

Pilgrimage Re-oriented: Buddhist Discipline, Virtue and Engagement in Bodhgayā

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Transnational Bodhgayā and Socially Engaged Pilgrimage

BODHGAYĀ is the most important pilgrimage site in the Buddhist world. It is where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment approximately 2,550 years ago. Yet, it is also located in the central province of Bihar, India's most impoverished state. After centuries of relative obscurity, Bodhgayā has resurfaced in recent years, undergoing a radical transformation from a small agricultural community into a burgeoning cosmopolitan town that attracts millions of international visitors. Its rural landscape now boasts exotic Buddhist temples and monasteries, hotels, restaurants, and shopping plazas interspersed with health organizations, educational institutions, and village cooperatives. The site's overtly foreign Buddhist character has transformed the lives of the local Bihari Hindu and Muslim residents who now experience the world in new ways. In turn, these shifts influence the ways pilgrims narrate and move through the physical and imaginary landscape of Bodhgayā.

Although this transnational and transformed Bodhgayā gradually emerged during the early nineteenth century,¹ the site has drawn global interest since the Mahābodhi Temple—the central place of worship there—earned World Heritage status in 2002.² Today, Bodhgayā's landscape has

¹ See Trevithick 2006, Doyle 1997.

² See Geary 2009.

been altered by vast transnational networks involving international Buddhist pilgrims, grassroots and global non-government organizations, and the local Bihari community. In fact, Buddhist pilgrimage activity itself is reconceived in this landscape. Foreign and relatively privileged Buddhists, mostly from Western Europe, Australia, North America, and East Asia interact with a community whose history is largely marked by poverty and oppression. As a result of this interaction, a small yet increasing number of pilgrims respond to the highly visible suffering by establishing, supporting, or actively participating in local and trans-local educational, health, and financial organizations.³

In this essay I argue that while social engagement may not be new to Buddhist practice in general, it is an innovative and emerging form of pilgrimage activity that is becoming increasingly present in Bodhgayā, as well as other sites along the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit. Today, social goals are made explicit in the works of these “engaged Buddhist pilgrims” as traditional forms of Buddhist expression, such as devotion, meditation, offering, and prayer have expanded to include social service, exemplified by pilgrim-sponsored and managed programs. These programs include primary and secondary schools, meditation retreats, health clinics, self-help groups, micro-lending schemes and vocational training centers for the local poverty-stricken Hindu and Muslim communities. The marked increase of Buddhist-operated non-government organizations (NGOs) in Bodhgayā comes partly in response to the notorious failures of the Bihari government to provide adequate education, food, medicine, clothing, and in some cases shelter,⁴ and partly from the engaged Buddhist perception that these social services are essential for personal, social, and spiritual transformation.⁵ Social work for these engaged pilgrims is not perceived as opposed to their spiritual activities, but integral to them. In this manner, the journey of pilgrimage is not only directed towards the quest to realize their own individual liberation, but is motivated instead by the goal of healing and transforming both self and other.

³ In 2012 there were approximately twenty foreign-operated NGOs of varying sizes in and around Bodhgayā. Each of these NGOs had between one part-time and up to seven full-time volunteers to manage their various projects. Throughout the pilgrimage season (October to March), dozens of visitors come to Bodhgayā to pay homage at the site of the Buddha’s awakening and serve at a charitable organization.

⁴ Weiner 2006, Ramagundam 2006, Sainath 1996.

⁵ Jenkins 2003, Goss 2000, Thurman 1996, see also Learman 2005.

My principal field site was at the Maitreya Universal Education Project School (henceforth Maitreya School), one of Bodhgayā's first foreign-operated charitable schools that provides education to approximately five hundred local children. Since 1999, this school has freely offered local children a unique approach to education that blends intellectual, physical, artistic and spiritual development. I also examined other foreign-run Buddhist-inspired organizations which offer similar holistic curriculums such as the Alice Project, Akshay School, Pragya Vihara School, Maitri Charitable Trust, as well as the Shakyamuni Buddha Community Health Clinic—all of which are long-standing Western-operated, Buddhist institutions which have deep social impacts on the local community. With the exception of Pragya Vihara School, all of these organizations are affiliated with the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), a global organization with branch centers and members in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. The aforementioned institutions not only support the local community, but also attract many volunteers from within the FPMT, as well as Buddhists from other traditions, pilgrims who want to incorporate social engagement into their Buddhist practices of compassion.

While concepts such as education, civic engagement, environmental protection, and human rights are not usually associated with classic models of Buddhist pilgrimage, I argue that emerging, socially oriented patterns challenge our assumptions about the nature of contemporary pilgrimage and its goals. To locate the various dimensions of socially engaged Buddhist pilgrimage at Bodhgayā, I investigate the new modes of interpretation and practice offered by Buddhist pilgrims in a town that is plagued by poverty, corruption, and caste prejudice. I do so with respect to the framework of Mahayana ethics consisting of three parts: moral discipline (*saṃvara śīla*), cultivation of virtue (*kuśala dharma saṃgrāhaka śīla*), and altruistic conduct (*sattva artha kriyā śīla*).⁶ Using data from field interviews and participant observation, I examine moral discipline in connection with pilgrims' practice of renunciation and observance of the moral precepts, cultivation of virtue through the development of wholesome qualities such as generosity and compassion, and altruistic conduct consisting of positive actions aimed at helping others. The objectives of these distinct, yet overlapping ethical practices are found historically in both Theravada and Mahayana texts on

⁶ These categories were originally derived from Aśaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgrāha* and have formed the basis for contemporary presentations of Buddhist ethics. See Queen 2000; Keown 1992, 2000, 2005; and Prebish 1993.

training towards perfection, and most of my forty-plus informants⁷ who considered themselves to be socially engaged linked some or all of these Buddhist ethics with their activities. Following Queen,⁸ I add engagement as a fourth part to this framework, rather than link it to altruistic conduct. Yet I reconceptualize Queen's definition to better fit Bodhgayā's unique transnational situation and the politically marginal and vulnerable status that pilgrims face generally as foreigners and specifically as social workers and activists attempting to empower the lowest rungs of Indian society.

