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Research Article

Meditation and Mass Civil Disruption: How "Engaged" Can an "Engaged Buddhist" Be?

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As a subgroup of the environmental movement "Extinction Rebellion," "Extinction Rebellion Buddhists" are a unique religious community in the United Kingdom. While at first glance the group might seem to align with broader trends occurring in the religious landscape, where Buddhists are increasingly involving themselves in political issues, they in fact encapsulate a distinct phenomenon in contemporary Buddhism: participation in direct-action activism. Through public, collective meditation, the group brings a distinctive emphasis to "mass civil disruption." Built on nearly two years of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper explores the ways in which Extinction Rebellion Buddhists challenge the perceived limits of Buddhism's involvement in social concerns, pushing the boundaries of how "engaged" an "engaged Buddhist" can be. This paper aims to situate the group's practices within the ongoing dialogue surrounding the limits and parameters of engaged Buddhism, arguing that XRB exemplify the ever-diversifying relationship between Buddhism and social change.

Keywords: engaged Buddhism; meditation; Extinction Rebellion; direct-action; prefigurative politics; social movements; environment

On a cold winter's morning in January 2023, I stood outside the Tate Modern Museum in London. The city was covered in a thick, heavy fog which extended from either side of the Thames River. The clock strikes 10 am, the designated meeting time. I quickly made my way to the front of the building which faces the riverfront, soon spotting the cluster of people who I am there to meet. The group's black clothing contrasts starkly with the vibrant, turquoise banner that they carry which reads "Extinction Rebellion Buddhists." Extinction Rebellion Buddhists (XR Buddhists, XRB) are a subgroup of the broader environmental movement Extinction Rebellion (XR). XR implements nonviolent-direct action tactics (e.g., blocking roads, staging mass arrests) to emphasize the urgency of the ecological crisis and protest the lack of government and corporate action in protecting the environment from the growing impacts of climate change. Identifying as a "decentralized" organization, XR consists of subgroups that are organized based on factors such as geographic location, occupation, and religion. These groups are involved in organizing actions themselves, participating in movement-wide actions with other subgroups, and developing direct-action tactics that reflect the movement's values and aims.

On this particular day, XR Buddhists were protesting Barclays Bank and the company's continued investment in fossil fuel. The instigator of this action was John, a founding member of XR Buddhists and a senior coordinator of the group.[1] John was a middle-aged psychotherapist and vipassana meditation teacher. His love of nature began as a child, when he would spend hours in the woodland and fields at the bottom of his cul-de-sac. Although John's interest in the environment extended back to his early years, he had only been practicing Buddhism for

[1] All participants names have been pseudonymized. This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

the past two decades. Initially, he was introduced to meditation through yoga, something he became involved with as he was undergoing his psychotherapist training. This led to an interest in vipassana meditation which ultimately brought him to his Buddhist teacher, Martin Aylewood, a co-founder of the Mindfulness Training Institute in the UK as well as the Moulin de Chaves, a residential retreat center in Southwest France. John believes firmly in the power of meditation, which he has experienced in his own life, in his professional career, in his time as a vipassana mindfulness teacher, and in his long history of involvement in eco-activism. As a result, he has dedicated his life to bringing Buddhist solutions and perspectives to the climate crisis. He is particularly well known for his organization of meditative actions both outside and inside branches of Barclays Bank and is extremely outspoken about the company's continued investment in fossil fuel. In one interview, another XRB member even joked that they must have John on some "Barclays blacklist," and that banks lock their doors when they see him walk by. Outside of XRB, John runs a climate café in his local area, is involved in various permaculture and anti-fracking initiatives, and has dedicated his social media to spreading awareness on harmful environmental practices and associated petitions. With a youthfulness to him that is remarkable for such a committed activist, he is a crucial member of XR Buddhists.

Once twelve individuals had arrived, John conducted a brief guided meditation centered on fostering a sense of connectedness with the Earth. Following his guided instruction, the group made their way across Blackfriars bridge. Reaching a secluded area a few streets from the Barclays on Fleet Street, XRB members quickly hung placards around their necks which read "Stop Funding Ecocide" and "Love and Grief for the Earth." "Love and Grief for the Earth" is the slogan of XRB. The phrase is meant to call attention to the interconnected reality of the climate crisis and the need to extend compassion to all living beings. Assembling into a single-file line, John led a walking meditation to the bank while carrying a large sign which read "Barclays the ecocide bank." Slowly, methodically, the group made their way down Fleet Street.

Figure 1: XRB walking meditation, January 2023. Photo by the author.

Reaching the bank, three XR Buddhists walked inside and began to meditate in the center of the building. John accompanied them to inform the bank manager of what they would be doing (meditating in protest of their continued investment in fossil fuel) and how long it would last (one hour). Employees appear bewildered by the situation, while customers moved hesitantly across the bank's grey tiled floor. Outside, the remaining eight XR Buddhists hurriedly attached a banner to a gate behind them which read "Barclays Funding Climate Breakdown"

and displayed a small neon green flag on the ground which simply stated "XR Buddhists." Once the setup was finished, the group sat in a single file line along the gate outside the bank and began to meditate. Members kept their eyes gently closed and their posture neutral, neither too relaxed nor too stiff. Their heads faced forward and, even through their sweaters and coats, I noticed the slow rise and fall of their chests, symbolizing a deep and methodical awareness of breath. Eventually, a ring of a Tibetan singing bowl by John signaled the action's end. The group of meditators retreated to a small park off Fleet Street for another guided meditation and to discuss their experience of the day's action.

Figure 2: XRB Barclays Action. January 2023. Photo by the author.

