

# SANTI ASOKE'S NON-TOXIC CROP CULTIVATION AS A PRACTICE TO PURIFY MENTAL DEFILEMENTS: A STUDY OF BUDDHASTAN RATCHATHANI ASOKE, THAILAND

Phaithoon Kosiumnuay

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Thailand

## ABSTRACT

**Corresponding author:**  
Phaithoon Kosiumnuay  
[pkosiumnuay@gmail.com](mailto:pkosiumnuay@gmail.com)

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Santi Asoke is one of the largest new Buddhist movements in Thailand. A pioneer to promote the consumption of organic food and vegetarianism in the country, Santi Asoke is also known for its successful organic farming. This study aimed to consider how Santi Asoke translated Buddhist doctrines into the practice of non-toxic crop cultivation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with informants selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Key persons such as Samana Bodhirak, the founder and leader of Santi Asoke, were purposively selected while other snowball-samples were Santi Asoke members in the Buddhastan Ratchathani Asoke Pyramidal Web, Ubon Ratchathani province. Community immersion was also conducted. The findings showed that Santi Asoke's unique style of organic and non-toxic crop cultivation was designed based on Buddhist teachings, especially those related to purification of mental defilements. An important contribution of this study is a deeper understanding that Santi Asoke did not focus only on moral restraint as generally reflected in previous scholarship but also pursued Buddhist spiritual practice through the Noble Threefold Training. The practices to cultivate morality, mental discipline, and wisdom were integrated into the development and practices of organic, non-toxic crop cultivation. In short, Santi Asoke's organic farming is an embodiment of the Noble Threefold training. Hence, its moral and spiritual practices for purification of defilements were not only extended inwardly in the form of bodily detoxification, but also outwardly in the form of organic farming.

**Keywords:** Santi Asoke; Buddhist morality; noble threefold training; organic farming; non-toxic crop cultivation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Apart from economic benefits, health and environmental concerns, spiritual and religious beliefs and practices are factors motivating farmers to turn to organic agriculture (Bui & Nguyen, 2021). Such motivations behind organic farming are found in countries as diverse as Japan, Zimbabwe, Cuba, the US, India, and Vietnam, for example. The motivations are based on different types of religions and spirituality, that is, traditional and indigenous religions, institutionalized religions (such as Buddhism and Christianity) and reformed or new

religious movements (Clammer, 2010; Sibanda, 2017; Caraway, 2018; Hoesly, 2019; Bopp, 2020; and Bui & Nguyen, 2021). In Thailand, Santi Asoke is a Buddhist movement that is well recognized for its major role in the practice and promotion of organic farming. It is one of the early movements for organic agricultural practices and organic food consumption in the country (Vidyarthi, 2015).

Founded by a Buddhist monk, Samana Bodhirak, Santi Asoke has been one of the most influential and controversial Buddhist movements in Thailand. A body of scholarship is devoted to its study. The studies by Jackson (1989), Satha-Anand (1990), Heikkilä-Horn (1997a, 1997b), Mackenzie (2007), and Liu and Chen (2016) mainly put Santi Asoke as a Buddhist reform movement in the context of the relationship between state and religion, and its responses to the authority of the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand and other emerging Buddhist movements such as the one formed by followers of Venerable Buddhadasa or that led by the Dhammakaya Temple. Meanwhile, the studies by Olsen (1993), Heikkilä-Horn (1997a, 1997b), Essen (2004; 2005), Kaewthep (2007), and Paunglad (2015) were devoted to details of Santi Asoke's background, doctrinal interpretation, ideology, systems of belief and practices.

Rather than the broader view as found in the aforementioned studies, others focused on more specific aspects, including ecological practice (Reyland, 2011), sufficiency economy (Essen, 2011), gender equality (Heikkilä-Horn, 2015), health-related beliefs and practices (Sitthikriengkrai & Porath, 2018), and political participation (Heikkilä-Horn, 2010). Although these previous studies were devoted to topics on different aspects of Santi Asoke, none focused on organic farming, especially details of how Santi Asoke translates Buddhist doctrines into organic practices. Namely, although some of them covered the topics of organic farming and underlying ideas, an analysis is still lacking that focuses specifically on the Buddhist doctrinal details and their transference into organic practices. This research aimed to fill in this gap.

