

Forschung und Lehre

Walking Meditation and Slow Marches: Buddhist Responses to Climate Change Protest

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Abstract

The climate crisis is arguably one of today's greatest challenges and the Buddhist doctrine offers a foundation for a comprehensive approach to environmental activism, grounded in core principles such as mindfulness, compassion, and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Consequently, many Buddhists have turned to environmental activism, trying to find their own ways of expression. This study explores how Buddhist climate change activism manifests in protests in Germany and the UK, particularly through performative techniques. Building on the concept of climate activism as edgework in the Anthropocene (Hentschel 2023), it examines how XR Buddhists Germany have reimagined the traditional Buddhist mindfulness practice of walking meditation as a public, embodied intervention. During XR Germany's Autumn Rebellion in Berlin (September 2022) and subsequent protest events, walking meditation was repurposed as a form of protest to raise public awareness and a means of cultivating alternative ways of being in the world. Based on textual analysis, online resources, interviews, and fieldwork, this paper analyses how Buddhist activists can participate in shaping new life worlds amid an ecological crisis by transforming a contemplative practice into a mode of secular civil disobedience.

Keywords: climate change protest, walking meditation, slow marches, Buddhism, Buddhist eco-activism, Engaged Buddhism

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Introduction

“What do we want? Climate Justice! When do we want it? Now!” When people think of Buddhism and its practice, they envision patient monks seated peacefully on their cushions in deep meditation. Yet, on Sunday, September 18, 2022, a crowd of around 100 people embarked on a walking meditation organized by *Extinction Rebellion* (XR) *Buddhists Germany* in Berlin, stirred by these calls (Scheuermann 2024: 161).

The current climate crisis—arguably one of humanity’s most significant challenges—has prompted many Buddhists to engage in environmental activism. This paper¹ observes how Buddhist walking meditation has been reimagined as a form of climate change protest and transformed into a secular act of civil disobedience, as exemplified by *XR Buddhists Germany*. Analyzing the intersection of Buddhist practice and environmental activism, it explores how Buddhist walking meditation has been re-imagined and repurposed as a (Buddhist) climate change protest method to create awareness about climate change and mobilize collective action.

Buddhism and Climate Crisis: Eschatology, Dependent Origination, and Activism

Climate change affects different parts of the world in unequal ways. While some regions have been able to adapt, others, such as the Himalayan region, are already experiencing drastic ecological shifts. Historically, this region has faced natural disasters, and its fragile ecosystem remains highly sensitive to environmental change. In response, various Buddhist traditions have developed ways to conceptualize and handle the uncertainties of nature.

Eschatological beliefs have long played a significant role in Buddhism, including the idea of living in a time of decline. Unlike Christian or Islamic traditions, which usually conceive of time in a linear fashion culminating in an apocalyptic end or eschaton, Buddhist cosmology follows a cyclical temporal model with repeating patterns of decline and increase. Hence, Buddhist cosmology does not narrate the development from a supposed cosmic origin of the world to its end but instead describes a continuous transformation process from a bird’s-eye view. Nevertheless, when narrowed down, the current period is classified as the age of strife, which is characterized by a gradual decline, a long process of deterioration marked by an increase in suffering, natural disasters, and social turmoil. This aligns with contemporary concerns about the growing effects of climate-related events such as floods, droughts, heatwaves, armed conflicts, and pandemics.

However, the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamūtpāda*, Tib. *ren ’brel*) implies that the future is not predetermined but shaped by an interplay of

1 AI-based tools (Grammarly and ChatGPT) have been used to improve the language, but all ideas—unless marked otherwise—are original.

causes and conditions. Hence, individuals are not determined by fate but possess agency. They can act to avert, transform, or postpone adverse outcomes. This dynamic view has historically motivated Buddhist practitioners to work toward preserving and restoring the Buddhist doctrine in times of perceived decline.

Prophecies about the degeneration and eventual disappearance of the Buddha's teachings (*Dharma*), such as those found in the *Kauśāmbī* prophecy,² provide a framework for understanding the urgency of contemporary climate action. These prophecies predict not a singular end-time event but rather the progressive erosion of the teachings over time. From a Buddhist practitioner's perspective, this scenario is particularly grave, as salvation from *samsāra*—the endless cycle of rebirth and suffering—is considered impossible without access to the Dharma. This altruistic perspective has historically led Buddhist communities to actively maintain and revitalize the tradition. This effort can be likened to contemporary environmental activism aimed at averting the climate catastrophe.

