

NEW BUDDHIST MOVEMENTS IN THAILAND

Towards an understanding
of Wat Phra Dhammakāya
and Santi Asoke

Rory Mackenzie



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NEW BUDDHIST MOVEMENTS IN THAILAND

This book examines two new Buddhist movements in Thailand, namely the Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke. These movements represent two distinctive trends within contemporary Buddhism in Thailand. Vastly different in belief and practice, they emerged in Thailand in the 1970s at a time of political uncertainty, social change and increasing dissatisfaction with the Thai Saṅgha and its leadership.

Rory Mackenzie explains why these movements have come into being, what they have reacted against and what they offer to their members. The Wat Phra Dhammakāya tradition views itself as a large, modern movement structured for growth, convenience and efficiency. It has spread to eleven different countries and Westerners are increasingly being attracted to the movement through the practice of Dhammakāya meditation. The author argues that there is some justification in describing this highly progressive movement as fundamentalist and millenarian due to their strong focus on meditation, and the belief that some members have in their leader a saviour figure. Santi Asoke members view the communities in which they live as places where they experience justice and support for living morally upright lives. They also view their communities as a locus for their liberation from suffering. The author suggests that Santi Asoke may best be described as an ascetic/prophetic, utopian movement with legalistic tendencies.

This book should appeal to those interested in Buddhism's confrontation with modernity, and its responses to evolving social issues in Thailand, as well as to those interested in new religions in the broader context of religious studies.

Rory Mackenzie teaches Buddhism and Practical Theology at the International Christian College, Glasgow. He has lived in Thailand for eleven years, is involved in the Thai community in Edinburgh and makes regular visits back to Thailand.

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First published 2007
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016
*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Mackenzie, Rory, 1951–

New Buddhist movements in Thailand : towards an understanding
of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke / Rory Mackenzie.

p. cm. – (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Buddhism–Thailand–History–20th century.
2. Buddhist sects–Thailand.
3. Munnithi Thammakai (Khlung Luang, Thailand)
4. Santi’Asok (Organization) I. Title.

BQ566.M33 2006

294.3’9–dc22

2006020969

ISBN 0-203-96646-5 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-40869-5 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-96646-5 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-40869-1 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-96646-4 (ebk)

TO ROSALYN, BEST FRIEND AND FELLOW
TRAVELLER FOR 30 YEARS, AND BECCA, JO AND
MI-MI WHO JOINED US ON THE JOURNEY

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PREFACE

An Introduction to *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke*.

This book seeks an understanding of two new Buddhist movements which emerged in Thailand in the 1970s. Vastly different in belief and practice, they developed in a time of political uncertainty, social change and increasing dissatisfaction with the Thai *Saṅgha* and its leadership.

I have sought both insiders' (*emic*) and outsiders' (*etic*) understandings of the movements. Members of both movements view their respective leaders as having qualities of *amnāt* (power), *ittipon* (influence) and *pāramī* (moral stature or charisma). In addition, they are confident in the veracity of their models of spiritual purification. Wat Phra Dhammakāya views itself as a large, modern movement structured for growth, convenience and efficiency. It communicates effectively with its members throughout the world via its satellite TV channel. The movement plans shortly to host 1 million attendees at its temple for special meetings geared towards world peace. The writer sees some justification in describing this highly progressive movement as fundamentalist and millenarian due to its strong focus on meditation, and the belief that some members have in their leader a saviour figure.

Santi Asoke members view the communities in which they live as places where they experience justice and support for living morally upright lives. This is in contrast to their experience in mainstream Thai society. They also view their communities as a locus for liberation from suffering.

Despite their strict, 'peasant' image, Santi Asoke are considerably less of a fundamentalist movement than Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Asoke members view their leader as a highly skillful teacher but not a saviour, thus they cannot be considered millenarian. I have highlighted similarities between Santi Asoke and the Catholic 'base community' movement, as well as the Thai 'community culture' school of thought. Despite some similarities in these areas, I suggest that Santi Asoke may best be described as an ascetic/prophetic, utopian movement with legalistic tendencies.

