed a regular presence in Asoke, while the *nāga* for example, is still only minimally represented. This also connects us to the previous consideration regarding the initial shift of integrating Buddha images and the reasoning from Bodhirak that the Asoke community was spiritually advanced enough to have a “proper” relationship to this new influx of images. The integration of these various figures, deities, and mythical creatures may reflect Bodhirak’s artistic inclinations (in connection with resident artists) being expressed in a new way now that he feels that members are able to “appropriately” interact and understand these depictions.

The discussion of images in Asoke would not be complete without a consideration of the monarchy, which is an important aspect of the Thai visual landscape. Royal portraits are omnipresent in both public and private settings and the relationship with the monarchy plays a prominent role in contemporary Thai life—examples include the country-wide celebrations that take place on King Bhumibol’s birthday (Father’s Day) and Queen Sirikit’s birthday (Mother’s Day).<sup>866</sup>

Bhumibol is deeply adored, often to the point of worship, by the Thai people. This is understandable, as few have heard any doubts about his greatness. In part it is because he is genuinely personable and desirous of helping his people. But this unquestioning adoration also arises from the toughly enforced law of *lèse-majesté*.<sup>867</sup>

Former Thai kings still participate in the visual landscape as well, and Stengs explores how “in the late 1980s, almost eighty years after his death, Chulalongkorn became the object of a nation-

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<sup>865</sup> SN 2.9; SN 2.10.

<sup>866</sup> This is particularly noteworthy as King Bhumibol was idealized as a father figure (*phokhun*) and this identification was “part of a long-standing royal effort to connect the monarchy to the established paternalist system of old.” Michael Jerryson, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 61–2.

<sup>867</sup> Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand’s Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 7. Also see, Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002); Antonio L. Rappa, *The King and the Making of Modern Thailand* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

wide personality cult.”<sup>868</sup> These relationships are spurred not only by the character of the king, but also from the many Buddhist (and Hindu) concepts of the righteous ruler guided by the *Dhamma*.<sup>869</sup> In Thailand, envisioning the king as *bodhisatta* is further entwined with the enormous popularity of the *Vessantara Jātaka* (and of the *Jātaka* genre generally) which tells the story of one of Gautama Buddha’s past lives as a prince, who renounces everything.<sup>870</sup> The relationship to the monarchy in Thailand can be a deeply personal one, as was illustrated by the grief over the death of King Bhumibol in October 2016. Mourning took place on a national level as television broadcast only in black and white,<sup>871</sup> and the government “sought cooperation of every organization in the country to abstain from holding any ‘entertainment activities’ for a month as a mark of respect to the nation’s sentiments.”<sup>872</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, “the Thai people find color identification through conscious color symbolism,” and as such, “a foreigner who is not familiar with Thai tradition will not understand when Thai people wear yellow clothes to praise their king,” as King Bhumibol was born on a Monday, which correlates with the colour yellow.<sup>873</sup> During this time of mourning however, yellow was replaced with black clothing, and there were also reports of individuals being publicly shamed if they were caught wearing any other colour.<sup>874</sup> This is also evidence of the social pressures to hold the king in high esteem.

Though Asoke has omitted many visual aspects of Thai culture, they too participate in the connection with the Thai monarchy. Pictures of the royal family were present in Asoke communities during my fieldwork in 2013–2014 and they tended to be small and discretely placed with the exception of the large portrait of King Bhumibol on one of the *toranas* in Santi Asoke. Since the king’s death, the number of images has fluctuated as memorial areas with large portraits of the king, draping fabrics, and flowers were created—it is unclear if more

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<sup>868</sup> Irene Stengs, “Portraits That Matter: King Chulalongkorn Objects and the Sacred World of Thai-ness,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University, 2012), 137.

<sup>869</sup> Also known as a *Dhammarājā* or *Cakkavattin* and is discussed by Jerryson, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road*, 56–73.

<sup>870</sup> The relationship between the Thai rulers and Theravāda concepts of the *bodhisatta*-king is a complex series of political, historical, and social interactions which are explored in depth by Patrick Jory, *Thailand’s Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jātaka and the Idea of the Perfect Man* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

<sup>871</sup> “All TV Channels Carry Monochrome Broadcasts,” *Bangkok Post*, October 14, 2016, <http://www.Bangkokpost.com/news/general/1109869/all-tv-channels-carry-monochrome-broadcasts>.

<sup>872</sup> “Kirins Bag Title as League Ties are Cancelled,” *Bangkok Post*, October 15, 2016, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/sports/1110897/kirins-bag-title-as-league-ties-are-cancelled>.

<sup>873</sup> Tien-Rein Lee, “The Color We Use in Our Daily Life - Communicating with Color” (Paper presented at the Asia Color Association Conference, Thanyaburi, Thailand, December 11–14, 2013), 22.

<sup>874</sup> Teeranai Charuvastra, “Ultra-Royalists Guilt-Shame People Who Don’t Wear Mourning Black,” *Khaosod English*, October 16, 2016, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2016/10/16/ultra-royalists-guilt-shame-people-dont-wear-mourning-black>.

pictures of the late (or newly crowned) king have been added as permanent features in Asoke communities.<sup>875</sup> Portraits of King Bhumibol are also occasionally placed on covers of Asoke publications and a few paintings of him (made by Asoke artist Saeng Sinn) are also present in the gallery space in Santi Asoke as well. During the 2013–2014 political crisis, Asoke associated with the “yellow shirts” in support of the monarchy, and along with the national Thai and Asoke flag, a yellow flag with King Bhumibol’s initials flies from the top of the previously discussed *toranas* in Santi Asoke. The inclusion of photographs, permanent artworks, and King Bhumibol’s flag in Asoke signals their support of him, though it is not clear what kind of personal relationships individual members have to the king. The late king is not the only royal member celebrated as Asoke communities have special events for Queen Sirikit’s birthday where students play music and perform traditional dances followed by *Dhamma* talks. The general reception of the newly crowned King Vajiralongkorn has been mixed because of past controversies, and it will be interesting to see if and how Asoke will include images of him in the communities.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning another interesting aspect of some Asoke communities (but particularly Santi Asoke) where artwork is exhibited. As Figure 4.24 shows, a display area is set up in Santi Asoke with a variety of original artworks. These include paintings or drawings of Bodhirak, the Buddha or Buddhist imagery such as monks, and lotuses. Others works include abstract art, more traditional Thai mythological figures, various kinds of fauna and flora or more unexpected images such as a fetus in the womb. This space is made for the appreciation and support of artists connected with Asoke. Most of the artworks in this area are unsigned, however there were a few pieces made by the Asoke monastic, Samana Tissa, who paints and draws. In other Asoke centres, there are also small collections of artworks or photos, however they are often displayed indoors and may be hidden from view. These areas show Bodhirak’s interest in art and giving a platform to encourage members to contribute and express their artistic inclinations. The inclusion of this space also regulates the community aesthetic in a sense as these various (and random regarding subject, style, and medium) artworks are confined to one area, keeping a certain consistency of the rest of the centre.

Lastly, in 2016 a gallery space was opened on the first floor of the *Millennial Vihāra* to exhibit the works of one of the most prolific and influential Asoke artists, Saeng Sinn, who has designed many of the sculptures and magazine covers. The original artworks used for the magazine cover of *Rao Kit Aray* [What We Think] are displayed in this area along with various

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<sup>875</sup> The details of these commemorative areas are unclear (how many and how long they were kept) however a few examples were posted on Asoke social media.

sculptures. The addition of this space not only creates more access to images which comment on and depict Asoke's political beliefs, but also further expands the variety of images seen in the main Bangkok centre. These two "gallery spaces" underscore Bodhirak's interest in promoting and displaying artwork in Santi Asoke, and is also a materialization of previously described overarching goal of merging *Dhamma*, Asoke beliefs, and art.



Figure 4.24 Display area for artwork in Santi Asoke.

As this short exploration of "other images" in Asoke shows, there is a diverse array of visual influences, particularly in Santi Asoke, which includes cultural and mythological figures, abstract art, the royal family, as well as gallery spaces exhibiting political themes, and other donated artworks. McDaniel argues that "orthodoxy" in Thai monasteries is largely an ideal as "it is difficult to find any one monastery that does not have some evidence of supposedly non-Buddhist texts or art, whether statues of Ganesha, scenes of Chinese romances, or Persian dignitaries."<sup>876</sup> Asoke communities could have previously fallen within this rare category of Buddhist sites absent from non-Buddhist imagery. The transformation of the *Millennial Vihāra* in Santi Asoke through the last decade is striking and has expanded the repertoire of imagery in Asoke many-fold and as such, the group has joined other monasteries in representing diverse non-Buddhist influences. This building and the artworks that are part of it are also difficult to place within the wider context of Asoke, as many images are exceptions (such as the inclusion of Hindu deities) to what is found in other centres. Bodhirak has the most influence at Santi Asoke, as it is his main residence, further, it is the central Asoke community, and represents the group as a whole. Further, Santi Asoke is the most accessible centre for visitors and tourists. Some images may only be found in Santi Asoke, however as the most prominent centre, this

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<sup>876</sup> McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 214.

gives these depictions a certain relevance as well. The development of these symbols in Santi Asoke may also signal the beginnings of the integration of these images into other centres. Some of the images discussed in this section are found regularly outside of Santi Asoke as well, such as the *singh* and *gajasīha*, creating further artistic consistencies in other Asoke centres besides the often-replicated Buddha statues and images of Bodhirak. The inclusion of this variety of images shows a recent assimilation, or at least the expression of representations from outside of the Asoke “official” belief system—which does not include for example Hindu deities and Taoist symbols. We can see the artistic expressions of Bodhirak and the Asoke group as a continual and ongoing development which has expanded especially in recent years with the additions to Santi Asoke discussed in this subchapter.

## CONCLUSION

Not only was Asoke previously known as “the centre without Buddha statues” for the first three decades of their existence, but a rejection of various mainstream Thai Buddhist features further solidified their own material culture and aesthetic profile. Asoke communities were created with the intention that they would be the ideal place to practice their interpretation of Buddhism; this included Bodhirak’s specific aesthetic vision and the choice to omit major cultural and religious images that are found in other Thai temples, such as the Buddha. Beginning with paintings of Bodhirak, we can see that Asoke communities have progressively incorporated more and more images to support and represent their beliefs. Some images such as the *Dhamma* wheel and mythological creatures have been adopted and adapted from outside sources, and others such as the use of the vulture or the Asoke flag, have been developed by Bodhirak. This repertoire was further expanded with the creation of Asoke-specific Buddha statues. Mythological creatures can now be found in many centres, and Santi Asoke houses a plethora of unexpected images, including Hindu deities and Taoist symbols. These developments highlight considerations around Bodhirak’s agency, as well as the agency of the indexes themselves, art as a representational tool for Asoke beliefs, the relationship between individuals and the community to these artworks, and the transformations that have occurred because of them. These transformations take place not only within the physical locations of Asoke but also in regard to identity as discussed around the development of the Buddha images.

Though there are nine main Asoke centres throughout Thailand and numerous smaller garden projects and communities, there is a remarkable consistency to the aesthetic profile and the artworks on display. Santi Asoke (the main Asoke centre located in Bangkok) was regularly cited in this chapter as the exception to many of the regular occurrences at the other locations,

as it has the largest quantity and diversity of artworks. The multiplicity of images in Santi Asoke includes art which is not present within other communities, such as abstract artwork, public display of political paintings as well as certain mythological creatures and deities. This diversifies the contents, styles, and mediums of art found in Asoke, and some of these images—especially Brahmanically influenced avatars—point to a blurring of the edges of accepted representations used within the community. The inclusion of mythical creatures, Hindu deities, and the symbolically diverse *toranas* in Santi Asoke exhibits how imagery from outside of their “official” belief system has been assimilated and is evidence of a shifting landscape within the centre whereby a previously strict position regarding non-Asoke images has softened, and an array of unexpected representations are now present. After many decades of resolute exclusion, the development of Buddha statues in 2006 pronounced a decided transformation in Asoke communities. Another relevant consideration is that the Buddha statues were created because Bodhirak deemed the group spiritually “ready” to have what he considers to be an “appropriate” relationship to the images—which includes not worshipping or deifying them. Stating that Asoke did not have Buddha statues because they firstly needed to concentrate on “strict disciplinary practice, to reduce the *kilesa* and to become pure” implies that Bodhirak believes that the group has reached a certain level of spiritual progress since the communities now contain Buddha images.<sup>877</sup> As such, the inclusion of Buddha statues can be seen as a physically manifested symbol of the group’s spiritual progress (as perceived by Bodhirak and members).

Even though many of these developments have taken place in the last decade, art has played a central role since the creation of Asoke. Certain images—paintings of Bodhirak for example—have been part of the Asoke landscape for many decades, and Bodhirak’s self-identification as an artist is an important factor. Bodhirak describes himself as an artist and instead of painting or sculpting, he says his artistic medium is the creation, shaping, and building of Asoke: “Every day, I am living and working on the art,” he states, however, “few people understand that I am an artist, painting the world and painting life.”<sup>878</sup> Bodhirak’s concept of art stretches beyond traditional art objects and a close relationship between *Dhamma* (with a focus on morality) and the creation of art can be seen from his description of the various kinds/stages of artworks in Chapter 4.1.2. The Asoke communities are not only Bodhirak’s “artwork” but the paintings, reliefs, and sculptures within it reflect, reinforce, and articulate beliefs held within the group. Their use of common Buddhist symbols—such as the Buddha or *Dhamma* wheel—always includes a transformation of these images to express Asoke-specific

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<sup>877</sup> Santi Asoke Boonniyom Community, “Phra Buddha Bhithamnimit.”

<sup>878</sup> Interview with Bodhirak at Santi Asoke, Bangkok, January 30, 2014.

beliefs. Further, the creation and use of unique images by Asoke, such as the vulture, their flag, or representations of the community, illustrates how the group sees itself but also how it wishes to be seen. The Asoke-made Buddha images reinforce and represent their distinctive approach to Buddhism which builds on their previous aesthetic profile and I would argue that these statues have become another unifying feature of the communities. Because Bodhirak has chosen to exhibit specific characteristics on the Asoke Buddha, an exchange occurs between the agency of the Buddha's typical likeness and Bodhirak's agency, imposing his interpretation of how the Buddha should be depicted. His choices regarding how to portray the Buddha also aim to be a critique of mainstream Buddha images and how they are deified. The creation of artworks is a collaboration between Bodhirak and artists (both lay and ordained as well as resident and non-resident members) and as such, Asoke is shaped not only by the agency of the images and Bodhirak but the members and artists who collectively come together in transforming the community. The lay resident artist at Santi Asoke, Saeng Sinn, has worked closely with Bodhirak to create a large quantity of sculptures and reliefs for the community as well as painting the covers to certain magazines, which has had an impact on the consistency of the style, material, and content of the images.

I believe is valuable to observe the development of images within Asoke communities—something that until now, has not yet been explored in depth by scholars, even though the absence of Buddha statues was a well-known feature of Asoke. The more thorough works such as the monographs by Essen and Heikkilä-Horn also only mention this aspect of Asoke.<sup>879</sup> Further, Fukushima touches on this, and Swearer briefly (though more thoroughly than other authors) discusses Asoke's rejection of Buddha images.<sup>880</sup> The first mentions of Buddha images in Asoke are by Mackenzie in a short remark, and by Seeger in a footnote.<sup>881</sup> I believe the lack of exploration of Buddha images and art in Asoke is because Asoke is a smaller group that after the publicity and court cases in the 1990s, has received limited attention, and it is only in recent years that the visual landscape in Asoke has evolved more fully. Further, research on Asoke often focuses on their beliefs and group structure as well as their alternative economic and schooling systems for example.<sup>882</sup>

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<sup>879</sup> Essen, "Self-Dependence and Sacrifice," 24; Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 119–21.

<sup>880</sup> Fukushima, "Another Meaning of Meditation," 136; Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha*, 246–8.

<sup>881</sup> Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 131; Seeger and Parnwell, "The Relocalization of Buddhism in Thailand," 157.

<sup>882</sup> See Chapter 1.1 for an overview of literature on Asoke, Chapter 2.4 for a discussion on Bunniyom (Asoke economic system), and Chapter 3.2.2 for a discussion of Asoke schooling.

Through examining some of the materialized art objects of the Asoke communities, the aesthetic formations, shared beliefs, and the changing landscape of the spaces can be better comprehended. The physical communities shift with the addition of each image as they line pathways, hang in central halls, and common areas. The creation of the Buddha to transmit specific Asoke messages was also spurred by Bodhirak's perception of the "spiritual development" of his community. Because these changes have influenced the physical communities, material culture, and daily life within Asoke, I argue that art has influenced and shaped Asoke as an aesthetic formation. In this sense aesth/ethic formation I believe is more appropriate as the reoccurring images are directly linked to their overarching motivation of spiritual attainment, guided predominantly through moral development. The artworks discussed throughout this chapter participate in shaping Asoke, the lives of members, and additionally show how Asoke visually discerns and defines themselves as a separate group while reinforcing their shared identity and history. This aims at fulfilling Bodhirak's goals of teaching an "appropriate" relationship to the Buddha, which he hopes to expand beyond Asoke, along with his overarching view of creating lived art fueled by his interpretation of *Dhamma*.

## CHAPTER 5: AESTHETICS OF ASOKE CENTRES

### 5.1 Introduction to Asoke Communities

Religions (and that means: religious actors) create their own environments, i.e. sacral topography, architectural ensembles, places of worship, as well as interior design, images, devotional objects, “soundscapes” or media signals that influence the everyday world of all the members of a society—and not only of the believer.<sup>883</sup>

I argue that the physical communities are the foundation of Asoke—firstly, they aim at supporting and representing the group’s ideals and spiritual goals, and secondly, these spaces have allowed the group to develop and endure; if Bodhirak had not founded these physical centres, Asoke as a distinct group would not have come into fruition in the same way, if at all.

The term “Lived visual data” suggests that “the built environment – the buildings, locales, and physical spaces that we inhabit – constitute a form of ‘lived text’ which can be investigated to uncover insights into cultural values and norms, insights which are generally not available to social researchers through more conventional forms of data.”<sup>884</sup> As such, I argue throughout this chapter that the physical spaces in which Asoke exist are valuable sources of “lived visual data” that aid in understanding the aesth/ethics of the community. The spaces are—according to Bodhirak and Asoke members—meant to be the ideal surroundings in order to progress spiritually, which includes living in a community of persons with shared beliefs as well as the specifically designed spaces.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Bodhirak considers the Asoke to be the result of his careful artistic expression and the communities have many layers of non-verbal messages that represent and teach his specific ideology. As such, these physical spaces act as interactive sensational forms and a “synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk* to be experienced with the entire sensorium.”<sup>885</sup> Plate argues that “the reorientation and reproduction of new meanings and identities and communities begins with a transformation of sense perception. Reformation is somehow always about sensual renewal.”<sup>886</sup> The Asoke communities consistently have a particular aesthetic profile to represent the beliefs of the group and are meant to aid members in evolving spiritually.

