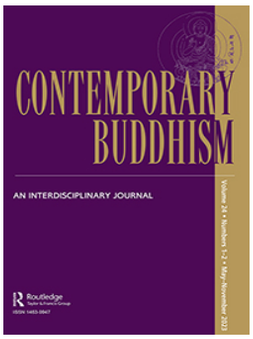
How Western Buddhists Combine Buddhism and Climate Activism

Cairns, Johannes

Routledge
2024-07-07

Cairns, J, Pihkala, P & Grönlund, H 2024, 'How Western Buddhists Combine Buddhism and Climate Activism', Contemporary Buddhism: an interdisciplinary journal, vol. 24, no. 1-2, pp. 70-109. https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2024.2374704

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/579099
10.1080/14639947.2024.2374704



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Contemporary Buddhism
An Interdisciplinary Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcbh20

How Western Buddhists Combine Buddhism and Climate Activism

Johannes Cairns, Panu Pihkala & Henrietta Grönlund

To cite this article: Johannes Cairns, Panu Pihkala & Henrietta Grönlund (2023) How Western Buddhists Combine Buddhism and Climate Activism, Contemporary Buddhism, 24:1-2, 70-109, DOI: 10.1080/14639947.2024.2374704

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2024.2374704

Published online: 07 Jul 2024.

CONTEMPORARY BUDDHISM
2023, VOL. 24, NOS. 1–2, 70–109
https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2024.2374704

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

How Western Buddhists Combine Buddhism and Climate Activism

Johannes Cairns [a,b,c,d], Panu Pihkala [a,d] and Henrietta Grönlund [a]

[a]Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; [b]Organismal and Evolutionary Biology Research Programme and Department of Computer Science, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; [c]Department of Biology, University of Turku, Turku, Finland; [d]Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science (HELSUS), University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

Previous research emphasises congruences between Western Buddhism and environmentalism, with both presented in juxtaposition to overconsumption, hedonic values, and anthropocentric worldviews. Nevertheless, incongruences also occur, including Buddhist tendencies for social disengagement, avoidance of conflict, and disinterest in the non-sentient world. Yet, virtually no empirical data exist on how Western Buddhist environmentalists negotiate tensions arising from combining the two elements. Here, we address this knowledge gap by exploring interview data from 13 Western Buddhist climate activists. We identify four major themes of negotiation: engagement, confrontation, Buddhist praxis and efficacy. Our findings show that Buddhist philosophy and practice often underwent biospheric reformulation, while the intentions, modes and outcomes of climate activism were often approached in terms of compassion and equanimity. Environmentalism was combined flexibly with Buddhism to justify individual emphases, ranging from solitary meditation practice to radicalised collective activism. Moreover, the negotiations were dynamic and featured unresolved tensions, demonstrating that combining the two elements involves major ongoing negotiation. The study findings have implications for understanding interrelationships between the climate crisis, religion, activism and identity work.

KEYWORDS Western Buddhism; climate activism; engaged Buddhism; late modern identity work

Introduction

In his landmark *Science* paper in 1967, US historian Lynn White proposed that environmental destruction has been intensified by anthropocentric interpretations of Christianity which relate to the more-than-human world as a human resource (White 1967). He suggested that Buddhist views placing human beings alongside rather than above other life forms may represent

CONTACT Johannes Cairns johannes.cairns@helsinki.fi Department of Biology, University of Turku, Turku 20014, Finland

a more environmentally sustainable approach to the environment, along with Eastern Christianity and figures such as Francis of Assisi. Indeed, Buddhism became a popular worldview among many environmentalists since the late 1960s (Nash 1989).

Buddhist doctrine highlights the virtue of material renunciation, extending compassion and gentleness to all life forms, and the intimate interconnectedness of animate and inanimate phenomena (Cairns 2024; Kaza 2018; Macy 2009). Views such as these may be considered in juxtaposition to hedonic values and consumer culture as well as supportive of environmentally sustainable lifestyles and social structures. Western Buddhism[1] also has historical connections to related features of counterculture such as vegetarianism and environmentalism (Jackson 1988; Kaza 2005; MacMahan 2009). Therefore, Western Buddhists may be expected to explore certain similar themes as those individuals concerned about the climate crisis, and environmentally active Western Buddhists naturally engage with both aspects.

Despite the apparent congruities between Western environmentalism and Buddhism, there are also various elements of Buddhism that contrast with elements in environmentalism. Unlike Christianity, Buddhism does not have a strong ethos of social engagement. The Buddhist view of conditioned existence (samsara) as something to become liberated from may decrease the individual's motivation to improve extrinsic societal conditions in favour of merit making and seeking enlightenment, or in the contemporary more secular Western context, seeking personal improvement and peace of mind through study and meditation (Cairns 2024; Loy 2018). Activism, in particular, may also give rise to social conflicts, disturbing the individual's peace of mind, giving rise to anger and grasping for external outcomes, counterproductive for such aims. Buddhist philosophy has also been argued to be relatively anthropocentric, failing to recognise the ethical value of units beyond the observable suffering of an individual sentient being, such as species or ecosystems (Schmithausen 1997; Sciberras 2008). Such contradictions are likely to result in tensions and negotiations in individuals seeking to merge Buddhism with environmentalism. In light of the scarcity of empirical data on the theme, here we explore which tensions are present and how they are negotiated among Western Buddhist climate activists using the theoretical frame of identity work. The results can help to better understand the complex identity negotiation processes of religious environmentalists, which has relevance also for the dynamics of adherence to environmental responsibility.

Late-Modern Identity Work

Negotiations between Buddhism and environmentalism can be examined through the frame of late modern self-reflexive identity work. With the erosion of traditional authorities and collective worldviews, late modern

Western life has become characterised by ongoing individual and eclectic identity construction (e.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Increasing levels of education have contributed to increasing capacities of individuals for analysis and self-reflection, making this identity work a highly self-reflexive process. Individuals consider their identities in terms of various lifestyles and ethical stances, especially those prevalent in the local community but also those available through education, travel and the internet. This process involves joining and separation with regard to particular views, practices and communities in search of logical consistency, personal integrity and a sense of meaning. Archer (2007) has described the current reflection of identity as 'meta-reflexivity', in which individuals navigate conditions of uncertainty relying upon values and personal life projects.

While individuals' identities are increasingly viewed as dynamic, fragmented and even momentary, having a coherent sense of identity is seen as a central human need (e.g. Hitlin 2007). The innumerable identity resource choices at hand in the global and online hypermarket can render individuals overwhelmed and cause attraction to simplified ready solutions offered by local, populist, ideological (e.g. religious or political), and economic interest groups. Nevertheless, identity construction does not cease with instances of joining or separation from particular views and practices but continues throughout the life of an individual as views develop, experiences accumulate and new influences appear.

There are different viewpoints and discussions related to how identities form and develop in terms of the stability of identity. Researchers have also taken different approaches regarding the focus on inner, cognitive processes versus social contexts and relations. While these discussions are beyond the scope of this article, in relation to them we build our approach on understanding identity as continually reflected upon, thus changing and socially constructed. We view individuals as forming and constructing their identities by internalising social roles (such as a 'Buddhist' or 'an activist'), which reflect the expectations of their social environment (e.g. Stryker 2000; on social identity more broadly, e.g. Deaux 1993). Their identity in relation to environmental issues and their relationship with 'nature' (the more-than-human world) are partly shaped by social factors but they can also have their own impact on one's sociality (e.g. Clayton and Opotow 2003; Chawla 1999). The concepts of 'ecological identity' and 'environmental identity' have been used to depict these aspects of identity. Many factors can have an impact on their formation, including family background, personality factors, contact with the more-than-human world, attitudes of peers and religious interpretations and practices (e.g. Chawla 1999; Clayton et al. 2021; Walton and Jones 2017).

In relation to all this, we also acknowledge the role of stereotypes in identity work. Individuals draw on stereotypical representations and use this understanding to shape their own identity. Both 'Buddhists' and

'climate activists' can also be viewed through stereotypes (e.g. Mannarini, Fedi, and Pozzi 2024) and ideals (e.g. Craddock 2020, 137 – 138) in identity negotiations. Stereotypical characteristics can either be internalised or rejected, if the stereotype of a climate activist, for example, is viewed as negative, so ideal that it is unreachable, or incompatible with other elements of identity (e.g. Buddhism or certain values) (for research on framings about climate activists, see e.g. Mayes and Hartup 2022; for an overview, see e.g. Levantesi 2023). In any case, understandings of features of potential identity references, including stereotypes related to them, become included in our viewpoint to constructions and negotiations of identity (e.g. Craddock 2020; Mannarini, Fedi, and Pozzi 2024). Furthermore, we draw on research stating that values can play a key role in identity. Individuals can attach their self-identity with the values they hold important (Hitlin 2007). This has been linked especially with individuals who are active in social movements or, for example, volunteering (Gecas 2000; Grönlund 2011; Mannarini, Fedi, and Pozzi 2024). Both Buddhist teachings and the climate crisis can be expected to influence one's values, and thus identity (for the wide-ranging research on environmental values, see e.g. Dietz, Fitzgerald, and Shwom 2005). The disciplines related to environmental education include numerous studies and frameworks about the formulation of one's relationship with environmental issues and the natural world (e.g. Stevenson et al. 2013).

A body of research has also investigated the relationship between identification and action more specifically related to activism. Identification with a social movement has been viewed as a key driver of engagement in collective action (e.g. Louis et al. 2016). Previous research has also shown that individuals can develop an identity of the kind of person who engages in activism or collective action, and this predicts engagement and strengthens motivation for action (Louis et al. 2016; see also Grönlund 2011). However, there can also be conflicting norms between in-groups, which can inhibit or challenge activism if the norms (or perceived norms) of one group contradict those of another (McDonald, Fielding, and Louis 2012). For example, in a study by Louis et al. (2016), national identification and political party identification were associated with less sustained engagement in the peace movement. According to Nita (2016), the degree to which environmental and religious identities can be integrated and the processes of integrating them vary in methods and results. In their study, the means of negotiating these two identities included assimilating new discursive units to one's faith identity, and interpreting environmental viewpoints to the language of the religion. However, religious identity and the identity of environmental activism were not always integrated but also their separation could be negotiated in different ways such as viewing the other identity as primary (Nita 2016, 144 – 153.).

The current ecological crisis, including climate change, affects humanity at such a magnitude that it challenges people's identities, values and behavioural habits. People have to negotiate the impacts of the socio-ecological crisis on their individual and collective identities (e.g. Brulle and Norgaard 2019). Religion and spirituality are part of these dynamics. The ecological crisis has impacts also on them (e.g. Gerten and Bergmann 2012), and the crisis has, therefore, been considered also as a spiritual and identity crisis (e.g. Pihkala 2022a). People may need to navigate changes to their religious views and spiritual practices (e.g. Pihkala 2024). Those concerned with ecological issues have pondered how to raise and educate young people so that they would behave pro-environmentally and be able to cope with the psychological demands of the situation (e.g. Chawla 2020; Pihkala 2020), and similar tasks apply to adult populations and the fields of environmental communication and adult education (e.g. Moser 2015).