Christine Hentschel's concept of *Edgework in the Anthropocene* offers a compelling lens for viewing Buddhist climate activism, particularly within the framework of Engaged Buddhism.³ Hentschel defines edgework not as mere thrill-seeking or recklessness, but as the necessity and decision to face the catastrophic realities of planetary crisis and to draw the necessary personal, social, and political consequences (Hentschel 2025: 2).⁴

This mirrors the Buddhist commitment to mindfulness and compassionate action in the face of suffering. This was explained in the famous *Four Truths of the Noble Ones* (Skt. *catvāri āryasatyāni*, Tib. *bden pa bzhi*)—sometimes rendered as the Four Noble Truths—that were taught in the Buddha's initial sermon.

“Suffering, this noble truth, must be recognized; the origin of suffering, this noble truth, must be avoided; the cessation of suffering, this noble truth, must be practiced”: thus, monks, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me the sight, there arose in me the understanding, the insight, the knowledge, the seeing. (Frauwallner 2010: 15)

The first two truths direct mindful attention to suffering and the cause of suffering, and in the last two truths, the Buddha taught the cessation of suffering in all its forms and the path that leads to this end. Taking up the middle-way approach outlined by the Buddha that balances mindfully between the extremes of ascetism and the

2 For an extensive treatment of the *Kauśāmbī* prophecy, refer to Nattier 1991: 52–54.

3 For a discussion of Engaged Buddhism in the context of Eco-Activism in the UK, see Zielke 2023.

4 “Edgework im Anthropozän setzt an einer veränderten Lebensrealität und gesellschaftlichen Selbstbeschreibung an, in der Selbstentfaltungsfragen zunehmend von Selbsterhaltungsfragen verdrängt werden. Vor dem Horizont planetarer Unsicherheit stellen sich Fragen des Überlebens, des Risikos und des Kontrollverlusts auf andere Weise. Der Edge ist jetzt die Schwelle zum Katastrophischen. Wenn das, was auf dem Spiel steht, das Überleben der Menschheit selbst ist, dann ist Edgework nicht mehr Abenteuerlust und Waghalsigkeit, sondern die Notwendigkeit und Entscheidung, dieser Realität ins Gesicht zu sehen und daraus die nötigen Konsequenzen zu ziehen: persönlich, gesellschaftlich und politisch.” (Hentschel 2025: 2)

indulgence of sensory pleasures, his followers can leave *samsāra*, the endless cycle of rebirths characterized by suffering, behind. In this way, Buddhist practice can also be considered edgework at the precipice of *samsāra*. Engaged Buddhist climate activists—such as those involved in movements like Extinction Rebellion Buddhists—embody this edgework by refusing to turn away from ecological collapse and the associated suffering. Instead, they treat it as an urgent call to ethical and spiritual responsibility. Just as traditional Buddhist communities may have historically responded to the prophesied degeneration of Dharma with renewed commitment, today’s Buddhist eco-activists may react to the climate crisis with collective actions rooted in an understanding of dependent origination, non-violence, and the aspiration to reduce or eradicate suffering—for all beings, humans and more-than-humans.

Avertive Apocalypticism and Buddhist Climate Activism

Daniel Wojcik has described “avertive apocalyptic beliefs” as those that frame the world as “not irredeemably evil or absolutely doomed” but rather as something that can still be saved through human agency. In this model, individuals and collectives are not merely passive recipients of divine fate but active participants in attempting to prevent destruction. They may even cause a transformation, bringing about a renewed world, a perfect age (Wojcik 2011: 84).

It seems justified to establish connections between Buddhist eschatology and avertive apocalypticism. As I have argued elsewhere, Buddhist dystopian narratives of decline often serve a pedagogical function, instilling a sense of urgency and responsibility that has contributed to Buddhism’s extraordinary resilience and *longue durée* throughout history. This “restorative enthusiasm” may also be relevant in the context of the ecological crisis (Scheuermann 2021). Climate activism, particularly within Buddhist communities, seeks to avert catastrophe, prevent collapse, and envision a better future.

