



Dhamma Detox at a Thai Buddhist (Asoke) Community Merit-Making, Colon-Cleansing, and Excrement

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Abstract. – In Thailand there is a Buddhist movement called Santi Asok. In recent years one of its lay communities has developed a five-day bodily detoxification course for the good of the Thai public as a form of merit making. Participants who refrain from eating food and drink other than the intake of herbal tonics, undergo various forms of detoxification procedure and particularly colon cleansing. The course culminates in the inspection of the participants' stools followed by a lavish vegetarian meal. This paper analyzes the detox course as a ritual of the body constructed within the anti-materialist and merit-making moral values of the Asok Buddhist community. In this ritual human excrement becomes a symbol revealing the unhealthy polluting demerits of modern consumer society. It concludes that "shit" is a powerful and even dangerous "natural symbol" to moralize with. [*Thailand, Buddhism, Santi Asok, detoxification, complementary and alternative medicine*]

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Most medical traditions utilize a metaphor of the body as "a container." This metaphor is rooted in a natural symbol of the body as an object that absorbs things external to it, contains, and then extracts them. Not all the body's processes of absorption and extraction might be universally known, but the process that supplies the universal image of the body as "container" is the one in which the body takes items

in through the mouth, passes them through a long tube (the gustatory track), and extracts what is left of them out through the anus.

The image of the physical body as a "container" consequently provides a second interrelated image of this receptacle as becoming internally dirty and accumulating toxic muck in the process. The accumulation of muck in the vessel is seen to be detrimental to the body and the well-being of the person and has to be occasionally cleaned out. One procedure is detoxification that purports to rid the body of toxic waste or foul elements from its system. This procedure places the physical body in remedial situations in which the polluting toxic substances that are assumed to exist in the body are usually forced out through the anus (defecation), the mouth (vomit), and the pours of the skin (sweat).

One type of detox cleansing remedy is colon cleansing (irrigation). This form of intestinal cleansing is an ancient technique originally practiced in humoral medicine in which a cleansing agent is either orally taken or is injected up the rectum to induce bowel movement. It was reintroduced into modern medicine already in the 18th century by medical experts such as Johann Kampf who believed that impacted feces had an adverse effect on the body leading to diseases, and he taught his students how to provide enema therapy (Alvarez 1919: 8). In the 19th century, Ilya Metchnikof argued that the body produces toxins that remain in the gut and are then reabsorbed by the body (autointoxication). It was therefore assumed that to prevent diseases certain cleansing procedures were necessary to irrigate the

colon so that the accumulated toxins could be decomposed with acidic substances and then flushed out from the body. The interest in irrigating the colon mirrored the middle class (bourgeois) ideology of sanitation and control of waste disposal of the time. During the 20th century, various apparatuses were devised for this procedure and sold to the general public. The practice of colon irrigation, although still used in nursing to empty the intestines for particular health procedures, generally fell into disuse as a health practice to cleanse the body of autotoxins as the concept of autointoxication was discarded and assumed to be false by medical practitioners. During the later decades of the 20th century forms of detoxification and colon cleansing have been popularly revived as complementary medicine. In response, medical skeptics try to delegitimize detoxification as being nothing more than a money-making quack industry (Ernst 2010: 429).

An anthropological approach to detoxification and colon cleansing would be neutral to the debate of whether detoxification has a scientifically-proven medically therapeutic efficacy or not and would be only concerned with it as a phenomena of social and semiotic practice. Needless to add that an anthropologist should immediately recognize that group detoxification programs that bring people together for its cause can be understood to be a modern bodily-cleansing ritual. Detoxers themselves may consciously strive to structure them as ritual.¹ Like any ritual (and this is not a definition of ritual), detox programs follow a process of placing those it is carried out for in a liminal position. During which time certain activities are performed to induce transformations that are supposed to occur on the participants through the affirmation of communicated knowledge and values (Porath 2011). The tripartite ritual structure of a “before,” “liminal,” and “after” period that generate the ritual process (Turner 1966) is structured along a) polluted, b) cleaning (detoxifying), and c) cleansed (detoxed) trichotomy. As Turner taught us symbols constitute the smallest unit of rituals. What these ritually en-framed symbols index to its participants depends on the key symbols (Ortner 1973) pertaining to the organizers’ general ideology; and within this frame of values they are instrumentally generated to instigate social action (Turner 1967: 32, 36).

Central to detox symbology is the physical human body as a container harboring toxic substances. In anthropology some authors have enumerated a number of symbolic bodies beyond the physical one. Douglas enumerated two bodies (1970), Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) enumerated three, and Firth four bodies (1973: 226). The theoretical point of all these enumerated body suppositions is that not only society is inscribed on the body but the symbolic image of the physical body, its parts, and its processes serve as a vehicle for powerful metaphors that encompass and connect the individual physical body to the other imagined and felt bodies, such as the phenomenally experienced body, the body of social values and values of resistance, and the imagined body of the society that enforces them (Synnott and Howes 1992). As a natural symbol in Douglas’ sense (1970), the image of the body as “container” and its processes of absorption and extraction is representationally constructed through social symbolism (Martin 1992) and pragmatically made to work within a particular social semiosis that provides patients with a value system of personal action for recovery. Medical treatments that purge, purify, or detoxify the receptacle of the body, like a pot being cleaned of its residual content, utilize procedures to semiotically connect the patient’s ailments to the debilitating psychological needs and behavioral actions for the social source of the defilement. Even as it is presented within a universal frame, the detoxification of the physical body and the affirmation of behavioral and social/cultural values are combined together in a totality of the therapeutic procedure. It also provides a template for the reconstruction of social values and norms to prevent the body’s defilement in the future. Thus, the practice of detox can be offered to people within a capitalist value system (giving the impression to medics that it is a money-making scam) or within a value system that opposes capitalism in which people are searching for alternative forms of therapy. Modern-day detox procedures and colon cleansing emerged as a global complementary medical phenomenon and not as part of traditional cultural therapeutics.

