Exploring Individualisation Processes in Western Buddhism: A Multi-thematic Analysis of Interviews with English and Italian Practitioners

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Abstract

Amongst the studies concerning Buddhism in the West, until now few have attempted to make an empirically based comparison between Buddhist practitioners from countries with different socio-religious backgrounds. This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap by analysing thirty multi-thematic qualitative interviews with lay practitioners connected in a variety of modalities to diverse Buddhist groups from England and Italy. The theoretical framework combines the concepts of individualisation, subjectivisation and bricolage to analyse the range of Buddhist interpretations and self-descriptions. The main research questions are: 1. What are the differences and affinities between practitioners of different nationalities belonging to diverse Buddhist traditions? 2. What is gained by applying the analytical framework? The paper argues that in most cases the decisive element is not nationality, but rather the connection with a specific Buddhist school. Furthermore, practitioners shape and at times challenge the ongoing processes examined in the theoretical framework.

Keywords

Buddhism in the West – Buddhism in Europe – Buddhism in England – Buddhism in Italy – individualisation – subjectivisation – bricolage – marketisation – qualitative interviews – Buddhist lay practitioners
1 Introduction

Research on developments of Buddhist traditions in western countries has mushroomed during the past three decades. In this regard, we would be justified in speaking about a plurality of “Western Buddhism”s.1 The “Western Buddhism” category is problematic given that, as Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann rightly clarify, the West is not and never was “a homogeneous whole with similar socio-political, cultural, and legal settings.”2

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead employ the phrase “subjective-life spirituality” in order to underline a shift from collective to individualised modalities of religious practice.3 Moreover, Woodhead states that the relationship between the nation state and religions remains important, albeit no longer as decisive as it once was. Instead, the relationship with consumer capitalism has become more central,4 and Claire Wanless adds that “individualized religion as a phenomenon in its own right remains underresearched and poorly understood.”5

Carlo Barone and Andrea Molle note that recent literature emphasises the individualisation of religious experience; however, they also state that, although religious practices are actively constructed by individuals, the contributions of group and social interaction remain essential.6 The authors warn of the insidious “interpretive risk” of “conveying a dangerously subjectivistic, ultra-individualised and psychologistic image of religious experience.

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1 Not to mention the plurality of Buddhism itself, which like any -ism cannot be considered a monolith. As concerns this aspect, see Pasqualotto, Dieci lezioni sul buddhismo, p. 15, where he explains that Buddhism “is a very rough transposition of the term Buddhadharma, which indicates [...] the ‘Buddha’s doctrine’ or, better, the ‘Buddha’s teachings’. In contrast, one should, more appropriately, call ‘Buddhism’ that very wide field of thought and meditative experiences, of texts and commentaries, that has developed and accumulated, stemming from the Buddhadharma.” Italian version (henceforth: It. vers.): “è una trasposizione assai approssimativa del termine Buddhadharma che indica invece, in primo luogo e in termini più precisi, la «Dottrina del Buddha» o, meglio, gli «Insegnamenti del Buddha». Mentre con “Buddhismo” si dovrebbe, più propriamente, denominare quell’amplissimo ambito di pensieri e di esperienze meditative, di testi e di commenti che si sono sviluppati e accumulati a partire dal Buddhadhama.” In order to facilitate reading, I have translated all quotes from primary and secondary sources from Italian into English.

2 Prebish/Baumann, Westward Dharma, p. 5.
4 Woodhead, Religion and Change in Modern Britain, p. 25.
6 Barone/Molle, Così vicini, così lontani, p. 184.
in contemporary societies.”

They also point out that if individuals become increasingly autonomous in building their own religious experience, this does not mean that they are not also socially conditioned to some extent. Different Buddhist forms are often linked to “a somewhat stereotyped image of individual, solitary and, so to speak, self-directed religiosity.” However, Barone and Molle highlight that practising often means maintaining a connection with a social group. Therefore, we should not underestimate the relevance of “collective conditionings.”

