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Is There a Traditionalist Buddhist Social Engagement? FPMT and the Study of Engaged Buddhism

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Is There a Traditionalist Buddhist Social Engagement? FPMT and the Study of Engaged Buddhism

Donna Lynn Brown¹

Abstract

This article builds on a previous article in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* by the same author, “[Beyond Queen and King: Democratizing ‘Engaged Buddhism.’](#)” That article argued that the limits that pioneering scholars of engagement placed around “engaged Buddhism” in the 1990s, out of which grew a rough consensus in Buddhist Studies concerning its nature, should be expanded so that scholarship on engagement includes more Buddhists and social endeavors. The article also noted that one group left out of scholarship was engaged traditionalist Buddhists. It added that much scholarly work on engagement focused on certain now-familiar twentieth-century movements, seldom adding new data. The current article contributes to filling these gaps. Proposing updated definitions of traditional

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Buddhism and Buddhist social engagement, it offers a brief review of literature on traditionalists' engagement and then presents new data on the engagement of the traditionalist transnational network *Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition* (FPMT). Analyzing these data, it then describes FPMT's pattern of social engagement as potentially suited to being called "traditionalist."

Introduction

Scholarship on Buddhists' social engagement was launched in the 1990s by Christopher S. Queen, Sallie B. King, and others (Brown "Beyond" 13). They theorized that Buddhists' engagement was, as Ann Gleig summarized it in a 2021 encyclopedia article, "an expression of Buddhist modernism" ("Engaged").² This approach inadvertently perpetuates a stereotype put in place by earlier scholars that depicts traditionalist Buddhists as withdrawn from society, passive in the face of suffering, and overly supportive of existing social orders.³ Assumptions about traditionalist disengagement then inhibit scholars from gathering data on their engagement and analyzing its patterns. The absence of today's traditionalists from scholarship

² Queen tends to overlook traditionalists' engagement. For example, in a 2022 book review, he suggests that in Asia and the West, traditionalists do not typically "serve their communities" through charitable or reformist activity ("An Introduction to Engaged" 108). King has written as well that traditionalists do not engage socially and Buddhists who do are all modernists (e.g., "Conclusion" 403, 408-409, 413-414).

³ The stereotype appears in works by early scholars like Max Weber, Louis Dumont, Melford Spiro, and Winston King, who present traditional Buddhism as disengaged (Brown "Is Buddhism" 64-70). It reappears in some later works on engagement and on Buddhist modernism. Thomas Yarnall, for example, finds it in various scholarly works on engagement (311-321). And David McMahan, in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, contrasts interiority, which he associates with traditionalism, with engagement, which he associates with modernism (252).

on engagement means that theories and narratives presented as comprehensive mainly reflect modernists' activities. Yet traditionalists are often engaged. And just as modernists engage in ways shaped by modern worldviews and modernized Buddhist teachings, traditionalists appear to engage in ways shaped by traditional Buddhist worldviews and teachings.

This article presents research on one traditionalist group, *Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition* (FPMT). It describes FPMT's engagement, identifies its motivations, objectives, and activities, and examines the possibility that it represents a type of engagement that can be called "traditionalist." It also adds to data available on FPMT, a sizable and influential, but little studied, Buddhist organization.

Definitions

Two terms are defined here: "traditional Buddhism" and "Buddhist social engagement." The definitions are stipulative—useful in analysis but not meant to imply absolute existence.⁴

Defining "traditional Buddhism" implicitly as "premodern Buddhism" and assuming that it did not survive modernity is common in Buddhist Studies, but the practice keeps scholars from distinguishing very different kinds of Buddhism active today. Although most of today's Buddhisms are practiced in ways adapted to modern times, adaptations differ in meaningful ways, permitting the creation of a definition of traditionalism that enables scholars to label contemporary Buddhisms "modern" or "traditional."

⁴ I define these terms because earlier scholars have defined modern Buddhism and Buddhist social engagement in ways that do not capture the Buddhists here called "traditionalists" and their socially oriented activities. Broadening this scholarship requires identifying which Buddhists and activities are under discussion.

David McMahan, in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, describes how modernizers replaced Buddhism's cosmology involving past and future lives propelled by karma with modernity's science-based worldview—less by openly rejecting the old cosmology than by ignoring it, psychologizing it, or making it metaphorical. Setting aside the cosmology led to abandoning or altering many Buddhist ideas and activities: teleology; merit; heavens, hells, and ghosts; many rituals; the perceived holiness of some beings and objects; guru devotion; and so on (3-21, 61-76).⁵ When reconstructing Buddhism, modernizers also attenuated connections to the past (5). Modern Buddhisms can thus be understood as Buddhisms profoundly reformed in the modern era in ways that replaced, with modern discourses, Buddhism's cosmology along with beliefs and practices expressing it. Lineal connections to predecessor Buddhisms grounded in this cosmology were diminished, and concern with such connections downplayed.

“Traditional Buddhism,” by contrast, here refers to Buddhisms in which lineages of teachings and practices remain highly valued and have been transmitted continuously across generations back to premodernity. Such Buddhisms retain Buddhism's cosmology, understood literally, and related beliefs and practices. This definition does not entail the absence of adaptations to modernity, but adaptations are of types insider leaders

⁵ McMahan discusses other changes, such as modern Buddhism's incorporation of Romanticism (117-147). However, a core change, out of which flow many others, is the replacement of Buddhism's cosmology with a science-based, naturalist worldview. For that reason, this article treats the cosmology's abandonment as one defining feature of modern or modernist Buddhism and its retention as one defining feature of traditional Buddhism. There are others who share this definition. For example, scholar-monk Bhikkhu Bodhi defines “traditional Buddhism” as “acceptance of the classical Buddhist framework of rebirth and karma, understood as a moral force with consequences extending beyond the present life” (Bodhi “Manifesting” 166).

consider peripheral, not core, to lineages.⁶ “Traditional” here does not mean merely old nor is it meant to imply legitimacy. It is meant to distinguish, for analytical purposes, two types of Buddhism active today vis-à-vis each other, neither of whose legitimacy is being questioned—“modern” and “traditional.”

Notably, this stipulative definition of “traditional Buddhism” applies only to Buddhisms, including their teachings and practices. It does not apply to Buddhists’ lifestyles, ethnicity, heritage, or organizational structures. Nor does it apply to a given Buddhism’s environment, which may be premodern, modern, or postmodern. It also does not apply to matters insiders deem peripheral to lineage, like temple design. People who practice Buddhisms here called “traditional” are labeled “traditionalist Buddhists” or “traditionalists.”

Using this definition, FPMT’s Buddhism is “traditional”; it is the Gelug lineage, deliberately not modernized or reformed in the modern era.⁷ FPMT transmits this lineage of texts, teachings, practices, empowerments, and so on using various means: teachings from lamas from that

⁶ Buddhist Studies scholars have tended to present “traditional Buddhism” as identical to premodern Buddhism, such that any adaptation to new times, no matter how peripheral to Buddhist teachings and practices, means a Buddhism is not traditional; they assume tradition cannot survive modernity. However, many other scholars of religion and culture define tradition as cultural or religious forms in substantial continuity with the past, whose links to the past are unbroken even though peripheral features may evolve. On this basis, tradition can co-exist with modernity. See, for example, Talal Asad on Islam (20); William Rory Dickson on Sufism (5-6); Jeffrey Stout on cultural and political ideas and practices (1-15); and Paul Heelas on spirituality. Heelas, for example, argues that modernity is a cultural space in which tradition—narratives, values, laws, customs, habits, and so on from the past—can remain and thrive (2-3, 7-11).

