

# BUDDHIST ECONOMICS AND THE ASOKE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY

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## **Abstract**

*This paper argues that a new traditional development system is emerging against the Capitalist World-System, that of the new traditional economics and the new traditional community. Such a developmental system simultaneously seeks to have socio-economic decision making embedded within a traditional socio-cultural framework, associated with a traditional religion, while at the same time seeking to use modern technology to some degree but still maintaining a distance from the world economy. The effort to achieve such a system is reviewed as an anti-systemic movement in Thailand, with analysis of Thai Buddhist Economics and The Asoke Buddhist Community.*

## **Introduction**

Under the banner of development and progress...Millions of men and women were thus mortally wounded in their bodies and souls, falling *en masse* into a destitution for which they had never been culturally prepared (Rahnama 2001: x). A trend of development: the steps of modernisation, industrialisation and then globalisation, seem the only way for the world to reach *prosperity, equality and liberty*, the ideology of liberalism. However, in the majority of the world, this is a "Myth of Development"<sup>1</sup>. The reality is that "all modern states, without exception, exist within the framework of the interstate system and are constrained by its rules and its politics. Productive activities are constrained by its priorities and its economics. Cultural identities are constrained by its models and its intellectual hierarchies." (Wallerstein 1999: 25-26) The framework of the interstate system becomes the structure of exploitation that causes the tragedy of mankind.

In World-Systems Theory, Immanuel Wallerstein has called the contemporary world-system the capitalist world-economy by which the core states have exploited the periphery states in the framework of the interstate system.

The capitalist world-economy, which by definition is governed by the drive for the endless accumulation of capital, is sometimes called the law of value. The capitalist world-system is constituted by a world-economy dominated by core-peripheral relations and a political structure consisting of sovereign states within the framework of an interstate system (Wallerstein 1999: 35).

Nevertheless, the world system is not a certainty as in Cartesian-Newtonian science. Wallerstein found three premises for the contemporary world.

The first is that historical systems, like all systems, have finite lives. They have beginnings, a long development, and finally, as they move far from equilibrium and reach points of bifurcation, a demise. The second premise is that two things are true at these points of bifurcation: small inputs have large outputs (as opposed to times of the normal development of a system, when large inputs have small outputs); and the outcome of such bifurcations is inherently indeterminate. The third premise... [is that] the period of transition will be a terrible time of troubles, since the stakes of the transition are so high, the outcome so uncertain, and the ability of small inputs to affect the outcome so great (Wallerstein 1999: 1).

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<sup>1</sup> This word is used by Rahnama: 2001, iv.

As for the premises, Wallerstein draws both moral and political conclusions. The first conclusion is that progress is not at all inevitable. We can move in directions other than forward. The second conclusion is that belief in certainties, a fundamental premise of modernity, is blinding and crippling. A new science called the science of complexity argues that the universe manifests the evolutionary development of complexity, and that the overwhelming majority of situations cannot be explained by assumptions of linear equilibria and time-reversibility.

The third conclusion is that in human social systems the struggle for the good society, anti-systemic movements, is a continuing one. Furthermore, it is precisely in periods of transition from one historical system to another (whose nature we cannot know in advance) that human struggle takes on the most meaning. That is to say, it is only in such times of transition that what we call free will outweighs the pressure of the existing system to return to equilibrium (Wallerstein 1999: 2-3).

Thus, fundamental change is possible, albeit never certain, and this fact makes claims on our moral responsibility to act rationally, in good faith, and with strength to seek a better social system.

### ***The New Traditional Movement***

An anti-systemic movement in the capitalist world-system is the perspective of the *new traditional system*. This perspective draws from J. Barkley Rosser, an American professor of economics, who proposes a new category of economy, *the new traditional economy*<sup>2</sup>. Although Rosser is not a World-System theorist, he sees this new category as a competing alternative system that, gaining significance to become a central feature of the future structure of the world economy and its respectively evolving and transforming systems (Rosser 1999: 764).

For Rosser, the new traditional economy is one in which economic decision making is once again embedded to some extent within a boarder socio-cultural framework, of either a traditional religion or a traditional view of society as a total household, but which uses, or seeks to use, modern technology, to be part of an advanced modern economy. The usual basis for such an embedding is a traditional religion and the appearance of a new traditional economy is usually associated with the imposition upon a modern or modernizing economy and society of a traditional religion by a religiously based political movement (Rosser 1999: 765).

Within the context of the old comparison between market capitalism and command socialism, the new traditional economy offers itself as a potential "Third Way." It claims to represent the best of both worlds and to be superior to either. It claims to combine the old with the new, the individual with the collective, the ethical with the practical. There is a harking back to a mythic past of the old traditional economy and the early period of the religion when all were supposedly righteous. This is to be revived within a modern context in which technology will not be alienating, but rather will enforce the harmony of the family and the group in a supposedly humane yet efficient socio-economic order determined by the rules and values of the traditional religion or culture (Rosser 1999: 765).