Detoxification and particularly colon cleansing is “Douglasian” in another very important sense as it brings us face to face with human exuviae and particularly excrement. Douglas (2002) famously argued that although filth or dirt was a universal concept, what passed for it was socially determined by the symbolic logic of “matter out of place.” Feces, mucous, and other internal body substances are private substances of each particular body that belong to what Leder (1990) has called the “absent” body. This body is the physical body behind the skin func-

¹ The word “ritual” here is not said in a disparaging manner as a medic might use the word “ritual” to denounce the activities of practitioners of other health traditions. Within the disciplinary profession of anthropological understanding, even the medical doctor’s encounter with the patient is a “ritual” and can be studied in terms of the study of ritual.

tioning without our experiencing it. For example, we experience “eating” and we experience body-waste evacuation, but we do not experience the process in between. Occasionally, though the body in between does make its appearance through certain body exuviae that index the internal process of the body, or it does so in the sensations of illness when the “disappeared body” (dys)appears (as Leder puts it) notifying us that something is malfunctioning. When the disappeared body makes its momentary public appearance, as in a discharge of odorous wind and its accompanying sound, or the need to relieve oneself of its waste products, these appearances and outcomes are accounted for through processes that have symbolically socialized them in specific ways (Pickering et al. 2013: 99). The degree to which these “out-of-the-body” substances are considered to be dirty “matter-out-of-conceptual-place” is socially and semiotically determined by the nature of enculturation, or what Elias (1994) called the “civilizing” process. Douglas (2002), however, provides a very important qualification for the dangers of “matter-out-of-place.” Once “matter out of place” is symbolically reframed, its powers are contained and can be used for the social good. Hence, Firth (1973: 287) rephrased Douglas’ expression as “matter in the wrong place” implying that once it is placed in the right place, it ceases to be abject.

Colon cleansing is concerned with cleansing the colon of toxic fecal matter and is therefore also related to the subject of scat. A number of authors writing about excrement and related topics such as latrines and sanitation have pointed out that there is a general academic avoidance of delving into the scatological subject, which at best sometimes only receives a quick sniff.² As Pickering et al. (2013) claim ethnographic studies “appear to stop off at the lavatory” and they consider this evasion of the subject to be itself a biased reflection of the middle-class “fecal habitus” and symbolic aversion to excrement. Nevertheless, a number of articles have been produced in historical and colonial studies although less so in anthropology on this topic.³ Feces, or to use the most connotationally symbolic lexeme for it in English, “shit,” is a highly polysemic vehicle to signal values that can even induce an intersensorial experience of smell on hearing the word. “Shit” also serves as an ultimate sign in the symbolic technique of inversion which also might explain its connection to humor (Budge 2012: 309). Not-

withstanding Douglas’s argument, fecal matter does seem to universally connote filth and it is precisely as filth that it can be semiotically re-framed and used. The ambiguity of fecal matter lies not only in it being a smudgy substance and to its unpleasant odor but in its very position in relation to the body that produced it. It does not belong in the body, and failure to release it would be a sign of the (dys)appeared body. As Lea (1999: 8) writes “excretion is the process of ejecting substances from the body” and it is “not a matter (that is) inside, separate from the body, waiting to come out, but of some kind of discomfort.” But fecal matter has no place out of the body either as it is the most abject of substances. In colon-cleansing procedures, feces become a focus of attention not as disposed-of bodily waste-matter but as internal substances that are in transit to the rectum but which in turn leave accumulated residues in the linings of the gut. By leaving fecal matter in the colon, waste-matter becomes detrimentally left in the wrong place where it can be reabsorbed by the body. Flushing this “matter-out-of-place” out of the body is then assumed to be necessary. In colon-cleansing feces cleansed out of the body is dirt in its right functional process, but outside of the body it still remains abject matter; “shit.”

The symbolic power of this most abject of matter is as such that in languages of civility the numerous words and euphemisms for it and its process of evacuation have symbolic connotations that semiotically sit in a graded hierarchy in relation to each other. In English, for example, words like ordure, stools, feces, excrement, poo (poo) turd, crap, shit (shite), or in Thai, *oojara*, *eu*, *khee*, all have specific extra-semantic connotations that determine their appropriate use.⁴ The hierarchic gradations of the “fe-

4 In Thai the three common words for defecation are *tai oojara* (polite, formal), *eu*, and the colloquial *khee*. The word (*tai*) *oojaara* from the royal lexical speech is official and used in formal discourse such as in medicine. Unlike its English counterparts, the sound of the word is imbricated with a semiotic sense of hierarchy and order in a way that formal words in English do not. It allows the speaker to contain the reference to “shit” in a polite referential context and was originally used to linguistically shield royalty and superiors from its reference. *Eu* is somewhat like “poo” in English and mediates its referent with a childlike onomatopoeic word. The sound *eu* provides the imagery of a “dropping” and the stomach muscles mildly contract when pronouncing it. The word *khee* is a switch word. It can be used to offend and insult, as it can be used to create intimacy through the avoidance of hierarchy. For example, among close friends a person might use the word *khee* to say that they want to go to the toilet. Interestingly the word *khee* it is not used to insult persons by calling them “shit.” However, the lexical sound *khee* lends itself to a number of words to refer to certain negative behavioral characteristics or habits in people in an inoffensive way, but which are somewhat difficult to trans-

2 Inglis (2002); Lea (1999); Loudon (1977).

3 Anderson (2010); Doron and Raja (2015); Budge (2012); Van der Geest (1998, 2002); Panoff (1970); and others quoted in the text.

cal” lexemes semiotically cleanse speech from the force of its power of disruption and contain it when reference to it has to be made (Laporte 2000). Such politer references to it are forms of symbolic containment. Thus, when cleansed, the “turd” can be elevated like the “prince of fools” and momentarily lapped up for its symbolic possibilities. This can only be temporary though as the power of “shit” is as such that it can never be contained for long, for it tends to leak through the construction of its “symbolic containment” and back into the disgustingly abject. In this presentation, varied terms for human excrement will be used, but the word “shit,” as the most symbolically pliable of all the terms for fecal matter, will stand as the general term for it.

This article analyzes a detoxification program in Thailand developed by some lay members of the Thai-Buddhist reformist movement usually referred to as Santi Asoke. The collection of research data was carried out in 2012 at the affiliated community of Srisa Asoke in Kantharalak District, Sri Sa Ket Province (North East region). Among the Asokians this detoxification program was first developed by the Srisa Asoke community and attracted people of greater Thai society who try out the detoxification program but who otherwise have never heard of the Asoke Buddhist movement. The main physical therapeutic aim of the program is liver and intestinal (colon) cleansing (*lang tab, lam sai*) carried out within a Buddhist frame of values held by the Asokians; hence it is called *Dhamma Detox* (or *dhamma lang pit peua kesukapab / Dhamma toxin-cleansing for health*). The organizers make it very clear at the outset that the program does not seek to cure people of diseases and is devised only as a supplementary holistic health procedure. The organizers provide the program to the general public free of charge in the Buddhist spirit of human merit-making. During the program participants detox their bodies over a five-day period at the end of which their stools are publically commented upon, which is then followed by a lavish vegetarian buffet.