⁷ FPMT’s Buddhism is not the only Buddhism that fits this definition. Much of today’s Tibetan Buddhism fits. So do some forms of Theravāda and Zen. McMahan, for example, describes the Zen Buddhism of the “Mountains and Rivers Order” in the US in a way that

lineage as well as *geshes* trained in Gelug monastic universities; training other teachers internally in reliance on the Gelug monastic curriculum and qualified Gelug teachers; providing followers with formal Dharma education programs based on core Gelug texts, like Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* (*Lam Rim Chenmo*), as well as on Gelug monastic curricula; and commissioning translations and publishing texts from the Gelug lineage for use by affiliates and individuals. FPMT's main monastery, Kopan, also preserves and passes on the Gelug tradition, including complex rituals lay-oriented Dharma centers rarely undertake. FPMT's main *raison d'être* is to safeguard and disseminate this lineage. Ethnographic research shows that almost everyone who practices Buddhism in FPMT contexts for any length of time values the lineage and has faith in its teachings, including the cosmological narrative that these embody (Brown *Reconstructing* 146-154, 164-166).⁸

"Buddhist social engagement" is currently defined in two main ways in Buddhist Studies; both refer to the use of material means to alleviate this-life material suffering.⁹ Queen describes it as the application of Buddhist teachings, such as compassion and interdependence, to the resolution of social problems, particularly by "collective action to address

fits this definition, although McMahan still categorizes it as modern Buddhism; just one of the less recent and more "serious" forms. Yet it embodies Buddhism's cosmology, transmits a longstanding lineage, is called "traditional" by its practitioners, and does not fit McMahan's definition of Buddhist modernism (264-265).

⁸ Regarding Westerners who practice traditional Tibetan Buddhism, research by others shows they generally develop faith in its cosmology. Geoffrey Samuel, for example, finds this to be true and explores potential reasons for it (330). Additional research into this phenomenon is discussed in Brown *Reconstructing* (94-98).

⁹ Engagement terms, like "engaged Buddhism," "socially engaged Buddhism," and "Buddhist social engagement" are not differentiated here given overlaps in scholarly usage. Many scholars now take the same approach (Brown "Beyond" 10). "Psychological" and "political" are included in "material" here to avoid repeating "material, psychological, and political."

systemic causes of suffering and promote social advancement in the world” (“Introduction: A New” 3).¹⁰ Put in place by Western scholars and incorporating progressive Western discourses, this kind of definition focuses on activism and is sometimes employed to deem social service and humanitarian aid not engagement. Its proponents also tend to deem some Buddhists ineligible to be counted as engaged—those not practicing modernized Buddhism or not “liberal and progressive.”¹¹ It can be called “exclusionary.”¹²

Its use presents certain challenges. First, it overlooks, presumably inadvertently, many past and present Buddhists and Buddhist social endeavors (Brown “Beyond” 11, 28-32). Second, it favors, over ethnically Asian and non-elite Buddhists, Western Buddhists and Buddhists whose Buddhism was hybridized with modern discourses by Asian elites (Hsu 20 fn. 9; Brown “Beyond” 36-38, fn. 33; Hsu/Chhi 361-363, 370). Third, it grants authority over what constitutes Buddhist engagement to Western academics (Brown “Beyond” 40-41). Finally, not all Buddhists or scholars support it given its reliance on non-Buddhist understandings of suffering’s causes and cures (Hsu 17-23; Ṭhānissaro “Wisdom”; “Justice”).¹³

¹⁰ An example of a similar definition in a well-known work of scholarship is that of Yarnall, who describes Buddhist social engagement as Buddhists’ involvement in (rather than renunciation of) the material world to reduce suffering by engaging with and transforming social, political, and economic institutions and systems (286).

¹¹ The phrase comes from Gleig’s encyclopedia article, “Engaged Buddhism,” in which she writes, “the consensus was that engaged Buddhism referred to liberal and progressive Buddhist figures or groups.”

¹² Brown describes the history and details of this type of definition (“Beyond” 8-17.)

¹³ Alexander Hsu calls this kind of definition “academic engaged Buddhism” and notes the positionality of its proponents and their exclusion of Asian perspectives (17-23). Funie Hsu/Chhi refers to it as “American Engaged Buddhism” and criticizes it for its association with “anti-Asian structures of denial and disavowal,” its “hegemonic discourse and frameworks,” and its exclusion of Asian American Buddhists’ engagement and definitions of engagement (361-363, 370).

“Inclusionary” definitions are now also found. Paul Fuller argues for defining engagement like Thich Nhat Hanh: “Buddhism . . . involved in life.” Fuller only requires that it be done by Buddhists, aim at reducing suffering, and use material means (1-7). Numerous other scholars agree.¹⁴

This article employs an inclusionary definition: Buddhist social engagement comprises activities, done by people who identify as Buddhists and believe them to be a spiritual practice, aimed at benefitting society by reducing others’ this-life material sufferings, using mainly material means. Activities may include providing food, health care, education, emotional support, employment, or disaster relief, building community, working for peace or social change, helping marginalized groups, caring for animals, or benefiting the environment. Faith-based means like prayers, rituals, or blessings may be combined with material means, but material ways of overcoming suffering must be present and substantial.

This definition includes some activities that exclusionary definitions may omit, such as social services, humanitarian aid, animal care,¹⁵ providing material necessities to poverty-affected monastics or children at monastery-run schools,¹⁶ faith-based activities intended to help en-

¹⁴ Scholars taking this approach include John Nelson and Alexander Hsu; Brown documents others as well (Nelson 83-86; Hsu 17-26; Brown “Beyond” 25-33).

¹⁵ The inclusion of animals is not generally disputed. The study of Buddhist ethics often includes animals.

¹⁶ Scholars who view such aid as not falling into the secular sphere may dispute its inclusion, but it is material aid with material as well as faith-based goals. It seems unreasonable to call giving necessities to poor lay people “Buddhist social engagement” but not to apply this label to giving the same necessities to poor ordained people or to children attending schools operated by monasteries or nunneries.

agement's beneficiaries when combined with material help, and Buddhists who have religiously traditional or politically/socially conservative beliefs, or who seek to preserve their religion or culture.¹⁷

What does the definition exclude? Examples include performing faith-based practices for others, or offering them Dharma teachings or imprints/blessings, in the absence of substantive material help; and undertaking violent acts, even if those involved claim the acts are socially beneficial.¹⁸

Scholarly Context

Prompting research on FPMT was the observation that eminent anthologies and surveys of Buddhists' social engagement mainly overlook traditionalist Buddhists. For example, just one well-known work in the sub-field of engaged Buddhism studies, an article by Jessica Main and Rongdao Lai, mentions FPMT (29-30). Its authors reference a lesser-known article by Kory Goldberg; in it, Goldberg analyzes one FPMT project, a school in

¹⁷ Buddhists "who seek to preserve their religion and culture" are specified here because scholars using exclusionary definitions may not include Buddhists with ideas perceived as nationalist, culturally nationalist, or ethno-nationalist. This has the effect of leaving out some Asian and ethnically Asian Buddhist groups undertaking socially beneficial activities (Reinke 6, 8, 11, 34, 81-97, 116; Main and Lai 1-2). Brown discusses this point ("Beyond" 45-46 including fn. 42).

¹⁸ A defining feature of social engagement is that it aims to reduce material suffering. If an activity has significant potential to harm, that criterion is not easily met. When activities harm some groups but are claimed to benefit others more, it is challenging to show that benefit exceeds harm given the difficulties of comparing harms and benefits. For this reason, it is likely best not to call them "social engagement"; perhaps they can be called "military" or "political" engagement. Other activities that might best be excluded from "Buddhist social engagement" are those that harm or fail to help while purporting to help, such as providing substandard material necessities, education, or health care, or helping in some ways but also exploiting or cheating those helped.

Bodhgayā, presenting it as socially transformative—“attempting to empower the lowest rungs of Indian society”—thereby placing it within exclusionary definitions of engagement (“Pilgrimage” 96-98).¹⁹ Nevertheless, Main and Lai’s and Goldberg’s articles have not raised awareness of FPMT among scholars of engagement; FPMT does not appear in other publications.