However, caution is necessary when using the term apocalypse in the context of Buddhist decline narratives or the climate crisis. The *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements* (Crossley and Lockhart 2021) acknowledges that while the term is rooted in Christian eschatology, it is also used in secular contexts to describe large-scale destruction and radical transformation:

Belief in the impending or possible destruction of the world itself or physical global catastrophe, and/or the destruction or radical transformation of the existing social, political, or religious order of human society—often referred to as the apocalypse. While the primary focus of articles will be on accounts of apocalypses which are understood in religious terms, or initiated by divine or supernatural forces, secular uses of the term (especially when these implicitly draw on or encode religious/supernatural themes) will also be included. As a secondary aspect, the definition includes implicit reference to revelation and prophecy, thus the definition includes belief systems in which the idea of destruction of the

world/societal order is understood to be attained by communication from divine or supernatural sources. (CenSAMM 2021)

Timothy Morton conceptualizes such crises as “hyperobjects”—entities so vast in temporal and spatial dimensions that they defy traditional frameworks of understanding (Morton 2013). Hyperobjects are a way to describe processes that are beyond imagination and, from a Buddhist perspective, may be similar to unfathomable phenomena just like *saṃsāra*, the endless cycle of rebirths characterized by suffering, which is driven by ignorance, karma, and dependent origination, or its counterpart *nirvāṇa*, which is beyond the sphere of experience of ordinary individuals. A similar incomprehensibility also applies to climate change, which poses an unimaginable threat to humanity. Its implications cannot be fathomed in their full extent by glancing at a hockey stick graph. Yet, the space that emerges from this incomprehensibility opens the possibility of transformative imagination that may envision a radically different (and potentially even better) future—a post-apocalypse.

Walking Meditation as Climate Protest: The Case of XR Buddhists Germany

On July 25, 2022, the *German Buddhist Union (Deutsche Buddhistische Union, DBU)*, a national umbrella organization representing over 60 Buddhist groups, shared an announcement from *XR Buddhists Germany* on social media. The post invited followers to participate in the group’s climate actions planned for Berlin on September 17–20, 2022. Although DBU posts generally receive little engagement, this one sparked a polarized reaction, with over 80 mixed responses ranging from strong approval to outright disapproval. Some critics questioned whether *XR Buddhists Germany* qualified as a Buddhist organization and a few even declared their intent to leave the DBU in protest.

Intrigued by this debate, I contacted members of *XR Buddhists Germany*, conducted interviews with organizers, participated in their 2022 Autumn Rebellion in Berlin, and have followed the group’s activities since then. My previously published research on this subject examined *XR Buddhists Germany*’s diverse Buddhist practices and their relation to the *Ecodharma* movement. Therefore, this paper partially overlaps with the previous article, but takes a closer look at walking meditation as a form of climate activism and its transformation into slow marches (Scheuermann 2024).

Walking Meditation and Climate Protests in Berlin 2022

During the *XR Autumn Rebellion* in Berlin, *XR Buddhists Germany* established a meditation tent at the protest camp near the *Federal Ministry of Economy and Climate Protection*. Here, the group, composed primarily of German Buddhists, organized traditional practices such as lectures by monastics, sitting and walking

meditations, and *metta* and *tonglen* (Tib. *gtong len*) sessions focused on developing loving kindness and compassion. They also engaged in public outreach through organized demonstrations, including walking meditations.

On September 18, 2022, *XR Buddhists Germany* collaborated with *XR Faith Bridge*, an interfaith XR group, to organize a walking meditation with over 100 participants. Walking meditation is a mindfulness practice that originated during the Buddha's time, is practiced in many Buddhist traditions worldwide, and has been popularized in the West by Thich Nhat Hanh (1996). Marching from Henriette-Herz-Platz to Lustgarten, participants wore colored clothing arranged in a gradient to mimic climate warming stripes, a widely recognized data visualization of climate change.