Current Study

Because of the presence of contrasting elements in Buddhism regarding social engagement and relationship to the more-than-human world, it has been unclear whether Western Buddhists consider Buddhism and environmentalism to be compatible and to what extent they experience tensions around the issue. In particular, there is a lack of empirical data on the theme. Of special interest are Western Buddhist environmental activists, who evidently have had to form some kind of reaction to these negotiations. To address this knowledge gap, here the lead author conducted in-depth life story and thematic interviews on 13 Western Buddhist climate activists from Australia, Canada, the UK and the US. *In this study, we explore how they negotiate climate activism and Buddhism*. These negotiations feature several themes identified among Western climate activists in general in previous work, but the emphases, interpretations and solutions are strongly influenced by Buddhist philosophy and practice. The results show that while many elements in Buddhism are widely considered to be compatible with environmentalism, there are also major sources of tension between the two identity resources, with important implications for Buddhist philosophy and practice, activism and pro-environmental behaviour.[2]

Buddhist teachings present the self as an impermanent and aggregate phenomenon, which may affect the relationship of Buddhists to the concept of identity. However, our research interest here is not on how participants relate to the concept of identity. Instead, we consider the negotiations by study participants on climate activism and Buddhism to be relevant to the context of late modern identity work as they reflect

more than simply attitudes and views, such as core values, self-image and worldview.

Material and Methods

Activism has been described as the intentional engagement by an individual in collective socio-political problem-solving behaviour (Corning and Myers 2002; Kenis and Mathijs 2012). Here, we adopt Fisher's (2015, 231) modification of this framework for climate activism, defining climate activists as people who 'intentionally engage in actions connected to the political and collective aims of addressing the problems of contemporary anthropogenic climate change'. This definition is wide, encompassing not only protest participation and writing letters to politicians but also lifestyle changes to reduce one's carbon footprint. Nevertheless, the lead author was particularly interested in recruiting participants from the subset of climate activists involved in collective non-violent direct action (NVDA), expecting negotiations regarding Buddhism, climate emotions and activism to be pronounced in collective and confrontational contexts. Such activism is typical of the new climate movement emerging in 2018 with heightened public awareness of the climate crisis, including groups such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion (Buzogány and Scherhaufer 2023). In terms of defining Buddhist for this study, there is no universal definition of what constitutes a Buddhist, although becoming one common features formally taking refuge in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and adopting various sets of ethical precepts (e.g. five precepts or Bodhisattva precepts). Especially, Western Buddhist groups display high variability in the type and level of commitment and beliefs expected from participants. Therefore, as stricter definitions would have been too exclusive, the lead author accepted as Buddhist any participant who self-defined as a Buddhist and was affiliated with a Buddhist group.

Based on the considerations above, in the initial participant recruitment message, the lead author sought core members of Buddhist groups involved in the new climate movement, particularly Extinction Rebellion (XR), since Fridays for Future is a youth movement and he did not wish to limit the age range of participants. The lead author initially (2021) used email to contact prominent US-based Buddhist Extinction Rebellion protesters who had received public media attention and representatives from the Zen Peacemakers organisation with a large network of socially engaged Buddhists. He also posted on the Facebook groups 'Extinction Rebellion Buddhists – UK' and 'Extinction Rebellion Buddhists – Global', as well as sending private messages to group moderators. Message responses led to the recruitment of approximately half of the 13 participants. The remaining participants were recruited through snowball sampling, asking participants

Table 1. Demographics of the participants.

Age	No. participants (n = 13)
30–39	1
40–49	3
50–59	3
60–69	3
70–79	3
Gender	
Female	6
Male	5
Non-binary	2
Country of residence	
Australia (AU)	4
Canada (CA)	2
United Kingdom (UK)	5
United States (US)	2
Place of residence	
Urban – major city (over 65 000 inhabitants)	9
Urban – small city (up to 65 000 inhabitants)	3
Rural	1
Education	
Bachelor's degree	4
Postgraduate studies	3
Master's degree	3
Doctor of Medicine	1
Doctorate degree	2
Buddhist tradition	
Insight Meditation Society (1 · non-affiliated)	3
Modernized Japanese Pure Land Buddhism	2
Modernized Japanese Zen Buddhism (US-derived lineages)	2
Secular Buddhism (Australian Zoom group following Jason Siff)	3
Tibetan Buddhism (1 · FPMT & 1 · non-affiliated)	2
Triratna (United Kingdom)	1
Environmental activism*	
Extinction Rebellion Buddhists UK	5
Extinction Rebellion, other groups	6
Greenpeace	3
One Earth Sangha	3
Five (5) other forms with two participants each**	–
Nineteen (19) other forms with one participant each***	–

*All participants were involved in more than one form of environmental activism. Four participants with different backgrounds (art, computer science, medicine, and teaching) had built careers around environmental issues. Several other participants with careers in psychotherapy or social work had also incorporated environmental components into their careers (e.g. sustainability projects or wild therapy).

**Other forms of environmental activism with two participants each: Climate for Change, Dharma Action Network for Climate Engagement (DANCE, UK), the Deep Adaptation movement, Save Old Growth anti-logging protests (BC, CA, 2022), and the vegan movement (UK).

***Other forms of environmental activism with one participant each: Clayoquot anti-logging protests (BC, CA, 1993), Conservation International, career in environmental conservation (Washington, D.C., US), career in environmental education (Adelaide, AU), career in environmental health (London, UK), East Bay Ecosattvas (California, US), Fairy Creek old-growth logging protests (BC, CA, 2021), Friends of the Earth, Global Tree Initiative, Haida Gwaii anti-logging protest (BC, CA, 1985), iNaturalist campaign (Adelaide, AU), Land Back movement (US), Melbourne EcoDharma (AU), revegetation projects (Adelaide, AU), Solastalgia Arts project (South Australia), The Nature Conservancy, tree planting (Melbourne, AU), Young Green Party (Germany), and the Zen Peacemakers Care of Country & Indigenous Knowledge group (AU).

for additional contacts in their networks (Table 1). This led to the recruitment of three participants not involved in climate protests but actively involved in other forms of climate engagement (two having started their own Buddhist climate engagement groups and one participating in a Buddhist climate engagement group). Snowball sampling led to all except for one Australian participant belonging to country-specific clusters: five participants from Extinction Rebellion Buddhists UK; two participants from the US with One Earth Sangha affiliation; two participants from Canada involved in Save Old Growth anti-logging protests; and three participants from Australia involved in a secular Buddhist Zoom group featuring various forms of climate engagement.

The study participants all had university education, mostly lived in large cities, and were relatively evenly distributed in gender and age, ranging from their 30s to their 70s, although only one study participant was below 40 years (Table 1). Taken the small sample size ($n = 13$), the participants represented a large variety of Buddhist groups popular in the West, including Insight Meditation, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Pure Land Buddhism, secular Buddhism and Triratna. Two of the participants were not formally affiliated with a Buddhist group at the time of the interview but both had a long history of Buddhist practice under various traditions. In addition to their current Buddhist affiliation, several participants had a history of Buddhist practice also in other traditions. Most participants had been practicing Buddhism for several decades, and only one participant had only very recently (under a year) become involved with Buddhist practice. Participating in Extinction Rebellion was the most common mode of climate activism, followed by the activities of Greenpeace and One Earth Sangha, a US-based Buddhist climate engagement group. In addition to the activities of these organisations, taken together, the individual participants were or had been also involved in numerous other modes of climate engagement. All participants were informed about the theme of the research project, processing and use of data, and their right to refuse to answer or withdraw at any point, expressing their consent either by signing a participant consent form or orally at the beginning of data collection.

Data Collection

The data were collected in 2022 through Zoom interviews carried out in English, performed once for each participant, and lasting between 1 h 7 min and 3 h 9 min (mean of 1 h 55 min).[3] Online video interviews allowed reaching participants located in remote geographic regions. The interview format also suited the study timing, since the COVID-19 pandemic was still causing restrictions on international travel, as well as the study theme (climate crisis),

removing the need for long-distance flights with a large carbon footprint. One observed downside of the method was disturbance in some of the interviews caused by occasional breaks in internet connection.

Zoom interview video files were recorded, transformed into audio files and transcribed to text format using the online-based TurboScribe AI tool (available at: https://turboscribe.ai/) which encrypts uploaded files and transcripts and allows only the account holder to access them. The transcripts were post-processed by adding metadata about text source (researcher/participant), correcting individual words that had been incorrectly transcribed, and editing phrase and paragraph division. This was followed by removal of personal identifiers (pseudonymization), including name, specific age and specific location, prior to sharing with research collaborators.

The interviews were a combination of an unstructured and semi-structured part, including life history and thematic components. Life story type interviews have been viewed as useful in analysing identity construction. The process of constructing identity can be viewed as an innate continuously reflected narrative, and these narratives can also be shared with others. McAdams (2006) describes narrative identity as a life story, which the individual construes to make sense of one's life and identity. The ways in which respondents describe their life stories and reflect on different issues thus provide information on how the person views their identity at the current moment, and in the case of this article, how they negotiate the influences and viewpoints of two central reference groups and building blocks of their identity: Buddhism and climate activism.

The interviews started with 'Please could you freely describe your path into climate activism'. Depending on the contents and breadth of the initial answer, the lead author tailored further questions based on themes identified in literature. The main themes of interest pre-identified were as follows: (1) the role of climate activism in the chronological life history and identity of the person; (2) the role of Buddhist elements in the climate activism; (3) biographical and structural availability of activism; and (4) political engagement of research participant. Theme 1 usually featured a question on the climate emotions experienced by the participant. Participants had been asked to reserve 2 h for the interview. For some participants, all the themes of interest could not be covered because the allotted time ran out and the participant or researcher had time constraints. In these cases, less comprehensive coverage of themes was accompanied by improved breadth of the life history section.

To protect the dignity of the research participants, it was considered important to ensure that no harm was caused to them during data gathering, storage or reporting findings (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK 2023). Participation was based on informed consent, with information provided about the theme, aims, methods and duration of the research as well as use and storage of the data. Participation was voluntary, and

participants had the right to withdraw at any time before publishing the findings without any consequence. Because the interviews contain life history and event details, they cannot be anonymised for distribution in a public social science repository without removing a large fraction of the contents. Furthermore, they include highly sensitive data, such as information about criminal activity and arrests during climate protests. Therefore, to protect the anonymity of the research participants, the decision was made not to publish the data in a social science repository but only to share pseudonymized interviews with academic collaborators (see e.g. Näre 2022).

Data Analysis

The interviews were read through several times to generate a holistic understanding of the contents and to inductively identify key themes of negotiation. Thematic analysis seeks to identify broad patterns (themes) in data and is better suited to identifying common threads extending across an entire set of interviews compared to content analysis, a related method that tends to break the data into smaller units of content (Braun and Clarke 2006; DeSantis and Ugarriza 2000; Sparker 2005). The analysis process led to the identification of four themes by the lead author: *engagement*, *confrontation*, *Buddhist praxis* and *efficacy*. *Engagement* refers to the relation of participants to different degrees and modes of social and climate engagement. *Confrontation* refers to subjective and collective experiences of being confronted in some way; the experiences and behaviours involve irritation, aggression, discussing difficult topics, public or peer criticism, civil disobedience, interaction with the police, criminal activity and violence. *Buddhist praxis* refers to individual and collective modes of practicing Buddhism, including meditation, chanting, rituals, teachings and discussion. *Efficacy* refers to the perceived efficacy of different forms of individual and collective climate engagement, capacity for Buddhism to undergo and inspire a green transition, and importance of efficacy as a motivator for climate engagement.

Various interpretations of Buddhist philosophy are included in identity work concerning engagement, confrontation and efficacy, while identity work concerning Buddhist practice emerged as a separate theme. It is acknowledged that the themes of negotiation could also be partitioned in alternative ways. However, the four themes identified were considered to encompass all the key issues of negotiation relevant for understanding how the participants use elements from Buddhism and Western environmentalism in self-reflexive identity work. In addition to the four themes of negotiation identified separately, biographic framing in the life story part of the interview was considered to reflect unique modes in which participants have negotiated their identities over time and the construction of which itself reflects the identity work of participants. This

material also shows interesting aspects of the formulation of their environmental/ecological identity. Therefore, identity work in biographic framing is described separately through analysing how Buddhist and environmentalist elements and their interrelations are presented, both chronologically and thematically, in the self-reflexive biographies of the participants.