Where FPMT’s engagement is sometimes acknowledged is in scholarship on Tibetan Buddhism. In that sub-field, scholars who reference it include David Kay, who wrote two decades ago:

FPMT Dharma centers also provide ‘temporal benefits’ . . . [Projects] such as the Maitreya (*sic*) Leprosy Center in Bodhgaya and the FPMT hospice centers in Australia also aim to actualise Lama Yeshe’s wish that his network should impact beneficially upon its wider society. (114-115)

Geoffrey Samuel, also almost two decades ago, listed some of FPMT’s social projects (307). Nick Ribush, an FPMT insider who published a scholarly article on FPMT’s history, references its social projects (179). Derek Maher mentions that FPMT and other transnational Tibetan Buddhist groups “operate numerous service organizations in India and elsewhere, many of them educational or medical” (277). Jessica Falcone alludes to FPMT’s school in Bodhgayā (114, 129). Abraham Zablocki references its school, leprosy clinic, and medical clinic there (265). Hannah Gould, Anna Halafoff, and Ruth Fitzpatrick highlight FPMT’s hospices in Australia (189).

Is there scholarship on other traditionalists’ engagement? Very little. To mentions of FPMT, Maher adds references to Tong-Len Charitable Trust, run by a Tibetan monk in India and operating schools and other services for marginalized Indians, and to other Tibetan-run social projects

¹⁹ Goldberg produced other articles and a Ph.D. thesis on the same topic; these provide substantial information on FPMT’s Bodhgayā school (“Constructing”; *Buddhists*).

in India (275-276). One large, engaged organization with roots in traditional Buddhism is Karuna-Shechen, established in 2000 (“Karuna Shechen”). Its impact is impressive (“Our Impact”).²⁰ Nevertheless, no publication in Buddhist Studies could be found that discussed it.²¹

Scholarship on engagement does highlight one organization rooted in traditional Buddhism: Buddhist Global Relief (BGR), founded by American monk Bhikkhu Bodhi. BGR, according to its website, works to alleviate hunger and poverty and improve opportunities for girls and women. Queen appears to have been the first scholar to discuss BGR (“Ethics” 506-507). Gleig (“Engaged”), Jay Garfield (181-182), and Fuller (16-17, 173) then mention it. Queen, however, overlooks Bhikkhu Bodhi’s traditionalism. He presents Bodhi as a Buddhist modernist, even though Bodhi calls himself a traditionalist on the grounds that he adheres to Buddhism’s old cosmology (Bodhi “Manifesting” 166-167, “Facing” 23, 31-32, 64-66). Other scholars follow Queen. Scholars thus make BGR’s engagement visible but render invisible the traditional Buddhism that prompts it, and do not examine how its engagement may be influenced by traditionalism. The effect, however unintended, is to perpetuate the idea that only modernist Buddhists engage and every Buddhist who engages is a modernist.²²

Lack of scholarship on traditionalists’ engagement does not entail lack of data. Data can be found on websites, in annual reports, and in other

²⁰ Other unstudied socially engaged organizations rooted in traditional Tibetan Buddhism include The Dalai Lama Trust, The Bodhichitta Trust, Lotus Outreach, Gaden Relief Projects, and Benevolent Organisation for Development Health & Insight. There are also other socially active groups practicing other forms of traditional Buddhism.

²¹ John Makransky references Karuna-Shechen in a 2022 article, writing, “For a recent example of an excellent Asian Buddhist service organization, see Karuna-Shechen” (8 fn. 7). Brown also mentions Karuna-Shechen but only to indicate that it does not appear in scholarship on engaged Buddhism (“Beyond” 30 fn. 29).

²² Brown describes this case in detail, including the bases for designating Bodhi’s Buddhism “traditional” (“Beyond” 44-45).

public sources, or gathered through ethnographic research. Stereotypes, exclusionary definitions, and silos in Buddhist Studies appear to be why scholarship on engagement overlooks traditionalists.

Positionality, Methods, Data

To address the dearth of scholarship on traditionalists' engagement, the author—a white Canadian woman with intermittent past involvement in FPMT but not closely associated with it²³—researched FPMT's engagement and attitudes toward it during the 2022-2024 period. Ethnographic research included online interviews with thirty-two people associated with FPMT and in-person interviews and conversations with more than eighty others in India, Nepal, and England. It also included visits to engagement sites in those countries.

Interviewees included key informants involved in the management of FPMT's international office and affiliates and others active in FPMT in various ways. The sample was balanced across gender, ethnicity, ordination status, age group, country of origin and residence, and type and duration of involvement in FPMT.²⁴ Research produced substantial data: observations, recordings, notes, and photographs. When research was completed, results were compiled, summarized, and sent to interviewees for their input. The handful who responded felt that the results represented FPMT well. Ethnographic research was then supplemented

²³ Additional information on positionality appears in *Brown Reconstructing* (19-22).

²⁴ Although the sample seems to reflect the FPMT population reasonably well overall, representation from FPMT's East Asian-majority centers in Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong was small, limiting results' reflection of this group. Additional details on sampling appear in *Brown Reconstructing* (19-22, 40-45).

with textual research examining FPMT publications and scholarship on FPMT.²⁵

FPMT Profile

Founded by Lama Yeshe (d. 1984) and his Dharma heir, Lama Zopa Rinpoche (d. 2023), FPMT is a transnational Tibetan Buddhist network disseminating the Gelug lineage. It has an international office in the USA and Dharma centers, projects, services, and participants around the world. Its main activities are Dharma teaching, study, and practice; publishing (including online), translating, and archiving; designing and delivering secular universal education²⁶; creating and maintaining holy objects like statues and stupas; and engaging socially. FPMT is a respected actor in Tibetan Buddhism outside Tibet—part of the wider Gelug system and close to the Dalai Lama. Its contributions to the survival and flourishing of the Gelug lineage are acknowledged in the Himalayan world (Brown, *Reconstructing* 71–73; “Long Life”).

FPMT’s history begins with the final stage, in 1959, of China’s takeover of Tibet, which prompted tens of thousands of Tibetans to flee to India, Nepal, and Bhutan (Gayley and Brallier 230–231; Samuel 297–303). Among the refugees were two young monks: Lama Yeshe, the elder, was

²⁵ Quotations found below come from ethnographic interviews. To maintain confidentiality, they are not separately cited. Instead, information is provided on speakers’ positionality. Quotations, although edited here, also appear in Brown *Reconstructing*, where each interviewee is identified by a code.

²⁶ “Universal education” in FPMT refers to secular teachings derived from Buddhism that are aimed at reducing individual suffering and societal conflict. They combine Buddhist teachings with Western philosophy and psychology to train adults and children in life skills and values: mindfulness, compassion, ethics, and so on (“Rejoicing in the Ongoing”).

Tibetan; Lama Zopa Rinpoche, still a boy, was a Sherpa from Nepal who had been sent to Tibet to study. They met at Buxa Fort, the former internment camp where India housed refugee monks and nuns, and Lama Zopa Rinpoche became Lama Yeshe's student. Moving to Nepal in the mid-1960s, the pair met Western seekers. A Black American woman bought them a house and land on Kopan hill near Katmandu. Soon the site was a social project, Mount Everest School, a boarding school Lama Zopa Rinpoche established in 1969 for boys from poor families in Himalayan areas of Nepal. The school was supported by funds the lamas' students raised (Hulse 59-152, 192, 206-242). Out of it developed Kopan Monastery, now a key node of FPMT (Ribush 167). As the two lamas gave teachings in Nepal and internationally, Dharma centers sprang up around the world, followed by an international office. FPMT was formally established in 1975 with Lama Yeshe as its spiritual director (164). When he died in 1984, Lama Zopa Rinpoche replaced him, retaining the role until his passing in April 2023.