PREFACE

This thesis suggests that the continuing ‘well-being’ of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke indicate both a disenchantment with traditional expressions of mainstream Thai Buddhism and a desire for Buddhist solutions for contemporary living. While Buddhism continues to inform the Thai psyche, the state regulated *Saṅgha* no longer has the credibility and status which it once enjoyed. It will not, therefore, be the ‘legitimising’ tool in the hands of the Thai government that it traditionally has been.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is the publication of my doctoral thesis, along with a few updates. Research students have supervisors and I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Peter Harvey, for his help during my years as a part-time research student. Despite a very busy schedule he read through several drafts of the thesis and supplied me with helpful information. I have greatly benefited from his comments and attention to detail. A thesis has examiners and I appreciate the constructive comments made by my external examiner, Professor Ian Harris.

There are several people I would like to thank at the institute where I teach, the International Christian College, Glasgow. The vice-principal ensured there was adequate time set aside for my research, both in terms of sabbaticals and annual study leave. The librarians were extremely efficient in obtaining inter-library loans for my work, and patient with me at the end of the project when I misplaced some publication details! Dr John Jeacocke was always very helpful when I ran into computing challenges or needed advice regarding the production of the manuscript.

I am grateful to those at Santi Asoke who welcomed me as an ‘outsider’ and helped me to think like an ‘insider’. Two of my mentors at the 2001 *Putta Pisek* ceremony (rigorous yearly training camp) made sure I was not simply an observer but a participant! I learnt a lot from this intensive involvement. Most of the questionnaires completed by the Santi Asoke members were translated into English by Bee Yacam. She also translated other Thai texts which proved important for the research. I appreciate her contribution. Thanks are also due to those who helped me at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The archive staff of the *Bangkok Post* were helpful, allowing me on several occasions to remain after office hours to research their extensive records.

Finally, thanks to my wife Rosalyn. She has been a constant source of encouragement to me throughout my research.

Edinburgh 2007

NOTE ON THE USE OF THAI WORDS AND REFERENCING

It may be assumed that the romanising of the Thai script is phonetic. The only exceptions are a very few word endings where the final letter of the Thai word reads one way but is pronounced another! For example, in Thai, a final ‘l’ is read ‘n’, thus what is pronounced ‘Mahidon’ is spelt ‘Mahido!’. Those skilled in romanising Thai script may wince at ‘Luang Phaw’ (Venerable Father) preferring ‘Luang Phoh’ but I have felt it best to follow Wat Phra Dhammakāya’s rendering of the title.

Pāli words are italicised and diacritical marks are used. Thai words are also italicised except in the case of names. For example, *Dhammakāya* meditation as it refers to a technical term within Buddhism; Wat Phra Dhammakāya, however, is not italicised as it refers to a temple and a movement. It appears to be a general convention not to use diacritical marks with Thai words. I depart from this protocol, however, if the Thai word is also a Pāli word, for example, *mahā*. Since I am dealing with Theravāda Buddhism I use Pāli terms, for example, ‘*nibbāna*’ rather than the Sanskrit term ‘*nirvāṇa*’. The only exception to this is the use of ‘*karma*’ (Sanskrit), rather than the not well-known Pāli term ‘*kamma*’.

In the Thai context, the name that is used is the given name rather than the surname. In order to standardise the referencing and bibliography of the book, I have used the surname of Thai nationals as the official name.

The Thai use the Buddhist calendar, dating from the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, thus 2006 CE is 2549 in the Buddhist Era. I use the Christian era equivalent for the publication date of the Thai texts.



Map 1 Map of Thailand.

Source: Reproduced with permission of the Central Intelligence Agency.

INTRODUCTION

The two New Buddhist Movements studied in this thesis emerged in Thailand in the 1970s. The social context included the emergence of an increasingly well-educated middle class, political control by the military and political protests by the people (1970 and 1973). In addition, an unstable situation was created by the activities of the Thai Communist Party and the war in Vietnam. There was also the difficulty of relating traditional Buddhist values to a generation very different from previous generations. These two movements have developed their own identities since Santi Asoke was excommunicated from the *Saṅgha* in 1990 after 15 years of controversy.¹ In 1999, the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement came close to leaving the *Saṅgha* after an intense period of allegations of unorthodox teaching, forceful marketing strategies and the alleged mishandling of funds by the abbot.

This book sets out to answer the following five questions

- How did the Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke movements begin and develop?
- What are their distinctive features and why do they appeal to their respective memberships?
- How accurate are the outsiders' descriptions and analyses of the two movements?
- How do the members of these movements go about their spiritual development?
- What do the findings of this research contribute to an understanding of the possible future structure of state regulated Buddhism within Thailand, and possible implications this may have for Thai society.²

Discussion of terms such as 'sect', 'cult', their Thai equivalents and 'New Buddhist Movement'

It seems appropriate at this stage to define some key terms.