PILGRIM DISCIPLINE AT BODHGAYĀ

Victor Turner notes that hardship and sacrifice are common features of pilgrimage.⁹ In the case of modern pilgrimage, however, anthropologist Luigi Tomasi argues that efficient travel and communications have changed pilgrimage from a journey of penance and piety to one of leisure and recreation.¹⁰ Yet, personal sacrifice, along with precept-taking, remains conspicuous among pilgrims to Bodhgayā and serves as the basis of other forms of Buddhist cultivation. In the specific context of Bihar, the understanding and affective experience of Buddhist "renunciation" and "no-self" (Pāli: *anattā*; Sanskrit: *anātman*) allow the socially engaged pilgrims to endure hardship and pour resources and effort into social action. These realizations also assist the socially engaged pilgrim to remain undaunted when projects or actions fail, because it is the activity—not the result—that is valued. Moreover, most socially engaged pilgrims assert that operating in a poverty-stricken, complicated, and unfamiliar milieu without personal discipline rapidly undermines coping mechanisms and intensifies frustrations.

⁷ During my numerous visits to Bodhgayā between 1996 and 2013, I observed and interviewed a global, multi-aged, multi-ethnic mixture of engaged Buddhist pilgrims primarily from North America, United Kingdom, France, Australia, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore. While most of the pilgrims were volunteering for a FPMT project anywhere from a few weeks to a few years, the pilgrims themselves hailed from many different Tibetan, Zen, Pure Land, Sri Lankan and Vipassana traditions. In addition, I encountered several non-Bihari Indians from Delhi, Mumbai, and South India who also volunteered at organizations in Bodhgayā. These Indians were typically Christian and Hindu. The pilgrims were not uniformly bound to any specific socio-economic group, demonstrated by their diverse forms of employment including taxi drivers, engineers, housewives, school teachers, monks, and CEOs, to name a few. For more precise sociological data concerning my informants, please refer to Goldberg 2011.

⁸ Queen 2000.

⁹ Turner 1974.

¹⁰ Tomasi 2002.

Pilgrim sacrifice

By travelling to Bihar, the most destitute and lawless state in India, pilgrims experience varying degrees of personal sacrifice and adversity. Christopher Titmuss, a British Buddhist meditation teacher and pilgrimage leader, explained to me in an interview how travelling to Bodhgayā strengthens the practice of awakening for both himself and his (mostly Western) students because of personal sacrifice:

My general perception of Western life is a kind of a pathological problem in terms of wanting, wanting, wanting, desire, desire, desire; there's never enough. It's a breeding ground for divisions, unhappiness, and violence. . . . Being in Bodhgayā, being in India, brings out appreciation and joy for the simple things of life. The sheer austerity of pilgrimage brings an appreciation for the ordinary in the everyday life. When one goes back home, we are grateful and mindful of how important inner contentment is.

In Buddhism, sacrifice and hardship are most often discussed in the idiom of “renunciation.” Renunciation, for Titmuss and other Western pilgrims I interviewed, was a common spiritual attitude associated with social engagement, as well as travelling in a less developed country where one must inevitably let go of one's Western standard of living. Similarly, Rita Gross explains that renunciation is the foundation of meditation practice, or “the foot of meditation” as she calls it in her analysis of the Vajrayāna supplication chant.¹¹ Gross insists that renunciation is not limited to any specific Buddhist form; rather it is an attitude central to self-transformation. Yet, what is fascinating about the socially engaged pilgrim movement is precisely the specific content (i.e., activities recognized as socially responsible in local and global contexts). On the one hand, renunciation for all pilgrims is characterized by confrontation with jolting Bihari poverty, the hassles of prevailing corruption, and the harsh environmental pollution. On the other hand, engaged pilgrim sacrifice specifically entails an increased commitment of time, energy, and money, well above the price of travel and accommodation, needed to establish and support educational and charitable enterprises.

Some pilgrims explain that their charitable work and renunciation of personal comfort are based on the Buddha's doctrine of no-self. The doctrine asserts that there is nothing permanent or essential about the

¹¹ Gross 1998, p. 97.

individual, who is constructed and conditioned by past actions and present presumptions. The “self” is a fluid, flexible and ever-changing collection of memories, thoughts, temperaments, and experiences. Engaged pilgrims did not see this doctrine as undermining a moral concern towards socio-economic development, as famously argued by Weber and Spiro.¹² Quite the opposite, it is positioned as the theoretical foundation for altruistic, “self-less” action. Harvey suggests that the doctrine of no-self is meant to collapse the distinction between altruism and egoism.¹³ In fact, King, Puri, and Keown suggest that the concept can be viewed as encouraging social cooperation and peaceful relationships with others.¹⁴

Recognized engaged Buddhists, such as the Thai activist and public intellectual, Sulak Sivaraksa, insist that people must “recognize that we as individuals cannot distinguish ourselves from one another or assume to be above anyone else.”¹⁵ Similarly, the Dalai Lama maintains that from a Buddhist perspective since the self has no “real” or “intrinsic” identity, it is logically impossible to refer to oneself existing in isolation from others. He writes, “self and other can only really be understood in terms of relationship, we see that others’ interest and self-interest are closely interrelated . . . [and] in a deep sense they converge.”¹⁶ To illustrate this convergence, Sallie King demonstrates how engaged Buddhist leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Cheng Yen have encouraged their students to think not only logically about this lack of separation as the motivating force behind altruistic and engaged action, but to *feel* the interrelationship between their happiness or suffering with that of others.¹⁷ From the Buddhist standpoint, knowledge of *anātman* derived from logical and intellectual analysis is important, but incomplete without a direct, embodied, and experiential understanding, essential for attaining liberation.

Several of my informants claim to adhere to this view of selflessness and interconnectedness, or perceive themselves as striving towards an experi-

¹² Weber 1958, Spiro 1970. Spiro distinguishes “nibbanic Buddhism” from “kammic Buddhism.” The former refers to the “total rejection of the spatiotemporal world . . . and renunciation of the sociocultural world” and aims at eradicating rebirth (Spiro 1970, p. 66). The goals of the latter, on the other hand, are to improve worldly status and achieve positive rebirths in the future. For Spiro, nibbanic Buddhists are the “true Buddhists” who understand that all “involvement in the world is . . . religiously perilous” (Spiro 1970, p. 427).

¹³ Harvey 2000.

¹⁴ King 2009, 2005; Puri 2007; Keown 2000.

¹⁵ Sivaraksa 2005, p. 42.

¹⁶ Dalai Lama 1999, p. 47.