Results

Biographic Framing

The participants display highly diverse personal histories of activism, Buddhism and their interrelation. This concerns both the timing of activism, with social or environmental engagement starting in the youth, adulthood or only recently with climate awakening, and the timing of Buddhist interest, spanning from the youth to under a year before the interview. Most participants displayed some form of social engagement prior to Buddhist interest, but some became interested in both during the same period, and some became interested in Buddhism prior to social engagement.

Historical interest in activism often began in the youth as part of student or local movements (e.g. anti-logging in Canada). Historical interest in Buddhism also often began in the youth when forming one's identity. Often both occurred under a broader framework of countercultural tendencies, characterised by adopting leftist and anti-capitalist political views, participating in anti-war and social emancipation demonstrations, advocating for indigenous rights, adopting a vegetarian diet, advocating for environmental causes, and involvement in non-Christian forms of spiritual practice. In some cases, major life changes or personal crises (e.g. divorce and career crisis) later in life coincided with discovery of or deepened commitment to Buddhism, activism or both.

Involvement in climate activism was mostly preceded by personal climate awakening through news coverage in recent years. Some of the participants were still in the immersion phase following this epiphany, making climate activism centre stage in their life, including social and intellectual pursuits (cf., Hoggett and Randall 2018). Others had already entered or moved through a crisis, seeking balance or reorientation (Pihkala 2022b). This included some that had already left activism behind, at least temporarily.

Intriguingly, in the biographic frames constructed by the participants upon the initial question, asking them to freely describe their path into climate activism, some participants omitted Buddhism entirely from their account. Many also described Buddhist interest in parallel with but without any link to social or environmental engagement. Some described Buddhist compassion practice to have been central in establishing a sense of

personal concern upon knowledge of the climate crisis. Nevertheless, none described Buddhist factors as the main motivator for becoming activated. One participant who had been activated by news coverage perceived as alarming explicitly declared that their activist philosophy had been mostly derived from Western political theory with little Buddhist influence.

> Other than [Buddhist influence on] following the middle path, not being radicalized, what propels me to outward action [. . .], being brave enough to sit and blockade the highway, would be more of [. . .] my Western political theory about [. . .] how democracy works, the North American culture of civil disobedience, our freedom of speech, and John Locke's social contract and freedom of rebellion if the social contract has been broken. (P7)

Concerning earlier life events priming climate activism, several participants attributed interest in social engagement to general traits related to their personality (e.g. always speaking out about difficult truths) or family background (e.g. Jewish people with connection to holocaust causing social sensitivity). Moreover, several participants described a strong connection to their local environment since their childhood. One participant described having emotionally unavailable parents and seeking emotional connection in the more-than-human world.

> My father was an economist, spent a lot of his time either in London or up in his room typing. He's written many books about economics. My mother was low-grade depression [. . .], a little bit unfocused, kind enough but a little bit drifty. [. . .] The consequence of that emotional unavailability or disconnect in my family was that I sought my emotional connection elsewhere. One of the places, probably the principal place I looked for it was in the natural world. [. . .] I spent a lot of my hours after school and at the weekends essentially exploring, wandering about, losing myself in the woods near my home, following streams, falling into streams, getting my boots full of water. [. . .] I used to go out at night. I remember I wasn't scared of the dark at all. I used to find it quite comforting to walk into woodland and just feel the velvety darkness, and the presence of trees felt very cozy and comfortable to me. (P2)

Two participants attributed their climate activism to a broader social engagement background in a Christian social relief context. Several participants had been involved in local or global environmental causes for several decades, positioning climate activism as a recent extension of this earlier environmentalism.

Concerning more recent and direct causes for climate activism, two participants described losing faith in politicians as the result of general political change perceived as undesirable (e.g. Brexit referendum in UK, and election of Donald Trump as President in US), motivating their engagement in climate activism operating outside of the political establishment. One participant became activated through connecting with the climate grief expressed by a person during an Extinction Talk event by XR (for ecological and climate

grief, see Pihkala 2024; the ecological grief dynamics among respondents are discussed in Cairns and Pihkala). Another participant became more strongly activated through activism itself, based on a powerful experience from an early XR action.

> There was one fairly pivotal experience when in my first days with XR one of the members asked whether I'd like to accompany her to [anti-logging protest involving locking herself to a car]. [. . .] That experience [. . .] was really quite defining for me in the way I was dealing with all that I knew that was being inside this car. My arm inside the ground, inside this extraordinary place, so ancient that there was that feeling of having no edges. I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else, not in the comfort of home, not in the comfort of loved ones. I just was totally, totally there. I've never felt that level of peace at any other time. [. . .] The ripple effect from what took place [. . .] has just reached home and is influencing many things. So much going on in the space of art and activism . . . (P8)

Despite Buddhism mostly featuring in a minor role as a motivator for climate activation, when asked more specifically about the theme, all participants elaborately described the influence of Buddhism on their relation to the environment and climate activism. Similarly, they described environmental awareness and climate activism to have profoundly shaped their relation to Buddhism. These bidirectional influences are described below under different themes of negotiation.

Engagement

By taking part in climate activism, the participants display social engagement. This causes negotiations regarding Buddhism, as traditional doctrine views the world of conditioned existence (samsara) as inherently unsatisfactory, seeking liberation from it in the short term through enlightenment or in the long term through creating positive karma leading to a better rebirth. A view of the world as inherently problematic and something to become liberated from can lead to turning away from the world and a disregard to improving it, considered to be ultimately futile as well as a waste of time better spent in spiritual practice or merit making (Cairns 2024; Härkönen and Cairns; King 2009). At the same time, Buddhist traditions lay a great deal of emphasis on cultivating virtues such as nonharming, loving kindness and compassion, as part of spiritual practice and merit making. This is seen in gentle treatment of other sentient beings and compassion towards those suffering, with related practices encoded into Buddhist ethical precepts (Kaza 2018; Macy 2009). The Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition particularly emphasises compassion, presenting the ideal practitioner as a Bodhisattva who practices not only for their personal enlightenment but motivated by compassion to save all beings (i.e. help all beings become enlightened). There are also widespread rituals

and meditative practices that aim to generate loving and compassionate mental states and send loving energy to or symbolically remove the suffering of other sentient beings. Such practices may create a positive mental state in the practitioner but can occur in isolation from attempts to tangibly help others and even be used to justify not doing so, especially if the rituals are considered to help sentient beings by themselves.

In contrast with traditional approaches, Western Buddhism often focuses on individual meditation practice and study, using Buddhist elements to seek improved mental wellbeing in modern society (Loy 2018). Those interested in Buddhism may exhibit alienation from cultural Christianity with authoritative ethical demands, which can result in leaving Buddhist ethical precepts to the side in favour of individual and eclectic modes of practice (Cusack 2011; Starkey 2023). Nevertheless, countercultural tendencies and soft values, including anti-capitalism, anti-consumerism, a care for social and global equality, seeking emancipation for oppressed groups, and care for animal welfare (including vegetarianism), are common among Western Buddhists (Jackson 1988; Kaza 2005).

The participants reflect awareness of the various positions and tensions around social engagement in traditional and contemporary Western Buddhism, presenting different arguments for a need for higher engagement in general or especially in the context of the climate crisis. Several participants argue that even if the point of Buddhist practice is to seek personal liberation from or to save all beings from samsara, this requires taking care of the ecosystems sustaining life. As one participant (P3) remarked, adding a Buddhist element to a common XR slogan, 'there is no enlightenment on a dead planet'. Another more traditional argument is to defer to the demand by authority figures such as the Dalai Lama for Buddhists to step off their meditating cushion and well-wishing alone and to also engage with the external world to solve global problems, including the ecocrisis. A related argument is that one's external behaviour in the world should mirror one's mental cultivation.

> I think the Dalai Lama said several years ago now that he's a green voter. [. . .] I was very heavily influenced by His Holiness and his kindness [. . .], and the compassion and the wisdom that comes with being a Buddhist. If you claim that language, then you want to see some evidence of that in your life. (P13)

> For me, if you're doing religion, you're becoming a kinder person. That's one of my tests, is it a good teaching or not, does it make you a kinder person? Does, then it's a good teaching. As we practice, we become more kind, we're more able to be compassionate. Then we're more likely to respond to suffering in others, in humans and animals and in landscapes. [. . .] For me, there's no point in being spiritual if that means we just end up worried about our own selves. (P5)

The most common traditional argument by the participants was to refer to the need to engage with the world out of compassion. One participant recounted the importance of compassion as an outcome of the enlightenment of the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, distinguishing him from other contemporary spiritual teachers. Most participants practice Mahāyāna Buddhism, and many referred to the centrality of compassion as part of the Bodhisattva path. Some participants described an otherworldly or internal focus to entail an overtly intellectual approach to Buddhism, lacking a key emotional component, particularly compassion. Several participants described an internal focus among Buddhists to represent spiritual bypassing, that is, using spiritual practice to escape from unpleasant experiences and realities.

> I raised the question [in Buddhist community] how do you all relate to the climate crisis in your practice. [. . .] I was shocked and a little disturbed, to be honest, by some of the reactions. [. . .] It was a lot of spiritual bypassing in my view, like, 'Oh well, I work here in this Buddhist meditation center so I'm doing my part'. I don't know if that's a terrible answer, but at the time it struck me like people were [. . .] not engaging seriously enough with the magnitude of what we are facing, not taking responsibility for their piece in it, or just straight up, 'Well, there are other worlds, so I take heart in that'. I don't know if that's a terrible thing either but at the time I was very angry, to be honest, and frustrated at the responses because no one's answer . . . You had woken up, but they had not, that's how I felt. (P9)

Compassionate engagement was understood in various ways. One participant described compassion as a situational and spontaneous response to witnessing suffering around oneself, and for it to be impossible to experience such compassion without responding in practice to the world around oneself. However, many participants described the need to extend compassion through abstract knowledge and reflection. For some participants, awareness of the climate crisis combined with Buddhist compassion practice necessitated taking action to mitigate the climate crisis. One participant who described being motivated partly by Christian examples of social relief in low-income countries extended compassion in the Buddhist context also particularly to human suffering in affected areas, especially malnutrition in children projected to increase with the ecocrisis. Some participants described a need for Buddhists to also extend compassion to future human generations that will suffer due to the ecocrisis.

Intriguingly, although several participants exhibited an interest in animal welfare, having adopted vegetarian or vegan diets already prior to climate awareness, none described compassion for non-human animals in the context of the ecocrisis. However, reverence for the more-than-human world in general was commonly reported. This was accompanied by animistic and biospheric formulations of Buddhist philosophy. The East Asian doctrine of

Buddha-nature was commonly evoked, referring particularly to the teaching by Japanese Zen master Dōgen who has written (in his seminal work Shōbōgenzō) that even inanimate objects such as rocks have Buddha-nature (Chen 2014). Several participants referred to also respecting or deriving inspiration from the biospheric worldviews of other 'wisdom traditions' such as certain indigenous and animistic worldviews. One participant with a science background reflected that she considers it more realistic and useful to relate to everything in the more-than-human world as being alive rather than as being dead.