Sect

A ‘religious group or movement which has broken away from a more orthodox mainstream religious denomination, or represents an entirely new religious formation’ (Barnard and Burgess, 1996:481). A sect may be viewed by the mainstream group it has departed from, or society in general, as schismatic, heterodox or heretical. Adherents of the new sect will usually judge the mainstream as having failed to maintain orthodoxy, or as being unwilling to accept new truth/practice.

The term *sect* seems to be an accurate one for Wat Phra Dhammakāya as it captures something of some deviance away from mainstream but with a lack of actual rejection by it. Indeed, this movement is actively involved in helping the aging and frail leadership (Thai *Mahā thera samakom*) of the Thai *Saṅgha*. Santi Asoke have been excommunicated from the Thai *Saṅgha* principally for their harsh criticism of what they consider to be lax behaviour among mainstream monks and refusing to comply with orders from monastic leadership. A result of this excommunication is that a good number of critics would say ‘Santi Asoke are not proper Buddhists’ – at least not the state regulated Thai version of Buddhism! Informed observers of the religious scene in the kingdom view Santi Asoke as being much further from mainstream than Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

Cult

Derived from the Latin *cultus* (‘worship’), a cult is a religious movement which draws its inspiration from other than the primary religion of the culture (Glock and Stark, 1965:245). Clearly both Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke are thoroughly Buddhist in orientation, although they borrow from non-standard Thai interpretations of Buddhism. Technically, they may be described as sects but not cults. Sometimes, however, critics of a group will vilify the group by referring to it as a cult. It may be that critics justify the usage of the term by the ‘cult-like’ characteristics of the group, such as the dissolving of marriages, and the unquestioning acceptance of all that the leader says.

New Religious Movement

This term is used as an umbrella term for ‘movements or organisations that have been called “alternative religions”, “non-conventional religions,” “cults” or “contemporary sects” ’ (Barker, 1989:4). The two movements considered in my research began in the 1970s, have well-defined structures and procedures and clearly qualify as ‘New Religious Movements’. They may more accurately be referred to as *New Buddhist Movements*.

It is important to consider the terms the Thai use for ‘movement’. *Klum* and *khana* are Thai words meaning ‘group’, or *movement*. *Puak* and *fai* may also be used for *group* or *movement* although, when used, tend to have a negative connotation.

False (*te am*) when used of a group indicates false teaching, while *laa te* corresponds directly to our word *cult*.³ Nevertheless, Thai tend to be less exclusive in their language than Westerners and use less condemnatory speech. There is also an understandable tendency among Thai to present Buddhism as unified, rather than divided. This is demonstrated by the fact that I seldom heard Thai who are critical of these movements refer to them as *cults* (Thai *laa te*).

It is attractive to describe these two movements as fraternities (Thai *nikai*) of Buddhism. This, however, becomes problematic in the Thai Buddhist context as the Mahānikai and Thammayut orders are the only official fraternities within Thai Buddhism.⁴ *Chao* is a Thai term meaning ‘people of a certain country’ and Santi Asoke members use it while speaking of themselves that, that is, *Chao Asoke*. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members define themselves as those who go to the Phra Dhammakāya temple, thus for a man ‘*pom bi Wat Phra Thammakai*’. The movement is also known as the Dhammakāya Foundation (*Monetee Thammakai*).

Model of research

There is a full description of the research methodology in Appendix One. I have located this in the appendices as I recognise some readers may be frustrated by being presented with several pages of methodological explanation! What follows is a brief introduction to my approach to the study of the movements.

I have sought to avoid ‘projection’ and ‘reduction’ ideas and tried to gain, to the extent it is possible, an insider’s (*emic*) understanding of both movements. The projection approach assumes that a movement’s belief and practice is simply a creation out of the needs and aspirations of those who belong to the movement. Traditionally, it has been used to show how human needs have created the image of some ultimate being, rather than man receiving revelation from that being. The reduction approach ‘explains religious phenomena (hence reducing it) in terms of the methods employed and the conclusions reached by disciplines other than religion’ (Cox, 1992:43).

