

Chapter 7

Social Impact of the Buddhadasa Movement: A Case Study

Buddhadasa movement has won increasing attention through the last half century and remains relevant today. Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhism has inspired individuals and groups in various social sectors to rediscover the meaning of Buddhism and to search for appropriate means to apply it in their daily lives and activities. Challenges arose after finding the underlying essence in their own culture. Many development organizations and foundations, according to Seri Phongphit, which have arisen since then owe much of their inspiration to Buddhadasa's teachings, for instance Khana-Kammakarn Sasana Pua Karn-Patana (the Thai Inter-religious Commission for Development), Mulaniti Patana Chonnabot (the Thai Rural Reconstruction Foundation), Mulaniti Dek (the Children Foundation). The search for the application of Buddhist teaching to modern life has been actively engaged in by both monks and laity in rural and urban areas. More and more monks devoted themselves to rural development work in the North, the Northeast, the South, and the Central regions. Some are head of provinces, districts, and abbots. They became leaders in their communities as well as inspirers of a new force with a wider circle of influence. Besides monks, laity in different professions including university professors and lecturers, judges, doctors, businessmen, teachers, are also playing a vital role in reformulating Buddhist teachings for various segments of lay society. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the social impact of the Buddhadasa movement at the community level.

This case study on community involvement and the Buddhadasa movement is based on field research undertaken at Wang Nam Yad village, Mae Soy sub-district, Chomtong district, Chiang Mai between 1987-1988. This study examines the role of a Buddhist monk, Phra Pongsak Techadhammo, the abbot of Wat Pha-laad, Chiang Mai, who is a follower of Buddhadasa well acquainted with Buddhadasa's ideas. He has been devoting his time to a development project at Wang Nam Yad, an area fraught with problems typical of the rural north: massive deforestation and poverty.

During the period of fieldwork (1987-1988) the author lived in Wang Nam Yad for three months (January-March 1988) and later frequently visited the village in order to join some of the villagers' activities. The small-scale study involved individual and group

interviews, observation, and participation in village events, and efforts to assess the role of Phra Pongsak in rural development and forest preservation both in the village and sub-district. I had no fixed set of questions but attempted in each case to direct inquiry to topics on which the informant had particular knowledge. Occasionally I conducted group interviews with the villagers, and this method proved very useful in stimulating discussion on a number of important issues -in the heat of argument, it would probably not have emerged in an individual interview. Most of the interviews were conducted in villages with a northern dialect which I am able to speak and understand. Because many important village meetings occurred before my field research was conducted, I also borrowed tapes recorded and video films which recorded meetings with Phra Pongsak. I did not, however, rely solely on the tapes and video films to gather information about these previous meetings. Interviews were also conducted with the persons and groups recorded on the tapes and video films to confirm our impressions and assessment of these meetings. To provide a better understanding of the background of the situation I will give a brief description.

Introduction

The name of Mae Soy is now always connected with the name of a 58 year-old forest monk, Phra Pongsak Techadhammo (Ajarn Pongsak) who has spent 35 years living in the forest and walking on pilgrimages (tudong) all over the north forest of Thailand. He believed that forests, water resources, the survival of farming villages, and morality are inextricately linked. The drastic deforestation at Mae Soy led to the shortage of water in streams which caused hardship for the farmers, who could no longer earn their living, and thus resorted to thievery. He began to work with the villagers to save the remaining forest and repair the damage already done by deforestation. He has not only preached to the people but has also initiated conservation projects. He faced many problems from the beginning. It was very difficult to motivate the villagers because most of them, despite hard labour, remained near or below subsistence level.

But when the villagers began to realize the importance of the forest to their lives, what followed was the growth of one of the strongest forest preservation movements in the

North. Together with the moral backing from the monk, a great many villagers discovered the will to fight against anyone who tried to exploit their forest. His efforts in rounding up villagers to protect the forest against illegal loggers have pitted him against those with vested interests including the local government officials. Intimidation is the least of his worries, since death threats have occurred. But the unassuming monk continued his programmes despite many risks. He said that: ¹

I am not afraid to work like this because -well, if you have opened your heart to the suffering of the villagers, you would do just the same. I have seen the problem with such clarity that I have no choice but to follow the course that I am taking.

Ajarn Pongsak is now at the centre of controversy, particularly among certain government officials for his announcement that "a single forest protection law can not be used to stop the massive destruction of the forest". He feels that although the law punishes, it does not teach people to love the forest as they love their lives. He has become well known among conservationists both in Thailand and abroad for combining Buddhist teaching, conservation, and rural development to solve the problem of deforestation and poverty at the village level. His work is an example of what many people hope to be a long-term solution to poverty in the rural areas. In 1988, he won the Good People of Society award, given by the Thai Rath and the Village Foundation in recognition of his work at Mae Soy. In 1989, he received the Good Supporter of the Royal Forestry Department award, given by the Agriculture Minister who announced that "Buddhist teachings can solve the environmental crisis". He was also a recipient of the Global 500 Roll of Honour award in 1990, given by the United Nation Environmental Programme (UNEP).

General Background of the Village Community

Wang Nam Yad (means the village of water's source) is a farming village, located on the alluvial plain of the Mae Ping river, some 75 kms. southwest of Chiang Mai. The village is

¹ Interview with Phra Pongsak at Wat Pha-laad, Chiang Mai, 1988.

composed of two hamlets, situated close together. The population, according to the official register kept by the village headman, was found to consist of 135 households with 620 people in 1988. The village is one of six villages which collectively form the sub-district of Mae Soy (tambol) included in Chomtong district, Chiang Mai. The settlement pattern of Wang Nam Yad is clustered, like that of the other five villages of tambol Mae Soy. The villages are separated from one another by distances of one to three kilometres, and are connected by dirt roads. Surrounding the villages are paddy fields. Each village (muban) is an administrative unit headed by a village headman (phuyaiban) responsible to the sub-district headman (kamnan). Both positions are elective and filled by local villagers. Village and sub-district headmen, who are paid by the government, are the intermediaries between district administration (the district head office is nai amphur) and the villagers.

Fifty percent of the village land is dominated by high mountains which are part of the Intanon mountain chain, the highest mountain range in Thailand. They are also the sources of three streams which provide the water supply for villages on the plain both for consumption and cultivation. Wang Nam Yad is one of a group of five villages which receive their water from the Mae Soy. This river has two feeder streams, namely the Mae Pok and Mae Tim which rise in two adjacent watershed valleys. The Mae Soy flows into the Mae Ping river which in its turn feeds the Chao Phraya, the river that dominates Thailand's central plain, one of the world's most fertile rice-growing areas.

Another twenty percent of village land are paddy fields and thirty percent is occupied by scrubland. Most of the paddy fields lie behind the village towards the north, near the foothill where weirs and earth dykes are used to control the flow of water from the three streams. The irrigation canals and sub-canals supply water to the paddy fields. This irrigation system is a small unit within which plants, soil, water and human labor are combined to produce crops. It is a small-scale traditional irrigation system which was primarily built and operated by villagers themselves, separately from the village headman and the local administration. There is a village irrigation headman and a committee which were elected by the villagers who use its water. In Wang Nam Yad alone there are two separate irrigation systems for eastern and western fields which lie along the two sides of the Mae Soy river.

The villagers at Wang Nam Yad, as elsewhere in the north, practice subsistence agriculture. Ninety percent of them (120 households) are farmers and own small paddy fields. Basic agricultural production centers on three crops: rice, legumes and vegetables. Of these, rice production is by far the most important and most rice grown is glutinous rice. The rice yields of the villagers appear to be for household consumption. And about forty households (33 per cent) produce less rice than family needs. Although their paddy fields receive some irrigation water, it is not possible for every location to grow more than one crop of rice a year. Because the amount of water available in the irrigation system is often insufficient to meet the needs. It is important to note that the function of the village irrigation system is affected by a great variation in rainfall from year to year, supplementing rainfall when it is insufficient. The level of the water in the streams is often too low to be used during the planting season when the water is most needed. In practice, most farmers rely on rain for their crops.

Some vegetables, requiring less water, are grown as a second crop for home consumption, but there is also commercial production of garlic, onions, soy beans, peanuts, cabbages, and corn. Garlic and soy beans are the basic cash crops. Some of them grow fruit trees, for instance longan, and mango, but only for family consumption. Agricultural pursuits in the village also include simple animal husbandary, gathering plants, herbs and wild fruits, and charcoal making. The division of labor within the village is of importance for effective implementation. A general division of labor does exist between the sexes, but is not rigid. The men do the heavy work such as plowing the rice fields, cutting of the timber. The women work in the village: cooking, feeding animals, fetching the water from the well. Both men and women work in the fields: sowing of seedling, transplanting, and harvesting. The boys and girls assist in all kinds of work but leave the heavy work to their parents. Exchanging labor traditionally given to assist other households such as in harvesting, house building is still much practised in the village. These co-operative labor exchange allows the villagers to carry out the hardest work quickly, and at the same time, it reflects a cooperative and social ties in the village.

The economic activities of the villagers were mainly directly toward subsistence farming, making use of simple tools. Simultaneously, modern technology has been introduced and pesticides and chemical fertilizers are employed to ensure good production. For the wealthier households (5 households) plow-machines and water pumps are used for cultivating the fields. Small village "rice mill" using machinery exists in the village. The owner of the machine is a villager, who either keeps the husks and sell them for pig fodder or takes cash if the villagers wish to keep the husks.

Farmers do not necessarily go to the market to sell their produce, because there are a number of middlemen who come to the village to purchase local produce from the farmers and resell it in the large market centers. Such traders are outsiders. The village has no market center but there are two general stores selling goods for daily use in small quantities. The owner of these shops are local villagers who are also farmers. During the agricultural season, they work in the fields and the shops are tended by old people. Because Wang Nam Yad is close to Chomtong district (about 5 kms), villagers go there for virtually all goods and services that cannot be obtained in the village.

