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**Incorporating Mindfulness: Questioning Capitalism**

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**Abstract**

This paper engages with Buddhist critiques of capitalism and consumerism; and it challenges the capitalist appropriations of Buddhist techniques. We show how Buddhist modernism and Marxism/socialism can align, and how Engaged Buddhism spawns communalism and socially revolutionary impulses for sustainability and ecological responsibility within the framework of Buddhist thought and mindfulness traditions. Our case study of the Thai Asoke community exemplifies Buddhist communal mindfulness-in-action, explores successes and idiosyncrasies, and shows how communal principles can operate in such work-based communities.

## **Introduction**

This article takes as its point of departure Purser and Milillo's (2015) recent landmark article 'Mindfulness Revisited: A Buddhist-Based Conceptualization', in which they question mindfulness scholarship that dwells on the enhancement of attention and present-moment awareness, and the reduction of stress. Their critique stems from how definitions of mindfulness in the literature vary from those derived from classic Buddhist sources. Salient to our review, their main reference point is the Buddhist understanding of what is 'mindfulness' or, more accurately, 'right mindfulness' (Pāli *sammā-sati*) as the seventh element of the Noble Eightfold Path - the foundation of Buddhist praxis. Early Buddhist texts explain how this 'mindfulness' both as a practice and a quality of mind (Kuan 2008, 1) is applied in contemplation and in resulting meditative states in relation to physical, emotional, mental and conceptual phenomena, experiences and constructs. Purser and Milillo argue that this Buddhist mindfulness provides both a theoretical and ethical corrective to the decontextualised individual-level construct of mindfulness that has informed the organisational theory and practitioner literature that 'reduces it to a self-help technique that is easily misappropriated for reproducing corporate and institutional power, employee pacification, and maintenance of toxic organisational cultures' (Purser and Milillo 2015, 3).

Purser and Milillo (2015) critique the reduction of mindfulness to stress reduction, arguing that the mindfulness movement has not seriously questioned why stress in organisations is so pervasive. Organisations find mindfulness convenient because it can individualise stress while helping employees cope with toxic corporate life, subdue employee unrest, promote acceptance of the status quo, and focus attention on corporate goals. They argue that focusing on the therapeutic side-effects of mindfulness detracts from its main purpose in Buddhism of attaining insight and cultivating compassion (for example by alleviating poverty through wealth distribution). The traditions of *sati* (Pāli), i.e. Buddhist mindfulness, differ substantially from their mainly secular adaptations in the context of the transnational expressions and flows of (post/late-)modernities (McMahan, 2008, pp.215-240; Wilson 2014) in the form of 'mindfulness' in wellness literature, psychotherapy (e.g. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy), business, education and cognate fields (e.g. Burnett, 2011; Bush, 2011; Fennell & Segal, 2011; Gilpin, 2008; Grossman & van Dam, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Metcalf, 2002; van Quekelberghe, 2009). Buddhist mindfulness is not ethically neutral: it can challenge values of profit-maximisation,

economic materialism, competitiveness and individualism by counteracting greed, hatred, and the delusion of an independent self. Purser and Milillo's more ethical approach to corporate mindfulness can provide insights on suffering's causes and conditions, and challenge the status quo. We can reconceive corporate mindfulness in terms of social engagement practice that addresses the causes and conditions of corporate greed, hatred and delusion (Purser and Milillo, 2015).

The current paper concurs with and does not seek to rehearse their critique of (mis)appropriations of mindfulness. Instead, our article develops their contribution by extending their arguments for critiquing capitalism; "The possession of capital or wealth; an economic system in which private capital or wealth is used in the production or distribution of goods and prices are determined mainly in a free market; the dominance of private owners of capital and of production for profit" (OED, 2017). We refer to communism as "a theory of classless society with common ownership of property and wealth and centrally planned production and distribution based on the principle 'from everyone according to their skills, to everyone according to their needs'" (Black et al., 2012). Communism, or "actually existing socialism," rests on equality and freedom, providing "an explicit alternative to private ownership" (Calhoun, 2002). Communism may have suffered serious decline but communist ideas continue to inspire many revolts against capitalism and its consequences (Galligan and Roberts, 2007). In the sense of principled socialism, which aspires to divide resources according to human need, communism is likely to have a prolonged future (Krieger, 2004).

Capitalist production conflicts with its alienative effects (to be discussed further below) because the former increases socialisation of the exploited and develops global homogeneity: capitalism creates and unites its own opposition amongst the dispossessed and disaffected working class (McLean and McMillan, 2009). Commensurate with this theme of homogeneity, we outline the philosophy of 'interbeing' and the practice of Socially Engaged Buddhism; the paper questions capitalism's appropriation of Buddhism, highlighting the potential for harmonising communism/socialism and Buddhism(s), and explaining their points of contact, especially with reference to the problematic notion of possessions. Before concluding, the paper offers a case study potentially providing an alternative to Buddhism's contested appropriation by capitalism: the Asoke Community. Our aim is to develop a dialogue between communism and Buddhism on one important shared aspect; the need for a humane society in which all things are

held in common. Largely beyond the paper's scope are both Marxist economic theory and the intricacies and divergences of Buddhist philosophy, comparisons of which could highlight many points of difference that would only increase ideological conflict, instead of promoting collaboration for the common good.