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<sup>2</sup> J. Barkley Rosser, who proposes *The New Traditional Economy*, drew his perspective directly from the older view of Karl Polanyi as articulated in *The Great Transformation* (1944). Please see details in Rosser, J. Barkley "The New Traditional Economy: A New Perspective for Comparative Economics?" *International Journal of Social Economics*, 1999, vol. 26, no. 6. pp. 763-778.

In this paper we shall review some of the new traditional movements of significance in Thailand, particularly those based on Buddhism. They are anti-systemic both in theory and in practice. We shall evaluate whether they match the criteria of Rosser's account.

### ***Buddhist Economics:***

#### ***A Thai New Traditional Economics as an Anti-systemic Movement in Theory***

In Thailand, a case of the new traditional economy is Buddhist Economics. There are various versions from Thai academics of anti-systemic movements such as *Phra*<sup>3</sup> Dhammapitaka (P. A. Payutto, 1992), Preecha Piamphongsan (1988) and the most recent one, Apichai Puntasen (2001). However, Apichai is only one person who critiques the contemporary economic subject and proposes Buddhist Economics as a subject of consideration in many theories of economy. He proposes an anti-systemic movement to overthrow the old system at the paradigm or the sum of assumptions underlying the concept of economics. For the reasons above, it is very interesting to see whether or not his Buddhist Economics matches the criteria of Rosser's account.

Apichai is a professor of economics, the same as Rosser. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in economics from Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. He was a lecturer at Thammasat University until his retirement. His highest academic position was that of Eminent Professor of Buddhist Economics from Thammasat University in 2001, a year before his retirement. At present, he is a dean of the Economics Department at Ubol-Rajthani University, northeast of Thailand, and has own research institute. His fields of specialisation are Quantitative Economics, Development Economics, Rural Development, Human Resources, Economics of Natural Resources and Environment, Political Economy and Buddhist economics (Apichai 2002: 186). His book that we shall discuss is *Buddha Settasaat: vivattanakaan trissadee lae kaan prayuk kab settasaat sakha tang tang* or "Buddhist Economics: evolution, theory and other applied economy", first published in 2001. This book was an academic work for his professorship and used in a lectured class of Ph.D. students at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand.

In Buddhist Economics, Apichai has scrutinised the economic subject that developed in the West. He does not compare between capitalism and command socialism, which is the old comparison as Rosser said, but rather he has pointed to the fundamental of all notions in the West. The fundamental of ethics in the West, not excepting Newtonian Physics, is Aristotelian logic of black and white, absent a large grey area in the middle. This logic formulated economics, based on either naturalist ethics or humanist ethics, is forced into a hard science that does not fit the existing continual changing world and potentially is harmful to humankind.

This paper (of Apichai) attempts to demystify the 'positive' or 'scientific' cloak of economic subject developed in the West. The basic false is the belief that economics is a value free subject which is in fact a value loaded one... The other false of economics is a 'scientific' guise through the adoption of a specific but an outmoded branch of physics, namely, a Newtonian physics, of trying to be an 'exact' sciences providing definite answer of true or false through the application of a specific but very popular form of mathematics derived from Aristotarian logic of black and white with the absence of a large gray area in the middle. Consequently, economics has been developed into a 'hard' science that does not fit the existing continual changing world (Apichai 2002: 167-168)

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<sup>3</sup> *Phra* is a prefix of the *Theravāda* Buddhist monks in Thailand.

As an anti-systemic movement, he has argued that in order to rescue the economic subject from being a dismal science in the real sense, an understanding of humanity in a new paradigm is needed. For a new paradigm based on traditional religion, Apichai has proposed Buddhist Economics, which implies the imposition of a Buddhist paradigm, especially relating to human value systems, available in Buddha-Dhamma, onto economics. He has imposed the old of Buddhist teachings onto the new of economic subjects. He claims for the superior that his Buddhist Economics will rescue people and systems from the potential fatalities of the contemporary economics, in other words; it is a potential “third way”.

Apichai has criticised the core of contemporary economics. The objectives of contemporary economics are *optimal satisfaction* under resource constraints for individual, and *optimal social welfare* under similar condition. If the core or the objective is wrong, all of the following details are also wrong. Apichai has argued the following two issues.

First is “satisfaction and/or welfare do not necessarily lead to ‘happiness and peace’ (Apichai 2002: 165).”

Second is “resource constraint understood in common by economists is income or personal wealth of each individual... Income can be generated by human beings collectively and indefinitely while physical resources are absolutely limited. Consequently, income as a constraint is not a real constraint. To maximise or optimise satisfaction through income constraint can easily result in utilisation of resources beyond their absolute physical limit (Apichai 2002: 166).”

Then, combining the individual with the collective, he has proposed the objective of Buddhist Economics to be *happiness and peace* both for individual and society, under the condition of resource constraints. To reach the objective, we should do economic activities through *panya*, the clear understanding of everything as it is.