The thrust of the phenomenological approach is an attempt to justify the study of religion on its own terms rather than on the terms of the theologian or social scientist’ (Erricker, 1999:83). While there is no firm agreement on a definitive phenomenological approach to the study of religions, it is a model that is quite widely used. Those who use it seek to understand that religion, or movement, on its own terms. Through a process (described in Appendix One) I arrived at an understanding of the movements based on my observation of life within the movements, as well as information and explanation from insiders. At this stage in the research I began to examine possible ways in which sociological and cultural forces may have shaped these movements. That is, I gathered and engaged with *etic* (outsiders’ views). Some of these outsiders were academics researching in the area. Others were lay people who had contact with the movements. In addition, I used typologies used in the classification of movements and applied these to Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke. The use of these typologies widened the

discussion as links were made to other movements which were not immediately obvious. I also tried to define how these movements work (and attract new members) by examining how their leadership functions in terms of the accepted Thai qualities of leadership, namely, power (*amnāt*), influence (*ittiphon*) and moral goodness (*pāramī*).

Brief remarks on some sociological factors that produce change

If religion does not continue to meet changing needs, adherents will declare it irrelevant, or have only a very nominal commitment to it. New Religious Movements thrive in rapidly changing social conditions. They provide meaning and purpose by offering an explanation of, or ways of dealing successfully with change. A new group may either reject or embrace new forces such as consumerism or globalisation.

The researcher of New Religious Movements in the ‘Two Third’s’ world needs to be aware of the way movements are or have responded to forces such as secularisation, globalisation, urbanisation, economic growth and decline and dynamics of the nation state. These issues are now briefly identified.

Secularisation may be regarded as the shrinking relevance of the values of religion to integrate individuals in society, or legitimise political or social structures.⁵ Wilson defines secularisation as ‘The decline of the influence of religious institutions, thinking and practices upon social life’ (Barnard and Burgess, 1996:323).

To combat secularisation, religious groups will often make considerable effort to make religion appear vibrant again. This has certainly been the case in Thailand since the establishing of a modern education system where schools are no longer based in temples and monks no longer teach. Monks have had to face a diminished role in Thai society for some time. The major challenge facing the *Saṅgha*, however, is reassuring the Thai people of the high moral standards of the monks, as the press have reported a number of financial and sexual scandals in which monks have allegedly been involved.

Globalisation involves the movement of goods, finance, ideas, fashion, people, information, leisure and social activities around the world. The key issue for sociologists is the manner in which these movements create problems for a particular nation’s social life and political governance. Economic globalisation, spearheaded by multinational companies, ‘is widely understood to have led to the reduced control of nation states over economic policy’ (Nash, 2000:49). There is pressure then on countries to create a good climate for the multinational corporations, otherwise they will lose business to other countries. At the same time they are left to manage the negative consequences of globalisation such as excessive economic dependence on the multinational companies, loss of political power over the nation, ecological damage and erosion of traditional values and/or cultural distinctives.

Globalisation is translated into Thai as *'lukanuwat'*. It is derived from *lok* the Thai word for world.⁶ The word is closely associated with *lokiya* 'worldliness' and thus has a negative connotation for many Thai. It 'evokes all that is unethical and immoral about the consequences of the globalizers' practices' (Reynolds, 2002:318).

MacDonalds, Svensens and Pizza Hut workers are being de-cultured through serving in these restaurants, as are those who use them. For the traditionalist, it appears that Western values have hijacked local culture. There is a cultural tension between the tradition and progress. Western food chains and fashion items such as Nike trainers, while powerful icons of globalisation, are not the only disseminators of Western values. Satellite TV and the Internet are also incredibly influential. What is being globalised is a secular capitalist system which is 'almost totally orientated to the accumulation of wealth rather than to the satisfaction of basic human needs' (Padilla, 2001:7).

Consumerism has been defined as 'a culture centred on the promotion, sale and acquisition of consumer goods' (Bilton *et al.*, 1996:656). The teachings of Buddhism and Christianity address the materialism associated with a consumer mentality, possibly through redistribution of wealth, or a simpler lifestyle.

New Religious Movements are not only brought about by changes in society. Sometimes they emerge due to tensions within religious traditions. Examples of this would include a group's perceived loss of commitment to its religious values, or leaders who are considered to be too lax in their practice, or are understood to be no longer teaching 'the truth'. Often personality conflicts are dressed up as doctrinal controversies and a new group emerges! The new group is invariably marginalised by the old group, and perhaps even by society. In time, as leadership of the new group mellows and the issues that inspired the breakaway from mainstream are addressed, the new group may be viewed as much less radical.

