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Engaged Buddhism in Finland—Too Cautious to Take Action

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Abstract

Socially engaged Buddhism emerged in the 1960s with the participation of Buddhists in Asia and the West alike in the anti-war movement and war relief efforts. The movement rapidly expanded to encompass numerous social and environmental concerns and projects. Although many theoretical studies discuss doctrinal aspects concerning the relationship of Buddhism to social action, very few empirical studies have been conducted investigating how Buddhists relate to social action and which doctrinal aspects they emphasize in actual practice. Here, we address this knowledge

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gap by examining the stances of Finnish Buddhists on social engagement. The study respondents represent a wide set of Buddhist traditions and groups in Finland. We identify several attitudes—positive, positively indifferent, reserved, and critical—among the respondents. Intriguingly, even those with a positive or positively indifferent attitude frequently display high caution in taking social action, preferring to keep it as an individual affair outside of the activities of the Buddhist group. The cautionary stance is related to Buddhist teachings such as impartiality, a meditation practice-focused approach to Buddhism, and financial and personnel resource constraints of Finnish Buddhist groups. We also suggest the stance could be partly explained by social and geopolitical factors. We argue that because Buddhist teachings relate to social engagement in an ambiguous fashion, individual and social factors can outweigh their influence among Buddhists.

Introduction

Socially engaged Buddhism, a modern, distinct movement within Buddhism, which started especially as peace activism in the 1960s and 1970s, is today a scattered movement (mainly) without a shared agenda, doctrine, or spokesperson. At present, engaged Buddhism seeks to address a wide range of different kinds of social and environmental issues. Thus, besides geographically localized pacifist political and anti-war movements such as those initiated by Thích Nhất Hạnh in Vietnam, the fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso in Tibet, and Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, there are other well-known engaged organizations. These include the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), the Zen Peacemakers, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), and various international organizations

founded by exiled Tibetan Buddhist lamas (e.g., Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition [FPMT], Rigpa, and Rokpa Trust). Nevertheless, within the aforementioned organizations, in smaller distinct organizations, in groups without a formal institutional framework, or as solitary practitioners, countless Buddhist monastics and lay practitioners are currently involved in a wide array of social concerns. These include, in addition to the above topics, global social liberation (e.g., women, ethnic, and LGBTQIA+ movements), animal rights, and environmental movements.

At the same time, there is ongoing discussion regarding the scope of the concept of engaged Buddhism, which has even been applied to phenomena such as mindfulness meditation, which alleviates human suffering (Kraft 486–487). Moreover, a number of individuals have raised concerns about the possibility that the term creates unnecessary division and discrimination within Buddhist communities (Bell 400–401, 413–414). According to some critics, engaged Buddhism also entails a profound change in Buddhist soteriology—from a highly personal or otherworldly notion of liberation to a social, economic, and this-worldly liberation, even entailing entities with non-sentient components such as ecosystems. On the one hand, it has been noted that the Buddha was not a social reformer and that the goal of early Buddhism was to leave society and the quest for individual enlightenment, not to serve others (Queen 2000). On the other hand, according to spokespersons such as Thích Nhất Hạnh, all Buddhism is fundamentally engaged, and the term "engaged Buddhism" lacks ultimate validity and has utility only from an instrumental viewpoint (Hunt-Perry and Fine 36; Nhat Hanh 31).

Although many of the organizations embodying engaged Buddhism and its values and practices have been in operation for several decades, in Finland, Buddhist groups that identify as engaged Buddhists have emerged only in recent years. Notably, the branch of Soka Gakkai International, which is known for its work promoting peace and education, was

founded in Finland in 1975. Many Tibetan Buddhist communities have also been doing charity work for a long time, especially by donating money to the aid work of their international Buddhist organizations. Nevertheless, more straightforward Buddhist activism seems to be a more recent phenomenon. The Buddhist groups exemplifying engagement are still marginal, and their influence on Finnish Buddhism is relatively limited. However, it may be expected that their concerns will increasingly receive attention among Buddhists in Finland due to the ongoing eco-crisis and the war in Ukraine, which has particular meaning for Finns owing to historical and geopolitical reasons.

In this article, based on the first author's research of Buddhism in Finland, we will explore the perceptions of Buddhists living in Finland regarding engaged Buddhism. Our first objective is to understand how Buddhist practitioners comprehend "engagement." Secondly, we aim to understand their thoughts and feelings about engaged Buddhism. Finally, we seek to elucidate why Buddhists in Finland interpret engaged Buddhism in the way they do, and particularly, how global and local factors might explain these attitudes.

We begin by discussing certain characteristics of engaged Buddhism. Then, we set our sight on Buddhism in Finland and provide the reader with basic background information. After elaborating on these more general background themes, we describe our research methods and data, examine the understandings of engaged Buddhism produced by the research material, and analyze the results from doctrinal, global, and local perspectives.

Engaged Buddhism

Although the word "engaged" is not always used in this context in popular Buddhist discourse, "engaged Buddhism" or "socially engaged Buddhism"

is a distinct social movement within Buddhism that arose in the 1960s. The term was coined by Vietnamese Zen (Thiền) Buddhist teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh in 1963 in reference to his own reformist views and social relief movement in wartime Vietnam, opposing the social passivity of the Buddhist orthodoxy in Vietnam at the time (Hunt-Perry and Fine 38; Nhat Hanh 30–31).

Until the 1990s, a major focus of engaged Buddhism was on geographically localized pacifist political and anti-war movements. Many key figures were influenced by Gandhi's practical implementation of the ancient Indian concept of nonviolence (Skr. *ahiṃsā*) in the Indian independence movement. In addition to Thích Nhất Hạnh (see Campbell 44), these include the fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso and his Gandhi-inspired active nonviolence stance in the Free Tibet movement (Robinett 238), as well as Aung San Suu Kyi and her democratic pacifist opposition to the Burmese military junta (Myat 3). Another noteworthy, although globally less influential, figure is the Japanese Nichiren Buddhist monk Nichidatsu Fujii (founder of the Nipponzan Myōhōji order), who was devastated by both the imperialist aggression of his native country in the early twentieth century and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. Fujii devoted the following four decades to peace walks, becoming closely acquainted with Gandhi (Green 134–137). Alongside Gandhi, an important predecessor of engaged Buddhism is B. R. Ambedkar. He not only continued Gandhi's legacy of social emancipation in India but, intriguingly, stood in opposition to him. Gandhi believed in the Hindu caste system, maintaining inequality between castes, whereas Ambedkar envisioned Buddhism as a more egalitarian framework, enacting mass conversion of the untouchable (Skr. *dalit*) caste to Buddhism between 1956 and 1966 (Queen, "Introduction" 22–23).

From the start, the engaged Buddhist movement developed in close interaction with global networks, with prominent Asian proponents enjoying high visibility in the Western media. Both Gandhi and Thích Nhất

Hạnh strongly influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. in his civil rights movement for racial equality. Martin Luther King, Jr. became briefly acquainted with Thích Nhất Hạnh, nominating him for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize, an award he himself received in 1964 (Campbell 52). The Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi went on to receive Nobel Peace Prizes for their work in 1989 and 1991, respectively.

