



Buddhist Ethics in a Globalized World: Cultural Exchange and Diversity in Buddhist Traditions

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the transformation, adaptation, and reinterpretation of Buddhist ethical frameworks within the socio-cultural, economic, and political matrices of the twenty-first century. As Buddhism increasingly transcends its traditional Asian topographies to enter globalized spaces, it undergoes a complex process of "glocalization," wherein its foundational universal principles are dynamically recontextualized to interface with local realities. This study interrogates the structural tensions between universalist ethical claims and contextual ethical pluralism across contemporary Buddhist traditions. By critically engaging with modern reinterpretations of core canonical paradigms—specifically compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*prajñā*), and interdependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*)—this paper evaluates the radical socio-political shifts manifested in Engaged Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism, and Navayana Buddhism.

Furthermore, the paper provides a critique of "McMindfulness," analyzing it as a commodified, depoliticized, and individualistic appropriation of Buddhist praxis tailored to serve neoliberal capitalist frameworks. Integrating critical feminist interventions and ecological paradigms (*Ecodharma*), this study illuminates how contemporary Buddhist ethics responds systematically to systemic gender inequality and global environmental degradation. Employing a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology rooted in textual hermeneutics, critical theory, and comparative philosophy, this paper constructs a coherent, socially engaged meta-ethical framework. It argues that contemporary Buddhist ethics, by synthesizing internal psychological transformation with external structural action, offers a vital paradigm for global discourses on justice, environmental sustainability, and collective human flourishing.

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1. Introduction and Conceptual Framework

The contemporary globalized world is characterized by hyper-connectivity, rapid socio-economic shifts, accelerating ecological crises, and deep cross-cultural friction. These conditions place immense strain on classical ethical systems. Traditional frameworks of morality are routinely challenged to provide answers to structural crises that transcend national, cultural, and geographic boundaries. Within this global intellectual landscape, Buddhism—one of the oldest philosophical and religious traditions of humanity—has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for structural elasticity, philosophical adaptation, and profound

cross-cultural dialogue.

Historically rooted in the geopolitical and cultural realities of ancient South Asia, classical Buddhist ethics is structurally grounded in the systemic diagnosis of the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariya-saccāni*) and the practical execution of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*). This ethical matrix explicitly emphasizes the systematic cessation of suffering (*dukkha*) through the triadic training of:

- Moral rectitude (*śīla*).
- Meditative absorption or mental discipline (*samādhi*).
- Analytical wisdom (*prajñā*).

However, as Buddhism migrated across historical epochs and geographic borders, its ethical expressions were continuously re-coded. This process of historical transformation is clearly observable in the ancient transmission vectors along the Silk Road and the subsequent structural adaptation within Chinese civilization, a phenomenon widely theorized as "Sinification." The historical evolution of Buddhism from an ascetic, world-renouncing Indian philosophy into a highly institutionalized, socially integrated East Asian tradition demonstrates that Buddhist ethics is inherently dynamic rather than static. It operates not as a fixed dogma, but as an evolving discourse shaped continuously by dialogue, cultural exchange, and lived practice.

In the twenty-first century, the forces of globalization have radically accelerated and intensified these cross-cultural interactions. This has given rise to highly distinct contemporary expressions, including secularized mindfulness movements, socially engaged networks in both Western and Asian societies, and radical anti-caste, rationalist reinterpretations within the Indian subcontinent. While these modern developments have exponentially expanded the geographic footprint and cultural capital of Buddhist philosophy, they simultaneously introduce critical vulnerabilities and challenges. The contemporary globalization of Buddhism brings to the forefront urgent tensions regarding textual authenticity, hermeneutical integrity, systemic commodification, and the risk of stripping the tradition of its radical ethical core. Accordingly, this paper explores the structural evolution of these ethical frameworks, maps their plural expressions across divergent cultures, and establishes a robust conceptual framework to understand how these profound transformations operate without compromising the foundational core of the Dhamma.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodological Orientation

To systematically analyze the structural mutations, adaptations, and ethical philosophy of contemporary global Buddhism, this study establishes a multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary theoretical framework. This framework synthesizes four primary academic pillars:

- **Textual Hermeneutics:** Serves as the baseline methodology for an analytical, contextual investigation of foundational canonical scriptures. Rather than approaching the Pali Tipitaka (such as the socially grounded *Sigalovada Sutta* and *Karaniya Metta Sutta*) or core Mahayana scriptures (such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* or *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*) as static dogmas, this approach treats them as dynamic, living guides for moral action to trace how core ontological constants are translated into modern socio-political idioms.

- **Comparative Philosophy:** Facilitates a critical dialogue between classical Buddhist moral frameworks and Western normative ethical systems, including Aristotelian virtue ethics, Kantian deontology, and utilitarian consequentialism. This tool is utilized cautiously to avoid epistemic reductionism, ensuring that Buddhist philosophy is recognized as an independent, structurally sophisticated system capable of challenging Western meta-ethical assumptions.
- **Critical Theory:** Instrumental in exposing asymmetrical power dynamics, structural inequalities, and institutional oppressions. It provides the analytical tools required to evaluate how modern Buddhist movements interface with the realities of the caste system, institutionalized patriarchy, and the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism.
- **Glocalization:** Formulated as the macro-theoretical lens to explain the simultaneous, dialectical forces of universalization and particularization. It provides a framework for understanding how Buddhist ethics is universalized across the globe while simultaneously being modified, reinterpreted, and indigenized within local socio-political environments.