FPMT is a sizable organization. As of 2024, it comprised 133 affiliates: entities, usually incorporated in their own jurisdictions, that follow FPMT's spiritual direction, use FPMT's educational programs and liturgical materials, rely on FPMT-approved teachers, and implement FPMT's policies. Of the affiliates, 112 were Dharma centers, retreat centers, monasteries, nunneries, or study groups. This number grew rapidly from the mid-1970s to the end of the twentieth century; it was roughly stable for a time and then declined slightly during the COVID-19 pandemic. An FPMT official interviewed indicated that declines were mostly related to small centers becoming satellites of larger centers, with little effect on participant numbers. Significant numbers of people are associated with FPMT in Nepal, India, Australia, Southeast Asia, the USA, and Western Europe. Areas with smaller numbers include Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mongolia, Japan, Africa, Israel, Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Canada. The countries with the largest per capita FPMT presence are Nepal

and Australia. In Nepal, Kopan Monastery has hundreds of monks and nuns and oversees several remote monasteries, schools, and a lay-oriented Dharma center; a second FPMT center is not affiliated with Kopan. Australia has approximately twenty FPMT affiliates (“FPMT Centers”).²⁷

As of 2024, FPMT also had twenty-one affiliated projects and services, including social projects. However, many socially oriented activities are not included in this count because they are undertaken by centers or monasteries. FPMT does not keep a list of its social endeavors, making their number difficult to estimate. At any given time, there are likely fifty to sixty distinct activities.

FPMT and Transnational Networks

How does FPMT compare with other Dharma-propagating transnational networks? The large ones have much in common: they arose in the twentieth century; were launched by charismatic teachers; and rely on today’s technologies and methods for operations, travel, communications, raising and distributing funds, and disseminating Dharma. What varies are their forms of Buddhism. They include Fo Guang Shan (FGS), Sōka Gakkai International (SGI), FPMT, Triratna Buddhist Order, Rigpa International, the Dzogchen Community, Diamond Way Buddhism, Siddhartha’s Intent, Dharma Drum Mountain, the Goenka movement, the New Kadampa Tradition, and Shambhala International. Taiwan-based FGS may be the largest, probably followed by SGI, but figures on participants in each organization are not available, making comparisons challenging. Measured by participants, FPMT is likely the largest Tibetan Buddhist network. It also

²⁷ Details drawn from the FPMT website cited were supplemented, adjusted, and verified in email communications with FPMT’s international office in April 2024.

has outsized influence due to its positive reputation and global dissemination, in multiple languages, of vast amounts of Dharma material—books, DVDs, videos, and online offerings.²⁸

Little scholarship on these networks exists. The most-studied appears to be FGS.²⁹ Some are completely unstudied. Scholars have produced a few summary descriptions, but these are neither comprehensive nor fully reliable, presumably because their authors had little scholarship on which to draw.³⁰ Other than on FGS, scholarship on each network's social

²⁸ On reputation, encounters with people from outside FPMT during ethnographic research revealed perceptions (anecdotal only) that FPMT is “trustworthy” because it is endorsed by the Dalai Lama, transmits an “authentic” lineage, has high quality Dharma education programs that people outside FPMT also use, has sound Dharma teaching in centers and good practice and retreat opportunities and facilities, and has a record of being well-run. In publications, scholars, with the exception of Jessica Falcone, have so far portrayed FPMT either neutrally or positively (Brown *Reconstructing* 83, 101-102). In the area of publishing, FPMT affiliate Wisdom Publications is one of the world's top Dharma publishers. It has published hundreds of titles in many millions of copies. FPMT has several other affiliated publishing companies producing works in various languages, and its Education Services department also publishes material. As well, FPMT's archive, Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive (LYWA) is a publisher. From its inception in 1996 through 2022, LYWA sold or distributed over a million hard copies of its books. LYWA's website LamaYeshe.com contains thousands of pages of teachings and many free books. LYWA also produces podcasts, has a YouTube channel, produces e-books and audiobooks, distributes material on social media, and uses Amazon print-on-demand (Lama Yeshe Wisdom). FPMT's published and online materials reach far beyond the people who participate in the activities of its affiliates.

²⁹ Works on FGS include Jens Reinke's *Mapping Modern Mahayana. Chinese Buddhism and Migration in the Age of Global Modernity*; Yu-Shang Yao and Richard F. Gombrich's *Chinese Buddhism Today: Conservatism, Modernism, Syncretism and Enjoying Life on the Buddha's Light Mountain*; and Stuart Chandler's *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization*.

³⁰ Three summaries were found. All include FPMT. Brooke Schedneck's “Buddhist International Organizations” is useful, but classes Goenka's network as socially engaged,

engagement is also minimal, even though some, according to their websites, are engaged.

FPMT's Reputation for Engagement

In 2023, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who led FPMT for decades, passed away. Other lamas soon composed prayers for his swift return. Such prayers usually praise the departed's devotion to teachers, spiritual accomplishments, transmission of lineages, and personal qualities. Many followed this convention. However, Gelug lama Lelung Rinpoche's composition added something new: social engagement. Lelung Rinpoche praised Lama Zopa Rinpoche for helping the poor, the marginalized, and animals ("A Prayer"). Some other leaders did the same. The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, wrote: "He provided thousands of members of the sangha . . . with regular food and built schools, hospitals, and homes for the elderly. He was a protector for the defenseless, a refuge for the vulnerable, a fount of generosity . . ." ("From His"). The head of the Gelug tradition as well as representatives of the exile Tibetan government also underlined Rinpoche's and FPMT's social impact ("Venerable"; "Gaden"). Such

which is questionable, and FPMT as not socially engaged, despite its social projects; overstates the centrally controlled nature of networks; and suggests that all networks disseminate modern forms of Buddhism. Another summary is Richard Payne's "Globalizing Tantric Buddhism." Payne, in contrast to Schedneck, understates networks' centralization, characterizing them all as highly decentralized. And Payne's descriptions of FPMT need updating. The third summary is a dated but still informative account of Tibetan Buddhist networks in Geoffrey Samuel's *Tantric Revisionings* (288-316).

acknowledgements reveal FPMT's reputation in the Himalayan world for engagement. Yet few in the West are aware of its activities.³¹

FPMT's History of Engagement

In its early years, FPMT did not prioritize engagement. Short of resources, it focused on teaching Dharma, a choice that reflected the importance Tibetan refugees gave to saving their lineages through teaching, study, and practice as well as by establishing monasteries, caring for lamas, passing on empowerments and transmissions, and finding and printing endangered texts. This situation was not historically typical. Studies show that before 1959 monasteries—Tibet's main religious organizations—were socially active, materially aiding individuals and communities and providing education and health care.³² In exile, re-established monasteries and new

³¹ It is notable that the obituary of Lama Zopa Rinpoche in *Tricycle*, likely the best-known American Buddhist magazine, does not mention his social engagement, unlike Himalayan sources (Oliver). *BuddhistDoor Global*, an online Buddhist magazine, also does not mention engagement in its obituary (Lewis). Among academics, Schedneck overlooks FPMT's engagement in her summary article on Buddhist transnational organizations and Gleig does not refer to FPMT in her survey of Buddhist social engagement (Schedneck 401, 405-411; Gleig "Engaged"). These lacunae suggest that FPMT's engagement is little known in the West, including among scholars.

³² Berthe Jansen notes that hagiographies emphasized the social endeavors of yogis, such as the construction of iron bridges to ease travel by Thangtong Gyalpo. She also describes the social, economic, and political roles monasteries played. Examples include: instructions from Tsongkhapa, initiator of the Gelug lineage, to monastics to give charity to the poor in ways compatible with vinaya; monasteries being a social safety net in times of trouble for communities with which they had connections; being involved in administration of justice; being the main providers of education to lay people, including teaching literacy and arts, crafts, medicine, and other skills; and being Tibet's main source of medical care and medicines. Jansen does not call the monasteries "socially engaged" because her implicit definition of social engagement is limited to efforts to transform the social

entities like FPMT reclaimed these roles only once their leaders felt sure lineages were safe. Tibetan history notwithstanding, FPMT's focus in its early years fostered a perception among some initial Western students that social endeavors distracted from "Dharma," an idea Lama Zopa Rinpoche later countered.

