

Beyond the ‘Capitalist’ World – System: Buddhism in Action

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While it appears that the capitalist system dominates globally, there are a number of “anti-capitalist” movements that exist and flourish. This paper investigates two cases of New Religious Movements that, while they do not completely refute capitalism, go beyond it to establish new Buddhist systems in action.

The Capitalist World - System

The twenty-first century marked the end of a long fight between great two ideologies, capitalism and socialism. Capitalism appears to have become dominant. The evolution of this domination can be classified into 4 periods, *mercantile, industrial, financial, and state welfare capitalism* (Shaw and Barry, 2004: 152-153).

The first of these, *mercantile capitalism*, was based on mutual dependence between state and commercial interests. Governments played a prominent role in the provision of laws and economic policies that were designed to encourage production for foreign trade, keep out imports, and promote national supremacy. This period was associated with military colonization.

The second period, *industrial capitalism*, was associated with the development of large-scale industries and industrial colonization. The confluence of a number of post-war factors, including a sound financial base, technology for mass production, market expansion for cheaply manufactured goods, and a large and willing labour force, produced industrial expansion in the United States of America (USA). This nation became the core and symbol of the Capitalist World – System.

Financial capitalism was characterized by pools, trusts, holding companies, and the proliferation of banking, insurance, and industrial interests. Accompanying this development was the trend towards larger corporations with control of increasing portions of the world’s economic capacity. This period was associated with financial colonization of the world.

The fourth period, *state welfare capitalism*, emerged from the Great Depression of the 1930s. Governments played active roles in regulating economic activities in an effort to smooth out the “boom-and-bust” pattern of the business cycle. In addition, government programs, such as social security and unemployment insurance, sought to enhance the welfare of the workforce while legislation legitimized the existence of trade unions.

As it evolved, capitalism developed as a framework for order and decision-making. People became mono-dimensional and refused to act unless the action suited the market and made a profit. Capitalism, with its emphasis on domination and power, satisfied *kilesa* or the greed of human beings, and the world became divided into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral nations, based not on boundaries but on strengths of political economies (Wallerstein, 1976; 1991; 1999). Countries strove to be members of the core and to exploit others in the semi-peripheral and peripheral contexts for their own benefit.

However, no system including capitalism is permanently fixed, all being susceptible to change as a result of social, economic, political, and religious forces.

Anti-Systemic Movements: New Religious Movements

One of these forces of change acting as an anti-capitalism system agent is the emergence of the New Religious Movement (NRM). This exists in a range of forms described as “glocalisation” (Robertson, 1992). From a global perspective, examples occur in different cultures and present a significant anti-systemic group (Clarke, 2006: 3).

NRM provides a new foundation for religions, introducing new beliefs and practices – often by reshaping and transforming the purposes of old ones – and acting as a catalyst for change at practical and epistemological levels. Such core notions as liberation (*moksha*) and enlightenment (*nirvana*) are increasingly being interpreted as a means to the end of transforming society rather than focussing on individual goals (Clarke, 2006: xiii-xiv).

Buddhism in Action

Buddhism, long considered a pillar of Thailand’s national identity and social cohesion, is not immune to market-driven turmoil. During the boom years immediately

before the 1997 Asian economic crisis, Jean Comaroff noted the relationship between economic and symbolic productivity, describing Thailand as a society "where the dynamism of capitalist production is a rival only by the drive of diverse forms of ritual creativity, both within and outside of Buddhism" (Comaroff, 1994: 301). The country in the 1990s saw an emergence of a diverse range of "prosperity religions" (Roberts, 1995: 2). These movements emphasized wealth acquisition as much as or even more than salvation. Rising to prominence within an emergent consumerist culture, Thailand's prosperous religious organizations accentuated long-established patterns of religious syncretism and luck-enhancing protective ritualism, incorporating elements from both Thai and Chinese traditions (Jackson, 2005: 34).