¹⁷ King 2009.

ential understanding of it. They maintain that this approach of selflessness enables them to act without any specific attachment to the results of action. In “topsy-turvy Bodhgayā,” Karl,¹⁸ a fifty-two-year-old English Tibetan Buddhist monk who has repeatedly volunteered at the Maitreya School since its inception, remarked “this is important because you never know when a project can get shut down.” Karl’s attitude, shared by many engaged pilgrims, required the individual to serve others without any desire for a particular reward; and according to Chögyam Trungpa, a pioneer in promoting the idea that practice must be engaged with every aspect of daily life, it is the only manner to act in accordance with the Dharma. Genuine, selfless compassion, or what he calls, “generosity without possessing,” has little to do with outward behaviour, and is located in the practitioner’s “selfless warmth.”¹⁹ In this way, all actions, whether appearing to be helpful to others or not, are a form of natural engagement, and as Geraldine, a forty-year-old English Vipassana meditator who also dabbled with Tibetan Buddhism said about her three-month teaching experience at Maitreya School: “Teaching and helping others is very natural for me, I’m not doing it to gain merits, like others around here do, but because it just feels natural, it just feels right.”

Pilgrim precepts

Akin to renunciation, engaged pilgrims understand precept-taking to be foundational for developing, maintaining, and deepening ethical integrity. The precepts also serve as the basis for performing other forms of Buddhist cultivation, including socially oriented activities at schools, clinics, and vocational training centers. Practicing the precepts enables the engaged pilgrims to manage the daily stresses, aggravations, and disappointments common to those who operate in an impecunious, knotty, and alien environment.

Throughout the day, swarms of lay pilgrims from almost every Buddhist tradition sit under or near the massive Bodhi tree to formally express their gratitude to the Buddha, his teachings, and his community by undertaking the five lay precepts. They vow not to kill, steal, misbehave sexually, speak improperly, or take intoxicants. King explains that these precepts are the starting point of Buddhist ethics.²⁰ The Buddhist moves from the practice

¹⁸ With the exception of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Christopher Titmuss, both internationally recognized figures, all names used in this essay are pseudonyms.

¹⁹ Trungpa 1991, pp. 65–73.

²⁰ King 2009, 2005.

of self-restraint to more refined levels of morality and virtuous behavior steeped in loving-kindness and compassion. Pious pilgrims often extend the number of precepts to eight—the first five plus abstinence from food after noon, sensual entertainment, and using luxurious seats and beds. On the full and half moon days, monks and nuns are seen sitting on their knees reciting the hundreds of precepts that guide their lives.²¹

The Buddhist program for cultivating concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (Pāli: *paññā*; Sanskrit: *prajñā*), in turn, requires the support of moral discipline (Pāli: *sīla*; Sanskrit: *śīla*) as well. Gunaratana states that:

[One] reason a moral foundation is needed for meditation follows from an understanding of the purpose of concentration. Concentration, in the Buddhist discipline, aims at providing a base for wisdom by cleansing the mind of the dispersive influence of the defilements. But in order for the concentration exercises to effectively combat the defilements, the coarser expressions of the latter through the instruments of bodily and verbal action have to first be checked. Moral transgressions being invariably motivated by defilements—by greed, hatred, and delusion—when a person acts in violation of the precepts of morality he excites and reinforces the very same mental factors his practice of meditation is intended to eliminate.²²

The Buddha preached ethical principles consisting of an abstinence from harmful mental, vocal, and physical actions to promote peace within oneself and in one's relations with others. Without these self-imposed moral guidelines, it would not be possible for the practitioner to progress in basic meditation practice, which for a Buddhist meditator, is an essential tool for individual and social transformation.²³ Moral development in the Buddha's teaching evolves from acting in accord with a set of prescribed acts to performing those same acts naturally.

²¹ Buddhist ethics scholar Damien Keown (2005) suggests that the lay and monastic precepts are common to the various Buddhist traditions and transcend the multiplicity of beliefs, customs, philosophies, and practices. The total number of precepts for Buddhist monastics varies according to tradition, ranging from 218 to 262 for monks, and 279 to 380 for nuns. In his analysis of Buddhist lay and monastic ethics in modern society, Charles Prebish (2000) provides an important distinction between morality (*śīla*) and monastic code (*vinaya*) as the former is a self-enforced ethical guideline, while the latter is an externally imposed framework for maintaining both inner discipline and a specific image for the wider lay community.

²² Gunaratana 1985, pp. 15–16.

²³ Saddhatissa 1997, Gunaratana 1985, Aronson 1980.

While all engaged pilgrims practice these precepts to a varying degree, not all have a developed formal meditation practice. Those who follow the precepts more strictly also tend to meditate more seriously, and all those who commit themselves more deeply to social engagement in Bodhgayā have a regular meditation practice of some kind. For instance, all the pilgrims with whom I spoke who return to Bodhgayā each year or who have lived and volunteered there for years at a time²⁴ had a daily contemplative practice ranging between two and five hours per day. While it is not uncommon for unseasoned Buddhists (mostly Western converts) to claim that they are “always meditating,” the deeply committed engaged pilgrims acknowledge that without the precepts and formal meditation practice they would not be adequately equipped to handle the constant and intense vicissitudes associated with living in Bihar.

PILGRIM VIRTUE AT BODHGAYĀ

While none of my informants claimed to act perfectly in accord with Buddhist ideals all the time, they all said they were striving to cultivate virtue. For them, ethical conduct did not arise solely from self-restraint, but from good moral character and feelings of love and compassion towards others.²⁵ In what follows, I identify how Buddhist contemplative practices on generosity and compassion typically employed for cultivating wisdom are also drawn upon as inspirational tools for social action. For these pilgrims, meditation lacking social engagement is perceived as insufficient for Buddhist cultivation of awakening. By performing “socially engaged *dāna*” and practicing the “divine abode” and “Medicine Buddha” meditations, socially engaged pilgrims believe they are laying the foundations for individual liberation and social transformation.

Pilgrim generosity

The term *dāna* usually translates as generosity, but refers more specifically to the act of “giving.” Traditionally, lay Buddhists supply the community of monks and nuns with material necessities such as food, cloth for making robes, shelter, and medicine because the monastics are entirely dependent

²⁴ In reflecting upon the status of long-term pilgrims volunteering in Bodhgayā, I embrace Wayne Fife’s position that people on a religious journey intending to return home, whether it is after a matter of weeks or decades are still considered pilgrims since they abide in a liminal state outside the boundaries of their structured lives at home (2004, pp. 155–56).