Social phenomena intertwined in the early fashioning of engaged Buddhism include the modernization of Buddhism in Asia, the importation and adaptation of Buddhism in the West, the post-colonialism nationalistic movement, and the post-WWII anti-war movement. The last of these was embedded in the student radicalism movement in the West in the 1960s. This created early links between engaged Buddhism and a wide array of originally largely secondary concerns, including race, gender and LGBTQIA+ equality, political liberalism and leftism, and environmentalism, as well as the advocators of these concerns among a young Western counterculture generation (including beatniks, hippies, and academics; Litsch 429–430, 436–437, 442; Queen, "Introduction" 2–4).

Western Buddhists soon began to create their own visions and organizations for engaged Buddhist work. These include the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), founded in 1978 in Hawaii by a group of Zen practitioners led by Robert Baker Aitken, and the Zen Peacemakers, founded in 1980 by Zen teacher Bernie Glassman. BPF is a grassroots organization, although many key figures have had ties to Thích Nhất Hạnh and his Order of Interbeing, which developed into a large network of Buddhist communities and social activities without a clear unifying agenda or set of priorities (Simmer-Brown). In contrast, Zen Peacemakers started out as a more hierarchical organization, although later, it also broadened to encompass an international network. Its distinct features included founding social service-based businesses (such as Greyston Bakery in New York, which produces the brownies for Ben & Jerry's chocolate fudge brownie ice

cream) and holding bearing witness retreats in the streets among the homeless or in warzones (Queen, "Glassman Roshi").

Asian Buddhists also began to create engaged Buddhist organizations in close contact with Western parties. In 1989, the Thai social activist Sulak Sivaraksa founded the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB). INEB has been particularly involved in human rights, military conflicts, and environmental pollution issues in South and Southeast Asia. However, branches of INEB have sprung up across the globe and currently encompass a wide range of national and international issues (Litsch 431). Engaged Buddhist activities are also a key component in three international organizations founded by exiled Tibetan Buddhist lamas: Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), Rigpa, and Rokpa Trust. The engaged activities of FPMT, founded in 1975 by Thubten Yeshe and Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, span from prison chaplaincy work in the U.S. and the Karuna Hospice Service in Australia to the Maitri Project treating leprosy in India (Bucknell 472; Cohn Parkum and Stultz 361; Litsch 433). Rigpa, founded in 1979 by Sogyal Rinpoche, has organized seminars and workshops on care for the dying. Rokpa Trust was founded in 1982 by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Tulku Rinpoche and has focused on assisting people with mental health problems through the Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Center in Scotland as well as overseeing a large number of social aid projects in Tibet (Bell 409–412). Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was also instrumental in the development of engaged Buddhism by founding the Naropa Institute in Colorado, U.S., in 1974. The Naropa Institute offers academic degree programs and organizes conferences and summer schools, combining Buddhist meditative practice and academic study, including a degree program on engaged Buddhism (Goss 330, 337–340).

Although engaged Buddhism has no set definition or agenda, it has distinct features in terms of ideology and practical implementation arising from the Buddhist background compared to other social movements

with similar agendas. One central theme is the lack of separation between virtue and utilitarian ethics. This means that self-improvement through practices like meditation, loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity, as well as personal insight into non-self and impermanence, are usually seen as connected to achieving peace and nonviolence at collective, structural, and global levels.

Important spokespersons for engaged Buddhism, such as Thích Nhất Hạnh, who coined the term in the first place, have remarked that all Buddhism is fundamentally engaged and that the term "engaged Buddhism" has utility only from an instrumental viewpoint while lacking ultimate validity (Hunt-Perry and Fine 36; Nhat Hanh 31). Closely related to this attitude is the view that concepts, views, and beliefs overall can be dangerous if associated with strong attachment and self-identification, serving to justify acts of greed and hatred. Furthermore, understanding, loving-kindness, and compassion should be extended boundlessly to all beings and parties, including the opponents of a social movement. Therefore, engaged Buddhism often lacks the divisiveness and hostility characteristic of secular social movements, seeking dialogue, collaboration, and compromise rather than victory over a perceived enemy. In keeping with these distinct features, the degree of focus on self-cultivation versus practical action in society, as well as the adequate measure of assertiveness and the practical measures required to advance an important ethical agenda, continue to be major subjects of discussion and debate within engaged Buddhist circles (Henry 30; Hunt-Perry and Fine 60–62; Kraft 493–501).

Buddhism in Finland

In comparison to many other European countries, Buddhism took longer to establish itself in Finland (Härkönen and Cairns; Baumann; Baumann

and Prebish). Historically, Finland was known for its religious unity, with the majority of Finns being members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, despite the presence of minority religions for centuries. Additionally, the number of people migrating to Finland has increased only since the 1990s, which is later than in many other countries (Illman, et al.).

Although there has been a long history of religious and cultural uniformity, it is worth recognizing that Buddhism was present in Finland from an early stage. In the nineteenth century, Finnish explorers, linguists, and missionaries encountered Buddhist peoples, including the Kalmyks and Tibetans. These encounters led to the publication of research literature and travel stories in Finnish-language newspapers. According to historical records, Buddhism was first mentioned in a Finnish newspaper in 1822, when the Turku *Wiikkosanomat* newspaper introduced the religion of the Kalmyks. Some Kalmyks had come to Finland with the Russian Cossacks. Church records also mention their burial beliefs as early as the 1740s. It is highly likely that the Kalmyks were the first Buddhists in Finland (Tolvanen).

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Buddhism made its way into the country through different avenues. These included the increasing interest of the Western upper and middle class in spiritualism, Eastern philosophies, scientific research, and critiques of Christianity. In the late nineteenth century, Buddhism began to gain attention in the Grand Duchy of Finland, influenced by the growing interest in international and domestic esotericism. The Theosophical Society in Sweden established its library in Helsinki in 1897, and the Finnish branch was founded ten years later. Key figures of the Finnish Theosophical Society, such as occultist and theosophist Pekka Ervast (1875–1934), Minister of Defense Yrjö Kallinen (1886–1976), and cosmopolitan Mauno Norberg (1884–1956), played significant roles in promoting Buddhism in Finland. Norberg, who had been involved with *Les Amis du Bouddhisme* in Paris,

influenced the naming of the first Finnish Buddhist Association, *Buddhismin ystävät-Buddhismens vänner* ("the Friends of Buddhism"), established in 1947 (Cairns and Taehye sunim).

The association's main focus was to study and discuss Theravāda Buddhism's teachings and work on translating and publishing related texts. In addition, the Friends of Buddhism began collaborating with other Buddhist groups across Europe and the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta early on. After three years of establishment, it also became a member of The World Fellowship of Buddhists. Nordberg attended the first congress in Sri Lanka in 1950 and the third in Burma in 1954 and contributed to international Buddhist publications in English and French.