Field work

Interviews and questionnaires within the movements

Santi Asoke: I was permitted to attend the *Puttha Pisek* festival at Phai Sali, some 300 kilometres north of Bangkok. More than 1,000 members gathered for six days of intensive teaching. I was privileged to be assigned two informants who steered me through the programme which started at 03:15 and went on to 21:00. They were skilled at explaining the reasons that underpinned Santi Asoke practice, such as walking barefoot and washing dishes in a particular way. As well as observing and participating in the various activities, I had opportunities to interview various members. Interviews were mainly carried out in Thai. I was also able to conduct a questionnaire in Thai. This was qualitative in nature and invited a 'free-text' response. The questionnaire was examined by several monastics for approval and then distributed to the lay membership. I received 62 returns from the 94 distributed questionnaires. Translation of the questionnaires was carried

out by two Thai as I found the translation very time consuming due to ‘hard to read’ handwriting and some difficult terminology. I was involved, however, in working with both translators and was able to clarify any questions I had regarding aspects of translation.

During my three field visits (1999, 2001 and 2002), I was able to stay on two separate occasions at Phatom Asoke, some 60 kilometres to the east of Bangkok, and also visit extensively at Santi Asoke in Bangkok. On these occasions I was able to have informal conversations as well as conduct formal interviews with monastics (including Bodhirak, the founder of the movement) and lay members. Normally Thai was used for these interviews but sometimes the interviewees spoke good English.

I was also able to make visits to Wat Phra Dhammakāya in 2001, but because of the intense media attention they were receiving, and their difficulties with the *Saṅgha* leadership, they were unwilling for me to conduct questionnaire work, or discuss controversial issues such as their views on the nature of *nibbāna*. I was, however, able to visit Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram, a temple which uses the same meditation model as Wat Phra Dhammakāya, as well as Wat Paknam to which both of these movements trace their inception.

Media attention had considerably diminished by the time I carried out my third field visit (2002) and Wat Phra Dhammakāya responded positively to my supervisor’s request for me to carry out research at the temple. I was assigned an *ubasok* who functioned as an informant, arranged for my visits to the temple and lined up interviews with Phra Dattacheewo, the acting abbot and another monastic.⁷ I was able to talk to members freely on Sundays and observe a variety of ceremonies at the temple.

My practice was to explain that I was an academic researcher who already had a faith commitment (Christian) and not a seeker after a new set of beliefs. This clarified to informants the reason I required the information. If I were understood to be a seeker, then an informant might assume ‘evangelistic mode’ and be disappointed at the end of the conversations when I did not change my religious allegiance.⁸

I spent time in Thailand in August and September 2006 engaging with both movements. I provided copies of my thesis to representatives of both movements and invited their comments, unfortunately there was little feedback. I also took the opportunity to gather information to update the research.

Interviews and information gathering outwith the new movements

I attended the four day International Conference on Southeast Asian Studies at Mahidol University, Bangkok, in February 2001. This gave me the opportunity to discuss aspects of the two movements with Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn (whose doctoral work was on the Santi Asoke movement) and Peter Jackson (who has written widely on Thai religion and culture). During my second and third field trips I was able to meet with a number of specialists in Thai Buddhism both

monastic and lay. Phra Suthithammanuwat (formally known as Phramāha Thiab Mali), dean of one of the postgraduate schools at Mahāchulalongkorn University was helpful in arranging interviews and providing some research material. Dr Tavivat Puntarigvivat was a valuable source of information on aspects of Thai society as well as the proposed *Fourth Saṅgha Act*. During my third field trip I was able to discuss some aspects of both movements with Dr Apinya Feungfusakul, who completed doctoral work on these two movements in 1993.

There were many others outside the movement who provided information. As I travelled around people would ask me what I was doing and I would take the opportunity to ask about their perspectives on these two movements. One former member of Santi Asoke who remained positive towards the movement provided me with a particularly helpful way of understanding the Asoke ‘mindset’. The archives of the *Bangkok Post* proved extremely useful for tracing the progression of the legal proceedings against the two movements.

Scope of the book

The preview of the book is as follows:

Introduction – Research objectives; discussion of some terms; methodological approach and some comments on sociological factors.

Literature review – An overview of the contribution of seven key writers in the field.

Chapter 1 setting the scene – The religious and socio-political context of the development of the two movements.