²⁵ See King 2009, 2005; Dalai Lama 1999.

on the laity for material support. *Dāna* also includes donating funds for the construction and maintenance of temples, monasteries, retreat centers, and holy objects. At the Mahābodhi Temple, donation boxes are ubiquitous, providing opportunities for people to share their capital and gain merit. Traditional forms of *dāna* are widely practiced around Bodhgayā. Construction of temples and monasteries is constant. However, a new form of “socially engaged” *dāna* has manifested in Bodhgayā in the form of fund-raising and sponsorship by foreign pilgrims. In particular, *dāna* by many pilgrims, especially Westerners, is increasingly focused on social and medical charitable projects aimed at eliminating the immediate causes of suffering in Bihar’s impoverished environment.²⁶

There is no dearth of *stūpas* and statues at the Root Institute of Wisdom and Culture—a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center primarily for international pilgrims that also operates a free health clinic for locals.²⁷ Upon close inspection, one observes that an overwhelming majority of the donor inscription plates at the Root Institute contain East Asian names, ironic because the majority of retreatants, visitors, and volunteers are Western. In his ethnographic study on Western Buddhists living in Kathmandu, Peter Moran suggests that the generosity of East Asian Buddhists can be explained culturally: they are born into a Buddhist tradition and are already familiar with the practice of *dāna* as a way to develop subsequent moral “perfections” (*pāramitā*) of morality, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom. He describes them

²⁶ In fact, many engaged pilgrims and local activists are critical of the construction of expensive Buddhist temples and monuments vis-à-vis the pervasive poverty that plagues the local Hindu and Muslim communities. These critiques are often more explicit when Buddhist paraphernalia is integrated into charitable projects for the indigenous population, and when the material Buddhist objects are given more importance than pedagogical tools. As one Western pilgrim-educator criticized, “The school spends *lakhs* of rupees on a *stūpa* when there weren’t even enough pencils for all the Class 4 students writing their math test yesterday. . . . It’s not right that there is so much emphasis here on campaigning to sponsor a *stūpa* in return for infinite merits when there is hardly any support for the school.” The presence of these objects and symbols not only reveals the transnational movement of religion and the divergent attitudes regarding those objects and symbols, but also demonstrates how multi-layered power relations form the often invisible backdrop to the establishment of religion in Bodhgayā. See my treatment of how transnational elite Buddhist material culture and practice in Bodhgayā is assimilated, transformed, legitimated, and contested into the local, socio-economically deprived non-Buddhist context (Goldberg 2013).

²⁷ For an elaborate discussion of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition’s charitable activities in Bodhgayā, see “Buddhists Without Borders: Transnational Pilgrimage, Social Engagement, and Universal Education in the Land of Enlightenment” (Goldberg 2011).

as culturally inclined to give as much as they can.²⁸ In contrast, Moran observes that Western Buddhists are more willing to donate to social projects with concrete goals rather than to the construction of religious monuments.

I observed a large number of Tibetan and East Asian Buddhist pilgrims in Bodhgayā offering money to anyone with an outstretched palm, while Westerners tended to have a tighter grip on their rupees. Shuyan, a middle-aged Singaporean pilgrim devoted to Lama Zopa, explained that giving freely is a practice of detachment, “We try to give without judgment of the beneficiary’s worth; we just give without thinking.” The Western donors I interviewed, on the other hand, were more inclined to critically assess their recipients, fearing that they will be cheated for personal gain by scoundrels exploiting the local poverty. Kristof, a Swiss pilgrim who follows the teachings of the seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa, explained that he has a critical attitude towards giving for two reasons: financial and textual. While rich in the eyes of locals, he drives a taxi at home and has elderly parents and a daughter in university to support. He also believed—based on Buddhist texts that he has read—that there is a connection between the merits a donor accrues and the spiritual and moral worth of the recipient.²⁹ This perspective, held by many Western Buddhists, explains why most Westerners feel more comfortable giving to charitable organizations that have a long-standing reputation.

²⁸ Moran 2004. The unique relationship between a religious teacher and his lay disciples also maintains religious and economic connections, contributing to the structure of what is perceived as normative Buddhist discourse and practice. Moran suggests that the bond between wealthy donor (*jindak*) and the lama is essential for organizational development; however, many Western disciples are unwilling or unable to match large East Asian donations and find it difficult to reconcile the material within the realm of the spiritual. In theory, then, the only benefits that donors receive are spiritual merits. However, from a practical perspective, as I noticed at the Root Institute, large donors receive more access to Lama Zopa, the spiritual director of the FPMT. Shuyan, for example, a very large donor and fund-raiser from Singapore, had several private meetings and dinners with Lama Zopa, and received a beautiful “blessed” *thangka* as a gift from him. In his discussion on the economic relationship between the *jindak* and the spiritual preceptor, Moran writes, “Chinese Buddhists expect very *immediate* rewards for their generous offerings: special ritual empowerments from Tibetan lamas, more attention from them, and material blessings in the form of consecrated substances and amulets” (2004, p. 73). Teachers like Lama Zopa have extremely busy teaching schedules and do not have time for intensive one-on-relationships that many students crave. The idea that the lama gives more time to others because of financial contributions is disturbing to some disciples.

²⁹ For instance, see the *Anāthapiṇḍikovāda Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

This critical attitude coheres with the contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist view of *dāna*, which Charles Jones identifies as “modern scientific charity.”³⁰ This practice—heavily endorsed by the engaged Buddhist organization Tzu Chi—consists of investing money in the latest medical, social, and educational technologies that will help eliminate the sources of immediate suffering. Resonating with this outlook, many socially engaged pilgrims operating in Bodhgayā are interested in a system of “enlightened education” that will transform society at its roots. By supporting institutions like the Maitreya School³¹ which offer education not only in standard academic subjects, but also Buddhist-influenced teachings of self-awareness, the role of the mind, interdependence, and compassion, these socially engaged pilgrims believe they are developing generosity in its highest form: the teachings themselves. As Karl, the interim school principal, explained, “a pilgrimage means travelling to a special place to meet with and practice the Dharma. The highest form of pilgrimage, then, is doing exactly what we are doing right here, right now, at the school.”

While some pilgrims prefer traditional over engaged *dāna*, other pilgrims do not differentiate between the two. For some of my informants, constructing Buddhist monuments *and* giving charity to the poor are indicative of one’s spiritual devotion and development. Shuyan explained, “building these things *and* helping the needy are signs of egolessness. . . . There are many ways to practice. I am spoiled and cannot live like a monk in a cave, but I can practice renunciation by sharing my money and property.” In this way, detachment, a corollary of generosity, can be performed in any number of ways, whether feeding the *saṅgha*, erecting a *stūpa*, building a school, or establishing a micro-lending scheme.