In this regard, Heelas writes that “in the contemporary West, powerful forces are at work. Life is becoming ever more regulated by legal, quasi-legal or economically justified procedures, rules, systems.” Then, referring to his research in the field of New Age spiritualities, he raises the issue of their possible connivance with the capitalist system. If they actually are “an integral tool of capitalism”, then “their ‘revolutionary’ capacity is obviously zilch.” The author points out beneficial as well as deleterious sides of the “holistic spiritualities” that might be positively “person-centred, expressivistic, humanistic, universalistic” or, conversely, lead to “capitalist-driven gratification of desire, the pleasing of the self, self-indulgence, if not sheer greed.” This is not a minor issue, and, as Heelas underlines, it brings us to the debate between “those who envisage the consumer as a passive, de-centred, saturated, more-or-less conformist, opiated victim of the formations and stratagems of capitalism, and those who emphasise the libertarian, emancipatory role of consumer activities and autonomous self-expression.” The author is right when he clarifies that, in order to address this debate properly, it is essential to analyse in depth the empirical evidence obtained through ethnographic investigation. Interestingly, Heelas introduces the issue of resistance when he asks, “to what extent has inner-life spirituality resisted sliding into self-absorbed consumption?”

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8 Barone/Molle, *Cosi vicini, cosi lontani*, pp. 183–184. It. vers.: “un’immagine un poco stereotipata di religiosità individuale, solitaria e, per così dire, auto-diretta”.
9 Barone/Molle, *Cosi vicini, cosi lontani*, p. 184. It. vers.: “condizionamenti collettivi”.
12 Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*, p. 11.
New Age spiritualities of life [...] contribute to ‘the resistance’ [...] against the erosion of the expressive [...] by those powerful forces bent on hierarchical control; bent on focusing ever more on what it is to be human in terms of that supreme target, wealth creation; bent on implementing the maximal ‘squeeze’ to ‘construct’ the self in terms of this ultimate goal.15

This quote raises a question I will address in the course of this paper: to what extent do participants employ Buddhist practice to resist or conform to the broader social processes depicted in the theoretical framework? As we shall see, it is true that religious individualisation and bricolage processes are changing the way in which people practise a religion, Buddhism in this case. However, these processes do not lead to the complete atomisation of practitioners. Therefore, we should relativise the processes and take into account the active reaction of those who are affected by them. In fact, practitioners can shape and challenge the processes under consideration through their own religious practice. Thus, it is relevant to evaluate how wide-ranging phenomena such as religious individualisation and bricolage take concrete form in the lived practices and experiences of European Buddhists. Evidence from empirical data might confirm or challenge such broad concepts. In order to examine this issue, I have elaborated a theoretical framework that until now has never been applied to a comparison of Buddhist practitioners from England and Italy.

The choice of these two countries depended on their different socio-religious backgrounds, with Anglicanism and Catholicism historically predominant respectively. In addition, my knowledge of both English and Italian allowed me to carry out interviews in practitioners’ mother tongues. For logistical reasons related to the universities that made this research possible – Leeds and Pisa – interviews were conducted in specific regions: Yorkshire and the Humber, North West England, Tuscany and Umbria. The aim of exploring qualitatively the degree of differentiation between Buddhist practitioners in two western countries – England and Italy – may show the heuristic potential inherent in this kind of comparative analysis. Moreover, it will shed new light on the complex and nuanced landscape of European Buddhism.

The paper is divided into seven sections. After the introduction, in the second section I seek to locate my research in the panorama of studies regarding Buddhism in the two countries. Then, in the third section, the relevant Buddhist groups are contextualised. The fourth section features an outline of the theoretical framework adopted, whilst the fifth explains the research

15 Heelas, Spiritualities of Life, p. 231.
methods. The sixth section elucidates the main findings from the analysis of the data. Finally, in the seventh and last section, I discuss the limitations and new insights of the research.