Although, the most important occupation of the village as a whole is agriculture, not all villagers are engaged in agriculture. The villagers who have no land of their own (15 households) earn their living most frequently by working as agricultural laborers, while some do carpentry work, make charcoal and saw timber. A few leave the village to seek employment outside to work in construction sites at Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Soan. The family ties, however, remained strong, usually they work in one place for 10 to 15 days and then return to the village. Most of the salary earned are given to their families or parents. As farming is not able to absorb the increase in population due to rise in birth rate, consequently several farmers also take other kinds of employment when there is no more work to do in their own farms. Particularly, when rain is inadequate and rice yield low, a number of villagers, especially young men, leave the village in search of employment. But only some of them find jobs.

Most of villagers are interrelated. The most tightly knit groups appear to be those of

kinsmen. There are several families who have lived for generations in Wang Nam Yad, and intermarriage is common, providing a bond which encompasses almost the entire village. Generational and relative-age distinctions are vital in village behavior, and kinship terms express these distinction. The extended family unit is breaking down to some degree as newly married couples have their own houses even within the village borders. There are also some conflicts among the villagers, especially concerning the management of water supplies to their paddy fields. There is no serious problem if the supply of water is abundant, but if it is poor, the farmers close to the source draw all the water they need. Those whose fields are remote are in trouble. Usually they are cooperative enough but sometimes each wants to use the water for himself and conflicts arise.

The village has no health center and school of its own. There is one health center and three elementary schools among the six villages of Mae Soy sub-district. Thus, two villages share the same school. The pupils at Wang Nam Yad have to go to Mae Soy school (about 1 km. from the village). All the people in the sub-district have to share the same health center which was built in Mae Soy village. Of the mass media, radio has the most significant impact at the village level. In 1988, electric lights had been installed in most houses and with in one year television sets made their appearance, but only prosperous villagers could own one (6 households). Very few newspapers were found in the village households. Movie and love story magazines have appeared in the village as the youth have become addicted to these on their visits to town.

Wang Nam Yad is not an isolated village. It is situated on the Chiang Mai-Hod highway, 75 kms. southwest of Chiang Mai. Communication with the village is easy and convenient. The village is strung out as a lineal settlement along the highway and there are small buses every fifteen to thirty minutes from Chiang Mai to Chomtong and Hod which run through the village. Undoubtedly, the modernizing influence of town centers and from Chiang Mai itself on social attitudes and the general level of knowledge of villagers is high.

Religious Beliefs and Village Life

Wang Nam Yad has a small temple (wat). The temple was built in the 1960s and is maintained by the villagers. The wat compound is bounded by a wall. There are a vihara (chanting hall), sala (general hall), and kutis (monks's dwellings). The temple itself has no bot (convocation hall) of its own, and so the villagers must go to Wat Mae Soy, a neighboring village, for important ceremonies such as ordination or to see visiting officials.

As all the villagers are Buddhists, the temple is the spiritual center of a village life. The ties between the temple and villagers make it a central place for all meetings, formal and informal. In 1988, there were an abbot, two monks and fifteen novice residents at the wat, and most of them are from this village. Wat Wang Nam Yad, like all other wat in Thailand, has a committee (khana-kammakarn-wat) composed of the abbot and five lay elders who were appointed by the abbot. All of them are ex-monks. Their duties are to organize Buddhist ceremonies, manage the finances of the temple, and to see that the wat is provided with the necessary equipment. Another important person concerning the wat is called Ajarn wat. His role is to invite (aratana) the monks to give precept, sermon or to chant, and to receive food or other gifts presented by laymen.² Most of Buddhist rituals which monks attend requires the invitations in Pali language.

The abbot of the temple is a young man who completed dhamma studies grade 1 (nak tham ek). His everyday administrative duties include instructing monks and novices, appointing a monk to give a chant or sermon when one is required, to clear the temple compound and keep it clean. Status differences of the abbot, monks, and novices are not obvious. All often join in the temple work. The abbot himself attends to more administrative duties and religious rituals rather than joining social activities in the village. He has frequent contacts with other abbots and his district head.

The daily routine of monks and novices begins with a collection of chants in the morning (tham watr) at about 5 o'clock, after which they go to receive food in the village. After breakfast, they learn chants and dhamma, and attend to personal matters such as

² Tambiah, S.J., *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 133.

cleaning the kuti, washing clothes, filling the water pots. After lunch there is a rest period, they then sweep the temple ground, bath and perform evening chants (tham watr, suad mon) at 6 p.m. They then study dhamma or practice chants before going to bed. It should be noted that as the language of chants is Pali, the monks and novices have to spend most of their time practicing. Learning chants is very necessary for the village monks because every village ritual, whether it is a family ceremony, a village festival or a community activity requires the monks' attendance and their chanting.

During Buddhist Lent (between July to October) the monks and novices have additional religious activities. The abbot teaches dhamma to the monks and novices. A sermon is preached to a village congregation every sabbath day (wan phra) and each monk takes his turn. There is a recitation of the Patimokkha (a set of monastic disciplines) by the full assembly of monks in the bot twice a month on uposatha days (at full moon and new moon).

The major role of monks at Wang Nam Yad is religious. The villagers need monks not only to perform religious ceremonies but to receive their gift and food offerings. This is necessary because it stimulates merit accumulation and consequent well-being. In the eyes of the villagers the monks are a symbol of Buddhism (or the heirs of Buddha); a monks' head is shaven; he wears a yellow robe; he observes the monastic disciplines and moral conducts; his way of life is virtuous. Thus he is more meritorious, said the villagers.

The various elements of Buddhist beliefs and practices among the village people are tied together by the concept of "merit" (bun). Merit-making is the central point of villagers' religious praxis. It involves more ritual than individual religious striving. The important acts of merit include feeding the monks and participation in the various merit-making ceremonies throughout the year.

At Wang Nam Yad, regularly providing food to the monks is the most common religious act in which all villagers engage. They have organized their offering of food to the monks by dividing the village into seven residential neighborhood units, each containing 19 to

20 households. People from different units take turns preparing food. Each section has a leader who is usually a woman. When it is her section's turn, she reminds the women in her section. The monks go to receive offerings of food only to a certain section in the morning. But on sabbath days (wan phra) the monks do not go on alms, as both breakfast and lunch are brought to the temple.

Such daily merit-making is a function of women rather than men. The male family heads and young men go to the temple when the major collective rites are held. Most villagers participate only in the important ceremonial occasions, such as entering Lent (khaw phansa), leaving Lent (org phansa), traditional Thai New Year (songkarn), Visaka Bucha and so on. They make merit by giving food, money, and other valued items to the monks; sermons and chants are recited, and religious blessings are given by the monks; people gain merit. The villagers do not comprehend the meaning of the Pali chants, but the sermons preached in the Northern dialect are often understood by the audience. The sermons on these occasions dwell on the advantage and effect of various kinds of merit-making both in this life and the next life. The aim of the villagers' merit-making is not different from what the monks preach: wealth, health, fortune, prestige, good family, intelligence, beauty both in this present life and the next. Moreover, "transferring merit" to one's dead ancestors is conceived and practiced as an act of gratitude to them.

However, during Lent the village people engage in religious practices which are not typical of everyday life. Many men give up drinking, gambling and refrain from killing anything. Some people are vegetarians. Every sabbath day, a number of people go to the temple in the morning not only to provide food to the monks but to receive the five precepts (such as not to lie, not to steal, not to kill) and some elders practice the eight precepts for a day, both of which imply individual moralistic conduct. Long sermons are delivered by monks in the late afternoon (about 3 o'clock).³ The sermons consist of the stories of the Buddha's life, the episodes of His previous life (phra chao sib chaad), and various folk tales. These stories, particularly the folk tales, center around the relatively simple explanations of merit

3 Out of the Lent, there is no sermon delivered on sabbath day and the villagers do not observe the five or eight precepts.

(bun), sin (baab), kamma, and rebirth.

Philosophical Buddhist doctrines, such as the concept of nibbana or the involved forms of meditation are not introduced. The villagers' understanding of Buddhism is the teaching of kamma (action). They believe that kamma affects their lives. The villagers believe their present existence is the result of accumulated action (kamma), both good and evil, in both former lives and the present one. Similarly actions in this life affect both this existence and the next. Thus his present conduct is directed towards accumulating merit so as to achieve a better life in the present as well as in the future. If sin outbalances merit, a life of poverty and hardship will follow. These beliefs are a part of their everyday life.

It is important to note that Buddhism in the village is, to some extent, permeated with Brahmanical and animistic concepts. There are obviously non-Buddhist elements such as the sprinkling of sacred water in many Buddhist ceremonies performed by monks. Marriage ceremonies in the village have Buddhist, Brahmanical and animistic elements. The villagers continue to believe in the guardian spirit of the family grouping (phi phu yaa); the guardian spirit of the village (suur baan), and the guardian spirit of the temple (suur wat). For example, before marriage the guardian of the family grouping is informed of the planned arrangements. Similarly, a man cannot change his village membership and residence without a ritual statement to suur baan beforehand. No village festival can be held in the wat without first informing suur wat.

Life Experiences of Phra Pongsak Techadhammo

Phra Pongsak Techadhammo was born in 1932 in the village of Tamnop Sub-district, Thatago District, Nakorn Sawan, the northern province of Thailand (about 250 kms to the North of Bangkok). He was the youngest of the two sons of Teim and Sut Suk-aram. His parents were Thais and were farmers as were almost all the villagers. His parents died when he was very young, so he and his brother moved to live with their uncle's family in the same village.

As a boy he was sent to Wat Tamnop school, a temple school of his native village. After finishing Primary school (Grade 4), he worked in the rice paddies of his foster parent's farm. Though his time was spent on the farm he was not only a farmer but also a trader. After the harvest he bought rice from farmers and resold it to rice mills at Nakorn Sawan. Even though he was the youngest trader in the village, farmers, from his own village and those nearby, preferred to sell their rice to him, because, on the subsequent sale of the rice in town, he would then buy salt from the proceeds, to give as gift to those farmers, a rare and very welcome present.