The next day, September 19, *XR Buddhists Germany* held another walking meditation, targeting *Deutsche Bank's* role in financing fossil fuels. The 25 participants, dressed in black, walked slowly from Friedrichstraße to the *Deutsche Bank* branch office, each carrying a sign reading “*Deutsche Bank: Stop financing coal, oil, and gas.*” Upon arrival, they delivered a letter to the branch manager and concluded with a silent sitting meditation on the street in front of the bank.

The walking meditations on Sunday and Monday followed a Sōtō Zen-inspired technique, advancing one step per full breath cycle. David E. Riggs described the practice as follows:

The super-slow style is unique to Sōtō and can now be seen in places around the world that have been influenced by Sōtō Zen. The precise ritual is thought of as having been passed down in an unbroken transmission from Dōgen (1200–1253), the founding figure who is taken as the source of all Sōtō orthodoxy. If, however, one reads the texts that the lineage has so meticulously preserved, it is clear that the details of this practice were in fact put together about 250 years ago, based on textual scholarship. (Riggs 2007, 223)

The extremely slow pace of the practice extended the relatively short-distance walks through Berlin to over an hour, transforming a traditional contemplative practice into a public performance of protest. The fusion of Buddhist meditation with political activism was underscored by the contrast between silent mindfulness and XR slogans shouted through megaphones, such as those mentioned above: “What do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!”

From Buddhist Walking Meditation to Slow Marches

Since at least 2019, *XR Buddhists* have organized climate change protest marches in the form of meditative practices in both the United Kingdom and Germany. In the UK, *XR Buddhists* participated in the October Rebellion in London, facilitating daily sitting meditations and walking meditation sessions (Extinction Rebellion: XR Buddhists 2024). Around the same time in Germany, on October 9, 2019, a *Meditate-*

In was held in front of the *Hessischer Landtag*, the state parliament of Hesse (Extinction Rebellion Wiesbaden 2019).⁵

Walking meditation appears to have first been used as a form of protest by *XR Buddhists*, but was later incorporated in Germany into interfaith meditation marches under the banner of *Extinction Rebellion Faith Bridge*. *XR Faith Bridge* is an interfaith subgroup of XR and there are overlaps in membership between this group and *XR Buddhists*. Notably, mindful walking as a contemplative protest form proved inclusive and acceptable to people of various faiths. For instance, some interfaith participants in the *Faith Bridge* meditation during the Autumn Rebellion of 2022 joined *XR Buddhists Germany's* walking meditation event the following day. While participation in a walking meditation seemed unproblematic for participants across faiths, one interfaith participant declined to carry the *XR Buddhists Germany* banner during the march, expressing that, as a non-Buddhist, he did not wish to identify publicly as such through that symbolic gesture.

Interestingly, one participant I interviewed noted that street-blocking is an “unintended yet effective side-effect” of the walking meditation technique, particularly when routes include crossing public roads. David E. Riggs provides the following strikingly vivid account of the slow, deliberate nature of the *kinhin* form of walking meditation:

Although it may be translated “walking meditation,” in order to distinguish it from seated meditation, *kinhin* as practiced today is closer to standing still than it is to normal walking. The prescribed procedure is that one should coordinate one’s walking with one’s breathing so that each tiny half step takes the time for a complete in and out breath. At a casual glance, the walker seems to be standing still, or frozen in mid-step. (Riggs 2007: 224)

The inherently slow pace of this type of walking meditation, which makes it well-suited for street-blocking, has attracted interest beyond the religious subgroups of XR and among other climate activist circles. *Last Generation* is particularly known for its radical tactics, including street blockades involving activists glueing themselves to the pavement. However, public acceptance of such methods has recently sharply declined. Incidents of verbal abuse, physical violence, and even drivers running over protesters have been reported. By contrast, despite effectively disrupting traffic when the route intersects with roads, slow marches are perceived as less confrontational and have not provoked the same level of public backlash, at least in Germany. During the walking meditations in Berlin in 2022, I noticed that the silent and peaceful nature of the protest march appeared to leave bystanders somewhat perplexed, uncertain of how to interpret the event. Although I had anticipated some hostility, none emerged—aside from a few amused reactions.