Its (Buddhist Economics’) only emphasis is to understand the world the way it is through *panya*. If everything that represents the real world or the real situation is clearly understood, there will be no reasons for pain, sorrow, sadness, conflict, contradiction, alienation, suffering, uneasiness or *dukkha*. Attainment of tranquillity or permanent peace of mind only requires clear understanding of everything as it is. It does not require excessive amount of consumption beyond basic physical needs. In fact, excessive desire for consumption resulting from desire or greed only results in the distortion of mind and the distraction of *panya* (Apichai 2002: 168).

Buddhist Economics seeks to achieve its goal of peace and happiness not through consumption of goods, but through *panya*. In Buddhism, *panya* can only be accumulated through spiritual practice by contemplation and deep thoughts, known as *sila*, *samadhi* and *panya*. Thus, economic decision-making in Buddhist Economics is not driven by market forces but by a traditional religious framework: from *panya* through spiritual practice and get *panya*. Economic theories in Buddhist Economics have *panya* as a prominent factor. Therefore, Apichai has called this system *panya*-ism.

The highest efficiency of consumption theory in Buddhist Economics is the lowest level of consumption which can sustain human beings in more spiritual practice. *Panya* is the main means through which humans reach happiness and peace, and is, therefore, a main factor driving efficient consumption. This is in stark contrast to mainstream economics, which emphasises increased pleasure through increased consumption. In Buddhist teaching, the pleasure from consumption is impermanent; it is a cause of renewed desire and renewed desire continues the cycle of suffering. Buddhist Economics removes the pleasure from consumption; the focus is only on survival and the fulfilment of physical needs (Apichai 2001: 453-455).

Furthermore, *panya* is also a core mode of production in the production theory of Buddhist Economics. Therefore, the production process must be linked to the consumption process through *panya*. For the production process, Apichai refuses the narrow understanding of input and output in contemporary economics. For him, economics has to clearly understand everything as it is through '*panya*.' Then, input-resources cover human resource (*panya*, intelligence and labour), produced resource (physical capital, social capital, hard technology and soft technology) and natural resource (energy and other natural resources, which are able or unable to be reused) (Apichai 2001: 435). Outputs cover products and waste, and in addition, waste is not only from production but also from consumption.

This linkage of *panya* will generate the efficiency of production that is "how to use the minimum resources with the maximum usefulness... to produce maximum of durable product and minimum waste (Apichai 2001: 414)."

Consequently, efficiency of the production process means efficiency of the all processes including production, consumption and waste. This concept goes against contemporary economic theories that emphasise only one dimension, production that is driven by market forces, while disregards efficiency of consumption and the minimization of waste.

Not only production and consumption theories but also distribution theory set decision-making on the Buddha's teachings. According to Buddhist teachings, there is non-self while put emphasis on giving, *dana*. Therefore, self-interest is not the emphasis of Buddhist Economics as it is in contemporary economics. Consequently, distribution theory in Buddhist Economics is neither according to his/her ability as capitalism nor according to his/her needs as socialism. It is allocated for everyone to sustain human beings (Apichai 2001: 483).

Although Buddhist Economics of Apichai is just a theory, it covers all dimensions of Rosser's account. Economic decision-making is embedded to *panya*, a core of Buddhism, as a boarder socio-cultural framework. In its input-resources, it covers social capital that stems from a traditional view of society as a total household and all technology, including modern technology. We can use Buddhist Economics for an advanced modern economy because Apichai has used the structure of subject as the modern economic subject but he has corrected it with Buddhist teachings. A reason that theory of Apichai matches the criteria of Rosser's account is likely that both of them are economists; consequently, they have the same dimensions of viewpoints.

Buddhist Economics, however, is not a political movement, as we shall see from the Asoke Buddhist Community.

### ***The Asoke Buddhist Community:***

#### ***A Thai New Traditional Community as an Anti-Systemic Movement in Practice***

The context of modern society in Thailand, like all modern states, exists in the capitalist world-system. The development model uses money as an axis to draw a dream for Thai people and measures success by GDP. There are two consequences. Firstly, the framework of all decision-making in Thai society, not only in an economic dimension, is based on market drive and interstate relationships. Self-perpetuating greed is the intrinsic value of this model (Akin 1999: 15).

Secondly, the state Buddhism, under the Sangha Council, cannot resist the force of capitalism. In a recent seminar named 'Crisis of Buddhism in Siam' organised by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, Sulak Sivaraksa, the prominent Thai Buddhist academic, and Praves Vasee, a long established doctor and

scholar, well respected in both Thai society and academia, discuss whether and how Thai society and Buddhism are dominated by capitalism.

Sulak critiqued Thai monks thus, “(Senior monks are) dominated by consumerism. (They just) emphasise wealth, power, and rank. No time to teach novices (Sivalak 1999: 64).” Praves raised an issue thus, “Thailand is a Buddhist country and also Buddhism is a good thing. Why is there serious moral degeneracy in Thailand? (Praves 1999: 7)”

As Wallerstein said, in periods of transition from one historical system to another... that human struggle takes on the most meaning (Wallerstein 1999: 3), in that context of Thai modern society, there are many anti-systemic movements based on Buddhism.