In the early 1950s, despite a promising start for Buddhism in Finland, the Friends of Buddhism experienced a decline in both members and resources, marking the end of a period of prosperity. They continued translating Buddhist texts, but the lack of funds made it impossible to publish anything. The original members of the Buddhist community grew older, and it became difficult to attract new, particularly younger, members to participate in activities. The Friends of Buddhism struggled to sustain their activities with minimal resources until the 1980s when the last active generation passed away (Cairns and Taehye sunim).

In the 1970s, there was a resurgence of Buddhism in Finland, which continued into the 1980s and 1990s. The Friends of Western Buddhist Order (now known as Triratna) was founded in 1973, and Soka Gakkai International established its branch in 1975. The first Tibetan Buddhist masters, including Kalu Rinpoche and Tarab Tulku Rinpoche, visited Finland in the 1970s. The Dalai Lama made his first visit to Finland in 1988. In 1980, Finnish artist Pekka Airaksinen founded a non-sectarian Tibetan Buddhist "Dharma Centre." In 1987, Timo Klemola, who had met Italian Zen teacher Engaku Taino during previous retreats in Orvieto, Italy, founded an association called *Zenshindojo* (Härkönen and Cairns). In the 1990s, the number

of Buddhist communities continued to grow. Among these was the establishment of Diamond Way Buddhism groups in Turku and Helsinki. The Friends of Buddhism was renamed Bodhidharma Association in 1998 under the leadership of Finnish-born monk Tae Hye sunim. The first associations of Buddhists of immigrant backgrounds were also founded during the 1990s. Some Thai women and their Finnish husbands established The Finnish-Thai Buddhist Association in 1994, and the Community of Vietnamese Buddhists (*Chùa Liên Tâm*) was set up in Turku in 1998. Vietnamese people have been coming to Finland since the 1970s but have practiced Buddhism privately for a long time (Härkönen, "*Elinvoimainen"*; Härkönen et al., "*Neljäkymmentä*").

In the twenty-first century, over thirty new Buddhist associations, communities, and groups of different sizes have been established in Finland, and the number of Buddhists in the country has significantly increased to almost 30,000. The majority of the Buddhist groups are Tibetan Buddhist (including Bön) and ethnic communities, especially Thai and Vietnamese, with various Zen associations also present. Most Buddhists, on the other hand, are of Thai or Vietnamese backgrounds. This reflects the presence of all the main traditions of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna, as well as various ethnic Buddhist groups in Finland. Additionally, there are Western Buddhist organizations and "secular" groups that focus on insight meditation or mindfulness instead of the central Buddhist doctrines (Härkönen "Johdanto osaan II").

Moreover, in Finland, there are Buddhist groups that can be specifically defined as belonging to a socially engaged Buddhist tradition. These groups include Helsinki Zen-Peacemakers Finland, Dharma Voices for Animals, and Green Buddha. Helsinki Zen-Peacemakers Finland, an official affiliate of Zen Peacemakers International, was established by artists Mikko and Maija Ijäs. The Helsinki-based collective engages in socially responsible work, silent reflection, and community service. Green Buddha is a Dharma group that focuses on climate and environmental activism. Its

goal is to integrate activism into Buddhist practice and develop forms of engaged Buddhism. In Green Buddha, it is crucial for Buddhist principles, such as compassion and wisdom, to manifest in tangible ways in the world, rather than simply remaining as meditative or personal ideals. The group is part of the broader engaged Buddhist movement Dharma Action Network for Climate Engagement and One Earth Sangha. Dharma Voices for Animals is a U.S.-based international non-profit organization with members in over fifty countries. Its main goal is to raise awareness of animal suffering among Buddhists worldwide. The organization provides educational materials, organizes petitions for animal welfare in Sri Lanka, and offers a vegan mentorship program (Cairns et al.).

The members of Soka Gakkai in Finland have been collaborating with Finnish peace organizations to promote peace and have taken part in Soka Gakkai's international anti-nuclear projects. Additionally, many Tibetan Buddhist communities in Finland have contributed to the humanitarian efforts of their international counterparts by donating money. However, it seems that engaged Buddhism is not widely recognized in Finland and remains relatively unfamiliar to many.

Materials and Methods

The discussion below is based on the first author's research project on Buddhism in Finland. The project involved forty thematic interviews conducted between 2019 and 2022 with Buddhist practitioners living in Finland and belonging to different Buddhist traditions, schools, and lineages. The interviews explored the history and current state of Buddhist communities, associations, and dharma groups in Finland, as well as their stance towards social and global themes like engaged Buddhism. The research dealt with both ethnic and Finnish Buddhist communities. However, the idea of engaged Buddhism did not come up as a major topic in

the interviews with Buddhists from an Asian immigrant background. Only one Vietnamese Buddhist participant was interested in thinking more about the question. Others either did not know about engaged Buddhism or did not have an opinion on the subject. One reason for this might be that ethnic Buddhism is still relatively new in Finland, and the main focus of the communities is to establish their basic activities in the country rather than to engage with society and its issues, not to mention global problems. Another reason might be that their Buddhist tradition is relatively exclusive, and engaged Buddhism is not part of the traditional canon and practices. This means that the research mainly focused on the views and experiences of Buddhists from Finnish or Western backgrounds.

Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, but a few were organized via Zoom as requested by the interviewee. The language of the interviews was mainly Finnish, but some of the interviews were also conducted in English. In addition to interviews, the author conducted participant observation in different Buddhist communities within the limits of COVID-19 restrictions. The material was analyzed thematically to identify speech related to engaged Buddhism and social and global advocacy.

The dignity and integrity of research subjects have been respected in all situations, including interviews and ethnographic inquiry. Thus, it has been important to ensure that no physical, mental, social, or economic harm is caused to research participants during data gathering, storage, or when findings are reported in research publications (The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2019). Participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were given information about the topic, the aims of the research, its duration, research methods, and how the research material is used and stored. They had the right to withdraw from the study at any time before publishing the research findings without any consequences. Participant observation was conducted only in public venues; individual practitioners are not

identifiable from the research material. Due to Buddhism in Finland being a small phenomenon, it has been essential to pseudonymize the interviewees and the Buddhist communities they belonged to as carefully as possible. For this reason, only the Buddhist tradition, age range, and gender of the participants are mentioned here.

Results: Attitudes Toward Engaged Buddhism

As might be expected, opinions about engaged Buddhism varied among Buddhist practitioners in Finland. These attitudes and perceptions can be divided into four categories. Firstly, there are those who were indifferent as to whether Buddhists should extend their energies to worldly affairs. Most of them had somewhat positive perceptions about Buddhist engagement, which, nevertheless, had no role in their lives or their Buddhist practice. Secondly, there are those who found engaged Buddhism as the essence of all Buddhism. According to them, Buddhist doctrine and ethics encourage concrete action for the benefit of others, or the desire to help others inevitably arises from Buddhist practice and the insight it produces. Some also thought that peaceful activism is compatible with Buddhist doctrine or that Buddhism can be used to justify this kind of activism. The third way was to approach engaged Buddhism with reservations. It was thought that the main values of engaged Buddhism are good in principle, but because they are difficult to implement impartially in practice, engaged Buddhism is somewhat problematic. Finally, some attitudes were mainly critical or negative towards engaged Buddhism. These views emphasized the understanding that Buddhism should not be mixed with politics.