In 1952, at the age twenty, he was ordained at Wat Tamnop, a temple in his village and he stayed there after his ordination. A few months later he went to Nakorn Sawan to study dhamma for Nak Tham 3 (Nak tham tri) at Wat Nakorn Sawan. After passing the exam he went on to Nak Tham 2 (Nak tham tho). While studying the principles of dhamma he found it very strange that there was no meditation practice along with the theoretical study. In 1955, after finishing Nak tham 2 he went to Bangkok in order to join the meditation course which was held at Wat Mahatat for one month. When the course ended he went on tudong (a meditational pilgrimages) through many parts of the northern forests. He spent two years (1955-1956) practicing meditation in the forests of Chiang Mai. He felt his practice was not advanced enough, but could see no further way forward.

In 1957 he returned to Wat Mahatat in order to check the method of meditation practice with his teachers. But there was no more to be learnt. This led him to study Pali at Wat Mahatat in order to understand more about Buddhist teaching and practice.

During the time he stayed at Wat Mahatat (1957-1959) an internal conflict arose concerning his beliefs. The behaviour and life-style of the monks in Bangkok seemed questionable. Some of them appeared only concerned with studying to pass the exams. Others were clearly ambitious for titles and achievement within the Sangha hierarchy. The rewards and appointments are traditionally distributed once a year. The monks whose hopes were fulfilled would then celebrate their successes. Huge celebrations would be organized lasting for the whole day. Five hundred monks were invited for a Chinese meal, catered by

Chinese restaurants.

He felt that if Buddhism had nothing more to offer than what he had already understood and practiced, it was no longer useful for him to remain in the monkhood. He considered disrobing, but while he was still wavering, another monk, a classmate in his Pali study, told him about Suan Mokkh and gave him a book by Buddhadasa. The Principle of Buddhism was a transcript of the first talk which Buddhadasa gave to the the first group of judges who asked for his teaching. Once he read the first pages of the book, he felt his internal conflict disappearing. Ajarn Pongsak described the experience:⁴

On the fourth page of the book the question was posed, "What is Buddhism?" It was then answered, "Buddhism is the principle of knowledge and its practice in order to rightly understand what is what."

This was a revelation to him, since before that moment he thought that the purpose of meditation practice was to get something or arrive somewhere. He went on to read as many of Buddhadasa's books as he could find and then decided to go to Suan Mokkh.

Experience at Suan Mokkh

Ajarn Pongsak went to Suan Mokkh in 1959. He did not receive a warm welcome from Buddhadasa. He recounted his first experience with Buddhadasa as follows:⁵

When I arrived at Suan Mokkh, Buddhadasa was upstairs in his old kuti. He sent a novice down to see me with the message "Tell the monk there is nowhere for him to stay". I was immediately downcast. I told the novice I could stay anywhere, even under the trees. The novice took me to Rong Tham (the open house for gathering). That evening Buddhadasa sent the same novice to me again with another message, "Tell that monk not to come and see me yet". I waited for two days, very worried. On the third morning he sent the same novice to tell me that he was now ready to receive me. So I went to pay my respects to him. But he ignored me and said, "There is no where to stay". I insisted that I could stay even under the trees. He was silent for a moment and then he said: "Round the back of the hill, there is a small hut that is empty now. You can stay in that". So I settled at Suan Mokkh and stayed there until 1964.

4 Interview with Phra Pongsak Techathammo at Wat Pha-laad, Chiang Mai, 1988.

5 Ibid.

At Suan Mokkh the feelings of peace which Ajarn Pongsak had previously experienced in the forest soon returned. He worked like other monks at Suan Mokkh, building new kutis, cutting a part of a hill to have stones for construction and to build a road. Throughout this time he learned a lot from the teachings of Buddhadasa, both based directly on the dhamma and his talks on a wide range of topics including society, politics and various problems considered in the light of dhamma. He said that he learned most from Buddhadasa when a monk did something wrong or against the teaching. The reprimand he received was not an impression of the passing moment. Ajarn Pongsak gave examples that had impressed him deeply:⁶

A newly ordained monk cut down a large tree to build a kuti. Buddhadasa went for a walk and saw the stump one afternoon. The next day after the meal he demanded of the assembled monks. Who cut down the tree? The monk who was building the kuti owned up. That day Buddhadasa lectured us on how trees had a value for our lives. He talked for an hour and I summed up that trees are an unlimited resource for human beings. It is from trees and other plants that man finds the four basic needs: food, shelter, clothing, and medicine. Trees are also the creator and protector of the natural balance. An awareness of the value of these benefits is part of morality. In short, a sense of gratitude is an essence of Buddhist morality. How can a monk who is not grateful to the trees for the benefits they provide, be successful in practising dhamma?

Shortly afterward another monk peeled the bark off a lot of trees in order to boil it to make a dye for the monks' robes. Buddhadasa saw all the damaged trees. The next day we once more had the opportunity to hear another striking sermon. "Nature is beautiful and pure. How is it that we as monks, fail to see this beauty and purity. Monks who can not see this how can they attain the truth"

From both sermons Ajarn Pongsak grew to understand how much all life depends on trees. They have their own lives that man has to recognize and respect. He felt gratitude for the trees and plants and thought he owed much to them. Ajarn Pongsak came to realise that trees were as the Buddha has stated, His life's companions who share the common experiences of birth, aging, sickness and death. Previously, though he had lived in the forest and knew that it brought peace, its extraordinary value had not occurred to him.

Move to Chiang Mai

6 Ibid.

In 1964 Ajarn Pongsak left Suan Mokkh for many reasons. He wanted to find a place to study and practice dhamma and to spread Buddhadasa's teaching in the north. He found Wat Pha-laad, an abandoned forest temple located on Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai (about 5 kms. from Chiang Mai). Here there was only an old monk who had been living alone for two years. The old monk was very happy to have another monk for company. Ajarn Pongsak chose to stay there and to seek fulfillment for his religious aspirations.

During the first three years he spent most of the time meditating and steadfastly practicing the way of a forest monk according to the dhamma-vinaya. As traditional tudong monks (wandering monks), every year after Buddhist Lent he would set out on his tudong (wandering) all over the north.

About 1971 Ajarn Pongsak began teaching the dhamma and meditation practice to people at Wat Pha-laad. There were individuals, groups of students and university lecturers from Chiang Mai university who came to discuss and practice dhamma with him since they knew that he came from Suan Mokkh. To practice meditation they asked for permission to stay at the temple for a few days, or few months. Thus, huts in the forest and houses (about 10 huts and 3 houses) were built. At the same time, he has been active in conservation. The large forest area of Wat Pha-laad (about 100 acres) was conserved as khet apai-taan (the land of forgiveness), a part of the religious sanctuary. Tradition prohibit any tree-felling or killing of wild animals in the land of forgiveness.

The time between 1972-1976 was the period of the student movement in Thailand. A huge demonstration led by the National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT) on 14 October 1973 caused the collapse of the dictatorship. The military was, for a time, removed from the center of power. Thailand entered a new era in its national life. Numbers of students became aware of the growing social problems in the Thai countryside and became involved in programmes of rural development. Many groups of them came to see Ajarn Pongsak to discuss how to apply dhamma in community development and how to solve the social problems in contemporary Thai society. Seminars concerning Buddhism as an alternative

way for society were held at Wat Pha-laad under the sponsorship of Khum Phrasan-ngansasana phur Sang-khom (the Religious Coordinating Group for Society), Sahakorn Naksuksa Maha-vittayalai Chiang Mai (Chiang Mai University's Student Union), and Ashsama Pacific (the Pacific Interreligious Relationship for Development). Students from many universities came to Wat Pha-laad to join the seminars.

For Ajarn Pongsak, the ability to apply dhamma in social development required not only discussion but also real dhamma practice. Learning one's Buddhism from books is not enough to bring dhamma understanding. This realization led him to look for a place to set up a meditation retreat centre, particularly for the youth from schools and universities. He went to Mae Soy valley (in Mae Soy sub-district) where he had been during his tudong in 1968. He explained his intention to the village headman and his deputy in setting up the meditation centre at a site near the Tu-Phu cave (about 8 kms. from Wang Num Yad village, Mae Soy sub-district). This site was known among the villagers as the site of an abandoned temple for many hundred years. The village leaders agreed to help him. Three simple huts were built and this meditation centre became known by the local people as Tam Tu-Phu (cave of the old monk). He visited Tam Tu-Phu regularly and also helped the villagers build a weir and feeder canal to their paddies fields. He taught the villagers in the surrounding area of the importance of trees and forests for their lives. But no one cared. The trees were valuable, all right, the villagers mocked. The trees meant money.

Though Ajarn Pongsak set up his meditation centre at Mae Soy sub-district in 1975, in fact it took him many years to start his development work. This was due in part to the downfall of the student movement in 1976. Thammasat University, regarded as the "spiritual center" of student activism was assaulted by police and rightwing fanatics. Hundreds of students were killed. A rightwing regime was installed with military support. Thousands of students, writers, and intellectuals went underground. Many of them sought refuge eventually with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the jungles of the North, Northeast, and South. At Wat Pha-laad, a hundred Border Patrol Policemen came to sweep the grounds of the temple to search for the weapons and students. Wat Pha-laad was regarded by the authorities at that time as a communist base and Ajarn Pongsak as a communist sympathizer.

He was not only under observation by the authorities (Internal Security Operation Command) but also by the conservative anti-communist Sangha of Chiang Mai (led by Chau Khun Srithammanithad, the former abbot of Wat Sanphakoy, Chiang Mai). After thorough and repeated investigations for many years, they pronounced him "clean". He did not continue any activities at Mae Soy until 1983 when the political situation eased.

