

Asoke Communal Consumption Community: A Buddhist Way of Living

Thamrong Sangsuriyajan, Doctoral Candidate, School of Management Science,
Ubon Rajathanee University, Thailand.
thamrong@montri.co.th

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ABSTRACT

The principle of communal consumption (*Satharana Pokey*) established by the Buddha for the *Sangha* (monastic community) during his life time, has been introduced by *Sammana* (title for monk in the Asoke community) Bothirak to the Asoke lay communities throughout Thailand and has it been their preferred way of living since 1984 (B.E. 2527). *Satharana Pokey* is an economic system of shared resources. Funds are deposited into a community central account for the expenditures of all members and in return, members offer free labor. It is a welfare approach where the community provides all the necessities for members' basic needs such as housing, food, health care, education, clothing and other miscellaneous expenses. The communities' social and cultural practices encourage members in sharing their beliefs, duties, responsibilities, relationships and meaning in life. In this paper, the author describes the history of the Asoke intentional community, its ideology, structure and governance with the focus on *Satharana Pokey*; and, last but not least, its people, their relationships and their way of life.

ASOKE: AN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

Rak Rakpong, a self-made man who was not satisfied with a life of material possessions and worldly fame, became a Buddhist monk in search of spiritual fulfillment. He was given the monk name Bothirak and in 1970 (B.E. 2513) took residence at Wat (temple) Asoka Ram in Samut Prakan province about 20 kilometers from Bangkok. Soon after ordination, Pra (title for monk) Bothirak became dissatisfied with the traditional practices of Thai Buddhist monks. Yearning for the ultimate spiritual truth, he began a serious study of Buddhist scriptures, focusing on the fundamental teaching of the Buddha. He finally took a step to break away from the state supported Buddhist organization, *Thammayut Nikhai*, to start the Asoke Buddhist movement.

The first Asoke community, Pathom Asoke, located in central Thailand, came into being in 1984 (B.E. 2527). A large number of followers, who wished to find a less materialistic lifestyle, and who wanted to live closer to the temple in order to participate in ongoing *Dhamma* (teaching of the Buddha) talks and practices, got together and purchased 60 rai (23.7 acres) of land for the community.

The land was divided into a residential area (including office buildings), agricultural land and a water reservoir. The members have ownership of their houses built on the land but do not own the land. Since then nine fully developed Asoke communities have been established throughout Thailand including one in Chiang Mai in the north, which functions as a training school for new monks, and 16 developing communities spread around the country [1]. Santi Asoke, located in Bangkok, serves as a coordination center. However, each community has its own administrators who independently manage its own affairs. The fully developed communities are made up of 3 three components: homes, temple and school. All the communities share common values of anti-materialism, living a simple community oriented lifestyle while working hard toward self-reliance, helping society and respecting traditional rural wisdom. *Dhamma* is woven into the fabric of their lives. This is signified by the way Asoke people greet each other and outsiders—*Charoen Thaam* translated as “May you progress in your development of morality and virtue.”

Members, both male and female, dress in simple clothes on all occasions and usually walk bare foot for both health and the spiritual practice of being in touch with nature and the energy of the earth. The Asoke people are strict vegetarians and only eat one or two meals a day from what they grow and produce. Every meal is prepared in a communal style and the people in the community are encouraged to eat together. Everything else in their daily lives such as food, resources, community governance, work and health care is communal in nature. This communal consumption way of life was introduced by *Sammana* Bothirak at its inception [2].

WHAT IS SATHARANA POKEY?

Satharana Pokey is a system practiced in the *Sangha* conceptualized by the Buddha. That is, all consumption is communal, which means there is no individual ownership of any thing, large or small, regardless of the source. For example, when monks receive food or gifts from people, those donations belong to the community and may be used by anyone who needs them.

Sammana Bhothirak reintroduced the Buddha’s concept to Asoke lay members. Residents’ basic needs are taken care of by the community. Asoke residents built their simple, basic houses on common land. They eat together and work together without pay to sustain the community.

The Asoke communities are built *on Satharana Pokey* coming from the principles of *Saraniya Thaam* and supported by *Bunniyom*. This is a unique and comprehensive social, cultural and economic system of a Buddhist way of community living shared by all Asoke communities [3].