Positively indifferent attitude

The first group had a generally positive but indifferent view of engaged Buddhism. Even if individual practitioners may be aware of or interested in engaged Buddhism, it is likely not to be part of their lives if it does not have any role in their Buddhist community and its practices. A female Zen practitioner in her thirties described her perceptions about engaged Buddhism this way:

> I'm quite familiar with this active Buddhism, and I know that meditation or something like that is organized in environmental matters. [But] as a community, we don't participate in these. It's probably also a bit of a question of resources, as we only have enough people and volunteers to run this [basic operations]. If we had an active person who would say, "Hey, I'm organizing this now," and he or she would start organizing it, that would probably be fine. But it has been the case that whatever is done is done around this core practice. Our approach is somehow different [from engaged Buddhism]. Compared to the Peacemakers, we probably profile ourselves as more traditional; we focus on this basic practice and don't take a stand. It might be that people practice here, and then, for the rest of their time, they do what they do.

A male Zen Buddhist practitioner in his fifties confirmed the above view by stating that his community focused on basic activities as a Buddhist community.

> First of all, we are slow and cautious. If someone wants to go and sit in a concentration camp or somewhere else, that's fine. But what we are investing in as a community is that I remember the Buddha saying that the best gift you can give to a person is to help a person realize. Well, that's

> our thing. And the fact is that our resources are not sufficient for us to organize seemingly silly activities, so we focus on the basics; this is our point of view.

Many communities with limited financial and human resources choose to prioritize traditional formal Buddhist practices over social or global activism and grassroots action. Their focus is on individual realization and how the community can support it. Although these communities do not actively encourage Buddhist activism, they do not prohibit their members from engaging in such activities. Each individual is encouraged to reflect on their own attitude towards engaged Buddhism. This attitude is also obvious in a statement by a female Tibetan Buddhist practitioner in her seventies who said:

> I think everyone must ask themselves that question. In a sense, Buddhism includes this idea of making a better world and the responsibility for one's actions and consequences. But then, at the same time, the root cause of everything is one's self and attitude, and that's where we start. There are a lot of different approaches to it. There is this kind of active Buddhism, where you go to meditate at the gates of the parliament building for the climate or animals, or there are different kinds of charity work. There is something like this, and then there is something like what the Buddhist Union of Finland does: Cooperation between religions and declarations for a better world.

Buddhists in Finland widely embrace and acknowledge the concept of making the world a better place. However, it is also noted that this endeavor begins with an individual mindset and personal actions. The responses highlight the notion that Buddhism can be followed through various methods and that one approach is not superior to another.

Ultimately, it comes down to personal preference. A female Triratna practitioner in her thirties stated:

> Yes, I can see that it [engaged Buddhism] can be a way to manifest Buddhism. It can be a kind, loving action in a way. But the fact is that each Buddhist has to find it himself or herself. There is no one model for how Buddhist practice should be conducted. It can't be said that all Buddhists should be activists, but everyone must find their way to realize those values. This is a roundabout answer, but something like street activism doesn't really appeal to me, at least if combined with Buddhism.

Although engaged Buddhism did not appeal to all practitioners, some found the practice to positively affect their relationships with others. A male Zen practitioner in his thirties said:

> Well, the question is, what are you looking for in Buddhism? If I think about it, I live a very minimalistic life, which may partly come from my monastic experiences. I think that practicing Buddhism shows. Many emotional reactions have eased, and the way I act with other people [has changed]. It does not necessarily mean that this will have a wider social impact. We don't have the Great Commission; we don't go around telling everyone about our thing. So, it doesn't necessarily lead to activism. The Buddhist ethical guidelines are the guidelines that I try to follow.

According to a male Tibetan Buddhist practitioner in his fifties, we naturally become less egoistic and more willing to help when we are not too occupied with our negative emotions, even though Buddhists should not be too concerned about a reality that is impermanent anyway. He said:

> Buddhists are not too concerned anyway because the Earth has to go, and even though we're all going to die, there will

> always be another place to go. So, it's not that it has to be saved at all costs, but it is a beautiful place where you can come into being to have a physical human life, with all kinds of polarities you can work with, making you grow. If certain things are bad, then your soul has an impulse naturally to make things better, and the less egoistic you are the more you start reaching out naturally. We don't have to accumulate that. When you feel good in your life, you're willing to help someone else, the environment, or whatever. When you're comfortable, you start seeing problems outside of you. [But] when you're not comfortable, when you're in deep pain, trauma, or whatever, you don't because the trauma is taking over your space. So that's part of the practice. The less insulted you are by life, the more naturally you want to reach out to life to make it a better place in whatever capacity you have. I think people are free to draw that line. Some people are vegan, some are vegetarian, and some eat meat, but the practice is the same.

The neutral or indifferent perspectives interestingly reflect both the collective and individual aspects of Buddhist practitioners. On the one hand, the practitioners were not involved in concrete, engaged activities if these were not practiced or emphasized in the Buddhist community they belonged to. It is, of course, possible that the practitioners chose to join a community that suited their needs or resonated with their ideas. Thus, on the other hand, the ideas about engaged Buddhism reflected an individualistic interpretation of Buddhism. According to these views, Buddhism is mostly a personal endeavor, and the practitioners themselves have to ponder if engaged Buddhism is something they want to get involved in or not. What is worth noting is that the interviewees did not discuss the influence of karma on an individual's Buddhist journey.

Instead, Buddhism was portrayed as a personal path shaped by individualistic and rational decisions.

Positive stance

Those who have a particularly positive attitude towards engaged Buddhism believe that engagement is the essence of Buddhism, and that Buddhist ethics require concrete action for the benefit of others. A male Vipassana practitioner in his late thirties said:

> I think that ethics is at the core of Buddhist practice and dharma and that it defines everything. It doesn't just mean personal ethics and personal actions but also how we see broader social issues or climate change, for example.

A male Zen Buddhist practitioner in his sixties brought up the Mahāyāna Buddhist bodhisattva vows, whose reciter promises to save all sentient beings:

> . . . countless sentient beings, I promise to save them all. This is the basic ethical starting point. People are obliged to act in the world for the benefit of other people. So, whenever a Zen practitioner sits on a pillow, for example, they go through these bodhisattva vows in their mind: "Why do I do this exercise?" I don't do it to liberate myself but all sentient beings. So, if that is the starting point, then, of course, it is ethical and obliges us to act in this world. So, what does that mean, and what can I do in general? What is such a skillful activity in the world? It can be anything, of course.