This section briefly examines the reforms initiated by King Mongkut (1804–68) who was a monk for 27 years before ascending the throne in 1851. *The Saṅgha Acts* of 1902, 1941 and 1962 are examined. The proposed *Fourth Saṅgha Act* is also discussed. The main thread running through the development of Thai Buddhism since 1824 is the tensions between the Thammayut and Mahānikai fraternities. In brief, Mahānikai and Thammayut family allegiances are no longer as strong as they once were. In some cases it may be argued that a person who would gain from the flourishing of the traditional Thai political system, and who in the past would have had an allegiance to the Thammayut fraternity, would be attracted to the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement. The ability of the Thai military to manipulate the state apparatus and its eventual loss of power is related to the emergence of the middle class with its desire to be involved in shaping issues that affect them, for example, the political process.

An analysis of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and its approach to spiritual purification – Chapter 2 traces the story of Luang Phaw Sot’s alleged discovery of *Dhammakāya* meditation in Thailand. Luang Phaw Sot’s career as abbot of Wat Paknam is discussed, as is his meditative practice. Khun Yai Chan’s contribution as a teacher of meditation and encourager of her young students is recorded, and how this led to the inception of Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The growth of the temple and the associated Dhammakāya Foundation is described, as is the forming of

Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram as a separate movement from Wat Phra Dhammakāya. There is description of some of the alleged land-owning irregularities associated with the abbot, and the associated legal proceedings. Highlights of my visits to the temple are recorded towards the end of this chapter.

Chapter 3 commences by offering an insiders' (*emic*) understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, this highlights the movement's attraction for its members. Six perspectives are offered including having a leader with qualities of power (*amnāt*), influence (*ittipon*) and moral goodness (*pāramī*). Six similarities between the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement and Sāka Gakkai are discussed.⁹ This serves to highlight some of the movement's distinctive features. Four outsiders' (*etic*) perspectives on Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement are examined. These include fundamentalism, millenarianism, a neo-galactic structure and a Buddhist prosperity movement. Typologies traditionally used to classify New Religious Movements are examined to see if any are useful in the quest to understand Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

Chapter 4 focuses on Wat Phra Dhammakāya's approach to spiritual development. The movement's understanding of *nibbāna* and *āyatananibbāna* is examined, as is the model of meditation. There is discussion about Tibetan and Yogāvacara practices as being a possible source of Luang Phaw Sot's approach to meditation.

An analysis of Santi Asoke and its approach to spiritual purification – Chapter 5 traces the life of Rak Rakphong and the founding of the Santi Asoke movement. There is considerable description of Chamlong Srimuang's political career and involvement with Santi Asoke.¹⁰ The legal proceedings against the movement which eventually led to excommunication from the *Saṅgha* are examined. There is description of the various Asoke communities based on my visits, interviews and reading. Structures of the movement, its use of schools and adult education are mentioned, as are its yearly festivals.

Chapter 6 commences with four insiders' (*etic*) understandings of Santi Asoke. Four key distinctives of Santi Asoke are examined. Theories that have been put forward by outsiders to explain/classify Santi Asoke are described and evaluated. These include 'fundamentalist', 'millenarian', a Buddhist version of Christian 'base communities' and a 'community culture' movement. I suggest an understanding of Santi Asoke as an ascetic/prophetic utopian movement with strong (nomian) legalistic tendencies. As with Wat Phra Dhammakāya, typologies are examined to see if they may be used helpfully to explain and categorise.

Chapter 7 focuses on Santi Asoke's approach to spiritual development. The Asoke understanding of *nibbāna* is considered, as is the Asoke approach to meditation, the Eightfold Path and spiritual development.

In conclusion, a summary of the answers to the first four research questions is made. The final research question is answered as suggestions are made regarding the future of state-regulated Buddhism within Thailand, and possible implications these may have for society within the kingdom.

REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON THE WAT PHRA DHAMMAKĀYA AND SANTI ASOKE MOVEMENTS

By the mid-1980s, the Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke movements had gained a high profile in Thai society. The former sent teams of white clothed members, predominantly students, into the housing estates to collect donations and recruit members. Santi Asoke were under investigation by the *Saṅgha* but had also attracted the attention of the populace with their rigorous practice and association with Chamlong, the then governor of Bangkok. Scholars thus began to investigate both movements at that stage, and published work soon followed. This review examines what I consider to be important texts on these movements.