### **The Social No-Self and Non-duality: Contemporary Engaged Buddhist Mindfulness and Capitalism**

Consciously marrying mindfulness with social advocacy and activism is central to the branch of Buddhist modernism known as Socially Engaged Buddhism. The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has proven most influential in this respect. Hanh, who is credited with coining the term (Socially) 'Engaged Buddhism' (Hanh, 1988, p.63) centrally reframes mindfulness as 'looking deeply' (Hanh, 2006, p.9) and 'keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality' (Hanh, 1976, p.11). Hanh's action-mindfulness connects to two core elements of Buddhist philosophy, no-self (see e.g. Carlisle, 2006) and non-duality.

In Buddhist thought, the ontological separation between self/other is artificial and ultimately the result of ignorance, whereas non-discrimination between self and other leads to compassion and understanding. Active compassion is hence an expression, application and performance of Buddhist knowing. Contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhism propagates 'Action Dharma' (dharma, or the Pāli variant dhamma, refers to the Buddhist teachings): social justice activism as central to the Buddhist praxis. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the extent to which Buddhist traditions have been socially 'engaged' historically; whether 'Engaged Buddhism' represents a new type of Buddhism; or to elaborate hermeneutical arguments on original/traditional/modernist/reformed modes of Buddhism (see Yarnall, 2003 and Temprano, 2013). Yet, for our discussion it is important to keep in mind that contemporary Engaged Buddhist thinkers such as David Loy see a direct link between individual dissatisfaction and social suffering (*duḥkha*) in the notion of no-self and the ensuing sense of lack (Loy, 2008, pp.15-23): When we realise that our sense of self is an ungroundable construct (Loy, 2003, p.27), egoistic goals such as money, fame and power usually fill the gap; these egoistic pursuits cause social suffering (Loy, 2000, pp.1-29; and 2003, pp.1-51).

Connected with 'No-self' is the Buddhist notion of Non-duality, which refers to the ultimate, transpersonal experience of reality as it really is, free from any subject-object ('I - you')

dualism (cp. Dunne, 2011, pp.73-75). In Mahāyāna Buddhism, in particular within Yogācāra philosophy, non-duality as a philosophical concept has developed further to refer to the ultimate sameness or identity of the triangular split into ‘subject-interaction-object’ or ‘perceiver-perception-perceived’. In East Asia, non-duality became a productive philosophical and meditational concept, in particular in the tradition of the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra, which was translated into Chinese for the first time in 406CE: one of its chapters is solely dedicated to ‘Entering the Dharma Gate of Nonduality’ (Ch. 9, Watson, 1999, pp.104-111). It can be argued that non-duality is implicit to No Self: where the artificial boundaries of identity-producing clinging (Self, Ego) have fallen away, then transpersonal, non-dual experience arises. (Yet, some Theravāda thinkers vehemently deny the compatibility of - Mahāyāna non-duality with Theravāda orthodoxy, see e.g. Bodhi, 1998).

Non-duality and no-self feature strongly already in the 20th century beginnings of Buddhist Socialism. In 1929, Taiwan’s ‘revolutionary’ monk Lin Qiuwu (Jones, 2000) critiqued capitalist greed as occurring because individuals and organisations have no insight on non-duality: they do not see that all things are interpenetrated and interdependent. The constructed artificial separate self builds from this ignorance in desiring personal possessions, developing hatred of the other, and distinguishing between people, giving rise to the class struggle (Lin, 1929). However, living in the awareness of ontological interconnections with others develops awareness that you are the other (Brien, 2002). With this awareness, the other’s suffering becomes one’s own. This leads to compassion, a wish to alleviate suffering, and a view that freedom only comes when the other is also free (ibid).

Overcoming false notions of self and duality has developed into a central notion in the social thinking of contemporary Buddhist modernisms. As mentioned above, for the most famous proponent of Socially Engaged Buddhism Thich Nhat Hanh (1991, p.91), engagement extends to mindfulness itself; yet, in many ways, Hanh’s approach to mindfulness appears to facilitate the secular present-centric appropriations of mindfulness that are criticised by Purser and Milillo (2015). However, Hanh’s understanding of mindful present-centeredness is not ethically vacuous. Rather, Hanh propagates mind cultivation deeply rooted in Buddhist virtue ethics.

With regard to organisational ethics, while supporting the idea that individual mindfulness supports an (in)corporate(d) mindfulness that cultivates interpersonal empathy (Hanh 2013), Hanh does not really address how mindfulness is organised. Rather, he follows core teachings of

Buddhist philosophy by asserting the interrelationship between awareness, human interconnectedness and relations - epistemology, inter-ontology and performativity (as discourse that effects action). To this end, Hanh (1998) introduces the term 'interbeing' and makes it central to his teaching. Hanh (1988) advocates meditating on and thus becoming the other person, which leads to selflessness and compassion. Eroding the edges of the fragile separate 'self' diminishes selfishness. Non-discrimination between self and other leads to understanding and compassion. One suffers the other's sufferings and so seeks to relieve them. With compassion, we can look at all of living reality at once and see ourselves in every being. Embodying the suffering of others leads to our realisation of their suffering and impels us to extinguish it.