This form of Buddhism, called "commodified Buddhism" (Jackson, 2005), also can be found in other countries, such as Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. However, forms of NRM known as "engaged Buddhism", whose purposes and objectives are more informed by communal and societal concerns aiming at returning humanity and spirituality to life and society. This paper investigates two cases of Buddhist movements. They represent different cultures, *Theravada* and *Mahayana*, but have the same objective to go beyond the Capitalist World – System.

The Case of Asoke Communities in Thailand

Asoke Communities emerged about three decades ago in a Thai *Theravada* context. Their emergence was due to two factors, the first being the domination of Thai people by capitalist values, making them more consumerist and less spiritual: the second being the lack of immunity of the Thai *Sangha* to the said capitalist values (see also Suwida, 2006a; 2006b).

*Samana*¹ Phothirak, the leader of the Asoke Communities, overthrew the theoretical and practical dimensions of the values and social system of capitalism, resulting in the Asoke Communities being the only places that has created alternative communities with their *Sangha* congregation. This congregation is not under the *Sangha* Council however.

Though being ostracised by mainstream *Sangha* and criticised by orthodox lay Buddhists, Samana Phothirak persisted in building up alternative Buddhist

communities, defining themselves as authentic Buddhists who can decrease their desires and simultaneously increase their productivity and creativity (Kanoksak, 2003: 2).

Asoke communities (*chum-chon Asoke*) developed from the Santi Asoke Movement in nine provinces².

Action Beyond the Capitalist World – System in the Asoke Communities

Samana Photirak strongly criticized the social values of capitalist society, such as virtue, cleverness, profit, loss, and objectiveness. He compared the Asoke Communities' new system, called *Merit-ism*, and capitalism in books (see also Samanalakkhano, 2001: 24), journals, and Dhamma teachings. These comparisons emphasized the different worldviews, frames of thinking and decision making that threaten humanity. The following issues are some examples that Samana Phothirak gave to Asoke people.

Capitalism and Asoke have different perspectives of virtue. Capitalism has a distribution theory called 'trickle-down' by which most resources are under the control of the upper echelons of society. These groups allow some of these resources to trickle-down to the rest of society through taxes and donations. People in the capitalist system who make profit, pay taxes legally, and make donations are praiseworthy. Many persons and companies in capitalist systems make donations to society – wealthy people donate computers and millions of dollars to poor countries; consumer product companies give funds to conduct activities about the environment; Thai Buddhists gives alms to monks and donate money to temples. What is the matter with doing these virtuous deeds? Samana Phothirak asks for explanations for the high prices of products and the great profits made that allow these people to be able to afford such donations. Why did they not sell at lower prices so that everyone can access the products? Do they give donations without concern for self-benefit, a major pillar of the capitalist system? This emphasis on self-benefit and self-interest leads to lack of trust about virtuous acts, leading to society becoming fragmented and its members suffering from loneliness.

In Asoke Communities, people donate to society as well but with the different worldview from capitalism. For Asoke people, the frame of thinking and decision making is a benefit for the whole, not one's own. They live together and work in the community without a salary (Marja-Leena, 2002). Asoke people enthusiastically join every activity in their community, such as teaching children, many not from the Asoke Communities. The schools set no fees for students and yield no salaries for

teachers. People plant many kinds of vegetable for everyone in the community. They cook vegetarian food for at least 300 persons per day. They develop knowledge and successful practices about Sufficiency Economy and inform anyone who is interested. They are a model of Buddhism in action for Thai society through their generosity and peaceful nature. Asoke people give to society with a purity of mind. One thing that they hope for themselves is to make merit and practice as a good Buddhist to eliminate their *kilesa* (greed, anger, and delusion). Virtue for the Asoke Communities does not hope for anything in return and is in fact a model of unselfish giving. Consequently, everyone in the Asoke Communities trusts each other and together builds a peaceful society.