Peter Jackson was born in Sydney, Australia in 1956. He first became known in the field of Thai studies with his 1988 publication *Buddhadāsa: A Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World*. In 1989 he published *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism*. This work is presented in two parts. It commences with an overview of Buddhism and the Thai elite. The second part examines the life and beliefs of some reformist monks including Buddhadāsa. The Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke movements are comprehensively covered. Jackson points out that although Wat Phra Dhammakāya is in the Mahānikai fraternity it is highly likely that it has members with Thammayut affiliations (traditionally associated with the establishment).¹ The movement has drawn a number of upper class laity who benefit from association with the establishment, viewing Wat Phra Dhammakāya as a means of preserving the status quo of traditional governance. Drawing from some findings that Jackson cites (1989:86), these probably would be people who appreciate the outward demonstration of discipline, good organisation, association with the royal family, bureaucracy and the military but are less concerned about orthodox teaching. Wat Phra Dhammakāya, according to Jackson is

[T]he religious expression of a political establishment which is seeking to retain its power by co-opting members of the increasingly wealthy and influential middle class, in particular, that section of the middle class seeking to establish itself in the patterns of authority and power.

(1989:205)

Wat Phra Dhammakāya utilises intense meditation training reminiscent of the Thai forest tradition. By undertaking such training some meditators attain unusual psychic or spiritual experiences. Jackson (1989:206) argues that such followers ‘appropriate for themselves the spiritual power and legitimacy which has traditionally been attributed to the forest monks’. This has the effect of reducing the sacred aura perceived by many to surround monks in the forest tradition.

In chapter seven of his book, Jackson carefully analyses factors contributing to the discourse within the Santi Asoke movement. First, Bodhirak’s understanding of Buddhādāsa (1906–93).² In some of his writings, Bodhirak acknowledges the significant influence of Buddhādāsa on his thinking. However, he goes on to show how his ‘teachings represent a development and improvement over those of the senior monk’ (Jackson, 1989:165). Buddhādāsa taught his followers not to cling strongly to anything, yet Buddhādāsa’s views have become so highly esteemed that many cling dogmatically to his teachings. According to Bodhirak, this strong attachment to Buddhādāsa’s ideas will block perceptions of truth (Jackson, 1989:165). Jackson correctly describes Bodhirak’s commitment to ethical, rather than meditative practice and his criticism of teachers who do not insist on the translation of teaching into practice.

Second, Jackson (1989:166–8) discusses the Asoke members’ mindset by juxtaposing them with typical supporters of Buddhādāsa. In summary, Asoke members may be understood as coming from the merchant or small businessmen/tradesmen class who (like Bodhirak) are of Chinese or Sino-Thai extraction.³ While being rationalistic and critical of what they regard as supernatural practices within Buddhism, they do not go quite as far as Buddhādāsa, who de-emphasises some aspects of Buddhist belief, for example, *karma*. Bodhirak’s followers are disenchanted with the political system which is implicitly supported by the Buddhism of the establishment. To join Asoke is to protest against being marginalised and to participate in a community that offers a different way of living.

Third, Jackson analyses the critical response of Anan Senakhan to Santi Asoke.⁴ The analysis of Anan’s protest gives insight into some aspects of Thai society, and helps the reader better understand the Asoke movement. Jackson points out that both Anan and Bodhirak believe that Buddhism in Thailand has been corrupted. Bodhirak has responded by withdrawing from the *Saṅgha*. Anan’s response is to reform it from within, thus avoiding divisive factions which could undermine the security and integrity of Thai Buddhism. Jackson suggests that considerations of the backgrounds of Bodhirak and Anan help to understand these differences. Bodhirak is a former TV personality and member of the middle class. This, along with his Chinese–Thai ethnic mix locates him outside of the establishment. It seems unreasonable for him to support something which is not disposed to benefiting him or those from a similar background. In contrast, Anan is a former member of the ‘Thai bureaucracy and he identifies strongly with the monarchy, symbols of national unity and with political policies which perpetuate the pivotal place of the Thai bureaucracy as an agent and administrator

of the centralist policies of the state' (Jackson, 1989:171). Anan sees Bodhirak as dangerous precisely because his criticisms of the *Saṅgha* are legitimate! Yet to attack the *Saṅgha* (and control of it by the state) and seek independent sources of authority is to weaken society and create confusion.