The Asoke Buddhist-Network Community of Thailand

The Santi Asoke Community Network was first established during the mid-1970s by a monk called Phra Bodhiraksa, or Samana Photirak, or Pho Than as he is called by the Asokians (*chao Asok*). During the 1960s and before joining the *sangha* (monkhood), Phra Bodhiraksa worked for a television channel, lived in a large house, owned a fancy car, and enjoyed the high life. Dissatisfied with this life of luxurious materialism he became a monk with the Thammayut Thai Buddhist sect, but later joined the Mahanikaya sect. Finally, in 1975, overtly critical of both sects for still being too “this worldly” he broke off from the Mahanikaya and formed a “Place of Buddhism” in Nakhon Pathom, which was first called Dean Asoke. The community attracted a number of lower middle-class, working-class, and rural people for whom his critical religious message had resonance (Mackenzie 2007: 117). Nine Asoke communities have been established from the initial gathering of the people who refer to each other as *Yatidham* (Relatives in Dharma). These communities reside in different parts of the country.⁵ The movement became publically known as Santi Asoke after the name of the Nakhom Pathom group, although each commune in the country has its own name prefixing the word Asoke signifying the town they are located in. The members of all these communities follow the particular teachings of Phra Bodhiraksa (Pho Than) who is the spiritual leader unifying all the groups.

Phra Bodhiraksa (Pho Than) was influenced by the tradition of forest ascetic monks but also claimed that his brand of reformist Buddhism combined elements of both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism (Heikkilä-Horn 1997: 44). He was also influenced by the teachings of earlier reformist Thai monks (particularly Buddhadasa) who wanted to see Buddhism purged of all its “supernatural” and “ritualistic” elements which he saw as accretions to the true teaching and practices of the Lord Buddha. In his “Handbook for Mankind” Buddhadasa called these practices and beliefs “tumors” on the body of true Buddhism. Hence, the Asokians reject many ritualistic practices monks perform for laity as well as rejecting the use of blessed amulets. The Asokians also reject the ontological status of spirits and demons existing in their own right and have redefined them as nothing more than the pro-

late into English: *khee bon* (complainer), *khee on* (someone who influences through soft persuasive tactics), *khee krot/ khee moho* (someone who is quick to anger and easily enraged), *khee nok* (bird shit, dirty, and used for Westerners), *khee niuw* (stingy; *niuw* meaning “sticky”), and other words. In these types of words the sound *khee* could be best translated as “shitter” rather than “shit.” The speaker, however, does not associate the word *khee* with “shit” when speaking, but only implies the meaning of the negative characteristic that the whole term refers to as a behavioral character (*nisai*). People also use these terms self-referentially, and there is no sense of vulgarity, impoliteness, or offence in using them.

5 Nakhon Pathom, Bangkok, Sri Sa Ket, Nakhon Ratchasima, Nakhon Sawan, Chiang Mai, Ubon Ratchathani, Chaiyaphum, and Trang.

jected defilements of the mind. Further, Nibbana is seen as achievable in this lifetime, for both monks and laity, if one sets one's mind to it and follows Buddhist moral behavioral rules (*sila*) and practice meditation.

It has been argued that the movement emerged in a period when Thailand was undergoing radical social change and at a moment of political turmoil just after the failed attempts at democracy and the crushing of the student movement in the mid-1970s (Heikkilä-Horn 1997: 11). A number of pro-democracy monks were defrocked by the then military government. Mackenzie points out that the anti-government protests of the period socially legitimized the civic act of political protest against the status-quo in Thailand and the movement emerged within this political milieu (2007: 159). The 1970s is also the decade of the rise of the middle classes, but there was also a growing dissatisfaction with the social disparity caused by economic development. The emergence of Asoke, then, mirrored the political and economic developments in Thai society of the period (Jackson 1989). Its emergence is described as a "reaction to the changing socioeconomic conditions of the Buddhist community and also to the inertia of the Buddhist establishment" (Suwanna 1990: 397). Unlike other religious reformist movements that emerged, also reflecting the changes in society but with a more capitalist bent (Jackson 1989), the Asok movement developed as a critique of the state-sanctioned *sangha* and the excesses of capitalist society. It called for a return to a simpler way of life, as it also strongly criticized both Thai monks and the laity for indulging in secular wealth (Suwanna 1990: 395). The movement also developed in mirroring-parallel to the rise of the lower-income middle-class' ideological infatuation with notions of traditional rural community and traditional Thai culture that were seen as being eroded by capitalist development.

In its earlier days, the group was politically active and even had a lay member who was a notable politician running for premiership. The group kept a relatively low political profile during the 1990s, as their monks (who were not ordained by the official *sangha*) were forced to defrock and renounce their Buddhist title (Phra) and in effect were excommunicated from the mainstream. This did not prevent members from participating in the political demonstration of the mid-millennium years though (Heikkilä-Horn 2010). According to Heikkilä-Horn (1997) the Asokian movement has suffered persecution not because of their beliefs and practices but because of their public involvement in denunciatory-style politics.

An Asoke community consists of monks and nuns, novices and aspirants as well as laypeople, all of whom live together in a temple compound. Other lay supporters who do not live with them pay visits to their temple compound and provide services as, for example, a teacher might provide some free hours of teaching to the compound's school. Members live a common lifestyle and maintain a unique identity in their main attempt at cleaning the self from defilements (*kilet*). Male monks wear brownish-colored robes in the tradition of the forest monks and go barefoot. Laymen and -women who live within the compound dress in indigo (the traditional dress of the northeastern farmer). They also walk barefoot. Women keep their hair short. Lay members of the community strictly observe five or eight Buddhist precepts (abstaining from killing, false speech, sexual misconduct, stealing, and abstaining from taking sense-altering substances) (Heikkilä-Horn 1997: 91; Essen 2004: 9). One important practice of the group is that they also abstain from eating meat and dairy products. Although the consumption of meat was not prohibited by the Buddha, the Asokians abstain from eating it as it entails killing living things and thus violates the first precept. Every member is restricted to one meal a day. This is seen as a way of cleansing the self from the defilement (*kilet*) of desire and greed. People are also not allowed to wear cosmetics and jewelry as these perpetuate narcissistic attachments to self. Neither are people allowed to wear Buddhist amulets as these are seen as belonging to superstition that only perpetuates a false sense of security of self (recall Buddhadasa's tumors).