Capitalist and Asoke perspectives of cleverness are at variance. Samana Phothirak explains the character of a clever person in the Capitalist World-System as one who can do something to gain more of an advantage over another person. When one can do business with a minimum of cost, even exploit others and the environment, then one is considered to be a clever person. When one can find a complex method to cheat or to be corrupt, then one is also considered clever. When one does a little but makes a lot of profit, it is a clever action. In the Asoke Communities, one is deemed clever when one serves society. Cleverness comes when one can give with a pure mind – particularly when one can help others with their suffering, when one can join in every kind of work – even if it is a hardship, and when one can perpetually maintain one's *sati* (mindfulness).

Profit, in capitalism, is to receive from others and society more than the original investment. In Asoke Communities, profit is for one to be helpful, to share, to give and to do for others more than an investment. In other words, profit for Asoke community members is associated with virtue. For example, if an Asoke member invests capability, either labour or materials, for 500 dollars, and gets back 400 dollars, there is a profit of 100 dollars in virtue. In the same case, if a person gets back 500 dollars, there is no virtue or profit. But if one gets back 600 dollars, there is a loss in virtue of 100 dollars.

Samana Phothirak states that loss in capitalism means the moment one is at a disadvantage. One who works hard but earns little experiences loss when compared with another who works for a few minutes but earns a lot in return. In Asoke Communities, to reap an advantage from society is a loss because one remains stuck in society. Consequently, one is in debt to society.

The objective of capitalism is capital accumulation. Nowadays, capital means money because it can be used to buy everything, even humans. People have to accumulate more and more money. Thus, everything is evaluated in financial terms. More consumption shows more money. Consequently, more consumption means more profit of life and that is where consumerism begins. In Asoke Communities, the objective is a good causal nexus, *karma*. They think that sin or merit is the real asset that will follow them in every life. For that reason, Asoke people do everything in the form of deed, word, and thought for the good causal nexus for themselves and for society.

The end, in capitalism, will imbibe all resources including human beings to be under the power of despoliation and squandermania until the world experiences a major crisis. These may be in the form of an environmental, economic, and/or health crisis. In contrast, the outcome for the Asoke Communities means a peaceful society in which everyone has a moderate life equipped with diligence, creativity, capability, and an awareness of the national resource value.

The above comparison between the worldviews of capitalism and the Asoke Communities is the interpretation of Samana Phothirak and also Asoke people. It appears to attack capitalism but actually Samana Phothirak attacks a system which praises *kilesa*. So, the examples that he gives are all the extreme *kilesa*, clearly the opposite to the Asoke's perspective.

The Asoke Communities have constructed their own system called *Merit-ism* (*Bun-niyom*). One of its purposes is to ridicule capitalism. Another purpose is to announce their position to always make merit for the society. The following table shows the contrasting ideas between capitalism and *Merit-ism*.

Table 1: The contrasting ideas between capitalism and *Merit-ism*

Item	Capitalism	<i>Merit-ism</i>
Virtue	Giving with expected returned benefits	Giving with a pure mind, no return expected
Cleverness	Getting an advantage more than others	Serving society with no advantage
Profit	Getting more than an original investment	Giving more than getting
Loss	Having a disadvantage	Getting more than giving
Objective	Money	Causal nexus
End	Crisis from despoliation and squandermania	Peace from conducting a moderate life

Source: Translated from Samanalakkhano, 2001: 24

Merit-ism in Practice: Buddhism in Action

In practice, Asoke members voluntarily work for their communities and those outside their groups. They consume and use things that they can produce themselves. They also learn to do things for their consumption and their own use. Consequently, Asoke Communities become self-sufficient and independent from the Capitalist World – System. Self-sufficiency gives them self-empowerment. Moreover, merit-ism motivates Asoke people to achieve efficiency, producing basically for their household use. If they have more, they distribute to those outside their society, donating things such as organic products, herbal medicines, and training courses.