Understanding such a matter is significant. According to Martin (2017), religious ideas can play an important role in legitimating beliefs and practices, and thereby generating consent from social members. As a Buddhist reform movement, Santi Asoke needs to draw upon Buddhist doctrines to justify its goals and activities. In so doing, not only is Santi Asoke able to claim its legitimacy as a form of Buddhism (or even the true Buddhism) but also defend itself against criticisms from the Sangha Supreme Council, mainstream Buddhism, and other Buddhist reform movements while simultaneously attracting new members who find credibility in its reinterpretation of Buddhism (See, for example, Jackson, 1989; Essen, 2004; and Heikkilä-Horn, 2015). Santi Asoke justifies its organic farming with Buddhist doctrines, and its success is not limited to the livelihood of its members but also extends to the promotion of consuming organic food and vegetarianism in wider society (See, for instance, Kaewthep, 2007; Paunglad, 2015; and Sitthikriengkrai & Porath, 2018).

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

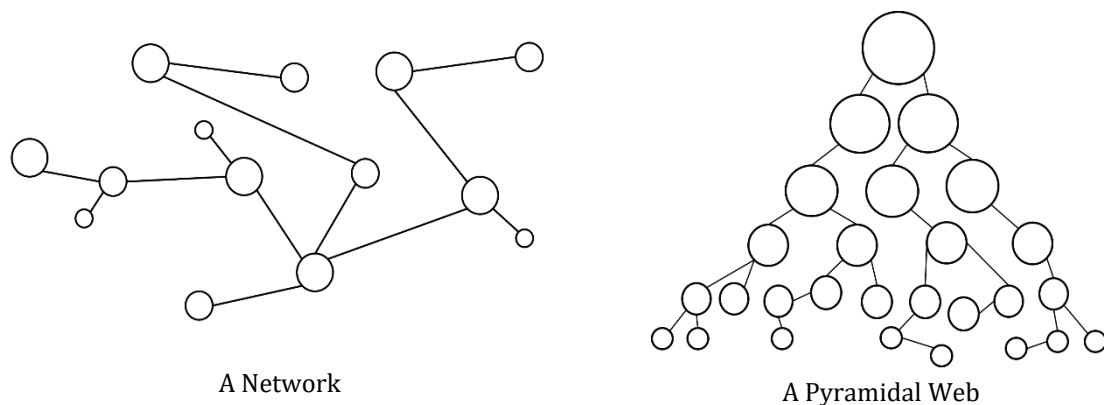
The author was granted permission from Samana Bodhirak, the founder and leader of Santi Asoke, to conduct in-depth interviews with him and members of the Buddhastan Ratchathani Asoke Pyramidal Web in Ubon Ratchathani province. Samana Bodhirak assigned Samana Dinthai, his secretary, to facilitate the author in data collection. Both purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select the informants. Key persons—Samana Bodhirak and Samana Dinthai—were purposively selected. The collected data were supplemented by those obtained from informants to whom the author was introduced through the snowball sampling technique. This latter group of 28 informants was qualified by their Buddhist insights and perspectives into the organic farming practiced in the pyramidal web. The snowball sampling process ceased when the interview data were saturated. The author was also allowed to engage in community immersion activities. The multiple sources of the data provided a basis for triangulation, which ensured credibility of the study (Hastings, 2010). The research was approved by the Mahidol University Social Science Institutional Review Board (MUSSIRB). The certificate of approval (number 2018/275.2711) was issued on November 27, 2018 and extended to 2021.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Buddhastan Ratchathani Asoke is one of the Santi Asoke branches. It differs from other branches in that it was first initiated by laypersons. In 1989, a large piece of land was donated to Samana Bhodirak. However, since the land was in his home province, he refused to develop a branch on it for fear that it would become a site of grandeur in his name and then go against his ideal goal of detachment. A group of lay members of Santi Asoke considered this piece of land to be a good location to practice the way of Santi Asoke. As a result, in 1993, they gathered there to develop a community called "Ratchathani Asoke." This inevitably led Samana Bhodirak to officially announce it as the second branch of Santi Asoke. The community was thereby

transformed into what Santi Asoke called a “Buddhiststan” (Buddhist place), which allowed Buddhist monks to live there.