Unlike other reformist Buddhists who try to reinterpret the Buddha’s teachings to be relevant for modern society, *Samana*<sup>4</sup> Phothirak, the leader of The Asoke Buddhist Community, overthrows the contemporary values and social system both in its theoretical and practical dimensions. The result is that The Asoke Buddhist Community is the only one that has created alternative communities, with their Sangha congregation which is not under the Sangha Council. However, it has proven to survive more than four decades as an anti-systemic movement in Thai society. Best of all, Asoke people are living together as a community based on authentic Buddhism<sup>5</sup> while using modern technologies, similar to the meaning of the new traditional movement of Rosser.

The Asoke Buddhist Community was a fieldwork study for the author’s Ph.D. dissertation at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. The research used a qualitative methodology and got data via in-depth interviews from with founder and Asoke people of various statuses, observations in daily life and in Asoke’s festivals, as well as Asoke’s books and related literatures. The period of study in The Asoke Buddhist Community was between January and June 2005 with occasional observation and staying in a number of Asoke communities (Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke, Rajthani Asoke and Sali Asoke).

### ***The Asoke Buddhist Community***

Background of *Samana* Phothirak is not as same as Apichai and Rosser, who are economists. Before ordained as monk, *Samana* Phothirak had a secular name as Rak Rakpongs. He was very successful in his career as a television-programming manager and song composer. In the book of *Samana* Phothirak’s biography, *Truth of Life*, many photographs show his worldly success. However, the captions provided are slightly mocking and teasing in tone, and ridicule that world of illusion he once lived in (Apinya 1993: 166).

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<sup>4</sup> *Samana* is a prefix for monks in The Asoke Buddhist Community. It is used instead of *Phra* that is a common prefix for monks in the state Buddhism after the Sangha Council accused *Samana* Phothirak and all clergies in The Asoke Buddhist Community.

<sup>5</sup> The Asoke Buddhist Community has divided Buddhist traditions into four categories. The first category is an “occult Buddhism” which their followers rely on mysterious power and believe in superstition, lottery predictions, fortune-telling, sprinkling holy water, and the distribution of amulets. The second category is a “capitalist Buddhism” which increases both the desires and the ability to satisfy the desires of the followers. Third category is a “hermetic Buddhism” which decreases both the followers’ desires and the ability to satisfy these desires. The fourth category is called “authentic Buddhism” in which their followers can decrease their desires and simultaneously increase their productivity and creativity. Asoke group is the fourth type (Heikkila-Horn 1998: 112-113, Kittikorn 2000: 47-48, Kanoksak 2003: 2).

While Apichai found that economic subject was fatal, Rak found that money and fame could not make him happy and peaceful. Both were aliens to the capitalist world-system that split human from nature and emphasised the material. Both also have proposed the 'Third Way' for human life.

*Samana* Phothirak, at first, was ordained as a Buddhist monk under the Sangha Council (Mahatherasamakom) in 1970. He was not pleased with the lax practice of mainstream Buddhist monks. His direct criticism of Thai monks caused him to have some followers and at the same time have conflicts with the *Sangha* Council. *Samana* Phothirak and his followers ended up forming their own group of disciples, namely the *Santi-Asoke Movement*, in 1971 followed by his resigning from the *Sangha* Council in 1975. Nevertheless, the conflict with the *Sangha* Council did not finish. It was followed by state legal action against his status as a Buddhist monk between the years 1989-1998. However, *Samana* Phothirak has never doctrinally resigned from his monkhood up to today.

Though ostracised by the mainstream *sangha* and criticised by the orthodox lay Buddhists, *Samana* Phothirak persisted in building alternative Buddhist communities. From *Santi Asoke Movement*, it became The Asoke Community (*chum-chon Asoke*) in nine provinces<sup>6</sup>, a group of Buddhist practitioners in Thailand which defines itself as an authentic Buddhism, in which its followers can decrease their desires and simultaneously increase their productivity and creativity (Kanoksak 2003: 2).

Asoke community becomes a model of self-sufficient economy, natural agriculture, alternative education, empowerment, and a utopian Buddhist community for academics, both Thai and international, as well as contemporary Thai government. They have their political party. As in Rosser's account of the new traditional movement, The Asoke Buddhist Community claims to be superior to the old systems. It is through an academic paper of *Samana* Lakkhano, a monk of The Asoke Buddhist Community. He presented his paper, "Santi Asoke's Social Movement<sup>7</sup>: The third option substituting capitalism and communism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Merit-ism (bun-niyom)", in The Fourth Chung-Hwa International Conference on Buddhism that was in Taipei, Taiwan on 18-20 January 2002 (Jinsiang-Bikkhu 2002: 5).

As for the account of the new traditional movement, we shall start at the core of Rosser's perspective, a framework of decision making, then follow by a framework of using modern technology and the last at a trend to be an advanced modern economy.