Asoke people open commodity shops with the slogan of “cheap, good quality, organic, and honest.” Products have two prices – one the cost price, the other the selling price. In this way, customers know exactly how much profit the shop makes. Trading in Asoke Communities is an obvious example of the framework of *Merit-ism*. The framework of trading is not for profit, as in capitalism, but for giving to society. It is a sale for less profit, for non-profit, or even a loss. Occasionally goods are even given away for free. For Asoke people, to give more than to get is a merit. Then, a loss in trading becomes a gain in merit called “*Ariya Profit*,” a profit of civilised people.

The framework of trading is not only for giving to society, but also a method for Asoke’s admirers (*yaattitham*) to gradually eradicate their greed. The big festival of Asoke Communities on New Year’s Eve is called “*Talaad Ariya*,” the market of civilised people. The market is an opportunity for Asoke admirers to sell products at a very low price, or even at a one baht price. The sellers come from all parts of Thailand with the intention to make a loss in trading but to make a profit in merit instead. Products in *Talaad Ariya* are not the same as other markets as there are only necessary products for life sustenance. Products toxic to mind and/or body are not allowed to be sold. Every year more than 10,000 people come to sell and buy at this festival. Trading is a prominent connection between the Asoke Communities and the modern economy. However, the framework of decision making is still not for profit but for merit and one’s mental development.

The 1997 Asian economic crisis is an excellent example illustrating the manner in which the Asoke Communities go beyond the Capitalist World – System. Thailand specifically and the Asian region generally were hit hard by the crisis. Many businesses went bankrupt and numerous people suffered. However, Asoke

Communities experienced little effect, other than more people bought vegetarian food at Asoke's food shops and more were interested in *Merit-ism*.

Nowadays, the Asoke Communities are models of a sufficiency economy, natural agriculture, alternative education, empowerment, and a utopian Buddhist community, for academics, Thai and international alike, and for the contemporary Thai government (Suwida, 2004b; 2004c; 2006a; 2006b)

The Case of the Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation of Taiwan

The Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation was established four decades ago in Taiwan. Master Chen Yen, a small Buddhist Bhiksuni, the founder of Tzu Chi saw suffering in society in the poor and the rich. While the poor had nothing, the rich had too much but still felt unhappy. Bhiksuni Master Chen Yen wanted to extinguish poverty, to help the poor, and to educate the rich. How could she do it? She had nothing but the Buddha's teachings to be charitable, merciful, joyful, giving, and loving (Suwida, 2004a).

Action Beyond the Capitalist World – System in Tzu Chi

Though Bhiksuni Master Chen Yen did not announce herself to be anti-capitalist, she taught her followers to feel concerned about humanity, society and the environment, but not at all about money. She taught them to be humble, to give love, to make merit, and to help alleviate people's suffering with no expected return, not even a word of thanks. People were grateful to be given an opportunity to serve Tzu Chi to make merit and to practice their minds. In Buddhism, everyone has a seed of the Buddha's nature, Buddhahood. To give love is a way to practice one's mind to develop the seed of Buddhahood. More love can cultivate one's mind to achieve the objective of life with enlightenment just as the Buddha himself did. The final picture that Bhiksuni Master Chen Yen and her followers expect to see is a loving and caring society free of exploitation in which everyone helps each other.

Great Love in Practice: Buddhism in Action

Bhiksuni Master Chen Yen brought the Buddha's teachings into practice. The first principle is "No work, No meal," implying that all must be motivated to self-care

and work, and not wait for help from others. So the Great Master and a small group of nuns planted vegetables for their own meals.

The second principle is “Simply do it.” This infers that people cannot afford to wait to start doing good deeds. The Great Master and her group decided to help people immediately even though they did not have any money. They started out by making handicrafts for sale. She asked her thirty followers—mostly housewives—to donate small amounts of money everyday and to help the poor. The help was not only financial or things for basic needs but also help for one’s spirituality. They took care of poor persons, feeding, body cleaning, and maintaining shelters. The Great Master gave charity to arouse people to give their love and open their hearts to love and to be loved. Bhiksuni Master Cheng Yen teaches people how to cultivate their ability to love.