3. The Dialectic of Normative and Lived Buddhist Ethics

A central debate within modern Buddhist scholarship centers on the classification and phenomenological reality of its ethical framework, featuring a persistent tension between normative reconstructions and the nuanced realities of "lived ethics."

3.1. The Normative Virtue Ethics Paradigm

Damien Keown has famously argued that Buddhist ethics is best understood through the structural lens of virtue ethics, drawing striking parallels between the Buddhist path and Aristotelian notions of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing). Keown defines Nirvana as the holistic realization of moral and intellectual excellence, where cultivating non-attachment (*arāga*), benevolence (*advesa*), and understanding (*amoha*) directly constitutes enlightenment. Peter Harvey complements this normative approach by emphasizing the absolute centrality of volition or intention (*cetanā*). According to the canonical framework, karma is explicitly defined as volition; hence, the ethical quality of an act is determined entirely by the psychological roots (*mūla*) from which it springs (greed, hatred, or delusion).

3.2. The Challenge of Lived Ethics and Moral Phenomenology

Conversely, scholars like Maria Heim and Charles Hallisey challenge this strictly systemic, highly analytical classification, advocating for a shift toward moral phenomenology and lived ethics. Heim argues that treating Buddhist texts as handbooks of Western normative theory risks obscuring the historical, contextual, and deeply relational nature of Buddhist moral experience. In lived Buddhist traditions, ethics emerges organically through narrative immersion, devotional practices, ritual interactions, and localized cultural protocols.

This tension underscores a significant methodological challenge in contemporary comparative philosophy: the risk of epistemic reductionism. When Western academics force Buddhist concepts like *śīla* exclusively into the parameters of Aristotelian virtue ethics or utilitarian consequentialism, the

unique psychological and ontological dimensions of the Dhamma are frequently minimized. A non-reductive comparative framework is therefore essential—one that respects the distinct philosophical architecture of Buddhism while enabling an authentic, two-way cross-cultural dialogue.

4. Socio-Political Transformations: Engaged, Humanistic, and Navayana Buddhism

As Buddhism has entered the global political arena, its ethical focus has expanded from an emphasis on individual psychological liberation toward a systemic commitment to structural and institutional transformation.

4.1. Engaged Buddhism

Coined and popularized by the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh during the geopolitical devastation of the Vietnam War, Engaged Buddhism fundamentally redefines the traditional parameters of Buddhist praxis. Thich Nhat Hanh asserted that mindfulness and meditation cannot be confined to isolated monastic enclaves; rather, they must actively confront war, institutional violence, and social injustice. Within this framework, dukkha is expanded from individual psychological ignorance to structural suffering engineered by socio-economic systems. David Loy extends this paradigm by arguing that modern corporate capitalism, militarism, and systemic institutional greed function as collective,

institutionalized expressions of the three unwholesome roots: greed, hatred, and delusion. True practice, therefore, requires a dual transformation: the purification of the individual mind alongside active, non-violent resistance against oppressive social structures.

4.2. Humanistic Buddhism

Pioneered in early twentieth-century China by the reformist monk Taixu and later systematized by Venerable Yinshun, Humanistic Buddhism (Renjian Fojiao) sought to shift the orientation of Chinese Buddhism away from otherworldly devotion toward the immediate improvement of human society. This philosophy operationalizes Buddhist ethics through vast global networks (like Tzu Chi) focusing on healthcare, disaster relief, and universal education.

4.3. Navayana Buddhism: The Radical Ambedkarite Paradigm

The most radical, politically transformative reinterpretation of Buddhist ethics in the modern era is Navayana Buddhism, established by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in India in 1956. Ambedkar's Navayana represents a profound paradigm shift that strips Buddhism of its traditional scholastic metaphysics, re-grounding the Dhamma entirely in the principles of social justice, human rights, and egalitarianism.

Table 1

Classical Buddhist Concept	Navayana Reinterpretation by B.R. Ambedkar
Dukkha (Suffering)	Shifted from cosmic/existential anxiety to the material, socio-economic suffering caused by caste oppression (Chaturvarnya) and class exploitation.
Karma (Causation)	Stripped of fatalistic, past-life determinism; reframed as a moral law governing interpersonal human actions in the present life, emphasizing accountability.
Ahimsa (Non-violence)	Removed from absolute, passive asceticism; reinterpreted as a dynamic moral principle that permits the defensive struggle for justice and rights.
Nirvana (Liberation)	Translated from a transcendent, post-mortem state of extinguishment into the real-world creation of a just, moral, and democratic society (Prabuddha Bharat).