From this ethnographic vignette, it is clear that public, collective meditation is used by XR Buddhists as a direct-action tactic, one that brings a distinctly Buddhist emphasis to XR's call for "mass civil disruption." Actions have been taken in parks, along roads, in the middle of streets, inside shopping malls and banks, and outside of government buildings. Following XR's encouragement (but not insistence) of mass arrestation, some of these actions have resulted in group members, still in their meditative state, being forcibly moved and arrested by law enforcement.

The engagement of Buddhists in sociopolitical issues is not unique to XRB. Often referred to as "engaged Buddhism," this development in the Buddhist tradition refers to the application of Buddhist principles and practices to situations of social and environmental suffering. While Paul Fuller (2021: 76) reminds us that Buddhism, throughout history, has been profoundly socially engaged, from Emperor Asoka (third century BCE) and Nichiren (1222–1282) to the White Lotus Rebellion in China (1796–1804) and the Meditation Movement in Burma (1824–1885), the origins of engaged Buddhism are often traced to the mid-twentieth century, when modernist Buddhist movements "elaborated Buddhist responsibilities as both a social concern and a personal responsibility of purification" (Cook 2010: 26). However, while at first glance XR Buddhists might seem to align with these broader trends occurring in the religious landscape, over nearly two years of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Bristol, Cambridge, and London, I came to learn that, even with the proliferation of engaged Buddhism in Asia and the West, the use of meditation as a form of direct-action is still very rare.[2] The

[2] While examples such as the Burmese meditation revival, where the practice was used as a direct response and resistance to colonialism, does reveal a historic use of meditation for direct-action, it is still rare. Other extreme forms of political protest have also been documented, such as the wave of self-immolation by Tibetans protesting Chinese occupancy (Whalen-Bridge and Kitiarsa 2013).

mesmerizing sight of Buddhists gathering together, using their meditating bodies as a sign of resistance, is therefore a very different kind of social engagement than those typically associated with engaged Buddhism.

In this paper, built on thirty semi-structured interviews and participant observation at protests, community gatherings, and planning meetings, I set out to explore the ways in which XR Buddhists are contributing to the ongoing negotiation and reconfiguring of Buddhism's relationship with social change by highlighting a distinct phenomenon in contemporary Buddhism: the use of public, collective meditation as a form of direct-action activism. The aim is not to prioritize XRB's form of engaged Buddhism above other, particularly Asian forms, nor is it to impose Western or modernist standards on the movement. Rather, I wish to highlight a recent and largely under-researched development and, in doing so, contribute to the discourse set forth by Fuller (2021) and Alexander O. Hsu (2022), which seeks to stop the imposition of fixed narratives and exclusionary limits on engaged Buddhism. Following Donna Brown (2023: 48), I argue that the way to build on this dialogue is to make the study of engagement plural, democratic, and inclusive. While attention has increasingly (and rightfully) been paid to the often-overlooked engagement efforts taking place in Asia, the case of XR Buddhists shows how Buddhists in the West are also expanding understanding of engagement and, in doing so, challenging the exclusionary limits placed by Western Buddhist scholars and activists. I advocate for the need to study them carefully, with all possible attention to their sociocultural context, and for the words of engaged Buddhists themselves to be centered, valued, and taken seriously.

To begin, I provide an outline of Extinction Rebellion Buddhists as an engaged Buddhist group, taking into account their history, aims, demographic, as well as organizational and mobilizing strategies. Considering changing trends in engaged Buddhism and environmentalism in the UK, in addition to interlocutors' previous experience with direct-action that often preceded their involvement in Buddhism, I argue that a distinct engaged Buddhist community has been formed. The following section focuses on the ways that XRB depart from forms and understandings of engagement typically associated with Buddhism in the country. While undoubtedly aligned in multiple aspects with major trends in engaged Buddhism, I argue that the group can more usefully be understood as addressing certain limitations (as they perceive them) of engaged Buddhism, largely in regards to its resistance to overt political activism. In doing so, XRB craft a distinct understanding of engagement, one which resists the imposition of a universal definition or fixed narrative. As a result, the following section serves as an exploration of the ways that XR Buddhists inhabit, negotiate, and understand engagement for themselves. When discussing the aim of their public demonstrations, XR Buddhists often reiterated that the goal was to disrupt the everyday routines, complacency, and carelessness that often surround the climate crisis, not only through their physical presence, but through the prefiguration of an alternate mode of being, one defined by their Buddhist values. As a result, I characterize the group's practices as a collaborative endeavor, whereby Buddhist principles and practice are intertwined with the ethos of XR. To conclude, I consider XRB within the broader context of the study of engaged Buddhism. I encourage scholars of Buddhism to resist resolving the issue of what "counts" as Buddhist social engagement by calling for a radical openness to a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations.

Extinction Rebellion Buddhists

XR originated in the United Kingdom in 2018 after being started by a group of people associated with the environmental campaign group "Rising Up!" (Berglund and Schmidt 2020). However, the history of XR Buddhists can be traced to 2013. This is because, before they were Extinction Rebellion Buddhists, they were the Dharma Action Network for Climate Engagement (DANCE). DANCE sprang from the work of Buddhist teachers involved in the meditative retreat center in Devon, UK, known as "Gaia House." Since 1983, Gaia House has been involved in ecology and "Green Spirituality," hosting talks and events that draw on all traditions of Buddhism (Cush 1996:

202).[3] In one of my many conversations with John he explained XRB's somewhat complex history. John began by stating that the aim of DANCE was to provide "a forum for the wider sangha to explore bringing Dharma responses to the climate crisis." At the time of DANCE's creation, John was involved in setting up a branch in London. He got together with another founding DANCE member, holding meetings in their homes in South London for an entire year, going back and forth on what they could actually do: "What could a good, proper Buddhist actually do?" he said, "there were endless discussions … thoughts on putting financial pressures which sounded dull, we held film showings, but ultimately, we felt completely rudderless." After a while of this back and forth, John came across an image which would change the entire course of the group. It was a photo of activists sat together, dressed all in black, being dragged away by police. John became inspired by this image and brought it back to the group: "I said we could use this by bringing something we know how to do—*meditation*—to our activism." The group first began by meditating outside of a Shell building in South Bank in 2014, an activity that quickly became a regular occurrence, with numbers growing every time.