Deforestation at Mae Soy Sub-district

We know very little of the community's history. The elder villagers recounted that the area surrounding Mae Soy sub-district was settled by villagers (collectively known as Khon-muang) 200 years ago.⁷ Before 1950, the plains and mountains were covered by a dense forest. It contained not only a great diversity of trees but plants of all kinds, wild animals, there was an extensive pine forest, and also varieties of teak, chestnut, and hardwood. The villagers lived in the forest to a great extent. It has provided them with water, building materials, food, fuel and medicine. They were not rich but they were content.

By the mid 1950's a commercial timber company was granted concession from the government to cut teak and other large trees in Mae Soy's plain. The company was not selective in their logging. Although there was still an apparent abundance of forest at that time, clear-felling was common practice, and this prevented the regeneration of the forest.

In 1973, after most of the large trees had been cut, a tobacco company was given permission to thin the forest, to take fuel for curing leaf tobacco. It had been stipulated that they were only to take trees less than ten inches in diameter, old defective and poor quality trees, and to replant as many trees as were taken. But illegal loggers moved in at the same time. The villagers thus witnessed the destruction of their greatest asset by what they thought to be powers beyond their control.

After the tobacco company's logging activities the local villagers who lived close by, finished the destruction by cutting virtually all the remaining young trees to be used in making

⁷ Interview with Mr. Kaew Kantajai, an elder of Wang Nam Yad, 1987.

charcoal. By 1978 the forest was devastated. The former deciduous forest had turned to scrubland. Now there is a burning hot plain of thorny scrub.

In addition, in the mountain area of Mae Soy sub-district there was another important cause of deforestation which is unique to the area. The headwater area was destroyed by the hilltribes, namely Hmong, through the practice of slash-and-burn shifting cultivation. The changing conditions of the upper watershed have led to the drying of the streams which feed the whole agricultural plain of the Mae Soy lowland. The activity of the hill-tribes is a complex issue and needs wider description in order to understand the picture, which is not within the scope of this thesis.

Beginning the Conservation Project at Mae Soy

In February 1983, Ajarn Pongsak went to his meditation retreat centre (Tam Tu-Phu) and found that the forest had been severely destroyed in Mae Soy valley. The forest in the lowlands had been swept away by concessionaires for commercial companies. Illegal logging had been carried out on the mountain ridges. Hilltribes, who migrated and settled on the upper watersheds of the Mae Soy valley practiced slash-and-burn cultivation destroying the forest from the top down. The lowland farmers who had not enough rice to last the year, resorted to making charcoal and cutting down the trees from the bottom up. Deforestation at Mae Soy had reached a crisis.

Ajarn Pongsak did not start by preaching to the villagers or persuading them to practice meditation, but rather he requested to discuss the situation with them. The meeting of village leaders and Ajarn Pongsak was a simple get-together. The concrete problems in daily life of the villagers, the problem of deforestation, and alternative solutions were discussed in detail. The village leaders knew that poverty in the village together with the increase in the population had led to an encroachment on the forest. It was a very complicated problem for them to solve.⁸ The villagers were poor. Most of them had only a small piece of paddy land.

⁸ Group interview with ten villagers and village headman of Wang Nam Yad, at Ban Wang Nam Yad, April 1987.

Cultivation yielded less than family needs. They had rice for family consumption for only about 5 to 8 months in a year. Whenever the rain was scarce, the villagers suffered even more. Landless families had to sell their labour daily. The villagers lived on cutting and selling wood, making charcoal, and selling their labour.

Ajarn Pongsak recognized that poverty in the villages was serious but insisted that the villagers had to stop cutting trees, making charcoal, and burning the forest during their hunting and gathering in the summer season because it was the only way to save the remaining forest. He saw that massive deforestation had led to the poor rain and water shortages that were affecting all aspects of life in the village. He suggested that the villagers should start taking care of the forest themselves before it was too late. They should not sit and wait for the government or anybody to do it for them. They had to be united and work together. Although the forest of Mae Soy valley is a national forest reserve and belongs to the government, the district forest officials came to inspect the forest only twice a year. How could they save the forest from all the illegal activities of both the villagers and hilltribes? Officers were too few and problems too many.

Ajarn Pongask argued that alone the forest protection laws and the district officials could not save the forest because the law was in the district officer's drawer. When the officials visited the forest, they brought the law with them, and the villagers and hilltribes stopped cutting the trees. And when the officials returned to their office, they brought the law back with them. So the villagers and hilltribes brought out their axes again. This problem of enforcement had been going on for decades.

Now deforestation at Mae Soy had reached a critical point. If the villagers did not protect their forests themselves, there would be no chance of keeping the remaining forest from destruction. Ajarn Pongsak advised that the villagers should ask for permission from the Royal Forestry Department to register the forest area of the Mae Soy valley as a Buddhist Park because it was the only way that the forest could possibly be protected. As a Buddhist Park, the trees and every kind of wild animal would belong to sasana (religion or Buddhism). Traditionally, the villagers would not destroy the sasana property. At least, they would not

cut the trees or shoot the animals within the boundary of the temple. Eventually, the village leaders agreed to his idea.

Subsequently, in May 1983, the first survey group of villagers led by Ajarn Pongsak went up the Mae Soy valley to inspect the watershed area where the sources of three streams provide the water supply for the villages' consumption and cultivation; Mae Pok, Mae Tim, and Mae Soy. They found that only 10 percent of the watershed of the Mae Pok, 40 percent of the Mae Tim, 80 percent of the Mae Soy remained. After the inspection they had another get-together to discuss the exact area which should comprise the park. Half of the village leaders wanted to establish the park for the whole of the watershed area of the three streams. Some of those present wanted to start with the Mae Soy watercourse because there were still a lot of big trees. Others said all or nothing. They were unable to find a way for everybody to agree.

In 1985 the rain was poor, and the water level in the three streams dropped sharply. The rice yields were low and the vegetable crop was almost completely lost. Most villagers ran short of rice and accumulated more debt. Raiding parties filched vegetables from the Hmong fields. This led to the murder of one villager who had stolen corn. Tension ran high between the lowland farmers and the Hmong who lived on the ridge. In April of 1985 there was a fire in the watershed area which raged for three days and three nights and smouldered for a week after that.

Buddhist Teachings and Conservation

The village leaders came to consult Ajarn Pongsak. The Ajarn saw that extensive destruction of the forest, poverty, and declining moral were interrelated. He decided to hold a meeting with the sub-district council and the Sangha of Mae Soy sub-district.⁹ The Ajarn pointed out that deforestation at Mae Soy valley had reached a critical point. Shortage of rain, a part of the result of deforestation, causes hardship to the farmers and had led them to act

⁹ All details of this meeting below was recorded with a tape-recorder by a follower of Ajarn Pongsak, 1985. The information came from the transcribing of the series of tapes which is kept at the Dhammaat Foundation, Wat Pha- laad, Chiang Mai.

selfishly or even commit crimes.

Moreover, the Ajarn saw that Buddhism, the monks, and the temple were all still in the village. Villagers were still going to the temple and making merit in accordance with traditions. But the sense of deep togetherness, an old community spirit, had gone. The villagers lacked the initiative to co-operate as a group for the sake of the common good. If they faced any big difficulty or found themselves facing a new challenge, they would find it very hard to work for the good of all. The villagers could not find a solution to their hardships. Whatever the problem they faced, people expected the government or outside organizations to solve it. This attitude of sitting and waiting for outside help was harmful to morality (*sila-tham*), according to the Ajarn. Most of monks probably did not perceive that the decline of rural communal values affected morality. He therefore considered it his duty as a monk to bring dhamma back to people's lives.

Destruction of the Forest was a Spiritual Problem

Furthermore, Ajarn Pongsak pointed out that the destruction of the forest was a spiritual problem as much as a material one. The attitude of all those involved in forest activities was not only unaccommodating in solving this problem, but it was also an important cause of deforestation. For example, the attitude of the government seemed to be that all forests belonged to the government, and that they were valuable resources only in terms of goods and revenue. This led to the legal destruction of the forests through such means as giving timber concessions, said the Ajarn. Furthermore, the government officials saw themselves as protectors of the forest. The local people who cut down the trees or made charcoal were then seen as thieves. Thus, a very undesirable situation had developed between the government officials and the local people. They had come to think of each other as "us" and "them", as arch enemies. The attitude of the local people towards the forest seemed to be to see trees only in terms of money or wood, said the Ajarn. So they cut down the trees and burned the forest thoughtlessly. They also thought that since the government owned the forest, they need not feel a sense of caring for or responsibility to the forest even though the survival of their lives and communities depend on it.

The Law Itself cannot Protect the Forest

Ajarn Pongsak believes that the survival of the forests depends upon changing the attitude of the government, government officials, and all people towards the forest and instituting proper planning between the government officials, monks, and people at all levels. He saw that forest protection laws by themselves could not solve this problem because their hold was too superficial. The law does not educate people to appreciate the value of forests. However, neither could dhamma by itself, because some people are incapable of learning. Thus authority must protect the forest by law. So the officials, monks and people must work together each with different duties, towards the same goal in order to solve this problem, said the Ajarn. He stressed that success in solving a problem means bringing dhamma back to social life, which is a duty of all Buddhists.

When Forest is destroyed, Morality is destroyed

Buddhism, according to Ajarn Pongsak, is a way of life that ensures peace and harmony in society. Monks' duties go far beyond narrow religious activities. From his Buddhist point of view, the approach to solve the problem of deforestation is to educate all agencies and people in the Buddhist concept of sila-tham (morality). The essential part of Buddhist morality (sila-tham), according to Ajarn Pongsak, teaches the knowledge and understanding of the true value and meaning of things to life, and gratitude towards things of such benevolence. To live with a sense of gratitude is the true life of the Buddhist.

Morality (sila-tham), for Ajarn Pongsak, does not simply mean the five, eight, ten, or two-hundred and twenty-seven Buddhist precepts. Performing all the Buddhist precepts (sila, such as not to lie, not to steal, not to kill) in itself does not mean we have sila-tham (morality), said the Ajarn. Sila-tham (morality), in its spiritual meaning, means the maintainance of balance both physical and spiritual within the individual, the society, and the environment. These two forms of balance are inseperable. All Buddhist precepts (sila) are tools to help achieve this balance. The key to successful living lies in finding and maintaining a balance of

physical and spiritual aspects of life, society, and environment.