Shuyan, a *feng shui* 風水 specialist and financial consultant, has made a pilgrimage to Bodhgayā most winters since 1992. His activities include both traditional and engaged renunciation and *dāna*. Lama Zopa, the spiritual director of the FPMT, appointed him as the director of the board at the FPMT center in Singapore. Shuyan raised about US\$150,000 to help construct a massive prayer wheel containing millions of mantras at the Root Institute *and* helped raise the same amount for the Maitreya School.³² The

³⁰ Jones 2009.

³¹ See Goldberg 2012 for a discussion on the Maitreya School’s spiritually based pedagogy and Goldberg 2013 for a critical examination of the divergent views concerning the FPMT’s claims of universality of certain Buddhist practices and objects located at the charitable school attended by Hindu and Muslim children.

³² In addition to the contributions made by Shuyan, one of the largest and wealthiest donors, most of the donations to Maitreya School and the Shakyamuni Buddha Community Health

year I met him he had travelled for five days to the principal Buddhist pilgrimage sites and then undertook a personal three-week silent retreat at the Root Institute. After his retreat, Shuyan returned home and delivered a report to his fellow donors regarding the Maitreya School's progress.

On the last morning of 2007, Shuyan and I had an opportunity to speak privately over breakfast since most of the other pilgrims skipped breakfast that morning to sleep in, after Lama Zopa's prayer session the previous night that had continued until 4:00 a.m. Sipping light, Western-style chai, Shuyan and I sat on the upper terrace of the dining area overlooking the vast expanse of paddy fields, dotted with traditional village hamlets and modern Buddhist temples, monasteries, and guest-houses. Shuyan explained that his pilgrimage, meditation retreat, and fund-raising for the school are all one and the same. Like so many socially engaged pilgrims maintained, the activities all appeared different outwardly; inwardly the motivation to serve others was identical.

Regardless of the type of generosity practiced: traditional, socially engaged, or a mixture of the two, all informants agreed that sincere intention was of the utmost importance. One afternoon, a Western woman stepped into my twice-a-week conversational English class that I held for local health-care workers in the clinic's waiting room. Embarrassed by her intrusion, she meekly asked where she could find Dr. Santosh's office to leave a donation. "His office is just in front of you," I said pointing to the pad-locked door with the large nameplate indicating the doctor's name, "but he's gone for the day."

Clinic are from pilgrims staying at the Root Institute or who are affiliated with FPMT, although some donations do come from itinerant pilgrims. Many people also donate online or by mail from abroad. Most of these are single donations, although some people donate on an annual or monthly basis. The size of these donations ranges between US\$25 per month to several thousand dollars per year, and every donor, regardless of the size of their contribution, receives a thank you note. Most of the regular donors who offer substantial contributions are Buddhists from Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan but the most significant donor is Lama Zopa himself who directs traditional monastic offerings and repurposes them towards these projects.

Some donors also come from outside the tradition as well. For instance, Mark, the clinic's director who is a long-time student of Thich Nhat Hanh and more recently the seventeenth Karmapa, recounted that last year a Theravada monk showed up to the clinic with a group of twenty-five Burmese pilgrims. When the monk saw that they were not practicing generosity, he chided them saying that they spend their money on futile devotional activities like putting gold leaf on pagodas instead of using their money to concretely help others. Within a matter of seconds, Mark chuckled, all the pilgrims pulled out their wallets and amassed approximately US\$1,000. Mark added that one of the largest regular donors to both the clinic and the school is not even a Buddhist, but a wealthy American Buddhist sympathizer who appreciates the social work carried out by the FPMT.

“Can I leave a donation with you?” she asked shyly. I replied, “Just put it in the donation box and he’ll get it in the morning.” She clumsily pulled out a large wad of cash consisting of thousand-rupee notes—about as rare for an Indian as a thousand-dollar bill is for a North American. “I’m sorry it’s so little, but that’s all I can afford at the moment,” she says as she stuffed a note in the donation box. “Don’t worry,” I said, mimicking numerous Buddhist teachers I had heard in the past tell their students, “it’s the motivation to help others that counts, not the amount you give.” Lama Zopa teaches his students that unconditional generosity is the perfection central to Mahayana Buddhism, and when combined with the sincere desire to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, generosity becomes a cause of Buddhahood. In this way, the merits accrued from giving are not calculated by the amount given, but by the compassionate attitude in which it is given. As an American pilgrim who had recently finished the annual three-week Vipassanā-Mahāmudra course at the Root Institute led by an Italian Vajrayāna monk stated, “generosity is the groundwork for virtue, and from it compassion flows.”

Pilgrim compassion

Compassion, or *karuṇā*, is a virtue common to all schools of Buddhism. In their published dialogue entitled *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama and clinical psychiatrist Howard Cutler insist that developing compassion is deeper than simply cultivating feelings of warmth and affection, and improving relationships with others. It consists of a non-violent state of mind “based on the wish for others to be free of their suffering and is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility, and respect towards the other.”³³ In Bodhgayā, this desire often emerges from specific “divine abode” and “Medicine Buddha” techniques and is associated with compassionate and concrete responses to the highly visible suffering. For many pilgrims who are oriented towards action, meditation practices disassociated from social engagement are considered self-centered.

“How do you deal with the poverty?” I asked Fran, an Australian student of Lama Zopa’s and who has been coming semi-regularly to Bodhgayā for the last twenty years. She replied,

I stopped thinking about myself. In the early days, I easily got overwhelmed. Each time I went into a village, it felt like I was

³³ Dalai Lama and Cutler 1998, p. 114.

hammered into the ground. I was totally helpless, totally. It was awful, because I was here to help others!

I asked her what changed.

With practice and guidance from Rinpoche I learned to lose myself, my own pettiness, and became open to their suffering. Sure, frustration and anger still arise when I see how in some ways so little has changed, but now I am more aware of myself, and this makes me more aware of others, and my heart opens.

She paused for a few moments and continued,

The more I open up and act compassionately, the better I feel. And when I feel good, a connection is there, it's so tangible. I'm present, open, and loving, and whatever I do, whether giving an English lesson or just listening to a person's story over a cup of chai, I feel so connected. It's very natural.