Saraniya Thaam and Bunniyom as Foundation Blocks of for Satharana Pokey

Longing to live in a fraternal relationship of compassion and sharing community is a time-honored dream for people in every part of the world. Thomas Moore (1478-1535), a seminal English author, wrote of a society founded on justice and equality in his famous book *Utopias*. It remains as an idealistic model society in people's hearts and minds today. In the Soviet Union communism was created as a communal sharing system based on the ideology of Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) In the original ideal, people collectively owned the national wealth and property similar to *in Satharana Pokey*. There was to be no central government and no differences in social status. People were envisioned to work for the state and their welfare would be taken care of by the state. The ideology was very appealing and influenced many countries throughout the world [4]. Nevertheless, the realization of this ideal continues to elude reality. Asoke believes that communal economic systems and equality fail to take root without the foundation of morality and ethical behavior.

On the contrary, the Asoke communal consumption system is founded on a Buddhist teaching of thoughtful consideration arisen from kindness or *Saraniya Thaam*. The six principles of *Saraniya Thaam* are:

1. Kindness in deed
2. Kindness in speech
3. Kindness in thought
4. Respectful behavior to others
5. Respectful unanimity of purpose, and
6. Communal consumption-- *Satharana Pokey*

In addition, Asoke's values and belief in a "meritism" way of life, or *Bunniyom*, also help in strengthening their communal consumption system by cultivating five characteristics in its members:

1. Sacrificing, time, work and possessions
2. Working hard
3. Striving for self-dependence
4. Being constructive and creative
5. Not taking advantage of others

Like many aspects of Buddhism, this communal system is a growing and developing system where each level builds on the development of the previous level. Each of the factors in *Bunniyom* supports each of the factors in *Saraniyathaam* which includes *Satharana Pokey*. With the strengthened community, individuals are strengthened in their development of *Bunniyom* and so forth in a virtuous spiral of development.

The Asoke slogan "Consume little, work hard, and give to the society" expresses their belief. As a result, members sacrificing time and energy for the good and benefit of their communities has become the normal practice. Without the two pillars of *Saraniya Thaam* and *Bunniyom*, the communal consumption system (*Satharana Pokey*) will not be able to sustain itself. [3] [5].

BUNNIYOM SOCIETY

With the increase of believers, more communities have come into existence throughout Thailand. So, there was a need to organize and set up central principles and a system—thus, the birth of the Bunniyom (Meritism) Society in 2004 (B.E. 2547).

The *Bunniyom* Society is founded on the principles of the four powers:

1. The power of *Thaamma* (the teaching of the Buddha) in guiding moral principles
2. The power of groups in reinforcing ethical behaviors according to *Thaamma*
3. The power of religion in creating social unity, and
4. The power of the law of action (*kamma*) to encourage compassionate actions for self and others. [6]

The *Bunniyom* Society is set up to guide both members and community development. The meritism attitude encourages members to be easy to take care of, easy nurture, easy to be satisfied as well as disciplined, respectful, diligent, not materialistic nor accumulative and working toward mental development. These are characteristics valued by the Asoke *Bunniyom* Society. Concurrently, the *Bunniyom* Society provides policy and direction to reinforce these values in living and governance in all areas of their community life [5].

***Bunniyom* community providing directions in areas of:**

- Religion
- Politics
- Communication
- Business
- Education
- Finance
- Industrial enterprise
- Agriculture
- Health
- Food management
- Waste management
- Culture and arts

Examples of this support can be seen in the area of communication where the Bunniyom Society and the Asoke communities support several publishing houses to provide news, educational materials, and transcriptions of dhamma talks by different monks in the community. The community as a whole owns its own television station to provide wholesome alternative programming to the commercials stations. Currently there is a lot of support for developing the learn-by-doing educational system used in the Asoke communities, and also developing higher education opportunities and how they can be incorporated into the community development.

ASOKE CULTURE

The Asoke culture is founded on the Buddhist teachings of morality and ethical behavior. The cultivation of *Saraniyathaam* and *Bunniyom* has led to a model of individual and community development expressed in their way of life, traditions, customs and rituals.