Slow marches have emerged as a less divisive yet equally impactful form of protest and were adopted by *Last Generation* in Germany in April 2023. The Newspaper

5 A video of the event was posted on the Facebook page of *Extinction Rebellion Wiesbaden*.

Die Zeit reported on this change of tactics with the article “Da schleichen sie.” (There they slowly creep along.) (Neumann 2023). These marches, while inspired by *XR Buddhists’* slow-paced protest forms, have also been employed by other climate activist groups, including *Just Stop Oil*, *Fridays for Future*, and *Renovate Switzerland*. Unlike *XR Buddhists* or *Faith Bridge* events, however, the slow marches associated with *Last Generation* are entirely secular in nature, with no visible religious or spiritual dimension.

It is worth noting, however, that public and political responses to slow marches have differed between Germany and the UK. Despite entering the public debate, slow marches have not yet become a subject of parliamentary discussion in Germany. In contrast, the UK government directly addressed such protest tactics in the Public Order Act 2023 (UK Legislation 2023)—widely referred to in the media as the “anti-protest bill”—which specifically aimed to restrict climate activism methods, including slow marches (BBC 2023). This amendment to the Public Order Act 1986 directly addresses protest forms like slow marches by redefining “serious disruptions” as “more than minor.” It became the subject of legal disputes, which resulted in an appealable High Court ruling in May 2024 that considered the new regulations unlawful (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary 2024).

Conclusion

The walking meditation case illustrates how Buddhist eco-activists have employed and reinterpreted traditional Buddhist techniques in response to the current climate crisis. Walking meditation, a practice deeply rooted in Buddhist mindfulness to cultivate a calm and attentive mind, was initially adapted by *XR Buddhists* into a form of public climate protest. It was then further secularized into slow walking during street-blocking slow marches, demonstrating how a previously religious technique used for self-development can evolve into a tool for civil disobedience and public engagement in the face of ecological crisis.

The secularization of Buddhist walking meditation reflects a trend that we can also see in the case of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which adapts a Buddhist technique for secular well-being. However, while MBSR remains primarily oriented toward self-development, eco-Buddhist climate protests are directed outward, aiming to effect social and environmental change. Since contemporary Buddhist thinkers have voiced critical comments on MBSR (Purser 2019),⁶ it is unsurprising that eco-Buddhist activism that stresses political urgency has also become a point of contention within Buddhist communities.

Through a traditional Buddhist lens, such a transformation might be interpreted as a degeneration of the Dharma—an element of Buddhist end-time narratives (Scheuermann 2021: 92–95). Drawing on the conceptual framework of multiple

6 Particularly its economic exploitation has sometimes been critically perceived and coined the “McMindfulness” industry.

secularities explored by Christoph Kleine and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (2021), this shift cannot only be understood as a loss of authenticity, but in a non-evaluating sense as a process in which religious practices cross into new spheres of meaning. It reflects a fluid negotiation between a religious and a non-religious sphere, wherein a ritual like walking meditation is opened to the political sphere and creatively reappropriated. In this light, the adaptation of walking meditation into climate change protest does not represent a rupture but an expansion of usage. It was facilitated by the hyperobject climate crisis that opened up the necessary space for reimagining and change.

In any case, the eco-Buddhist activists' edgework not only has to counter the catastrophic realities of the current planetary crisis, but also the critical scrutiny and suspicion of contemporary Buddhist communities. Such edgework can indeed be regarded as a deeply affective, deliberate, collective and laborious effort, as described by Christine Hentschel (2023: 9–10),⁷ which implies here a struggle not only on a personal, social, and political level but also in the realm of religion.

Hence, rather than retreating into passive despair or doomsday agony, Buddhist eco-activists engage in a form of edgework that confronts the truth of suffering explained in the Buddha's first sermon and, in this way, keep open the possibility of a transformation toward a different (and hopefully better) future.

7 "Edgework – ernstgenommen als die gefühlsintensive, geplante, kollektive und mühsame Anstrengung im Angesicht planetarer Zerstörung – lässt eine Landschaft von Praktiken des doing loss entstehen, auf die sich ein genauer Blick lohnt, um unsere Gegenwart in ihrem post/apokalyptischen Ringen zu verstehen." (Hentschel 2023: 9–10)

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