For the Asokians, the first step to the erasure of the defilements that cause suffering is through moral practice (*sila*). The practice of *sila* is the antidote to overcoming transgressions of crude form (*vittikama*) that relate to violent conduct, harsh speech, and substance misuse. It helps people to abstain from the six vices of *abayamook* (drinking, alcohol, smoking, gambling, sexual promiscuity, and indulging in nighttime entertainment). Practicing *sila* also makes a person kind, considerate, and empathetic to others. *Sila* also paves the path to merit-making which erases bad karma. The second category of pollutants are of the conscious mind that prevent mental development, such as lust and hatred and these are prevented through meditation (*samadhi*). The third category constitutes the subtle forms that are difficult to recognize and it is by wisdom (*panna*) that one can dig them up and remove them from the mind (Mackenzie 2007: 181 f.).

The Asokian communities are formed in such a way so that laypeople can practice both *sila* and *sa-*

madhi as well as *panna*, in their daily living. The monks and nuns form the “inner circle” and practice “world rejecting asceticism” (Heikkilä-Horn 1997: 172). The laypeople as well as anybody who sojourns with them for a short period are the “outer circle.” They have to follow the monastic rules and practice inner-world asceticism as they go about their worldly focused activities. The practice of inner-world asceticism by the laity is based on Asoke teachings (drawn from Buddadhasa) that sees the achievement of Nibbana as a state of mind rather than a mythical place that is somewhere beyond reach. Therefore, and as already mentioned, it is possible for both monks and laypeople to achieve Nibbana in this life if they follow the precepts, practice merit-making, and meditate (Mackenzie 2007: 174). Hence, the Asokian movement has developed a communal type of living in which laypeople can live closer to the monks making it easier for them to benefit from the religious insights of the Buddha’s teachings as they still engage in worldly pursuits that are necessary to maintain the commune. The laity are encouraged to work diligently in farming, sell produce at a cheap price, and do communal chores in the compound. Community members also maintain vegetarian restaurants where they sell food to the public at a very cheap price. The moral principle that governs the layperson’s commercial engagements follows the dictum propounded by Phra Bodhiraksa, “our (material) loss is our (spiritual) gain” and one of the main slogans that govern their economic pursuits is “consume little, work hard and give the rest to society” (Essen 2005: 46). By producing and selling for society at a cheap price, or even for free, the Asokians make merit and merit-making is the currency of spiritual wealth.

Meritism (*bun-niyom*) underscores the Asok ideology for action and governs social relations between laypeople and between the group and greater Thai society. In Thai Buddhist practice the layperson makes merit by donating to the monks and temple; so people can accumulate merit and can come closer to a state of Nibbana in later lives. Among the Asokians its accumulation is attained by giving and helping and doing things for others (and not just for the monks) (Essen 2004: 14).

Meditation is another important practice. The problem for the laity is that they have to carry out the work for the commune and so have little time for it. To solve this contradiction laypeople living in the compound have been taught to practice mindfulness and meditate with eyes opened while they work (Heikkilä-Horn 1997; Essen 2005). Their daily living is regulated to accord with the practice of mindfulness carried out over every worldly engagement.

Mindfulness is applied to even the seemingly least religious activity, such as washing dishes and disposal of waste (Mackenzie 2007: 134).

It is for the monks to provide guidance to the laypeople. To ensure that people maintain the precepts, the monks monitor people’s behavior but in a guiding and unthreatening and sometimes humorous ironic manner (Essen 2005: 50). They thus provide shared wisdom and insights and allow the layperson to reflect on themselves. The laity are also encouraged to pursue knowledge even from non-Buddhist sources that can be useful for the daily living of the common good.

Although the guiding clergy and laity have a close structural relationship (and even eat together), we cannot really say that the Asokian commune is a *communitas* in the strict Turnian sense. A religious hierarchy still does exist between fully ordained monks, nuns, novices, aspirants, and laypeople who live in the temple compound (Heikkilä-Horn 1997; Essen 2005). Mackenzie (2007: 144) characterizes this social organization as a “flattened hierarchy” and there is greater equality between members within each functioning group. However, a sense of *communitas* does exist among the laypeople. Turner (1966) argued that “*communitas*” stands as momentary formation in opposition to “structure” and, therefore, is difficult to maintain in the long run without it. What keeps the Asokian lay *communitas* as an ongoing social formation is its structural connection to the clergy. The Asokian clergy has allowed for the laity to be connected to it in a particular way that generates a sense of *communitas* for merit-making. Some authors have referred to the Asokian community as forming a kind of utopian community that emphasizes renunciation and moral purification.⁶ For this end, the Asokian image for the layperson’s good life has been modeled on the ideal image of the peasant farmer, a popular ideological image in Thailand, which is commonly used contrastingly with the lifestyles promoted by capitalist development. The Asokian layperson’s lifestyle follows communal living based on organic agriculture and petty-commodity production (Mackenzie 2007: 133). Mackenzie (2007: 163) characterizes the atmosphere in their commune as providing an “old fashioned rural ambience.”

Notwithstanding this rural idyll the Asokians have always been very much concerned with Thai society and with the desire to change it. Their ideal aim is to create Buddha *chatniyom*, a national society of empathetic people following the Buddhist

6 Apinya F. (1993); Reynolds (1994: 447); Heikkilä-Horn (1997: 31).

morals (*sila*) and precepts, making merit (*tam bun*) and developing the Buddha consciousness (Heikkilä-Horn 1997: 122). Its members have developed organic farming techniques, organic fertilizer use and have promoted environmentally friendly Buddhist ways of waste management (Essen 2005: 111).⁷ They have also been staunchly promoting vegetarianism as well as campaigning against the use and availability of alcohol and drugs. Essen (2005: 45) tells us that the Asokians see their activities as an alternative Buddhist development to capitalist or materialist development. It is theirs to seek to build the nation through Buddhist “spiritual development.” Sharing and working for others, both within the commune and for the greater Thai society, is paramount to achieving these goals.