The balance of nature in the environment is achieved and regulated by the functions of the forest, said the Ajarn. It provides a space for human to live in peace and contentment. Destroying the forest or not recognizing the value of all the benefits we owe to the forest (nature) is a lack of morality (sila-tham). When we destroy the forest, we offend the basic morality (sila-tham), both physical and spiritual. Mankind may take whatever the natural world provides, but man must also exercise responsible action in order to maintain it. "To have a sense of gratitude to nature (forest)", he said "is to gain an understanding of the essence of Buddhist morality".

Forests are the creators and protectors of the balance of nature. They are a basic element of sila-tham. The survival of forests is essential to the survival of sila-tham, and ensures human well-being and harmony in society. It is, therefore, a direct responsibility of monks to teach people to protect the forest and environment, said the Ajarn.

In addition, Ajarn Pongsak pointed out that Buddhism is essentially a conservationist religion. In the Buddha's time the forests were the monks' abode. The monks had to live simply and in harmony with nature -understanding the way of nature is understanding the truth.

Finally, the Ajarn asked for the monks of Mae soy sub-district, the rural monks who appreciate the importance of the forest, to teach and awaken an understanding of the value of the forest in the villagers' lives. Effective preservation of the forest must begin with the people who live within it. The villagers had to feel the forest as theirs, before they would be willing to protect it. The Sangha of Mae Soy sub-district and the Sub-district Council agreed to lead the villagers. They made a written appeal to the district officer to halt the hilltribes further destruction of the upper watershed forest and also informed him that they were to take on the responsibility of protecting the forests of Mae Soy.

During the collection of all villagers' signatures for the appeal, the District Head

Officer (nai amphur) happened to visit a development project in the village. Some of villagers asked the District Head Officer for his opinion on the appeal. The nai amphur said "Where is Ajarn Pongsak? We do not know anything about him. He may just come to cause trouble for you and then disappear, what will you do then?"¹⁰ This was enough to make the people tear up the paper with the signatures. The villagers divided into two groups: those who wanted to join the conservation project, and those who were frightened of being arrested for doing so.

The Role of Monk in Forest Preservation

Two weeks later (October 1985), Ajarn Pongsak called a meeting of all the villagers of Mae Soy sub-district. Things really started in earnest. Five hundred people, the Sub-district Council, and the abbot of all five monasteries met at Wat Mae Soy. The Ajarn talked about the importance of the forest.¹¹

We, villagers look at a tree and see only its value in terms of money or how much we can sell it for. Therefore, we fell and burn the forest thoughtlessly. We think that forests belong to the government. So we feel we do not have to protect the forest even though it feeds and shelters us from birth to death.

The forest does not simply mean valuable resources, goods or money. It has its own life, and is useful to all mankind. The forest stands for the world's life and land. It is the source of food for the world, feeding man and animals since the beginning of time. The value of the forest is inestimable.

Forests and its benefit are a boundless source of wealth, not just money and wood. They are the foundation for maintaining the natural cycles of the air we breathe; they help to regulate the rainfall upon which our lives depend; they form a giant "sponge" with their extensive roots in the soil from which the rivers emerge; they produce clean water for us to drink; they enrich soil which we grow our crops in. Every tree and its leaves are useful to the world. They give freely of their produces and ask for nothing in return. They are common property belonging to the whole nation. Cutting trees or making charcoal is no compensation for the death of the forest which used to sustain us. Let us not forget how much we are owing to the forest, and to regard it with reverence and gratitude.

The Ajarn, moreover, preached gratitude to the forest as the villagers' first home and

10 Group interview with ten villagers and village headman of Wang Nam Yad, at Ban Wang Nam Yad, April 1987.

11 The information was derived from tape-recordings concerning the Ajarn's sermon given to villagers which was recorded by the Ajarn's follower, October 1985.

second parents.¹²

For us (rural people), forest are our first home. The one we live in, that we cherish so dearly and are possessive about is in fact only our second home. Without the first, we cannot have the second. Why do we destroy and burn our first home?

Forests are also our second parents. Our human parents give us life but the forest sustains it. We never brought food because we found it in the forest. Forests are like parents serving all the children. From it we get the four necessities of life -food, shelter, clothing, and medicine. We recognize gratitude to one's parents as a great virtue, so how can we live off the forest so thanklessly? How can we kill our second parents, so mindlessly? A mind that feels no gratitude to the forest is a coarse mind.

The failure to see and appreciate the value of the forest for its unlimited benefit to life, to seek out to destroy it, is spiritual corruption.

The Ajarn also indicated that the forest, in fact, belongs to all villagers because it feeds them from generation to generation. Their well-being is one with the well-being of the forest. The impetus for the regulation and protection of the forest lies in their own hands rather than the government officials. By starting small, they can effect changes in their small ways. Then the authorities would later follow. If the villagers did not begin to co-operate in order to take on the responsibility to protect their remaining forest themselves, the situation would just be hopeless for them. To emphasize this point he indicated that there would be more hardship and asked what the future would hold for their children. How would the villagers feel if their children become robbers or beggars, he asked pointedly. Thus, he concluded that if the villagers started to protect the forest they would not only be protecting their lives but that of their children and grandchildren.

After this preaching, the divided villagers united, the appeal was rewritten. This time it was signed by all the villagers, the monks, and the Sub-district Council, and sent it to the District Officer. Subsequently, the District Head Officer replied that action would be taken to prevent further destruction of the forest watersheds and asked the villagers to cease their agitations on this matter. At the same time the Sangha's head of Mae Soy sub-district, in an interview with the district head officer, was told there was no need for him and other monks

12 Ibid., The information came from tape-recorder about "the Ajarn's sermon given to villagers", October 1985.

to join the conservation project of Ajarn Pongsak, "Let him come alone".¹³ The deputy district officer responded by requesting the abbots of all five monasteries to withdraw from the project. One of the abbots recounted that the deputy district officer declared that:¹⁴

"Forest protection was the duty of government officials not that of monks or villagers. If the monks continued to support the project, they will be placing themselves in an illegal situation. They were liable to being disrobed or arrested".

The Sangha head of Chiang Mai received complaints that Ajarn Pongsak was getting involved in activities that were unbecoming for a monk. The sub-district and village headmen were also reminded that they themselves were government officials and therefore subject only to order directly from the district officials. The headmen hesitated to participate in further conservation actions.

Search for the Solution

In order to continue the preservation project, Ajarn Pongsak asked each village to choose ten representatives to meet together and made a second inspection of the upper watershed forests. Instead of the fifty that he requested, ninety two joined this survey. The Deputy District Officer, the District Forestry Officer, and two police went to observe their activities. The sight shocked them. Only a tenth of the once dense forest remained. The rest had been cleared for the hilltribes' cabbage plantations. A number of pesticide bottles were found in the cabbage fields. Several opium fields were also found. A new road had been cut by the Thai Norwegian Highland Development Project right through the ridges of the primary forest. Some villagers took photos all of this.

Resentment of the hilltribes became widespread amongst the villagers. They requested that the police arrest the Hmong for destroying the forest of the upper watershed. The Deputy District Officer, however, reasoned that the Hmong of Ban Pa-Kluay were the responsibility of the Thai Norwegian Highland Development Project which sought to

13 Interview with the Sangha's head of Mae Soy Sub-district, at Wat Nong Kan, April 1987.

14 Interview with the abbot of Wat Wang Nam Yad, April 1987.

eradicate opium-growing by the Hmong. They thought that once the project had achieved its goals, destruction of the forest would cease. The villagers countered, why is it that when we, local villagers fell a tree, we are immediately arrested but when the hilltribes fell a whole valley and take as much of the agricultural land in the National Reserve Forest as they want, no charge is made against them? Are they above the law. The deputy officer was unable to answer. Instead he asked the villagers in order to probe them, "shall we join the Communist Party?" The villagers refused his suggestion and went on to state their needs -the King as their leader, the police to enforce law and order, and no administration officials.¹⁵

Three days later (January 29, 1986), the district head officer ordered an investigation into the activities of Ajarn Pongsak. That is, both of his meditation center and his involvement in forest conservation. This news spread through the villages. Resentment grew amongst the people against the district officials. The villagers felt that the officials were protecting the hilltribes. The Hmong were seen as destroyers of the forest and as the cause of their diminished water supply. Discussion on the problem of deforestation at Mae Soy valley became a popular topic amongst the villagers. Many groups of people from villages of the Mae Soy sub-district and nearby went to visit and consult the Ajarn at his meditation centre (Tam Tu-Phu). He preached a number of times on the need for forest conservation and a "correct attitude" towards the forest. He used the concepts of compassion and gratitude, important virtues in Buddhism, to foster the villagers' awareness of conservation.

Further, the Ajarn's actions rather than Buddhist precepts showed how the villagers must behave if they wanted to protect their forest. Small discussions were held between the villagers and the Ajarn. The central discussion focused on how to solve the problem of deforestation and the poverty at Mae Soy.¹⁶ Many alternative solutions were raised and talked about in detail. Tam Tu-Phu, at that time, became the centre of free discussion for the villagers. Through this, the Ajarn taught dhamma to them. The abstract values of Buddhist teachings were translated into concrete acts and linked to the motives of individual actors. He

15 This information came from group interview with villagers at Wang Nam Yad, April 1987.

16 The information was derived from group interview with ten villagers and village headman of Wang Nam Yad, at Ban Wang Nam Yad, April 1987.

said that "once the villagers are aware their well-being is one with the well-being of the forest and feel gratitude to it, no one needs to tell them about conservation. They will protect the forest themselves because they protect their lives."¹⁷

The villagers put together a photo story on the deforestation of Mae Soy and sent it to the district office and the Governor of Chiang Mai. An exhibition of photographs showing the state of the damaged upper watershed forest was shown at temple festivals in the villages. As a result, people became more aware of the problem. Many people from other sub-districts who had suffered from severe destruction of their upper watershed forest by the Hmong of Ban Pa-Kluay, eagerly joined the conservation group, until it consisted of over 2,000 people.