> I think Buddhism is overly simplistic in some of these regards, and we can learn from other cultures. There are better ways of relating to the unavoidable violence that is entailed in living and breathing and eating. We can really shrink and collapse with guilt, and because we're trying to be so small. I don't believe that it serves the larger calling, that collapsing into nothingness, because it's endless, you'll never get to zero, if painful guilt is involved as opposed to a sense of exchange and indebtedness, and a relationship with Earth where I take and I take and I take and I give and I give and I give. That kind of relatedness is possible, practical, and it's how nature does it, this is how biology operates, exchange and relationality. To embrace the taking, because it's necessary for life to some degree, but also to see the ways in which we are obliged, necessarily, to ensure sustainability of whatever it is we take as much as we can, and to, in any case, give back. [. . .] How do we give back as we necessarily take is something that's not part of our Buddhist cultures and ways of looking because we value blamelessness. Oh no, how am I going to get to blamelessness when it comes to the Earth? I can't. (P10)

Compassion and reverence for other people or the more-than-human world was frequently intertwined with views on the interconnectedness between all life forms, their well-being, and the ecosystems sustaining them. Several respondents explained their climate engagement to be motivated by the combined force of compassion and insight into interconnectedness. Interconnectedness was described in a Mahāyāna Buddhist context as the codependence of all conditioned phenomena, considered to be compatible with the understanding in modern science, including physics and ecology.

> If you just look at the way that an ecosystem works, it's a network of interdependent entities all working together. If you look at the universe, that's the way it is. It's not independent entities floating around. Everything is connected, even just, for example, through gravity, that's a connection. If you look at quantum physics, not that I know anything about quantum physics, but I have heard of quantum entanglement, for example, the theory that everything is connected in a web, and it's very close to Indra's web [. . .] where every little jewel at the intersection of the strands of the web reflects all other jewels. So every entity carries within it an echo of all other things. If you look at the human body, it's an example of that. Our blood is about the same salinity as seawater. Our bones are made of elements which we share [. . .] about 75 percent, 80 percent with stardust. [. . .] We breathe in and out. The idea that [. . .] we

> are somehow individually or as a species [. . .] above, beyond, disconnected, independent of natural world is delusional. It's just wrong if you look at the evidence. In fact, Einstein said that this idea of ourselves as independent existing selves [. . .] was an optical delusion of consciousness, interesting phrase. That was from Einstein, so it's got to be right. But if you're a physicist, that's what they're discovering. Buddhists knew this 2,500 years ago, and I'm sure other cultures too. If you look at the indigenous cultures, they're so much more reverential and connected and full of story and ritual in relation to the land and species. So if you are saying that you are a Buddhist and that you agree or see the relevance of dependent coarizing, and there's no way you can avoid that if you're a Buddhist, I do not see how you can justify not acting. (P2)

Despite deriving various Buddhist views justifying their climate engagement and arguing why other Buddhists should also engage, the participants related to the level of engagement in various ways. Most participants were critical of disengaged Buddhists and people at large, considering them to have a deficient sense of care and understanding of interconnectedness, and some even displayed contempt. Nevertheless, several participants expressed sympathy for the need for Buddhist to occasionally withdraw from the world to temporarily focus on internal work. This might feature regular meditative practice, meditation retreats, or longer-term periods of internal focus. Several participants also expressed sympathy for differing mental and physical capacity of people to participate in climate engagement, with some being able to participate more and in direct action and others less and through other means such as donating to environmental organisations.

Some participants had also moderated their personal level of climate engagement owing to difficult experiences and uncertainties concerning efficacy and psychological wellbeing. One participant described commonly feeling overwhelmed by the ecocrisis and needing to regulate her level of activity to protect her mental health. This resonates with research which shows how action cannot be the only means to engage with climate anxiety, but instead a balance is needed (e.g. Pihkala 2022b). Several participants described feelings of uncertainty concerning the efficacy of climate activism and reported feeling paralysis after a couple of years of intense engagement, returning to Buddhist practice with an internal focus. One participant justified this return of internal focus as contributing to the transformation of consciousness needed for a sustainability transition among humanity.

> I believe an incredible amount of suffering [will be] caused by these various states of [ecological and social] collapse. Nevertheless, I think it's possible for humanity to survive [in] much reduced numbers, I don't know what sort of social structures. [. . .] To bring about the necessary transformation of society, I believe, coming from my Buddhist background, that you first need a transformation of consciousness. [. . .] Buddha taught how to do that, that teaching is already there, and it's in other traditions too, many indigenous peoples know how to do that, and other religions, I'm not saying it's exclusive

> to Buddha Dharma. But since that's my tradition, therefore that's what I work in. For the rest of [. . .] this life, I dedicate myself to doing whatever I can to contribute towards this transformation of consciousness. It doesn't mean everybody has to transform immediately, that's impossible anyway. But [. . .] if you look at the understanding of social and cultural hegemony, you can see that consciousness changes in the global community through the agency sometimes of quite a small group of people. The Dharma community has something to offer, very important. My focus now is more towards that. I will still do some activism, I will still sometimes go on the streets with the XR Buddhists [. . .], participate in their meetings, and we do some retreats and [. . .] various things which I'm involved with. But in a way, I think that there's a deeper level, and somehow I'm connecting more with that now. (P1)

Interestingly, along similar lines, the same participants who criticised Buddhists with an internal focus occasionally also characterised internal Buddhist practice as addressing the root cause of the climate crisis, greed in the human mind. Related to this, one participant explicitly criticised non-Buddhist XR activists for an overtly external focus (planning and preparing for actions), and most participants described it to be essential to combine inner work with external activism. Therefore, most participants did not consider external social and climate engagement as something isolated from their previous and primary forms of Buddhist practice. A flexible definition of what constitutes social and climate engagement also allowed several participants to move between different levels of external activism without apparent contradiction.

All participants describe climate engagement through adopting lifestyle changes as a result of climate awakening to decrease their carbon footprint. These include avoiding flying and using private cars for transportation, transitioning into a vegetarian or vegan diet (although many had done so already previously due to animal welfare reasons), voting for political candidates with ambitious climate agendas, avoiding unnecessary consumption, using solar and other forms of renewable energy, and recycling and reusing clothes and other items. Most participants report experiencing ecological guilt from unsustainable lifestyle choices and the compromises they have made in this regard balancing different habits, values, desires and social expectations (for ecological guilt in general, see Fredericks 2021; Jensen 2019).

The carbon footprint of one's lifestyle appears to be an area of constant negotiation and life adjustment for the participants similar to that reported previously among people concerned about climate change. The participants also connect this negotiation to various Buddhist themes. Many participants attribute overconsumption to greed in the human mind, expressing an appreciation for simplicity in desire and austerity in consumption, and a view that such simplicity and austerity are not in conflict with individual flourishing (i.e. they value eudaimonic over hedonic happiness). Similar to

people concerned with the climate crisis in general, many participants negotiate guilt by deferring to the structural and collective nature of the ecocrisis (for a wider discussion of ecological guilt among the participants, see Cairns and Pihkala). However, none described the important role of social, political and economic structures in the ecocrisis to justify utter lack of individual responsibility. Instead, many participants used Buddhist concepts of collective karma and responsibility arising from interconnectedness of people and their actions to justify simultaneously experiencing and assuming responsibility for one's part in the ecocrisis while not being weighted down by crippling personal guilt. One participant described guilt as anger directed at the self and as a non-Buddhist feeling that was never taught by the Buddha, preferring the concept of collective responsibility instead. One participant described the traditional Buddhist virtue and ideal of nonharming to be unrealistic and potentially leading to overt guilt and austerity. According to her, Buddhists could derive inspiration from the science of ecology and certain indigenous worldviews depicting ecosystems as a web of resource exchange. In this scheme, human beings accept their inevitable role in the web of life, both respectfully taking and taking care to give back resources rather than simply seeking to minimise taking of resources.

Confrontation

Anger is one of the three root mental poisons in Buddhism, and violence runs counter to the most important traditional ethical precept, harmlessness, as well as the Mahāyāna Buddhist emphasis on compassion (e.g. Anderson 2019; Cozort 1995). Buddhism also places high value on cultivating equanimity. This is particularly the case for contemporary Western Buddhism where practitioners often focus on meditation and mindfulness practice to cultivate a calm mental state (e.g. Loy 2018). In contrast, Western activism, including environmentalism and the new climate movement, often features open expressions of anger and aggression; restless, disruptive, and confrontational action such as non-violent direct action (NVDA) in XR protests; and even outright violence (for anger and climate change, see Bergman 2023; Gregersen, Andersen, and Tvinnereim 2023). This makes situations of confrontation that may involve or give rise to agitation, aggression, civic disobedience, public criticism, police interference, criminal activity and violence an important point of negotiation for Buddhist climate activists (see also McRae 2018).

The participants display a wide range of views regarding confrontation. One participant described anger as a dangerous emotion, easily leading to distorted views and unwise reactive behaviour even when the person considers to be behaving in a justified manner, and its expression should be restrained. Many participants described it to be important to develop positive

and equanimous mental states before and during climate actions, avoiding agitation and aggression that give rise to similar qualities in others and are counterproductive for achieving the goals of activism.[4]

> For me there's something really important about doing activism in the spirit of the world that we hope to bring about. There's no point doing your activism in an angry way. Then you're laying the seeds for there to be anger in the world. Much better for me at least to continually be attempting to embed my activism in peace, in steadiness, in loving kindness, because that's meaningful and profound in and of itself in that moment and because it's also creating conditions for more of that in the world in the future. (P3)

Many participants describe liking XR because of its avoidance of violence and focus on NVDA, consistent with Buddhist philosophy. Nevertheless, some participants also consider anger and even violence to potentially serve a purpose in activism. One participant had re-evaluated his relationship to anger upon reflecting on the XR slogan 'love and rage', beginning to see rage as a complement to love rather than an opposing force. Several participants described the avoidance of difficult emotions, particularly anger, and discussions or situations that may involve confrontation in Buddhist communities to be a major obstacle to social and climate engagement. One participant connected a non-confrontational culture in Western Buddhist communities also to white privilege and patriarchy, repressing atypical expressions of emotions.

> In that Black Dharma discussion thing there's also talk about the problem of suffocating expressions of anger from the white middle class liberal Buddhists that may be part of the natural self-expression of some other groups of people. I can definitely see that dynamic, see how it's played out in my own life and my conditioning. Personally, I've not always been able to express anger as much as might be healthy to do for various reasons, my family conditions and stuff. Growing up, I've had [Buddhist] teachers encourage me, like I want to get to the forgiveness part when something has happened, and my teacher [is] like, 'Maybe you should write, don't send it but write an angry letter, express your anger'. But these are American Buddhist teachers. I mean emotions are so culturally affected that it's fine, maybe Tibetan teachers can talk about anger being this huge poison, 'Don't do it unless you're really seriously in the Tantric path. But just a scratch or two beyond the anger is grief, and a feeling of helplessness'. Like there's anger because these people aren't having the reactions that I want them to have. But [. . .] I think the anger can be really clarifying sometimes, not to stay in it, because it can really solidify identity really quickly, but it can really call your attention to something. I'd side more with the Buddhist teachers that say it's okay, we got to get real about this being an important emotion, not to live in but to feel. (P9)

Several participants reported experiencing anger towards Buddhists or people in general who were disengaged or disinterested in the climate crisis or had unsustainable lifestyles; politicians implementing insufficient climate

policies in favour of short-term and local economic goals and pleasing constituents; and large corporations with high fossil fuel emissions and yielding political power. Some did not problematise these experiences, appearing to accept them as part of their Western cultural upbringing. Others struggled with resolving them with their Buddhist philosophy, and some had accepted, decreased or transcended them through Buddhist philosophy (e.g. impermanence) or meditative practices (e.g. equanimity).