2 Contextualising the Research

In a seminal contribution, Martin Baumann remarks on the exponential growth of Buddhism in Europe since the 1990s. He also underlines an increasing interest in a religion “held to be fashionable, modern, and deep in content.” Perhaps the interest aroused is no longer “euphoric”, but the “positive recognition” continues to be generally present. Prior to tracing the historical development of the Buddhist presence in Europe, the author recalls that it is characterized by a diversity and plurality of traditions, schools, orders, and lineages. Far from the regions that experience homogeneity in legal, social, and cultural terms, country-related specificities have made a lasting impact on the spread and institutionalization of these traditions and lineages.16

Precisely by virtue of these specific and complex features – and given the wide extent of existing literature about Buddhism in Europe, particularly the United Kingdom and Italy – I have consciously chosen to focus on studies regarding the two countries that have used the qualitative interview instrument. I will take into consideration works elaborated since the 1980s for Italy and the 1990s for the United Kingdom because the first studies entailing interviews which I was able to retrieve date back to 1980 in Italy (Bergonzi) and 1991 in the United Kingdom (Bell).17

Sandra Bell’s doctoral dissertation addresses the different degrees of adaptation of the Theravāda lineage of the Thai Forest Sangha master Ajahn Chah and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) by means of

16 Baumann, Buddhism in Europe, p. 85.
17 As early as 1979, Ian P. Oliver publishes a book about Buddhism in Britain. Subsequently, in 1989, Deidre Green conceptualises a continuum along which the different British Buddhist groups can be placed, on the basis of their greater or lesser adherence to the original tradition in order to adapt to their new environment. Elizabeth Puttick (1993) deals with the growth and appeal of Buddhism in Britain, whilst Stephen Batchelor (1994) endorses the idea of a spectrum of adaptation. In all these cases, the authors do not employ qualitative interviews.
interviews. Similarly, Philip A. Mellor (1991) focuses on the same traditions as Bell, but without employing interviews. Mellor states that, notwithstanding the choice to practise Buddhism, “Christian discourses and forms of life continue to have an observable influence on English Buddhism.” This might suggest a potential differentiation in Buddhism when practised and embedded in English Protestant as opposed to Italian Catholic culture. Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaeere (1994) employ questionnaires and structured interviews to address the British Sōka Gakkai, with the aim of “illustrating the typical processes of encounter and attraction, the ways in which commitment was stimulated and sustained, and among what sort of people.” Helen Waterhouse (1997) focuses her research on “authority structures for individual practice and for the process of adaptation” within six Buddhist groups in the city of Bath by employing interviews as well as participant observations.

With regard to Italy, in 1980 Mauro Bergonzi employs interviews to explore the early spreading of Eastern doctrines in the country. He reports interviews in their entirety, adding brief introductory and concluding texts. During the 1990s, the general and academic interest slowly grows, leading to the publication of Giampiero Comolli's work (1995). He visits several centres and monasteries across Italy in search of fascinating stories and anecdotes, without claiming to produce an exhaustive sociological survey. In 1992 Maria Immacolata Macioti (1942–2021) begins her research about the Italian Sōka Gakkai by...
means of interviews and participant observations. Her monograph provides an insightful view on the Buddhist organisation through the life stories of her interviewees. In the early twenty-first century, PierLuigi Zoccatelli employs participant observations and interviews to study the temple of the Japanese Buddhist school Shinnyo-en in Milan. Subsequently, Comolli explores the “spiritual biography” of Italian Buddhist practitioners by means of “in-depth interviews” to respondents affiliated with different Buddhist traditions. Sernesi and Squarcini (2006) edit a collective volume that deals with representations, institutions and modernity in contemporary Buddhism. In this volume Barone and Molle address the Italian branches of the Sōka Gakkai and Sūkyō Mahikari. In carrying out this comparison, the authors provide relevant insights about the former. A few years later, Colette Nieri analyses the case of the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute, a Gelugpa monastery in Tuscany, by means of interviews. Her main aim – like Macioti and Comolli – is to scrutinise the spiritual biographies of participants, with particular attention to the reasons they decided to abandon Catholicism for Buddhism. Finally, Zoccatelli edits a collective study concerning the Sōka Gakkai, with a contribution by Raffaella Di Marzio, who addresses the conversion dynamics of Italian practitioners.