The Asokian ideology of meritism conforms to Thai-ideal Buddhist values of kindness, empathy, goodness, and helping others, and in this respect is not too alien to non-Asokian Thais. But where it differs is in their particular notion of meritism (*bunniyom*) as symbolically contrasted to the modern values of capitalism (*tunniyom*) and materialism (*watuniyom*). Everything that capitalism stands for is opposed to meritism. This aspect of modern society the Asokians denounce as debilitating people from achieving an ideal Buddhist society. As alluded to, Asokians do not see merit as something to be obtained through magical means but through practical means of right conduct towards others. Capitalist materialism as part of Western globalization is here understood as the defiling Other which has transformed traditional Thai Buddhist society in such a way that it has caused havoc in people’s morals, forcing people to cling to money-making defilements that in turn causes poverty, inequality, and suffering. Those who follow and live according to meritism are people satisfied with the simple life of self-sufficiency, live in small houses, and do not need much wealth to be happy. Happiness comes from living modestly, showing kindness to all living creatures, giving to others, and following the Buddha’s precepts. The Asok communities see it as a meritorious duty to present to society an example of this alternative Thai Buddhist way of living and how it could and should function (Mackenzie 2007: 157). For this aim they organize different workshops lasting for a few days and free of charge to disseminate knowledge within a particular ideological and moral frame. These workshops are seen not just as a form of merit-making but are so designed to open up

a field of merit for others to engage in merit-making as well. These workshops can be about Buddhist spiritual development and character-building, alternative ways of building the nation, teaching about environmentally friendly agriculture, and efficient ways of waste disposal. In these workshops participants are lectured factual information about the topic combined with Buddhist ethical values in a classroom setting. Participants are also exhorted to abstain from the six defiling vices of *abayamook* (Essen 2005: 110). These are workshops popularly researched for secular knowledge that “is out there,” that can be of benefit to people and which are offered to encourage people to improve their life-way.

In these workshops the participants are also expected to carry out various chores, cleaning, and cooking, and whatever else needs to be done in the compound. This engagement is defined as merit-making as it draws people into the Asokian lay *communitas* and encourages them to do things for others. It also shows participants other more economical ways of doing and experiencing things for their daily living in line with Buddhist values. Finally, the benefit of vegetarianism is wholeheartedly stressed and promoted.

The Detoxification Program

The detoxification program was initially pioneered for the Asoke community in 2005 at the North Eastern community called Srisa Asoke. The Srisa Asoke community (in Sri-sa-ket) is the most active group having its own temple, school, and land to produce vegetables for the residents’ consumption. It is a self-reliant community that has developed organic techniques of farming which it sees as the way forward for a self-sufficient nation of Thai Buddhists (Kanoksak K. 2007). The commune has served as a pioneer community of religiously-contextualized secular knowledge for the other Asoke communities.

The detoxification program is a latecomer in the Asokian merit-making practice of disseminating knowledge to society. The people who played a vital role in developing and implementing the detoxification program at Srisa Asoke were Achan Khwandin and Achan Kaenfa, after members of the community asked reimbursement for detoxification and colon-cleansing they had undertaken elsewhere. As such expenses were not included in community welfare, the request was rejected. Since those who had undergone a detoxification program claimed that their health had improved, this piqued Kwandin’s curiosity. She recognized not only the therapeutic potential of detoxification but also its spiritual potential

⁷ This they have called three professions to save the nation. See also Essen’s discussion on Asoke notions about economic development (2010).

to bring people into a field of merit-making. During the same time, Ah Kaenfa was one of those who experimented with detoxification after he was diagnosed as suffering from an illness. He also felt that his health had improved after undergoing the procedure (Malee 2016). He, therefore, encouraged Kwandin to pursue this new interest. Kwandin began to develop her knowledge of detoxification procedures by researching information through books and articles on the internet as well as learning from people who were practicing bodily detoxification.⁸

Although the Asokian detox program does have a religious intention, it has attracted many Thais who, although being Buddhists, are not members or supporting followers of the Asoke group. One program can host about a hundred people who come together from all walks of life to undergo detoxification of the body. Participants are usually over the age of forty, although some younger people participate in the program as well as the occasional foreigner. The non-Asokian participants who enroll for the detox program are people who seek an alternative therapy to improve their health rather than people seeking to join a religious sect. Many people also participate in it to learn new alternative techniques of health care. And in the merit-making spirit of sharing knowledge there are those who attend the Asokian detoxification program and use the knowledge they learnt to set up their own detoxification centers. Others who are satisfied with the outcomes come back for more detox and also help those responsible for the program to develop it further by allowing them to experiment with them in developing new techniques.

Over the course of five days, the participants are put under a strict bodily regime of self-renunciation which follows a structure of repetitive activities. They have to wake up every day early in the morning at 4:30 as the Asokians do. On waking participants are not allowed to brush their teeth or use cosmetics. The body must be in its natural state. A mild exercise is performed in the morning. The first detox procedure is oil-pulling in which the participant have to swish a spoonful of coconut oil in the mouth for a few minutes as a means of de-

toxifying it. Next the face is detoxed by smearing curcuma powder on it. Then a foot-soaking detoxification procedure is carried out in which the participants place their feet in a clay bowl of water seasoned with herbs. The idea behind this procedure is that toxins leave the body through the pours of the feet as well. Throughout the day people have to refrain from eating all solids, but a herbal drink is given in the morning and once around five or six in the evening. Lidtox, a herbal drink made of mainly Psyllium husk (a herb commonly used as a laxative) and lemon extracts, combined with few other herbal ingredients, is taken three times a day, around 9:00 a.m., noon, and 3:00 p.m. The aim is to prevent anything from going into the body through the mouth other than laxative herbal tonics, so that the bowl movements can be eased and intestinal transit of all solids and assumed toxins is accomplished. The participants are each given a colon hydrotherapy kit in the form of a plastic bottle and a long plastic tube and they are taught how to inject base water mixed with lye up the rectum to flush the colon and restore the body alkaline balance.

On the last night of the program the liver is detoxified. Around 10:00 p.m. the organizer ask participants to congregate outside their room and together hold a half-full bottle of olive-oil. They start a countdown. When reaching nil they give the order to all the participants to shake the bottle together and gulp the oil down immediately. The participants do this in an encouraging atmosphere of merry unison. Some participants also drink lime juice to make the oil more palatable. The organizers then warn everybody that it is common for people to feel wrestles and not fall asleep and that they should expect the urge to vomit, and if so, should do so. It is also stressed that all participants have to defecate into small bucket-bins made available to them, so that Ajan Kwandin can inspect their feces in the morning. In the morning after the inspection of the buckets, the participants are all hosted to a lavish vegetarian buffet before leaving.