Nevertheless, there was never a time when FPMT had no social projects. Even before FPMT existed, Lama Zopa Rinpoche established, in 1969, Mount Everest School on Kopan hill—FPMT's first social project. Its second was a free clinic that that Lama Yeshe encouraged and his Western students with medical backgrounds established in 1973 in the same location. Originally for the school's students and teachers, the clinic, whose services were sometimes intermittent, began serving neighboring Nepalis when those running it realized that no other care was available nearby (Hulse 245). For several years, the school and clinic were FPMT's only social projects. One Western Dharma student interviewed during research who was present at the time explained: "those were the maximum we could manage because of our resources." In 1992, better resourced, Kopan Monastery established Maya Daya Clinic at the base of Kopan hill as a stable source of care for local people as well as monastics and schoolchildren from surrounding monasteries.³³

order, which she indicates monasteries did not do. Nevertheless, by inclusive definitions, they were engaged (42-43, 121-122, 141-146, 173-174). Derek Maher also emphasizes the social role of premodern Tibetan monasteries, writing that "service to society became a standard element of monastic life" (271).

³³Interviewees at Kopan indicated that by 2021, other medical services were well-established in the area, so Kopan closed the clinic, keeping only a small clinic operating within the monastery for residents and occasionally neighbors. Kopan then re-established Maya Daya Clinic as a dialysis clinic at a nearby hospital. The evolution of the clinic demonstrates adaptation to changing local circumstances ("Rejoicing in the Addition").

As the years passed, FPMT's social endeavors multiplied, although in an ad hoc way. These were led, not by its international office, but by individuals on the ground, sometimes with encouragement or advice from one of FPMT's lamas. Lama Yeshe proposed the development of secular universal education in 1983 ("Rejoicing in the Ongoing"). In 1987, Kabir Saxena, having been encouraged by Lama Yeshe, established Root Institute in Bodhgayā as a social project. Root helped marginalized people in various ways in its early years, such as by teaching sewing and planting trees.³⁴ In 1989, Pamela Cayton established Tara Redwood School in California to provide holistic and universal education to children ("History"; Bauscher). Also in 1989, Adriana Ferranti began offering leprosy care in the Gaya region of India ("MAITRI Charitable"). Ven. Pende Hawter founded Karuna Hospice Services in 1992 in Australia to offer palliative care incorporating Buddhist principles ("About Us" Karuna). Other projects were also launched in the 1990s and beyond; some are described below.

As activities multiplied, thinking about engagement in FPMT evolved. By the 2000s, Gelug monasteries in Nepal and India, including FPMT's Kopan Monastery, were thriving. Lineages were being practiced, preserved, and transmitted. Within FPMT, Dharma education programs, teacher and translator training programs, publishing efforts, and Dharma centers were largely in place. These successes opened up space for other activities. At the same time, engagement's profile was rising because the Dalai Lama was encouraging it, Buddhists (East and West) were financially more able to support it, and younger Buddhists were often socially oriented (Brown *Reconstructing* 202-203).

³⁴ Root Institute was established in 1987, three years after Lama Yeshe's passing, with the concept and some money coming from Lama Yeshe. Efforts to establish it began in 1983, but several years were required to procure the needed land, which occurred in 1987. Social projects were underway before the land was purchased (Hulse 1120, 1221, 1222). Root is now a Dharma center and continues to operate social projects.

In 2007, FPMT announced Lama Zopa Rinpoche's "Vast Visions," a set of priorities intended to guide its activities for decades to come. One priority was social engagement, whose benefits and place in FPMT the Vast Visions clarified. Rinpoche affirmed that engagement was a Dharma practice of no less benefit to other beings and one's own future than meditation, puja, or other formal practices ("Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Vast"). This led to increased support for it throughout FPMT. One India-based socially engaged woman tellingly recalled, "Before the Vast Visions, people [in FPMT] would say to me that social work was not Dharma! Dharma was meditation, pujas, study. After the Vast Visions came out, I didn't hear that anymore."

In 2014, FPMT further addressed engagement by establishing "Five Pillars of Service" for Dharma centers. To that point, most centers had focused on Dharma teaching and formal practice. Few were engaged and engagement was mainly done by other affiliates. The Pillars broadened the activities centers themselves were encouraged to undertake, including social projects (FPMT Annual Review 2014 5, 14). Today, Dharma teaching and formal practice remain centers' priority, but many are also socially active. Interviewees reported that, across FPMT, engagement has increased in the last ten to fifteen years, partly due to the Vast Visions and Pillars. When a center is not engaged now, they emphasized, it is not because members believe engagement is not an important Dharma practice, but because it lacks sufficient resources (Brown *Reconstructing* 206-207, 215-216).

One senior FPMT official summarized FPMT's current situation:

[Social engagement] is the direction in which we want to go, and obviously, Lama Zopa shows us himself by getting so involved in finding money for these projects and in supporting them. . . . So obviously we want to do more. . . . Maybe with FPMT, it's not implied by the name of the organization but when you look at the activities and when

you look at the annual report and when you look at the resources that are invested by the organization, then I think it shows the significance and the importance of social engagement. . . . It's also part of our practice to do it. . . . we have to practice compassion in action.³⁵

FPMT's Current Engagement

This section describes some, though not all, of FPMT's current social endeavors.

Several FPMT affiliates' only activity is engagement. Maitri Charitable Trust in Bodhgayā is one example. Operating since 1989, as of 2024, Maitri has a main site with a small hospital and other medical facilities, mobile health clinics, and a free primary school. The main site and mobile clinics provide care for leprosy, tuberculosis, mothers, children, and young women. They also provide supplemental nourishment—vitamins, milk, pulses, formula—to expectant mothers, newborns, and young children, educate girls about their bodies, and dispense menstrual products. Maitri also sometimes distributes food to families in need, and its staff care for dozens of rescued animals (“MAITRI Charitable”; MAITRI E-News).³⁶

³⁵ “Compassion in Action” is a motto of Lama Zopa Rinpoche that is posted at many FPMT sites and often appears in FPMT publications.

³⁶ Maitri Charitable Trust and its facilities were visited during ethnographic research.

Another freestanding affiliate is Liberation Prison Project, operating since 1996 when an ex-gangster wrote to FPMT's *Mandala* magazine asking for a free subscription. Ven. Robina Courtin, editor at the time, responded. She then launched a project through which volunteers have supported the spiritual and emotional lives of thousands of incarcerated men and women around the globe with letters, phone calls, and visits. The project is both spiritual and social, helping prisoners experience friendship and connection, improve their mental outlook, and build meaningful lives ("Our Students"; "Meet the Liberation").



Fig. 1. In rural Bihar state, women line up with their children to receive medication and nutrition supplements from one of Maitri Charitable Trust's mobile clinics. February 2023.

Photo: Donna L. Brown.

Tara Redwood School (TRS) was founded by Pamela Cayton in 1989, initially as a preschool and then as an elementary school as well. TRS aims at educating children's hearts and minds, giving them academic foundations, emotional intelligence, values, physical skills, and contact with nature. It blends Montessori and Creating Compassionate Cultures (CCC) methodologies; CCC is a universal education program, also used by other organizations, inspired by Lama Yeshe and developed by Cayton ("History"; Bauscher).

Other freestanding engaged affiliates include hospice services in Australia, Malaysia, and Spain; a Buddhist college in Oregon; The Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom, a global universal education project headquartered in England; and an international project for young people called Loving Kindness Peaceful Youth.

Some social projects are operated by Dharma centers or monasteries. Kopan Monastery³⁷ continues to operate Mount Everest School. In 2023, the school had approximately 330 students and was government certified to Grade 10, working toward Grade 12. The school offers the government curriculum, universal education teachings, and, given that the students are from Buddhist families, Buddhist teachings. Kopan oversees, operates, and/or financially contributes to several other schools as well as a hostel, ensuring that girls and boys from Himalayan families receive an education, retain their culture, and learn the basics of their religion. Without Kopan, poverty and remote locations would keep many Himalayan children from receiving quality education (Brown *Reconstructing* 244-245).