Throughout the years of DANCE's existence, the group seemed to fit well with the typical image of an "engaged Buddhist group" in the United Kingdom. During the time of DANCE's proliferation, engaged Buddhism in the country was largely united under broad networks such as the "Network of Engaged Buddhists" (NEB) and the "Center for Applied Buddhism" (CfAB) (see Bell 2000; Henry 2013). As such, DANCE acted as one of a multitude of networks aimed at bringing engaged Buddhists across the country together. However, the distinction to be made here is that, while the NEB and CfAB acted largely as forums for discussion, DANCE members were united by a shared interest in nonviolent direct-action. These insights are crucial in understanding two drastic changes which subsequently altered the trajectory of DANCE.

First, throughout the early 2000s, engaged Buddhism became progressively more popular in the United Kingdom, as evidenced by many Buddhist communities in the country creating their own engaged Buddhist groups instead of relying on broader networks. In fact, the NEB disbanded in 2014, citing the proliferation of specifically designated engaged Buddhist groups within a variety of Buddhist communities as making their organization increasingly unnecessary.[4] Second, in 2018, the climate movement began to grow to an unprecedented size, with "large-scale global protests demanding government action to address the climate crisis" (Stuart 2022: 806). In the United Kingdom, one particular environmental movement became the face of British climate activism: Extinction Rebellion.

XR Buddhists emerged as a subgroup of Extinction Rebellion in 2019, a year after the movement's creation. DANCE became involved in the first ever XR protest by occupying a Barclays Bank in Piccadilly Circus, where, after meditating for three hours, they were physically removed by police. After this, the group joined the Rebellion in April of 2019, where they conducted a protest meditation in the middle of various busy roads in London. This led DANCE members to want to formally disband and become a subgroup of XR. The group became inspired by Extinction Rebellion's use of nonviolent direct-action for "mass civil disruption" and decided that they needed to be "more engaged" or "more recognizably XR," as they would put it in a posting on their website. Just as they believed XR had something to offer them, the group contended that, as Buddhists, they also had something to contribute to XR. In an explanation of their decision, the group stated:

> We have found that Extinction Rebellion Buddhists has something unique to offer the Extinction Rebellion movement. Our compassion for all life, our capacity for equanimity and teachings of interdependence and impermanence have allowed us to offer a powerful presence, stability, and place of refuge to other members.

[3] For a history of the growth of environmentalism within Western engaged Buddhism, see Kaza (2019).
[4] https://www.nbo.org.uk/uk-network-of-engaged-buddhists-dissolves. Accessed on 25 November 2025.

XRB's actions and 200 members are a small proportion of the wider XR movement (whose protests—or "Rebellions"—attract thousands of people). And yet, the subgroup has had a substantial presence and influence. Within XR, there are strong references to Buddhism through mindfulness and regenerative culture. In particular, XR draws on the work of Buddhist activist Joanna Macy, whose workshops teach activists to process ecological grief in order to more effectively engage in environmental action. XRB have hosted guided meditations during past Rebellions to ensure mental and physical wellbeing amongst the broader membership. The group also regularly collaborates with other XR faith groups, especially Christian Climate Action (CCA). Interfaith "vigils" or "faith bridges" are routinely held during Rebellions, where XRB and CCA engage in their respective religious practice/protest together.

In line with the broader organization, XRB adheres to a self-organizing-system structure within their decentralized framework: authority is distributed among roles that are consented to by everyone in the subgroup, and they abide by the "XR UK Constitution." John explained to me that, in addition to himself, there are a select few other XRB members who are largely responsible for the day-to-day running of XR Buddhists. This is because 1) they volunteered for various roles (media, technical, organizing, etc.); 2) no one else volunteered; and 3) they tend to have the largest amount of experience in their roles and are the most dedicated to the group's continuation. Nonetheless, XRB strives to be non-hierarchical. As a national network, the group is united by their Telegram group, a secure messaging service that is a favorite of activist communities and is in near constant use by XR Buddhists, as well as Zoom meetings that tend to take place on a monthly basis (but are more frequent in the lead-up to an action). These virtual platforms serve as spaces where XR Buddhists plan upcoming actions, voice opinions, engage in debate, and connect with one another. In areas where there are a significant number of XRB members, specific WhatsApp and Telegram groups have been created within the XRB subgroup such as XR Buddhists Cambridge, XR Buddhists Bristol, etc. Meditative actions organized by local groups typically take place on a weekly or monthly basis, depending on the group's size. Several times a year, members from across the UK gather en masse in London for actions such as the Barclays action described above and for XR's large-scale protests, including their biannual multi-day "Rebellions."