Unlike other branches, Buddhastan Ratchathani Asoke is under a lay administrative board with Buddhist monks as advisors. It had a network of laypersons who did not actually live in the community, but regularly supported and participated in its activities. They were former community members or Santi Asoke practitioners who lived in their own homes. However, instead of the term “network,” they preferred the term “pyramidal web” since they considered their network to have the pyramidal shape of the fishing net, which comprises its head and feet. This figure gives an impression of multidimensionality, interconnectedness, and a center-periphery relationship, which they believed to better describe the relationship among the network members. With its top guiding center and broad foundation, the pyramidal web is secured because it is governed and led toward its noble goals and, at the same time, firmly grounded in the strong support from its interconnected members (Thaithatgoon, 2019). To give a clear picture of what the pyramidal web is like, a graphic comparison between a network and pyramidal web is shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1:** A graphic comparison between a network and a pyramidal web

Organic farming was practiced from the beginning when Ratchathani Asoke was being developed. They called their practices “Kasikam Raisarnpis” (non-toxic crop cultivation), since their farming neither included raising livestock nor used any synthetic chemicals. They used the term “non-toxic cultivation” interchangeably with “organic farming” and “non-synthetic chemical farming.” This excerpt from Samana Bhodirak’s interview offers an excellent analogy of mental and chemical toxins and intoxication, which portrays the overall picture and underlying ideas of “Kasikam Raisarnpis”:

“Buddhism teaches us to be mindful of toxins and the state of intoxication. Toxins harm the health of humans, animals, and the environment. Intoxication, which cannot be observed, is even more harmful since toxins are a part of it. There are many forms of intoxication, such as being intoxicated by wealth, status, praise, worldly achievements, mundane happiness, food, consumer goods, sounds, shapes, odors, tastes, and touch. For instance, chemicals make vegetables look beautiful, crispy, and delicious, but neither producers nor consumers are aware of the dangerous consequences of food contamination. These chemicals not only kill pests but also harm beneficial beings. The environment absorbs toxins, polluting plants, soil, water, air, and endangering all stakeholders. Although Kasikam Raisarnpis does not practice animal husbandry, it inevitably relates to living beings, from elephants to microorganisms. Farmers must be mindful of them to coexist according to dharma principles. When farming is a part of dharma practice, it should be successful, and plants will grow abundantly through accumulated merit. In contrast, a farming project without practicing dharma and morals will ultimately fail.”

The non-toxic cultivation is embedded in Samana Bhodirak’s initiative called “Three Livelihoods to Secure the Nation,” which was later changed to “Three Livelihoods for Humanity.” The first livelihood is waste management, which involves collecting and fermenting organic waste products using microorganisms to create fertilizer. Non-organic waste products are collected, repaired, and reused according to the principles of reducing, reusing, renewing, and recycling. The second livelihood is the production of non-toxic fertilizer without the use of synthetic chemicals. The fertilizer is made from organic substances, e.g., humus, animal manure, and various fermented wastes. The third livelihood is non-toxic cultivation, which Samana Bhodirak advocated for people in society to see as an alternative model of safe food production.

From their Buddhist perspective, non-toxic cultivation fell under the category of right livelihood in the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the Buddhist doctrine of eight practices that lead to liberation from Samsara.

The Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariyamagga*) is an extended version of the Noble Threefold Training (*Trisikkha*), which comprises morality (*sīla*), mental discipline (*samadhī*), and wisdom (*paññā*). The right livelihood is in the category of morality. Moral training starts with observance of precepts such as the Five, Eight, and Ten Precepts. It is the necessary preliminary step to curb the Three Poisons (*kilesas*), which include greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). Therefore, Santi Asoke's notion of organic farming, a form of right livelihood, is deeply related to moral training to restrain the Three Poisons.

The primary goal of organic farming was to provide food to the community members. Any surplus products became goods. However, when it came to economic practice, Santi Asoke resorted to the system that was developed in place of capitalism. That system was "Boonniyom" (meritism), which aimed at acquisition of merit (*puñña*, or *boon* in Thai) rather than demerit (*pāpa*) caused by a craving for profits and capital. While capitalism is driven by greed for profits, Boonniyom is motivated by generosity, an antidote to greed. There are four levels of economic practice under Boonniyom: selling goods lower than market prices, at cost prices, lower than cost prices, and free distribution.