Kopan also provides health care. From its inception in the early 1970s through 2021, it operated clinics for its neighbors. By 2021, other clinics were flourishing in the area, so Kopan closed its clinic and established a much-needed dialysis unit at a nearby hospital, funding machinery, operating the unit, and covering its financial shortfalls.³⁸



Fig. 2. Maya Daya Dialysis Clinic, Katmandu. Entry to dialysis area. March 2023. Photo: Donna L. Brown.

³⁷ Kopan Monastery and many of its projects were visited during ethnographic research.

³⁸ Maya Daya Dialysis Clinic was inaugurated by Lama Zopa Rinpoche in March 2022, although it began operations somewhat earlier. The history of Kopan's clinics appears in a video available online (FPMT "Transforming" 00:00:40-00:07:52). Details on the clinics

In 2015, when a disastrous earthquake struck Nepal, Kopan created “Kopan Helping Hands,” a social engagement coordinating committee, and shut down regular activities for a month to help out. FPMT’s international reach attracted funds. Hundreds of monks and nuns gave out drinking water, cleared rubble, prepared meals, and distributed aid at the monastery gates, by truck, and on foot. As time passed, Kopan Helping Hands provided additional aid for rebuilding roads, homes, and damaged monasteries (Mohaupt). Kopan delivered \$US 923,822 in relief and rebuilding aid (“Helping the World” 60). In 2020, during the pandemic, Kopan Helping Hands again aided Nepalis. It continues to coordinate Kopan’s social efforts: taking aid to remote villages where people are very poor or aging without relatives; supporting remote schools; providing scholarships for children to attend higher education; helping families confronted with overwhelming difficulties; lending medical equipment to families caring for dying relatives; and paying for medical care, prosthetics, or other aids for poverty-affected people with disabilities or special needs (“Kopan Helping Hands: Helping”; “Kopan Helping Hands Revived”). It also oversees a large animal sanctuary.



Fig. 3. Maitreya Universal Education School, Bodh Gaya. A statue of Maitreya Buddha is visible beside the school. February 2024. Photo: Donna L. Brown

Maitreya Universal Education School is operated by Root Institute, FPMT’s center in Bodhgayā, a poor area with a reputation for inadequate

also appear in Brown *Reconstructing* (186–187, 255–257) and include information gathered when Maya Day Clinic was visited during ethnographic research.

government-provided education. Root initially established a school on the site in 1997. The school has gone through several changes and has operated in its current form since 2012. In the 2024-25 school year it enrolled 275 children from kindergarten through grade eight, teaching the government curriculum and universal education (Root Institute). Root Institute has also provided health care since 1991 with main and mobile clinics. Offerings have varied but as of 2024 included homeopathic medicine; basic allopathic care; physiotherapy for cerebral palsy patients; dental care; and education in HIV prevention, hygiene, nutrition, and women's health ("Shakyamuni").³⁹

Other FPMT Dharma centers also operate ongoing socially oriented activities. In Mongolia, for example, alleviating poverty by providing food, shelter, clothing, bedding, and health care is a major focus of FPMT's center, which also offers Dharma and universal education to help restore Mongolia's heritage. Other centers are active in hospice care; chaplaincy; supplying food and other necessities; operating support groups; addiction, mental health, and wellness programs; universal education for children and adults; refugee resettlement help; community-building activities to create connection and fight loneliness; restoring heritage buildings for use by low income communities; skill development workshops; job training and employment for marginalized people; environmental activities; DEI initiatives; economical cafés and second-hand sales for low income neighbors; and community projects in coordination with other organizations (Brown *Reconstructing* 247-258).

³⁹ Root Institute's projects were visited during ethnographic research.

Many centers operate time-limited endeavors. These can be difficult to trace so only a few examples are given here. A typical project was an initiative in 2020 by FPMT's center in Vienna, Austria to raise funds for refugees and an animal sanctuary ("Panchen"). Some centers have organized tree planting to help the environment. During the pandemic, Vajrapani Institute in California housed refugees from a nearby forest fire; Kadampa Center in North Carolina made masks, expanded a prison penpal project, and helped Meals

on Wheels; Milarepa Center in Vermont raised funds for a food bank; Kasih Hospice in Malaysia organized the sewing of 25,000 pieces of personal protective equipment; Potala Hospice in Spain gave emotional support by phone and email to isolated people; and Root Institute distributed food (Miller 54-58).

Some projects operated by students of FPMT's lamas are not formally affiliated with FPMT, but FPMT sometimes contributes funds to them or publicizes them, giving them semi-affiliate status. One example is Alice Project School in Sarnath, India, established in 1994. Together with two branch schools, as of 2023, it was educating over 1,000 children annually ("Alice"). Another is Akshay School in Bodhgayā, established in 2008, a primary school with more than 200 students ("16 Guidelines"). The



Fig. 4. Local children play with toys at a jumble sale at Jamyang Buddhist Centre Leeds, UK. March 2023. The popular jumble sales are held regularly in Jamyang's building, a former factory in a low-income neighborhood that the center is renovating. The building is used for large numbers of community and wellness activities that benefit people in the area and connect the center to its neighbours. March 2023. Photo: Donna L. Brown.

Global Tree Initiative was launched in 2019 by Tenzin Ösel Hita, considered in FPMT to be the reincarnation of Lama Yeshe. As of 2023, it had coordinated the planting of more than four million trees in sixty-seven countries (“Global Tree”). Enlightenment for the Dear Animals raises funds for animal rescue and care, including at FPMT affiliates (“Enlightenment”; “Tree of Compassion”). And the Frome Kindness Festival in Frome, UK was initiated by Alison Murdoch, a longtime student of FPMT’s lamas (“Kindness”).

FPMT’s international office also financially supports unaffiliated organizations. Its largest contribution has been to a food fund for Sera Je Monastic University in India, where, prior to FPMT’s intervention, monks often experienced hunger, malnutrition, and disease. At the behest of Lama Zopa Rinpoche in 1991, FPMT began funding food supplies; it was soon providing three meals a day even as the monastic population grew from 1,300 in 1991 to 3,500 in the 2000s. In 2017 and 2018, FPMT replaced funding flows with an endowment of \$US 5.3 million (Tsultrim 26-46; Cabezón and Dorjee, 480-481). Food funds are now also in place for Gyudmed Tantric Monastery in India and the Idgaa Choizinling College of Ganden Monastery in Mongolia (“Supporting”; “Mongolian”). Support for food enables the monastics responsible for FPMT’s lineage to study and practice Dharma without precarity or interruption. Other unaffiliated projects in India and Nepal include homes for elderly and disabled Tibetan refugees and schools and hostels for children.

This summary does not capture all of FPMT’s activities. However, those presented illustrate its types of engagement. Notable features include: encouragement for engagement from FPMT’s lamas and FPMT official policies; significant involvement in education, social services, and humanitarian aid; a tendency to aim at communities linked to Buddhism (though not always); decentralization, with initiatives designed and de-

veloped on the ground and not by the international office; because of decentralization, variety in activities and organizational forms; and a role for the international office in raising and distributing funds.