<sup>6</sup> The Asoke Buddhist Community has nine centres as

- 1) Sisa Asoke in Srisaket, northeast, 1976
- 2) Sali Asoke in Nakornsawan, central, 1976
- 3) Santi Asoke in Bangkok, capital, 1976
- 4) Pathom Asoke in Nakorn Prathom, north of Bangkok, 1980
- 5) Sima Asoke in Nakorn Rachsima, northeast, 1990
- 6) Rajthani Asoke in Ubolrachthani, northeast, 1994
- 7) Taksin Asoke in Trang, south, n/a
- 8) Phu-pha Fa-Nam in Chiangmai, north, 1995
- 9) Hin-pha Fa-Nam in Chaiphaphum, northeast, n/a

Source: Kanoksak 2003: 4

<sup>7</sup> *Santi Asoke's Social Movement* was a name that The Asoke Buddhist Community used in the beginning of the group. Now, *Santi Asoke* is a name of Asoke people who live together at an Asoke Buddhist community centre in Bangkok. However, this name is still known by Thai people and foreigners to represent The Asoke Buddhist Community.

***Decision Making in The Asoke Buddhist Community***

The framework of decision-making in The Asoke Buddhist Community is based on its objective. Samana Phothirak said that he has tried to develop humanity. The main objective is to eradicate kilesa following dhamma of the Buddha (Phothirak 2004: 22).

In Theravada Buddhism, the highest aim is Nirvana or the state of lokuttara panya or thoroughly knowing the truth. The Buddha taught some tools to reach that state such as Atthangika-magga or the Noble Eightfold Path, Tri-Sikkha or the Threefold training that are sila, samadhi, panya or morality, concentration and wisdom and Paticcasamuppada or the Dependent Origination. The purpose of all tools is to eradicate kilesa or greed, anger and delusion. Therefore, the traditional religion of the Buddha becomes the framework of development or decision making in various dimensions in The Asoke Buddhist Community.

***The first dimension is a system of the new traditional development.***

“The most important thing in development is to build humanity to have real morals. Social problems now come from humans who have no morals, not from a lack of knowledge.”<sup>8</sup>

Samana Phothirak responded with a strategy to develop Thai society. His perspective presents the root of problem of the core-peripheral relationship in the world-system. As Wallerstein said, in all modern states “the cultural identities are constrained by its (/the framework of interstate’s) models and its intellectual hierarchies (Wallerstein 1999: 26).” In The Asoke Buddhist Community, intellect or knowledge is not a framework of cultural identity but ‘bun’.

In doctrine, bun or puñña in Pali means bases of meritorious action that consist of giving, practicing the precepts and developing the mental (P.A. Payutto 1992b: 110). The purpose of bun is for ending self-centredness. In other words, to eradicate greed, anger and delusion, kilesa. Nowadays, Thai Buddhists in the mainstream system reduce meritorious actions to only almsgiving. Furthermore, the purpose of bun is changed taming to capitalism. Thai monks come to expect money or worthy material while laypeople come to expect accumulation of good deeds, which will bring one to better states such as money, status and fame. It is contrary to the Buddha’s teaching, more for self-centredness. It has become the notion of Buddhist “meritocracy<sup>9</sup>” that has been criticised by reformist Buddhists as well as Samana Phothirak.

To conform to the Buddha’s teaching of spiritual practice, Samana Phothirak revives the corrected meaning of bun. The objective to eradicate kilesa seems a theory, while bun is tangible in practice. It becomes a new traditional system based on bun or merit to the purpose of the new traditional development to developing the mental. The Asoke Buddhist Community named this new system as ‘bun-ni-yom’ or merit-ism to ridicule both ‘thun-ni-yom’ or capitalism and the mainstream Buddhists in Thai modern society. Getting more than giving, as in capitalism, or making a profit, is actually a loss in “bun-ni-yom” because it is an evil which hinders self-development.

The framework of Bun-ni-yom or the new traditional system of The Asoke Buddhist Community is simply giving to society, practicing the Buddhist precepts or sila and all for developing the mental. Then social order in The Asoke Buddhist Community is elaborated by the level of sila or mental development against the

<sup>8</sup> An interview between Samana Phothirak and the author on January 2, 2005 at Rajthani Asoke, details were published in Raksram 2005: 48-55.

<sup>9</sup> “Meritocracy” is a criticism of the mainstream Buddhism by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the prominently reformist monk in Thailand. He then proposed an idea of “*dhammocracy*”. Please see more details in Jackson 2003: 228.



intellect or wealth in the mainstream. To be an anti-systemic movement and a new traditional movement, Samana Phothirak deconstructs capitalist social structure and then reconstructs the new structure within the dhamma meaning.

One implication of the rise of the new traditional system ideology is that it can become the basis of conflict between nations, as traditional religions emphasising their traditional conflicts with each other. This idea parallels Huntington's (1993) argument that in the Post-Cold War world the 'clash of civilisations' is becoming the dominant basis for international conflict. The Asoke Buddhist Community has a response to this kind of argument. The emphasis of the Buddhist system is to give while developing the mind to be modest. The qualities of generosity and humility are personable, whether in an individual or a society. Consequently, the Buddhist system would not clash with other religious systems, even the capitalist system.