Regardless of the size of the protest, the basic structure of an XRB action is largely unchanging and can be grasped from the ethnographic vignette provided at the start of this paper. Actions begin with a guided "check-in" meditation centered around grounding practitioners in Buddhist principles, remembering why they are there and fostering a mindset of compassion and interdependence. Guided meditations are led on a volunteer basis and the leader changes regularly. Leaders implement whatever techniques and visualizations they see fit (however, they tend to focus on body and breath awareness). Check-in meditations are followed by participants discussing various questions (either collectively or in pairs) that pertain to the group's aims. For the Barclay's action described above, for example, the discussion question was "What are you doing on the last day of the world?" Once this conversation has concluded, oftentimes the group will engage in a dedication of merit, followed by a reading of their "Declaration of Interdependence," a lengthy statement that is read at the start of each protest. In it, the group proclaims that all things are connected and urge humanity to "urgently awaken to the reality of interdependence." The group tends to focus on broad teachings such as interdependence as XRB is not affiliated with any particular Buddhist community. Members come from a diverse array of traditions (and therefore diverse forms of Buddhist philosophy) and have chosen to join XRB in addition to their more "traditional" affiliations. However, most XR Buddhists are members of a Western Buddhist tradition, namely the Triratna community, which will be introduced in greater detail below. A select few members identify as "lone Buddhists," or not subscribing to any particular tradition.

Actions themselves vary widely in duration. Some will last for an hour, some three hours, some have even lasted twenty-four hours. An action begins and concludes with the ringing of a Tibetan singing bowl. During actions, XR Buddhists tend to wear all black, aside from the placards that hang around their necks. They might bring cushions or stools to sit upon, food to share, as well as small Buddha figurines and incense to display. Practitioners' sitting posture mirrors the traditional cross-legged sitting posture that is characteristic of Buddhist meditation practice: the torso is straight, the head faces forward, and the eyes are closed. Meditators do not open their eyes, engage with the public, or speak to one another until the action finishes. At this time, group members will retreat to a secluded area nearby for yet another guided meditation and to discuss their experiences of the action.

With the vast majority of XR Buddhists being white, middle-class, left-leaning, and highly educated (possessing at least a master's degree), the group is afforded great privilege and can engage in their activism with relatively limited risk when compared to non-white, non-Western activists.[5] This demographic also resembles the one provided by Phil Henry (2013) in his study of British engaged Buddhism, which identified the movement as overwhelmingly dominated by white, politically progressive converts. However, in "becoming part of the XR organism," as John would put it, XR Buddhists diverge drastically from the typical image of an "engaged Buddhist group" in Britain. The group chose not to continue to affiliate themselves with a broader engaged Buddhist network, nor disperse into engaged Buddhist groups that were sprouting up in their own sanghas, but to align themselves with an eco-activist organization. The reasons for this will be discussed below. However, here, it is pertinent to note that, as Western converts, XRB members tended to be "activists" long before they were "Buddhists." In interviews, I routinely asked interlocutors to describe their history with both Buddhism and activism. While most interlocutors found Buddhism in their early to mid-adulthood (largely after taking a meditation class, the second largest number of people were introduced through friends/acquaintances), their relationship with activism, particularly direct-action, could often be traced back to their childhood and teenage years. Out of thirty interviews, this was the case for twenty-two individuals (roughly 75% of interlocutors). One XR Buddhist was involved in resistance against apartheid at seventeen, another referenced their first "Save the Whales" protest at eleven years old, and one member participated in the "Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp" at only sixteen, where she joined thousands of women in chaining herself to the fence of the base in protest of their housing of nuclear weapons. Others spoke of their involvement in Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, etc. These findings have led me to conclude that XR Buddhists, through an affiliation with activism first, have been able to cultivate a distinct religious community which shares a passion for meditative direct-action. In doing so, the group contests the perceived limits of engaged Buddhism that remain prevalent in the United Kingdom today.

Pushing the Boundaries of Social Engagement

It is commonly agreed that much of the inspiration for engaged Buddhism lies within the Buddhist tradition itself because core tenets of compassion and sympathy have continuously motivated social action in traditional Buddhist stories (Aronson 1980: 20). In a lay context, there is a duty to care for one's family, for others, as well as for the monastic community through donations (*dana*) of food, money, clothes, etc. However, even the strictest forest monks of the past have been known to possess a social activist character, in addition to being serious ascetics (see McDaniel 2006: 107). Despite this history, engaged Buddhism has attempted to distinguish itself from more traditional thought through its focus on the collective nature of suffering, as it is caused or facilitated by social and environmental conditions and structures (see, for example, Kraft 1999; Fuller 2021), as well as its desire to promote social and institutional change (Gleig 2021). This desire to define what

[5] XR Buddhists have attempted to engage with this issue, participating in what they call "Solidarity Workshops," which discuss ways to protect, support, and be more inclusive towards Buddhists of color and the wider group of POC activists.

engaged Buddhism "is" reflects a hegemonic form of "academic engaged Buddhism" (also referred to as "the consensus") that emerged in the late 1990s (Hsu 2022: 17). Following Amod Lele (2013), Hsu (2022: 20) identifies engaged Buddhism as a "textual project" and contemporary engaged Buddhists as "a privileged community of hyperliterate Anglophone scholar-practitioners" who created an accepted and prevailing idea of engagement. This idea is characterized by Brown (2023: 8) as a "Western activist vision."

XR Buddhists undoubtedly align with these major trends in engaged Buddhism, not only in terms of their demographic and alignment with core features like collective, grassroots activity, but in their consumption of and interest in engaged Buddhist literature. Group members regularly discussed the release of new texts with one another and would reference engaged Buddhist material and leaders in interviews, particularly Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, and Joanna Macy. Many XR Buddhists wrote engaged Buddhist material themselves for online mediums like the XRB website (which essentially serves as a group blog) and *Tricycle*. Some members even published (or were in the process of attempting to publish) books on engaged Buddhism and Buddhist ecology. At the same time, however, the group did not rely entirely on the themes, ideas, and practices espoused by previous engaged Buddhists. They did not universally follow a single teacher or school of thought and, instead, were more concerned with addressing certain limitations (as they perceived them) of engaged Buddhism and taking these developments further.