Academic Lecturing and the Therapeutic Cure of Meritism That Completes the Holistic Needs of the Body

Over the five days, as the participants refrain from food-intake but are imbibing herbal drinks at the appropriate times of the day, the organizers provide a series of lectures on detoxification. The lectures emphasize the idea of toxins accumulating in the body's digestive system. Achan Khwandin and other speakers explain that the system collects all re-

⁸ Although the movement idolizes a certain imagined Thai rural lifestyle and opposes materialist globalizing development, particularly for Thai society, it nevertheless obtains and develops its secular knowledge from globalizing sources. For example, Essen (2005: 112) tells us that the organic farming program its members developed for the community and which they would like the Thai rural society to follow, was inspired by the modern natural farming movement in Japan. Likewise, the detox program was a development from the popular global circulation of ideas about it as it is represented in Thai.

fuse from the food it eats and this accumulates in the gut. Meat, undigested food, foods with chemical additives, carbonated soft drinks, and consumer junk food pass through the intestines and change the body's balanced state to be more acidic causing a toxic imbalance that erodes the body organs and this can and does lead to illness. To have a healthy balance the body needs to dispose of these accumulated toxins. The best way of disposing toxins is to follow the "biological clock," another theme focused on in the lectures. This is a concept taught to participants to help them understand how each of the twelve organs, the liver, lungs, large intestine, stomach, spleen, heart, small intestine, urinary bladder, kidney, pericardium, the thermoregulatory system, and the gallbladder, all have their own active moments during the day. Understanding the "biological clock" and knowing each organ's moment can help in scheduling a lifestyle-change fitting for each organ. For example, 11:00 p.m. is said to be the time of the gallbladder when it is most open to draining toxins and gallstones. One to three in the morning is the time for the liver. To fully affect the particular organ one has to focus on it during its moment of the day to achieve a fully balanced functioning organ for a healthy body.

The discussions are bolstered with data from research findings claimed to have the pedigree of Thai and non-Thai international science. By lecturing in an academic and informative manner in a classroom and by providing statistical research-findings the Asokian hosts explain their knowledge and techniques as scientific facts made presentable to a mainly non-commercially focused middle-class and urban audience seeking alternative forms of health care.

During these lectures, images of the liver and intestines and other relevant organs are shown on a TV screen and their functions are explained as well as how they can be infected by toxins. Pictures of diseased organs are also shown. For the participants the images are easily identifiable. In the context of body detoxification the displayed images of the liver/intestines iconically represent and index the innards of each participant on the screen, as if they were temporarily extracted from the inside of their bodies and demonstrated before them. The lectures make the functioning of the submerged "disappeared body" appear before participants eyes. As already mentioned, this "disappeared body" is the body that humans prefer not to know about, because when it resurfaces, it does so as dysfunction. In the detox lectures, this disappeared body is made to symbolically appear and its (dys)appearance is revealed to be toxic.

The organizers also emphasize a specific approach to the disease experience that tries to encourage its transcendence through a change in behavior. Hoppe (2009) following Papadopoulos (2007), calls this an "adversity-activated development" approach. This approach is one taken by some people suffering from illness who become aware that some of the debilitating effects of a disease affliction can be overcome through an attitude and lifestyle change. Such an understanding of how to relate to illness is the one taught by the Asokians. During the program a placard hangs on the wall which condenses this view. The placard states that illness should not be seen as an enemy and is not necessarily bad. Instead, illness should be considered as a sign that there is a disorder in a person's life and it provides a message for people to change those elements in their lifestyle (attachments), so that they can restore a healthy balance again. The notion follows the same logic of "individual agency" behind the Buddhist notion of "sin." Sin and bad karma of previous lives are not unchangeable ontological properties of the person but an act that could be prevented and erased by merit-making activity and right action (Essen 2005: 11, Sasaki 1979). Likewise, illness should be seen as a sign telling the person that something is wrong with the body and a change in behavior is necessary. Illness then is taught to be a sign for a behavioral awakening and a transcendence of self.

The detox program exposes participants to the particular Buddhist ideas of the Asoke group in light of which they are encouraged to reflect upon their way of life, their bodies, eating habits, and the diseases they encounter. The lectures are combined with talks about *dhamma* and right living and the concept of merit-making (*bun niyom*) referentially frames the semiotics of the program. The organizers continuously remind the participants that their detox program is different from others in that it is carried out as an act of merit-making and that merit-making to clean the non-physical defilements of the body is also central to the whole procedure. Meritism is the guiding therapeutic concept for the participants. By participating and following the rules of the program the participants are already making merit. In the lectures participants are taught that unlike the liver and colon, which are physical, merit cannot be empirically observed. Instead, merit must be realized through, and within, oneself and one's own action. The principle of merit-making teaches and encourages people to give to others, help others, and to share with others without thinking of getting a return. It is based on letting go of the self that is dependent on a behavioral readjustment in relation to the social environment. When a person makes merit,

he/she feels happy and joy and this provides a sense of moral cleanliness inside. Through merit-making one can joyously transcend the everyday selves into selves accepting of, and empathetic of others. In the process, merit-making cleanses the non-physical defilements of the body and also mitigates what one does as well as what one consumes.

To encourage merit-making the program (as with all Asokian functions) is constructed as both a teaching device and as field-of-merit. It places participants' detoxifying physical bodies within a social space where people can make merit by actively doing things for others and exchange experiences and knowledge. The organizers encourage people who are all strangers to each other to help with preparing herbal beverages, cleaning toilets, cleaning the floor, collecting herbs, cleaning waste buckets, and other chores that the compound needs. All of these activities cultivated a sense of empathetic human togetherness and friendship among the participants who are forced to relate to strangers with empathy, generosity, and kindness. They place each individual in a context in which they are encouraged to renounce their social status and reduce occupational and social disparity that the external society has created between them. For example, in the Asokian foot-soaking procedure each participant has to provide the water for the other to soak the feet. In a society where feet are considered to be the lowest and dirtiest part of the human body (and symbolically used to express hierarchy) this activity is so organized so that it inverts the social status of people. A person with a high status job such as a university teacher might find him-/herself providing water for the feet of a farmer or a street cleaner in order to help them detoxify their bodies. The feet-soaking procedure is thus framed within the context of letting go of one's social self and encourages thought about egalitarianism and helping others and merit is made that cleanses the defiling toxicity of social strata as it affects oneself and others.