The lack of independent self leads in contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhism to the privileging of the 'Bodhisattva'-ideal of embodied altruism: the quest for private enlightenment gives way to the notion of helping others (Shen-yen, in Brazier 2002). Engaged Buddhist compassion eschews person-centred judgments, which can flow from less sophisticated and popular Buddhist interpretations of karma (cause and effect); instead, clinging to false notions of a self and identifying with affective emotions is addressed on a macro-level with regard to societal patterns of exploitation and structural greed; in this way, striving for the cessation of suffering (nirvāṇa) can refocus on working for the nirvana of society (Dalai Lama, in Brazier, 2002, p.97). As Kenneth Kraft (2000) emphasises, socio-economic structures and mechanisms just as well as individuals are subject to the Buddhist three 'defilements' (kleśa) or poisons: ignorance, greed and hatred/anger.

As class conflict and exploitation of the poor cause human suffering, liberation is built upon 'interbeing' (Hanh, 1998): trans-egoic, inter-personal being and care; and founded on a level socio-economic justice (Ambedkar, 1984), which covers the material needs for spiritual micro- and macro-transformations. While dualism gives rise to grasping, greed, and class distinctions, modernist 'Marxist' Buddhism aims for social justice and societal transformation; in order to resolve the class struggle, the liberation of the deprived and propertyless classes is propagated, using methods that exclude violence (Lin, 1929).

On the other hand, Capitalism as "the dominance of private owners of capital" (OED, 2017) emphasises individualism and is therefore incommensurate with the non-self of Buddhism. This is a further reason why contemporary Buddhist reform thinkers such as Buddhadāsa see the notion of interdependency as more aligned with Socialism (Buddhadāsa, 1986). Buddhadāsa

rejects equating Buddhism with communism, citing the incompatibility of materialist dogmatism with the Buddhist ‘no-self’ and ‘not-mine’ teachings (Jackson, 2003, p.237). Yet, for him, “communism is still good. It has benefit for the world if it helps us build up peace for the world” (quoted *ibid.*). Instead of either state communism or liberal democracy, Buddhādāsa proposes a dictatorial style of *dhammic* socialism, which emphasises cooperation above competition. He justifies his scepticism and critique of liberal democracy and capitalism by reasoning that the Buddha himself had the principle or ideal of socialism but his method of working was dictatorial (quoted in Jackson, 2003, p.240). In this reading, Buddhism opposes capitalism, with its notions of property, ownership and possessions as ends in themselves, because those material ends are non-conducive to freedom and liberation but instead reinforce and perpetuate the ignorance that Buddhism tries to eliminate (Puligandla & Puhakka, 1970). However, leading Engaged Buddhist Social theorist David Loy warns that both socialism and capitalism offer us naturalistic salvation in the future, when we (or at least some of us) will become happy because our desires are satisfied (Loy, 2003, p.28). In contrast, Buddhism does not aim at desire satisfaction but at desire *transformation* (*ibid.*). However, following the Buddha’s teaching on the middle path between luxury and self-mortification, it could be argued that a degree of physical, economic and social security and wellbeing is indeed important for spiritual transformation. Buddhist socialism or forms of strategic Buddhist-communist alliances can contribute to advancing the conditions, which enable individuals (and societies) to develop and transform far beyond material satisfaction and hedonist egotism.

### **Anti-Capitalism and Buddhism**

Loy’s *caveat* regarding both capitalism and socialism notwithstanding, in the modern world Buddhist traditions are at the crossroads, facing mainly the temptation to align themselves with late-capitalism and global consumerism. The spiritual roots of capitalism, as Max Weber famously argued, lie in Protestant ethics (see Loy, 1999, p.98-103 and Loy, 2002, pp.173-182). Now, “Western capitalism is looking for inspiration in eastern mysticism”, including Buddhism, a relatively recent Schumpeter opinion column in *The Economist* observes:



*“...it sometimes seems as if it is the Buddhist ethic that is keeping capitalism going. The Protestants stressed rational calculation and self-restraint. The Buddhists stress the importance of mindfulness – taking time out from the hurly-burly of daily activities to relax and meditate”* (Wooldridge, 2013).

Mindfulness is becoming part of the self-help movement and part of the disease that it ought to cure. It is seen as a source of competitive advantage, a means to progress in life, thus losing its rationale. Buddhism generally becomes the cure for the stress induced by capitalism, functioning as its ideological supplement, dealing out an ‘opium of the people’; for the (post)Marxist cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, the ‘Western Buddhist’ meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity (Žižek, 2001 see Mollgaard, 2008; Peoples, 2012).

Žižek (2011) also observes that the Chinese government tolerates, supports and regulates religious practices in the interest of social harmony and stability; to curb the social disintegration caused by capitalism, China now celebrates Buddhism, which was formerly eroded by the Cultural Revolution. In parallel with this, some Buddhist leaders have recognised their close (albeit not full) alignment with Marxism/communism, both in theory and in practice. For example, Thich Nhat Hanh reflects how

*“...in Plum Village we live simply. Monks, nuns, and laypersons - we live together like a family. No one has a private car. No one has a private bank account. No one has a private telephone. Actually, we are the true communists”* (Hanh, 2007, p.175).