While the practice of self-subsistence and Boonniyom is based on the Buddhist teaching to restrain from excess and greed, the practice of non-toxic crop cultivation is influenced by the first Buddhist precept to abstain from killing and causing harms. In Buddhism, the counterpart of non-harming is loving kindness. Hence, the virtue of loving kindness was implied in this way of cultivation. Santi Asoke's non-toxic crop cultivation relied on organic fertilizers, plant hormones, and effective microorganisms. They used both compost and bio-fertilizers. The former type incorporates raw materials like sludge liquor, ethanol residue, basalt, chicken manure, pig manure, and cow dung. Green manure, especially napier grass which is rich in nitrogen, also creates fertilizer.

The bio-fertilizers involve a fermentation process which utilizes home-grown microorganisms. Food waste and biodegradable organic materials undergo fermentation with these microbes to create fertilizer that gradually improves soil condition and enriches it with nutrients. The beneficial microbes in the fertilizer prevent harmful ones from attacking crops. These materials ferment while covered with white "humus" mold, which indicates nutrient formation. While various types of microorganisms were utilized in the composting process to turn organic materials and residues into fertilizer, they were also used for microbial fermentation to produce hormones and cultures of effective microorganisms. For example, plant hormones were obtained from a year-long fermentation of pork placenta marinade mixed with molasses, rice bran, and coconut water.

While the use of non-toxic substances for crop cultivation did not cause harm to crop consumers or pests, it also led to the avoidance of harms in other ways. First, no chemical was released into the ecological system. Second, in the process of producing organic compost fertilizer, plant hormones, and effective microorganisms, garbage (such as food wastes) was collected to use as raw materials so that it was not released to create pollution in the environment. Thus, no harm was caused to living beings in the environment.

Other methods were developed to translate the virtues of non-harming and loving kindness into the cultivation practices. For instance, plowing was lessened or avoided when possible in order not to disturb or kill earthworms. In addition, since no pesticide was used, several methods were devised for pest control. The crops' natural immunity and defense mechanisms were strengthened by the use of plant hormones and effective microorganisms. The latter two could in themselves ward off pests too. Different types of crops were grown in different seasons when their pests were less. Separate plantation areas were established to lure away and at the same time feed insects. Plants, such as Chinese green mustard, morning glory, Chinese cabbage, zucchini, cucumber, long beans, cabbage, and cauliflower were grown to feed worms and insects so as to divert them away from the crops. Apart from using papaya leaves to lure apple snails away from paddy leaves, farmers also employed a method of manually collecting and relocating them to a safer place.

Coconut water fermented with molasses were used as a natural hormone and insect repellent. Herbal substances or wood vinegar were applied to repel pests while pungent-smelling plants, for instance, cabbage, cilantro, and pepper were mixed together to deter insects, which do not like the smell. Farmers picked all ripened fruits that fell on the ground so that they did not attract pests. Light-reflecting and refracting objects such as water-filled plastic bags were used to drive away flies. Some informants even stated that they used a method of talking with insects to persuade them to go elsewhere. These are only some of the instances developed in the effort to translate the virtues of non-harming and loving kindness into farming practice.

The above portrayal of organic farming by Santi Asoke shows that, falling under the category of right livelihood in the Noble Eightfold Path or morality in the Noble Threefold Training, the practices centered around the efforts to behave in accordance with moral teachings about greed and generosity, non-harming and loving kindness. However, a further in-depth inquiry showed a deeper spiritual practice behind the non-toxic crop cultivation. That is, it was not only restricted to the practice of morality but extended to the practices of mental discipline and wisdom.

A key to appreciate the significance of this point is to return to the teaching of the Three Poisons and the Noble Threefold Training. The poisons, which basically include greed, hatred, and delusion, are also known as defilements or impurities. Their counterparts are generosity, loving kindness, and wisdom. These defilements are expressed in unwholesome actions in the bodily, verbal, or mental levels. At the most basic level, moral precepts are tools to control bodily and verbal actions so that they are not under the influences of the poisons. At higher levels, inner cultivation is practiced to develop mental discipline and wisdom, which are meant to cleanse the mind of the poisons (Harvey, 2000).