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<sup>883</sup> Hubert Mohr, “Material Religion/Religious Aesthetics: A Research Program,” *Material Religion* 6, no. 2 (2010): 241.

<sup>884</sup> Michael Emmison, Philip Smith and Margery Mayall, *Researching the Visual*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SAGE, 2012), 5.

<sup>885</sup> Nina Ergin uses this phrase in relation to Ottoman mosques in, “The Soundscape of Sixteenth-Century Istanbul Mosques: Architecture and Qur’an Recital,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 2 (2008): 213. She further cites her inspiration from Gülru Necipoğlu, “A Kanun for the State, A Canon for the Arts: Conceptualizing the Classical Synthesis of Ottoman Art and Architecture,” in *Soliman le Magnifique et son Temps*, ed. Gilles Veinstein (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1992), 195.

<sup>886</sup> Brent Plate, “The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred,” *Cross Currents* 62 (2012), 178.

The development (or perceived development) of the individuals and group has in turn shaped the communities (as was discussed in regard to the Asoke Buddha statues in Chapter 4.2). This cyclical “double-direction” interaction is noted by Bergmann: “lived space includes and affects lived religion, and lived religion affects the spatiality of faith and social life.”<sup>887</sup> As such, the examination of lived spaces in Asoke is an especially significant aspect of the group which has not been previously explored in depth.

Nine main centres as well as numerous smaller agricultural centres are situated throughout Thailand.<sup>888</sup> Asoke has self-described objectives for their communities:

1. to bring together devout practitioners who wish to live in or near Asoke;
2. to practice simplicity, humility and frugality, and live by the precepts;
3. to develop spiritual practice through diligence, creativity, cooperation, generosity, unity, selflessness, kindness, and compassion for each other and all of humanity;
4. to live together in a natural and ecologically balanced community, and rely on each other through old age, illness, and death;
5. to enable self-sufficiency and self-reliance, capable of producing necessities within the community;
6. to support the basic needs of members (from a central fund);
7. to allow everyone (members and non-members) to develop merit through sacrifice (volunteering or donating for example) that will produce what the community needs; surpluses are then given away or sold through the *booniyom* system;
8. to develop an ecologically and socially balanced community;
9. to propagate Asoke’s beliefs through concrete mediums (print media for example) and through the lived practices in the communities;
10. to develop virtue (*ariya*) to the highest state since being a human is the most precious birth.<sup>889</sup>

These spaces share recurring aspects which create a recognizable aesthetic, as various Asoke-specific beliefs are expressed for example in the layout, buildings, and use of nature of their communities. This chapter examines a range of features present in Asoke centres, which are often indicative of an intended “natural aesthetic” and stands in stark contrast to the ornately decorated mainstream temples and monasteries in Thailand.

It is striking that the monks in the Theravada school of Buddhism, known for their orthodox attention to the Vinaya, eschewal of material luxury, and austerity of monastic

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<sup>887</sup> Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 75.

<sup>888</sup> The main Asoke centres: Santi Asoke (Bangkok), Pathom Asoke (Nakhon Pathom), Sisa Asoke (Kantharalak Sisaket), Sali Asoke (Phaisali Nakhon Sawan), Sima Asoke (Nakhon Ratchasima), Ratchathani Asoke (Ubon Ratchathani), Phu Pha Fa Nam (Chiang Mai), Tha-le Dharm (Amphoe Mueang Trang), and Hin Pha Fa Nam (Kaeng Khro Chaiyaphum).

<sup>889</sup> This list is in reference to Pathom Asoke but can also apply to other communities as these are overarching goals in Asoke. This list is based on my fieldwork and can also be found on Asoke’s webpage: “The Emergence of Buddhist Santi Asoke,” accessed August 14, 2019, <http://www.asoke.info/01Religion/Buddhastan/santi-asoke/santinakon02.html>. Jeanne Matthews Sommer describes a similar list with nine points which was derived from her fieldwork in Pathom Asoke (which according to a personal communication was undertaken in 1999). Notes from her fieldwork are documented at: [https://web.archive.org/web/20081011182304/http://www.warren-wilson.edu/~religion/Thailand/pathom\\_ aso ke.shtml](https://web.archive.org/web/20081011182304/http://www.warren-wilson.edu/~religion/Thailand/pathom_ aso ke.shtml).

practice, dress, and comportment, are also the purveyors and stewards of some of the most lavish (if not gaudy) monasteries in the Buddhist world. There is hardly a monastery, even a forest monastery, in Thailand that could be called aesthetically austere.<sup>890</sup>

I would however argue that Asoke achieves an aesthetic austerity, with perhaps the exception of the *Millennial Vihāra* in Santi Asoke, though it is also spartan compared to the golden, intricately embellished temples commonly found in Thailand.<sup>891</sup> I will demonstrate this through exploring the “lived visual data” within Asoke communities and examining reoccurring themes throughout this chapter. This chapter begins with an examination of the importance of nature and a “natural aesthetic” in Asoke through considering the relationship of Asoke to the natural world from a historical and geographical perspective as well as from within the community.

As “aesthetic” is being used in this thesis as encompassing our “total sensorial experience of the world and to our sensuous knowledge of it,” it is important to mention various forms of sensory input.<sup>892</sup> This thesis focuses primarily on the visual elements of Asoke, however with the awareness that senses inform and shape one another, as brought to light by discussions of the “embodied eye.”<sup>893</sup> In order to expand the breadth of sensory experience, Chapter 5.1.2 contains concise explorations of auditory, olfactory, tactile and gustatory perceptions and experiences within Asoke communities.

Asoke spaces and buildings are discussed in Chapter 5.2, beginning with an overview of the community layout. Consideration of the location and organization of various buildings and structures illustrates the delineation of the boundaries between “inside” and “outside” of Asoke. Chapter 5.2.2 explores the central hall or *sala* in Asoke communities, where the majority of religious activity occurs. Small huts called *kuṭīs* are the focus of Chapter 5.2.3 which are the most significant form of personal dwelling in Asoke. The centres have a wide array of buildings ranging from common halls, kitchens, libraries, schools, health centres, media rooms, and factories (used for producing food and health products, as well as fertilizers for example) which are considered in Chapter 5.2.4. To conclude this section, the displaying of preserved corpses, skeletons and graphic images of disease and death in Asoke communities will be examined briefly.

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<sup>890</sup> Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 165–6.

<sup>891</sup> As seen in figure 5.3 and figure 5.10.

<sup>892</sup> Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrip, “Aesthetics,” in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 21.

<sup>893</sup> As discussed by David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye. Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

The aesthetic of the Asoke communities is shaped using “organic elements” through natural building materials, vegetation, agricultural plots, and man-made water features such as ponds, streams, and waterfalls. Chapter 5.3 is concerned with the role of these additions and how they affect the communities and express certain Asoke values.

The commonalities which create the aesthetic profile within Asoke communities constitute an important aspect of the Asoke identity and represent their beliefs, and as it contrasts distinctively with what is seen in the majority of Thai temples, it is a definitive and unusual aspect of the Thai religious landscape worthy of exploration.

### 5.1.1 The “Natural Aesthetic” in Asoke

Nature (Thai: *thammachat*) was a regularly discussed topic in Asoke, especially regarding farming, food, clothing, the physical communities, or general lifestyle. The idea of living as “naturally” as possible permeates Asoke tangibly as well as in action and idea. Asoke’s objective for “environmental rehabilitation/restoration and preservation” are listed as five main points: (1) To promote a simple, natural lifestyle, (2) Create positive values around maintaining the environment of the community, (3) Develop consciousness around effectively using resources, (4) To promote public health, (5) Create ecological balance in the community.<sup>894</sup> This emphasis on “nature and the natural” in Asoke is a well-known feature and has been noted by other authors—Heikkilä-Horn, for example, reports that in the results from her questionnaire on the “key values of the Asoke people,” “nature and natural” is put on the top of the list.<sup>895</sup> Some of Asoke’s ecological practices have also been discussed by Meessen<sup>896</sup> and Reyland.<sup>897</sup> Though these aspects of Asoke have been mentioned by other authors, there is much that has not been discussed in regard to the relationship to nature, or the implementation of the Asoke understanding thereof within the community. Further, there has been no examination of the

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<sup>894</sup> “The Emergence of Buddhist Santi Asoke,” accessed August 14, 2019, [https://www.asoke.info/01\\_Religion/Buddhastan/santi-asoke/santinakon02.html](https://www.asoke.info/01_Religion/Buddhastan/santi-asoke/santinakon02.html).

<sup>895</sup> Other key values from this survey included modesty, devotion and sacrifice, concentration, unity, loving kindness, and compassion. Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes: Belief and Practice of Santi Asoke* (Bangkok: Fah Apai, Ltd., 1997), 159.

<sup>896</sup> Asoke as an “eco village” was discussed by Meessen, with a particular focus on the agricultural programs developed by Asoke and sponsored by the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC). Merel Maria Meessen, “The Ecovillage Movement in Transition Partnership with Government, A Multiple Case Study: Thailand, Senegal and Damanhur (Italy)” (master’s thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2013), 46–53.

<sup>897</sup> William Reyland, “Santi Asoke Ecology at the Nexus of Dependent Origination” (master’s thesis, Assumption University of Thailand, 2011); William Reyland, “Santi Asoke: A Community of Ecological Practice,” *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* 16 (2011): 39–54. Both of these works by Reyland rely heavily on Mackenzie’s *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, which has been unfavorably reviewed as poorly edited, uncritical, and is problematic due to the many mistakes in the citations, missing references, and limited fieldwork (See note 65). Reyland’s work also includes factual mistakes, unclear/misappropriated sources as well as missing citations.

aesthetic of the communities themselves and the integration of “natural elements.”<sup>898</sup> Since this is an important and recurring theme expressed physically in the communities, I will briefly outline the significance and possible influences of this “natural aesthetic” in Asoke. To understand the objective in Asoke of living in a natural setting, it is firstly helpful to make mention of the relationship to the forest and natural environments in a broader Thai Buddhist context and the Thai Forest Tradition, which has played a role in influencing Bodhirak.

Discussions on Buddhism and the environment span over a wide range and Payne notes that “the relation between Buddhist thought and contemporary environmental and ecological concerns has become one of the most important dimensions for the development of Buddhist thought as applied to contemporary issues.”<sup>899</sup> In the 1980s in Thailand, an environmental movement, led by monks (sometimes called “development monks” or “ecology monks”) emerged to become a widespread action, using creative methods to curtail deforestation, such as tree ordinations.<sup>900</sup> Specifically in regard to nature and environmentalism in contemporary Thai Buddhist contexts Seeger notes that there is “a large number of diverse, and often complexly intertwined, shifting and ambiguous factors that have not only generated changes in Thai views of nature, but also informed and motivated environmental action and perspectives.”<sup>901</sup> These factors include,

the charisma of (individual) Buddhist monks and the Thai monarchy, intervention by the state, Buddhist-animistic rituals, (decreasing) belief and awe in the supernatural of nature, teachings of Buddhism as a ‘green religion’, Buddhist soteriology (through the re-enactment of the spiritual quest towards awakening), increasingly widespread scientific understanding of the ecological system, Western-influenced environmentalism, views of forest as a place for recreation and leisure...and also, unfortunately, the too obvious dire results of the overexploitations of nature.<sup>902</sup>

This passage reveals the complexity of understanding relationships to nature and the environment in contemporary Thai contexts, and as this is a far larger topic than is feasible to discuss in this short sub-chapter, this section focuses specifically on the Thai Forest Tradition

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<sup>898</sup> “Natural elements” is put in quotations as many of these features are man-made and/or use non-organic materials.

<sup>899</sup> Richard Payne, “Buddhism and the Environment,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, Last Modified September 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393521-0067>.

<sup>900</sup> See, Susan Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012); Avery Morrow, “Tree Ordination as Invented Tradition,” *ASIA Network Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts* 19 (2012): 53–60; Lotte Isager and Søren Ivarsson, “Contesting Landscapes in Thailand: Tree Ordination as Counter-Territorialization,” *Critical Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 395–417.

<sup>901</sup> Martin Seeger, “Ideas and Images of Nature in Thai Buddhism: Continuity and Change,” in *Environmental and Climate Change in South and Southeast Asia: How Are Local Cultures Coping?* ed. Barbara Schuler (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 73.

<sup>902</sup> *Ibid.*

as they have played an influential role in the aesthetic of Asoke communities.<sup>903</sup>

Historically monastics have either practiced in the forest or have lived in monasteries closer to or within villages.<sup>904</sup> In Thailand wandering monks have had a long history of practicing in the forest and it was this kind of lifestyle that inspired the creation of the Thai Kammatthāna Forest Tradition around 1900 CE by Ajahn Mun (Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta Thera, 1870–1949) and his mentor, Ajahn Sao Kantasīlo (1861–1941).<sup>905</sup> Monks from both official Thai lineages can be part of the Thai Forest Tradition, which is known as a particularly austere branch with emphasis on closely following the *vinaya*, meditation, and ascetic *dhutaṅga* practices.<sup>906</sup> The Forest Tradition, not without past tensions, now has a harmonious relationship with the Thai *Saṅgha*, and has become well known—especially as a number of forest monks are revered by many in Thailand as *arahats* and are popular subjects for amulets.<sup>907</sup> The Forest Tradition has spread internationally, in part due to the influential monk Ajahn Chah (1918–1992) who founded an international monastery in northeastern Thailand where a number of westerners ordained and practiced.<sup>908</sup> Arguably the greatest challenge to monastics practicing in the forest has been the widespread deforestation in Thailand in recent decades, which has impacted and altered the forests, physical landscapes, and the relationship to the forest.

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<sup>903</sup> For further discussions on Thai Buddhism and environmentalism, see: Martin Seeger, “Ideas and Images of Nature in Thai Buddhism: Continuity and Change,” in *Environmental and Climate Change in South and Southeast Asia: How Are Local Cultures Coping?* ed. Barbara Schuler (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 43–74; Pierre Walter, “Activist Forest Monks, Adult Learning and the Buddhist Environmental Movement in Thailand,” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 26, no. 3 (2007): 329–45; M. J. G. Parnwell, “Eco-Localism and the Shaping of Sustainable Social and Natural Environments in North-East Thailand,” *Land Degradation & Development* 17 (2006): 183–95; Ivarsson Søren, “Man, Nature and Environmentalism in Thailand: The Role of Buddhism,” in *Forest in Culture – Culture in Forest: Perspectives from Northern Thailand*, ed. Ebbe Poulsen et al. (Tjele: Research Centre on Forest and People in Thailand, 2001), 33–54; Susan Darlington, “Not Only Preaching—The Work of the Ecology Monk Phrakhrū Nantakhun of Thailand,” *Forest, Trees and People Newsletter* 34 (1997): 17–20; Philip Hirsch, *Seeing Forests for Trees: Environment and Environmentalism in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996).

<sup>904</sup> Early monastic practice was often grouped together and contrasted to the lifestyle of lay persons, however as was explored by Reginald Ray, this fails to encompass the complexities and differences within monastic lifestyle. Reginald Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>905</sup> For further reading on the Thai Forest Tradition, see: Zhi Cai, “Doctrinal Analysis of the Origin and Evolution of the Thai Kammatthāna Tradition with a Special Reference to the Present Kammatthāna Ajahns” (PhD diss., University of the West, 2014); Kamala Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); Jim Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-state: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Brooke Schedneck, “Forest as Challenge, Forest as Healer: Reinterpretations and Hybridity within the Forest Tradition in Thailand,” *Pacific World Journal* 13 (2011): 1–24.

<sup>906</sup> *Dhutaṅga* (*Thudong* in Thai) consists of thirteen ascetic practices, ranging from eating one meal a day, seclusion and living without shelter. Also see Chapter 1.2 for a discussion of the term ascetic.

<sup>907</sup> For further reading on the Thai Forest Tradition and amulets see: Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>908</sup> Ajahn Chah’s teachings have spread to Europe, North America, and Australasia with nearly 30 branches or associated centres, according to forestsangha.org.

As with the changing forests in Thailand, various aspects of Buddhist practice, belief, and dialogue have also shifted and transformed in the last century—and the influences of the emergence of a globalized world and modernity is often discussed under the term “Buddhist modernism.”<sup>909</sup> These changes have informed how monastics, or more broadly, Buddhists, relate to the natural world (among other things) and is argued by McMahan to be largely in part caused by the, “considerable influence of Romanticism—along with its successors transcendentalism, metaphysical religion, and later forms of spiritual eclecticism.”<sup>910</sup> McMahan explains some of these elements as follows:

Many staples of Buddhist modernist literature—the exaltation of nature, the idea of spiritual experience as identifying with the natural world or a universal spirit, the emphasis on spontaneity and creativity through the cultivation of an interior experience, the transcendence of conventional morality through an intuitive and interior source of ethics, the reverence of the simple and the rustic over the complex and technological—owe much to the intertwining of Buddhism and the Romantic-Transcendentalist stream of thought. This intertwining also ushered the dharma into the narratives of suspicion toward the mechanized worldview of scientific rationalism...Romantic and Transcendentalist influences drew Buddhism into the orbit of hope for a reenchantment of the disenchanting, industrialized, and materialist West with help from the supposedly more spiritual East.<sup>911</sup>

Though a complex and multifaceted exploration of overarching subjects, patterns begin to emerge in more specific cases and studies to reveal how this may be translated into a lived religious experience. Schedneck follows McMahan’s assertions and delves more specifically into how the forest was depicted in the Pāli Canon and by early practitioners of the Forest Tradition, and how the relationship to the forest has shifted:

The Pāli canon writings of the forest and the forest tradition of Thailand already contained the qualities of escaping the distractions of the world and meditating in solitude, but through interactions with discourses of modernity such as Romanticism, this is accentuated. The forest becomes a place to escape modernity. It is a challenge to twenty-first century living, instead of just a challenge to the mind, and becomes a symbol of anti-modernism against materialism and narratives of progress and development. Forest monasteries were always places of natural surroundings and solitude, but this meaning is extended for contemporary interlocutors. Nature itself becomes entwined with the teachings of the Buddha. These reinterpretations show the range of expressions present from which to draw in the Buddhist tradition. The

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<sup>909</sup> Buddhist Modernism is also called “Protestant Buddhism,” or “modern Buddhism” has been explored in depth by various authors, see: Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus* (Berlin: Alfred Metzner, 1966); Donald S. Lopez Jr., ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and “the Mystic East”* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Donald S. Lopez Jr., ed., *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon, 2002); Stephen Berkwitz, ed., *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006); David McMahan, *Buddhism in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>910</sup> McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 77.