Similarly, the Dalai Lama (1996, p.38) declares

*“I still think of myself as half-Marxist, half Buddhist’, arguing that Marxism is founded on morality (the equal distribution of wealth and the equitable utilisation of the means of production) while Capitalism is concerned with profitability. Subsequently, he declares that ‘Marxism talked about an equal and just distribution of wealth. I was very much in favor of this”* (Dalai Lama, 1999).

In fact, this position rests on earliest Buddhist practices. It has even been claimed that the Buddha's Sangha was the world's first communist social grouping (Gunasekara, undated) and that early monastic rules are far more rigorous than were to be found in communism in Russia (Ambedkar, in Rodrigues, 2002, p.179).

Marx critiqued religion as an artifice, a delusion and a diversionary consolation. This critique does not undercut Buddhism, which does not neatly fit the Western, colonially universalised concept of 'religion' and is subsequently construed as 'philosophy' or merely a 'method' in contemporary Buddhist modernisms. Actually, Marx's critique corresponds to the Buddha's critique of false views. The description of religion as an opiate cannot apply to the dharma/dhamma, under the premise that the Buddhist teachings simply analyse reality. Furthermore, Gunasekara (undated) claims that both Marxism's critique of religion and its atheism are commensurate with Buddhism.

There are several contact points between Buddhism and Marxism. Engaged Buddhism highlights how the Buddha's teachings translate into social transformation, as well as the transformation of consciousness. Equally, Marxism begins with the problems of human suffering. Shields (2013, p.476) asserts that Marx was primarily concerned with alienation and dehumanisation as the fundamental problems of human existence, pointing out that both traditions ultimately seek a resolution of existential determination in response to alienation (Shields, 2013, p.462). While human life is characterised by alienation, communism "puts humans in such conditions and in such relations with one another that they would not wish or have need for wrong-doing or evil" (McLean and McMillan, 2009). Thus enabling people to live the moral life that Buddhism recommends.

Both philosophies rest on the question of how we reconcile with ourselves and each other; recognise the depth of human suffering and offer liberation; critically analyse existence and seek radical change; seek to transform consciousness, ending alienation and selfish individualism; recognise that thought is not enough to end alienation and suffering - practice is also necessary; and emphasise causality - it is necessary to eliminate the causes of suffering (Shields, 2013). Other authors concur with the above points. For example, Slott (2011) argues that both philosophies privilege change, share a humanistic goal of alleviating suffering and reject otherworldly absolutes and dualisms.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1998, p.40) noted that the Buddha prescribed Six Concords, six principles of community life, one of which is sharing material resources. Generally, the Buddhist notions of interdependency and no-self lead to renunciation of personal possessions with entry into the Buddhist monastic orders; in modernist terms, this can be radicalised to mean 'no possessions': proprietorship presupposes someone who possesses but since there is no self that can possess, there cannot be any possession (Puligandla and Puhakka, 1970). Thus, Buddhist traditions clearly oppose capitalism's privileging of property accumulation, which it sees as ignorance: collecting things and attaching the self to them loses freedom.

Buddhist thought becomes a hermeneutical tool in the call for social change: for example, revolutionary Buddhism in Taiwan calls people to cherish the propertyless and deprived classes (Li, 1991). Thus, it is necessary to require from everyone according to their ability and to each according to their need, without selfishness, everyone producing in common (Li, 1991).

Modernist movements in South-East Asia have flirted with socialism. Thai elder statesman Pridi Banomyong (regent 1944-45, prime minister 1946) favoured Buddhist socialism. Furthermore, the father of post-colonial Myanmar, U Nu (1907-1995), propagated Buddhist state socialism as well as the mindfulness of Mahāsī Sayadaw's mass meditation movement, which proved instrumental for the globalisation of Buddhist mindfulness (Braun, 2013). The aforementioned prominent Thai reformer Buddhadasa (1986) advocates dhammic 'social-ism' (opposing both capitalism and communism), a natural state wherein everything exists within a single system; his vision relied on voluntary personal frugality, coupled with generosity to others, whereas socialism classically involves work and state redistribution of wealth. Another leading Thai Buddhist thinker, Sulak Sivaraksa, stresses that social transformation develops ethical responsibility. While social forces such as consumerism emphasise craving and dissatisfaction, hindering our development, being religious involves working for social change: religion is at the heart of social change, and social change is the essence of religion (Sivaraksa, 1992, p.61).

Communist-utopian societies seek to develop full human potential, allocate resources for the benefit of all, and guarantee income, health services and education, thereby diminishing insecurity (Slott, 2011). However, life still causes suffering. At this point, Marxism reaches its limit. Equally, Buddhism reaches its limit in terms of explaining systemic causes of economic inequality. So perhaps they can learn from each other.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (1996) complains that the flaw of Marxist regimes is their emphasis on class struggle. He argues that we overemphasise political action, which privileges the external. Social change requires inner change – becoming less selfish (Dalai Lama, 1996). It is imperative to recognise that individual transformation is a prerequisite of social transformation – and equally important to understand that social structures shape and constitute the individual. Buddhism’s prescription for happiness can be criticised as lacking an understanding of the social conditions that cause suffering, while Marxism overlooks the existential facts of suffering (Slott, 2011).