According to this male, Buddhist ethics oblige, but it does not in itself answer what this helping or engagement should be. Although the

practice obliges, it also results in compassion and a desire to help others. The man continued:

> . . . If the mind is trans-illuminated, or the mind is studied, then the basic idea across all Buddhism is that dualism and subject-object are a delusion created by the mind. The whole practice aims at breaking this dualism, in other words, blurring the boundaries of the ego. And at best, if a person succeeds in that, it produces compassion for sentient beings. It produces the loss of the illusion of separateness in some form or at least to some degree. . . it produces a sense of human togetherness and everything that arises from it. Compassion, which is the basic Buddhist virtue, is built into the practice. We often talk about *prajñā*, wisdom, and compassion, *prajñā karuṇā*; they go hand in hand. One cannot exist without the other. So, if you learn to understand the structure of the mind and the structure of the world, with that comes a compassionate relationship because you understand that we are not different and that they go hand in hand.

Unlike some positive, indifferent practitioners above, who believe that Buddhist practice can lead to more positive relationships and attitudes towards others and the environment, the man above believed that Buddhist mental practice inevitably leads to the awakening of compassion and the desire to help. Realizing emptiness means ending the distinctions made between self and others, leading to the inevitable rise of compassion. This idea was shared by a male Zen practitioner in his forties:

> . . . Buddhist practice evokes deep compassion for everything, and compassion is action. As Joan Halifax says, it is an empathic resonance that awakens in us, but it only becomes compassion when we do something about it. If we

> see that someone is suffering, and when there is compassion, we will do something to alleviate that suffering.

According to this perspective, what defines compassion is the action that accompanies it. A male Zen practitioner in his thirties believed that forest activism and Buddhist doctrines are compatible and both changes in our views and concrete actions were needed. He shared his plans this way:

> My idea is to get Buddhist practitioners involved in the activist movement, which has now grown a bit. The means used in forest activism are also non-violent means of civil disobedience. They are exactly in accordance with the Buddha's doctrine, defending life without violence. The natural creatures other than humans are in a pretty miserable state. Or, of course, people are too, and this is why others [natural creatures] are too. But we humans are more ruthless than they are, so they need to be supported first and foremost. Yes, I've also thought about how I could help people so that they wouldn't do harm. Probably both need to be done, such as quick actions that are very concrete, prevent someone from cutting down a forest, and at the same time you need to change worldview.

The man mentioned above was involved in both Buddhism and forest activism. However, it is possible to support engaged Buddhism even if one has not directly participated in it. A female Tibetan Buddhist practitioner in her thirties also believed that as times change, new questions and topics for activism naturally arise and this is a welcome trend:

> I haven't been involved, but of course, it's a good thing. It's a good thing when the purpose is to eliminate the suffering of all beings by all means. There are certainly similar

> methods, which historically may not have been used in Buddhist countries, that will be used in, for example, the modern world. In a way, something new comes to that Buddhist tradition. For example, feminism has definitely had a lot of benefits for Buddhism as well.

The quote suggests that as the world and its challenges change, Buddhism must also change and strive to respond to the suffering relevant at any given time. Practitioners who support engaged Buddhism believe that Buddhist doctrine and ethics compel compassionate individuals to act for the benefit of other living beings. In their view, Buddhism and social engagement or activism are not in conflict. On the contrary, engagement is seen as an integral part of Buddhist practice and is seen to arise from a more formal practice.

Reserved attitude

Those who had a reserved attitude towards engaged Buddhism often considered it to be in line with the fundamental values of Buddhist doctrine, but its practical implementation was seen as challenging. These individuals believed that engaged Buddhism carries certain risks, particularly in terms of the politicization and dogmatization of Buddhism, as well as the potential for biased action and egoistic motivation on the part of engaged Buddhist practitioners. A female Zen practitioner in her mid-forties emphasized that their Buddhist community is dedicated to teaching Buddhist principles and facilitating Buddhist practice and realization:

> The position of my own tradition has been and still is that the essential question to which this tradition answers is the question of overcoming one's own internal dispersion and the true personal experiential realization of one's own so-

> called Buddha nature and then manifesting that realization in one's own life. And our tradition is very strongly positioned that this is the only question that matters. That is, our community has strived to provide a framework for the individual to work on the big questions so that he or she can firsthand realize who he or she is and become free. And after that, that person as an individual acts in society as they wish. Then, in a way, she or he participates in society and is integrated into society, but in a very invisible way. This is the starting point of our tradition. If I think about these types of socially engaged Buddhism, it has sort of developed in such a way that the people who developed it in America first trained in this kind of traditional Zen and they have gained some kind of insight and vision from there, which in their case has taken shape in socially engaged Buddhism. I think that this is necessary. It can be very necessary and good to be done, and I am interested in it. But the question that I think always arises at this point is that if a person starts that practice directly from there [activism], does she get something from that practice with the insight of her own nature and her own mind. And to that question, I'm not sure how [to answer]. That's kind of the point where I would ask the question, how is this actually going to happen? Because everyone does social work, at least quite a few. If that social work is not really positioned in understanding oneself, people usually burn out, and that's all.

The woman was concerned about the risks she associated with engaged Buddhism. She suggested that activism should stem from a deeper understanding and more formal practice, similar to the approach taken by the earlier developers of engaged Buddhism. According to her, without

this foundation, individuals may be at risk of burning out when engaging in social and activist work. A female Vipassana practitioner in her thirties also expressed concerns about engaged Buddhism. She believed that the intention behind engaged Buddhism is crucial in determining whether it can have a positive or negative value. She thought that engaged Buddhism should be based on right intention and Buddhist ethics, which requires a deep and thorough Buddhist practice. She said:

> I think that's a really interesting discussion, and my spouse and I have discussed it quite a lot. And there has also been some discussion about it in our community's Facebook group at some point. When, for example, some Extinction Rebellion links were brought there, we discussed whether they belonged there and whether they were actually detached from our practice tradition. This [ER] is, after all, a group that does not obey the law and we can't bring such material and such thinking into our association, something that not everyone perhaps can sign, and who nevertheless want to practice Buddhism. Maybe I myself would position it [activism] outside of Buddhist practice. This is because I see that the important thing is intention. When it is said that it is precisely through this kind of deep practice that it arises that I want to act like this in the world, and this comes from compassion. But it can't be that a practitioner, who perhaps hasn't been practicing for that long time, jumps in an Extinction Rebellion demonstration, and maybe has a lot of aggression in the background or sadness, fear. And then, on the other hand, Buddha also taught that people are different, and different practices are suitable for different people. I also believe quite strongly that for some people, practice leads to activism, but then again, for others, it can lead to helping or compassion in closer circles,

> which can be just as powerful and as important. We don't know where everything will lead because we are only individuals who are not yet enlightened, so the intention is really important. And it is also one of the things that has been really, really important to me in the Buddha's teachings and helps me in those ethical choices.