> Sometimes it [social engagement] becomes an internal conflict as a Buddhist. Most Buddhists do not engage because they feel when you engage, you come into opposition with people. It's hard if you come to opposition to not disturb the inner peace of mind. We have always been mind training to have inner peace of mind and not to go and get affected by what's outside there, because outside there has always been told to us is illusory. It's impermanent, it's a passing thing, it's a karmic thing. You do not engage in a way that disturbs the inner peace, nor create outer tensions, unless you are a Bodhisattva. [. . .] I still have anger when I see inaction, especially the corporations. I would be lying if I said, oh, I love them so much. I do not love them, especially the corporations that are logging our old growth, destroying the ecosystem, and the fossil fuels and the pipelines. The anger comes from watching people like myself being handed roughly or brutally by the police or being paid by the industry that has all the power. They are all common folks, the indigenous people, they are brutalized, jailed, what have you. I would be lying if I said I didn't feel some anger. [. . .] How do I process it? Besides just the statement that you're not supposed to have anger, you're supposed to look at it as impermanent, that it is not you, it is not I, there's no I. Anger as an emotion is something you have to observe as a phenomenon that arises, and then may [recedes] at some point. But because eco-anxiety is permanently there, because the environment is permanently getting worse and worse, it's harder to handle. If I was angry at something, at an event that had a time frame, oh, you know, someone just kicked my car, so I get angry, I can handle that. That's easier to handle because it's past, he has kicked my car and he's gone off. After a few hours, my anger subsides. But it's like handling a low-grade fever that won't go away. (P7)

Several participants described anger as a force that can be motivated by or channelled through compassion into productive action. This type of anger was likened to moral outrage and called fierce or wrathful compassion. It was contrasted with anger targeted at particular people, 'anger at', characterised by blaming. Several participants also noted that XR fosters a culture of non-blaming which they considered to be consistent with the Buddhist approach to rage in activism. Similar to compassion in general, fierce compassion was also described as either situational and spontaneous or involving abstract knowledge and reflection. One participant described the latter form of rage as a force that brings down destructive social and economic structures, but nevertheless, arguing in favour of the primacy of more gentle forms of compassion.

> In Tibetan Buddhism, we have these wrathful deities, with fangs and big eyes and hair and all that. We have our methods for transforming anger through compassion into something which is still a very strong force in the world. That is basically how I practice. It's transformation of anger into a compassionate power rather than to destroy the other person, that really is negative. But to destroy the ideology or system or political structures or economic structures, to some extent, that very powerful energy is useful. It's destroying itself. In a way, we don't need to do too much. We probably need to be more looking after the people who are suffering through the collapse. [. . .] I've mentioned it before but still I say compassion is the most important part of this whole process for me. (P1)

Several participants described previous negative experiences with social or climate activism due to the involvement of aggression and violence. Some of them had been deterred from activism because of this. They considered non-violent XR, faith group and Buddhist climate activism to align better with their values and preferences. Buddhist sitting or walking meditation protests were particularly described to have a positive, stabilising effect on other activists, onlookers, and the Buddhist protesters themselves.

> In practice on the ground, in Rebellions, people seem to really like our Buddhists. Quite a few times we've done walking meditation through the chaotic, different places where Rebellions [are] happening and people bow at us or give us a thumbs up, because we bring something quite different. There's a lot of noise at Rebellions [. . .] and the Buddhists counterbalance that quite nicely. There's something about that sitting still and solid that I think is really important, and other people have said that too. I think that's our contribution. (P5)

The participants represented various positions regarding confrontational aspects in climate protests. At one extreme, one participant who was engaged in various other forms of climate activism but not in protests described admiring protesters but being afraid to do so herself because of the damage to her reputation from being arrested. At the other extreme, one participant described enjoying being confrontational, and that such people are enriched among activists. Several participants had engaged in various forms of NVDA, including planning to be and being arrested, accepting NVDA as a way to bring political and public attention to the climate crisis. One participant described being strict about non-violence in protests and when participating in activist recruitment, screening candidates against a tendency for aggression and violence.

There were also participants who were open to the use of violence in protests. One participant (P1) described sympathy towards limited and strategic violence against property by other activists, as long as it was not motivated by a reactive, angry response, although he described an unwillingness to personally destroy property. Another participant (P7) even described sympathy towards violence against people to prevent even greater

human suffering and ecosystem destruction. Although they considered this to be against the basic Buddhist teachings on non-violence and restraining the expression of anger, they also derived a compassion-based Buddhist justification for this. They used examples from the Jātaka tales describing past lives of the Buddha as a Bodhisattva who would sometimes commit violent acts out of compassion, sacrificing himself by a willingness to carry the dire consequences of the negative karma thus created. Despite presenting this rationale, they described themselves as being conflicted around the issue and thus far avoiding violence.[5]

> [The] Bodhisattva path is an exception. [. . .] The renunciant and hermit go to the mountains, eat as little as you can, live a very simple life and practice. That would be more of the Arahant path where you're actually liberating yourself, which is great. You send out all these positive, peaceful vibes to everyone else of the sentient world. But the Bodhisattva path, if you read the sutras of the Bodhisattvas and even of Siddhartha Buddha himself, that has a lot of sacrifice in them. [. . .] The Bodhisattva path is very hard because it requires you to look at the karma around you and assess it right now, right here. You don't have a precedent what do a Bodhisattva do in this case. We don't go out and kill people or plant a bomb and hurt people in process. But then do we just do the minimal and see the poor people of the third nations all die away? Because that's what's happening. The climate emergency will affect the poorer nations first, the lowest rung of the human society. Is it a Bodhisattva to say, I'm not going to look at this because they're so far away? [. . .] The whole thing is going out of proportion, the way they make profit, especially the timber companies [. . .] and the extractive industry, and the oil and the fossil fuel industry is just way off the profit. What does the Bodhisattva do in this case? I don't know. The Bodhisattva only have to decide when the time comes. I'm practicing, I did take my Bodhisattva vows, and this is also an occasion where it comes into practice. (P7)

Buddhist Praxis

Climate activism had altered the Buddhist practice of most participants. Western Buddhist practice often focuses on sitting meditation practice, which had been affected in numerous ways (Loy 2018; McMahan 2008). Most participants were involved in Buddhist XR protests involving sitting meditation. Some had also taken part in walking meditation protests. This had extended their private and communal spiritual practice into the public sphere.

Some participants reported powerful experiences during sitting meditation in protests, involving experiences of moral alignment, boundlessness and unity with the more-than-human world. For many participants, the experiences of sitting meditation in protests had also affected their sitting meditation practice elsewhere. One participant described their meditation

content to have extended into social and structural issues and the collective karma involved, contemplating how countless people contribute to complex structural problems such as the fossil fuel industry. One participant described a powerful experience of nonseparation with the more-than-human world during an XR protest where they were tied to a car in the middle of an anti-logging protest (for oneness experiences in meditation, see Van Lente and Hogan 2020; for their relevance for pro-environmental behaviour, see; Garfield et al. 2014). The experience had transformed the trajectory of their entire life, including artist career and spiritual practice. One participant described a sitting meditation practice in an XR protest prior to being arrested to have been their most powerful meditative experience and experience of congruence.

The participants also commonly reported using sitting meditation practice combined with Buddhist philosophy (e.g. teachings on impermanence of conditioned phenomena and letting go of attachment) to recognise, embrace and calm difficult emotions and experiences, ranging from climate grief, anger, despair and hopelessness to interpersonal conflicts and restlessness during protests (for various climate emotions, see Pihkala 2022b). Some participants described periods of withdrawal from activism into internal Buddhist practice to recharge from, reflect on, or seek reorientation in social and climate engagement.

In addition to extending their practice to the public sphere, many participants had been involved in resourcing non-Buddhist activists by facilitating sharing of experiences from actions and climate emotions as part of regenerative culture work in XR, and allowing other activists and onlookers to join meditation protests. Although most forms of Buddhism do not seek to actively convert people, in this manner, these participants had extended their Buddhist teaching and practice to cover also non-Buddhists in varying degrees. Thereby, they used Buddhism to participate in a transformation of activism and help people deal with difficult climate emotions and other experiences.

As a result of climate engagement, some participants had also begun to incorporate natural settings into their individual and private spiritual practice, seeking a stronger connection between their spiritual practice and the environment. Two participants running a Buddhist temple at their house had incorporated outdoor walks and meditation into their communal spiritual practice. Several participants described spending more time and practicing meditation in their garden, with two participants reporting communing with trees.

In addition to sitting and walking meditation, the participants also reported incorporating environmental themes in individual and communal chanting ceremonies and rituals. A group of XR Buddhists have had workshops featuring, among others, Buddhist practices for dealing with climate

emotions (The Work That Reconnects by Joanna Macy et al.; see Macy and Brown 2014) and communal 1-h mantra meditations led by several people with the mantra being dedicated for environmental purposes. One participant who felt intense environmental grief was encouraged by a Buddhist teacher during a retreat to develop a grief ritual. Creatively applying elements from a teaching by US Insight Meditation teacher Jack Kornfield, he has developed a morning ritual in his garden shrine including communing with trees, sitting meditation, and placing stones on the shrine table accompanied by a prayer representing and commemorating the 200 species lost to extinction each day (for the importance of ritual for engaging with ecological grief, see e.g. Menning 2017).

In addition to collective meditation and rituals around environmental themes or in natural settings, many participants are involved in Buddhist climate engagement or activist groups featuring teachings on Buddhism and ecology and sharing of climate emotions and experiences from activism. Many participants describe these communal experiences as extremely important for their mental well-being and spiritual practice.

Upon their climate awakening, several participants describe experiences of distance, loneliness and irritation regarding their original Buddhist community owing to a disregard for and disengagement with the climate crisis, considered to be self-serving, ignorant and uncompassionate. Similarly, many participants describe experiences of distance from previous and other activists owing to an external focus and aggression. Several participants elaborately describe the importance of connecting with other Buddhists who are also concerned about environmental issues, sharing their core values, worldview and spiritual approach. Some participants describe connecting more with Buddhist climate activists from different Buddhist traditions than with disengaged Buddhists in their own tradition. One participant describes meeting other Buddhists engaged in climate activism as pivotal for a deepened commitment to Buddhist practice. Although most of the Buddhists in her primary Buddhist community are disengaged, she considers the existence of like-minded Buddhists elsewhere to be reason enough to have faith in the capacity to combine Buddhism with environmental concern important for her. Only one participant is critical of other Buddhist climate activists, considering them to be too non-confrontational and aligning more with stronger advocacy represented by Christian faith groups as well as radical solitary examples of climate activism.

> I'm not a typical Buddhist [. . . .], I don't relate to a lot of Buddhists. I often find more in common with Christians because of the devotional aspect of Christianity, and just the flavour of Christianity. [. . .] We [XR Buddhists] do a lot of meditating, and it's not my favourite thing. Chanting is our main practice . . . [. . .] There are a lot of Buddhists who don't like the idea of confrontation or doing anything that upsets anyone else. That's a big thing in

> Buddhism. [. . .] I think that's true for everybody, lots of people don't like that, but Buddhists especially can feel like it's not ever helpful to upset other people. [. . .] I've got a part that quite likes breaking rules. Lots of people in XR have got that part because that makes it possible, because we've all got the rule following ones as well. We probably all have both parts. The ones that like to break the rules, I talked to a few XR colleagues who enjoy that, quite free. [. . .] It can be controversial, hunger strikes [are] controversial. I had a Christian colleague who sewed his lips shut as an action a couple of years ago, and that was very controversial. Some people were very disturbed by that. I thought it's very powerful action. (P5)

Efficacy

Similar to climate activists in general, the Buddhist climate activists struggled with questions around efficacy. These negotiations interacted with negotiations concerning engagement and confrontation, such that efficacy was sometimes presented as a major justification for social and climate engagement and the confrontations, tensions, and disruptions involved, including all the related Buddhist themes described above. Most participants considered individual lifestyle changes and activism to have relatively low efficacy compared to collective activism. Some participants considered collective climate activism to have great efficacy. One participant described climate activism as continuing the legacy of historical social movements that have transformed societies and politics. One participant described XR protests to have already had great effect in climate policy and public awareness of the climate crisis.