A synthesis of Marxism and Buddhism - or, indeed, a third way such as Buddhādāsa’s ‘social-ism’ - is needed to address both the external and the internal causes of suffering (Brien, 2002). In his book ‘Zen Marxism’, Shackley (2001) states that Zen and Marxism are both ways to emancipation, each addressing a different obstacle to it. Buddhism teaches that suffering is caused by attachment, which can be resolved by morality and meditation. Marxism teaches that social ills are caused by economic exploitation, which can be resolved by socialist revolution. Thus liberation is both psychological and economic, both inner and outer, so that mindfulness and the building of the revolutionary party are both recommended and should be practised simultaneously.

### **Virtue Economics, EcoBuddhism and Communalism**

In the Buddhist modernist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, Buddhist thought met with the two poles of modernism, Rationalism and (European) romanticism / (American) transcendentalism (McMahan, 2008; 2012). In particular, the latter pole influenced Buddhist anti-capitalism and anti-consumerism and gave rise to Buddhist practices and critical-constructive thought - Buddhist ‘theology’ (Jackson and Makransky, 2000) or ‘dharmology’ (Corless, 2000) - of sustainability and socio-economic justice. Although consumerism’s growth coincided with that of capitalism, they are nonconflatable terms. Capitalism’s profit motives, markets, mass production and low prices drove consumer culture (differencebetween.net, 2017).

One example of Engaged Buddhist virtue economics is the Thai ‘*sacca* savings’ (สั่งจะสะสมทรัพย์ *satcha sasom sap*) co-operative, a group providing micro-lending based on Buddhist principles of merit and morality. The ‘*Sacca* savings’ group was founded in 1992 by Phra Subin Paneeto in the southern Trat province and now operates across the whole of Thailand, spreading

also to Myanmar and Laos. *Sacca* (Pāli ‘truth’ = Thai สัจจะ *satcha*) points to the core Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths and establishes the co-operative run scheme firmly in Buddhist ethics: in order to qualify for a micro-loan, credit history and securities are not decisive, but strong community ties and commitment to a Buddhist lifestyle (such as abstinence from alcohol). As grassroots community welfare initiative, ‘*Sacca savings*’ exemplifies counter-capitalist Buddhist micro-economics (Petchmark et al., 2011, pp.103-108).

Another prominent form of Buddhist sustainability engagement concerns ecology. Since the 1990s, ecology and eco-sustainability have become increasingly relevant in contemporary Buddhist ethics, in the form of socially engaged Buddhist ecological theory as EcoBuddhism ([www.ecobuddhism.org/](http://www.ecobuddhism.org/), see also Harris, 1995) and ‘Green Dharma’ (Ives, 2009). Economic and ecological sustainability often go hand in hand as the example of cultural forest management supported by the ‘*Sacca savings*’ cooperative in Trat shows (Duangnapa et al., 2009). (Eco)Sustainability and economic self-sufficiency is a prominent concern of some contemporary Buddhist reform movements such as the Asoke community (Essen, 2010), which feature as a case study further below. The importance of the topic is well-articulated by Ericson et al. (2014), who argue the link between sustainability and one key component of Buddhism, mindfulness:

*“Ecosystems are under pressure due to high levels of material consumption. Subjective well-being sought through other means than material rewards could make an important contribution to sustainability. A wealth of research indicates that mindfulness contributes to subjective well-being by focusing the mind on the here and now, giving rise to stronger empathy and compassion, facilitating clarification of goals and values, and enabling people to avoid the hedonic treadmill. There is also a body of research that shows how subjective well-being, empathy, compassion, and non-materialistic/intrinsic values are associated with more sustainable behaviour ... we suggest that promoting mindfulness practice in ... workplaces and elsewhere could be construed as a policy that pays a double dividend in that it could contribute both to more sustainable ways of life and to greater well-being”* (Ericson et al., 2014, p.73).

Prominently, the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh utilises eco-mindfulness (Hanh, 2008) and in Thai Buddhist modernism, examples of EcoBuddhist engagement include the protection of

the forests through ‘tree ordinations’ by ecology monks (forest conservation monks: พระสงฆ์อนุรักษ์ป่า phrasong anurakpa). EcoBuddhism and Buddhist traditions of sustainability and self-sufficiency are closely linked to anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist streams of modernist Asian Buddhist thought discussed above.

Buddhadāsa’s (1986) Dhammic Social-ism rests on what he perceives as the balance and harmony of nature, which itself has implications for environmental care (not just social care). He argues that if we used natural “resources according to what Nature desired or allowed, we would not need to use as much as we do now” and so “[t]here would be plenty for everyone ... indefinitely.” “[H]owever, we are squandering the earth’s minerals” unsustainably, “contrary to the Dhamma”. If we used them properly, according to nature, “there would be plenty” (Buddhadāsa in Puntarigvivat, 2003, p. 200).