This woman raised concerns about the potential impact of engaged Buddhism if adopted by a Buddhist group. She worried about the group getting involved in potentially illegal activities and the unwillingness of some people to participate. She also highlighted the important Buddhist concept of intention, which determines whether an action is positive or negative. Finally, she stated that different practices are suitable for different people and that because we are not enlightened, it is difficult to know whether getting involved in engaged Buddhism is, after all, good or bad.

The intention behind socially engaged activities is important, and it is also crucial to be aware of the agenda and goals of the activism. A Vietnamese Buddhist man mentioned that protesting is acceptable if the goals and agenda are known:

> A protest, for example, is not wrong, but it depends on what you are protesting for. Who is leading the demonstration, what is his goal, where is he leading these people, and in what way he demonstrates that is another matter. For example, now that America has this Black Lives Matter, so in the first place, it was against racism. It's not wrong. It's perfectly fine; it's ok to go and show your opinion. But what it has now led to is completely wrong. It depends a lot on where the demonstration is taken, what one stands for, or what one speaks for. If you're a Buddhist, yes, you can express your opinion. But in what way and what its aim or

> goal is; that is what determines whether it is right or wrong.

A man in his thirties who practices different schools of Buddhism mentioned that he is interested in engaged Buddhism, seeing it as a necessary and positive development. However, he also expressed concerns about the politicization and dogmatization of Buddhism:

> This is a difficult question. On the one hand, activism can easily become politicized, and then it can easily become dogmatic. . . I see a lot of risks in that, but at the same time movements are still being formed, and in a way, I feel that we need changes on a collective, large level, and together we are stronger. So yes, I sometimes think that I could join that activity. For the most part, at least, it seems quite peaceful, and I have somehow thought about changing the world through non-violence. I would like to believe that it is possible, and if I say this, the next thought is that I see it as a really positive thing. However, I always think about the backlash.

Those who had reservations about engaged Buddhism considered it a positive and worthwhile activity in terms of principles. However, they saw many risks in participating in engaged Buddhism, both for the individual and for the Buddhist community.

Critical views

Those who were highly critical of engaged Buddhism believed that the associated risks are so serious that it is preferable to avoid this form of Buddhism entirely. They argued that getting involved in activism means

mixing Buddhism with politics, which makes it impossible to uphold the Buddhist ideal of equanimity. A Tibetan Buddhist teacher expressed this viewpoint:

> I try to stay out of politics because if you think that the most important task is to teach all beings who are interested in Buddhism, then if I myself take a strong political position, then those who are in some other party cannot come and listen to my teachings because of that. That's the reason why we don't get involved in party politics.

A middle-aged male practicing Tibetan Buddhism shared the same opinion:

> It's a completely personal matter. Someone might find that kind of thing interesting, but it doesn't necessarily happen in the role of a Buddhist or a practitioner, but rather in the role of a concerned citizen. However, we do not want to connect such personal political activities with Buddhism. It is then a person's own opinion, and he can act based on it. The Tibetan Buddhist practitioners probably have very different political opinions; you can probably find a wide range there.

A female practitioner in her thirties from the Triratna community suggested that Buddhism and politics should not be combined.

> I don't think it's good, at least publicly, to combine these because they're not the Buddha's teachings; there's nothing political in the teachings; they're just a way to free yourself from all the burdens of concepts. In activism, then, something like the world is divided into parts, and something is tried to be pushed. The ultimate happiness cannot

> be found there. But I understand that sometimes it is useful to act for the benefit of this society with a compassionate attitude. If I did something [activism], I would do it secretly and not tell anyone.

A female Tibetan Buddhist practitioner expressed concern about the potential for aggression within Buddhist activism.

> Personally, I don't like it. I think they can go somewhere else where it can be carried. Actually, I haven't even really thought about it; this is just such an intuitive objection to activism. Maybe there is a bit of a gate theory here. If you go along with it, then you are automatically in saṃsāra. When you go there flat-out, there's a lot of aggression mixed with that kind of flat-out going. I know a lot of aggressive vegetarians who have been really angry if someone eats something. In my opinion, this is something other than wisdom. I'm not saying that all Buddhists should just sit and smile, but don't take the Buddha there with you. --- In my opinion, Buddhists should not get involved in politics. Of course, sometimes you have to; you shouldn't close your eyes to saṃsāra and imagine that everything is great. So, you could go, as a Buddhist, you could join some social activity. I'd rather go that way. Vegetarianism and animal protection and the like. After all, they are all acceptable things.

She continued:

> And then again, the line between ethics and politics is starting to blur nowadays; you can't really say what goes where, and usually, if you promote something, then you oppose something else. As our teacher said, "If Trump wins

> the election, Biden will suffer. But if Biden wins, Trump will suffer." This in itself is a non-Buddhist polarized aspect. One should always try to find solutions where no one suffers.

The above statements demonstrate that engaged Buddhism is primarily understood as political activism and participation in party politics. Many Buddhist teachers are questioning whether they should express strong opinions on these topics, as holding the wrong political opinions can deter potential practitioners. The main concern is whether maintaining a neutral stance will be effective if you take a strong position on something.

The reluctance of Tibetan Buddhists to take a stand on the human rights and political situation in Tibet has been remarkable in the Buddhist community in Finland. Only one Tibetan Buddhist community in Finland has openly addressed the Tibet question. They have actively highlighted the situation in Tibet on their website and have invited well-known Tibetan political figures and former political prisoners to visit Finland. When asked about the reason for their activism, a woman from the community said, "How can Tibetans practice [Buddhism] if they don't have the right to do so?" However, there is a group of Tibetan Buddhism practitioners who choose not to take a position on the situation in Tibet by participating in demonstrations or signing petitions. Some refrain from visible political expression because their Tibetan teachers have advised them to do so. According to them, delivering humanitarian aid to Tibetan areas could become difficult or impossible if their political opinion about the situation in Tibet is voiced. A female Tibetan Buddhist explained:

> We have such things, such as Tibetan human rights. They have been on the back burner in the Buddhist field for a long time, but for as long as I oversaw the humanitarian work of our organization, we were advised that we have to

> be really, really diplomatic. So that we can act to get help there. Just like all humanitarian activities are based on not getting involved in politics because otherwise, the target group would die there. We can't share that money and food with them if we start arguing. And it's still a bit the same [situation] because the humanitarian work hasn't finished, so we're still being cautious about it.

There are differing views on the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet. Although the practitioner mentioned above acknowledged that the Tibet issue is something practitioners have to consider, not everyone agrees with this. A female Bön practitioner expressed her opinion:

> [Buddhism] is a spiritual practice and not a political exercise. They are separate. Buddhist spiritual teachings are in no way tied to Tibet. They are not tied to any country or corner of the world. They [the teachings] are, of course, tied to those people who can give those teachings, but it has nothing to do politically with Tibet.

These Buddhist practitioners emphasized that being generous and helpful can have a deeper impact beyond trying to change things or persuade others. The female Bön practitioner continued.