In comparison to other new Buddhist movements in Thailand, Santi Asoke was portrayed as one that focused on the outer or behavioral aspect of moral practice while others—that is, those led by the Dhammakaya Temple and Buddhadasa's followers—focused on development of inner aspects such as mental discipline and wisdom. (See, for instance, Jackson, 1989; Satha-Anand, 1990; Heikkilä-Horn, 1997a, 1997b). In this regard, Mackenzie (2007) indicated, "Mainstream Thai Buddhism regards Asoke's focus on *sīla* in order to be free from suffering as inadequate" (p.182). This portrayal of Santi Asoke with its emphasis on behavioral observance was in line with the above standard explanation of the Noble Threefold Training, which proceeds from morality through to mental discipline and wisdom to purify the mind of the three poisons.

Although Santi Asoke's organic practices can be seen in the same light, that is, as tools to control external behavior, the interview data uncovered a downplayed aspect of the practices. It is the aspect of the cultivation of mindfulness (*sati*) and wisdom. In this regard, their approach of non-toxic crop cultivation does not only restrain behavior but also leads to purification of the mind. In other words, it is not only moral but also spiritual practice. Two key aspects of spiritual practice stood out from the interview data. They are mindfulness and knowledge, which can respectively be related to mental discipline and wisdom.

From the informants' interviews, mindfulness was found to be operating in the background of cultivating activities. When efforts and time were devoted to growing crops, it was natural to feel *dosa* such as anger and hatred to observe that the crops were damaged by pests. Therefore, while the organic farmers at Buddhastan Ratchathani Asoke had to be mindful of anger and hatred, it was not enough to simply follow the guidelines of cultivation practice designed to promote non-harmfulness. It was very inconvenient to follow these guidelines, for example removing pests like apple snails one by one. Accordingly, the farmers had to be mindful of annoyances that arose in their mind. They also had to be mindful of their *lobha* expressed as a desire for good-looking crops. Informants considered such *lobha* to be "mental litter" that could eventually intoxicate the mind with attachment. Based on mindfulness, they did not act upon the defilement and could counter them with equanimity (*upekkhā*) and loving kindness.

It was noted by informants that Santi Asoke did not understand the practice of *vipassana* as merely traditional meditation with closed eyes. It involves observing one's own mind while performing daily tasks. The goal is to be fully focused on the task at hand and to reflect on one's own mind and reactions to external stimuli. Negative emotions arise from one's own defilements and reflecting on the state of one's own mind is called *vipassana* practice. This method can be practiced at any time and place and involves letting go of the self by remaining indifferent and not reacting to sensory and emotional experiences. Practitioners are encouraged to let go of negative thoughts and emotions, and maintain equanimity.

As people are usually blind to influences of defilements, it can be seen that for these farmers *moha* or delusion, which is closely related to ignorance (*avijjā*), was curbed by the practice of mindfulness, which allowed them to have wisdom into the state of their mind. Furthermore, informants offered another explanation of wisdom to include modern knowledge in ecology on one hand and knowledge in methods and techniques of organic farming on the other hand. The former allowed people at Santi Asoke to estimate how deep and wide the impacts would be if synthetic chemicals had been used. The latter helped them produce organic compost fertilizer, plant hormones, and effective microorganisms.

Informants indicated that, before the impressively successful results, it took Santi Asoke members quite some time to learn the knowledge and master the techniques. They testified to the long process of wisdom cultivation through trial and error before they could successfully implement organic farming. Apart from their direct experience from their own experimentation, they studied from sources such as books. The one that was especially influential was the translation of Masanobu Fukuoka's book, "The One-Straw Revolution" (Fukuoka, 1987). While practicing and learning from the guidelines in the book, they also had several study trips to other organic farms. Experts were also invited to provide instruction. Especially after the on-site instruction by Dr. Cho Han Kyu (also known as Han Kyo Cho), the founder of Korean Natural Farming (KNF), Santi Asoke's organic farming was revolutionized and started to take firm and stable steps toward achieving its present success. Even these days, the informants stated that they were still refining and learning new methods and techniques.

To give a broader picture, these findings clearly confirm a finding in Tanko and Ismaila (2021) that religion is one of the factors that determine choices and adoption of agricultural technology. Also, the findings

echo Miao et al. (2021), whose study showed that religious beliefs had significant impacts on farmers' decision making and motivated them to abandon standard ways of practice and develop innovative farming practices.