Participants are also encouraged to share knowledge and even services with others. Participants who are knowledgeable in complementary forms of medicine, even if they do not pertain to the Asokian therapeutic repertoire, are encouraged to share knowledge on how to balance the body system. In addition, a few participants with professional skills also provide services for the other participants. A beautician is encouraged to provide free haircuts to others. A participant who works as a masseur or possesses such knowledge will be encouraged to share this expertise with others as well as give people free body massages. Knowledge and services that are commoditized in external capitalist society

are decommoditized and their reproduction is made available in the context of meritism.

Stool Inspection, Mirroring “Shit,” and the Vegetarian Antidote to the Defilements of Meat Consumption

In the morning, Ah Kwandin inspects the content of each bucket-bin containing the participants' stools and representing the conditions of their gustatory tract. The bins symbolically keep the “shit” within the classification of “stools” (or in Thai, *oojara*) and maintain a sympathetic personal connection with the colons that ejected them. The defecators cannot yet disown their own production. The bins are lined out in rows or aggregated together in an orderly manner like people congregated for inspection, or like works of art made available for public viewing. Ajan Kwandin performs her scatological knowledge by authoritatively inspecting the contents of each bin, poking and stirring it with a stick. She shows no disgust. She examines them for any anomalies before its defecator and others who are present. Considering that there could be up to a hundred people, this is quite a task. In special cases, such as stool with blood clots or with an unusually strong smell, she squeezes a bit of the fecal matter between her fingers or brings it close to her nose and smells it. She examines it and in this way explains to its defecator how its characteristics, smell, texture, and color all indicate the particularities of its disposer's health. Each participant is made momentarily to see the signature of his/her dietary habits in his/her own feces, which indexes their behavioral and consumer lifestyle.

When Kwandin comes to inspect the bins, it raises many contradictory sensations in the participants who are placed in an uncomfortable situation. Their feces are made public. For urban middle-class Thais, who live in a nation that for more than a hundred years has undergone the national sanitary transformation of their “toiletary habitus” (Inglis 2002), which brought it in line with a more bourgeois sensibility (Davisakd 2007; Jory 2015), defecation is a private matter that should be carried out with a latrine (flat or seated) and cleaned with water in a closed and private space (*hong nam*, i.e., water room).⁹ Defecating in bins is a highly un-

⁹ The Thai toilet is usually a flat latrine with two feet-size platforms extending on the sides allowing the person to squat. The toilet can be on the ground or raised on a block. There is usually a large bucket of water with a bowl for cleaning and flushing. Today this is the more traditional toilet and is found in both the countryside and the towns. In rural areas, this toi-

comfortable compliance and for stools to be made public could be embarrassing.¹⁰ Further, Thai fecal euphemisms are particularly used to evade a direct mention to body waste and shield people who are in a categorically superior position such as *ajans* (teachers, lecturers) from its reference. In the detox program, however, participants have to accept that someone who throughout the program served them as an *ajan* (teacher) and supervisory guide and who gained their respect, is now concerning herself with *their* excrement as she heroically and selflessly “delves” into the bins for the benefit of providing them with knowledge about their health. But all these uncomfortable sensations they have to let go of within the experiential context of *communitas* merit-making. Kwandin makes it clear that the “stool” inspection is an act of merit-making, a rather challenging idea for people who have a different concept of what counts as merit-making. She also points out to the participants that as “shit” can signify what is wrong with the body, so one can reflexively learn from it that nothing is permanent. Further, once people get used to the foul smell and the dirtiness of “shit,” and this is only a matter of time, they can realize that everything is relative. If people train themselves into seeing that what is abject and disgusting is not the thing itself but is the image of it determined by dispositional attachments and projections, then people can recognize that as with everything else the sense of disgust is impermanent and illusory. In this respect, Ajan Kwandin would see eye to eye with Mary Douglas. But she goes further by relating this aspect of “shit” to positive action. As people have no attachment to “shit” and can clean it out from their colon without reservation, people should likewise also dissolve their attachments to

those things that defile them. By being less obsessively possessive and by letting go people can become happier and more tolerant with their surroundings and this is a step towards merry-making.

Following the public display and inspection of their body waste through which a subtle moral criticism is made of their modern eating habits, the participants have to enjoy one more merit-making moral “assault” on their digestive system. After the fecal inspection, all the starving participants are hosted to a lavish vegetarian buffet. The meal comes after four days of refraining from eating food solids and being lectured about the negative effects of the food they eat and particularly meat, which among the Asokians is categorized as a form of substance abuse that works against merit-making and raises toxicity in the body. By contrast, vegetarian food is not only considered to be healthy but is also a form of holistic medicine associated with loving kindness and merit (Heikkilä-Horn 1997: 162). After five days of *Dhamma* Detox self-renunciation and being confronted with the “shit” of their own dietary habits and starving but, nevertheless, joyous in the *communitas* atmosphere, a final lavishing buffet of vegetarian allsorts (a delicacy under normal conditions) is the “cherry on the cake” of a moral argument that cannot be made any clearer and one that under these symbolically transformative conditions cannot be fully contested.

Cleansing Defilements for a Better Buddhist Society

Taylor (2001) has noted that Thai Buddhist practices of the body are symbolically extended to work within the ideology of the nation as a body. The detox program is a good example of such a symbolic extension in which gross physiological symbols, (what Turner called the sensory pole) are made to critically index the moral and social order (or the ideological pole) (Turner 1966: 28). When the program was first implemented it was done so as a health procedure for the Asokian relatives in *dhamma*. Later, it was promoted as a detoxification program for the general public as a means of merit-making alongside others of their more conventional merit-making programs mentioned above. That detoxification would fit in nicely with the Asokian ideology of an ideal *dhamma* nation is revealed in an interview that Essen conducted with Ah Kaenfa a few years before the program was devised. Responding to her question “what is an ideal Buddhist society?” Ah Kaenfa is quoted as saying:

let can be sometimes outside the house. The genders are kept separate unless the toilet is in a more privately owned public setting where only one toilet exists. Another type of toilet is the Western-type toilet seat. Instead of a bucket of water these usually have a water-sprinkler. Sometimes there is a toilet paper-roll. This toilet represents a newer type of toilet becoming popular over the last decades of the 20th century and its popularity corresponds to the rise of the middle classes and ultramodern spaces.