> When we have daily exercises, and if you really want to do them properly, it involves practice of the Four Generosities a day. They are done at the level of the mind. And they are important. You can also help financially, give food, money, and whatever people need in life. But we want to emphasize that you have to remember that generosity is not only about concrete physical generosity but the sharing of all kinds of important good experiences; that is great

> generosity. And it's more than that. It's not just sharing spiritual experiences but whatever one has learned and so on. Generosity is such a broad concept.

She also wanted to dispel the misconception that Buddhism is selfish navel-gazing. Like many others interviewed, she pointed out that the most important aspect of Buddhism is to first change oneself. Only then is it possible to help others wisely and compassionately, with the right intention.

> People imagine that meditation is about staring at your own navel because they don't understand that the starting point is that you do those exercises. You will become a more positive and better person, and you will open to everyone else, and you will become more generous and compassionate, and you will be able to help people in a completely different way. Because a lot of help can be very selfish and start from selfish motives. What is that genuine motive, and with what motive do you do that generosity? But when it's not understood that way, even my friends have sometimes said that Buddhist practice is a totally selfish thing. Staring at one's own navel! They imagine it like this.

Those who are especially critical of engaged Buddhism have similar concerns about it as those who approach engaged Buddhism with reservations. However, more than these, they understand engaged Buddhism as a political activity, which for them means taking sides and deviating from the Buddhist principle of equanimity.

Discussion

The study reveals that the views held by Finnish Buddhists on social engagement echo a wide range of topics featured in global discussions about the theme. The virtue of working to relieve the suffering of beings is itself not rejected, as all Buddhist traditions emphasize virtues such as nonviolence, loving kindness and compassion. However, various strands of Buddhist teachings are used to justify stances on practical action on a continuum from endorsement to rejection.

Doctrinal aspects that incentivize social engagement include universal Buddhist virtues of nonviolence, loving-kindness, and compassion (Schmithausen 12–13, 34), as well as the bodhisattva ideal and notion of interbeing particular to Mahāyāna Buddhism (Hunt-Perry and Fine 53–54; W. King 16; S. King 23–24; Queen, "Introduction" 14–15). The practitioner on the bodhisattva path delays full enlightenment until having helped all other sentient beings become enlightened. The bodhisattva path focuses on practicing the Six Perfections (Skr. *pāramitā*): generosity (Skr. *dāna*), ethical conduct (Skr. *śīla*), patience (Skr. *kṣānti*), energy (Skr. *vīrya*), meditation (Skr. *dhyāna*) and insight (Skr. *prajñā*). The practice of the Perfections may assume the form of social relief and other forms of engagement. Alternatively, a Mahāyāna practitioner may consider social engagement to represent an advanced stage of cultivating the Perfections on the bodhisattva path. This can result in social passivity, despite the same underlying practice philosophy. Compared to Theravāda Buddhism, many Mahāyāna schools have also placed greater emphasis on lay practice and monastic models more strongly interwoven into the fabric of the surrounding society, including involvement with agriculture and trade; (for the case of Chan Buddhism, see e.g., Wang and Xiao). In certain Mahāyāna Buddhist schools, the doctrine of interdependence has also been developed to support social engagement. According to the doctrine, all phenomena are relational (empty of a separate self), arising in dependence on one another. This represents a type of systems thinking where the well-

being of all sentient beings and the condition of their surroundings are all inextricably interconnected (Hunt-Perry and Fine 48; Kaza 164–168, 174; Schmithausen 12–13, 34). Therefore, one cannot advance one's own well-being in isolation but only by advancing the well-being of other beings. Several of the study respondents mention compassion or love as reasons for social engagement, and some explicitly mention the bodhisattva ideal. Intriguingly, interdependence is infrequently mentioned by the study respondents in this context. This may reflect a lack of awareness of Buddhist literature on social engagement among Finns, as the other doctrines are more generic and occur across Buddhist teachings.

There are also various interpretations of key Buddhist doctrines and practices that have been argued to disincentivize social engagement. These can be further classified into traditional and novel disincentives. Traditional disincentives include particular interpretations of karma, enlightenment, and rebirth. Although the Buddha taught that karma—volitional mental, verbal, and physical actions of a person in the past (including past lives)—is only one factor contributing to current circumstances, the doctrine of karma has been frequently interpreted as people having earned their current circumstances. This has led to blaming victims of ill extrinsic circumstances (including oneself), for their own suffering, such as physical disability, mental illness, the female gender (in countries with gender disparity), or poverty. This can further engender a hostile or indifferent attitude towards other people or organisms facing extrinsic adversities and a submissive attitude towards one's own adverse extrinsic conditions. The rationale holds that by bearing the karmic burden of past unskillful actions, the negative karma becomes exhausted, and the suffering ends by itself. However, even if the underlying interpretation of karma were correct, it has been argued that this does not imply passivity. The whole reason the Buddha taught was to empower people to cultivate a range of skillful actions constituting spiritual practice, in turn, creating the karmic consequences leading to future circumstances. The Buddha also explicitly discouraged people from wasting time that could be better

used in skillful action by speculation regarding their karmic inheritance (King 159–161).

Traditional views on enlightenment and rebirth that can discourage social engagement are based on a focus on individual spiritual practice to escape the endless samsaric cycle of suffering by achieving an otherworldly state or rebirth in a higher realm (divine realm or pure land). These views frame suffering and social problems in the world as inherent features of samsara that cannot be quenched. However, by devoting oneself to meditative practice or merit-making, one can free oneself from samsara or extrinsic conditions obstructing spiritual practice (Loy 59, 67). This view has an element of empowerment (to determine one's own fate) and can be connected to virtues such as loving-kindness and compassion. For instance, the reasoning may hold that the most compassionate thing one may accomplish for the sake of other beings is to liberate oneself from desire, aversion, and ignorance, or that one cannot truly be of benefit to other beings without pure intentions only achieved through intense contemplative spiritual practice. Nevertheless, the outcome is social retirement and passivity.

David Loy has recently argued that this-worldly Buddhism of the modern mindfulness movement shares the social passivity of the otherworldly Buddhism seeking to escape saṃsāra. Similar to personal escape from samsaric suffering into otherworldly states or realms, the mindfulness movement is focused on the ideal of maximizing personal well-being through meditative practice rather than addressing or transforming the problems of the world (59). In the mindfulness movement, this ideal has strikingly different features, with close connections to individualism, consumerism (well-being industry), and a secular (mindfulness-focused) interpretation of Buddhism, yet it can have the same outcome of social detachment.