FPMT's Non-Engagement

Many scholars suggest that real Buddhist engagement transforms society through activism. Yet institutionally, FPMT is seldom activist, although some individuals are activists outside FPMT contexts.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, interviews revealed a widespread desire to improve or transform society. A contradiction? No. Interviewees believed that society would change when people's minds changed. Hence, education, not activism, was their preferred means: Dharma education for Buddhists and universal education for non-Buddhists. FPMT's founding lamas promoted this approach. One example: in a 1975 talk, Lama Yeshe told listeners that socialism would not solve societal problems because changes in social structures would not reduce delusions. Even universal prosperity would not end unhappiness because "there would still be attachment, there would still be anger . . ." Channeling longstanding Buddhist teachings unhybridized with Western discourses, he indicated that reducing delusions through education was the way to fix society (Yeshe *Becoming* 19-22; "Universal").⁴¹ Lama Zopa

⁴⁰ Institutional activism occurs occasionally. For example, at least one FPMT center has attended a Pride parade. Thubten Norbu Ling (TNL), located in New Mexico, USA, had a float in Santa Fe's 2024 parade. Many members as well as TNL's main teacher participated. As well, some centers promote environmental awareness or social justice by organizing lectures, conferences, etc. on relevant topics (Brown *Reconstructing* 160, 192, 226, 248-249).

⁴¹ Lama Yeshe's 1975 talk circulated informally in FPMT for many years and then was placed in one of FPMT's most popular Dharma books: *Becoming Your Own Therapist*, first published in 1998 and often reprinted. Hence, the comment has had wide circulation.

Rinpoche similarly recommended education, particularly universal education for children, as the route to a happier, more peaceful world (“Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s Vast”; “Bodhgayā”).

Interviewees gave additional reasons for FPMT’s lack of activism. One practical reason was that FPMT affiliates are often viewed as foreign, and their engagement relies on governments for permits, accreditation, visas, and so on.⁴² Another was that laws may limit activism where affiliates are legally established as charities. A third was that FPMT is global and diverse. Causes popular with one culture, or one group within a Dharma center, may not resonate with another culture or group, so activism could foster division. Some interviewees also doubted activism’s benefits and felt that more good came from social services: “small scale work that changes lives.” Other reasons drew on Buddhist teachings, particularly on the hazards of anger. A few interviewees said activism was based on or promoted anger.⁴³ Although some Buddhists today revalue anger in situations of injustice, doing so appears rare in traditionalist FPMT.⁴⁴ Sev-

⁴² Goldberg notes this as a reason why, despite Bodhgayā’s social problems, there is virtually no activism among the many engaged Buddhist organizations there (“Buddhists” 128, 129).

⁴³ Valuations of anger relate to Buddhism’s cosmology. If the cosmology correctly depicts the universe, anger’s purported destruction of merit becomes an issue. Hence, concern with the hazards of anger suggests that the Buddhism practiced is not modernized.

⁴⁴ *Tricycle* offers examples of this revaluation. In one article, a (modernist) Insight Meditation teacher writes that “getting in touch with our anger is vital” in order to “engage destructive social structures” (Thanissara). In another, the author discusses modern attempts to reconcile anger as righteous, appropriate, and useful with canonical texts that oppose anger, revealing some modernists’ desire to find a place for anger in Buddhism (Edmiston). Gleig’s *American Dharma* gives examples of modernist/ postmodernist Buddhists describing anger as appropriate when facing injustice (155, 254, 279). These approaches contrast with the “traditional” one, expressed for example by non-FPMT teacher Thubten Chodron. She disagrees with the idea that anger can be useful to fight

eral interviewees, older ones in particular, also felt that activism, by disturbing the mind, could be an obstacle to formal Dharma practice that would benefit society more.⁴⁵ Finally, many believed FPMT was already doing what it did best: fundraising globally to offer locally appropriate services. For example, one male who worked in chaplaincy indicated that if FPMT shifted to activism, others would not take on its projects; their benefits would be lost. Despite expressing progressive views, he felt activism was better left to other organizations.

It is notable that interviewees who expressed political views reflected typically progressive stances. None felt that traditional Buddhism entailed conservative opinions. One man stated, for example, “I don’t equate tradition with conservative activity or conservative viewpoints.” Comments lauding the openness of FPMT’s lamas to people with non-mainstream (such as LGBTQ+) lifestyles were common. Many Western interviewees reported past involvement in progressive causes—environmental, anti-capitalist, women’s rights, queer rights, Free Tibet, and so on. FPMT’s people are diverse, geographically, culturally, and generationally, so opinions surely differ, but openness about lifestyle and concern for poverty were expressed by Asian and Western interviewees in all age groups. However, it would go too far to suggest that any one political opinion is everywhere shared. The idea that organizations either are or are not “liberal and progressive” poorly accommodates global, multi-cultural, multifaceted networks like FPMT.

injustice (Borges). Another non-FPMT traditionalist, Bhikkhu Bodhi, makes no provision for righteous anger when summarizing canonical anger teachings, writing only that anger disrupts social harmony and harms the self and others (Bodhi *The Buddha’s* 49).

⁴⁵ Amod Lele writes that “a significant portion of premodern Indian Buddhist tradition” treats activism as hindering spiritual progress, although the tradition supports humanitarian aid. He cites teachings which state that activism may not resolve others’ suffering, and, for those doing it, may negatively affect “the tranquility required for liberation” (239, 246-250, 275).

What research nevertheless shows is that FPMT's lack of institutional activism does not signify withdrawal from society, passivity in the face of suffering, unquestioning support for existing social orders, or political or social conservatism. It signifies instead that longstanding Buddhist beliefs shape thinking about engagement. One of these beliefs is that the main source of beneficial social transformation is improvement in people's minds.

Is FPMT's Engagement "Traditionalist"?

Research shows that FPMT is a socially engaged Buddhist organization. Yet its pattern of engagement varies from that of many modernist Buddhist organizations. Does that make it traditionalist? Here, engagement is called "traditionalist" if its motivations derive from, and its objectives and activities express, traditional Buddhist teachings rather than modernized Buddhist teachings or modern discourses.

FPMT's engagement is mainly motivated by longstanding Buddhist teachings. Almost everyone interviewed felt that such teachings promoted social engagement as beneficial to others, meritorious, and soteriological. When asked about their own motivation for engaging, alongside a general wish to help others, they cited these teachings. One was guru devotion: some interviewees engaged to fulfil the wishes of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and/or the Dalai Lama. Other teachings they mentioned included loving-kindness, compassion, *bodhicitta*, generosity, merit, purification, Buddha nature, interdependence, and karma. The Mahayana concept of engaged *bodhicitta* came up over and over; it was understood to demand involvement with others and society and was connected to Lama Zopa Rinpoche's emphasis on "compassion in action." Across the board, interviewees believed longstanding teachings from their lineage required helping others; almost all felt such teachings referred to material as well

as spiritual aid. And most also wanted material help to be supplemented with faith-based ways to influence long term outcomes for beneficiaries: improved karma, rebirths, and prospects for enlightenment.

Interviewees did not cite modernized Buddhist ideas as motivators for engagement.⁴⁶ One such idea is that karma is social. “Sociokarma” suggests that the suffering of some groups is caused by society rather than the past actions of the suffering individuals. Interviewees did not mention this idea and, when asked, dismissed it as not found in Buddhist teachings. They described karma as individual even if many beings shared the same karma, producing collective karma.⁴⁷ One Western interviewee from FPMT’s founding generation, for example, stated, “Disease and poverty, those are symptoms of those individuals’ negative karma. If they hadn’t created the cause, negative karma, they wouldn’t experience them.” A younger interviewee, also Western, reiterated that “social structures come from individuals’ karma.” Himalayan monks interviewed did not recognize “sociokarma” as a Buddhist teaching. People in FPMT evidently do not need the concept of sociokarma to engage socially.

⁴⁶ Gleig indicates that the motivators of engagement (among modernist Buddhists) include interdependence (understood as a cosmic web of positively valued interconnections) and interpretations of karma that make sufferings’ causes societal (Gleig “Engaged”). These ideas are both modern. Roger Jackson, in his summary of Buddhism’s cosmology, underlines that social karma, for example, is not found in classical sources where “karma is one’s own” (*Rebirth* 93). And the “web of life” doctrine, sometimes described by scholars as the main Buddhist teaching supporting engagement, is an interpretation of interdependence that draws on Romanticism and was apparently first published in 1990 (Brown “Beyond” 12-13, including fn. 8 and 9; see also McMahan 149-182). Hence, although modernists’ engagement surely draws on longstanding Buddhist teachings like loving-kindness and compassion, it also relies on modernized teachings.