Fran, like other engaged pilgrims, stressed a model of compassion-cultivation that is rooted in patience and understanding of how affairs progress slowly within the local context. The Dalai Lama calls Cutler's attention to the notion that genuine compassion is tangled up with neither attachment nor expectation, both of which can cause a relationship to be partial, biased, and unstable. While feelings of closeness may exist in these relationships, the Dalai Lama insists that as soon as a disagreement arises then mental projections associated with that relationship will shift from friend to enemy, love to hate, and so forth.³⁴ A genuine, universal compassion, on the other hand, is based on the rationale that all human beings have an innate desire to be happy and overcome suffering, just like myself. And, just like myself, they have the natural right to fulfill this fundamental aspiration. On the basis of the recognition of this equality and commonality, you develop a sense of affinity and closeness with others. With this as a foundation, you can feel compassion regardless of whether you view the other person as a friend or an enemy. It is based on the other's fundamental rights rather than your own mental projection. Upon this basis, then, you will generate love and compassion.³⁵

Like Fran, most pilgrims claimed that cultivating the kind of compassion described by the Dalai Lama is their primary aim. Several informants mentioned that coming to Bodhgayā and volunteering with an NGO is a

³⁴ Dalai Lama and Cutler 1998, p. 114.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

matter of benefiting others and helps them understand the value of compassion towards both oneself and others. They believed pilgrimage in India—and more specifically, engaged pilgrimage—helped them strengthen their conviction of compassion’s efficacy and determination to deepen it within themselves and help others do the same. Most pilgrims used the language of compassion in their daily spiritual discourse. It was evident that they viewed volunteering with some organization aimed at assisting the local community in poverty alleviation as an expression of compassion.

All socially engaged pilgrims with whom I spoke practiced meditation formally and consistently in order to cultivate compassion. Most identified either the “divine abodes” (*brahma-vihāra*) or “Medicine Buddha” as their technique of preference, and viewed these techniques as supporting their volunteer work.³⁶ The *brahma-vihāra* practice involves the cultivation of loving-kindness (*mettā-bhāvanā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), appreciative joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). The practitioner directs these sublime qualities towards himself or herself, cultivates and enhances them, and then projects them outwards to others. By doing so, the practitioner is thought to free himself or herself from enmity, ill will, and distress. Simultaneously, the practitioner cultivates generosity and happiness. Once these feelings are strongly rooted, the practitioner can then direct them outward towards loved ones, acquaintances, enemies, and finally, towards all sentient beings. Some engaged pilgrims specified that they included local teachers, students, parents, other pilgrims, and even government and police officials blocking their projects! In this way, the pilgrims characterized the *brahma-vihāras* as a support for social engagement. After repeated practice, the practitioner experiences these positive qualities and then acts them out in society. Mona, an eclectic Buddhist pilgrim from the Netherlands who has volunteered at numerous schools during the last fifteen years as an English, mathematics, and science tutor commented, “I need to do this every evening, without it I am hopeless. Tuning in to the *brahma-vihāras* is so cleansing . . . helps me connect to the people I’m working with, especially those who I get frustrated with!”

Typical of socially engaged interpretations of meditative practice, as Bond observed with the Sarvodāya movement in Sri Lanka,³⁷ and further maintained by several of my informants, these practices helped them cul-

³⁶ Traditionally this is a Theravada Buddhist meditation; however it is not uncommon to find Mahayana Buddhists (at least Western ones) also practicing this meditation, or some variation of it, as I observed at the Root Institute and with practitioners in the Shambhala tradition.

³⁷ Bond 1996, p. 126.

tivate a positive state of mind in face of all challenges and empowered them to continue with their social action. A. T. Ariyaratne, Sarvodāya's leader, argues that using the *brahma-vihāras* purely as a meditation exercise is insufficient, rather it should be a motivational tool for compassionate action.³⁸ That is, meditation *without* social engagement is not viewed as sufficient practice. As Harvey Aronson points out in his classic *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism* the practice of the *brahma-vihāras* was traditionally performed in seclusion and the perfection of these states was thought to emerge by withdrawing from the world, not engaging in it. As meditational subjects, they are intended to produce a calm and tranquil mind that can radiate the four sublime qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity into the world, not to produce an ethic for social participation.³⁹ Thus, contemporary engaged Buddhists in general and engaged pilgrims in particular widen and alter the traditional formulation of the practice.

Not only are the *brahma-vihāras* practiced as meditations and “compassionate actions” by engaged pilgrims, but also by local Maitreya School teachers and students. During *Chāth Pūjā*, a local holiday celebrated a week after the national New Year's holiday, *Diwali*, Divesh, from class 9, had lost an eye when a faulty firecracker exploded in his face. The next morning during assembly at school all the children practiced the *brahma-vihāras*, keeping Divesh in mind, sending him loving-kindness and compassion. All the students then made him “get well soon” cards, and some of his classmates offered to tutor him at home so that he would not fall too behind in his studies. These children had integrated the *brahma-vihāras* into their school life, not only as meditative exercises, but as concrete moral actions as well.

The Medicine Buddha mantra and visualization is another method commonly used by engaged pilgrims, especially practitioners of the Tibetan Vajrayāna traditions, to develop compassion. One afternoon I joined a group of retreatants on the clinic tour that typically happens after every retreat. We were guided around the clinic by Mark, who spoke about the clinic's activities. After Mark had finished, we all sat in the upstairs waiting room where Ram, a local nurse, described the typical patients who come to the clinic. Above Ram was a painting (*thangka*) of the Medicine Buddha, who resembles the Tibetan image of the historical Śākyamuni Buddha with the

³⁸ Cited in Bond 1996, p. 127.

³⁹ Aronson 1980, pp. 55, 64.

exception that he is bright lapis blue and that he has a bowl of healing herbs in his lap rather than a begging bowl. With his palm facing outward in the *mudrā* of giving, the Medicine Buddha seemed to be blessing Ram's audience. When Ram was done speaking, Venerable Ngawang, the burly English FPMT monk who had led the previous retreat, taught the group a Medicine Buddha meditation:

Close your eyes and visualize the Medicine Buddha radiating healing energy. If you do not feel comfortable visualizing the image of the Buddha then choose any religious icon, Jesus, or whatever you wish, or simply a universal, pure energy. In whatever form or non-form this energy takes, now direct it towards yourself . . . the patients in this clinic . . . the health-care workers . . . the volunteers . . . the people of Bodhgayā . . . Lama Zopa Rinpoche . . . all sentient beings.