<sup>911</sup> *Ibid.*, 76–7.

reinventions are not radical changes but are developed and finessed to fit new contexts and discourses of debate about modernity and globalization.<sup>912</sup>

These transformations, broadly explained by concepts of Buddhist Modernism, bring to light many considerations of the interweaving of thought and practice, the continual shifting and sharing of ideals, and how these aspects in turn shape modern religious life on a smaller scale, as seen in the example of the Thai Forest Tradition. Not only has Asoke been influenced by the Thai Forest Tradition, but many core Asoke beliefs closely align with Buddhist Modernist thought.

As seen from a brief description of Buddhist Modernism, the concept of nature is further connected with striving towards a “true” or “original” Buddhism. The Thai Forest Tradition is relevant within this discussion because as Swearer notes, “various permutations of the Theravada Forest Tradition considered to be closer to the ideals of ‘pure’ Buddhism have influenced the shape of Buddhist reformism and revitalization in Southeast Asia.”<sup>913</sup> The search to recreate an “original” or “pure” Buddhism can be found in numerous contexts, geographically and historically, and Asoke is again an example of a group which actively strives to embody this. The ideals and the aesthetic of the Forest Tradition as seen as a close representation of “original” Buddhism has further influenced Bodhirak and many prominent monks in Thailand and abroad. As seen above through Schedneck’s exploration of the transformations within the Thai Forest Tradition, even branches of Buddhism considered closer to these pure ideals also are subject to shifts and change, and themselves are a product of larger transformations.

Asoke came into being in the 1970s, as rifts were forming between upper and lower classes, forests were quickly disappearing and there was much political unrest. At this time, many modern and technological developments were becoming more commonplace in urban centres, the income gap was increasing, farmers were revolting due to unfair treatment, communism threatened to spread over neighbouring borders, and student protests against political corruption ended in the infamous Thammasat University massacre.<sup>914</sup> Bodhirak and Asoke have been shaped by these events, as well as influential monks in Thailand, and incoming ideas from Buddhist Modernism.

Thai culture, identity, and self-reliance were felt to be under threat from the forces of modernization, capitalist development, globalization, and westernization, and this was

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<sup>912</sup> Brooke Schedneck, “Forest as Challenge, Forest as Healer: Reinterpretations and Hybridity within the Forest Tradition in Thailand,” *Pacific World Journal* 13 (2011): 19.

<sup>913</sup> Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: SUNY, 2010), 164.

<sup>914</sup> For an overview of economic changes leading up to this time, see James Ingram, *Economic Change in Thailand 1850–1970* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971).

to be countered by the privileging of the village community, which was seen as the bedrock and final repository of traditional Thai cultural values and social practices.<sup>915</sup>

The Asoke emphasis on promoting a simple, agricultural, rustic peasant lifestyle, while criticizing capitalism, corruption, and misuse of technology can be seen in ideas of Buddhist Modernism and were also nationally relevant issues at the time of Asoke's formation. These beliefs are expressed aesthetically, as has been explored throughout this thesis (particularly in regard to appearance of members and artwork found in Asoke) and one of the major conveyors of these values are the communities themselves. As I will exhibit, this is achieved through diverse means and has created a distinct appearance specific to Asoke communities.

“Going back to nature” and living in a natural setting is a core feature of Asoke, and many of their initiatives have shaped the physical spaces; activities that “return or bring back nature” include planting various types of trees in the community, perennial plants, herbs, fruit trees, and vegetable plots as well as “making streams, sandy beaches, and waterfalls within the community” that will “create a balanced ecosystem.”<sup>916</sup> A central aspect of achieving the desired “natural environment” is the relationship to the soil, fertilizer production, and irrigation systems in order to develop a verdant space. Asoke members would take me on tours when I arrived, and they would often exclaim how the group has transformed the landscape from barren, arid land to lush forested areas, and productive gardens.<sup>917</sup> The landscape of many Asoke communities has been deliberately and dramatically shaped through planting, agriculture, and water features. As such, much of the nature in Asoke is not the result of moving to pre-existing forested areas but has been specifically curated—the intention is to make the appearance of a “natural” setting, even if it is man-made. This is seen in the creation of waterscapes, such as waterfalls, and rivers which are meant to appear as though they are naturally flowing through the community.<sup>918</sup> Concrete beams are designed to resemble tree trunks, while fake vines and roots hang and wind to give the impression of a more natural environment.<sup>919</sup> Large boulders and sandstone looking platforms or large areas of ground are also man-made. The technique to make the rustic sandstone-esque appearance is further used in architectural features, on both a small scale or in a large and dramatic way as seen in Figure 5.1. The creation of these “natural” appearances will be a recurring theme throughout this

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<sup>915</sup> Martin Seeger and Michael Parnwell, “The Relocalization of Buddhism in Thailand,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 15 (2008): 85.

<sup>916</sup> This is based on my fieldwork and can also be found on Asoke's webpage: “The Emergence of Buddhist Santi Asoke,” accessed August 14, 2019, <https://www.asoke.info/01Religion/Buddhastan/santi-asoke/santinakon02.html>.

<sup>917</sup> Some of these transformations can be verified through early photographs of some of the centres.

<sup>918</sup> Discussed in Chapter 5.3.2.

<sup>919</sup> For a specific example of this, see Chapter 5.2.2.

chapter when exploring various aspects of the Asoke communities. It is obvious in some spaces that these “natural elements” are in fact artificial, and others are realistic enough that the viewer may think that a stream, for example, was naturally occurring. Certain aspects are convincing because of the mixture of man-made and organic elements, as seen when a stream is lined with large plants or living trees emerge from an artificial landscape which has been designed around it (as seen in Figure 5.4, in Santi Asoke). As these spaces are created from mock and organic elements, it becomes clear that the origin of the landscape is secondary to what it represents and how it shapes the “feeling” of the community, or what is sensed. These curated spaces inform the senses and imply a natural environment, regardless that not all the elements involved are organic or naturally occurring.

The creation of these spaces has been an ongoing and central aspect of Asoke since the group’s beginning, and throughout the decades the communities have developed a certain aesthetic repertoire which interconnects the centres. This aids in both defining the boundaries of the physical locations and creating a cohesive and unique expression which distinguishes Asoke as a separate entity within Thailand. This reoccurring aesthetic profile links the centres while concurrently assisting in deepening an identity to Asoke and supporting an ease of movement of members between centres. This was recognized during my fieldwork as after some time in Pathom Asoke, I felt comfortable traveling between centres due to their similarities and familiarity with not just the lifestyle, but also the aesthetic uniformity of the centres. I recognized how my relationship and perception to the Asoke spaces changed throughout my fieldtrips, especially regarding the man-made “natural elements”; when I first encountered these aspects of the community (imitation tree trunk beams or the large addition to the *sala* in Ratchathani Asoke in Figure 5.1 for example) I found it to be rather striking and somewhat unusual.<sup>920</sup> As I spent more time in Asoke these aspects receded into the background and blended in with the rest of the community, until it seemed commonplace.<sup>921</sup> Though the physical spaces are specifically curated with natural and faux-natural elements, I would argue, from my own experience, and through interviews with members, that a cohesive feeling of being surrounded by a natural setting is developed.

To conclude, it becomes evident that there are a wide range of ideas and values that have helped inspire, shape, and influence the physical expressions of Asoke. Many elements from modernization, globalization, political and social movements, as well as other monks and

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<sup>920</sup> At first, I found these renovations odd and rather reminiscent of an Indiana Jones movie set from the 1990s.

<sup>921</sup> I was reminded of this after returning to Germany when showing images of Asoke to others, sometimes they would remark on how strange these aspects of the community look.

lineages, have influenced Asoke, their spaces, and the aesthetic of their communities. Creating physical centres has been central to the development of the group, and a specific overarching material culture and aesthetic profile (based on their concepts of living in a natural environment) interconnects the communities.



*Figure 5.1 Main community building in Ratchathani Asoke; the sala is located on the ground floor.<sup>922</sup>*

### 5.1.2 Sensory Experience in Asoke

Aesthetics is understood in this thesis to signal sensory perception, rather than concepts of beauty or artistic value.<sup>923</sup> This work focuses predominantly on visual elements within Asoke, with the understanding that an embodied perception thereof also includes other sensory information: “The *embodied eye* means that seeing is never independent of touching, hearing feeling, and the manipulation of the body and environment; and that the study of religious seeing is the study of embodiment.”<sup>924</sup> Though this thesis strives to approach Asoke from an embodied perspective couched in the visual, what remains to be more fully discussed are the complexities of the other senses.<sup>925</sup> A brief, focused exploration of the various sensory perceptions is helpful to present a broader understanding of Asoke communities, especially because, as Herzfeld notes, “sensory perception is a cultural as well as a physical act; sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell are not only means of apprehending physical phenomena, but

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<sup>922</sup> In 2017 this area was developed into a large water feature and now includes more statues, and the gardens have been relocated. Photograph taken in 2014.

<sup>923</sup> Further discussed in Chapter 1.2.

<sup>924</sup> David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 54.

<sup>925</sup> Sensory studies have become an important branch of recent academic explorations in Buddhist and other religious contexts. An extensive list of literature from the last decade of sensory studies can be found here: “Books of Note,” Sensory Studies, <http://www.sensorystudies.org/books-of-note>.

are also avenues for the transmission of cultural values.”<sup>926</sup> Certain spaces interact with our senses differently than others, and the aspects of Asoke which create their specific aesthetic are collectively imagined to shape their values into physical communities. This is further relevant in Asoke as Mohr writes, “it is the sense organs that allow the body to communicate with its environment, to experience and shape it. They belong to the sensory systems that, consciously or not, influence and shape religious behavior and thought.”<sup>927</sup> This section endeavours to introduce and explain selected auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile aspects and experiences within Asoke, as they will take a less prominent position throughout the rest of this chapter.<sup>928</sup>

Buddhism has had a long auditory history as teachings were passed down through an oral tradition for approximately 500 years, and to this day chanting and sermons continue to play a significant role in many forms of Buddhism throughout the world.<sup>929</sup> Wong considers that in Thai Buddhist contexts, “certain kinds of ritually defined sound (e.g., music and recited texts) create a bridge between the human and sacred realms,” expressing the potency of belief around these practices.<sup>930</sup> Along with chanting, a wide range of sounds are found in Thai temples, sometimes including an unexpected cacophony as described by Taylor: “The whole scene at Wat Sanam Chan also has resonances of a country fair, loudspeakers blaring out an incessant mix of music forms, combining popular notions of religion, colour and carnivalesque, with the flavour of the market place.”<sup>931</sup> Of course there are diverse auditory experiences at temples, as some are more serene than others, depending on the location, teacher, number of persons visiting etc. As with variation throughout other Thai temples, Asoke also has a range of sounds, as some of the smaller, more rural communities tend to be quieter than larger centres that have more traffic or are closer to (or in) urban centres. This section discusses auditory

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<sup>926</sup> Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 240.

<sup>927</sup> Hubert Mohr, “Material Religion/Religious Aesthetics: A Research Program,” *Material Religion* 6, no. 2 (2010): 240–1.

<sup>928</sup> This is constrained to the Western concept of five senses, rather than the Buddhist addition of “mind” as a sixth sense.

<sup>929</sup> For further discussions on orality in Thailand, see: Daniel Veidlinger, *Spreading the Dhamma: Writing, Orality, and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Martin Seeger, “Orality, Memory, and Spiritual Practice: Outstanding Female Thai Buddhists in the Early 20th Century,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 7 (2014): 153–90. For other important explorations on the aesthetic of sound in other contexts, see: Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Annette Wilke and Oliver Moebus, *Sound and Communication: An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

<sup>930</sup> Deborah Wong, *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 103.

<sup>931</sup> Jim Taylor, “Buddhism, Copying, and the Art of the Imagination in Thailand,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 8 (2007): 8.

experience in Asoke in relation to chanting, music, communication, and sounds from the natural environment (birds and water for example).

Chanting Pāli texts is integrated into the daily life of Asoke lay and ordained members; a typical day in Asoke centres begins with chanting at 3:30am for thirty minutes, followed by sermons given by monastics. Booklets with the Pāli translations in Thai are available for newer members or visitors. Chanting also takes place before meals, during monastic meetings to confess any transgressions, and in other formal contexts, such as ordination or funeral ceremonies. During these text recitations monastics and lay members typically kneel with their hands in the *Añjali Mudrā* while facing all in one direction—for example in the *sala* everyone faces forward, often towards the present Buddha statue(s); afterwards, the *samanas* and *sikkhamats* will turn around to face the lay members.<sup>932</sup> This is interesting to note in regards to sensory experience as chanting is also associated with a particular bodily posture, as members may relax and sit more comfortably once the chanting ends.

The intonation of the chants is another prominent aspect of the acoustic aesthetic in Asoke. Heikkilä-Horn mentions that “the Asoke group does not, in fact, chant, but tries to recite the prayers by reading without any rhythm. Chanting is regarded as singing, which is forbidden according to the seventh precept.”<sup>933</sup> This statement is slightly misleading as the seventh precept (which forbids watching and partaking in entertainment) is regularly “violated” in Asoke as singing and music are performed by students and some lay members and heard over the loudspeakers.<sup>934</sup> Monastics do not sing or play music, and Heikkilä-Horn further states that “several monks mentioned their dislike of particular mainstream activities such as...chanting in rhythm” and that “the elaborated mainstream Buddhist rituals are seen as a negative phenomenon. The rhythmic Pali chanting and the glittering statues of Buddha and the other decorations are regarded as hiding the essence of Buddhist doctrine.”<sup>935</sup> Similarly Apinya notes this stating in Asoke “they do not chant melodiously in high and low tone like the traditional Theravada style, but chant in normal tone.”<sup>936</sup> The Asoke-specific approach to the seventh precept, which allows certain kinds of entertainment in the communities (such as singing and television) suggests that the monotone chanting is associated more so with their aim to

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<sup>932</sup> Thai: *wai*. The action of putting one’s hands together in front of the chest or head and it is often used as a greeting or sign of respect and is an important aspect of Thai culture.

<sup>933</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 223.

<sup>934</sup> This is discussed further below and in Chapter 2.2. Also, the regular watching of television in Asoke is a breach of this precept, however in Asoke it is considered a form of *Dhamma* practice.

<sup>935</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 153, 156.

<sup>936</sup> Apinya Fuengfusakul, “Buddhist Reform Movements in Contemporary Thai Urban Context: Thammakai and Santi Asoke” (PhD diss., University of Bielefeld, Germany, 1993), 162.

differentiate themselves from “mainstream” practices and a further attempt to legitimize the group through practicing what they believe to be in line with “original” Buddhism.<sup>937</sup>

As described in Chapter 2.2, the seventh precept forbids watching and partaking in entertainment, and typically a strict interpretation and practice of the precepts is stressed in Asoke, however the relationship to is entertainment uniquely interpreted. Asoke uses television, music, and entertainment within all the centres and during festivals, technically breaking this precept on a regular basis, however this was explained by Asoke members as a form of *Dhamma* practice in itself. In Asoke, music was played on loudspeakers in the morning and to call the school children to class; the loudspeakers sometimes relayed messages and announcements. The use of music in Asoke did not appear consistent, some centres using their loudspeakers more often than others. Songs composed by Bodhirak during his time as a musician were also played. Though I was unfamiliar with the songs played on the speakers, some members mentioned that music from outside Asoke can be used if it is deemed to have an appropriate message. Singing, dancing, playing instruments and acting in plays is permitted to an extent within Asoke, and is seen during various festivals when the students and adults arrange small performances.<sup>938</sup> Many of the students learn how to play traditional instruments and sing together, as promoting Thai culture is an important aspect of Asoke values. At other times, they may be permitted to play pre-approved popular music and perform to it.

Communication and the transfer of ideas and experiences play a large role in Asoke, and oral teachings are central to this. One of the prevalent auditory aspects is the daily the use of FMTV (the Asoke television station) to listen to morning sermons from Bodhirak and *Dhamma* talks from other monastics. This is arguably the most important form of dissemination of Asoke beliefs and the chief teaching method. Further, Asoke uses language in a unique way, such as their greeting, instead of saying the standard Thai “*sawatdi*” to greet each other, they say “*charoen tham*,” which translates to “may your *Dhamma* progress/prosper.”<sup>939</sup> Active

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<sup>937</sup> This hypothesis is based on my fieldwork in Asoke; however I did not have the opportunity to interview members specifically on this aspect as my focus within this thesis is visual elements and material culture (appearance, artworks, and communities).

<sup>938</sup> Generally, as a precaution against the possibility of sensual pleasures (*kāmatanḥā*) arising, or causing sexual temptation, anyone between the ages of 14 to 45 years old refrains from dancing. Heikkilä-Horn observed exceptions to this rule during her fieldwork in 1994, when students over the age 14 partook in folk dances. See, Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 224.

<sup>939</sup> For a more extensive exploration of language in Asoke, see, Sunai Setboonsarng, “How to Apply Wittgenstein’s Perception of ‘Language Game’ with the Explanation of Meaning of Religious Language: Case-Study of Santi Asok” [in Thai] (master’s thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2530 [1987]) and Sunai Setboonsarng, “Language Game and the Use of Language of the Asok Followers,” [in Thai] *Chulalongkorn University Journal of Buddhist Studies* 1, no. 3 (2537 [1994]), 53–81. Asoke also develops their own lists of vocabulary as well, an example can be seen on their website: <http://www.boonniyom.net/44999.html>.

listening plays an important role not only in the context of Bodhirak's lectures, but also in the numerous regularly occurring group meetings for organization, problem solving or planning.

Lastly, the sounds generated from the integration of natural elements shape the auditory landscape of Asoke. This includes the sound of water which ranges from dramatic and thunderous waterfalls to serene spaces of still reservoirs or babbling brooks that meander through the community.<sup>940</sup> As Asoke spaces are filled with trees, many kinds of birds can be heard with a wide range of songs, caws, squawks, and hoots; these sounds are accompanied by various insect hums and chirps. The water, trees, bird and insect sounds further reinforce the "natural aesthetic" as discussed in Chapter 5.1.1.

Olfactory perceptions are an oft-neglected sense and thought of as "lower" on the sensory hierarchy, however as Low notes,

smells take on a social character. Smells are routinely employed to catalogue, denote and connote our social ways of being. Indeed, we are how we smell, both in emanation and inhalation...olfactory communication provides embodied articulations of social relations as well as ideas of the self.<sup>941</sup>

This was exhibited within the Thai context by Cohen who notes that a certain "olfactory dualism" comes into play within urban environments, where "malodorous garbage, the stench of which is inoffensive to the Thai slum dwellers, is permitted to accumulate in the environment, even as individuals take considerable care to avoid much weaker body odors, which are culturally offensive."<sup>942</sup> Though much has changed in urban spaces in Thailand throughout the last three decades since Cohen's study, his work touches on some of the still relevant sensorial relationships and underlying complexities. In Buddhist environments, smells may vary greatly depending on the temple in question, and Chinese Buddhist temples often have distinct smells from Thai temples for example. This depends on many factors including the use and kind of incense, flowers, food, candles, or other offerings present as well as the location of the temple, if it is close to a busy road, food stalls or in a more rural area. In comparison to many temples that are full of large bundles of incense, flowers, or other noteworthy odours, Asoke communities contain a much different range of olfactory experiences. Incense, as one of the most characteristic and influencing factors on smell in Buddhist spaces in Thailand is wholly omitted within Asoke as they believe it is not part of a "true" practice of Buddhism and is associated with many mainstream rituals which Asoke

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<sup>940</sup> Discussed in Chapter 5.3.2.