⁴⁷ “Collective karma” is not the same as “social karma” i.e., “sociokarma.” The former term suggests that many beings have created the same karmic causes and thus share the same karmic effects. The latter terms express the idea that suffering is caused by social structures rather than by karmic causes created in the past by those who suffer.

Interviewees also did not interpret interdependence in the modern way as a positively valued web of life. They understood interdependence, in the context of engagement, to mean that, because beings are mutually reliant and connected across lifetimes, they can and should help each other. Also not mentioned as motivators were other modern discourses. Although interviewees sometimes expressed contemporary Western views on social justice, they did not attribute their engagement to them, but to longstanding Buddhist teachings. Motivations reported during ethnographic research thus contradict stereotypes that portray traditional Buddhism as unsupportive of engagement and engagement as reliant on modernized Buddhist teachings or modern discourses.

It is not only motivations in FPMT that derive from traditional teachings. Activities and objectives do also. These frequently reflect two features stipulated here as defining traditional Buddhism: Buddhism's cosmology and concern with lineage.

On cosmology, interviewees' comments, observations of engagement, and FPMT's publications all reveal a *de facto* social philosophy: that engagement should have dual objectives: short and medium term material benefits and long term spiritual ones, including good rebirths and enlightenment. One older nun explained, "it's good to help overcome the day-to-day problems of people but . . . [FPMT] always combines that with . . . making them connect with something positive that will benefit them long term and create the causes for . . . good rebirths." FPMT's *Mandala* magazine similarly states that engagement should combine "practical and spiritual methods" ("Helping"). Schools funded by its international office are expected to teach universal education or Dharma alongside government curricula to help students benefit society and their own futures in this and later lives. Lama Zopa Rinpoche affirmed this dual approach. In 2015, he said, for example, "We offer . . . hospices and many other social services. Here it is not only to help the body, but mainly to help the mind. The

whole point of FPMT is to bring sentient beings to full enlightenment” (*FPMT Annual Review 2015* 2). Speaking during the pandemic to Kopan monks, he emphasized that their efforts to alleviate pandemic-related suffering among poor Nepalis helped the latter immediately and in future lives: it encouraged faith in monastics that would plant “the seed of liberation” by causing them to later encounter Buddhism (“Kopan Helping Hands Revived”). Similarly, aid sometimes combines the goals of helping others and safeguarding lineages. Food for monastics is one example. The dual objectives, reflecting a traditional picture of the cosmos and a concern with lineage, exemplify what is here called “traditionalism.”

FPMT’s socially oriented activities often combine objectives in this way even though its international office does not require this. Affiliates have, as one senior FPMT employee stated, “complete independence” when engaging socially.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, research found that most social efforts combine the material and spiritual, likely because doing so grows naturally out of FPMT’s traditional Buddhism. Examples include:

- Engagement often incorporates gurus’ advice because gurus are assumed to be higher beings who know how to generate spiritual as well as material benefits. For example, Lama Yeshe promoted universal education on the grounds that it would benefit those receiving it immediately and in later lives; many people in FPMT develop and deliver universal education.

⁴⁸ The interviewee, knowledgeable about international office-affiliate relations, contrasted affiliates’ freedom when engaging socially with the “guidelines and requirements” they had to follow when teaching Dharma.

- Engagement often includes prayers, pujas, or dedications expected to improve engagement's outcomes, given the traditional Buddhist teaching that suffering has karmic causes so alleviating it may be ineffective without addressing karma. Practices are also done to promote beneficiaries' good rebirths and enlightenment. Kopan, for example, performs prayers for dialysis patients with these aims.
- Holy objects like stupas are often placed at sites of engagement to give beneficiaries imprints and opportunities to create merit that are expected to help them progress to better rebirths and enlightenment. Statues, stupas, and images can be observed at Maitreya School in Bodhgayā, for example. One interviewee with decades of involvement in FPMT shared a view often heard during research:



Fig. 5. Images in the main hall at Maitreya Universal Education School, Bodh Gaya, include Maitreya Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha, and Green Tara. February 2023. Photo: Donna L. Brown

There's no point in just doing social work. Unless you take them round the prayer wheel, you take them round the stupa, you say prayers or mantras . . . Unless you're injecting Dharma into social work, you might relieve temporary suffering but . . . that has got to be integrated into planting seeds and slowly bringing people to the path [to enlightenment]. . . . [Material assistance] is still good if it helps people, but it has to be done in balance [with spiritual help].

- Care for animals is aimed in part at improving their rebirths. For example, at Kopan's animal sanctuary, animals are led around stupas daily to receive imprints.
- Education is perceived as the best way to change society because it can improve people's minds, such that, governed less by delusions and more by ethics and compassion, they create better societies now and in the future. FPMT's significant investments in education demonstrate its priority.
- Regarding lineage, schools in which children have Buddhist heritage teach Buddhism in part to keep it alive in Buddhist communities, as well as government curricula to help children succeed in daily life. Mongolians receive material aid combined with Dharma and universal education to restore their Gelug heritage. FPMT provides material necessities to monastics so they can preserve and transmit lineages.

Hence, FPMT's engagement can be called "traditionalist" on the grounds that its motivations, objectives, and activities embody traditional Buddhist teachings and concerns.

Conclusion

FPMT is socially engaged. Its social endeavors show that traditionalist Buddhists can be engaged as part of their Buddhist practice. Stereotypes of traditionalist disengagement are thus demonstrably inaccurate, while exclusionary definitions of engagement, which discourage studying traditionalists, lead to overlooking their activities.

FPMT's engagement, motivated and shaped by its traditional Buddhism, differs from modernist Buddhists' engagement motivated and

shaped by modernized Buddhist teachings and modern discourses. Modernity's science discourse, for example, encourages modernists to dismiss rebirth and downplay or alter teachings on karma. They then tend not to address what traditional Buddhism teaches is the negative karma of those who suffer, nor help them create the positive karma it teaches will reduce future suffering. Another modern discourse, that of socialism and social justice, steers modernists toward activism. Revaluing anger at perceived injustice as potentially positive reinforces this tendency.⁴⁹ Modernists may then value activism more and education, social services, and humanitarian aid less than traditionalists. As for gurus, few modernists seem to share traditionalists' concern with implementing their advice. Nor is it evident that modernists engage in ways that help protect lineages. Modern beliefs shape modernists' engagement, potentially suiting it to being labeled "modernist Buddhist social engagement."

By contrast, traditionalists' engagement, if FPMT is representative, is motivated and shaped by longstanding Buddhist teachings. It may incorporate gurus' advice, combine material assistance with faith-based elements expected to improve beneficiaries' karma, future lives, and prospects for enlightenment, eschew anger and activism, emphasize education to better society, prioritize social services and humanitarian aid, and address the needs of those who inhabit, preserve, and transmit lineages. That its motivations, objectives, and activities embody unmodernized Buddhist teachings suggests that calling it "traditionalist" is apt. Whether the engagement of other organizations rooted in traditional Buddhism,

⁴⁹ On modernists revaluing anger as positive, see fn. 44.

like Karuna-Shechen and BGR, has similar motivations and features warrants investigation.⁵⁰ Only further research can establish the generalizability of “traditionalist Buddhist social engagement.”

Given that many traditionalists are engaged, it makes sense to include them in scholarship that gathers data on, theorizes about, anthologizes, or surveys Buddhist social engagement. Recognizing traditionalists’ activities would broaden scholarship on engagement and make it more inclusive. It would also increase appreciation of all Buddhists’ efforts to reduce suffering and build a better world.

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⁵⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi is one traditionalist who appears to share aspects of FPMT’s basic pattern of thought and action: faith in Buddhism’s cosmology, progressive attitudes, and the prioritization of social services over activism.

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