Jackson's analysis of these movements reflects an in-depth understanding of the Thai socio-political scene. Much has happened in the field since his book was published in 1989. Jackson briefly reflects this in a chapter entitled 'Buddhism's Changing Political Roles'.⁵

It is no longer possible to make a strong claim that any particular religious form is politically crucial as an ideological justification for a given sector's position or role in society. . . . Legitimacy in Thailand, as in most capitalist countries, is now framed largely in terms of instrumental values, that is, the state's capacity to deal effectively with social, economic and ecological problems and to increase the material well being of the population.

(1997:77)

Jackson argues that the lack of reform of the *Saṅgha* indicates that 'religion has become increasingly separated from state political processes' (Jackson, 1997:77). While recognising that individuals are still religious, Jackson appears to suggest that the political apparatus no longer feels the need to regulate Buddhism. This demonstrates that a secularisation of the establishment has been in process.

Donald Swearer, professor of religion at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania has spent some years teaching in Thailand and has researched Thai Buddhism extensively. Written in 1991, his chapter in *Fundamentalisms Observed* is important to the study of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke, as it discusses the distinctive features of fundamentalism in Theravāda Buddhism.⁶ Initially, Swearer suggests that Wat Phra Dhammakāya seeks to recreate the old galactic policy with the intention of restoring a 'vivid and dynamic past to a fragmented Thai society and a political environment continually beset by corruption and factionalism, in which the symbolic power of the monarchy is waning and the practical power of religion is virtually non-existent' (Swearer, 1991:657).⁷ This perceptive point highlights the pivotal role of the temple. For example, ascetic forest practice is arranged to take place in the temple grounds rather than in a forest in the provinces. I engage with Swearer regarding the galactic model in the *etic* perspectives on Wat Phra Dhammakāya towards the end of the Chapter 3.

Swearer points out that Wat Phra Dhammakāya's decision not to open other temples throughout the country protects it from the charge of creating a new sectarian tradition. He also notes that this has been unnecessary as the movement dominates the Buddhist societies of virtually all the universities and colleges in the country.

Swearer views fundamentalism in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia as a reaction to the introduction of Western values, technology, education and political systems.

He suggests that they may be even characterised as ‘postmodern in that it seems to be a direct consequence of, and formed in reaction to, the adjustments traditional Theravāda Buddhism made to the challenge of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ (Swearer, 1991:677). He views the following distinctives as part of fundamentalism in Theravāda Buddhist societies in the region:

- A quest for identity (national, communal and individual). This search involves a return to what is perceived to be primordial and ideal;
- Strong, charismatic leaders whose followers consider themselves to be under threat;
- Ideologies which tend to rest on simplistic, dualistic and absolutistic worldviews. That is, non-negotiable understandings of what is acceptable/unacceptable with no possibility of synthesis of extremes;
- Often exclusive (sometimes evangelistic), the movements reject competing views as ‘morally evil, spiritually confused, and/or intellectually misguided’;
- An obsessive sense of their unique role or destiny. Such movements may be ‘quasi-messianic or explicitly millenarian’;
- A tendency to stress the value of direct experience coupled with plain and simple religious practice.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya, according to Swearer

[A]stutely packages a fundamentalistic form of Thai Buddhism that offers a way of embracing a secularized modern lifestyle while retaining the communal identity once offered by traditional Buddhism – all the while maintaining that it is ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ Buddhism, in contrast to its competitors.

(1991:666)

Swearer sees Santi Asoke’s ‘born-again Buddhism’ as exhibiting several aspects of fundamentalism. He understands the movement to be reacting against a secular, materialistic culture which is replacing a traditional life informed by *Dhammic* principles. Furthermore, Swearer understands Asoke to have a dualistic and absolutist *Weltanschauung*.

Phra Ajahn Mahā Sermchai Jayamanggalo (now referred to as Phra Rajyanvisith is the abbot of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram and is also director of the Dhammakāya Buddhist Meditation Institute.⁸ His book (English Language) *The Heart of Dhammakāya Meditation* was published in 1991. The writer, formally a researcher and lecturer, entered the monkhood in 1986. He was appointed abbot of the newly registered Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram temple in 1991 and continues to be in demand as a meditation teacher. His publication is a detailed manual of *Dhammakāya* meditation. Wat Phra Dhammakāya have recently simplified this approach. In addition, Sermchai’s book defines