The third principle, “*Brahmavihāra*,” is the important Dhamma for Mahayana Buddhists. The Four Divine Abidings (*Brahmavihāra*) has four states of a restful mind: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Bhiksuni Master Chen Yen brought the *Brahmavihāra* into practice and stated that they were the four missions of the Tzu Chi Foundation (Cheng Yen, 2006, 46-47).

Step 1 – Kindness becomes “Charity.” From only 30 housewives, 40 years later, there are now almost ten million members around the world who want to donate money, materials, time, labour and “loving-kindness” to relieve the suffering of human beings. The charitable activities of Tzu Chi are not only charity per se but also knowledge dissemination. Material charity is simply a means but mind and knowledge dissemination charity are the objective. The end of this mission is for the members of society to be able to manage their lives with a positive state of mind as compassionate human beings. “International Relief” of the foundation reflects the Buddha’s teachings that a religion transcends all races, nationalities, and geographical distances. Today, Bhiksuni Master Chen Yen and ten million of her followers direct their help where needed throughout the world to help people from the disaster. The Foundation goes beyond the Capitalist World – System.

Step 2 – Compassion becomes exemplified through the building of “Hospitals.” Master Cheng Yen travelled throughout rural Taiwan for 6 years collecting data on the types of misery the people faced. Bhiksuni Master Chen Yen then decided to build a hospital in the rural area from only \$10,000 which they had at that time. The task was very difficult. Nowadays, Tzu Chi has six general hospitals in every region of

Taiwan. The hospitals are not aimed at making a profit, but at teaching the rich and helping the poor. Doctors and nurses in Tzu Chi's hospitals regard patients' illnesses as their own, thus they endeavour to give the best treatment possible to make patients comfortable, even for those who have no money.

Step 3 – Sympathetic joy becomes “Da-Ai TV” or the Great Love TV Station. Joy is the spirit behind the mission of humanitarianism, which means to spread joyful stories and positive information to people. At Tzu Chi's media outlets, such as the Great Love TV Station and Tzu Chi magazines, Great Love is the framework of decision making for all programs. It is not for media ratings as in the capitalist society, but for promoting the bright side of human nature by covering and reporting all sorts of positive news happenings around the world. Through these stories, they help calm people's agitated and worried minds and bring happiness and peace to people. This assistance guides them toward a right direction in life.

Step 4 – Equanimity becomes Unselfish Giving and then becomes “Education.” Children are worthy of 100 years of investment. They are our future generation worthy of love and education. Bhiksuni Master Chen Yen decided to build schools for children for elementary, secondary, college, and university levels. The objective of Tzu Chi's education is to plant love and service-mindedness – the Buddha's nature – in these young children's hearts. Children can then gradually give love to their families and society. Consequently, they are the young blood that builds a peaceful world. Education is not only for children, but also for everyone in society. The Tzu Chi Foundation educates society about the environment with its project of “garbage becomes gold.” They promote and educate their neighbours to sort garbage to sell it for the recycling process. The communities start to think about consuming and producing not to satisfy human's unlimited wants, but to respond to human beings' basic needs instead. Garbage becomes gold as the income from selling the garbage can support one of the three expenditures, namely the Great Love TV Station.

Conclusion

Though quite contrasting in approaches, Asoke Communities in Thailand and the Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation of Taiwan are good examples of NRM who operate differently to the capitalist system. The framework for decision making is based on humanity and socio-culture, not money, capital, and market. Both call on traditional

values from the past. The Asoke Communities revive Thai rural culture, such as community, paying respect, Thai dress, organic farms, ancient medical sciences, and an integrated system involving home, temple and school. The Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation, on the other hand, resuscitates the Confucian tradition and Chinese culture, such as paying respect to one's parents, having tea ceremonies, and doing Chinese paintbrush and flower arrangement. All of these traditions appear unfashionable in modern society under the Capitalist World – System.