The most comprehensive volume on British Buddhism is Robert Bluck’s monograph (2006), analysing seven main Buddhist schools, as well as their adaptation and change in the British environment, by means of interviews with leaders and expert practitioners. Waterhouse (2015) casts light on the

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23 The journal La Critica Sociologica devotes an entire issue to Buddhism, with a specific section about Italy. Here Macioti presents the first results of her research project (1994–1995, pp. 164–165).

24 Macioti, Il Buddha che è in noi, p. 19. In 1996 Maria Angela Falà publishes a brief essay about historical contact between Buddhism and Italy as an appendix of the translation from English into Italian of Walpola Rahulā’s What the Buddha Taught [L’insegnamento del Buddha].


26 Comolli, Un buddhismo facile e piacevole, p. 66. Moreover, Squarcini (2006) publishes a study in which he employs the triad lux, luxus and luxuria as an interpretive lens to examine the spreading of South Asian religious traditions in the West.

27 Cf. Nieri, Per una ricerca sul buddhismo in Italia. In her monograph, Falà (2016) merges a historical perspective with data about the two most important Italian Buddhist organisations, the Italian Buddhist Union [Unione Buddhista Italiana] and the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai [Istituto Buddhista Italiano Soka Gakkai].


29 Other literature focuses on more specific aspects or traditions. For example, Martin Baumann devotes a specific study to the engagement of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order in British society by means of innovative entrepreneurial projects.
experiences of young people and their parents in British Sōka Gakkai families through her qualitative fieldwork. Finally, Caroline Starkey (2021) gives voice to ordained women belonging to different Buddhist groups by exploring their life stories. In conclusion, it is clear that British and Italian scholarship has tended to concentrate on specific Buddhist groups or on diverse Buddhist traditions but in the same country. Until now, no cross-national comparative analysis has involved English and Italian practitioners belonging to such a wide range of traditions.

3 Locating Participants in the Context of Buddhism in England and Italy

Buddhism in the West is characterised by its multiformity. In Asia it is often possible to find only one tradition or several schools of a specific tradition in a single country, whereas in Europe several traditions coexist in the same country. This makes it difficult to draw a concise overview of the historical development and current presence of Buddhism in the continent.30 In addressing the presence of Buddhism in the United Kingdom, Woodhead argues that its settlement in the country was different – as well as less problematic and controversial – from that of other religions because British culture selectively absorbed Buddhism throughout the twentieth century.31 In the same volume, Bluck recalls that a relevant aspect of this settlement is that Buddhism did not come to the United Kingdom primarily through immigration processes, as the first Buddhists in London were converts, not Asian immigrants who started to arrive in the country some decades later. He also underlines the high degree of consistent with a particular interpretation of Buddhist ethics (Baumann, Work as Dharma Practice, p. 372). In Sandra Bell’s paper concerning the rooting of Theravāda Buddhism in the United Kingdom, her primary focus is the theme of adaptation (Bell, Being Creative with Tradition, p. 2). David N. Kay publishes a volume about Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain, focusing on the concepts of transplantation, development and adaptation. He chooses as case studies the New Kadampa Tradition and the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, in particular discussing the theory according to which British Buddhism may in part be influenced by Anglicanism (Cf. Kay, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain). Jeanane and Merv Fowler analyse 150 questionnaires with closed and open questions presented to members of the Sōka Gakkai in Wales and the Borders (Fowler/Fowler, Chanting in the Hillsides, pp. 2–3). In these cases the interview instrument is absent or not central to the research design.

30 Baumann, Il buddhismo in Occidente, p. 323.
31 Woodhead, Religion and Change in Modern Britain, p. 85.
differentiation of Buddhism in the United Kingdom.\(^{32}\) In Italy, too, Buddhism came initially through converts, while immigration fluxes from Asia began to increase only recently. Moreover – as in the United Kingdom – all the main Buddhist traditions have representation.\(^{33}\)