5. Subversive Critiques: Feminist Reconstructions and Ecodharma

Feminist Interventions in Buddhist Hermeneutics

Rita Gross, in *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, initiated a systematic feminist critique of Buddhist history and philosophy. Gross argued that while the core ontological tenets of Buddhism—specifically the doctrine of no-self (anattā) and the emptiness of inherent existence (śūnyatā)—are fundamentally gender-neutral and egalitarian, the historical institutions, monastic hierarchies, and textual lineages have been deeply patriarchal and androcentric. This historical contradiction led to the systemic subordination of women and the denial of full ordination rights (bhikkhunī upasampadā).

Feminist reconstruction involves a dual methodology: the historical retrieval of suppressed female voices (such as the poetry of the early enlightened nuns in the Therīgāthā) and the philosophical deconstruction of patriarchal structures. Scholars like Karma Lekshe Tsomo have expanded this discourse globally, though contemporary scholarship must continuously work to amplify indigenous Asian feminist voices to ensure that feminist liberation is not structurally imposed as a form of Western cultural imperialism.

5.1. Ecodharma and Ecological Interdependence

Simultaneously, the global ecological crisis has prompted the

development of Ecodharma—a contemporary synthesis of Buddhist teachings with deep ecology and environmental activism. Ecodharma finds its absolute philosophical anchor in the foundational doctrine of praṭītyasamutpāda (dependent origination). Environmental philosophers like Joanna Macy and David Loy utilize this ontological insight to dismantle the Cartesian dualism of Western modernity, which falsely separates the human subject from a commodified objective nature. Ecodharma asserts that the ecological crisis is, at its core, a spiritual crisis rooted in the delusion of the separate, autonomous ego. When an individual realizes their radical interconnectedness with the biosphere, environmental activism is recognized as a legitimate and vital form of spiritual practice.

6. The Neoliberal Capture: A Critique of "McMindfulness"

While globalization has catalyzed progressive movements, it has simultaneously facilitated a profound ethical compromise through the widespread commodification of Buddhist meditation practices, critically conceptualized by Ronald Purser and contemporary sociologists as "McMindfulness." In its traditional canonical setting, mindfulness (sati) is never practiced in isolation; it is structurally embedded within the Noble Eightfold Path as Right Mindfulness (sammā-sati), which is tethered to Right View (sammā-diṭṭhi) and Right

Action (sammā-kammanta). Under the influence of neoliberal capitalism, however, mindfulness has been systematically extracted from its ethical matrix, secularized, and transformed into a highly profitable consumer commodity.

Purser presents a sharp critique of how modern corporate structures, military institutions, and elite financial systems deploy mindfulness as a psychological tool for self-regulation and stress reduction. By framing stress entirely as an individual, psychological failure to adapt, McMindfulness effectively depoliticizes the individual. Instead of addressing systemic issues like exploitative labor, corporate mindfulness pacifies workers, urging them to manage stress individually to remain highly efficient agents of capital.

McMindfulness functions as a modern ideology that pacifies political dissent and insulates predatory systems from structural critique, highlighting the urgent necessity to construct a robust, ethically grounded counter-framework.

7. Synthesis: Towards a Globalized Meta-Ethical Framework

To resolve the fragmentation characteristic of contemporary Buddhist ethics—visible in the divide between normative theory and lived experience, as well as the tension between universalism and corporate commodification—this paper proposes a comprehensive, globalized meta-ethical framework. This integrated model relies directly on the foundational insight of *pratītyasamutpāda*, acknowledging that the individual and society are not separate entities but mutually co-arising phenomena.

Therefore, any ethical system that prioritizes inner psychological peace while ignoring structural oppression is conceptually incomplete and prone to neoliberal co-optation. Conversely, any political movement that demands external structural revolution while ignoring the deep-seated psychological roots of greed, hatred, and delusion within its own agents is vulnerable to ideological corruption and authoritarian degeneration. The globalized meta-ethical framework positions itself as a modern iteration of the Middle Path (*majjhimā paṭipadā*), demanding that the cultivation of internal clarity, wisdom, and compassion find immediate, concrete expression in social, economic, and political engagement.

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Buddhist ethics is not a static or historically confined system of ancient Asian rules, but a dynamic, evolving moral philosophy capable of critically engaging with the complexities of a globalized world. Through its foundational commitments to compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*prajñā*), and interdependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), Buddhism provides a sophisticated framework to evaluate and address contemporary crises, ranging from systemic social inequality to global climate collapse.

Modern movements such as Engaged Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism, and the radical anti-caste paradigm of Navayana Buddhism have successfully transitioned the primary focus of classical morality from an individualistic pursuit of ascetic liberation toward a collective commitment to structural justice, human rights, and corporate accountability. Simultaneously, the rise of McMindfulness represents a significant co-optation, reducing a radical path of ego-dismantling transformation into an individualistic,

therapeutic tool designed to support neoliberal capitalist productivity. Ultimately, by actively engaging with feminist hermeneutics, environmental activism, and structural social justice, the globalized Dhamma overcomes the false dichotomy between personal spirituality and collective responsibility, providing an invaluable analytical lens and a powerful practical tool for universal human flourishing.

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