<sup>941</sup> Kelvin E. Y. Low, *Scent and Scent-sibilities: Smell and Everyday Life Experiences* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 166.

<sup>942</sup> Erik Cohen, "The Broken Cycle: Smell in a Bangkok Soi (Lane)," *Ethnos* 53, no. 1-2 (1988): 48.

denounces. Fresh flowers may be occasionally present to decorate memorials for deceased Asoke members, as well as for commemorations of the late King or used as part of the television sets on FMTV.

Personal hygiene plays a large role in Thai cultural contexts and typically Thais shower once or twice a day and are particularly sensitive to bodily odours—as was also demonstrated in Cohen’s observations above. Even though Asoke members strive to live a “natural” life and are often engaged in agricultural and other work that influences one’s smell (not only through body odour but working in the fertilizer factory or recycling plants for example), personal hygiene, clean clothes, and hair are important aspects of one’s presentation.<sup>943</sup> Also in Asoke, it is not acceptable to use any kind of perfume as is prescribed by the precepts; shampoos and soaps are “all natural” and without added perfume.<sup>944</sup>

Many Asoke buildings are well ventilated as they are not enclosed by walls or windows and any odours that might arise, from food for example, tend not to linger. As Asoke centres are generally in more rural areas and filled with trees, the air smells generally clean and fresh. Areas with large water reservoirs tend to have a swampier odour, and some centres, such as Ratchathani Asoke would be sensorially transformed during times of flooding. Some noteworthy areas of Asoke with unique or stronger odours were the soy sauce and fertilizer factories, buildings for growing mushrooms and workshops for herbal soap, and other similar products. There is arguably a distinct smell to the food in Asoke since they use noticeably different ingredients and methods of cooking compared to common Thai cuisine. This leads to a discussion of gustatory experiences in Asoke.

As Van Esterik notes, “food is an intensely personal product, deeply embedded in senses and memories,” and not only does food play an important role in Thailand, but it specifically shapes the material culture of Asoke.<sup>945</sup>

The human plasticity for learning new tastes and textures leads members of many cultures to develop elaborate foods, all of which carry meanings of incorporation, digestion, style and distinction. Since we all eat and since in Thai Theravada Buddhism the gift of food is a vitally important activity reflecting merit and power, it is to be expected that food and “taste” are of interest in Thai cultural production.<sup>946</sup>

Further, Asoke’s interpretation of Buddhist tenets—particularly the first precept to “not kill”—has shaped the group identity and dictates the palates of members and their daily experiences

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<sup>943</sup> For a westerner (who was not used to washing her clothes by hand, tropical climates, and showering twice a day, for example) keeping up with the community personal hygiene standards required a heightened diligence.

<sup>944</sup> See Chapter 2.2 for further discussion of precepts.

<sup>945</sup> Penny Van Esterik, *Food Culture in Southeast Asia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2008), xi.

<sup>946</sup> Leedom Lefferts, “Sticky Rice, Fermented Fish, and the Course of a Kingdom: The Politics of Food in Northeast Thailand,” *Asian Studies Review* 29, no. 3 (2005): 256.

with food. Asoke is strictly meat-free, they use no milk products or eggs and there is very little sugar, deep-frying or unhealthy foods, as such, the food is decidedly different than typical Thai meals.<sup>947</sup> Asoke creates many of their own recipes, with a focus on fresh and healthy foods, both cooked and raw. Enormous pots filled with curries, soups, beans, and vegetables are served at the main meal along with large platters of freshly picked greens. Rice, noodles, and soy products typically accompany the meal and many dishes are based on Thai cuisine but modified to exclude animal products—for example they have created their own recipes for “fish sauce” and meat substitutes. At the main meal sweets are sometimes donated, and sticky rice and perhaps a few cookies or other deserts may be available.

From exchanges during my fieldwork, it appears many members take pride in their ability to develop a wide array of vegetarian versions of well-known Thai dishes, and the positive reception of their food can be seen in the popularity of the Asoke vegetarian restaurants. Diet, and as such, taste, are important aspects in Asoke, and deciding to give up meat, which most Thais deem particularly delicious, is considered an ascetic act which some members find quite challenging. Essen notes cases where new Asoke members “suffered resistance—even ridicule—from family, friends and co-workers” for adopting a vegetarian diet.<sup>948</sup> Food is a central aspect of Thai culture, and because Asoke differentiates themselves through their diet, it is an important factor which reinforces their group identity and cohesion.

In regard to tactile experiences, the most prevalent examples in Asoke are the clothes worn, walking barefoot, and the emphasis on physical labor, and particularly agricultural work. The typical member and student “quasi-uniform” is made from a medium to thick weight cotton and are loose-fitting to be both modest and allow for ease of movement.<sup>949</sup> Wearing clothing made from a similar style, fabric, and colour bonds the group visually as a cohesive unit, and also gives members similar tactile experiences. The same can be said for the Asoke preference for walking without shoes. This is often described as receiving “natural reflexology” and reinforces certain aesthetic and ascetic elements within Asoke, as members all subject to feeling the dirt or sharp gravel pathways underfoot. Further shared tactile experiences may include the prominence of physical labor and agricultural work, as many members are regularly physically interacting with tools, plants, and soil. Touching other persons is generally avoided in Asoke, though the students seem more relaxed in this regard, and can be seen being physically close or

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<sup>947</sup> Asoke members describe themselves as “vegetarian” and there may be cases of small amounts of milk products in the community (in donated snacks for example), though typically Asoke can be classified as vegan.

<sup>948</sup> Juliana Essen, *Right Development: The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 47.

<sup>949</sup> Discussed in Chapter 3.4.

playful with other students of the same gender. Lastly, because members live together in communal spaces, their tactile experiences can also be shared to some degree, through for example, sitting on the same floors, touching communal objects, and spending time in the same locations.

This thesis focuses on the aesthetic of Asoke which is predominantly reflected in a discussion of the visual as explored in Chapter 3 through appearance, Chapter 4 with artwork, and the current chapter regarding the physical spaces of the communities. This sub-chapter recognizes and specifically discusses other sensory aspects as they provide a rich tapestry of information and experience, especially in addressing and understanding a wider sensory perception of the Asoke communities.

## 5.2 Lived Space and Material Culture of Asoke Communities

### 5.2.1 Community Layout

The organization and layout of the main Asoke centres have various salient and reoccurring features. This discussion also illustrates the boundaries of where the “inside” and “outside” of Asoke lay, and the delineations between them. Though each centre has a different geography and layout, there are reoccurring and noteworthy aspects of how certain buildings, dwellings, and stores are located. Bodhirak, Asoke literature and members describe three main elements—home, temple, and school—which form the core of their communities. More specifically, “home” (*bahn*) represents what the Asoke call the “Meritism Community,” the “temple” (*wat*) is described as the “Buddhist Centre” and the school (*rongrien*) is the propagation of “Meritism Education.”<sup>950</sup> These three features are described as being supported by underlying Buddhist principles, which in this context is the Asoke interpretation thereof. The home-temple-school triad is meant to represent the central foundation and essential tenets within the community, and it translates physically in the community as structures dedicated to each of these aspects. A variety of other buildings in Asoke fall outside of these categories, such as factories or “creative structures” and are discussed below.

Asoke spaces often fit a pattern of having central meeting areas, as well as groupings of huts (*kuṭīs*) for the monastics and permanent residents, or dormitories in what I would describe as the “centre” or “core” of the community. This core consists of communal spaces, such as the *sala*, meeting/dining hall, and a kitchen as well as office buildings, and schools; offices and schools are not always separate and sometimes occupy the upper stories of a main hall or other

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<sup>950</sup> As described by members in interviews and Asoke hand-outs for example. Essen also mentions this aspect of Asoke communities. Essen, *Right Development*, 26.

building. Sex-segregated spaces for male and females—lay members and monastics—who live in *kuṭīs* are found within this central area, along with dormitories for students and visitors. As such, the home-temple-school triad is spatially grouped together and physically located in the centre of the Asoke communities.

There is not often a strong spatial delineation between where this “central area” transforms into houses for other lay residents, though at times, a small stream (as seen in Pathom Asoke) or a road (in Santi Asoke) mark these boundaries. Simple wooden houses are typically built in Asoke communities, though Santi Asoke has more urban housing with two to five story residential buildings surrounding the main centre where members reside. The peripheral areas before leaving the borders of Asoke often have industrial buildings, agricultural areas, or large ponds. Industrial buildings are frequently spatially separated from the residential areas, particularly those with strong aromas, such as those used for fertilizer or soy sauce production. This is dependent on size as well, as many of these buildings/warehouses require space that is only available in more remote corners of the communities. Gardens and mushroom “houses” are typically found on the borders and surrounding areas of Asoke centres, however there are some examples of centrally placed agricultural areas. Similarly, large bodies of water are usually not in the core of the community, while some streams and waterfalls are.<sup>951</sup>

Centres such as Pathom Asoke and Santi Asoke have stores or restaurants directly outside the main entrances. On the outskirts of these communities, Asoke-run shops, second-hand stores, vegetarian restaurants, herbal health stores, and media shops provide an overlapping or transitional area between the interior and exterior of some centres. The commercial land in front of Santi Asoke in Bangkok was purchased by the group in 2003, extending it to a total of approximately 13 *rai* (2.08 hectares). More rural communities (such as Ratchathani Asoke) may have a restaurant located in a nearby city.<sup>952</sup>

Most Asoke centres have a delineating border which is marked by a sign or gateway. An example of the regularly changing landscape of Asoke can be seen in Pathom Asoke where the entrance to the community was redesigned in 2016–2017. Above the main road leading into the centre, a large rust-coloured arch made of welded metal poles sits atop two rectangular pillars of the same materials. The Asoke vulture sculpture (discussed in Chapter 4.4.2) is perched upon the arch while *singh* and *gajasīha* sculptures (see Chapter 4.4.5) sit on either side on the road upon artificial rock structures; a Thai flag hangs from the left-hand side, and an Asoke flag (discussed in Chapter 4.4.4) from the right. Other centres have statues and signs at

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<sup>951</sup> Further discussed in Chapter 5.3.2.

<sup>952</sup> *Rai* is a measurement of land equaling .16 hectares.

the entrance of the community which consistently recreate the specific Asoke aesthetic with reoccurring themes, images, and even fonts for lettering.

This introduction to aspects of the main components of how Asoke communities are spatially organized presents a basic framework in order to understand various structural elements, which are discussed in the following sub-chapters.

### 5.2.2 Central Halls

The main hall (*sala*) is the central religious gathering place within Asoke communities, where members congregate for *Dhamma* talks, chanting, meetings, celebrations, and other events.<sup>953</sup> *Salas* differ aesthetically from other areas and buildings in Asoke as they are the most thoughtfully designed or embellished structures of the community and contain most of the religious imagery.

Though there are variations in the size and architecture of the *salas* in Asoke, many common elements exist. Often occupying a large area of space in the central part of the community, the main halls are always on the ground floor, either part of a larger multi-story building (as is the case for example at Pathom Asoke and Ratchathani Asoke seen in Figure 5.1) or as a stand-alone structure (as seen in in Sali Asoke in Figure 5.2). *Salas* are beam-supported buildings with no external walls, windows or screens separating it from an exterior environment. The floors are made from stone, tile, or resin, with a wide platform on one side of the room, approximately 50cm high for the monastics to sit upon, while the lay members sit directly on the floor.<sup>954</sup> These spaces are generally devoid of furniture, though there are exceptions for larger gatherings, where benches and chairs may be placed around the edges of the building for elderly members or to give persons in the back a better view of the area where Bodhirak or other monastics sit. A television is rolled to the front of the *sala* for Bodhirak's daily sermons on the Asoke television station FMTV, however it is stored out of sight when not in use, making these halls typically bare, open spaces during most of the day.

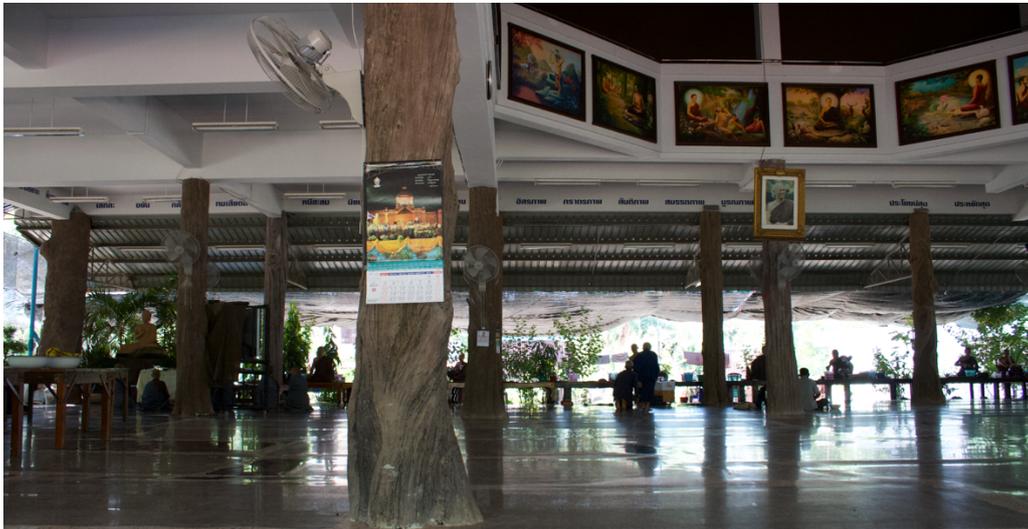
Another reoccurring aspect of these main halls is the art on display and the use of the Asoke created faux-natural aesthetic. Natural building materials such as large tree trunks are used, or concrete pillars will be sculpted to give the appearance of a tree. Many pillars, beams, and facades are also embellished with vines and other details. It is unclear if the same building methods have been used throughout all Asoke centres, however a consistent appearance is

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<sup>953</sup> Halls are open and available for use by students and members throughout the day and are not exclusively used for sermons or religious events.

<sup>954</sup> These platforms are visible in the back of Figure 5.2.

maintained. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show examples of these naturally inspired architectural features in and outside the buildings. Figure 5.1 shows a large addition to the main community building in Ratchathani Asoke which uses curved, irregular walls, a sandstone colour, and large organically draped vines/roots. Figure 5.2 exhibits features such as trees (real and faux) used as pillars and Buddha images on display in the main hall in Sali Asoke.



*Figure 5.2 Interior of the sala in Sali Asoke during the annual Phuttha Phisek festival.*

Apinya notes that through the lack of inner and outer decoration in the *sala*, Asoke “challenges the mainstream tradition,” and that the *sala* (in Santi Asoke) “looks very similar to a normal Thai wooden house. Inside, there is no altar, no Buddha image, not any kind of decoration to differentiate it from a normal traditional Thai house.”<sup>955</sup> In recent years this has changed with the introduction of artworks and Buddha images.<sup>956</sup> The main halls are where the majority of the Buddha images are located, both in statue and painting form. Statues of the sitting and walking Asoke-made Buddha are placed in the *sala*, and in some instances, such as in Pathom Asoke, a grouping of multiple seated Buddhas are present. Since the walking Buddha statue had been developed not long before the time of my fieldwork, not all the *salas* I visited had a copy, though recent reports reveal that the walking Buddha has now found its way into many more centres.<sup>957</sup>

In some cases, artworks are imbedded and melded together into the *sala* architecture, as seen in Figure 4.16, showing a relief where monks and lay persons can be seen pushing a large *Dhamma* wheel. In many centres it is common to find a series of paintings depicting popular scenes of the Buddha’s life (as discussed in Chapter 4.2.2). Other images found in the main

<sup>955</sup> Apinya, “Buddhist Reform Movements in Contemporary Thai Urban Context,” 81.

<sup>956</sup> See Chapter 4.2 for a longer discussion of Buddha images in Asoke.

<sup>957</sup> According to images uploaded to google maps and facebook.

halls include photographs or paintings of Bodhirak, or occasionally Buddha paintings unrelated to the series pertaining to the Buddha's life.

The exception to the previously discussed aesthetically similar *salas* is the *Millennial Vihāra* in Santi Asoke Bangkok. The circular multi-story building topped with a dome made of silver beams is also at times used as representative symbol of Asoke (and especially Santi Asoke) as it is the main feature of the central Asoke community. It does not have a comparable function to *salas* in the other centres, and another main hall also exists in Santi Asoke where most sermons and meetings take place, and has the common features mentioned above. Though this building is quite different to the other *salas*, it is an important structure and symbol of Asoke and as such, deserves a short exploration.

This structure is officially called *The Millennial Vihāra - Buddha's Relics Chedi* and replaced the original deteriorating building which had been donated to Asoke; though construction began in 1993, it has yet to be fully completed.<sup>958</sup> *Vihāra* translates to “abode” or “dwelling place” and typically refers to monasteries where monastics would live full or part time, however in this case it is designated specifically to the multi-story building at the centre of Santi Asoke.<sup>959</sup> The *Buddha's Relics Chedi* is a golden multi-tiered structure containing relics and Buddha statues which has been placed atop the silver dome that crowns the *Millennial Vihāra*. *Chedis* (Pāli: *cetiya*, *thūpa*) are Thai shrines or memorials similar to *stūpas* (Sanskrit) and are typically hemispherical structures with a spire emerging from the top, and a wide range of styles and sizes exist. They often house the relics of monastics who were believed to have achieved certain levels of spiritual attainment, or relics thought to have belonged to historical figures, most notably, the Buddha. This is the only *chedi* present in the Asoke communities and in 1996, Bodhirak presided over a ceremony to enshrine relics within it.<sup>960</sup> According to an Asoke website page, Bodhirak led monastics and lay followers in “placing the Buddha's relics and then Buddha's images from various periods in the golden *chedi*” and Asoke members I asked believe that relics in the *chedi* are in fact from the Buddha.<sup>961</sup> I found this rather unexpected as Asoke and Bodhirak have been outspoken regarding superstition around relic worship and similar mainstream rituals.

This building was created by Bodhirak with various intentions, three of which are cited

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<sup>958</sup> This still seems to be the case in 2020.

<sup>959</sup> *Vihāra* also relates to the heavenly abode (*dibba-vihāra*), the divine abode (*brahma-vihāra*), the noble abode (*ariya-vihāra*).

<sup>960</sup> This event coincided with the King Bhumibol Adulyadej's celebrations to commemorate his 50-year reign.