Activities connected to engaged Buddhism in the UK tend to involve raising money for charity, hosting dharma talks and meditative retreats centered on social and environmental responsibility, and dedicating oneself to the continuous practice of mindfulness and ethical behavior (see Henry 2013; Bell 2000). However, from my time in the field, it became clear that the majority of engaged Buddhists in the country refused to involve themselves in anything that could be deemed overtly "political." Such resistance seems counterintuitive to the "Western activist vision" that Brown (2023) describes. However, the work she draws on that defines engaged Buddhism as social and political activism, which includes (but is not limited to) that of Chrisopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (1996), Ann Gleig (2021), and Jay L. Garfield (2022), tend to focus on activism through grassroots empowerment, rural development projects, charitable work, and advocacy. Mention of Buddhist participation in direct-action activism, particularly beyond the Cold War era and in the twenty-first century, is limited. While Gleig and Garfield both briefly mention Extinction Rebellion Buddhists, they only describe the group as an emerging force in engaged Buddhism and make no attempt to explain the reasons for this. With this in mind, I argue that in the UK, engaged Buddhism tends to eschew overt forms of political action for more institutionally regulated political projects and programs. This avoidance has been examined in a Finnish context by Mitra Härkönen and Johannes Cairns (2025) and was experienced firsthand by XR Buddhists. As mentioned, in the UK today, engaged Buddhism largely takes place within the sangha, with many communities possessing their own engaged Buddhist groups and subgroups dedicated to various social aims. However, members of Extinction Rebellion Buddhists have chosen to join XRB in addition to their more "traditional" affiliations. As a result, a common sentiment amongst interlocutors was that most engaged Buddhist groups in the country were simply not "engaged" enough for them, especially in the context of the climate crisis.

In Bristol, for example, Theo (they/them) told me of their struggles with getting their Buddhist community to engage in environmental issues. Theo was in their mid-thirties and had left behind their career as a civil servant (which required them to be politically neutral) to dedicate their life to eco-activism. They were essential, particularly in an organizational capacity, for XR Buddhists as well as multiple other environmental groups. For example, in 2023, when hundreds of animal rights protestors invaded the Grand National course and forced the start of the world's most famous steeplechase to be delayed by a quarter of an hour, Theo played a pivotal role behind the scenes. They had found Buddhism almost a decade previously while they were living in London and came across an invitation to attend a sangha called Wake Up, a strand of Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village

sangha. The group is exclusively directed at practitioners aged eighteen to thirty-five so as to provide a unique space for young people and increase youth membership. At the time, Theo told me that they felt quite socially isolated. As an autistic individual, social spaces were difficult for them. Small talk and friendliness were sources of great anxiety. What Theo liked about Wake Up was that, because of meditation, large portions of the meetings were conducted in silence. "It was a really lovely space for me to be in," they said, "It was a neutral space, and it allowed me to be with other people in a way where … I don't actually have to talk to people." Meditation helped Theo to feel less anxious and eventually inspired them to convert to Buddhism. After trying out various Buddhist traditions, they eventually joined the Triratna community. Formerly known as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, Triratna has been a prominent force in the proliferation of "Western Buddhism," especially in the UK. Its founder, Sangharakshita (born Dennis Philip Edward Lingwood), is often credited with bringing Buddhism to the West. Along with this, Triratna has had a pioneering role in engaged Buddhism, establishing a charity, the Karuna Trust, in the late 1970s, to support medical, social and educational projects in India and elsewhere. According to their website, "this outward-looking, other-regarding attitude is central to the way we practice as Buddhists."[6] And yet, Theo, as well as multiple other XRB members who were affiliated with Triratna, spoke of the community's resistance to political activism. Describing their own experience, Theo said:

> I know there have been people in different sanghas who have really struggled to get their sanghas to engage … when I moved to Bristol and started going to my sangha I was like 'why don't we hold a workshop around climate change?' and … lots of the people who I was speaking to were anti-XR…. And so … we really had a fight over what it was we were going to talk about and they basically didn't want us to bring anything remotely 'political' into the discussion … someone even sent me fourteen mindfulness trainings and one of them was on kind of 'harmony in the sangha' and another was on 'not being political' but it also talked about engaging with compassion and reducing suffering in the world and it's kind of like, well, how do you do that if you're not engaging?

The issues that Theo raised were voiced by many XR Buddhists. For example, another XRB member described Triratna Buddhists to me as "a bit … *cushion oriented*." While he made it clear that working on one's spiritual development is crucial, he also asserted his desire for there to be a "good Buddhist influence in society." In some instances, group members became involved in arguments with their fellow sangha members, and on rare occasions some individuals even left their Buddhist communities entirely, either becoming lone Buddhists or affiliating themselves with a more "activism friendly" group. The vast majority of interlocutors therefore told me that the reason they chose to join XR Buddhists in the first place was because of the lack of social engagement that they were receiving within their own sangha. This is not to say that XR Buddhists saw their participation in direct-action as the best or only way of engaging with the world. One group member, Robin, referred to a friend and fellow Pureland Buddhist who was on a three-year meditative retreat: "He's not doing anything in the world," she said:

> But … I think what he's doing is engaged Buddhism, even though he's not directly helping…. I think there are different ways of being engaged. For me, it's about noticing what needs doing and what we feel called to do. So, what is it that the Buddha wants me to do with my life? And following that. And that looks different for different people.

Many interlocutors had a similar view that all Buddhism was engaged, regardless of whether one is actively trying to bring about social change. Others were more aligned with "the consensus" view of engaged Buddhism described above. For example, when reflecting on his identity as an engaged Buddhist, James, an XRB member and ex-anarchist turned pacifist, said:

[6] https://westlondonbuddhistcentre.com/about-us/triratna Accessed on 23 November 2025.