*The second dimension is decision making on consumption process.*

When we walk in The Asoke Buddhist Community, we shall feel relaxation with nature and the simple life of the Asoke people. Everyone looks healthy in rural Thai traditional clothes with short hair, no make up, no scent and no accessories. They altogether have one meal a day for higher practitioners and not more than two meals a day for the basic practitioners. In their homes, there are not many belongings and furniture. For example, there is no mattress, no air conditioner, no refrigerator, no television and no safe box. The decoration around their homes looks clean and natural with plants. The life in The Asoke Buddhist Community brings us back to the time that Thais consumed just enough for survival, before the globalisation era that has changed Thai society to become consumerist, following central states of the capitalist world-system.

For the framework of consumption, Samana Phothirak returns to the same doctrine of Buddhism as Apichai: that is to consume for sustaining human beings, the most efficiency in consumption theory. This framework is based on a reinterpretation of kilesa in a broader sense than in the common understanding. In The Asoke Buddhist Community, things other than the four basic needs: food, shelter, medicine and clothes which must be satisfied for life to continue, are extravagant. To consume or partake in extravagances is kilesa, including sexual activity. In this framework, worrying about the four basic needs is the cause of accumulation, hoarding, delusion, anxiety, greed, want, crime, war, and wrong occupation. This reinterpretation of kilesa results in the socio-cultural framework for decision-making as a frugal way of life.

Another decision-making option regarding consumption is the practice of vegetarianism. Samana Phothirak claims that the followers of the Buddha cannot eat meat. This perspective directly opposes to the mainstream Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. He has raised two teachings from the Buddhist cannon as the framework of this (Phothirak 2005: 25-29). The first teaching is *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*, to abstain from killing, which is the first precept of *pañca-sīla*, five rules of morality. The second teaching is *maṃsa vaṇijjā*, trading in animal meat, which is one of five trades with should not be done by a lay disciple. The traditional Buddhist cannon is a good reference and difficult to counter as well as easy to understand for common Thai Buddhists. The concept of vegetarianism has a positive response from 100,000 Thais (Heikkila-Horn 1998: 88). On the contrary, the state Buddhists have a negative response to these ideas, which was to attack Samana Phothirak as a person who has broken Thai Buddhist religion.

However, Samana Phothirak has claimed that Mahayana Buddhism has a practice of vegetarianism differently from Theravada Buddhism. He wants to go back to the era that there was only one Buddhism, neither Theravada nor Mahayana. This is once

again a way in which The Asoke Buddhist Community claims to be superior to the mainstream system.

***The third dimension is decision making on production process.***

In The Asoke Buddhist Community, there are two prominent frameworks for decision making on production process.

First is a concept in traditional religion, 'bun' or merit that consists of giving, Buddhist precepts and mental development. In the Asoke Buddhist communities, everyone works vigorously as a team in various working bases such as natural agriculture, cooking, printing, radio broadcasting, commodity production, selling, training etc. Most of them are volunteers. A few people receive a small salary but not more than 3,000 Baht (75 US\$) a month<sup>10</sup>. Asoke people voluntarily work as a practice to give more than to get and consider it as a merit. This is consistent with the eradication greed, a component of kilesa. All work in The Asoke Buddhist Community is equivalent in social status, neither money nor hierarchy against to the mainstream. Furthermore, they do not constrain in the framework of intellectual hierarchy as in the mainstream culture.

Marja-Leena Heikkila-Horn, a researcher from Finland studied her Ph.D. fieldwork at the Asoke communities in 1994-1995, said thus "(in Asoke) the main point with work, is hence nor the result neither the gain, but the process itself. To work in a team, requires compassion to your fellow workers, it requires concentration to carry out the work despite the possible disturbance and noise of the surroundings (Heikkila-Horn 2002: inner cover)."

Asoke people believe that to succeed in work as a team they have to eradicate the sense of self, which automatically eradicates kilesa. Then, group and society become the most important factors for the Asoke people in having a place and inter-action to develop their mind. This is a good, traditional religion-based strategy to integrate individual with society. While there is a liberty in the individual, there is a concern for the collective. Then both individual and society get usefulness together. This is the same as Apichai, who has combined the individual with the collective goal, contrary to the mainstream economics, which views individual and collective goals as a separated duality.

Furthermore, to work as a team builds kin relationships in The Asoke Community as a household, respect for adults, mercy for juniors and friends, to pay respect in every occasion, and gathering in the evening after work for movies or conversation. This becomes social capital just as the traditional Thai culture. When there is need of ad hoc assistance in some work bases, all people available would rush to help. Everyone looks upon their community as their home. The Asoke Buddhist Community not only return to the traditional Buddhist religion but also to traditional Thai culture. They select the good aspects from each and revive them. At the same time they would not hesitate to leave tradition that is not good (such as authoritarianism) to die.

Another component of 'bun' is the Buddhist precepts or sila as a framework of the production process. Asoke people hold on to the content of the first precept, an abstinence from killing. Moreover, they elaborate this teaching to cover an abstinence from distressing human, animal, and nature. This issue strongly counters the core-peripheral relationship and the destruction natural to the mainstream. Therefore, The Asoke Buddhist community emphasises natural agriculture.