> I see that [climate protests bringing about change] since the first Rebellion and the climate strike. Greta [Thunberg] is also a massive part of this, the national conversation has massively changed around climate change. I think that's largely because of XR and Greta. I've got no proof of that, but the timescale seems to fit. I think that it has had a massive impact on the country. Even Insulate Britain, I wasn't a part of it, but I know that people are starting to talk about them more positively now because of the energy crisis. As an individual, and as a group, as part of that movement, I think it has a massive potential for change, and activism has led to massive change in history. It has, it hasn't. We have the civil rights movement, and that was amazing, but there's still racism, it's not like it solves everything. [. . .] Women still live under patriarchy in lots of ways, it's not like the suffragette solves that, that they got to vote. There's some big things that can happen, so I have hope, but also I'm not certain about that. (P5)

Several participants described distrust for the ability of the political and corporate establishment to affect change, as well as the power of major corporations to influence politicians, motivating a need to operate outside of the system of representative democracy. Nonetheless, many of the participants with this stance were uncertain about the efficacy of the

new climate movement, considering various ways to renew the mode of activism and alternative forms of engagement. Some participants considered disruptive XR protests (e.g. road blocking) to cause irritation in the public and to be counterproductive for the aims of the activism, while others considered widespread disruption to be effective for drawing political and public attention to the urgency of the climate crisis and inadequate climate policies. Some participants considered XR and the new climate movement at large to have exhausted its initial momentum building up since its origins in 2018 until the global wave of climate protests in September 2019, and to be in a state of reorientation, with an unclear outcome. One participant (P10) described the social and political system in the West to have gradually developed 'immunity' against NVDA since the time of Martin Luther King, absorbing new protest movements through marginal arrests and media coverage with decreasing public interest and political efficacy. She described a need to invest more in other modes of climate engagement besides protests such as lobbying and public strikes. One participant also described the need to develop forms of grassroots participatory democracy for individual citizens to have a stronger voice in climate policy.

Several participants described having accepted the inevitability of large-scale socio-ecological collapse. Some among them had adopted a Deep Adaptation view (Bendell and Read 2021), holding that people must also prepare to adapt to the collapse rather than simply focus their efforts on preventing or mitigating it. Through views and practices decreasing greed and overconsumption, Buddhism was seen by several participants to have efficacy for the transformation of consciousness required for adaptation to the collapse.

Several participants also considered Buddhist views and practices to increase the efficacy of conventional climate activism by resourcing activists, introducing inner work to complement external actions, and to conduct activism in the spirit of the world the activists seek to create. Despite this widely held view, some participants also criticised other Buddhists for inaction and questioned the ability of Buddhists in general to undergo or inspire a green transition. One participant (P10) attributed this to the lack of prophetic authorities in Buddhist communities who could create visions for the future, as well as the lack of a tradition of organising the communities for action, in contrast to Christianity seen to perform better on these fronts. Another participant (P5) also appreciated Christianity for a stronger social ethos. As described above for engagement and confrontation, many participants reported avoidance of social involvement and difficult topics in communities, preferring to focus on meditation practice and the cultivation of positive mental states and group harmony. This inner, self and positive focus was seen as an obstacle for climate engagement and efficacy.

With regard to the importance of efficacy for their climate engagement (for discussion, see e.g. Sangervo et al. 2022; Angill-Williams and Davis 2021), some participants considered that one human individual can have only very small efficacy, practicing accepting and not being deterred by this reality. Some attributed this to the Buddhist concept of collective karma, describing the outcome of the ecocrisis as not being in their hands alone but that each person should still take responsibility for their part. This was described not only as a depressing but also as a liberating insight: one can do one's small part and feel that that is sufficient, without feeling responsible for the entire global issue. This approach is in line with active and radical hope identified previously among XR protesters (Stuart 2020). Other participants struggled with the desire to bring about systems change and described feelings of rage, depression and paralysis after a period of intense climate activism that had not led to the expected changes in climate policy (on crisis and burnout in activism, see e.g. Hoggett and Randall 2018; Nairn 2019).

Many participants expressed acting primarily from a sense of moral alignment, living according to their values, rather than from a desire or attachment to achieving particular sociopolitical or ecological outcomes. Some of these participants described simultaneously carefully considering issues of efficacy in their modes of engagement. In the most radical form of this approach, some participants described being primarily motivated by moral alignment and compassion, with little concern for efficacy. This could be considered as an approach beyond active or radical hope, one of transcending hope entirely (on a similar phenomenon in a Christian context, see LaMothe 2024). Such an approach of transcending hope was connected to Buddhist teachings on non-attachment, virtue ethics (i.e. importance of cultivating nonharming, compassion, and equanimity for their own sake as part of mental cultivation on the path to enlightenment rather than to obtain any particular external outcomes), and trusting in the unknown but inevitable positive karmic consequences of actions motivated by positive mental states and wisdom.

> But then the challenge is to do this anyway, right, even if it's not going to be effective to avoid that. We can slow it, maybe, but we can also be live in alignment with what matters. That's all I can do, that's really what you can do. You can't rely on results ever, on anything. You can do your best. I don't mean that in a glib way. I mean, be the best person or respond in the most aligned way with what you know to be true, real and compassionate. That's just all you can do. (P2)

Discussion

In the study at hand, we have sought to examine climate activism and Buddhism as resources in individual identity work, using the framework of

late modern self-reflexivity, with particular attention paid to tensions and negotiations between the two resources. We found that the participants considered various aspects of Buddhism and climate activism to be compatible, but we also identified four major themes of negotiation: engagement, confrontation, Buddhist praxis and efficacy. These negotiations had major effects on how participants interpreted and practiced Buddhism and activism.

The biographic frames presented by the participants reflect various common themes: personally significant experiences of the more-than-human world (positive connection or experiences of degradation; Chawla 1999, 2020); family background of social justice (Chawla 1999); distraught response to recent political events (e.g. Brexit referendum; and election of Donald Trump as President of the US; Hickman et al. 2021); counterculture features (including vegetarianism) exhibited by Western Buddhists (Jackson 1988; Kaza 2005; MacMahan 2009); Western cultural legacy of Christian social relief work or family background of social justice issues (Chawla 1999; Dorrien 1995); and the legacy of historical social and environmental movements, including the Christian tradition of social relief work (King 2009). They also reflect the individual, eclectic, fragmentary and dynamic nature of identity work in late modern Western societies. Notably, Buddhism was seldom self-identified by the study participants as a key driver of climate activism. Nevertheless, Buddhism and activism bidirectionally influenced each other in numerous ways. Furthermore, the continuums constructed in the biographic frames reflect the production of continuity in self-identity, a sense of coherence in different times and contexts. The reflexive process of constructing identity has been described as negotiating a coherent life story (e. g. McAdams 2006), which is illustrated in the interviews.

Our results demonstrate the research participants' awareness of different views, representation, social expectations, values and in some cases also stereotypes related to both Buddhism and environmental activism. Identities are not merely 'picked' or chosen but actively negotiated and constructed from and in relation to these elements and resources as illuminated by our results. The participants argue their positions in relation to them in a typical manner for identity work (Mannarini, Fedi, and Pozzi 2024; Stryker 2000), rejecting some experiences and views, and fitting different values, views and expectations related to Buddhism and activism together. They interpret both practices of climate activism and Buddhist teaching and practice actively, also in differing ways from one another.

The negotiation between Buddhism and activism is especially vivid in relation to the theme of confrontation, which illustrates how a seeming contradiction (McDonald, Fielding, and Louis 2012) is reconciled with different strategies. These include, for example, rejecting certain experiences, representations or characteristics of both Buddhism and activism, choosing reference groups such as specific types of Buddhists or activists (ideals;

Craddock 2020), accommodating contradictory elements such as aggression with one's own mental state or channelling anger through compassion, and applying Buddhist practice (sitting meditation) to a method of demonstration or vice versa, making the demonstration a part of one's Buddhist practice.

As suggested by Nita (2016), negotiations between the two examined identities include assimilation of new discursive units (such as anger, confrontation) to one's faith, and interpretation of viewpoints related to environmental activism to the language of one's religion. And on the other hand, our results show how Buddhism is also interpreted to the language of climate activism and its core values. Values, especially related to preserving the environment, but also to Buddhism (such as compassion), provide a fundament in the navigation of identity construction of the Buddhist climate activists as suggested by Hitlin (2007) and also Gecas (2000). Indeed, despite the nuanced argumentation provided by the participants, many of them expressed acting from 'a sense of moral alignment', living according to their values (on living according to one's values and its connection to eudaimonic wellbeing, see e.g. Hüppauff, Richter, and Hunecke 2022; Ryan, Huta, and Deci 2006). This core of value-identity thus seems to direct the negotiations and to precede questions such as efficacy in the thinking of the participants.

Negotiations around social and environmental engagement echo themes discussed in earlier work on socially engaged Buddhism. Turning away from the illusory and impermanent world of samsara is rebuked by invoking the importance of a felt sense of compassion and interconnectedness, especially in the context of the Mahāyāna Buddhist Bodhisattva path, considered to cause a mature Buddhist practitioner to, by necessity, respond to suffering around oneself (King 2009; Macy 2009). Such compassion and interconnection are closely connected to knowledge of modern climate science and the large-scale suffering ensuing from the climate crisis (similar observations are made by Wiseman 2021, 145 – 149). Merging Western and Buddhist elements, the climate crisis is conceptualised as a systemic problem brought about by collective karma, with each individual having a personal share of responsibility for the problem (on interpretations of karma and social engagement, see King 2009). Disengaged Buddhists are criticised, among others, for using Buddhist practice as a spiritual bypass, for having an overtly intellectual approach to Buddhism, and for lacking compassion. Biospheric versions of Buddhist philosophy are advocated and creatively reformulated, drawing inspiration also from indigenous worldviews, to support a more caring relationship to the more-than-human world. Similar alignment with biospheric worldviews has also been observed recently in a study on a number of Norwegians concerned about the climate crisis (Løkken 2022). Therefore, the identity work of Western Buddhist climate activists on this theme draws influences both from Buddhism and climate activism, seeking to merge the

two in meaningful ways. Acting according to one's values is a central way of maintaining but also reflecting self-identity (e.g. Grönlund 2011).

Previously identified sources of commitment to environmental protection include belief in the intrinsic rights or holiness of ecosystems, a belief that environmental work makes life meaningful, and a sense of obligation to do what one understands to be right (e.g. Chawla 1999, 18). All these themes occur in the study participants' interpretations of Buddhist doctrine and practice. Buddhist doctrine is reformulated to emphasise reverence for the more-than-human world, climate activism is considered a deep expression of Buddhist virtues and practice, and Buddhist cultivation and insight are commonly considered to oblige to climate responsibility. Adopting and advocating for biocentric formulations of Buddhism also suggest that Buddhist climate activists have a strong environmental identity (EID), considering themselves to be an integrated component of the natural environment, which has been linked to environmental concern and pro-environmental behaviour (Clayton et al. 2021). Therefore, Buddhist climate activists draw on features from Buddhism linked in a general societal and broad international context to committed, long-term environmental engagement.