However, these two communities have not rejected all things modern. They use resources that are to their advantage, particularly modern technology. Technology, for Asoke community members, is something that benefits society. Technology is not alien, but is instead used to enhance the harmony of the group in a humane yet efficient socio-cultural order, all of which is determined by the rules and values of traditional Buddhism and Thai culture. Most of the centres have air-conditioned computer rooms due to the tropical heat and humidity. Mobile phones are only used by persons whose duty it is to cooperate with people or networks, particularly in the large centres such as Rajthani Asoke. In producing *dhamma* media and commodity products, each centre selects appropriate equipment and technological appliances. They try to use soft technology that does not harm the environment, such as micro-biotic fertilizer instead of chemicals for natural agriculture, and wood power instead of cooking gas for food production.

On a similar but larger scale, Tzu Chi uses modern technology for functional purposes, not for image. Tzu Chi has its own television channel, Da-Ai or The Great Love TV Station, broadcasting world wide via satellite. Nowadays, Da-Ai studio uses the best technology available. They produce a variety of entertainment programs that cultivate Great Love in all hearts. They do not care about the ratings but they do care about building a peaceful world. They refuse to advertise things that might misguide people's way of living. In addition, they produce many types of media to distribute Dhamma and to disseminate Buddhism in action.

In operating contrary to the Capitalist – World System, Asoke and Tzu Chi select a combination of good things from the past and from the modern world. They integrate and go beyond both the past and the modern, and build a new system, a Buddhist system in which human beings know their objective of life. All developmental dimensions of the Buddhist system are embedded in the traditional Buddhist religion and traditional culture. It is not governed by the drive for the endless accumulation of

capital. As such, prosperity, equality, and liberty that are unattainable in capitalism become tenable in a Buddhist system where one can achieve a happy and peaceful life. The Buddhist system is a new traditional perspective of a developmental system that operates outside the parameters of the Capitalist World – System. However, the new Buddhist system of Asoke and Tzu Chi do not dominate the systems of their own countries but are part of a trend of anti-systemic movements in the transition period of the Capitalist World-System.

Acknowledgements

This study is financially supported by the Thailand Research Fund through the Royal Golden Jubilee Ph.D. Program. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Tavivat Puntarigvivat, Dr. Preecha Piampongsan, Dr. Tienchai Wongchaisuwan and Dr. Peter A. Jackson, for their academic advice and guidance. While completing the manuscript, I appreciated the encouragement from Dr. Prathurng Hongsranagon. I would also like to thank my family for their understanding and their full support and assistance during the term of the study.

Notes

1. Samana is a prefix for monks in the Asoke Communities after the Sangha Council accused Samana Phothirak and all clergy members in the Asoke Communities. It is used instead of Phra which is a common prefix for monks in state Buddhism.
2. The Asoke Buddhist Community has nine centres (Kanoksak, 2003: 4) as follows:
 - 1) Sisa Asoke in Srisaket, in the northeastern region of Thailand, year 1976
 - 2) Sali Asoke in Nakornsawan, in the central region of Thailand, year 1976
 - 3) Santi Asoke in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, year 1976
 - 4) Pathom Asoke in Nakorn Pathom, the northern part of Bangkok, year 1980
 - 5) Sima Asoke in Nakorn Ratchasima, the northeastern region of Thailand, year 1990
 - 6) Rajthani Asoke in Ubon Ratchathanee, the northeastern region of Thailand, year 1994
 - 7) Taksin Asoke in Trang, the southern region of Thailand, year n/a
 - 8) Phu-pha Fa-Nam in Chiangmai, the northern region of Thailand, year 1995
 - 9) Hin-pha Fa-Nam in Chaiyaphum, the northeastern region of Thailand, year n/a

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