Thus far, we have elaborated Buddhist critiques of capitalism and consumerism - and challenged the capitalist appropriations of Buddhist techniques. We have shown how Buddhist modernism and Marxism/socialism can align, and how Engaged Buddhism spawns communalism and socially revolutionary impulses for sustainability and ecological responsibility within the framework of Buddhist thought and mindfulness traditions. Our following case study of the Thai Asoke community exemplifies Buddhist communal mindfulness-in-action, explores successes and idiosyncrasies, and shows how communal principles can operate in such work-based communities.

### **Exemplifying Mindfulness-in-Action: Asoke as Anti-Capitalism**

In the following case study, we investigate mindfulness-in-action within Modernist Buddhism(s) at the example of the Thai Asoke movement. Which patterns and mechanisms of engaged mindfulness emerge? How is communalism, anti-consumerism and anti-capitalism framed within Buddhist value systems? How does the complexity of a charismatic Buddhist movement in a specific socio-political context affect its practice of engaged mindfulness? We address these questions based on 1) textual analysis of primary and secondary sources; and 2) data collected by Scherer through participant-observation at Asoke centres and retreats; and problem-focused guideline-based interviews with Asoke officials and power brokers. As conceptual integrated

case study rather than strictly sociological ethnography and in line with anthropology of religions methodologies we present integrated findings and analyses.

In the Asoke community critiques of consumerism go hand in hand with an emphasis on sustainability and self-reliance akin to EcoBuddhist engagement. With its overtly patriotic and royalist leanings, Asoke is certainly not self-defining as communist. Nevertheless, Samaña Pothirak (Bodhirakṣa, born 1934) founded the radical Buddhist movement as a community, based on principles of selflessness, simplicity, self-sacrifice, self-sufficiency, and hard work - in opposition to the values of materialism and consumerism. Asoke's lay members are mostly drawn from the relatively well-off upper middle classes of urban Thailand, but preferably don the simple dark blue garments of Isaan (Northeast Thai) farmers. It can be argued that this expresses a middle class vision of (almost Rousseauesque) utopian simplicity. As Rory Mackenzie puts it

*“While the traditional farmers’ image of caring for and living off the land capture much of Asoke’s anti-consumer, anti-Western, value system there is also a focus on the transformation of society’s values. [...] Asokans believe that they can gradually transform Thai society until its practice is based on the Dhamma”* (Mackenzie, 2007, p.165)

Asoke is best understood in Weberian terms as a religious movement which is paradoxically both *virtuoso* (see Sharot, 2001, p.11) and charismatic; Asoke can be seen as a ‘fundamentalistic’ (Swearer, 1991) or ‘ascetic yet prophetic’ (Mackenzie, 2007, p.165) reaction to modernity or as a form of Radical Buddhism with ascetic tendencies. With his own virtuoso claims rejected by the institutional Thai Buddhist elite, Samaña Pothirak has prominently and successfully positioned himself as counter-hegemonic charismatic figure; his monastic dissent and the Buddhist radicalism at the heart of his movement continue to be sources of embarrassment for Thai Buddhist establishment (Keyes, 1999, pp.129-133). Asoke rejects mainstream and hybrid Thai (state) Buddhist practices such as merit-making, the transfer of merit for the deceased and the cult of the amulets as spiritual consumerism and emphasises the Noble Eightfold Path, placing little value on formal meditation practice: for Asokans “mindfulness arises from focus on daily tasks rather than concentration on a meditative object.” (Mackenzie, 2007, p.191). Although in many ways the Asoke movement provides counter-ideology to state Buddhism (Kaewthep, 2008,

pp.64-67), which it decries as either ‘occult’, ‘capitalistic’ or ‘hermetic’ (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997, p.112-113), its radical orthodox stance is politically mitigated by its vocal royalist-patriotic (yellow shirt) allegiance and political support. Pothirak points out the link between political involvement and Buddhist practice: Asokans’ engagement calms down societal conflict and aids societal mindfulness (*sati*, สติ) (Scherer, 2012). The Asoke movement is hence both engaged and political, advocating communal living; vegan (มังสวิรัตติ mangsawirat) organic diet and agricultural self-reliance. Members live communally, produce food, and run grocery and herbal remedy stores with the aim of helping consumers rather than making profits (Ekachai, 2001). Followers aim to eat only one meal per day (only vegan food), renounce the use of money, do not request donations, and commit to non-exploitation and self-sacrifice in service to others. While detachment from luxuries and material and sensorial gratifications features prominently in the Buddhist traditions, Asoke has drawn criticism for these apparently austere demands for a ‘truly Buddhist’ lifestyle. Asked about the seeming contradictions between Asoke’s asceticism and the Buddha’s central teaching of a middle path (between luxuries and self-mortification), samana Pothirak points to the fact that the Buddhist mean is not an absolute but biographically and fluidly dependent on the perspective and starting point of the practitioner: a follower wont to luxuries will experience the middle at a different point than a follower used to more spartan living. Through self-cultivation, the Buddhist mean will shift more and more to sensorial detachment and hence will appear to outsiders more and more ascetic (Scherer, 2012).