A particularly intriguing interpretation made by some participants after several years of active climate engagement was to return to a focus on teaching or practicing Buddhist meditation and study, considering this to represent a deep form of climate engagement (e.g. partaking in 'transformation of consciousness' needed for a sustainability transition in society). Some participants reported that this was felt to be needed also in relation to psychological wellbeing. In this manner, some study participants were able to consider themselves to be deeply engaged with the climate crisis despite decreasing pro-environmental behaviour on the outside. While this approach may allow participants to manage identity conflicts regarding a felt sense of importance of the climate crisis and attraction to meditation focused Buddhist practice, its immediate implications on pro-environmental behaviour may be negative. This subset of participants highlights the endogenous focus (change within themselves) characteristic of the study participants in general relative to an exogenous focus (change within the other; for use of these terms in a typology of climate activists, see Kirsop-Taylor, Russel, and Jensen 2023). Thus, the empirical findings from this study support previous theoretical work on engaged Buddhism (e.g. King 2009) and Buddhist environmentalism (e.g. Kaza 2018) suggesting that an endogenous focus is characteristic of Buddhist climate activists. Several study participants also described feelings of alienation from other activists in non-Buddhists contexts because of an external focus typical for Western activism. Moreover, some participants described Extinction Rebellion to be attractive partly because of also incorporating endogenous aspects (e.g. regenerative culture

work to resource activists). Together these results demonstrate that negotiating one's position in the endogenous-exogenous continuum is a major source of tension for Buddhist climate activists. The resulting focus will depend on the relative strength of the individual's alignment with different aspects of Buddhism and climate activism, often changing over time and the arc of activism (cf., Hoggett and Randall 2018).

The participants displayed a wide array of ways of relating to confrontation, including irritation, conflicts, aggression and violence. These responses can be positioned in various parts of the continuum from endorsing equanimity and restraint to accepting anger and disruptive behaviour. Buddhist elements on the danger of anger and importance of virtuous intentions of equanimity and compassion were used to endorse the former approach, while fierce compassion bringing down destructive systems and the sacrificial Bodhisattva practice of skilful means, performing violent acts to prevent even greater violence, were used to endorse the latter approach. Some participants also explicitly criticised Buddhism for repression of anger and conflict, preventing addressing important issues, describing themselves to also draw positive influences on anger and confrontation from Western culture, emancipation movements, and activism.[6] The wide range of views on this issue suggests that confrontation is a strong point of contention between Buddhism and Western activism, despite the observation that the culture of non-blaming, non-violence and activist regeneration in the Extinction Rebellion were appreciated by many participants. The polarisation between the two resources around confrontation could explain why individuals resolve the issue in such different ways, reflecting personal histories, preferences, and emphases among sources of influence. It also illustrates different approaches to a potential identity conflict between climate activism and Buddhism, and the negotiations related to the potential conflict.

Buddhist practice was so strongly and comprehensively affected by climate activism that it emerged as a separate theme of negotiation. Notably, upon their climate awakening, many participants described a sense of separation from other Buddhists, similar to that reported in general by Western people in contrast to the surrounding society that has not awakened (Løkken 2022). Many participants also described a sense of separation from other activists because of an external focus or endorsement of aggression. Therefore, in terms of Buddhist practice, finding other Buddhists concerned about the climate crisis was a pivotal experience for many participants. Social relations and the social identity provided by such group membership can be viewed as a vital resource in reflection and constructing self-identity (e.g. Tajfel 1981). In these communities, participants held teachings on Buddhism and ecology; shared personal thoughts, emotions and experiences on the climate crisis and activism; practiced communal meditation, rituals

and chanting, often with environmental content and in natural settings; and planned and engaged in climate activism, typically featuring walking or sitting meditation. These collective contexts, in turn, fed back into the personal Buddhist practice of the participants, incorporating elements of the more-than-human world and structural issues into their personal meditation practice and rituals. The Buddhist practice forms that emerged also derived influences from indigenous ways of dwelling among and intimately connecting with the non-human world, such as communing with trees. Such changes in Buddhist practice may be considered to represent attempts by participants to incorporate key new identity elements such as an increased importance of the non-human world and structural issues into their personal practice, and separation from forms of practice that feature detachment from the more-than-human world and a self-betterment focus.

The efficacy of activism also emerged as a key point of negotiation. On the one hand, perceived efficacy was used to justify social engagement, itself a point of negotiation. On the other hand, attaching to outcomes common in Western activism was widely criticised. Most participants held positions of radical hope also reported previously among Extinction Rebellion activists, described as accepting that one cannot prevent large-scale socio-ecological destruction but is still motivated to do what one can out of moral alignment, that is, living and acting according to one's values (Stuart 2020). This notion of moral alignment was associated with powerful meditative experiences by several participants during climate actions, combining a more general Western theme with a Buddhist practice context. Such experiences of internal alignment, freedom and equanimity could even be described as an even more radical form of transcendence of hope, with participants drawing on Buddhist elements of impermanence, the importance of virtuous intentions (e.g. compassion) alone for positive karmic outcomes (that may not be known), letting go of attachment, and equanimity.

The results of this study show how multifaceted identity issues can be in the context of the current socio-ecological crisis. Ecological/environmental identity, religious identity and activist identity are strongly interwoven and interactively constructed, a process involving negotiation between conflicting elements and considerable internal tensions and struggle. Emotions also strongly affected negotiations of identity and vice versa. This theme is broad, and the authors address it in a separate paper (Cairns and Pihkala). Moreover, the present study contributes to the burgeoning field of Religion and Ecology, exploring how Buddhism mediates the response of adherents to the climate crisis at both psychological and behavioural levels.

Notes

1. Western Buddhism refers to the study and practice of Buddhism in the West, especially Europe and North America, by non-Asian converts (Cheah and Suh 2022).
2. In another research article, the author(s) focus more explicitly on the role of climate emotions and pro-environmental behaviour for these activists (Cairns and Pihkala).
3. The same data has also been analysed specifically from the viewpoint of environmental emotions (Cairns and Pihkala).
4. For a wider discussion of climate anger among the respondents, see Cairns and Pihkala.
5. 'When I do direct action, I think I would still be very much on the middle way. I hope we'll never come to the point where you do actively see your life being threatened. You do actually see your children's life being threatened if the government continues to approve the licences for logging out trees and lying to us. Like the latest BBC expose that Drax that powers UK's energy harvests the primary forest from Canada, which is a colony of UK, to turn into wood pellets to burn in their big furnace to give power to UK. They had lied to the public because they told us that they were using the slash path, which is all the leftover after logging, but they were actually logging primary forest. All these kind of lies make it very hard not to be radical. Because it's almost like some of my peers saying, well, they're all out to kill us. Because who's going to die first when the climate crisis comes? This is the time where I have to use the middle way or the Bodhisattva'. (P7)
6. For more discussion on the interpretations of climate anger by the respondents and negotiations on climate emotions, see Cairns and Pihkala.

Acknowledgments

We thank Dr. Mitra Härkönen for valuable comments that helped us to improve the manuscript.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes on contributors

Johannes Cairns, PhD, is Adjunct Professor in the field of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (Title of Docent in Evolutionary Genetics and Bioinformatics) at the University

of Turku and Doctoral Researcher (MA) in Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Dr. Cairns is also affiliated with Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science HELSUS. His research in religious studies focuses on the relationship between belief and environmental activism, based on empirical data on Western Buddhist climate activists. Recent publications include an anthology of Buddhism in Finland (Buddhalaisuus Suomessa; co-edited with Mitra Härkönen; Finnish Oriental Society 2023), including a chapter on engaged Buddhism in Finland. His biology research focuses on the resilience of ecosystems to anthropogenic disturbances. Moreover, he is co-founder of One Health Finland (est. 2016) promoting multidisciplinary collaboration to solve global health and environmental challenges.

Panu Pihkala, PhD, is Adjunct Professor of Environmental Theology (Title of Docent) at the University of Helsinki, Faculty of Theology, and also affiliated with Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science HELSUS. He is currently known as a leading expert in interdisciplinary research on eco-anxiety and other eco-emotions. Dr. Pihkala is the author of several books about eco-emotions in Finnish and he has received several awards in Finland for his work with eco-anxiety. He hosts the podcast "Climate Change and Happiness" with pioneering environmental psychologist Thomas Doherty and leads workshops on eco-emotions.

Henrietta Grönlund, DTh, is Professor of Urban Theology in the University of Helsinki. She has specialized in research on prosocial behavior and civil society, including the role of religion and values in these themes. Her current research interests include the ways in which religion, both in its organized and lived forms, manifests in urban contexts and interacts with urban societies. Professor Grönlund has conducted empirical research on these themes in several national and international research projects. Her research has been published as monographs and in volumes and journals of theology and religious studies, social sciences, and urban studies. Professor Grönlund's work has been awarded with several national and international academic prizes, and she is a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters.

ORCID

Johannes Cairns http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1329-2025
Panu Pihkala http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6876-8011
Henrietta Grönlund http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4106-898X

Author Contribution

J.C. designed the study, collected the data, performed the thematic analysis, framed and interpreted the study results, and wrote the first manuscript draft. P.P. and H. G. contributed to developing the framing and interpretation of the study results (climate activism and identity work contexts, respectively). All authors have approved the final form of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The interview data contains sensitive information on political activism, including criminal activity. Moreover, much of the data is life story interview data which cannot

be anonymised without removal of the bulk of the data owing to a high density of information such as events and social connections which may allow identifying the study participants. To protect the study participants, we have decided against sharing the data in a public repository (see e.g. Näre 2022).

References

Anderson, C. S. 2019. "Anger Makes us Ugly: Reflections from Pāli Buddhism." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 39 (1): 27–36. Accessed May 15, 2024. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A603318355/AONE?u=anon~86bf714&sid=googleScholar&xid=1239dadf.

Angill-Williams, A., and C. J. Davis. 2021. "Increasing Climate Efficacy Is Not a Surefire Means to Promoting Climate Commitment." *Thinking & Reasoning*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/13546783.2021.1979651.

Archer, M. S. 2007 .Making Our Way Through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility. https://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/74236/frontmatter/9780521874236_frontmatter.pdf.

Beck, U., and E. Beck-Gernsheim. 2002. Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218693.

Bendell, J., and R. Read, eds. 2021. *Deep Adaptation: Navigating the Realities of Climate Chaos*. Cambridge, UK & Medford, MA: Polity Press.

Bergman, H. 2023. "Anger in Response to Climate Breakdown." *Zeitschrift FüR Ethik Und Moralphilosophie/Zeitschrift Für Ethik Und Moralphilosophie* 6 (2): 269–292. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42048-023-00149-y.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa .

Brulle, R. J., and K. M. Norgaard. 2019. "Avoiding Cultural Trauma: Climate Change and Social Inertia." *Environmental Politics* 28 (5): 886–908. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1562138.

Buzogány, A., and P. Scherhaufer. 2023. "The New Climate Movement: Organization, Strategy, and Consequences." In *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Policy*, edited by H. Jörgens, C. Knill, and Y. Steinebach, 358–380. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Cairns, J. 2024. "Phases of the Buddhist Approach to the Environment." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 30. https://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/2024/02/12/5317/.

Cairns, J., and P. Pihkala. "How Western Buddhist Climate Activists Negotiate Climate Emotions." *Unpublished Manuscript*.

Chawla, L. 1999. "Life Paths into Effective Environmental Action." *The Journal of Environmental Education* 31(1): 15–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/00958969909598628

Chawla, L. 2020. "Childhood Nature Connection and Constructive Hope: A Review of Research on Connecting with Nature and Coping with Environmental Loss." *People and Nature* 2: 619–642. 10.1002/pan3.10128.