<sup>961</sup> “Santi Asoke Boonniyom Community,” accessed August 18, 2019, [http://www.asoke.info/Book/santi\\_history/santiasoke\\_history.html](http://www.asoke.info/Book/santi_history/santiasoke_history.html).

as: creating a relationship with nature and art, to build a potently religious space, and to have a spiritual impact.<sup>962</sup> A further list expands the purpose of the building: (1) To be used as a strong and durable multifunctional *vihāra* (2) To be used for appropriate social events (3) To be used as an office (4) To be a *chedi*, a place for worship (5) To be a work of art in architecture (6) To have a relationship to the natural environment (7) To enhance spirituality and promote emotional integrity.<sup>963</sup> Besides the practical aspects, the overlapping themes of creating a religious structure that integrate art and the natural environment are again present in these intentions, reinforcing the conscious and active effort towards joining these facets. Another reason behind the development of the *Millenial Vihāra* is discussed by Essen:

The most startling example of public accumulation is the fantastic million Baht Asoke temple in Bangkok... When I first arrived at the Asoke center in Bangkok, I viewed this extravagant use of materials as a contradiction to Asoke rhetoric. I asked one Srisa Asoke resident I met in Bangkok what she thought about using so much money and materials to make this temple. Her response was simple: “Where will all the people sleep? We must have space for all the people who come to Santi Asoke for special festivals.” I also asked Sikkhamat Chinda her opinion. She waved her hand in dismissal, stating that she does not use the temple. The temple is not for her or regular Asoke people, but for outsiders—it is a bridge to the outside world. Sikkhamat Chinda explained that in order to make a connection with more people who perhaps do not have as much wisdom as the first wave of Asoke followers, it is necessary to compromise. The Asoke movement therefore builds a beautiful temple as expected by average Thai Buddhists to entice more people to come.<sup>964</sup>

Essen’s fieldwork took place from 1999–2001, and prior to that, changes were noted by Heikkilä-Horn who states that “when I arrived in Santi Asoke in October 1994, I was surprised to see a huge construction site. The building of a giant-sized temple in concrete at the Santi Asoke centre in Bangkok seems to symbolise the change from an extremely austere and radical Buddhist group into a more socially-oriented one with manifold activities carried out by the fairly diverse membership.”<sup>965</sup> The *Millenial Vihāra* continues to be a distinctive aspect of Santi Asoke, and of the group as a whole, however as more modern concrete buildings have been added to the communities, the *Millenial Vihāra* is perhaps not as juxtaposed to the rest of Asoke as it was twenty-five years ago. What I observe as the most significant shift in recent years is not the *Millenial Vihāra* building itself, but the inclusion of an unexpected and diverse array of images within it. Abstract and cultural images, mythical creatures, and Hindu deities are not

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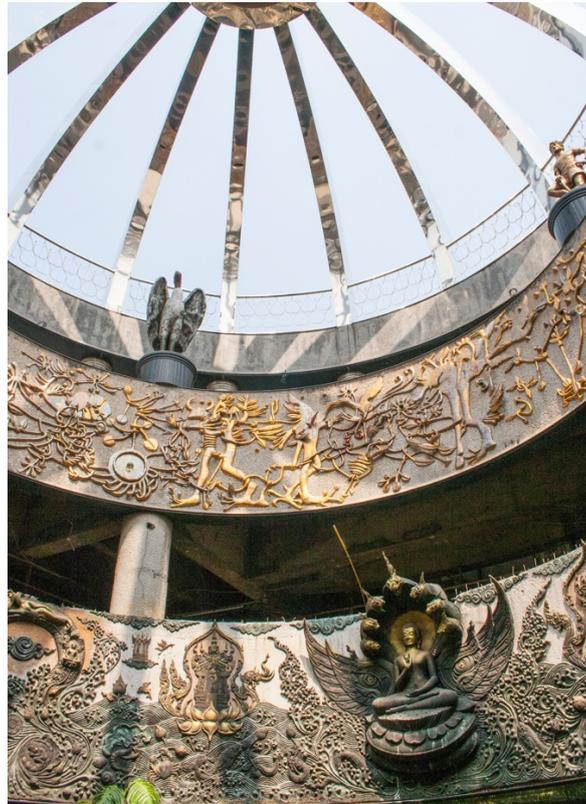
<sup>962</sup> “How Santi Asoke Buddhist Temple was Established,” accessed August 14, 2019, [http://www.asoke.info/01Religion/Buddhastan/budh\\_santi3.html](http://www.asoke.info/01Religion/Buddhastan/budh_santi3.html).

<sup>963</sup> “Santi Asoke Boonnyom Community,” accessed August 14, 2019, [http://www.asoke.info/Book/santi\\_history/santiasoke\\_history.html](http://www.asoke.info/Book/santi_history/santiasoke_history.html).

<sup>964</sup> Juliana Essen, “Self-Dependence and Sacrifice: Development in a Thai Buddhist Community” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2002), 128.

<sup>965</sup> Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 210.

central figures within Asoke artworks, but their use in the *Millennial Vihāra* exhibits the assimilation of imagery from outside of their “official” belief system.



*Figure 5.3 Upper tiers of the Millennial Vihāra in Santi Asoke.*

Many images are present in this central structure, and they do not adhere to only one style either. An abstract relief is juxtaposed with a highly detailed relief of religious imagery on the balcony directly below it, and statues of Bodhirak as a youth, a vulture, a boat, and a large lotus surrounded by four smaller vultures with outstretched wings are placed below the silver dome.<sup>966</sup> In 2015, three large and intricate *torāṇas* (free-standing arched or ornamental gateway) were completed and added to the upper floor of the building; these are an interesting addition as they exhibit diverse symbols and styles. The transformation of the *Millennial Vihāra* in the last decade is striking and has markedly expanded the repertoire of imagery in Asoke and this demonstrates how the group has joined other monasteries in representing diverse non-Buddhist influences. This building and the artworks within it are difficult to position within the wider context of Asoke, as many images are exceptions (such as the inclusion of Hindu deities) to what exists in other centres.

The *sala* has an integral function in Asoke, symbolically, and practically. It is the “temple” portion of the community where members participate in chanting, listening to sermons

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<sup>966</sup> See Figure 5.3 and refer to Chapter 4 for further discussion on details and artwork within the *Millennial Vihāra*.

from Bodhirak on FMTV or from the monastics within the community. This encompasses an important part of the Asoke way of life and particularly in relation to knowledge transfer. Although *salas* in Asoke communities have reoccurring themes and aesthetic similarities, the *Millenial Vihāra* in Santi Asoke is an exception to many of these features. This structure does not have a comparable function to *salas* in the other centres but it is an important place and symbol of the group, especially as an example of artistic and aesthetic diversity within Asoke.

### 5.2.3 Personal Dwellings

A diverse range of personal dwellings exist within Asoke—from small raised platforms with thatched roofs to larger two-story homes and dormitories. Monastics and dedicated resident lay members live in small huts, called *kuṭīs*. The *kuṭīs* in Asoke are an important aspect of their lifestyle as well as material culture—again aiming to emphasize their dedication to living simply, frugally, within nature, and in accordance with what they believe to be an “authentic” and “original” Buddhism. Ashraf comments on the significance of this kind of dwelling:

The ascetic hut becomes critical because it is no mere object of reflection but a metonym of that reflection; the hut stands for how asceticism structures its intentions and practices...these simple structures...have played a critical yet paradoxical role in cultural imagination. While asceticism is understood as a practice of renunciation and reduction, it also involves intrinsically an architectural project with immediate implications of spatial rootedness and material embellishment.<sup>967</sup>

The symbol of the ascetic’s hut is potent in many contexts and the use of simple *kuṭīs* within Asoke communities is meant to reinforce and express core values while also being used as a way to validate and authenticate the group’s beliefs and practices as compared to mainstream monastics. Asoke members often referred to their rustic dwellings to distinguish and emphasize their “humble” lifestyle from how they perceive many Thai monks to live. An often-heard critique from Asoke of mainstream temples is the luxurious lifestyle of some monks and abbots—this includes their living spaces.

The material culture of Asoke communities’ contrasts with mainstream temples in various ways and this is also relevant when discussing personal dwellings. An excerpt from McDaniel describes in closer detail the appearance and placement of personal dwellings at the well-known Wat Mahabut in Bangkok:

There are not only dozens of small images in the public places of the monastery. There are also many in the private monastic cells. These images communicate close

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<sup>967</sup> Kazi Khaleed Ashraf, *The Hermit’s Hut: Architecture and Asceticism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 3.

relationships. For example, the present abbot of Wat Mahabut, does not live next to the other monks. He occupies a *kuṭi* (cell) next to two shrines: the first one with the large image of the Buddha image, Luang Pho Yim, and the other is a small air-conditioned room which houses a large image of a former abbot of Wat Mahabut, Phra Khru Phithak Thawonkhun. The particular placement of this shrine enforces the connection between this highly revered abbot of the monastery with all subsequent abbots. He partakes in the prestige of his predecessors.

His own *kuṭi* is a mess of magazines, images, unopened mail, books, gifts, ritual implements, and toiletries. But among this mess another relationship is formed. The abbot, who is particularly dedicated to the famous Thai monk, Somdet Phutthachan Phromarangsri To (c.1782–1876), has a large image of this famous monk in his room and receives visitors who wish to take the five precepts in front of it...If the abbot is not available, one of his assistants conducts the ceremony which ends with the pouring of holy water (*nam mon*) and the tying of a string bracelet (*sai sincana*) around the devotee's wrist.<sup>968</sup>

This excerpt describes a variety of factors related to mainstream monastic living spaces; themes of spatial placement, imagery, personal items, and connecting spaces to ritual will be explored in order to further illustrate the differences in Asoke. Firstly, the placement of the abbot's *kuṭi* in Wat Mahabut, as described by McDaniel above, signals a relationship to the authority and prestige of previous abbots and other prominent monks. Commemorating and reinforcing connections to deceased abbots is common throughout Thailand, and various methods are used such as creating altars with preserved remains, photographs, paintings, statues, or the building of a *chedi*. Bodhirak and other senior Asoke monks live in sparse environments with no visual reminders or connections to a lineage in their personal spaces, thus reinforcing being part of a group of their own making.<sup>969</sup> They perceive their *kuṭi*s as returning to basic living conditions, as they believe the Buddha would have lived; through these dwellings, Asoke aims to associate with a idealized image of an ascetic and austere monastic lifestyle, rather than an existing Thai lineage.

The number and kinds of images in the description of Wat Mahabut contrasts sharply with Asoke as there are no equivalent shrine areas though some Buddha statues and occasional images of Bodhirak are present, these are sparse in comparison to the intricately embellished, image-dense mainstream shrines. This is particularly seen within the monastic areas of Asoke, where there are generally no statues, or images present. In some instances, simple painted wooden signs with proverbs or text from Bodhirak may be adhered to a tree or post. In the

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<sup>968</sup> Justin McDaniel, "The Agency between Images: The Relationships among Ghosts, Corpses, Monks, and Deities at a Buddhist Monastery in Thailand," *Material Religion* 7, no. 2 (2015): 252–3.

<sup>969</sup> In some cases (examples are found in Pathom Asoke and Sali Asoke) there are images in Asoke of celebrated Thai monks that Bodhirak has drawn inspiration from, such as Ajahn Sao Kantasilo, Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Chah, and Bhikkhu Buddhadasa. These images are not present in the main *sala*, nor do they have a prominent position within the community, however their inclusion in Asoke is nonetheless noteworthy.

monastic areas, there may also be images of diseased/decaying bodies on display with a preserved corpse or skeleton.<sup>970</sup>

Next, McDaniel describes the contents of the *kuṭī* and the objects within it, writing that the abbot's space "is a mess of magazines, images, unopened mail, books, gifts, ritual implements, and toiletries." This differs to the personal spaces of the monastics and lay members living in Asoke. The most important items for monastics are their robes and bowls, and in many of their *kuṭīs*, there is little more than that. Mosquito nets, possibly fans, toiletries, straw mats for bedding, and extra robes are often the only other additions seen in personal living spaces. Lay members who live in *kuṭīs* may have a slightly larger collection of items, but simplicity and order are maintained on their small wooden platform. Renunciation of the material world and possessions is a central feature in Asoke, and as many items are owned communally, there is little need for personal ownership. As well as having few belongings, cleanliness and keeping personal spaces orderly is highly valued for all members. Encouragement to renounce as much as possible may create a certain amount of pressure within the community for lay members to conform to group expectations and to live as simply as possible.

Lastly, the statement from McDaniel that the abbot's living quarters are used for rituals contrasts with Asoke as well, especially as the rituals described are strongly denounced by the group. This further reflects the contrast between mainstream practice and Asoke, in regard to the use of space and the relationship and interactions between lay members and monastics.

Living in *kuṭīs* is intended to reflect Asoke's ascetic beliefs and lifestyle; each monastic has their own hut, and many of the permanent residents also live in these small *kuṭīs*. *Kuṭīs* share a similar structure and style throughout the various communities and consist of a raised wooden platform (measuring approximately 1.5 x 2.5 metres) covered by a thatched, or simple metal roof. Figure 5.4 shows examples of typical *kuṭīs*, as seen in Pathom Asoke and the same style is found in archival images from the late 1970s, evidencing that this type of hut has been a defining feature of the community architecture, and very little changes have occurred in this regard. The dedication to this kind of dwelling is further revealed in Santi Asoke, where within the bustling city of Bangkok, Asoke has created a faux-forest environment with *kuṭīs*—as seen in Figure 5.5.

Clusters of *kuṭīs* are found within Asoke centres; the *kuṭīs* for the *sikkhamats* are often closer in proximity to the *kuṭīs* for female lay residents, as well as the dormitories for female

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<sup>970</sup> This is further discussed in Chapter 5.2.5.

guests. The same arrangement is true for the monks, male lay residents, and guests in another area of the community. In many forest monasteries, the *kuṭīs* are spaced further apart to give the inhabitant the feeling of seclusion, and provision of an isolated place to practice sitting and walking meditations. Asoke is community centred, and because there are no formal meditation practices, there seems to be little need or interest for having particularly secluded areas. This is also perhaps related to the size of the Asoke communities, and the emphasis on living in “nature” or a “natural way” which for them does not necessarily mean being secluded in the forest.

*Kuṭīs* are not the only form of personal dwelling within Asoke, though they express the ideal for members in regard to ascetic practice and lifestyle. Living and practicing the Asoke way of life is the central purpose of the community and is important for lay members as it gives them the opportunity to leave the “worldly life” while having the backing of a community. Providing lay practitioners a place to reside that supports their spiritual aspirations was cited as one of the most important aspects of Asoke described to me by lay residents.

Some lay members live in small houses which are placed on the periphery of the inner community further from the main centre of kitchens and communal halls. These houses, though larger, are generally very sparsely furnished, and members live in accordance with an Asoke-appropriate lifestyle. Some houses stand empty except for during larger festivals or events. In Santi Asoke, larger multi-story apartment buildings surrounding the main centre also house lay members. Typically, these homes have very little furniture (perhaps except for chairs for older members) and few electronic appliances as televisions and radios are used communally.

Other personal living spaces include the dormitories for students where the girls and boys are separated. For visitors there are gender-segregated dormitories; these are typically large open buildings with little furnishing (sometimes a closet for straw mats is present for example) as there are no beds and members sleep directly on the floor on a thin straw mat.<sup>971</sup>

Personal dwelling spaces, particularly in the form of *kuṭīs* in Asoke, aesthetically express ideals of renunciation, living communally, and residing in a natural setting. As seen from the comparison to the example of a monastic space in a mainstream temple, Asoke differs in many aspects, as was explored through the placement of the *kuṭīs* within the community, imagery and connections to lineage, personal items, and how the spaces are used, especially in regard to ritual.

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<sup>971</sup> In regard to my fieldwork, my sleeping situations depended on the community, at times I had the entire female dorm to myself, and other times I shared it with up to twenty women. In Sali Asoke, I slept on the ground outside under a mosquito net and during my stay in Ratchathani Asoke, I stayed in a small single room to myself.



*Figure 5.4 Sikkhamats kuṭīs in Pathom Asoke (left); Samanas kuṭīs in Santi Asoke (right).*

#### 5.2.4 Other Buildings and Structures

Asoke engages in an extensive array of activities, which is reflected in the diversity of the buildings present in and around the community. Schools, libraries, stores, health centres, kitchens, dormitories, washrooms, recycling stations, sheds, and large industrial buildings are found in Asoke. The buildings have a broad range of styles as well—for example, some of the newer health centres are quite modern, while other structures have a more traditional Thai appearance, and others are more industrial. This section will give a brief explanation and description of various buildings and structures excluding the main *salas* and *kuṭīs*, which were discussed prior.

Kitchens typically have a large open adjoining area where the main daily meal is served and eaten, and which also functions as a meeting space. The dining/meeting building has been constructed in a variety of shapes and sizes depending on the community, though there are many common elements to these spaces as well. In the centres I visited, these spaces had a similar architecture and aesthetic. Often the kitchen and the communal/dining space are housed under one roof, with pillars as supports, and the majority of the building has no outside walls, windows or screens dividing it from “outside.”<sup>972</sup> They were often sparsely decorated, with occasional images of Bodhirak, the late king and royal family, revered monks (such as Ajahn Mun) or possibly an Asoke Buddha statue (as seen in Sali Asoke). Other common elements found in these spaces include clocks, calendars, a television on a metal rolling stand, and a few plastic chairs. Kitchens are well organized and have a wide array of cooking implements for feeding

<sup>972</sup> In my observations, the only exception to the kitchen and eating hall being under one roof was in a small farm project outside Pathom Asoke where the buildings were joined by a bridge over a small stream.

large groups of people. Tables, cooking surfaces, a fridge, storage areas for food and spices, and racks for the large number of pots, bowls, sieves, and other cooking utensils are also common elements found in Asoke kitchens. In the afternoons and evenings, the area is used for informal gatherings, meetings, or for the students to watch a movie.

Another addition to the kitchen space is the garbage and recycling areas where compost, recycling material, and waste are gathered in multiple individual containers.<sup>973</sup> The recycling stations are typically small covered structures, not attached to a main building and the waste is regularly sorted and distributed to the appropriate centres, so that very little is discarded. Lastly, the washing station is a common feature in Asoke, where generally three to five large basins filled with water are placed in a row on a table.<sup>974</sup> The first two basins typically have soap and cloths or sponges for washing, and the later basins are filled with clear water for rinsing, with a drying rack nearby. This system is used in the smaller communities as well as during large gatherings and festivals. All members and students are responsible for cleaning their own dishes.

Schools, libraries, offices, media rooms are also important additions in Asoke, and are typically congregated in larger multi-story buildings. These buildings, unlike the previously described communal dining area, have walls and doors, and rooms with computers are often air conditioned. Many of these buildings seem to be built in the 1980s and 1990s and often have a dated appearance. As seen with Figure 5.1, some of these buildings are renovated to include organic looking elements. These buildings may have statues at the entrance, or artworks both in and outside, which are often original paintings found only in one location.