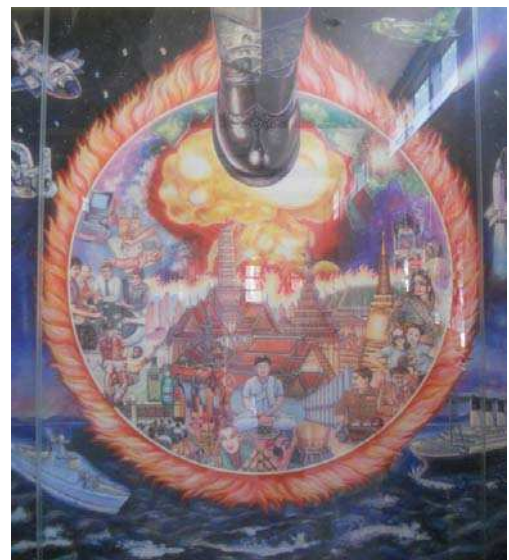
The Asoke movement offers an alternative anti-consumerist community, attracting those disillusioned with materialism by offering them a close-knit community and a simple, modest lifestyle without luxuries ([bunniyom.com](http://bunniyom.com)). There is a strong value of sustainability too, as Asoke village communities rely on organic agriculture and the produce sold in cooperative shops; they invest the income in dental clinics and free schools, and in order to send members to quality hospitals.

A contemporary, large diptych painting at the Sisa Asok centre (Isaan) illustrates Pothirak’s counter-ideology to globalised consumerism and capitalism. On the panel of vices, we see the world globe burning, while its Thai centre is ablaze with (nuclear?) explosion, literally stamped under the boot of capitalism and war. The internet, alcohol, drugs, gambling, competitive sports, westernised education overshadowed by global brands, social drinking, and hedonistic socialising are depicted in the left half of the apocalyptic scene. The right half depicts



wrong religion and superstition, global pop culture, and prostitution, while the generals are playing war. In the lower middle, a religious leader's 'meditation' is depicted, aiming for worldly goods such as beautiful women, gold and other riches, and power. In contrast, the messianic companion panel depicts the Asoke utopia with Pothirak residing in a Bodhi-leaf at the heart of a golden Buddha, surrounded by idyllic scenes of the Asoke merit society living a self-sufficient ascetic community life-style (Scherer, 2012).

**Illustrations 1&2 - Asoke worldview diptych at Sisa Asok (2012)**



Still, Pothirak's messianic, peaceful utopia appears to conflict with the highly charged, nationalist-patriotic politics of Asokans. Sisa Asok also features a three dimensional model of the contested Wat Preah Vihear (Pra Vihan) on the Thai-Cambodian border – the dispute over ownership of this Ancient Khmer temple led to renewed military conflict between the two countries in 2011. During the campaigns, Sisa Asokans supported the Thai soldiers en-route with food and cheers (Scherer, 2012). Among the yellow-shirt anti-Thaksin protesters during the 2005-2006 crisis and later, the presence of the Asokan 'Dharma army' (kongthap tham, กองทัพธรรม) was widely publicised (Heikkilä-Horn, 2010). Moreover, in his sermons, Pothirak frequently uses martial imagery. However, Asokans stress that their political activities are in service of virtue only and that their virtuous presence calms down heated elements and maintain, where possible, the peacefulness of the protests (Scherer, 2012). Still, the idiosyncrasies of

Buddhist *virtuoso* radicalism, utopian-charismatic millennialism and patriotist, militant politics make an intriguing puzzle and provide slightly contradictory readings of the movement's communal mindfulness-in-action.

On a doctrinal-ideological level, in its core mission and aims, Asoke asserts meritism (bun niyom บุญนิยม) as a way of training and applying the three aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path: wisdom (Pali: paññā); ethics; (sīla) and meditation (samādhi) in daily life and socio-economic activities. Under the motto 'Consume Little, Work Hard, and Give the Rest to Society' is an alternative to consumerism (boriphok niyom บริโภคนิยม) and capitalism (thun niyom ทุนนิยม), which it criticises for having wrong criteria to measure success: pleasure, position, wealth and fame. Pothirak (2012) explains 'meritism' in direct juxtaposition to consumerism:

*"The individual Asoke has to practice the Bunniyom type of trading until he/she realizes personally that there is no need to compete, no need to accumulate, no need to advertise, that 'giving is a human virtue; giving leads to happiness and competition does not.'"* (Bodhiraksa, 2012) (Bong and Sanghsehanat, 2012).

Meritism aims for spiritual accumulation, not material accumulation. Whereas capitalists want more clothes and money, Asokans are called to be satisfied with small houses, little money, simplicity and modesty. Asoke is anti-consumerist in the sense that consumption is only for well-being, so well-being should be maximised and consumption minimised. Asoke villages are often mostly self-sufficient, while collectively owning expensive items and pooling money through foundations for new investments.

Asoke's self-sufficiency economy relies on organic agriculture, with several organic fertiliser plants and recycling facilities and more than 160 hectares of organic farmland (Setboonsarng, 2007, p.14). Spiritual merit accumulation, not material accumulation, are in the centre of Asoke's socio-economic and ecological stances. Pothirak in his sermons frequently uses the martial image of (five or seven) Dhamma Weapons, among which he prominently lists Veganism and Organic agriculture (the others being: Meritist enterprise; Health provision; Education; Media; Politics); he sees Asoke as the model for both Thailand and Buddhism (Scherer, 2012).