Cheah, J., and C. Suh. 2022. "Western Buddhism and Race." In *Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, edited by, R. K. Payne and G. Halkias. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.725.

Chen, S. 2014. "Buddha-Nature of Insentient Beings." In *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, edited by D. A. Leeming, 208–212. Boston, MA: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6086-2_9002.

Clayton, S. D., S. Czellar, S. Nartova-Bochaver, J. C. Skibins, G. Salazar, Y.-C. Tseng, B. Irkhin, et al. 2021. "Cross-Cultural Validation of a Revised Environmental Identity Scale." *Sustainability* 13 (4): 2387. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13042387.

Clayton, S. D., and S. Opotow, eds. 2003. *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Corning, A. F., and D. J. Myers. 2002. "Individual Orientation Toward Engagement in Social Action." *Political Psychology* 23 (4): 703–729. https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895x.00304.

Cozort, D. 1995. "'Cutting the Roots of Virtue': Tsongkhapa on the Results of Anger'." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 2: 83–104. https://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/04/Cozort.pdf.

Craddock, E. 2020. *Living Against Austerity. A Feminist Investigation of Doing Activism and Being Activist*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.

Cusack, C. 2011. "The Western Reception of Buddhism." *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 24 (3): 297–316. https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.v24i3.297.

Deaux, K. 1993. "Reconstructing Social Identity." *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 19 (1): 4–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167293191001

DeSantis, L., and D. N. Ugarriza. 2000. "The Concept of Theme as Used in Qualitative Nursing Research." *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 22 (3): 351–372. https://doi.org/10.1177/019394590002200308

Dietz, T., A. Fitzgerald, and R. Shwom. 2005. "Environmental Values." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 30 (1): 335–372. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.energy.30.050504.144444.

Dorrien, G. J. 1995. *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK. 2023. "The Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and Procedures for Handling Alleged Violations of Research Integrity in Finland." https://tenk.fi/sites/default/files/2023-11/RI_Guidelines_2023.pdf.

Fisher, S. R. 2015. "Life Trajectories of Youth Committing to Climate Activism." *Environmental Education Research* 22 (2): 229–247. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2015.1007337.

Fredericks, S. E. 2021. *Environmental Guilt and Shame: Signals of Individual and Collective Responsibility and the Need for Ritual Responses*. Oxford University Press.

Garfield, A. M., B. B. Drwecki, C. F. Moore, K. V. Kortenkamp, and M. D. Gracz. 2014. "The Oneness Beliefs Scale: Connecting Spirituality with Pro-Environmental Behavior." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53 (2): 356–372. https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12108.

Gecas, V. 2000. "Value Identities, Self-Motives, and Social Movements, '." In *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, edited by S. Stryker, T. J. Owens, and R. W. White, 93–109. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Gerten, D., and S. Bergmann, eds. 2012. *Religion in Environmental and Climate Change: Suffering, Values, Lifestyles*. UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gregersen, T., G. Andersen, and E. Tvinnereim. 2023. "The Strength and Content of Climate Anger." *Global Environmental Change* 82: 102738.

Grönlund, H. 2011. "Identity and Volunteering Intertwined: Reflections from the Values of Young Adults." *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 22 (3): 852–874. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-011-9184-6.

Härkönen, M., and J. Cairns. "Engaged Buddhism in Finland – Too Cautious to Take Action." *Unpublished Manuscript in Review*.

Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, R. E., Mayall, E. E., Wray, B., Mellor, C., and van Susteren, L. 2021. "Climate Anxiety in Children and Young People and Their Beliefs About Government Responses to Climate Change: A Global Survey." *The Lancet Planetary Health* 5 (12): e863–e873. https://doi.org/10.1016/s2542-5196(21)00278-3.

Hitlin, S. 2007. "Doing Good, Feeling Good: Values and the self's Moral Center." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 2 (4): 249–259. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760701552352.

Hoggett, P., and R. Randall. 2018. "Engaging with Climate Change: Comparing the Cultures of Science and Activism." *Environmental Values* 27 (3): 223–243. https://doi.org/10.3197/096327118X15217309300813

Hüppauff, T., N. Richter, and M. Hunecke. 2022. "Heavy Crisis, New Perspectives? Investigating the Role of Consumption, Time Wealth and Meaning Construction During Countrywide COVID-19 Lockdown in Germany,'." *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology* 3: 100045. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cresp.2022.100045

Jackson, C. 1988. "The Counterculture Looks East: Beat Writers and Asian Religion." *American Studies* 29 (1): 51–70.

Jensen, T., ed. 2019. *Ecologies of Guilt in Environmental Rhetorics*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Kaza, S. 2005. "Western Buddhist Motivations for Vegetarianism." *Worldviews* 9 (3): 385–411. https://doi.org/10.1163/156853505774841650.

Kaza, S. 2018. "Buddhist Environmental Ethics: An Emergent and Contextual Approach." In *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, edited by D. Cozort and J. M. Shields. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198746140.013.17

Kenis, A., and E. Mathijs. 2012. "Beyond Individual Behaviour Change: The Role of Power, Knowledge and Strategy in Tackling Climate Change." *Environmental Education Research* 18 (1): 45–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2011.576315.

King, S. B. 2009. *Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Kirsop-Taylor, N., D. Russel, and A. Jensen. 2023. "A Typology of the Climate Activist." *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 10 (1). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02398-z.

LaMothe, R. 2024. "Experiences of Beauty and Eco-Sorrow: Truths of the Anthropocene and the Possibility of Inoperative Care." *Pastoral Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-024-01127-w.

Levantesi, S. 2023. "'Enemies of Society': How the Media Portray Climate Activists." *Green European Journal*, October 17,Accessed May 21, 2024. https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/enemies-of-society-how-the-media-portray-climate-activists/.

Løkken, R. H. E. 2022. "The Lived Experience of Coping with Emotional Responses to Climate Change: An Existential Phenomenological Study." Master's thesis, hovedoppgave i Profesjonsstudiet i psykologi, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet (NTNU), Fakultet for samfunns- og utdanningsvitenskap, Institutt for psykologi. August, 2022. https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/handle/11250/3039457

Louis, W. R., Amiot, C. E., Thomas, E. F., and Blackwood, L. 2016. "The "Activist Identity" and Activism Across Domains: A Multiple Identities Analysis." *Journal of Social Issues* 72 (2): 242–263. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12165.

Loy, D. R. 2018. *Ecodharma: Buddhist Teachings for the Precipice*. USA: Wisdom Publications.

Macy, J. 2009. "The Ecological Self." In *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Reading*, edited by W. Edelglass and J. Garfield, 428–436. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
Macy, J., and M. Y. Brown. 2014. *Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work That Reconnects*. Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society.
Mannarini, T., A. Fedi, and M. Pozzi. 2024. ""We, activists", "They, the activists": Exploring Activist Identity Among Youth Inside and Outside the Stereotype." *Identity* 24 (2): 156–172. https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2315441.
Mayes, E., and M. E. Hartup. 2022. "News Coverage of the School Strike for Climate Movement in Australia: The Politics of Representing Young strikers' Emotions." *Journal of Youth Studies* 25 (7): 994–1016. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1929887.
McAdams, D. P. 2006. "The Role of Narrative in Personality Psychology Today." *Narrative Inquiry* 16 (1): 11–18. https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.16.1.04mca
McDonald, R. I., K. S. Fielding, and W. R. Louis. 2012. "Conflicting Norms Highlight the Need for Action." *Environment and Behavior* 46 (2): 139–162. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916512453992.
McMahan, D. L. 2008. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. New York and London: Oxford University Press.
McMahan, D. L. 2009. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
McRae, E. 2018. "Anger and the Oppressed: Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Perspectives." In *Moral Psychology of Anger*, edited by M. Cherry and O. Flanagan, 105–121. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
Menning, N. 2017. "Environmental Mourning and the Religious Imagination." In *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss & Grief*, edited by A. Cunsolo Willox and K. Landman, 39–63. Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
Moser, S. C. 2015. "Whither the Heart(-To-Heart)? Prospects for a Humanistic Turn in Environmental Communication As the World Changes Darkly." In *Handbook on Environment and Communication*, edited by A. Hansen and R. Cox, 402–413. London: Routledge.
Nairn, K. 2019. "Learning from Young People Engaged in Climate Activism: The Potential of Collectivizing Despair and Hope." *Young* 27 (5): 435–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308818817603.
Närе, L. 2022. "Is Open Science Good for Research and Researchers?" *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 12 (1): 1–3. https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.553.
Nash, R. F. 1989. *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*. The University of Wisconsin Press.
Nita, M. 2016. *Praying and Campaigning with Environmental Christians: Green Religion and the Climate Movement*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
Pihkala, P. 2020. "Eco-Anxiety and Environmental Education." *Sustainability* 12 (23): 10149. https://doi.org/10.3390/su122310149.
Pihkala, P. 2022a. "Eco-Anxiety and Pastoral Care: Theoretical Considerations and Practical Suggestions." *Religions* 13 (3): 192. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030192.
Pihkala, P. 2022b. "The Process of Eco-Anxiety and Ecological Grief: A Narrative Review and a New Proposal." *Sustainability* 14 (24): 24. https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416628.
Pihkala, P. 2024. "Ecological Sorrow: Types of Grief and Loss in Ecological Grief." *Sustainability* 16 (2): 2. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16020849.

Ryan, R. M., V. Huta, and E. L. Deci. 2006. "Living Well: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective on Eudaimonia." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9 (1): 139–170. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9023-4.

Sangervo, J., K. M. Jylhä, P. Pihkala, P. Lauri, A. Favero, N. Forsell, and C. Johnston. 2022. "Climate Anxiety: Conceptual Considerations, and Connections with Climate Hope and Action." *Global Environmental Change* 76: 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2022.102569.

Schmithausen, L. 1997. "The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics." *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4: 1–74. http://dharmaflower.net/_collection/earlybuddhist.pdf .

Sciberras, C. 2008. "Buddhism and Speciesism: On the Misapplication of Western Concepts to Buddhist Beliefs." *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 15: 214–240. http://enlight.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-MAG/mag172903.pdf.

Sparker, A. 2005. "Narrative Analysis: Exploring the Whats and Hows of Personal Stories." In *Qualitative Research in Health Care*, edited by I. Holloway, 191–208. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Starkey, C. 2023. "British Buddhism, Secular Mindfulness, and the Politics of Sustainability." *Religion* 54 (2): 179–202. https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721x.2023.2222694.

Stevenson, R. B., M. Brody, J. Dillon, and A. E. J. Wals. 2013. *International Handbook of Research on Environmental Education*. UK: Routledge.

Stryker, S. 2000. "Identity Competition: Key to Differential Social Movement Participation." In *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, edited by S. Stryker, T. J. Owens, and R. W. White, 21–40. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Stuart, D. 2020. "Radical Hope: Truth, Virtue, and Hope for What Is Left in Extinction Rebellion." *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 33 (3–6): 487–504. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-020-09835-y

Tajfel, H. 1981. *Human Groups and Social Categories. Studies in Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van Lente, E., and M. J. Hogan. 2020. "Understanding the Nature of Oneness Experience in Meditators Using Collective Intelligence Methods." *Frontiers in Psychology* 11. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02092.

Walton, T. N., and R. E. Jones. 2017. "Ecological Identity: The Development and Assessment of a Measurement Scale." *Environment and Behavior* 50 (6): 657–689. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916517710310.

White, L. 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155 (3767): 1203–1207. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203

Wiseman, J. 2021. *Hope and Courage in the Climate Crisis: Wisdom and Action in the Long Emergency*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-70743-9.