The production of food is an integral aspect of Asoke life, and along with agricultural activities, the manufacturing of a wide range of products can occupy much of Asoke member's time. Due to the large scale of some of these endeavors, a variety of factory buildings are present in Asoke. These buildings differ from what could be described as a large shed for tofu production, to industrial sized warehouses dedicated to sorting and packaging rice or manufacturing rice noodles. There are also large buildings for making, packaging, and storing fertilizer, soaps, shampoos, lotions, and medicinal products.

“Creative building projects” are structures within some Asoke communities which are uniquely decorated to convey a certain message or lesson. One example can be seen in Sisa Asoke where four bathrooms were erected representing different senses: “Form-Flavor-Smell-

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<sup>973</sup> There were often separate containers for plastic bottles, plastic packaging, glass, paper, juice and milk boxes, cloth, metals, batteries, and “other” items.

<sup>974</sup> Members and students many times mentioned with a certain amount of pride, that this way of washing dishes helps reduce water consumption and is special to Asoke. It is unclear when or why they developed this system, and though it is not unique to the community, it has been widely adopted and is now a feature of Asoke daily life.

Sound.” Designed and constructed by an Asoke monk, each toilet was adorned with features to represent each sense.<sup>975</sup> Another example of this kind of structure can be seen in Ratchathani Asoke, where the upper portion of a huge pair of blue jeans emerges from the ground (Figure 5.5). A main feature on the jeans is a brown belt with a buckle sporting the slogan, “Never lose your *sīla* even if it costs your life.”<sup>976</sup> A wooden boat and the name of centre is also prominently displayed on the belt buckle as well. The specific building materials are unclear, but often a metal frame and wire mesh are used to create a form to which plasters and paint are applied. These are unusual, however noteworthy aspects to some of the Asoke communities as they are creatively designed for didactic purposes with specific meanings.

In addition to these aforementioned spaces, there are a wide range of functional buildings such as recycling centres, stores, medical centres, restaurants, washrooms, and storage areas. As with their wide range of function, they have a broad architectural style, size, and position in the community. Recycling centres contain large collections of items ranging from broken bicycles, to clothes, scrap metals, and everything in-between, whereas some of the medical centres (as in Pathom Asoke and Ratchathani Asoke) are newly built, modern, sparsely decorated and very clean.

This section is not intended to catalogue the vast array of buildings present in Asoke, but to give a glimpse at some of the main features, as well as the diversity of uses and appearance of the structures in the community.



**Figure 5.5** “Never lose your *sīla*, even if it costs your life” jeans in Ratchathani Asoke.

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<sup>975</sup> This project was further described by Essen, *Right Development*, 62.

<sup>976</sup> It was unclear if anything was kept in the interior of the structure.



Figure 5.6 Interior of the Asoke general store in Pathom Asoke.

### 5.2.5 Places of Reflection on Death

Within Asoke, the presence of preserved corpses and graphic images of disease and death are on display to inspire reflection on the impermanence of the somatic form. This is not unusual and as Van Esterik observes, in Thailand, “there is a fascination with grotesque bodies at every level of society.”<sup>977</sup> The use of images of death is frequently found, and Klima links these images with political change and the anti-individualist approach to death perceived from a Buddhist perspective.<sup>978</sup> Meditations on death and the use of cadavers have long been used in monastic practice and graphic images of corpses are also found in popular culture as Hamilton notes:

The laws in Thailand against “obscenity” are particularly strictly observed... representations of the sexualised body are suppressed throughout Thai society, while representations of the mutilated and decaying body are commonplace, as in images of murdered and mutilated people seen in regularly appearing magazines that are devoted to their depiction and that can be found in every bookstall.<sup>979</sup>

On closer examination, themes of death and sexuality are not always clear-cut and Fuhrmann argues that the contemporary sphere of public death imagery in Thailand is especially multi-faceted when taking sexuality into consideration:

Death imagery does not function only as the guardian of a democratic public sphere. Rather, because it manifests not only in religion, magic practices, and leftist politics but also in the daily news and in leisure viewing, it becomes difficult to sustain the claim of its uniform political effectivity. Thai feminists have criticized the eroticization of images of female corpses in daily print media, but widely available popular

<sup>977</sup> Penny Van Esterick, *Materializing Thailand* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 211. For a diverse discussion of this topic see, Bryan J., Cuevas, and Jacqueline I. Stone, eds., *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2007).

<sup>978</sup> Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), chap. 6.

<sup>979</sup> Annette Hamilton, “Video Crackdown, or The Sacrificial Pirate: Censorship and Cultural Consequences in Thailand,” *Public Culture* 5 (1993): 524.

magazines...are a still more specialized niche for the pleasurable viewing especially of female death. These publications variously combine images of gore, ghosts, magic, and soft porn. In these viewing contexts death becomes a register of the sexual, and death images are for pleasurable consumption rather than religious instruction or anti-individualist contemplative practice.<sup>980</sup>

The development of media that includes sexualized images of death is particularly interesting as the contemplation of death in Buddhist contexts is often practiced to aid in overcoming sexual desires. Two prominent Theravāda meditations on death are *maraṇasati* (mindfulness of death, death awareness) and *asubha bhāvanā* (meditation on the foulness of the body); in order to assist these reflections, some monastics also seek out charnel grounds in which to meditate.<sup>981</sup> It comes as no surprise that the ascetic environment of Asoke uses preserved corpses and skeletons, at times paired with a series of graphic images of bodies in various states of disease, damage, and decay. Texts may also be present in these areas; an example is a poem painted on a large board next to a standing skeleton in Santi Asoke:

I used to be like you in the past.  
You will be like me in the future.  
Recently, you are waiting to die.  
You will see, I can't bring anything with me.  
We come here with nothing. We truly leave with nothing.

The bodies on display are often people who had a connection with Asoke in some way, either a member themselves, or a relative of an Asoke member. The bodies and skeletons are housed in glass containers and covered with a small roof or gazebo type structure. In some communities, the bodies are displayed within the monk's area, however in Sali Asoke, they are assigned to a more publicly accessible place on a road.

Deceased Asoke members are either cremated within an Asoke centre, or their relatives take their body to be cremated during a more traditional funeral ceremony elsewhere.<sup>982</sup> There are cremation sites in some Asoke centres and preceding the ceremony, the coffin is displayed; examples from Pathom Asoke (from a funeral for a *samana* as well as lay member in 2017) show an intricate silver holographic façade with Buddhist imagery and detailed borders which is surrounded by large potted plants and a large framed image of the deceased person is placed

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<sup>980</sup> Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 63.

<sup>981</sup> For an introductory discussion on these meditations, see George D. Bond, "Theravada Buddhism's Meditations on Death and the Symbolism of Initiatory Death," *History of Religions* 19, no. 3 (1980): 237–58.

<sup>982</sup> Heikkilä-Horn mentions that "Asoke monks and Sikkhamats often attend funeral rites in the other temples," however I do not know if this continues to be the case. Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 136.

on a stand.<sup>983</sup> Heikkilä-Horn describes how a funeral pyre (with the corpse on it) was burned in a field—since the time of her research, cremation buildings have been erected in some Asoke centres specifically for this purpose.<sup>984</sup>

A noteworthy addition in Ratchathani Asoke is the artwork on a boat used for funeral ceremonies, as seen in Figure 5.7. A tryptic of triangular reliefs is placed under the gables and these depictions are unique as it includes the only image of a reclining Buddha, I observed in Asoke. The reclining Buddha image is in the centre of the tryptic and is being consumed by flames while surrounded by divine and human followers. From these flames, two birds emerge and fly towards the commonly found sun/circle motif in Asoke.<sup>985</sup> In the image under the left gable, the Buddha sits on a lotus with his hands in the common Asoke *mudrā*, surrounded by divine and human followers, again with the sun symbol at the top of relief.<sup>986</sup> Lastly, the image to the right depicts a hellish scene: skulls, vicious animals, sea creatures consuming each other,<sup>987</sup> tormented humans and skeletons with alcohol bottles in their hands, and a large Rāhu demon head with protruding horns and teeth sits atop the image.<sup>988</sup> As seen in this relief, Asoke-specific themes are used to embellish certain buildings—in this case, as representing heavenly realms with the Asoke sun/circle, and hell realms with alcohol and characterisations of consumerism. These artistic themes further symbolize the karmic repercussions after death and have a similar purpose as the corpses or graphic images discussed above.



*Figure 5.7 Funeral boat, Ratchathani Asoke.*

<sup>983</sup> This description is based on images uploaded to Pathom Asoke's google location, and it is unclear if the embellished façade is a screen or a complete coffin cover and it was used for both funerals. There were no funerals during the time of my fieldwork, and as such, my research is limited on this particular aspect of Asoke.

<sup>984</sup> Heikkilä-Horn further describes some of the details of a funeral ceremony in Asoke, however I was unable to confirm the current standard procedure for funerals in Asoke. Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 136.

<sup>985</sup> Further discussed in Chapter 4.4.4.

<sup>986</sup> See Chapter 4.2.1 for a discussion of the meaning of this *mudrā* and the Asoke Buddha images.

<sup>987</sup> For other examples of images in relation to consumerism, see Chapter 4.4.3.

<sup>988</sup> See Chapter 4.4.5 for elaboration on Rāhu.



*Figure 5.8 Preserved corpse on display in Sali Asoke.*

Though the practice of displaying deceased bodies and graphic images of disease and death is not specific to Asoke, these aspects of the centres further shape the aesthetic of the community. As seen with the example of the funeral boat, reflection on the nature of impermanence is promoted through artistic representations in the physical structures of Asoke as well.

### **5.3 Creating Nature with Plants and Water in Asoke**

This section considers the use of “natural elements” which are not directly in connection with buildings, as an overarching term to encompass the use of flora (both uncultivated, and agricultural areas) as well as exploring the ways in which water is used as a central feature in Asoke communities. Other elements that will not be extensively explored that fall under this category could also be the types of trees, dirt pathways, rocks and fauna within Asoke communities.<sup>989</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5.1.1, the integration of natural environments into Asoke is an important representation of the beliefs and ideal image of spiritual practice, renunciation, and connection with an “authentic” Buddhist way of life which is distinct from the modern material, technological, and consumerist world.

#### **5.3.1 Flora**

Asoke uses flora to shape their communities, which is intended to bring them closer to their ideal way of life that is integrated with nature. This section explores the various uses of plants in agriculture, planting for soil regeneration, enhancing the appearance of the centre, the role of fertilizers, and ways in which the member’s interaction with the flora constantly transforms the Asoke landscape.

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<sup>989</sup> Because of the treed areas, some animals find their way into Asoke centres, and an array of birds are seen and heard, and various reptiles can be found as well.

Agriculture is a central aspect of Asoke life and as one of the “professions to save the nation,” much time, space, and energy is devoted to farming. Mock and Kaufman mention that throughout Thailand “at the community level, different organizations have attempted to put ‘Buddhist agriculture’ methods into practice...The most well known of these is the Thai religious sect Santi Asoke.”<sup>990</sup> Gardens occupy large patches of land in most Asoke communities and numerous locations outside the main centres are used exclusively for this purpose. Often, smaller agricultural centres are nearby (within a half hour, or hour drive of a larger Asoke centre) and they may have members, students or monastics living there to tend to the fields. Other gardens are tended to during the day by members who go home in the evenings. I had the opportunity to visit such garden projects outside of Ratchathani Asoke, Pathom Asoke, as well as a project Mahidol University, one of Bangkok’s main universities, which is run by Asoke farmers.<sup>991</sup> As seen in Figure 5.9, in some centres large areas that are not being used for dwellings, are cultivated—though this is dependent on how much space is available in and around the community. Of course, some centres have more agricultural areas than others; Santi Asoke in Bangkok for example has only a very small garden, but this is due to being located in the middle of the city where the space is limited. Mushroom farms are present in some centres, as well as fruit trees, covered growing houses, and large trellises for beans and other climbing plants. This an important aspect to Asoke life, and it also shapes the appearance of the community.

Asoke’s agricultural practices have been influenced by various factors, however the natural farming methods developed by Masanobu Fukuoka are particularly noteworthy. Fukuoka’s methods were introduced into Thailand in the late 1980s and rice farmers in the northeast experimented with his methods which are based around four principles: no cultivation (tilling/cultivation of the soil), no chemical fertilizer or prepared compost, no weeding, and no dependence on chemicals.<sup>992</sup> According to Sununtar and Gilman however, the farmers “encountered various problems, the main ones being a shortage of rice straw for covering the soil, drought, compacted soil, poor sowing techniques and poor water management. The latter factors meant that without ploughing, weeds were restricting the rice plants growth.”<sup>993</sup> The

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<sup>990</sup> Alexander Kaufman and Jeremiah Mock. “Cultivating Greater Well-being: The Benefits Thai Organic Farmers Experience from Adopting Buddhist Eco-spirituality,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 27, no. 2 (2014): 5.

<sup>991</sup> Another large well-known Asoke agricultural centre is close to Phu Pha Fa Nam in Chiang Mai.

<sup>992</sup> Masanobu Fukuoka, *The One Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming* (1978; repr., New York: New York Review Books, 2009), 33–4.

<sup>993</sup> Sununtar Setboonsarng and Jonathan Gilman, “Alternative Agriculture in Thailand and Japan,” *Horizon International, Yale University* (1999): <http://www.solutions-site.org/node/47>.

implementation of Fukuoka's natural farming methods in Asoke has also been noted by various authors, however I would argue that Asoke is more inspired by his philosophy rather than his specific farming methods.<sup>994</sup> Fukuoka is quoted that he believes the overarching goal of farming "is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings" and much of his method is tied to spiritual development, harmony with nature and an "original" method of agriculture.<sup>995</sup> As such, there are many overlapping aspects with Asoke values, and even though it seems as though few (if any) Asoke gardens use Fukuoka's farming principles strictly, his concepts are still present and discussed. The garden projects that I saw used tilling, sometimes with tractors, and Asoke is well known for the development of their own compost and organic fertilizers. It is not clear to what extent the different Asoke gardens are weeded. I was granted a tour of the main fertilizer production factory in Ratchathani Asoke, where organic waste is composted and mixed with a microbe "juice" which is held and fermented in large, covered plastic vats. Soil is enriched in Asoke through these fertilizers as well as crop rotations and Asoke members demonstrated pride when describing their methods and the results thereof. There appears to be a considerable amount of experimentation, and each centre or agricultural field has unique needs depending on the soil quality and specific region/climate. Certainly, the expertise and management of these spaces by specific members also plays a large role. Natural agriculture is a defining feature of the landscape in Asoke and an important aspect of daily life, moral expression, and group identity.

Between 2001–2007, Asoke communities promoted their agricultural methods and "clean lifestyle" to the rural farmers who, in exchange for participating in an instructional five-day course at Asoke, received a three-year postponement on paying loans owed to governmental Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC). Based on interviews, Meessen reports that around 300,000 farmers had been trained in these programs.<sup>996</sup> As such, we can see that Asoke values around "clean" agricultural production has not only stayed within the confines of the communities, but they have actively promoted their farming methods and conjoined ideologies.

Certain areas within Asoke centres have not been planted for food purposes, but for soil regeneration, to help against flooding, or the general aesthetic improvement of the centre

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<sup>994</sup> See, Heikkilä-Horn, *Buddhism with Open Eyes*, 54; Reyland, "Santi Asoke Ecology at the Nexus of Dependent Origination," 94–5; Reyland, "Santi Asoke: A Community of Ecological Practice," 49–50; Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand*, 132; Essen, *Right Development*, 73, 138; Sununtar and Gilman, "Alternative Agriculture in Thailand and Japan."

<sup>995</sup> Wendell Berry, preface to *The One Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming* by Masanobu Fukuoka (1978; repr., New York: New York Review Books, 2009), xv.

<sup>996</sup> Meessen, "The Ecovillage Movement in Transition," 47.

(visually and for air quality for example). Members in different centres explained that when Asoke moved onto the various pieces of land, they were often barren with poor soil.<sup>997</sup> By creating water reservoirs, and fertilizing the land among other agricultural practices, large areas have been transformed into lush, treed landscapes full of plant-life. The practicality of planting green spaces which grow relatively wild for soil regeneration, to prevent landslides, and flooding is closely tied to the active creation of healthy ecosystems and to the naturalistic appearance of the centre. There are also certain areas that have been planted to be decorative, this is most obvious in Santi Asoke, however many of the rural communities use flora for this purpose as well. Some plants are in pots or hung in baskets. Potted plants and sometimes flowers are used for decoration for the “sets” created on FMTV and for staging at festivals. Small plots of ornamental vegetation may be arranged outside buildings or at the entrance to a community.



*Figure 5.9 Cultivated land surrounding the Buddha in Ratchathani Asoke.<sup>998</sup>*

Transforming landscapes through planting vegetation and creating green spaces connects the members living in these communities to the natural world, which is a core feature of Asoke values. This creates an interactive dynamic of constantly shaping and replanting, tending, and interacting with the broad range of flora in Asoke communities. Many activities in Asoke are agriculturally dependent, the seasons are punctuated by the cycles of what plants are growing, and what needs harvesting or tending. Plants are living, growing, and changing

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<sup>997</sup> Typically, upon arrival Asoke members would give me introductory “tours” of the centres and discuss the various changes that had occurred, the boundaries of the community as well as other basic information about the layout of the centre.

<sup>998</sup> In 2017 this area was renovated to include a large water feature, more statues, and the gardens have been relocated. Photograph taken in 2014.

organisms, which create a continual relationship shaping the physicality of the community, and having a marked daily impact on the lives and interactions of the members. Core Asoke values are expressed with flora through their aim to develop an ideal image of a “natural,” and “authentic” way of living and practicing their interpretation of Buddhist teachings. This is further meant to authenticate the group and reinforce their dedication to opposing modernity as well as visually enhancing the centres with greenery. Lastly, because agriculture, self-reliance, sustainability, and vegetarianism are central in Asoke, it is an integral aspect of Asoke daily life and belief.

### 5.3.2 Waterscapes

The use of water within Asoke is noteworthy as it features prominently in most centres. As discussed throughout this chapter, “going back to nature” and living in a natural setting is a primary feature of Asoke, and many of their initiatives have shaped the physical communities; one central aspect to achieve this goal is “making streams, sandy beaches, and waterfalls within the community” that will “create a balanced ecosystem.”<sup>999</sup> This sub-chapter will outline the use of water in Asoke as an aesthetic feature as well as the emphasis on using water sustainably for personal and agricultural needs.

The addition of streams, waterfalls, and ponds in Asoke communities adds specific (typically positive) sensory information to an environment, and as Baugh poetically notes:

Water also features largely in our appreciation of nature. Rivers and streams, seashores and lakes...Other than the obvious need that we have for water to sustain life, what is it that we look for in these waters of Earth. Aesthetically, what do we see or hear, or feel in quiet pools, tumbling streams, or crashing waves along a shore? I doubt that there is anything in the environment that attracts me more quickly or engages my attention and fixes me so raptly, than a pool of water.<sup>1000</sup>

Water exists in a variety of forms in Asoke, from waterfalls small and large, to streams, babbling brooks, large slow rivers, and reservoirs of seemingly still bodies of water. This variety of waterscapes greatly influences the environment, some of which have been created by Asoke, and others were pre-existing geographical features. I will use three centres as examples of various aspects of how water is integrated and relevant—namely, Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke, and Ratchathani Asoke.