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<sup>10</sup> This salary is very low while the lowest level of wages for Thai labour (2005) is 230 Baht a day or 6,900 Baht (172.50 US\$) a month.

The second socio-cultural framework of the production process is 'self-sufficiency'. The prior objective for production in The Asoke Buddhist Community was to produce the minimal amount of goods necessary for sufficiency in each community centre, goods such as rice, vegetables, fruits, fertilizer, cleaning detergents, herbal medicines, clothes and some equipment. All products produced are natural products. They also buy some commodities from outside, but only the things that they have no ability to produce by their own such as electricity, petrol and automobiles. This framework is opposite to industrialization in the capitalist world-system, in which people produce mono-crops on comparative advantage and then purchase everything they need. That system is a cause of exploitation between the core and the periphery.

Within these two socio-cultural frameworks, the production process is linked to the consumption process, to produce the things that are needed. This type of production process opposes to the capitalist system which produces both what is needed and un-needed. The needs in The Asoke Buddhist Community are not a big quantity because they emphasise to consume only for maintaining the basic, physical needs, the most efficiency in consumption theory. This model, however, is not a constraint for development because the framework of working is a meritorious action that activates Asoke people to engage energetically in any type of work, so there is an excess of both labour and production. The excess becomes green products for selling to the market. This is a linkage to the modern economy as in Rosser's account. The difference is the framework of decision-making for the types of products that are the needed and useful to the consumer. Asoke people think to give benefit to the consumer not the only market drive.

Social value in the production process of The Asoke Buddhist Community presents as its motto 'maximum usefulness, maximum savings, useful for own self, useful for others' that becomes the most efficiency in production theory of Buddhist Economics.

#### ***The forth dimension is decision making on distribution process***

The framework of the distribution process in The Asoke Buddhist Community is based on the model of the Buddhist monk society, *Sangha*. The monks are allowed to have food and belongings just for sustaining life and the excess is given to the centre of society, a type of community fund. In The Asoke Buddhist Community, they are building their community assets (*Sataranapokee*) by getting little and giving the surplus of their activities to the centre. As Apichai said, this concept is based on the non-self, while putting emphasis on giving, *dana*. Four basic needs are allocated from *Sataranapokee* to everyone in The Asoke Buddhist Community to sustain them.

This framework develops equality for all in community. There is no need to discuss rights or justice, either, according to his/her ability, as under capitalism, nor according to his/her needs, as under socialism. This system may sound a little like Communism or Socialism but the differences are spiritual practice and an egalitarian system that make Asoke people willing to dare to be poor as a motto showing the puritan pride of the Asoke group. "Diligence, be initiative, dare to be poor, endure sarcasm" (Kanoksak 2003: 5).

#### ***The framework of using modern technology***

To eradicate kilesa that covers belongings more than physical needs or the framework of the consumption process is also a framework of using modern technology for the individual in The Asoke Buddhist Community, while '*bun*' or the framework of production process becomes a framework of using modern technology at the collective level.

Asoke members do not use technology for one's own individual comfort. They do not have a personal air conditioner, television, refrigerator, car, stereo, or mobile phone. In each community centre, the members would select only appropriate technology for its usefulness to society. There are two or three television sets in the meeting hall (*sala*), where the members gather in the evening to watch TV or video programmes for a couple of hours. The films, which have been screened by Samana Phothirak, are shown for educational purposes. It is the same as the way that the Buddha taught dhamma through "jātaka", the stories of the Buddha's previous life, but The Asoke Buddhist Community taught dhamma through the modern stories.

Most of the centres also have computer rooms, often air-conditioned because of the tropical heat and humidity. Mobile phones are only for persons who have duty to cooperate with many people or network particularly in the large centre such as Rajthani Asoke. In producing dhamma media and commodity products, each centre will select appropriate machines and technological appliances. They try to use soft technology, which does not harm the environment, such as micro-biotic fertilizer instead of chemicals for natural agriculture, wood power instead of cooking gas. Technology, for Asoke people, means something which benefits society and the masses not only fulfils an individual's personal desire. It will not be alienating but will enforce the harmony of the group in a humane yet efficient socio-cultural order determined by the rules and values of traditional Buddhism and Thai culture.

#### ***The framework of decision-making on a trend to be an advanced modern economy***

The economy in The Asoke Buddhist Community may sound a little like socialism in regards to *Sataranapokee* and a little like a closed economy in the dimension of self-sufficiency. However, there is a prominent dimension connecting The Asoke Buddhist Community to the modern economy, which is trading.

#### ***Trading in Asoke Buddhist community***

In Asoke's shops nearby each the Asoke community, there are many people from outside who come to buy products, both those produced by the Asoke communities and those produced elsewhere. The customer can see two prices on the label of product, one is the cost another one is the selling price. With this system, the customers know that how much they benefit from the shop. If one looks around the shop, he/she shall see the principle of this shop, *bun-ni-yom* trading that is 'cheap, good quality, organic and honest.' Trading in The Asoke Buddhist Community is an obvious example of the framework of '*bun-ni-yom*' system. The framework of trading is not for profit, as in the mainstream, but for giving to the society. It is a sale for less profit, non-profit or loss. Occasionally goods are even given away for free. For Asoke people, to give more than get is merit or '*bun*' then loss in trading becomes gain in merit that they call '*Ariya profit*' or profit of civilised people.