In the following month (February 17, 1986), a meeting of 500 villagers was held at Wat Mae soy in order to discuss measures to protect their forest. They also invited the monks of Mae Soy to join the meeting and to lend them moral support for the conservation project. The monks wanted to join, according to the Sangha head of Mae Soy sub-district, but a senior monk of Chiang Mai had given them orders not to do so.¹⁸ The villagers felt that the government officials had not only taken no action towards preventing further destruction of the forest by the Hmong but also attempted to divide and isolate them. It was up to them, therefore, to unite and decide on preventive measures. Two suggestions were made. One that the Hmong be resettled in the valley; the second that a fence be built to protect the headwater of the three streams. The second plan was chosen because the villagers could effect it by themselves. They also notified the district office that they would do this on February, 25, 1986.

The district head officer countered immediately by calling a meeting of the villagers on February 22, inviting the Sangha provincial, district, and sub-district heads, the district forestry head officer, and twenty policemen to attend. One thousand villagers gathered to hear the government officials, including the Sangha heads, forbidding the building of the

17 Interview with Ajarn Pongsak at Tam Tu-Phu, April 1987.

18 Interview with Suvit Namthep, one of nine villagers who went to ask the monks of Mae Soy sub-district to join the conservation project, April 1987.

fence. The district head officer announced that any activity in the National Reserve Forest was forbidden and therefore the erection of a fence on the forest ridges would be acting against the law. The Sangha heads continued by asking the villagers to heed the district officials' injunction. The villagers countered by describing their problems. One of village representatives said that:¹⁹

We, villagers have ceased felling trees, and making charcoal, even though our lives are more difficult. Why are the Hmong allowed to continue to fell our forest? And why are they are being encouraged to settle permanently in the area of the headwaters?

Why aren't they subject to the same law? The entire upper catchment area of the three streams is directed to the Hmong's cabbage fields. So the streams that used to feed our rice fields are running dry most of the year. This year, three months into the rainy season, 40 per cent of our paddy fields remain unplanted. We are suffering from severe rice shortage.

Worse of all the heavy use of chemical pesticides from the Hmong's cabbage plantations has contaminated the stream water. The Hmong stored pesticides in ponds and pumped them through sprinkler systems. During the raining season: dead fish are seen floating on the surface; our buffaloes get sores if they swim in the creeks; we get diarrhoea and dizziness if we drink the water. And when we attempt to protect our remaining forest, we are told it is against the law. How can we save our lives?

The headman of the village irrigation system added that:²⁰

A few years ago, my work was to mobilise villagers to repair the weirs because of strong currents. The water level was enough to cover an elephant's back. Now the streams are fast drying up and we have to dig the stream bed. Little forest is little water also. In all my life, I have never experienced this much hardship. Things are turning upside down.

Another villager continued that:²¹

Cabbages are a problematic crop. They are worse than opium-growing. For poppies the Hmong need a small amount of land, only three rai per family (1.2 acres) is enough, and it can only be grown once a year. They do not also require

19 The events of this meeting were recorded in video-tape by a follower of Ajarn Pongsak, February 1986. The information below was transcribed from the video by the author.

20 Ibid., From the transcribing of video "A meeting between the villagers and Nai Amphor (District Head Officer)", February 1986.

21 Ibid.

the use of pesticides.

The problems began when foreign agencies and government authorities set up projects to replace opium cultivation with cash crops such as cabbage. For cabbages the Hmong need to clear a lot of land, up to 20 to 30 rai (8 to 12 acres) per family. As the price is guaranteed, cabbages are planted over more than 10,000 rai (4000 acres) from mountain top to mountain top, where dense forests once stood. Extensive pesticide is used in the cabbage fields. The hilltribes refuse to eat their own produce, preferring to export their vegetables to the town.

As the cabbage can be cultivated three times a year, the steep land lose its nourishment very rapidly, and within a couple of years the patches have to be moved to a new area which means more forest has to be destroyed.

Cabbages earn the Hmong about 7,000 baht a rai (2.5 rai equal 1 acre) at each harvest. The Hmong of Ban Pa-Kluay own 30 to 40 new pick-up trucks, to transport the cabbages down to the district market. They are not hilltribes but traders. And if you think that the Hmong are really abandoning opium growing for cabbages you are fooling yourselves. You do not have to walk deep into the forest to find out that they are behind the cabbage fields. Recently, the Patrol Border Policemen found two heroin refineries in the forest area of Ban Pa-Kluay. By moving the hilltribes down, the growing of opium would automatically end because opium only grows at high altitudes. The question is, does the government want it to end.

Resentment was evident in their voices as they talked about the painful changes and the authorities' lack of responsibility. At this stage the meeting became rather chaotic, various subjects being discussed at the same time among the villagers.²² What they felt was that the authorities were not attempting to solve the problems.

Agreement with officials could not be reached and the villagers announced their intention to erect the fence around the watershed. A large group of villagers walked out of the meeting. The district head officer asked them loudly, "Are you proposing to treat the hilltribes as though they are cattle, to be kept out of the forest with barbed wire?" One villager replied sarcastically, "No, not cattle. The hilltribes are thewada (Gods); they are above the law of the land". Another villager called out "Here we have a peculiar situation. Officials with both the duty and authority of the law refuse to employ the law with the hilltribes." Tempers were running high. The meeting was immediately ended.²³

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

It is important to note that prior to the introduction of the conservation project Mae Soy's villagers had never engaged in any serious discussion with government officials in any meetings nor organized protests against the officials because many of them thought that it was against the law.²⁴

The Monk-Led Campaign for Conservation

On February 25, five hundred people led by Ajarn Pongsak walked 11 kms. up to the 1500 metres-high ridges, carrying their own food and tools. They erected a barbed-wire fence, ten kilometres long, to mark the upper boundary along the ridge above the headwaters of the three streams (Mae Soy, Mae Tim, and Mae Pok) to protect young trees and the remaining upper watershed forest, covering 70 square kilometres. The fence had gates to allow the Hmong access to crop production but to discourage subsequent cultivation and further destruction of the forest. They also labelled all large trees in the area with official-looking numbers. They worked day and night and finished everything within 4 days.

The monk's leadership of the conservation campaigns was disapproved of not only by the government officials but also by the clergy. The Ajarn and villagers were immediately charged with encroaching on the National Reserve Forest and stirring up conflict between the villagers and hilltribes. The investigation committee composed of the Sangha deputy of the province, the Sangha district and sub-district head, the regional, provincial, and district forestry head officer, the district head officer, and the policemen came to interview the Ajarn at Tam Tu-Phu.²⁵ They originally intended to arrest him.²⁶ The meditation centre was cleared by the policemen. The Sangha deputy of Chiang Mai ordered the Ajarn to leave his meditation centre, as it was illegal to live in the Reserve Forest, and stopped all his conservation work at Mae Soy valley because it was against the law and was also inappropriate for a monk.²⁷ The district head officer added that the meditation retreat centre

24 Interview with the headman of Wang Nam Yad, Mr. Saokaew Kantajai, 1987.

25 This information came from the memory notebook of Ajarn Pongsak in "sequent of events" from 1983-1989.

26 So Ajarn Pongsak expressed himself, interview April 1987.

27 Interview with Ajarn Pongsak, at Tam Tu-Phu, April 1987. This story below was recounted by

was illegally set up in the Reserve Forest, and it must be dismantled. The Ajarn explained that the area of the meditation centre was the site of an old monastery prior to the National Reserve Forest, the ruins of which were still evident. He had not damaged the forest in any way. On the contrary, he had urged the villagers to cease destruction of the forest and to protect it. His conservation work was inseparable from Buddhist teachings. To teach the villagers the importance of the forest to their lives and to awaken their responsibilities towards it, was a part of dhamma teaching. In doing this, he was fostering sila-tham (morality) into people's lives.²⁸

He opined that nowadays, it was no longer enough to teach dhamma within the temple or to reaffirm dhamma in people by preaching only. The times were dark and sila-tham (morality) asleep, said the Ajarn, so it was now the duty of monks to act concretely in order to bring dhamma back to people's lives. Only by this way could society be saved. Everyone had two levels of duty: duty as a member of society; and as a human being.²⁹

As for the villagers encroaching on the Reserve Forest by erecting the fence, Ajarn Pongsak argued that in this case if we followed the letter of the forest protection law, then all the people involved have been at fault.³⁰ The hilltribes of Ban Pa-Klauy were accused primarily of the destroying the forest because they settled in the Reserve Forest. All the officials in the units of the province, from the governor down to the district officer were the second group said to be guilty. Pointing to the law that states that no human settlements are allowed in first-grade upper watershed forests, he argued that officials had both the duty and authority to act, refused to enforce the law. They had allowed the hilltribes to settle in such an area which is directly against the law. The Thai-Norwegian Highland Development Project was the third guilty party. It was faulted for encouraging the hilltribes to settle permanently on the upper watershed area in the National Reserve Forest. The project also built roads through the intact forest on the ridges. This, he stressed, amounted to the destruction of the National

Ajarn Pongsak and was recorded with tape-recorder by the author.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

Reserve Forest.

Fourth, he and the villagers of Mae Soy were said to be guilty, for erecting the fence in the Reserve Forest in order to keep the last patch of the watershed forest from the destruction of the Hmong. As you can see, said the Ajarn, we have all broken the law. Are there enough rooms in jail for all of us?