After the practice, the monk distributed little autographed cards with a Tara image and mantra (*Om Tara Tutare Tare Sohā*) inscribed on it; he then instructed the group to chant the mantra twenty-one times. He closed the session by rapidly reciting the Medicine Buddha mantra: *Tādyatha Om Bekhandzye Bekhandzye Mahā Bekhandzye Radza Samudgate Svāhā*. Afterward, many of the students expressed their appreciation for Ngawang's generosity and inclusiveness to allow room for everyone to participate in the compassion practice. Ngawang explicitly linked the traditional Vajrayāna mantra and visualization practices to the production of compassion for the contemporary, local patients and health-care workers, as well as engaged pilgrims volunteering their time at the clinic.

Afterward, Ngawang took the retreatants to visit the newly constructed Tegar Karmapa monastery, along with its set of stunning paintings. I stayed behind to chat with Angelina, a Spanish volunteer who has been with the FPMT for three years. She came in on her day off to visit a patient and the patient's baby, both infected with AIDS. When I asked her if she ever did the Medicine Buddha practice, she explained how every morning she practiced *ānāpāna-sati*, or awareness of respiration, for about forty-five minutes. "It's very good for me, but very difficult to control my mind, it wanders all over the place. I like much better my Medicine Buddha," the short woman with piercings in her eyebrows and lip said. Later I learned that this Medicine Buddha mantra and visualization practice was common among many engaged pilgrims, especially those working in the field of health.

In her translation and commentary on the mantra, Buddhist writer Lillian Too proposes that reciting the Medicine Buddha mantra has a dual purpose.

On the one hand, it is believed to contribute to the alleviation of physical, mundane suffering of both the reciter and the people it is directed towards. On the other hand, the mantra is also thought to help the practitioner attain enlightenment and then elevate others to that state.⁴⁰ Every day a recording of Lama Zopa chanting the mantra is played at high volume in the clinic because it is believed that anyone who hears it, whether they have faith in the Dharma or not, will overcome their suffering and never be reborn in a lower realm again. With this faith, both Mark and Angelina recited the Medicine Buddha mantra most evenings while circumambulating the Mahābodhi Temple, saying they did so for the benefit of patients at the clinic in particular and for all beings in general. Angelina further explained that the mantra increases the power of the medicine in the clinic. In addition to the mantra, they also visualized the Medicine Buddha hovering above the person, pouring healing nectar from his bowl into the crown of the person's head, making him or her feel well and happy. The visualization then continues with the Medicine Buddha emanating cooling blue light beams that reach all sentient beings, including the visualizer. The Medicine Buddha then melts into them, and they become one. After such a practice, they feel refreshed and strengthened for another day of intense work at the clinic.

This Medicine Buddha practice is a well-articulated form of *sādhana*, or self-transformation, along the Tantric Buddhist path. While many engaged pilgrims practiced this complex procedure, only a minority of adept meditators are thought to effectively carry it out. Most pilgrims were reserved about discussing their personal practice, although one pilgrim whom I knew well shared her experience with me. She explained,

I usually invoke the Medicine Buddha because I am a healer. People always come to me with their problems. It comes natural to me to soothe people, and when I have the Medicine Buddha with me my skills are that much more effective.

I inquired how this type of mantra and visualization helps her in her daily life. She explained,

For one thing, it helps me realize emptiness at an experiential level. Without this realization, genuine compassion cannot arise. By having my guru or the Medicine Buddha enter me, unify with me, I feel stronger and more competent to continue with the challenges faced on my journey towards liberation.

⁴⁰ Too 2003, p. 92.

This pilgrim's experience corresponds with Janet Gyatso's description of the three-dimensional map of self-transformation where the meditator "learns to see him- or herself as looking like the Buddha-deity from outside, appropriates the speech patterns of the deity by chanting its mantras, and learns to feel the experiences of the deity within."⁴¹ Just as Lama Zopa continues his guru's religious and humanitarian work,⁴² advanced practitioners are said to also identify with the historical guru's personality and mission. Gyatso maintains that beyond visualizing the guru's body, speech and mind, advanced meditators may "assume and carry out the guru's writing projects . . . visionary, educational, or building projects, and especially, take on the guru's institutional position and property."⁴³ For advanced Vajrayāna meditators, this complex, reflexive, and transformative practice requiring sustained concentration and imagination manifests realizations of emptiness identical to the guru or deity, and for those meditators with an explicit socially engaged ethic, this practice is the bedrock of their participation in social affairs.

MULTIPLE PRACTICES, ALTRUISTIC RESPONSES, AND APOLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Mark, a tall, Caucasian American nurse-practitioner who looks younger than his sixty years, connected his Buddhist practice with his work at the Root Institute's Shakyamuni Buddha Community Health Clinic:

Everything we do is our practice . . . my work here with the health program is my practice. . . . If we do whatever we do mindfully then it is our practice. That is the goal of our practice, to understand that our practice is not just sitting on a cushion, but taking what we have achieved in terms of peacefulness, mind-transformation, through our study of the Dharma, and integrating that with everything that we do. If we are not successful at that, then the practice is just academic. And so I have a practice that includes sitting and walking, mindful movements or yoga, but those are only a part of the greater practice of everything I do.

Mark has spent four years as the program director at the clinic. Although he works for an organization directed by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Mark identified

⁴¹ Gyatso 2002, p. 185.

⁴² Lama Yeshe. Described by Mackenzie (1991).

⁴³ Gyatso 2002, p. 191.

himself as a student of the Vietnamese Zen monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, whose famous exhortation: “All Buddhism is engaged” inspired him deeply. For Mark and other engaged pilgrims who understand practice in this multi-dimensional way, there is no difference whether one is working for an organization or one is meditating at a temple: both activities are one and the same as long as the motivation to eradicate *dukkha* is at the forefront of the mind. Despite the variation in practices or discourses deemed “correct,” Mark notes that segregation is generally mitigated by an acknowledged sense of solidarity. When I asked him how he felt about other pilgrims and their varying practices, he responded that he was generally inspired by them and tended to seek out parallels that transcend time and culture:

I feel very connected. I have always liked to watch other people practice [at the temple] because I think that watching other people practice can help our own practice and every practitioner can be a teacher for us, so I think that it is important to be mindful and to observe other people practice.

Similarly, Angelina commented that she also feels close to the other pilgrims, even if she does not share all their religious ideologies or practices. She focuses on unification of practices and meanings, even if the implications and meanings of such actions may vary:

I feel connected because all of us are in same path, same teachings, same intention, but I feel distance from all the guru devotion. . . . Anyways, this doesn't matter, because we are all in same path; differences are not important, they are secondary.