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<sup>999</sup> This is based on my fieldwork and can also be found on Asoke’s webpage: The Emergence of “Buddhist Santi Asoke,” accessed August 14, 2019, <http://www.asoke.info/01Religion/Buddhastan/santi-asoke/santinakon02.html>.

<sup>1000</sup> Tom Baugh, “Thoughts on the Aesthetics of Water,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 14 (2016): <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=777>.

Santi Asoke has arguably the most dramatic water feature, as seen in Figure 5.10. A large waterfall (approximately 9 meters high) cascades down an artificial rock face and pools at the bottom.<sup>1001</sup> This waterfall has a far-reaching presence—it can be heard from a considerable distance, and in close proximity has a considerable auditory force, it shakes the ground surrounding it, and creates a mist.<sup>1002</sup> The waterfall is placed within the centre of the *Millenial Vihāra*—making it a main feature not only because of its impressive presence, but also due to its central position, directly below the huge silver dome that tops the structure. Nearby, smaller streams also flow through the treed area where *kuṭīs* are housed. The Bang Toei canal is located directly behind Santi Asoke which is connected to the large Chao Phraya river that flows through Bangkok.

Pathom Asoke has two relatively still bodies of water of considerable size, in contrast to the Santi Asoke waterfall. A swimming pond is located to the right of the main entrance where a small waterfall cascades down rocks into the pond. Water also spouts out of the roof of a small raised platform in the middle of the pool, as seen in Figure 5.11. The second body of water on the other side of the community is considerably larger (approx. 100 meters long and 30 meters wide) and is fed by the nearby Phraya Phan river. From this small lake in Asoke, a river winds through the community, with bridges and steppingstones across it. Members had built a long dock and a large pontoon made of wood and bamboo with a thatched roof shortly before my fieldtrip in 2013.

Ratchathani Asoke in northeastern Thailand is probably the centre most influenced by waterscapes. The community is situated next to the large Mun river which can have considerable seasonal flooding. A smaller river branches off the Mun river near Ratchathani Asoke, and it is here that many of the boat-residences are located. Some buildings on land are atop large barges or boats that float when the river floods.<sup>1003</sup> Many other buildings and houses are built on high stilts. The use of water in Ratchathani Asoke was further expanded in 2017 to include waterfalls emerging from the large building pictured in Figure 5.1. An intricate system of pools collects the water and are used by children for swimming during large events. A fountain that cascades water onto the large Buddha (as seen in Figure 5.9) is also a new addition, though it is unclear if this is a permanent feature, or if it will only be used for special occasions.

Though Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke, and Ratchathani were the focus of this section, it is common for Asoke centres to have nearby rivers, manmade ponds, or reservoirs. The Asoke

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<sup>1001</sup> A partially hidden Buddha sculpture also sits inside the waterfall.

<sup>1002</sup> As discovered in many half-audible recordings taken in Santi Asoke.

<sup>1003</sup> An example of a boat structure on land is seen in Figure 5.7.

community Phu Pha Fa Nam is close to the Pa Pae river and the centre Tha-le Dharm (in Southern Thailand) is adjacent to the Nang Noi river. Still water is located in Sali Asoke and Sisa Asoke in the form of large rectangular manmade reservoirs. Some communities also have wells and rainwater is collected. As Asoke communities promote complete self-sustainability, water is a valuable resource used for agricultural plots and daily life. Specifically, in regard to Sisa Asoke, Reyland notes that,

in the northeast of Thailand the issues of water and agricultural needs have often created tensions between land owners, farmers and government officials. At Sisa Asoke, water usage, collection and grey water recycling are handled as valuable resources. Grey water, such as from showering is diverted into trees and green spaces. A large and fairly deep pond supplies ample storage for the dry season. Cisterns, roof collection and well-water, sufficiently meet the total demands of agriculture and human consumption.<sup>1004</sup>

The needs of the community regarding water typically appear to be met, however in Sisa Asoke, Essen reported a water shortage during her stay in 2001 after a “Children’s Day” festival where,

the water flowing out of the faucet slowed to a trickle and then stopped altogether. By late afternoon the next day, the water still was not running. I asked my housemate Raud what caused the water stoppage. She answered, “Sometimes the power goes out, and sometimes people use too much water and the pump cannot keep up.” Last night, she surmised, the many people who made dinner for the children used large quantities of water to cook and clean up. The pump was still struggling to replenish the community’s water supply. This situation suggested to me that cooking communally might indeed conserve water.<sup>1005</sup>

Communal cooking is one method for reducing water consumption and the style of dish washing with multiple large buckets filled with water also serves this purpose.<sup>1006</sup> The typical Thai style of bathing and toilet flushing (with small buckets of water) also conserves water, as does handwashing laundry.

A final consideration regarding water is the drinking water in Asoke. Large silver containers are placed throughout many Asoke communities containing purified, filtered water made in a Pathom Asoke water distillery. This was frequently described as having many health benefits, and the importance of drinking water was reinforced almost daily. These large silver vats are one of the few shiny, modern looking aspects to Asoke communities.

The use of water in Asoke, as a prominent and central feature in large communities, supports Asoke values and fulfills a practical purpose. Water is used to reinforce the “natural” aesthetic in Asoke, accompanying the rock structures, plants and trees which shape their communities. Practically, as agriculture has a large role in many Asoke communities, having

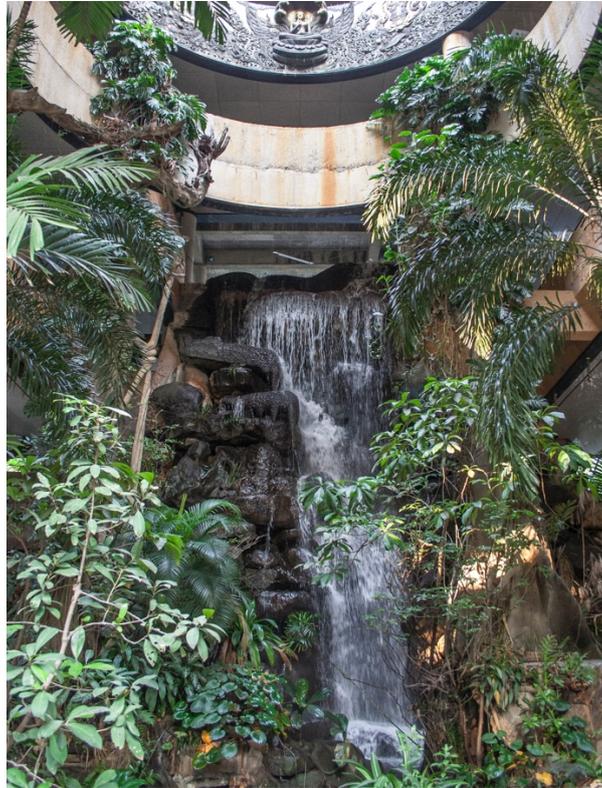
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<sup>1004</sup> Reyland, “Santi Asoke Ecology at the Nexus of Dependent Origination,” 96.

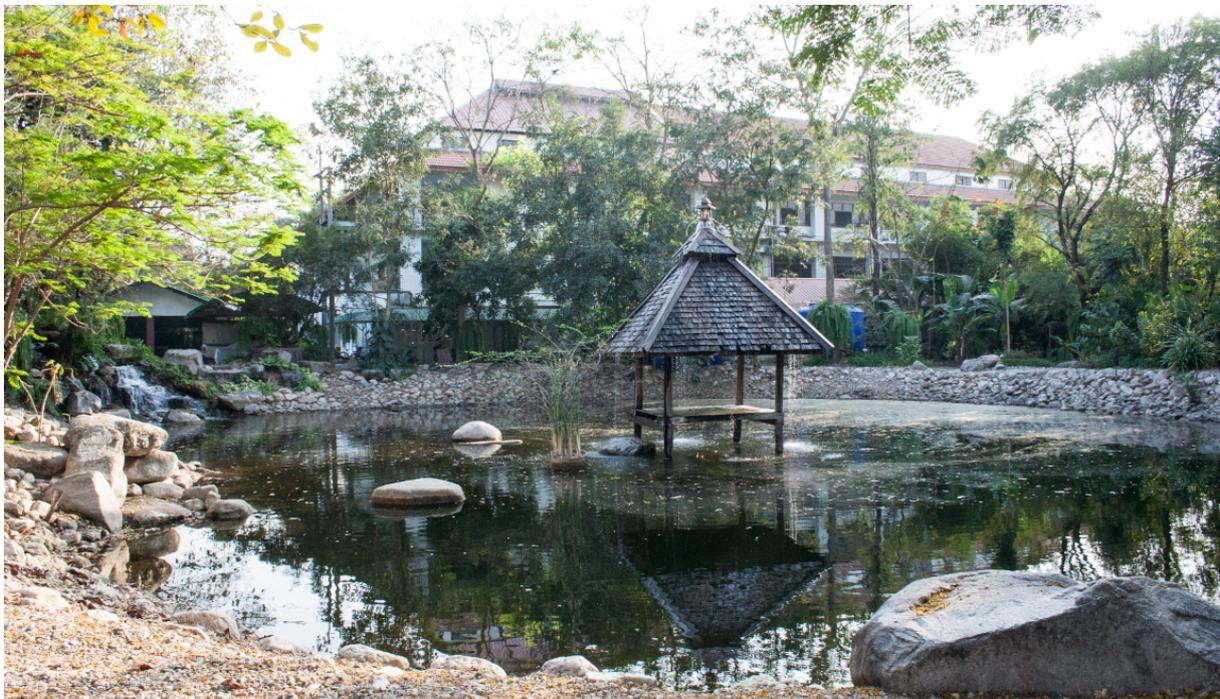
<sup>1005</sup> Essen, *Right Development*, 79.

<sup>1006</sup> This was also described in Chapter 5.2.4.

access to a nearby water source benefits not only their landscape, but also their crops. The Asoke slogan of “consume little” is applied (as discussed previously) to economic/capitalistic consumption and also concerns to how members engage with natural resources such as water.



*Figure 5.10 Waterfall feature within the Millenial Vihāra in Santi Asoke.*



*Figure 5.11 Man-made swimming pond in Pathom Asoke.*

## CONCLUSION

The idea of investigating “lived visual data” proposes that insights, cultural beliefs, and customs can be revealed through examining inhabited physical spaces, as they are a form of “lived text” that is often not available to researchers through more orthodox methods of data collection.<sup>1007</sup> I have argued throughout this chapter that Asoke’s physical spaces are a valuable source of “lived visual data” that aids in understanding the aesth/ethics of the community. These spaces have been curated in a particular way and act as interactive sensational forms and a “synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*” that is understood and encountered through all of our senses.<sup>1008</sup>

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, I mirror Plate’s statement that creating new identities and communities begins with a reshaping of the senses; and as the lived environment influences sensory input, I argue that aesthetic reformation is also key to Asoke communities.<sup>1009</sup> Would Asoke have developed in the same way without access to space in which to create this sensual restructuring? I view the dedication to a specific aesthetic style or profile as a central tenet to the group—for example, in Santi Asoke, Bangkok, large trees, dirt paths, and waterscapes have altered the urban space in order to recreate this aesthetic ideal. Asoke has used sensory reformation to further their spiritual progression, to actualize their beliefs, and define and authenticate the group.

Bergmann notes the cyclical and interwoven relationship between lived religion and lived space: where the space involves and impacts the lived religion, and the lived religion influences and transforms the spatiality of belief and community life.<sup>1010</sup> This supports the view that the physical communities play a foundation role in Asoke. The centres represent the group’s beliefs and spiritual goals and also are designed to be the ideal place for members to develop spiritually. Bodhirak considers Asoke to be the result of his careful artistic expression and the communities have many layers of non-verbal messages that represent and teach his specific ideology. The creation of the physical locations has allowed Asoke to evolve into a distinctive group—with a distinguishing aesthetic profile.

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<sup>1007</sup> Michael Emmison, Philip Smith and Margery Mayall, *Researching the Visual*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SAGE, 2012), 5.

<sup>1008</sup> Nina Ergin uses this phrase in relation to Ottoman mosques in, “The Soundscape of Sixteenth-Century Istanbul Mosques: Architecture and Qur’an Recital,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 2 (2008): 213. She further cites her inspiration from Gülru Necipoğlu, “A Kanun for the State, A Canon for the Arts: Conceptualizing the Classical Synthesis of Ottoman Art and Architecture,” in *Soliman le Magnifique et son Temps*, ed. Gilles Veinstein (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1992), 195.

<sup>1009</sup> Plate notes, “the reorientation and reproduction of new meanings and identities and communities begins with a transformation of sense perception. Reformation is somehow always about sensual renewal.” Brent Plate, “The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred,” *Cross Currents* 62 (2012), 178.

<sup>1010</sup> Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 75.

Instead of “sensational forms” with clear boundaries (rituals, books, artifacts or religious media as generally described) I would expand this definition and argue that the whole of the physical Asoke communities can be considered sensational forms, as the material aspects thereof are designed and intended to direct and further spiritual development. To members, Asoke communities are more than just the physical spaces in which they live, as they are also considered the most effective place to practice their understanding of Buddhism and progress spiritually. Most aspects of the outside “materialist and consumerist” culture are absent and everything from the dirt pathways to the *kuṭīs* and buildings have didactic functions reminding them of Bodhirak’s teachings and their ultimate spiritual goals.

Asoke has been inspired and shaped by a broad scope of factors, and specific values emerged during the creation of the group which have maintained a central position in their communities and identity. The ideal of creating small, rural, agricultural communities is a core feature in Asoke which emerged as a reaction to many of the tensions and changes that were happening in the 1960s and 1970s in Thailand. Modernization, globalization, political and social movements, as well as other monks and lineages (notably the Thai Forest Tradition and Buddhādāsa) have further influenced Asoke, their physical spaces, and the aesthetic of their communities. Their aesthetic profile aims to unite the ideal rural village and ascetic elements to connect the group with their conception of an “authentic” or “original” Buddhism.

A prominent aspect of the Asoke communities is the emphasis on the rural, agricultural village which is interwoven with a “natural aesthetic” in various ways. The idea of living as “naturally” as possible permeates much of Asoke tangibly as well as in action and idea, which encompasses their relationships to farming, food, clothing, the physical communities, and general lifestyle. The use of natural materials (or materials that are designed to look “natural”) inform core facets of the Asoke centres—such as the *sala*, main meeting halls, the *kuṭīs* or the dirt roads that weave through the communities. By exploring the assorted aspects that comprise some of the main elements of the centres, I have shown the variety of functions of the community, the use of architectural styles, and layout as well as the overarching aesthetic profile which is created by the group. Asoke centres are a unique microcosm in Thailand, markedly different than the majority of temples in regard to purpose and sensorial input—especially as Asoke communities are not made for worshippers to come and give offerings but have been made by Asoke members for Asoke members with the purpose of spiritual development. The contrast to most mainstream Buddhist environments is also exemplified through a lack of ornately designed and decorated buildings, and the consistent use of “natural” materials to differentiate themselves and reaffirm their connection with what they believe to be

an “original” form of Buddhism. The shared imagination of Asoke, informed by Bodhirak’s guidance, aims at reconstructing how they believe the Buddha would have lived, while also being prompted by the ideal of the traditional agricultural Thai village. Both of these aspects have been shaped by many factors including influences from prominent monks and Buddhism modernism for example. Through the study of the intersections of actions and processes that form communities (physical as well as imagined) and understanding Asoke as an aesthetic formation, the importance of exploring the physical communities becomes evident.

Considerations of the shared aesthetic experience in Asoke, how members inform their senses, and have their senses moulded through actively constructing and living in a particular kind of environment, provides insight into the values that form the group and their physical communities. These spaces are the manifestations of central Asoke beliefs that are continually being shaped through the agency of Bodhirak, the members and their shared imaginations, which in turn informs and transforms the lived aesthetic experiences and permeates the lives of persons in contact with these spaces. The aesthetic profile which is consistently implemented in all Asoke centres has been carefully curated and in recent decades has extended to include modern elements and buildings. Transformations occur on large and small scales in Asoke—new buildings, artworks, the integration of water in various ways, the daily upkeep of sweeping pathways and tending gardens—and meanwhile the overarching aesthetic style of Asoke is not abandoned, but rediscovered and built upon. These continual revisions illustrate how Asoke actively translates their principles into their physical surroundings, and in turn how those environments are intended to support their spiritual progress.

This chapter aimed at weaving together the assorted threads of aesthetic intentions in the physical spaces of the Asoke communities, which exhibits a rich tapestry of interactions, agencies, and sense shaping. The commonalities which engender the “Asoke aesthetic” constitute a consequential aspect of the Asoke identity and represent their ideologies and as it contrasts with the majority of Thai temples, it is a definitive aspect of the Thai religious landscape worthy of investigation.

## THESIS CONCLUSION

This thesis argues that the reformation of senses in Asoke—through their specific interpretation of the *Dhamma*—has shaped not only a coherent aesthetic profile and material culture unique to them but is the underlying structure that allows Asoke to be seen as an aesth/ethic formation. An extension of this argument is that the Asoke communities act as interactive sensational forms and a “synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk* to be experienced with the entire sensorium.”<sup>1011</sup> In this thesis, these aspects were examined through considering the basic beliefs within Asoke (Chapter 2), the appearance of members (Chapter 3), Buddha images and artworks present in Asoke (Chapter 4), and lived spaces (Chapter 5).

A reoccurring thread woven through this thesis is how sensory metamorphosis—which is based on Bodhirak’s interpretation of Buddhist principles with an emphasis on moral conduct—is key to the initial formation and current aesthetic of the Asoke community. During the conception of the group, a purposely guided sensory reformation occurred through establishing the first Asoke centre; this laid the foundation of the aesthetic intentions behind the lived spaces as well as lay and monastic attire for example. This shift formed new Asoke-specific meanings and identities, and though this preliminary transformation was likely the most defining for the group, this has been an ongoing process as the communities have regularly undergone changes and continue to shape a particular material culture. The process of recurring development and the modelling of subjects and communities which highlights Asoke’s shared aesthetics can be observed through how members have tuned their senses, prompted experiences, influenced their bodies, and formed a concrete material culture consisting of certain features. These aspects are based off and represent various Asoke beliefs but are also meant to aid in the fulfillment of spiritual goals.