In the following month (March, 1986), the villagers formed a Watershed and Forest Conservation Group of Mae Soy Sub-District (Khum Anurak Pha Lae Thon-nam Lam-taan Tambon Mae Soy), in order to manage and control their forest. The group known as the Conservation Group, was headed by Suvit Namthep, 50, a villager of Mae Soy sub-district, who had been recently elected as a member of the Chiang Mai Provincial Council. Most of Mae Soy's people were members of the Conservation Group. There were about 500 hundred adult males who volunteered for the conservation project.

Environmental Consciousness Mae Soy's Villagers

Many conservation activities were operated through the voluntary labour of the members. Fire breaks were cleared over 70 sq.kms., and village fire patrol groups were formed. Regular patrols continued to clear firebreaks, keep the fence in repair and flush out intruders. Water pipes, nine kilometres long, were laid on both sides of the valley to aid in fire control and watering of the forest during dry seasons. Their most important task was to restore the damaged watershed. "The kind of forest that can give birth to rivers, is such a complex system that once destroyed, there is little hope of restoring it to any like its former", said Ajarn Pongsak.³¹

"Little hope, but some is enough for the people of Mae Soy to try", said Suvit "There is no scientific work to provide any model for reforestation but the locals know a great deal about plants that made up the vanished forests".³² The villagers collected as many varieties of seeds as possible from the forest, and germinated them in the nursery. The denuded ridges

31 Participant observation with a group of villagers took part in the tree planting work in January 1987. The author interview with Ajarn Pongsak and many villagers in this day.

32 Interview with Mr. Suvit Namthep in the tree planting work, January 1987.

were replanted with thousands of the original trees. Two thousands holes (1 metre x 1 metre x 1 metre) were dug in heavily degraded areas and filled with rich loam and manure to plant the trees. "It is difficult to assess how much worse it is", complained Mah Muangjai, a headman of the village irrigation system, "Only ten percent of the upper watershed forests remain. We must do two things to ensure we can live in the future: plant trees, and use water as skillfully as we can. This is the only way to solve the problem".³³ "Now we have a clear vision of what needs to be done and how to achieve it, said Min Kantajai, a committee member of the Conservation Group, "Ajarn's teaching is simple and direct. For villagers, it brings promise. But for those who have been making fortunes out of destroying forest, it is a threat".³⁴ Mrs. Bunpan Charlaonlak, one of the villagers who participated in the tree planting work said "I am a grocer and have no farmland but this is the second year I join this work. I noticed that Mae Soy's people are much more aware of forest conservation and they consider deforestation as a serious problem".³⁵

In March 1987, villagers from three other sub-districts of Chomthong, who, too, were suffering from water shortage owing to the destruction of the upper watershed forest by the Hmong of Ban Pa-klaury, joined the Conservation Group, raising the number to over 7,000 people. Subsequently, a meeting of four Sub-districts Councils was held to discuss the deforestation of the watershed forest and the threat to their livelihood. It was agreed that the only way to protect the remaining forest and restore the depleted watershed areas of the four sub-district (Mae Soy, Doi Keaw, Sob-Tia, and Ban Luang) was to move the Hmong village from its present site on the watershed to the valley. Available land on the other side of the Mae Ping River could be given to them.

In April 1986, members of the Sub-district Councils and the Head of the Conservation Group went to talk with the headman and the hilltribes of Ban Pa-Klaury, and asked them to move down to the valley where land and water would be prepared for them. However, the hilltribes were unwilling to change their ways. They could not live down below

33 Interview with Mr. Mah Muangjai in the tree planting work, January 1987.

34 Interview with Mr. Min Kantajai, in the tree planting work at Mae Soy, 1987.

35 Mrs. Bunpan Charlaonlak, interview January 1987.

because it was too hot. The headman, Tong Sae-Yaang said that his people have a good life here, and it is the future for their children.³⁶

At the end of May, the Conservation Group submitted a petition to the district and provincial head officers, asking them to relocate the hilltribes to the valley. Shortly afterward the governor of Chiang Mai invited Ajarn Pongsak, the Head of Conservation Group, the Sub-district Council committee, the Thai-Norwegian Highland Development Project officials, the Hilltribe Welfare Division officials, representatives from every government department of Chiang Mai, and the Sangha head of Chiang Mai to attend a meeting at the Provincial Hall.³⁷ The governor announced that it was not possible to relocate the Hmong in the valley. Hilltribe resettlement required large amounts of money and the government had little money. The Thai-Norwegian Highland Development Project was concerned with the prevention of opium-growing, not with environmental degradation and the conservation of watersheds. Moreover, good land was hard to find and relocation also meant a painful change in the hilltribes' way of life. The Hmong had been living there for so long that they should not be disturbed. But action would be taken to ensure that no further tree-felling should take place within the fence boundary.³⁸

The villagers were dissatisfied with the governor's announcement, and the head of the Conservation Group stated that:³⁹

Please try and understand our difficulties. Deforestation at Mae Soy and three other sub-districts is a far worse threat to our lives than angry hilltribes. We fight to protect the last patch of dense forest which is the source of our livelihood. We know that it is hard for the government officials to understand how much our lives depend upon water and forest.

The Hmong first came to settle at Ban Pa-Kluay only 15 years ago, starting with 5 families (about 30 people) in 1975. Their village was located on the head of watershed area. They practiced slash-and-burn shifting cultivation. As their fields have spread, the upper watershed forest has disappeared. We informed the district officer of the problem, initially in 1978 and for several years following.

36 Participant observation in the meeting between the members of the Sub-district Councils and the headman of Hmong at Ban Pa-Kluay, 1987.

37 Information of this meeting came from my transcribing of tapes recorded by Ajarn Pongsak, May 1987. It was kept at the Dhammanaat Foundation, Wat Pha-laad, Chiang Mai.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

There was no response.

Ten years later (1985), the hilltribes had increased to 101 families, approximately 430 people. Ninety percent of the upper watershed forest of four sub-districts were devastated. Six main streams were running dry most of the year.

Imagine how much 42,000 lowland farmers who depend greatly on water from the hill, suffer. Now other sub-districts have finished planting rice; some are almost harvesting. But we have to wait for the little trickles of water coming down the hill. We are suffering from serious rice shortage and poor crop yields. Moreover, the heavy use of pesticides by the hilltribes for their cabbage fields has contaminated water source, endangering both animals and people's lives. This problem has been raging on for several years without solution.

One of the Conservation Group committee members added that:⁴⁰

The governor tells us the government has little money, to resettle all the hilltribes down. But, however, much you have, you must use it to bring them down. If only enough to bring down 100 families, then bring just 100, because in a few years there will be 120 or 130. It is better to let them increase in the valley. Since the increase of the hilltribes means that much increase in destruction of the forest.

Problem must be solved at its cause. You cannot leave the wound to fester. If the government does not have enough money to relocate just this one hilltribe village, will they be able to solve the problem of the death of Mae Soy's people?

The head of the Sub-district Council opined that:⁴¹

To resettle the hilltribes down in the valley, of course, there is going to be hardship, difficulties in adjusting. But we are not bringing them down and abandoning them. They are coming down to places that have been all-prepared for them with land and water to grow things on. Perhaps the elders will never learn to adjust, but the young people will learn how to grow rice in the valley and learn all about valley living

By moving the hilltribes down, opium-growing would automatically end because opium only grows at high altitudes. Moreover, it is not against the law to move people who are living on the watershed which is national property belonging to the whole nation, to settle in a more suitable location.

A representative of the Sub-district Council added that:⁴²

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

The issue that if the Hmong move down to the valley, they will lose their culture is irrelevant. In fact, the Hmong have already changed their old way of life. Both government and foreign projects that support the Hmong brought roads schools, clinics, consumer durables, fertilizers, pesticides, and new-found wealth to them.

At Ban Pa-Klauy, television antennae adorn almost every roof of the Hmong; they have their own power generation system. Thirty percent of Hmong families own the new model pick-up trucks. Through cabbage trade, the Hmong have regular contact with the town. Some Hmong families already bought orchards from the lowlanders. Do not judge cultures merely from costumes or language.

The governor, however still insisted that resettling the hilltribes would be a complicated and sensitive matter. It must be a national policy. He declared that the hilltribes should remain on the mountain.⁴³

The villagers did not agree with the result of the meeting. They, including the Ajarn, believed that they must push on if they wanted to save what was left of their forest. Mae Soy's farmers said that "We will fight to end the deforestation before it's the end of us, we see very clearly that destruction of the forest means destruction of our lives, so with or without government officials co-operation we will solve this problem".⁴⁴ In July 1987, the committee of the Conservation Group staged an appeal, accompanied by photographs of the destruction of the catchment area, heavy use of pesticides on the hill slopes, and the dried streams. The appeal ever directed to the Prime Minister, the Royal Forestry Department, and the Third Army.

The monk and the villagers' campaign to preserve the upper catchment area and call for the resettlement of the hilltribes from the watershed area to the lowland had made the Ajarn a controversial figure, prompting the inevitable question of whether what he was doing was compatible with his role of monk. The critics, said he was involved in actions that amounted to discrimination against a minority group. In reply to why he was making a strong stand on the matter, Ajarn Pongsak said that:⁴⁵

43 Ibid.

44 Group interview with villagers at Wat Wang Nam Yad, May 1987.

45 Interview with Ajarn Pongsak at Wat Pha-laad, Chiang Mai, 1988.

I heard this question many times, particularly, from the humanitarians and some government officials concerned. They told me, we must have compassion to the hilltribes because we are Thais and and Buddhists. The hilltribes are Thai too.

I told them that to solve a problem you need wisdom coupled with compassion, whether you be officer, peasant, or monk. If you employ only compassion you would fail. Compassion is not appropriate for every case because it is too soft. If you go to solve a problem, you meet the trouble-maker and feel too sorry for him to do anything to stop him. And what about compassion for his victim? The cure must match the sickness. Compassion must be guided by the clarity of wisdom, and wisdom must be tempered by compassion, otherwise it can be harsh.