Among the doctrinal aspects of disincentivizing social engagement, the study respondents make no reference to karma, which may also be considered something improper to mention in a Buddhist context. This may reflect a more individualistic and secular approach to Buddhism among Western Buddhists compared to more traditional Buddhists in Asia. Notably, none mentions primarily seeking personal well-being through meditative practices either. However, one reason for the absence of this motive may also be that study respondents consider it to be an improper motive to state in an interview. Although direct mentions of escape from saṃsāra do not occur, to some respondents, Buddhism is first and foremost a method of internal cultivation with disregard for the state of the external world, which could be considered a more secular interpretation of this doctrine. Notably, this stance has previously been discussed as a feature of Theravāda Buddhism in particular (see e.g., Swearer), but in our study, it is held by representatives of several Mahāyāna Buddhist groups. This could reflect elements of the mindfulness-as-well-being movement, namely, a quest for personal positive transformation through meditative practices rather than being connected to the doctrine of saṃsāra. Overall, this theme is not as prominent in our study as might be expected based on previous literature on the topic at the global level. More stress is placed on the delicacy and subtlety of the relationship between internal cultivation and social activism and between compassion and nonpartiality.

The doctrinal understanding of social engagement by the study respondents is strongly connected to how they relate to social engagement. The mainstream of the study participants displays social passivity, covering respondents displaying positive indifferent, reserved, and critical attitudes. Those with positive indifferent and reserved attitudes stress the primacy of internal cultivation and the importance of careful consideration of the underlying intention and specific means of social engagement. Many argue that because of the complexity of the issue, social engagement should be a personal choice that should not be connected clearly

with Buddhist practice groups. This may reflect the individualistic emphasis of Buddhism in the West or, alternatively, practical political caution in Tibetan Buddhist or Asian-based groups. Some respondents with a critical stance are skeptical about whether social engagement is possible in the first place without being accompanied by burnout, expressions of aggression, or attachment to dualistic views. Compassion is highly valued by several study participants, but whereas some use it to justify a positive attitude towards social engagement, many others interpret it in a polar opposite manner. For them, compassion results in embracing all parties of conflicting views and not taking stances, which is considered to be biased and discriminatory behavior: uncompassionate and therefore unsuited to a Buddhist.

The study respondents also mention non-doctrinal, practical reasons for social passivity. These include personnel and financial limitations, as Finnish Buddhist groups are often small and operate under low resources. This is used as a justification for focusing on forms of internal cultivation such as meditative practices and Dharma study interpreted as core functions of the groups. Moreover, in small groups, individual activist members may have a disproportionate effect on the social engagement of the entire community. These effects are likely to be particularly important for Buddhist groups without a clear institutional stance on social activism.

A key final question is why the study respondents view and relate to social engagement in the way outlined above. At the global level, the lack of mention of karma and escape from rebirth, as well as the advocacy of social engagement being a personal choice rather than a group affair, could all be related to the prominence of individualistic and secular interpretations among Western Buddhists. At the local level, the lack of mention of interdependence could reflect a lack of access to or interest in English-language Buddhist writings on social engagement, where this concept is often featured. Among the global discussions on the theme, a key

local focus of the Finnish respondents is the complexity and tensions surrounding the issue (internal cultivation vs. external activities; compassion vs. nonpartiality). This high level of caution appears as a key justification for the social passivity of the respondents across the positive indifferent and reserved people. As those with a critical stance reject social engagement altogether, this leaves only a small minority with a clearly positive attitude to be socially engaged.

The observation that only a very narrow set of study participants display social engagement suggests that an ambiguous relationship between personal cultivation, the virtue of compassion, and social action in Buddhist teachings constitutes a major bottleneck for Buddhist social engagement in Finland. It is possible that such ambiguity causes other factors, such as cultural customs and personal interests, to outweigh the role of Buddhism in social engagement. Finland is located between Western Europe and Russia and has a history of highly cautionary and diplomatic politics to appease political and trade entities that may be adversaries of one another and yet important for national security and the economy (e.g., Ritvanen). One example in relation to Buddhism is cautionary politics with China on the Tibet issue (alongside other human rights issues), with no head of state agreeing to meet the Dalai Lama officially during his visits to Finland. The welfare state provides a high standard of living, with very low levels of corruption, and relatively high equality of the genders and several minority groups, which may have also obstructed the formation and maintenance of an active culture of social protest and political involvement. In Nordic welfare state countries, the Church and municipal authorities cooperate in welfare provision in a highly organized fashion, with little need for citizen movements and non-profit organizations to address most welfare issues (Angell and Pessi 80). It has also been argued that, due to Lutheranism, the political culture of Nordic countries emphasizes social passivity through subordination to and belief in Church and state authorities (Tiilikainen 31). Factors such as these could cause the

Finns to have cautionary and complacent tendencies regarding social engagement, leading them to interpret the ambiguous Buddhist teachings in a way that supports their preference for social passivity. Moreover, it is possible that an unintended outcome of social passivity is due to the voluntary work of Finnish Buddhists within Buddhist organizations taking the place of voluntary work that could be done in other areas of society, as different activities compete with the free time of people (Hanifi 43).

Conclusion: Too Careful to Care?

In the research study, we were interested in how Finnish Buddhist practitioners understand engaged Buddhism, what ideas and attitudes they have towards it, and which factors could explain these understandings and perceptions.

Many interviewees were unfamiliar with engaged Buddhism as a global phenomenon and movement. All of the respondents were of the opinion that compassion is one of the most important doctrines in Buddhism and that compassion should be extended to all living beings. However, perceptions of how compassion should appear or be expressed varied considerably. According to some, compassion should not remain just an ideal but should be cultivated through concrete action. Such an attitude adheres to or comes close to the ideas and actions of international engaged Buddhism. Nevertheless, some of the respondents associated engaged Buddhism especially with political activities, which, according to them, do not belong to Buddhism. For them, engaged Buddhism did not mean, for example, voluntary work or participation in humanitarian projects but, above all, secular (party) political activities. Clearly, the majority of those studied had a positively indifferent or reserved attitude towards engaged Buddhism. It thus seems that Buddhist practitioners in Finland are particularly careful when it comes to deliberately participating in social activism as *Buddhists*. Prudence can be explained by Buddhist

teachings, such as impartiality, but also by various geopolitical and social factors.

It could be assumed that there would be a Buddhist generation growing up in Finland which is increasingly aware of the ideas of engaged Buddhism and whose Buddhist practice would be anchored specifically to engaged Buddhism. This generation is fluent in global digital platforms where engaged Buddhism is promoted. Moreover, young people have also been active in recent years, for example, in the environmental movement. In Finland, they are probably also freer from the geopolitical concerns of the older generation and the political caution that results from it. However, the research on millennial Buddhists shows that engaged Buddhism is not particularly important to this generation. For them, Buddhism is a "philosophy of doing, "which means, above all, personal meditation practice, not engaged activism (Härkönen "Y-ja"). Nevertheless, a few Buddhist groups placing prominence on socially engaged action, Nirodha (Insight Meditation Society), Helsinki Zen–Peacemakers Finland (Zen Peacemakers), and a Finnish chapter of Dharma Voices for Animals have emerged in recent years. However, it is possible that this simply reflects an increase in the diversity of Buddhist groups globally over time, and thus also locally in Finland, rather than a particular trend toward increased social action among Finnish Buddhists.

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