> So, to me, all Buddhist practice, whatever tradition, includes love and compassion. That's part of being a Buddhist, whatever kind of Buddhist you are.... Now, coming from a political ideological side ... the world structures need changing: economic structures, political structures, social structures. For instance, relationships between humans and the environment, relationships between humans and other species. All those things are part of politics, ideology, which all social activists, all social transformers, they're somewhere within all that. So engaged Buddhism to me is where you're in a kind of crossover between these two. Where you're in a practice where ... your meditation or your philosophical reflections ... connect with what you do on the outside in society in terms of trying to bring about social change. So, I would say in general, engaged Buddhism is where those two are brought together in a particular person. And I'm one of those people.

Nonetheless, in all of these understandings a common theme presented itself: a resistance to a strict and universal definition of engaged Buddhism. XR Buddhists chose to define engagement in terms of what it meant for *them*. This is evidenced by Robin's assertion that "there are different ways of being engaged," and James' repeated emphasis on "to me." Interlocutors were well aware of the conflicting and diverse opinions on engagement, which they had experienced in both their everyday Buddhist lives and their consumption of engaged Buddhist literature. As a result, they did not envision engaged Buddhism as one coherent thing or category. XRB's participation in meditative direct-action reflects their desire to articulate a particular and situated understanding of engagement, one that resonates with their distinct religio-activist identity. They were not interested in following the words of a single leader or school of thought, nor did they wish to create a blanket term that encapsulated the entire engaged Buddhist population in the UK. By integrating "mass civil disobedience" into their spiritual practice, the group reflect a unique and pluralistic embrace of discourse, in which Buddhist principles and practice are intertwined with the overarching ethos of XR.

Out of the Sangha and Onto the Streets: Intertwining Buddhism and Climate Activism

As the scientific consensus on the severity and immediacy of climate change grows increasingly dire, there is a growing recognition amongst activists that urgent and decisive action is necessary to mitigate its most catastrophic impacts. An array of environmental movements both within the UK and beyond have therefore sought to "generate urgencies" with the hope of translating unbearable or barely bearable conditions into ethical or political scenes demanding response (Sutton and Spratt 2008). This sense of urgency has deeply embedded itself in Extinction Rebellion. Such conclusions are made evident by the group's three demands. The first is to "tell the truth," meaning that all institutions, state and corporate, must acknowledge that we are in a "climate emergency." The second, is to "act now." For XR, this is specified in a call to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025.[7] The final demand is "be the change," which calls for "a culture of participation, fairness and transparency." XR envision a government which is led by a Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice.[8] As such, in line with broader trends occurring in environmentalism, XR advocate for a sense of urgency in order to foster action. The group sends a message that we need to act now (before we go extinct), implementing disruptive tactics with the goal of initiating swift societal change.

By affiliating themselves with XR, a common theme presented itself in interviews with XR Buddhists: due to the urgency of the climate crisis, direct tactics were necessary. One interlocutor, Amy, made this a focal point of our discussion. A resident of Cambridge, Amy was fifty-five years old at the time of our interview. Her interest in environmentalism was one of her earliest memories, as it started with her mother, who she witnessed at a young age standing between a tree and a chainsaw in protest of it being chopped down. "The tree is still

[7] When XR began in 2018, 2025 was seen as a realistic date. The movement keeps this target to show how much time has been lost. See https://extinctionrebellion.uk/about. Accessed on 26 November 2025.
[8] https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/demands. Accessed on 26 November 2025.

there," she told me. Amy had many happy memories planting trees with her mother, making compost, and learning to recycle. In her adulthood, she regularly signed petitions and wrote to MPs to try and help the environment. However, for her, witnessing an Extinction Rebellion action in London at the end of 2018 was what reignited her passion for nonviolent direct-action, a passion which would put her in the center of a media storm. Hours before the official Armistice Day ceremony in 2020, Amy joined an army veteran in staging a controversial protest where they unveiled a banner on the Cenotaph, a war memorial in central London, which read "Honor Their Sacrifice, Climate Change Means War." Amy, an NHS nurse, and the veteran were dressed in their respective uniforms. She stood alongside him in standing meditation in front of the memorial. This action sparked nation-wide outcry from the public, from the then-Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and from Amy's own family, friends, and co-workers, who ostracized her. Amy told me of the members within her Buddhist community who refused to speak to her, of the death threats she received, of the risk that was posed to her career, and of the toll the response to her actions put on her mental health. However, she was adamant that she would do it all over again, remarking that:

> The suffragettes were pilloried by society, weren't they? They were hated by much of the population. We wouldn't be here now if they hadn't done what they did. And the things that were hated in the past have come around to being, you know, part of our historical good. But the difficulty now is that we haven't got the time. The Civil Rights Movement and Suffragism took years and years to change public opinion. And we haven't got that much time which is why the urgency, and the level of action is escalating.

Due to the severity of the climate crisis, XR perpetuates the notion that a rapid transition to a sustainable society is needed. For them, mass civil disobedience is "the only remaining alternative to avert the worst of the catastrophe."[9] Therefore, whether they are standing in front of the Cenotaph or sitting in the middle of a Barclays bank, meditation, for XR Buddhists, serves as a way to bridge the gap between religious practice and "above the ground" civil disobedience and is, in their opinion, in accordance with XR's aims.