The government use compassion and understanding the hilltribes so much until now all the upper watershed forest in the North have gone. But in fact, no one should live and farm on the upper watershed area where the rivers born. That is the heart, the lifeblood of the land. It is common property belonging to the whole nation. We tend to forget that once nature is destroyed, no amount of money will do any good. I feel sorry for the hilltribes, but if the forests are further destroyed all parties, including the hilltribes will be affected.

When I asked whether leading a struggle to preserve the forest has brought out conflict between the Hmong and the lowland farmers, the Ajarn replied that:⁴⁶

It should not be a conflict, the villagers were willing to find the hilltribes a suitable site and undertake all the necessary work to solve this problem. While the government officials did not think this should be attempted. Conflicts came about just because the government officials lack initiative and understanding of the problem ...they did not accept that the law has failed to preserve the forest and refuse this aspect of monk's duty, that is has place alongside the law....If the government want to preserve forests, their attitude toward forests and the potential of local residents must be changed first.

Community Development from the Grassroots

Ajarn Pongsak continued his conservation work by setting up a community development project to help the villagers become self-sufficient. It was clear to him that the forests could not be effectively protected as long as people were still greatly dependent on them. The Dhammanaat Foundation was set up at Wat Pha-laad, Chiang Mai, in 1987, to carry out the necessary rural development project. With public donations a rice bank, funds for crop produce and for a co-operative shop were established in five villages to relieve immediate needs. Traditional irrigation system and feeder canals were developed to bring all

46 Ibid.

farmland into cultivation in summer. To enable them to be self-sufficient, some 1500 rai (600 acres) of unproductive scrubland at Wang Nam Yad was surveyed for allotment to 408 landless families of Mae Soy sub-district. Sites for reservoirs and feeder canals were also planned. These activities were co-operative works between the Ajarn and Mae Soy's people.

When I asked the Ajarn whether he had made any plans for the conservation and community development project at Mae Soy, he said that "I have no faintest idea or plan of how to do it. But when I saw the suffering in the village due to forestation. I knew exactly what I had to do..."⁴⁷

The role the villagers played in the campaign allowed them to realize their collective problem-solving capabilities and the potential to improve their own lives. Having awakened to their capacity for self-reliance led to change in various aspects of the community's life, particularly in their role of co-operative arrangements in the socio-economic and political spheres.

Government Actions

In August 1987, things changed. The Director General of the Royal Forestry Department came to Mae Soy, spoke to 5,000 villagers on behalf of the government and assured them it was government policy to relocate the hilltribes to the valley. As a result, the Royal Forestry Department released the area of heavily degraded forest, 1500 rai (600 acres) at Wang Nam Yad to 408 landless families of Mae Soy sub-district. Early in 1988, the Forestry Department, the Dhammanaat foundation, and the Conservation Group started to co-operate on a community development and reforestation project to help the landless people to become self-reliant. The project aimed to ultimately stop forest encroachment by the villagers. It was agreed that: the Royal Forestry Department would provide machinery and operators, the Conservation Group would provide the labour, and the Dhammanaat Foundation would fund the operation. The five year project will be completed by 1993.

47 Ibid.

Nine kilometres of dirt road and bridges were built to gain access to the area. Four reservoirs with a capacity of one million cubic metres, four main channels over a distance of seven kilometres with irrigation network were constructed. Levelling 1500 rai of land meant each family could own 3.5 rai (1.4 acres). It was expected that in 1992 all 408 families would be settled. The Dhammanaat Foundation provided three millions baht (150,000 US\$) for these activities. All funds of the Foundation come from public and private donations, and in particular, from many intellectual and professional groups from Bangkok that have come to a retreat at the meditation centre. These latter group have included, Thammastan (Dhamma Association of Chulalongkorn University), Ramatibodhi Hospital, United Nations Environmental Programme, Ford Foundation, and the German Embassy.

The strength of Mae Soy's villagers and monk in conducting an effective environment campaign has become well-known in many regions of Thailand. Ajarn Pongsak has been consulted by different groups involved in environmentally related local peoples' campaigns, including groups attempting to organize local communities to protest against the destruction of the forest by "influential people" in the north and northeast, the award of mining concessions, and dam building in intact forests in the south. By helping people to protect the forest, he has come to realize that conservation work can be life threatening, the protection of the sacred robe notwithstanding. Although Ajarn Pongsak has been investigated many times, the authorities have until now deferred handing down a judgement. He said that "the government officials wanted to arrest him but they were afraid of the revolt of the villagers".⁴⁸ According to one of the provincial officials, the Ajarn has been black listed as a troublemaker, and the provincial officials are waiting for an order of arrest to be issued.⁴⁹

In 1989, the government banned all logging concessions after the country suffered its most disastrous floods due to the deforestation crisis in the South in late 1988. In November 1989, a plan to resettle the hilltribes living in the upper watershed forest areas in the mountains in Chiang Mai to the lowlands received Cabinet approval. But how and when is

48 Ibid.

49 This story was recounted by a provincial official who wished his name not to be mentioned, October 1988. He said to the author that "Please don't tell anybody about what I have said, and if you want to write about it in your book please don't mention my name."

not unclear. Suvit said "We will wait to see whether the government is able to keep its promise to us. If this problem has not been solved within two years, we will have to solve it by our own way".⁵⁰

The government policy in relocating the hilltribes was seen by many as impractical and inhumane. Numerous seminars were organized to discuss this issue in both Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Ajarn Pongsak was invited to speak at these seminars. His ideas on the application of Buddhist principles to conservation and community development began to spread to the public through newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets to both Thai and English-speaking audiences. The Mae Soy story, and information on the formation and activities of the strongest local conservation group were also reported.

Recognition

By 1989, all eight sub-districts of Chomthong had joined the Conservation Group raising the number to over 97,000 people. Its name was changed to the Association of Conservation and Protection of the Watershed Forest of Chomthong District. It is the largest local forest preservation movement in the North. Soon after its name was changed, the Association announced its intention to protect the forest of the Inthanon range (500 sq.kms). During the holiday period, local schools brought their classes into the forest of Mae Soy for weekend camping to stimulate an interest in nature. Student and lecturer groups of Buddhist clubs from sixteen Universities all over Thailand were attending meditation retreats and discourses on Buddhism and Conservation at Tam Tu-Phu. Significantly, the Sangha's role in conservation was becoming increasingly important. Monks from the Maha-Chulalongkorn University, a Buddhist University in Bangkok, arrived for a four-day seminar on the Monks' Role in Forest Conservation. They discussed the importance of forest preservation and the use of Buddhist ethics as a force to achieve this.

Recently, 70 forest monks, already engaged in conservation work, joined together at Tam Tu-Phu to form a Monks' Association for the Conservation of Life and Development

50 Interview with Mr. Suvit Namthep at Wat Mae Soy, October 1989.

(Khum Phra Anuruk Pur Cheevit Lae Karn-Patana). Ajarn Pongsak was elected as the head of the group. It was an association dedicated to achieving conservation side by side with development, based on the principle of Buddhism. The discussion focused on the achievement of a balance between the maintenance of nature and the development needs of man. They also called on Buddhist monks from all over the country to join forest conservation efforts and pointed out that some funds from the temple construction fund could be set up aside for forest conservation work in their communities. "It is time that sasana (religion or Buddhism) played a part to solve the environmental crisis" said the Ajarn.⁵¹ In 1990, the Department of Religious Affairs submitted a proposal to the Sangha Council that the two government departments (the Royal Forestry Department and the Department of Religious Affairs) work together for the protection of the forests of Thailand.

The Mae Soy project has become well-known as a demonstration project, reflecting the potential of villagers in effective forest protection and the force of religious teachings in igniting their conservation awareness. The most visible success of the project is to carry out land reform and the emergence of new villages, born out of the new hopes generated by the ideas of co-operation within the tripartite alliance of monk, government officials, and villagers. In part this alliance was the belief that environmental preservation and community development needs a larger spiritual dimension. The project has gotten attention from the government officials, academics, fellow Buddhists, and both Thai and foreign conservationists. An active Thai conservationist, M.R Smansnid Svasti said "Ajarn Pongsak is a man who believes in what he does and is courageous enough to face the authorities....Rousing of the villagers from their hopelessness to act on their fate is the means to social reform."⁵²

A medical lecturer of Mahidol University, Pareya Tatsnapradit said "the case of Mae Soy showed that Buddhist teaching could to raise the spirit of self-reliance....The mass-consciousness of self-reliance is the root of democracy. The concept of bringing sila-dhamma

51 Based on my observation of this meeting at Tam Tu-Phu, 1989.

52 Interview with M.R Smansnid Svasti, Chiang Mai, 1988.

(morality) back to society could be used as a means to change the society."⁵³ The director of the International Consultancy on Religion, Education, and Culture (ICOREC), who serves as part of a team of religious advisors to Worldwild Life Fund (WWF), Mr. Martin Palmer came to Thailand to learn about Ajarn Pongsak's work in 1986. The Mae Soy story has been used in educational materials for schools in Europe and elsewhere.⁵⁴ He also shared this story with other Buddhists in Japan, Sri Lanka, and China.

Many government departments and foreign organizations have come to visit Mae Soy. To illustrate, foresters and academic groups from the Agriculture Ministry, the Forestry Department, Chulalongkorn University, the National Institute of Development and Administration (NIDA), the Third Army, foresters from Asean countries, and International Religious Conventions with delegates from Asia, Europe, and Africa have come to visit.

Once regarded as a trouble-maker and a nuisance, Ajarn Pongsak has been presented with three awards: the Good People of Society award (1988), the Good Supporter of the Royal Forestry Department award (1989), and the Global 500 Roll of Honour award (1990). He is the first Buddhist monk in Thailand to be named for the United Nation Environmental Programme's Global 500 Roll of Honour Award.⁵⁵ Although things have changed in his favour, that does not mean the end of his mission to bring morality back to society.

53 Interview with Dr. Pareya Tatsnapradit, Chiang Mai, 1988.

54 The Nation/Thailand's English-language newspaper, December 28, 1986.

55 The Nation/ Thailand's English-language newspaper, June 5, 1990.