There were many materialized things discussed throughout this thesis which develop and articulate not only a collective aesthetic profile of the community but also communicate a range of Asoke beliefs non-verbally. As we can see through the changes in attire for the monastics due to the legal turmoil in the 1980–1990s, the adoption of television in the communities, the more recent creation of Buddha images, or the building (and embellishing) of the *Millennial Vihāra* in Santi Asoke, for example, there have been external and internal forces that have continued to reshape the material culture of Asoke. These changes are important as

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<sup>1011</sup> Nina Ergin uses this phrase in relation to Ottoman mosques in, “The Soundscape of Sixteenth-Century Istanbul Mosques: Architecture and Qur’an Recital,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 2 (2008): 213.

they not only shift the materiality of the community, but the aesthetic profile expands beyond representing beliefs and also influences personal and group identity as well as how Asoke relates and differentiates themselves from mainstream Thai Buddhism.

I argue that the material features of Asoke—which includes aspects that are not obviously of religious nature—can be considered “sensational forms” which develop and underpin the “aesthetic formation” of Asoke as a group.<sup>1012</sup> I would further say that the material culture of Asoke and the communities themselves are all encompassing sensational forms as they also “address and involve participants in a specific manner and induce particular feelings” and importantly, these sensations are linked with spiritual progression and attainment.<sup>1013</sup> As *sīla* is central for reaching their spiritual goals, many of these sensational forms are representing this facet of Asoke belief and leads me to perceive Asoke as an aesth/ethic formation. Bergmann coined the term aesth/ethic as he considers moral philosophy and sensory perceptions to be deeply and inevitably linked as “the perception of moral problems must be prior to their reflection and solution.”<sup>1014</sup> Though stemming from a non-Buddhist context, this term is significant when considering Asoke because *sīla* is the core method used to achieve their overarching goal of spiritual development—which is done largely through sensory renewal. Not only do members perceive and reflect on morality but it further forms the basis of their lifestyle and spiritual goals. As such, I find it fitting to consider Asoke not only an “aesthetic formation” but an “aesth/ethic formation.”

A central feature of Asoke material culture and sensory reformation can be seen through the adoption of a particular appearance. The development of the lay “Asoke uniform” and specific monastic appearance constitute a form of “sensory renewal” and these aspects not only set Asoke apart as a distinct group but have also been foundational in developing Asoke as an aesthetic formation. This can be seen as social relationships are perpetuated through vision as members recognize each other as part of the group and pronounce their degree of dedication through their attire. The embodiment of values which are embedded onto the meanings of these appearances is also significant and the connection to Asoke beliefs, especially *sīla*, highlights the importance of exploring the expression of morality through the body. The use of Asoke-

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<sup>1012</sup> Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” in *Religion: Beyond A Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 707–8.

<sup>1013</sup> “Collective rituals are prime examples of sensational forms, in that they address and involve participants in a specific manner and induce particular feelings. But the notion of ‘sensational form’ can also be applied to the ways in which material religious objects - such as images, books, or buildings - address and involve beholders.” Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” in *Religion: Beyond A Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 709.

<sup>1014</sup> Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 77.

specific appearances becomes a totem for members and it further conceals an individual's status and background while generating a collective image where distinctive markers are dissolved.

Another noteworthy aspect of Asoke not previously discussed by other authors is found in the relationship to artwork. I argue that conceptualizing Asoke as a “synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*” is additionally relevant in three main ways: (1) artworks throughout Asoke communities, (2) Asoke as an aesthetic artistic creation (3), and Bodhirak's identification as an artist. The artworks in Asoke express beliefs, act as didactic tools, and support/inspire spiritual progression. Bodhirak places artwork in Asoke high on a moral hierarchy of art because it contains the “essence” of *Dhamma* (through symbolism or intent), which he states will benefit those who encounter it, making the artwork inherently meritorious. Further, Bodhirak considers Asoke as a whole an art piece, or artistic expression in and of itself. According to Bodhirak's understanding of art in connection to his interpretation of *Dhamma*, he sees the group as a medium which he shapes and creates as an artist—which includes the aesthetic profile of the physical communities and the members.

Crossing the boundaries from “outside” to “inside” the Asoke communities comes with various sensorial changes through the use of natural elements (trees and streams for example), traditional architecture, and Asoke specific imagery. These transformed aesthetic spaces are more than just the place in which Asoke members live, as they are developed to be the most effective place to practice their interpretation of Buddhism and progress spiritually as they understand everything—from the plants, dirt pathways, artwork, and buildings—to have a didactic function pointing to Bodhirak's teachings and their ultimate goal. Asoke has used a particular sensory renewal in their communities to represent their beliefs, define themselves as a separate and legitimate group, and as the basis to their spiritual development. Exploring and understanding the physical spaces and “lived visual data” of the group is especially important as Asoke impacts and transforms their lived spaces and the physical communities also involve and influence members and the group as a whole.

It was not my initial intention to investigate the aesthetics and material culture within Asoke, however as I began spending time in various Asoke communities, it was explained that the things around me had specific purposes, moral significance, or were being used as didactic tools. This brings us back to Geertz stating that “whatever the level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them.”<sup>1015</sup> After a time, I began to

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<sup>1015</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 453.

learn the non-verbal messages that their material culture (clothes, buildings, art, food etc.) intended to transmit and I started viewing the members and the communities from a different perspective after understanding these coded meanings. Members would often mention that everything had been carefully designed or that Bodhirak had consciously created all aspects of Asoke; of course, it is impossible to know if “every detail” had in fact been constructed this way by Bodhirak and the Asoke community, or if certain Asoke-appropriate meanings were later placed upon features that were already present. Regardless of the origin of these meanings, Asoke members and communities see themselves clothed in layers of non-verbal messages which represent and teach their specific ideology while aiding in their spiritual progression.

As any study, this dissertation is limited and there are omissions and areas that have potential for further investigation. I consider the following topics fruitful explorations that I was unable to include: The aesthetics of Asoke politics (how as a group they recreate their identity outside the communities while being politically active); the use of media and images in magazines and online;<sup>1016</sup> quality and kind of physical movements and interactions of members; understanding how Asoke students perceive and learn through sensory renewal and the material culture of Asoke; and exploring different isolated senses (vision, audition, gustation, olfaction, and somatosensation) in depth. Even with the limitations, I hope to have shown that the Asoke group is fertile ground for studies that are applicable within a wider context.

As Asoke is a small movement confined within Thailand, previous authors have focused predominantly on their group structure, beliefs, history, political involvement, *Bunniyom* system or comparisons to the Dhammakāya or Buddhādāsa movements.<sup>1017</sup> Considering religious communities through the lens of religious aesthetics, aesthetics of religion, material culture, and lived religion is a relatively new development and my work contributes to the growing literature exploring contemporary religions through this approach. Within Buddhist studies, my thesis furthers discussions around new movements, contemporary Buddhist art and material culture, the plurality of Buddhism in Thai and Theravāda contexts, and the role of women in Buddhist communities. As such, though this dissertation is narrowly focused on a specific aspect of a small Buddhist group in Thailand, I see it contributing to many larger discourses.

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<sup>1016</sup> This topic was originally included in this thesis, however proved too broad of an exploration to be included.

<sup>1017</sup> As was outlined in Chapter 1.2.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

*All photographs, unless stated, have been taken by the author during field trips between 2013–2014.*

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## GLOSSARY

### *Thai (T), Pāli (P) and Sanskrit (S) terms.*

*Abayamook* (T). Six vices: alcohol, drugs (including cigarettes) gambling, nighttime entertainment, laziness, and sexual playing.

*Ajahn* (T). Teacher; title of respect for monastics.

*Akhantuka chon* (T). A temporary guest in Asoke.

*Akhantuka pracham* (T). Permanent lay guest in Asoke; a permanent guest who has lived for a minimum of six months in Asoke may apply to be a resident.

*Anāgāmī* (P). “Non-returner”; someone who has achieved the third stage of awakening.

*Anattā* (P). No-self or non-self.

*Angsa* (T). One-shouldered vest/undershirt typically fastened with ties at the waist and worn by monks under the outer robe.

*Anicca* (P). Impermanence; one of the three characteristics of existence (*Tilakkhaṇa*).

*Añjali Mudrā* (S). The position of the hands placed palms together in front of the chest, in a “prayer” position. See *Wai*.

*Antaravāsaka* (P). Monastic inner robe, covering the lower half of the body.

*Arahant/Arahat* (P, T *Phra Araham*). Fully awakened being; one who has realized *nibbāna* and will have no future rebirths.

*Aramik* (T). Lay male residents in Asoke.

*Aramika* (T). Lay female residents in Asoke.

*Ariya* (P, T). Noble; noble person.

*Avijjā* (P). Ignorance.

*Bhikkhu* (P). A fully ordained Buddhist monk.

*Bhikkhunī* (P). A fully ordained Buddhist nun.

*Bodhisatta* (P, S *Bodhisattva*). A being intent on Buddhahood; a future buddha. In Mahāyāna Buddhism it refers to a being who vows to refrain from entering *nibbāna* for the benefit of all other sentient beings.

*Bun* (T, P *Puñña*). Merit, meritorious deeds.

*Bunniyom* (T). Merit-ism; Asoke’s economic system.

*Charoen Tham* (T). Asoke greeting, “may your *Dhamma* progress/prosper.”

*Chedi* (T, S *Stūpa*, P *Thūpa*, *Cetiya*). A memorial or shrine.

*Dāna* (P). Charity; “almsgiving”; offering; generosity.

*Dasa sil mātā* (P). Sri Lankan female renunciates who keep eight or ten precepts, shave their hair, and wear yellow/orange robes.

*Dhamma* (P, T *Thamma* or *Tham*). The teachings of the Buddha; the Truth.

*Dhammakāya* (P, T). A Thai Buddhist tradition founded by Luang Pu Sodh Candasaro in the early 20th century. Also see, *Wat Phra Dhammakāya*.

*Dhammayuttika Nikāya* (P, T *Thammayutnikai*). One of the two major recognized Thai Buddhist monastic denominations which was created in 1833 by King Mongkut, or Rama IV during his time as a monk.

*Dhammacakka* (P, S *Dharmachakra*). Also called *Dhamma* wheel; typically an eight (or multi) spoked wheel symbolizing the teachings of the Buddha, and is often a representative symbol of Buddhism.

*Dhutaṅga* (P, T *Thudong*). Ascetic or austere practices; strict observances undertaken by monastics and may be observed for a shorter or longer period of time.

*Dukkha* (P). Suffering or unsatisfactoriness; one of the three characteristics of existence (*Tilakkhaṇa*).

*Gajasīha* (P, S *Gajasimha*, T *Khochasi*). A mythological creature with the body of a lion and the head of an elephant.

*Hamsa* (S). Mythological aquatic bird.

*Jhāna* (P). Mental absorption.

*Kāmatanḥā* (P). Sensuality; sensual pleasures.

*Kamma* (P, S *karma*). “Action, work or deed”; spiritual principle of cause and effect where intent and actions of a person can influence their future (including future lives).

*Karuṇā* (P). Compassion.

*Khandha* (P). Aggregates; the five aggregates relate to the elements of personhood: material form (*rūpa-kkhandha*), feeling (*vedanā-kkhandha*), perception (*saññā-kkhandha*), mental-formation (*saṅkhāra-kkhandha*), consciousness (*viññāṇa-kkhandha*).

*Kilesa* (P). Mental impurities or defilements.

*Kinnaree* and *Kinnon* (P, T). Popular mythical creatures with the upper body of a human and lower body of a bird.

*Klot* (T). A large hanging umbrella with mosquito netting used typically by monastics.

*Krak* (T). The second stage towards ordination within Asoke for female residents.

*Kuṭī* (P). Small cell/dwelling/raised platform, typically for monastics.

*Lobha* (P). Greed.

*Lokiya* (P). Mundane; worldly.

*Lokuttara* (P). Super-mundane; transcendental.

*Mae Chi* (T). Thai female renunciates who keep eight or ten precepts, shave their hair, and wear white robes.

*Mahā Nikāya* (P, T *Mahanikai*). One of the two major recognized Thai Buddhist monastic denominations, see *Dhammayuttika Nikāya*.

*Mahatherasamakhom* (T). A Council of Elders also called the *Saṅgha Supreme Council of Thailand* or *SSC*. The council, assisted by the Department of Religious Affairs, regulates, and governs the *saṅgha*.

*Mettā* (P). Loving-kindness.

*Mo hom* (T). Farmer/peasant shirt with a high collar and distinctive blue indigo colour and is common in rural Northeastern Thailand. Many Asoke members wear this style of dress as a quasi-uniform.

*Moha* (P). Delusion.

*Mudrā* (S, P *Muddikā* and *Muddā*). Symbolic gesture, especially with the hands or body posture.

*Nāga* (P, T). Popular mythical cobra with one or multiple heads.

*Nak* (T). The second stage towards ordination within Asoke for male residents.

*Nibbāna* (P, S, *Nirvāṇa*, T *Phra Nipphan*). The highest and ultimate goal of all Buddhist aspirations; the full extinction of defilements and release from future rebirths.

*Nikāya* (P). Assemblage, class, or group, especially in regard to varying branches within Buddhist practice.

*Pa* (T). The first stage towards ordination within Asoke for both male and female residents.

*Paññā* (P). Wisdom.

*Paṭipatti* (P, T *Patibat Tham*). the practice, conduct or ‘pursuance’ of the Buddhist teaching—in contrast to theoretical knowledge *pariyatti* (P) or *pariyat* (T).

*Phra Rahu* (T, P *Rāhu*). A deity who is associated with eclipses.

*Piṇḍapāta* (P, T *Binthabat*). Literally, “dropped lump (of food)”; the collection of alms.

*Pluksek* (T). Consecration of amulets and similar items, however Asoke uses the term to refer to their rejection of magical practices and instead imbuing themselves with spiritual intentions; *Pluksek* is also an annual festival in Asoke.

*Rai* (T). Measurement of land equaling .16 hectares, 1,600 square metres or 40m x 40m.

*Rongrien* (T). School.

*Sādhāraṇābhogī* (P). Commonwealth, sharing of resources.

*Sakadāgāmi* (P). Once-returned; someone who has achieved the second level of awakening and will only be reborn once more.

*Sala* (T). Large hall or pavilion.

*Samādhi* (P). Single-pointed concentration.

*Samana* (T, P *Samāna*). A recluse. In Asoke, Samana refers specifically to the fully ordained male monastics within the community.

*Samanutthet* (T). A male novice in the last stage towards monkhood before full ordination in Asoke.

*Samatha-bhāvanā* (P). Development of serenity or tranquility.

*Saṃsāra* (P). Cycle of birth, aging, death, and rebirth.

*Samyojana* (P). Fetters; ten fetters that tie beings to the wheel of existence.

*Saṅgha* (P). Buddhist monastic community; in Thailand this refers to the state-sanctioned community of *bhikkhus*; in a larger context can refer to the extended Buddhist community of lay persons as well.

*Saṅghāṭi* (P). The outer monastic robe.

*Sati* (P). Mindfulness.

*Sikkhamat* (T). The Asoke designation for female ascetics, they undertake ten precepts, shave their hair, and wear grey/brown robes.

*Sīla* (P). Moral conduct.

*Singh* (S, T). Lion; mythological lion commonly found in South Asian and Thai contexts.

*Sotāpanna* (P). “Stream enterer”; someone who has attained the first level of awakening and has entered the “stream” which will lead them towards awakening.

*Suñña/Suññatā* (P). Void/voidness; empty/emptiness.

*Sutta* (P, S *sutra*). Literally, “thread”; *suttas* comprise the second section of the Pāli Canon (*Sutta Piṭaka*); a discourse or sermon by the Buddha or his contemporary disciples.

*Thammachat* (T). Nature; natural; relating to nature.

*Thilashin* (Burmese). Female renunciant in Myanmar, they observe the ten precepts, and wear pink/orange/brown robes and have a shaven head.

*Thīna-middha* (P). Sloth and torpor.

*Ticīvara* (P). The three robes of a monk (inner, under and upper robes).

*Tilakkhaṇa* (P). Three characteristics or marks of existence: impermanence (*aniccā*), suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*).

*Tipiṭaka* (P). The three divisions of the Buddhist Pāli Canon.

*Toraṇa* (P, S). Free-standing arched or ornamental gateway found largely in Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain contexts.

*Upāsikā* (P, T *Ubasika*). Buddhist female practitioner or lay devotee.

*Uposatha* (P). Periods of religious observance occurring two to six days each lunar month depending on the cultural context; biweekly recitation of the *vinaya* rules by monastics.

*Uttarāsāṅga* (P). Upper monastic robe which wraps around the body and either leaving the left shoulder bare or covering both.

*Vihāra* (P). An abode; dwelling place; also relates to the heavenly abode (*dibba-vihāra*), the divine abode (*brahma-vihāra*), the noble abode (*ariya-vihāra*).

*Vinaya* (P). Monastic discipline.

*Vipassanā-bhāvanā* (P). The development of insight.

*Wai* (T). Placing the hands palms together in front of one's chest or face as a sign of greeting, prayer, thanks, or respect.

*Wat* (T). Temple; monastery.

*Wat Phra Dhammakāya* (T). The most well know *Dhammakāya* temple, north of Bangkok.

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## **Abstract [Deutsch]**

Die Asoke-Gemeinschaft wurde Mitte der 70er Jahre des 20. Jahrhunderts gegründet und hat sich seitdem zu einem maßgebendem und außergewöhnlichem Bestandteil der thailändischen Religionslandschaft entwickelt. Die Gemeinschaft besteht sowohl aus ordinierten Frauen und Männern, als auch aus Laienmitgliedern, die für ihr politisches Engagement und ihre individuelle Interpretation der buddhistischen Lehre bekannt geworden sind. Die vorliegende Dissertation untersucht, inwiefern bei den Asoke die Formung der Sinne – durch ihre spezifische Interpretation des *Dhamma* – dazu führte, dass die Gruppe ein ihr eigenes kohärentes ästhetisches Profil und eine einzigartige materielle Kultur ausbildete. Das Hauptaugenmerk liegt dabei – basierend auf Feldforschung – auf den non-verbale Merkmalen, so zum Beispiel dem äußeren Erscheinungsbild, dem Kunsthandwerk/ Kunstschaffen und der Gestaltung der Lebensräume. Damit wird das Zusammenspiel zwischen Überzeugungen, materieller Kultur und Ästhetik bei den Asoke besser nachvollziehbar.

## **Abstract [English]**

The Asoke group emerged in the mid-1970s, and since then has developed into a definitive and unusual feature within the Thai religious landscape. The group consists of female and male monastics and lay members who have become known for their political involvement and distinct interpretation of Buddhist teachings. This thesis sets out to examine how the shaping of senses in Asoke—through their specific interpretation of the *Dhamma*—has formed a coherent aesthetic profile and material culture unique to them. Through looking at the non-verbal messages of the appearance of members, artwork, and lived space—which is based on fieldwork—the interplay between the beliefs, material culture, and aesthetics within Asoke is better comprehended.

**Publications resulting from this thesis:**

Ritchie, Robekkah L. "Sikkhamats: The Aesthetics of Asoke Ascetics." In *Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities*, edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 137–64. Albany: State University of New York Press Press, 2018.