The focus of the non-toxic crop cultivation is the teaching of right livelihood in the Noble Eightfold Path or, in other words, morality in the Noble Threefold Training. Even though the unique cultivation practices appeared to confirm the idea as testified by Mackenzie (2007) that Santi Asoke focused on the external aspect of behavioral restraints to observe morality, the findings showed that the farmers also practiced mental discipline and wisdom. In other words, they did not practice only one but all of the elements in the Noble Threefold Training. From this, it can be concluded that they not only performed moral practice but also spiritual practice to purify the three poisons or defilements.

While the findings agree with Heikkilä-Horn (1997a, 1997b) and Mackenzie (2007) in that Santi Asoke also emphasized mental discipline through the practice of mindfulness integrated into daily activities, it is further recognized that, apart from wisdom as knowledge in Buddhist teachings, Santi Asoke also considered the learning and mastering of modern knowledge in organic farming as part of wisdom. The methods, techniques, and guidelines developed in the learning process to improve the non-toxic crop cultivation were, then, the fruit of wisdom cultivation.

Moreover, the findings align with Sitthikriengkrai and Porath (2018), who showed the so-called inward extension of Santi Asoke's interpretation of Buddhist moral and spiritual practices to purify defilements in the form of their concern with cleanliness of the physical body as manifested in their practice of detoxification. In addition, this study shows the so-called outward extension of moral purification into the physical world through their characteristic practices of organic farming. It can be stated that both highlight that the center of Santi Asoke's concern is to physically purify mental defilements.

In some respects, the findings are similar to Hoesly (2019), who studied Sunburst Farms' organic farming and found that their agricultural practice was part of the spiritual practice embodied in the process of food production, preparation, and consumption. In their farming, Sunburst farmers experienced cosmic consciousness, meditatively labored, and connected to their fellows and Mother Earth. In this respect, grounding their organic farming on religious and spiritual beliefs, both Santi Asoke and Sunburst farms integrated spiritual practice into their organic farming. In other words, their spirituality and farming practices are inseparable. Moreover, another important factor is that communities should be formed in order to support and sustain innovative farming practices. It is clear that religious and spiritual beliefs significantly contribute to community formation.

However, the cases of Sunburst Farms and Santi Asoke have an important difference. While Sunburst organic farming had a commercial purpose and aimed at profitability in order to provide financial support for their survival, Santi Asoke adopted the Boonniyom system and, therefore, did not care about profitability. On the contrary, Santi Asoke was against the idea of gaining monetary profit, because its quest could lead to the promotion of greed.

It should be noted that Santi Asoke adopts an agent-based perspective in the sense that it focuses on what individuals ought to do to other living beings, which reflects the agent-relative nature of Buddhist ethics. A main reason is the Buddhist doctrine on the law of karma, which teaches that what a person becomes or experiences is explained by consequences of that person's deeds (Fink, 2013). It would be helpful to highlight that this feature is distinctive by comparing it to another kind of agricultural spirituality that emphasized reciprocity between human beings and biota. Pigott (2021) pointed out that such an emphasis is a result of the underlying belief that human beings are members in the biotic community, while Gupta (2023) referred to a similar kind of belief that human beings and Nature have a familial relationship. Therefore, it can be seen that by providing different worldviews, different religions lead to different emphases and thus practices.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

At Ratchathani Asoke, organic farming in the form of non-toxic crop cultivation was developed by disciples of Santi Asoke. Some of their methods and techniques were scientific, in particular the use of microorganisms to produce fertilizer and hormones while some others sounded peculiar such as the methods to lure pests away by providing separate plantation areas or even talking to them. Despite the variety of methods and techniques, the reasons behind all of these practices stemmed from Buddhist teachings. The findings show that Santi Asoke's unique style of organic farming was the result of its efforts to translate Buddhist doctrines into practice. The variety of methods and techniques sheds light on how Santi Asoke translated Buddhist doctrines into non-toxic crop cultivation. Although the practices appeared to focus on moral training and behavioral restraint, they were in fact implemented with mental discipline and developed by wisdom through both Buddhist and modern agricultural knowledge. By this virtue, its organic, non-toxic crop cultivation was in itself an embodiment of the Buddhist spiritual practice of the Threefold Training.

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