As Bong and Sanghsehanat (2012) have shown, for Pothirak, communal ecological engagement is part of a wider effort to apply the bun niyom concept for social change. Asoke Engagement focusses on ‘right living’ (sammā-ājiva, the fifth element of the Noble Eightfold Path) by multimedia promotion of the Buddhist teachings (dhamma), popularising vegan diet, adopting organic agriculture, recycling (dry waste management) with the participation from the public, and offering an alternative education system, in which work stations function as classrooms or learning bases. It engages in ethical and spiritually inspiring commercial practices through the Asoke Goodwill Markets, as an alternative model to the stressful profit-oriented business operations seen elsewhere, empowering local communities and insulating them from external crises (Bong and Sanghsehanat, 2012). The Asoke Goodwill Markets are the most outward facing expression of Merit Practices: non-profit oriented, they exemplify meritism as the sharing of goods, services, time and labour. They are usually connected to Vegan eateries where bun niyom meals are free or priced below or at cost; similar Asoke Goodwill Markets are spread around Thailand - six in 2014, the largest being at Santi Asoke, Bangkok; these markets sell recycled and other, mainly organic products labelled with both the cost and the selling price. The aim is to earn ‘merit’ not ‘money’, so selling a product for free or below cost price is seen as meritorious.

A Goodwill Market volunteer summarises the foundation of Asoke economic and ecological enterprises:

*“We practice giving rather than being greedy; .... It is not easy to overcome this mind that habitually tends towards developing more greed, so we have to be watchful of our mind all the time. Ven. Bodhiraksa advised, ‘when the customers were in trouble in times of economic crisis, we should have compassion for them, give and help them more than at other times. ..’. If we had the ability to give, we should give. Don’t get trapped in a mind of cost or profit-making too much”* (Bong and Sanghsehanat, 2012).

Through Goodwill Markets, recycling, and the distribution of organic products and fertilisers, the Asoke Community actively engages the urban population in particular in Bangkok (Santi Asoke) to see and/or participate in an economic and ecological life style that is propagated as spiritually beneficial to oneself, others and the environment. The entrance arch at the Santi Asoke Buddhist

centre (พุทธสถาน สันติ อโศก putthothan santi asok) in Bangkok programmatically displays the mottoes of '(autonomous) liberty' (อิสระเสรีภาพ itsaseriphap), 'harmony/brotherhood' (ภราดรภาพ pharadaraphap), 'peace' (สันติภาพ santiphap), 'integrity' (บูรณภาพ buranaphap), and 'efficiency/capability' (สมรรถภาพ samatthaphap).



**Illustration 3 - พุทธสถาน สันติ อโศก Santi Asoke Buddhist Centre, entrance arch**

According to Heikkilä-Horn (1997), the key Asoke values include nature and the natural, compassion and kindness, whilst the values that they oppose are luxury, wastefulness, and laziness. Metta should be shown to all that lives through veg(etari)anism. The Asoke group embrace natural agriculture, natural food, clothes, eating utensils and building materials. They practice modesty through simplicity in eating, clothing and housing, opposing luxury, which they perceive to be superfluous, wasteful, and against the Buddha's teaching on necessities (medicine, food, clothing, and housing). Devotion is to society, work and the Asoke group. For Asoke members, work is meditation. Every moment should be meditation through concentration, consciousness and awareness of the world (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997). This is an example of what Buddhist-communist mindfulness can look like.

## Conclusions

This paper argues that Buddhist critiques of capitalism and consumerism challenge capitalist appropriations of Buddhist techniques. We show how Buddhist modernism(s) and Marxism/socialism can align, and how Socially Engaged Buddhism spawns communalism and socially revolutionary impulses within the framework of Buddhist thought and mindfulness traditions. The Asoke Community exemplifies Buddhist communal mindfulness-in-action within Thai modernist contexts; it is demonstrated that for Asoke traditional Buddhist practices of merit-making and formal meditation are deemphasised and that the community interprets mindful communal work and social engagement as its core practice; such communal work is modelled on self-sufficiency and meritism as an alternative to consumerism; for Asoke, mindful living as a form of the Buddhist value of ‘right livelihood’ includes strict moderation, veganism, organic agriculture, and recycling, yet also extends into the proliferation of Buddhism through media and to politics. This contrasts to secularised capitalist appropriations of mindfulness in the service of boosting effectivity and revenue as critiqued by Purser and Milillo (2015). With all its idiosyncrasies between utopian radicalism and patriotic millennialism, Asoke demonstrates how communal principles can operate in such idealistic work-based communities. In particular, Asoke’s meritist economic model of corporate mindfulness and its counter-consumerist virtuoso radicalism promises to become fruitful for future research into capitalism-resistant corporate mindfulness. On the macro-societal level, learning from Asoke’s incongruities, the dissociation not only from consumerist late-capitalism but also from charismatic politics and interpellation with the nation-state ideologies could prove an important ingredient to mindful social change on a corporate level. Future research should therefore enquire if and how the lessons from Asoke’s stance and alternative approach to socio-economic engagement transfer to other organisations.

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