The framework of trading is not only for giving to society but it is also a method for Asoke's admirers (*yaattitham*) to eradicate their '*greed*' gradually. A big festival of Asoke Buddhist community in the period of New Year named '*Talaad Ariya*,' or the market of civilised people, opens the opportunity for Asoke's admirers to sell products at very low price. Some products are priced at only one baht. The New Year of 2005 the board of The Asoke Buddhist Community sold three cars lower than the market price, at 50,000 baht (1,250 US\$) each. That year, The Asoke Buddhist Community made a loss, or gained '*Ariya profit*,' of about 4 million baht (100,000 US\$). Every year there are more than 10,000 people to sell and buy at this festival. Trading is a prominent connection between The Asoke Buddhist Community and the modern economy. However, the framework of decision-making is still not for profit but for

merit and mental development. It is not a trend to be an advanced modern economy, which runs contrary to Rosser's account of the new traditional economy.

To examine a boarder socio-cultural framework of decision-making in The Asoke Buddhist Community with an account of the traditional movement of Rosser, one sees that it is deeply embedded within a traditional Buddhism and also a traditional Thai culture. In Rosser's paper, he examined the Islamic economy and the Confucianist new traditional economy in Japan and found that they try to be an advanced modern economy. In the case of The Asoke Buddhist Community, they do not try to be an advanced modern economy, or attempt to be as a model of the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism presented by Max Weber (Heikkila-Horn 1998: 220). Oppositely, they try to distribute the concept of giving from the Buddhist economy to external society.

It may be that what has made The Asoke Buddhist Community so successful is that its version of new traditionalism was not something imposed consciously from above as an ideological system, but rather that it emerged spontaneously from the root of Thai society itself. Its success reflected that it is a direct continuation of the old traditional system of Buddhism, which has adjusted to Thai culture and outside influences while maintaining its own internal integrity.

### **Conclusion**

Rosser argues that there is a 'religious economics' and an 'economics of religion.'<sup>11</sup> The two approaches are working at cross purposes. 'Religious economics' seeks to convert people to particular religions, to embed their views of economics within a religion as part of a move to the new traditional economy. The 'economics of religion' essentially follows the formalist approach of analysing religious behaviour according to the supposedly universal principles of rational economic behaviour within, in which supposedly all social behaviour is embedded.

This controversy is adopted in this paper to be two approaches of 'religious system' and a 'system of religion.' 'Religious system' seeks to convert people to particular religions, to embed their views of development within a religion as part of a move to the new traditional system. It must viewed as a new perspective, or at least as a new model of a developmental system, a new form in which developmental behaviour is embedded within a broader socio-cultural framework in a way unseen in the capitalist world before. The 'system of religion' essentially follows the formalist approach of analysing religious behaviour according to the supposedly universal principles of rational developmental behaviour within which supposedly all social behaviour is embedded. Then, the system is merely a minor variation on the universal model of the mixed market economy with such systems merely providing minor rules or adjustments to the basic pattern.

While Rosser could not use the extent of religious economics as a new perspective of the new traditional economy stating that it is very hard to make a definitive case at the current time anywhere in the world, it is surely emergent in Thailand. Buddhist Economics and The Asoke Buddhist Community have the extent as the 'religious system'. They are a 'Buddhist system', while the mainstream Thai Buddhism such as the state Buddhism and the *Sangha* council are a 'system of Buddhism'.

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<sup>11</sup> Rosser derives this argument from Kuran, T. (1994), "Religious Economics and the Economics of Religion", *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, Vol. 150, No. 4, pp.769-775.

All developmental dimensions of the Buddhist system are embedded in traditional Buddhist religion and traditional Thai culture. It is not governed by the drive for the endless accumulation of capital. Prosperity, equality and liberty that are un-reached ideology of capitalism become successful in Buddhist system. Moreover, they reach happiness and peace. Buddhist system is a new traditional perspective of developmental system against the capitalist world-system.

However, the new traditional system of Buddhist Economics and The Asoke Buddhist Community cannot be said to dominate the majority of Thai society. They are a trend of anti-systemic movements in the transition period of the capitalist world-system. Despite Rosser's arguments, it is not so hard to make a new traditional system at the current time. Probably, the prominent reason of success is the emphasis on spiritual development not the material development or at least both together.

The new traditional system becomes a practical model, which probably is a most meaning, a small input has large outputs in transition period of the historical system. It could activate an ideological movement of significance around the world in many societies. Where it has come the closest to actually existing has been in societies where its adoption has been carried out gradually and only partly consciously, with resulting synthesis thus most fully respecting and reflecting the genuine traditions of the society in question. It is this successful synthesis of the modern and the traditional which lies at the heart of the new traditional system's perspective and its appeal for many developments seeking a path in transforming the world system.

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