Individual Development

To be a member of an Asoke community, laity must uphold at least five of the precepts (*sila*): abstain from killing, stealing, all sexual activity, lying and taking intoxicants. The next requirement is to live on a strict vegetarian diet because harming or killing animals is in violation of the first precept.

In the Asoke community, contrary to the general culture, one does not gain respect from wealth, power, social status or age but rather from exercising eight or more precepts. (refrain from eating after midday, refrain from enjoying luxurious entertainments and dressing up, and refrain from sitting or sleeping on luxurious seats or beds) To develop these characteristics, the Asoke communities establish schools and a curriculum designed to emphasize a high moral standard and the ability to work hard -- both are considered by the community to be more important than mastery of academic subjects. Intellectual thinking without ethics and not grounded in practice is useless, according to Asoke beliefs [6].

Community Development As Expressed in Their Way of Life

Asoke communities believe in natural, organic farming. For members' health and environmental benefits, all agriculture is done using only organic fertilizers and other natural products. In order to be self-reliant, the community depends on the labor of all able members to provide for their daily living. Members work hard together to provide for what they need such as food, clothing, medicine, farm products, fertilizer, cleaning products, etc.

As a vegetarian community, they plant and mill organic brown rice, grow mushrooms, herbs, vegetables and fruits, make tofu products, soy bean paste and soy sauce, etc.

Work to provide for the basic needs of the community has a priority over other activities. Nevertheless, members also operate four types of businesses: publications, vegetarian restaurants, agricultural products and consumer goods for their own community, other Asoke communities, local markets and the public-at-large.

Based on their meritism policy, all goods are sold below the market price and only cash is accepted in payment. All income is turned over to the community to be used for the welfare of the community. In addition, surplus funds in each community are donated to the central Asoke administration for support of the community at large.

Their spending policy is based concept of getting the most value for the community and society. Because of this principle, even garbage is not wasted. All garbage is separated into four categories: 1) reusable, 2) repairable, 3) recyclable and 4) reject-able.

Last but not least, Asoke residents believe good health is a relationship of balancing mental and physical well-being. The community has created a comprehensive health care program that is a combination of mental and emotional wellness, honest and meaningful work, a clean environment, a vegetarian diet, exercise, and body cleansing through detoxification.

Structure and Governance, People and their Relationships

Each of the Asoke communities has a committee that is elected by members of community, the size of the committee depending on the individual community. Villagers can propose their ideas to develop their community to the committee members at anytime or at the monthly meeting. All of Asoke communities are separated into nine groups for cooperation, and each group elects a representative to form a central committee that also has others members that are elected by members of all community at a yearly meeting of all of the communities.

There is a big meeting called *Maha Pawarana* for Asoke monks once a year in November at Pathom Asoke in Nakhon Pathom province. At this meeting they discuss the community living arrangements as they have been in the past and consider what might be beneficial in the future.

In September 2008 the members of twenty five Asoke communities had 100 monks, 27 Sikkamats (ordained women) and 3,000 lay people living full time in Asoke communities. Monks and Sikkamats are the most respected people of the community. They are invited to every meeting of the community to give advisement before. The respect for lay people is based on their age and virtue.

Traditions, Customs and Rituals

This Buddhist reform movement led by *Samana* Bodhirak was founded to be more socially engaged in the life of people and communities and this is the essence of the Asoke community culture. The ideology of the movement has been translated into practices which over time have become traditions, customs and rituals in members' daily lives. These dictate, sustain and protect the community culture from the influence of the materialistic culture around them.

From January to December, each community holds at least one event that signifies its custom. For example, Rachathani Asoke Community in Ubon Rachathani province in the northeast celebrates their New Year by setting up an *Ariya* (civilized) Market selling goods such as rice, farm products, fertilizer, cleansing products, herbal medicine, etc., below cost. In order to persuade the larger community-at-large of the value of a vegetarian diet, Asoke communities operate inexpensive vegetarian restaurants outside their communities and give out free vegetarian meals once a year on Thai Father's Day (December 5th, the King's birthday) and sometimes more often. These are among the ways the communities contribute to society.

EPILOGUE

The Asoke community offers its model of community organization, communal consumption or *Satharana Pokey* as an economic, social and cultural way of life based on compassion for all people. This style of community was developed by the Asoke Buddhist community in search of spiritual happiness.

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