- 10 With the same civil sensibility references to the natural need are made through the expression *hong nam* (water room) and the notice for the place indicating toilet sometimes displays the word *suka* (pleasure). Although in Thailand defecation is a private matter, people are not averse in letting people know that they need to relieve themselves. For example, apologizing that one has a need to defecate (or urinate) tends to make reference to the place where it is done rather than the act. In Thai, a person will say “*pai hong naam*” (go to the water room/toilet), which sometimes can have a sign over its door with the word *suka* (pleasure). Another reference is *buat* meaning aching. The word *tai oojara* is rarely if ever used in everyday speech.

The perfect society is a society that has people who are perfect. *It is a society in which people are empty of defilements. They don't have defilements at all ...* The perfect society is the society of the noble ones (*ariya*) because they are not wicked, not greedy they do not gather in. They sacrifice for society. There is only giving not taking. This is perfect (Essen 2005: 119, our italics).

It is easy to see how this Buddhist explanation of the ideal society of noble people cleared of defilements of the mind-body-self could be extended to an understanding of poisonous defilements of the physical body and also how the cleansing of each individual body is a process of building a Buddhahood. A healthy society is a society of individuals cleared of all defilements. A healthy body is one free of poisons that infect the gut caused by defiling behavioral dispositions from a morally contentious and defiling lifestyle it is exposed to. The concept of bodily detoxification resonated with the merit-making ideals of the Asokian community as with Thai ideas of the body as an object that not only can be easily defiled and needing to be purified internally, but is physically and behaviorally defiled by the modern society people live in. Adopting and developing the detoxification program has given the Asokians a technique of getting into the very bowls of individuals in order to clean their intestines of the pollution of the meat-eating materialist society they live in. It also uses the detox program to take the opportunity to show participants an alternative possibility for a morally good and healthy way of living through the adoption of meritism. Achieving good health and following Buddhist morality are made to overlap.

Similar to their other programs, *Dhamma Detox* is organized for the purpose of helping build a good society and for finding methods of reducing defilements (Heikkilä-Horn 1997: 170). And like their other activities the detox program is organized in such a way so that non-Asokians can connect to the Asok laity in merit-making. The Asokians, however, do not necessarily want people to join them, although they are open to everybody through a specific procedure of incorporation. Instead, as monks provide lay people with a model by which they can morally measure up their activities in the world, the Asokian “family in Dhamma” provide a lay-Buddhist model by which the average person who attends their programs can morally measure-up his/her own behavioral activity for the benefit of his/her health and community.

As already mentioned, the program generates an atmosphere of *communitas* providing the social frame for the field-of-merit. Among the Asokians, *communitas* is not just a type of “social order.” It

is propagated as a technique to organize people in a certain way so that a field of merit-making and knowledge about merit-making can circulate. As the social nature of the Asokian organization is to persuade participants to engage in merit-making activities, the participants are socially formed into a momentary extension of the Asokian community. Participants (though not the Asokians) become what McDonald (2004) calls “an experiential community.” Wenger (1998) calls this kind of community a “community of practice.” For these authors an “experience movement” refers to the movement of people who come together for the purpose of exchanging information in a context of shared experience. People from all walks of life participate in the movement out of interest and do not necessarily participate in it continuously. Neither is the exchange of experiences meant to generate a collective identity for those who come together for it. In the Asokian program, the participants form a temporary community based on their wish to detox their bodies and find new expressions to their ailments and illness.

Conclusion

The Asoke detox program utilizes a number of therapeutic procedures that are globally promoted by complementary health networks. One of the main targets is the cleansing of the lower gut. In a recent article, Cousins (2015) has argued for an “anthropology of the gut.” He asks the question of whether the gastrointestinal tract, that is “the whole apparatus from the mouth to the anus,” can be a specific kind of anthropological object. He exhorts us to see “the gut as a particular kind of mediator of social relations, and, in a more philosophical register, of insides and outsides, of events, and of difference” (2015: 2). For the anthropology of the gut, Cousins (2015: 3) suggests that we should explore the notion of the gut as an “indexical sign vehicle” and having a role in the making of meaning and bodily well-being in everyday life. The gut is connected to social relations and behavioral dispositions of social needs and desires. He adds that the gut is a “possible tool with which to critically reassess the relationship between the individual and the collective and the narratological and the physiological” (2015: 9). It is suggested here that liver and colon cleansing is a fine topic for the “anthropology of the gut” and that the social life of “shit” also falls within its purview. In an article on latrines, Pickering (2010) provides an image of fecal power in which the modern nation state has controlled the bodies of its citizens by connecting itself to people’s anuses and intes-

tines (the gut) through waste disposal, piping systems, and latrines. In the Asokian detox, an inverse image is provided in which the participants' entoxined gastrointestinal-tracts are symbolically made to connect to the materialist society through its packaged super-market and fast foods, meat and risky-product that finds entry into people's gaping mouths. For the Asokians this connection has a detrimental effect on people's health and the signs shown up in their stools. Anderson (2010) has pointed out that "pollution" and by extension excrement can be analogically or symbolically used to reinforce moral and social order to demarcate categories and express transgressions. He adds that "shit" is an "antitranscendental sign of the present failures" (2010: 173). But as Budge (2012: 310) points out, for shit to have its moral impact and show up the transgressions it has to be publically connected to some person. In the detox program this connection is maintained by keeping the participants' evacuations in buckets as they are publically inspected. As feces are one form of dirt, which is viewed as the inverse of food, its power gains a semiotic force through obverse or reversible mirroring (Babcock 1978). When Aj. Kwandin holds up a bit of a participant's "shit" to show them what is wrong with their digestive track, she subtly also shows up the defiling nature of the consumer lifestyle imposed on them by the capitalist-style development. The aim is to help the participants to transcend their selves by transforming their dietary and behavioral ways and for them to enter into a great engagement with a merit-making lifestyle. She also uses "shit" to teach about non-attachment overcoming disgust and the ephemeral nature reality.

According to Inglis (2002), "faecal matters are always inherently political in character." In fact, we would add that the "power of shit" (as Budge phrases it) is rooted in a symbolically obverse moralism and it is from this that its political character is powerfully generated. To conclude, then, whether one is embarrassed and disgusted by it and try to avoid it, or whether one gains some pleasure in it or whatever other scatological fetish one might have, one thing that can be said about "shit" is that it seems to be also a very, very good natural symbol to moralize with (!) – and therein lies the ambiguously dangerous aspect of its symbolic usage.

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