Meditation is typically pursued as a spiritual complement to action within and amongst engaged Buddhist groups (see Henry 2013). However, for XR Buddhists meditation *is* the action. For much of the Buddhist population such a practice is considered to not only diverge from acceptable forms of "engagement," but compromise their religious convictions. This is largely due to the assumption that political activism hinders spiritual progress by interfering with "the tranquility required for liberation" (Lele 2013: 239). Nonetheless, XR Buddhists were adamant that their actions served not as a distraction but as an intense exercise of religious development and cultivation. When discussing the aim of their public demonstrations, XR Buddhists often reiterated that the goal was to disrupt the everyday routines, complacency, and carelessness that often surround the climate crisis, not only through their physical presence, but through the embodiment of an alternate mode of being, one defined by their Buddhist values. Public, collective meditation was framed as a kind of prefigurative politics, or a way in which activists embody, within their activism, the ethics and practices they foster for broader society. Extinction Rebellion has been known to implement prefigurative politics, as it employs radical inclusivity and participatory democracy, non-hierarchical organizing, and regenerative culture (Evans 2021). Through their public demonstrations, the organization showcases alternative ways of living, whether that be as a collective through expressions of creativity, non-hierarchical organizing, and community-building, or within subgroups through demonstrations of art, culture, or in the context of this research, faith. XR Buddhists routinely described their actions as opportunities to "showcase an alternative," "embody an alternate mode of being," and "live out their Buddhist values" for others to see. As a result, the

[9] https://www.commondreams.org/views/2018/10/19/climate-activists-occupy-greenpeace-uk-headquarters-wait-cant-be-right. Accessed on 26 November August 2025.

group envisioned meditation as a form of changemaking that emerged from within practitioners and was subsequently extended outwards.

As a practice aimed at transformative liberation, the prefigurative process of meditation first involves an experience of change on the ontological level. In enacting specific embodied techniques, XR Buddhists foster a particular sense of connectedness with the Earth. In doing so, they cultivate an embodied sense of responsibility for the planet that acts as a duty of care for all living beings. This subjective transformation is not limited to the domain of activism, as it was repeatedly credited as influencing XRB members' daily lives. While some committed to taking public transportation, shopping/banking sustainably, and going vegan, others refused to fly, grew their own produce, and, as mentioned, published work on Buddhist ecology. All interlocutors had been on some form of meditative eco-retreat (whether online or in person), many repeatedly. In Cambridge, three XRB members lived together in a Buddhist eco-commune. Robin, the Pureland Buddhist, also lived in a Buddhist eco-commune near Malvern, which she helped to run alongside her partner, another XR Buddhist. Participation in XRB also inspired other forms of engagement outside of the group. For instance, Sam, a computer programmer, helped to create the "Cambridge Carbon Footprint," an online carbon calculator. When I asked Sam about his motivations for becoming involved in the project, he said it was Buddhism, and more specifically XR Buddhists, which instilled in him the desire to inspire others towards more effective, conscious, and compassionate environmental action. Such sentiments underscore XRB's objective. When practiced collectively and publicly during political protests, the transformation engendered in meditation becomes part of a larger political project, one aimed at a "collective awakening of society as a whole," as one group member put it. Through their bodily presence XR Buddhists use their religious practice to capture the attention of those groups who play significant roles in environmental oppression—namely the UK government, its massive corporations, as well as everyday citizens—and urge them to rethink their relations to the more-than-human world.[10] "The way through our problems is through raising consciousness and the best way to do that is through meditation practice," Phil, an XR Buddhist from Bristol asserted. "I think activism has to start from in here," he said, pointing to his heart. "It's that internal change that can ultimately lead to a collective one."

In intertwining religious self-cultivation with a prefigurative project, meditation, for XR Buddhists, is profoundly spiritual *and* political. While practitioners engage in religious self-cultivation through the shaping of their own being and living in accordance with Buddhist conceptions of the good, a crucial aspect of these activities is their collective and public nature. Meditation is often considered private and individual. It is not typically thought of as a relational practice, or having an audience. However, not only does the practice possess important (and often overlooked) social dimensions, the demonstration of physical decorum (of which meditation is the training for) is a very traditional part of Buddhism (see Cook 2010). In the context of political activism, engaged leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh, inspired by Gandhi and the success of his peaceful resistance movement (Campbell 2019: 44), aimed to present themselves as symbols of nonviolence and "otherwise." As a result, when asked about the inspiration for their actions in interviews, XR Buddhists tended to credit Extinction Rebellion (its founders, theory of change, etc.) alongside their respective Buddhist influences (e.g., Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Joanna Macy, the Buddha himself). When reflecting on their actions, one group member argued that "[p]art of the power of what XR Buddhists offer is that we embody a different way of being in the midst of a … end-game, capitalist, high-consumer culture by taking our meditation practice into the streets … something about that modeling of a different way of being is really important and fits my Buddhist values." XRB therefore compel us to reconsider how long-standing scholarly distinctions between internal and external world, private and public, and sacred and secular are being unsettled by engaged Buddhist groups in response to increasingly dire sociopolitical situations.

[10] For a detailed analysis of XRB's prefigurative practices, see Zielke (2024).

The use of meditation as a form of direct-action is becoming progressively more common. Gleig (2019: 253) references various "Dharma and Direct-Action" workshops that were held across the US in 2015 and combined meditation with nonviolent civil disobedience. Around the same time, an action held by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in Oakland, California involved a meditating blockade on the steps of a Marriott Hotel to protest its hosting of Urban Shield, a weapons expo and Swat training for police to practice militarized techniques (Gleig 2019: 253; 2021: 2). Today, there are multiple groups that combine meditation and direct-action, such as the Buddhist Action Coalition NYC, Zen Peacemakers, and One Earth Sangha in the US and the Earth Holder community in Germany (Zhang and Shi 2024). These groups are undoubtedly influenced by (if not affiliated with) broader social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Occupy, Rising Tide, etc. While a study of how these groups relate to one another remains to be written, it is clear that Extinction Rebellion Buddhists are one of multiple groups (largely in the West), that are challenging the belief that political activism is incompatible with the religion. In fact, one group member envisioned Buddhist practice as a kind of resistance in itself. When describing the similarities between meditation and civil disobedience, Erica, a Zen Buddhist from Bristol, remarked:

> Gluing yourself to your friends … or chaining yourself to buildings … you're standing there, and you can't move, you've made a commitment to be there and to be steady, and that's what Buddhist practice is. You make a commitment. And you may want to move in your Za Zen or whatever, but you don't. Civil disobedience. I'm not going to shout or yell. I may have an itchy knee or a sore ankle but, no, I'm not going to scratch. And that, actually, is the essence of nonviolence and the essence of that kind of activism.