Since the central feature of all Buddhist practice is addressing and eliminating human suffering, none of the socially engaged informants I interviewed judged their fellow pilgrims whose practice was limited to traditional devotional activity as self-absorbed or deluded. Involvement with social work is a moment along the continuum of compassionate action leading to healing and liberation, not a permanent departure from or addition to it.

Still, since Buddhist activities are taking new forms, socially engaged practice in Bodhgayā challenges the notion of what it means to be a twenty-first century Buddhist pilgrim in India. With the exception of a handful of pilgrims such as the Japanese Ambedkarite Surai Sasai⁴⁴ and to a minor degree, Christopher Titmuss, most of Bodhgayā's transnational, non-resident,

⁴⁴ See Doyle 2003.

socially engaged Buddhist pilgrims, and the charitable organizations in which they work, refuse to directly advocate for structural changes in Bihari society. This refusal may reflect the Buddhist teaching on altruism that an individual's purification is all that is required to construct a virtuous society, but it may also signify a lack of political capital that can be utilized in this area. At the same time, however, the lack of political involvement by these organizations may also be more calculating. While they may not depend on the government for financial support, they certainly need the state's cooperation in other respects such as travel/working visas, construction permits, accreditation of their educational institutions, and so forth. To ensure the smooth functioning of current and future projects, leaders of these organizations believe that it is beneficial to cooperate with whoever is in power. On the surface, these organizations may not fit perfectly into Queen's and Chappell's models of "engagement,"⁴⁵ but in terms of their impacts on the community one cannot deny their role in social transformation.

One example that comes to mind is how S. N. Goenka, the Indian Vipassana meditation teacher, refrains from taking a political stance and asserts that all he does is teach meditation freely to anyone who is interested. However, several of his students are high-ranking Indian government officials and leaders of the business community who affect government policy, as seen by the penetration of his meditation courses into the public school system, prison system, and the manner in which government officials in several states are permitted to take periodic paid leaves to partake in a ten-day Vipassana course. Thus, while Goenka's organization does not directly call for institutional change, it has a significant transformative impact in India's schools, prisons, and government departments.⁴⁶

Similarly, but less pervasive than the Vipassana movement in India, the Maitreya School affects the education of students from many other schools in the region and even worldwide. For instance, many schools such as Akshay and Divine Land send their teachers to Maitreya for training in

⁴⁵ Queen 2000, 2003; Chappell 1996. Authors such as Queen and Chappell contend that if an activity is to qualify as "social engagement" instead of mere altruism it must directly address complex and pervasive political oppression, socio-economic injustice, and ecological destruction. Followers of this camp prioritize systemic socio-political action as a primary spiritual practice with all others subsidiary to it. If structures perpetuating suffering continue to exist, then individual and social liberation are unattainable and the work of the Buddhist rendered incomplete.

⁴⁶ See the Vipassana Research Institute's *Vipassana: Its Relevance to the Present World* (1994) for its collection of anecdotes on the impacts of Vipassana practice on various social institutions.

“Special Program”⁴⁷—the foundation of the school’s holistic curriculum, and a number of other schools have expressed an interest in doing the same. As the first batches of students graduate from Maitreya School, some have become teachers at other schools wishing to integrate some of Maitreya’s pedagogical features into their own.⁴⁸ Moreover, several teachers from the West volunteer at Maitreya School partly to help out, but also to learn more about the curriculum so that they can adapt it to their respective schools back home (for instance, the Tara Redwood School in California that integrates Maitreya School’s Universal Education curriculum with the Montessori pedagogical approach). Hence, this holistic method attracts many curious pilgrims because on the one hand, they are eager to get involved with a school which has aims that they fundamentally believe are essential for eliminating suffering and creating a better society. On the other hand, many of these pilgrims are keen on learning more about the curriculum so that they can take home knowledge and skills to apply at the schools in which they work. Moreover, several informants reported that they had unsatisfactory learning experiences as children and were excited to be involved with a radical alternative to what they had been exposed to in their youth. In this light, what seems to be simply an “altruistic” response, in fact, may have “engaged” effects on global scales.

Another reason for the absence of direct political activism in Bodhgayā results from the precarious situation that foreigners find themselves in as “foreigners” who can easily be deported from the country. Engaged pilgrims wish to alleviate the suffering of the local population and to improve conditions towards a just society; at the same time, they do not see themselves as the appropriate people to bring about that change. Due partly to the pilgrims’ transitory position and partly to their perceptions of social change, several pilgrims said they perceive their roles as supporters

⁴⁷ See Goldberg 2011, 2012.

⁴⁸ While some graduating students proceed on to some form of higher education that will help them climb the socio-economic ladder, many are forced to find employment to support their families. Some students have become teachers at other schools or found work with foreign-sponsored organizations; many have joined their family’s vocation. I have observed that the students’ financial and social aspirations often conflict as the Buddhist ideals of simplicity, compassion, and renunciation that they learned on a daily basis at school are challenged by the desires arising from the flow of media-generated images of wealth and status. See Goldberg 2011 for my analysis of the tensions felt by local students and teachers concerning their positions in their local communities and the global economy, and Goldberg 2013 for a treatment of the divergent interpretations concerning education and employment among foreign Buddhists and local Biharis.

and sympathizers of change, not direct activists. In other words, as one pilgrim put it, “we want to help the locals help themselves.” Dave, an engaged pilgrim who has been in Bodhgayā for most of the last seven years⁴⁹ explained, “No matter how long I stay here with them, I’ll always be an outsider. Sure, I’ve made lots of very close friends, but I am not Bihari, and if Bihar is going to change, then Biharis need to instigate and carry out the work.” This attitude was widely held by Bodhgayā’s engaged pilgrims, who saw themselves as teachers who can provide locals with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to change inefficient and oppressive social, educational, political, and economic structures. These pilgrims attempted to empower the locals to challenge existing conditions and create new ones based on social justice and welfare. While they did not necessarily directly and publically criticize the state, their involvement with social projects implicitly did.

CONCLUSION

Bodhgayā’s engaged Buddhist pilgrims represent the Buddhist ethics of altruism and engagement, and dispel assumptions that Buddhism is narcissistic, apolitical and other-worldly. The explicit social goals of a growing number of pilgrims emerge as devotional and contemplative forms of practice and have broadened to include education, health, and job creation for those plagued by poverty and discrimination. Implicit in their activities is a sense of ethical development requiring discipline and virtue as stepping stones for altruism and engagement—integral ingredients for individual and collective awakening which manifest themselves along the pilgrim’s path.

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⁴⁹ See n. 24.

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