Through one's "spiritual underpinnings," as Erica put it, one defies the urge to quit, to resort to negative emotions, to turn away from suffering. Through intense, collective, and public moral crafting, XR Buddhists "be the change they wish to see" in the world in a way which transcends personal experience. While the group's practices are undoubtedly inspired by the dramatic actions of the UK left, particularly the current British climate movement, such an aspiration can also be traced back to the religious tradition. In fact, one might argue that Buddhism was one of the very first movements ever, anywhere, to try and reconstruct life on a new basis. The religion is, and always has been, "a response to what is fundamentally an ethical problem—the perennial problem of the best kind of life for man to lead" (Keown 1992: 1). In the face of war, caste, and suffering, Buddhism prefigured an alternative, one based on virtues of love, equanimity, and wisdom.[11] Continuing this tradition, in intertwining meditation and mass civil disruption, XR Buddhists participate in environmental issues in a way which is overt, confrontational, disruptive, yet still in line with their Buddhist values. In doing so, they voice a particular view of what it means to be engaged as a Buddhist in a time of rapid environmental decline.

Conclusion

As meditation's use as a form of direct-action continues to gain gradual visibility, it has inevitably become subject to the same debates that have long surrounded the Buddhist tradition. Throughout history, scholars have attempted to develop an image of what they consider "original," "primitive," or "pure" Buddhism (Almond 1988: 7). As a result, the various moves towards a "this-worldly" Buddhism, curated by modernist discourse, have resulted in widespread backlash. In terms of engaged Buddhism, even the existence of the movement is called into question. Whether scholars are arguing that all Buddhism is inherently engaged, that engaged Buddhism is simply a Western farce, or that engaged Buddhism must fit into a strict definition, the development has been consistently scrutinized, compartmentalized, or altogether dismissed (see Gleig 2021). This scrutiny

[11] While Buddhists have aspired to these virtues, it is pertinent to note that the religion has, throughout history, been used for harmful and violent purposes (see Jerryson 2015). This harm has extended to the environment (see Elverskog 2020).

now extends to XR Buddhists, so much so that at a conference I attended in September of 2023, I was faced with the question of whether what XRB are doing can even be considered engaged Buddhism at all.

While undoubtedly aligned in multiple aspects with typical images of engaged Buddhism in the UK, in affiliating themselves with Extinction Rebellion, XR Buddhists diverge drastically from "acceptable" forms of Buddhist social engagement. However, worrying about whether XR Buddhists are engaged Buddhists or not, I argue, is not only comical, as group members routinely identified themselves and their practices as engaged, but potentially harmful to the field of study. The endless querying of what fits or does not fit within engaged Buddhism's rigid boundaries has led to a tremendous loss of enthusiasm for the term and topic (see Hsu 2022). I therefore suggest in this article that scholars of Buddhism resist resolving the issue of what engaged Buddhism "is" (a movement, a category, a thing) and instead attend to the multiple ways people articulate, embody, and reflect on it. Ethnographic investigation (which I argue is sorely needed in studies of engaged Buddhism) might help to revitalize the study of engagement by revealing the continuously diversifying attempts being made to be "engaged," to draw on and challenge previous engaged Buddhisms, and to forge new models. Whether one is going on a meditative retreat, planting a tree, participating in charitable and social service work, encouraging ethnic or national feeling, or blocking traffic, Buddhists across the world are representing and defining what engagement means for them. I advocate for their words, lived experience, and sociocultural contexts to be centered, situated, and taken seriously.

Within XRB, efforts to urgently awaken humanity to the reality of interdependence unfold against the backdrop of the climate crisis and increasing environmental precarity. When reflecting on their practices, one group member remarked:

> It's impossible to know what the Buddha … would be doing if he was living through this time of the climate crisis … but the Buddha who springs out of the pages of the suttas and the sutras, to me, is one that is continually responding with compassion and loving kindness and vigor … so regardless of whether what we [XRB] do fits into some past form of Buddhism, for me, if I am really touching my heart and coming from a place of loving kindness and compassion and nonjudgement, then … any action I do out of that is my Buddhist practice. For me, responding to this crisis from that place is one of the most important things we can do.

Previous founding moments of engaged Buddhism have been forged during moments of intense crisis and urgency, such as World War II, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War (King 2009). During these moments, existing religious institutions and structures are challenged, negotiated, and reframed. As a result, like many Buddhist forms of engagement that have preceded it, I argue that the use of meditation as a form of direct-action has been borne from a time of immense social and environmental upheaval. Today, Buddhists are meditating publicly and collectively to call for a ceasefire in Gaza, to end racial injustice, and, of course, to protest the climate crisis. Influenced by these ongoing developments, in addition to their previous relationships with activism, which could be traced back to childhood in most instances, XR Buddhists contribute to the growing trends that are occurring within the religious landscape. With collective acts of disobedience becoming an increasingly normal aspect of political life (Sommier, Hayes, and Ollitrault 2019: 185), in intertwining meditation and mass civil disruption, the group voice one of a multiplicity of views of what it means to be "engaged" as a Buddhist. For them, an affiliation with a nonviolent direct-action movement reflects the urgency of the situation at hand and the need for this reality to find religious expression in present-day action.

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