Locating the participants in a specific Buddhist school or tradition is at times a problematic undertaking. The group includes practitioners formally affiliated with a specific organisation, but also people who practise meditation without any formal affiliation or without defining themselves as Buddhists. There is also the case of a practitioner who, despite being formally affiliated with the Italian Sōka Gakkai, continues to participate in rituals of religions other than Buddhism, highlighting the problematic nature of defining an individual’s affiliation when it comes to religious identity. Thomas A. Tweed’s question “Who is a Buddhist?” raises the problem of defining the religious identity of people who practise or are interested in a religion without affiliating with it. Since religious identity is not “singular and fixed”, we cannot simply consider the two narrow categories of “adherents” and “non-adherents”. Trying to overcome essentialist approaches, Tweed proposes “self-identification as one helpful standard for identifying Buddhists.”\(^{34}\) He also suggests new labels in order to include “diverse characters in the story” and take account of the fact that “religious identity is hybrid.”\(^{35}\)

I also take into account a respondent who refuses to define himself as a Buddhist, despite regularly practising silent meditation. In other cases, interviewees do not appreciate the idea of being labelled as Buddhists, whether out of a general dislike of labels or of those who flaunt their Buddhist identity, or out of reasonable doubt about the real meaning of the labels “Buddhism” and “Buddhist”.\(^{36}\) Maintaining an essentialist stance leads us to perceive religious identity as if it were in a hermetically sealed box, whereas at times it has porous boundaries. Moreover, considering practitioners who are not affiliated with Buddhism or who do not label themselves as Buddhists enables us to explore the liminal areas between different religious phenomena, where identity and affiliation might blur. This approach allows us to know more not only about Buddhism but, more generally, about religiosity in western countries, and to

\(^{32}\) Bluck, *Buddhism*, p. 131.

\(^{33}\) Molle, *L’Oriente italiano*, p. 74.


\(^{35}\) Tweed, *Who Is a Buddhist?*, p. 28.

\(^{36}\) In this regard, it would be interesting to investigate how individuals practising in different Buddhist schools and traditions prefer to define their religious identity. I found intriguing differences, for example, between Theravāda and Sōka Gakkai practitioners in approaching religious self-definition, especially in the public arena.
cast our gaze beyond rigid essentialist categories to the complex nuances of lived religiosity. The participants in this research can be located along a spectrum, with several degrees of formal or informal affiliation and modalities of religious self-identification. However, in order to make data more intelligible, in the analysis sections I identify participants with a number and an acronym indicating a specific affiliation. It is important to emphasise here that this indication does not always imply a formal affiliation, but in some cases simply the Buddhist tradition to which the participant was most connected at the time of the interview, as reflected in his or her personal background or daily practice.

As regards these traditions, the Samatha Trust stems from the Theravāda tradition of Thai origin but is a secular organisation founded in 1973 in the wake of the interest aroused by the teachings of Boonman Poonyathiru (known as Nai Boonman, b. 1932), a Thai layman. On the other hand, the Jamyang Buddhist Centre in Leeds was founded in 1996 under the spiritual direction of Lama Zopa Rinpoche (1945–2023). The centre draws inspiration from Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama (b. 1935), Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935–1984) and Tenzin Ösel Hita Torres (b. 1985). It is affiliated with the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition (FPMT), an organisation within the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. The Serene Reflection Meditation and its monastic core, the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, were established by Reverend Master Jiyu Kennett (Peggy Kennett, 1924–1996) and originate in the Japanese Sōtō Zen school, with specific adaptation to western society. Peggy Kennett was formerly a Christian; however, disillusioned by the way the Church treated women, she devoted herself to the study of Theravāda Buddhism, then spent seven years training in Japan under Reverend Kohō Keidō Chisan Zenji (1879–1967), joining the Sōtō lineage. The British Sōka Gakkai is affiliated with the Sōka Gakkai International. Ikeda Daisaku (b. 1928) founded the latter in 1975 as a global association of different national branches connected to the Japanese Sōka Gakkai. The Sōka Gakkai was originally established in 1930 by Makiguchi Tsunesaburō (1871–1944) as Sōka Kyoiku Gakkai [Society for Value-Creating Education] and inspired by the teachings of the monk Nichiren (1222–1282). The British branch, previously known as Nichiren Shōshū of the United Kingdom, changed its name to Sōka Gakkai International of the United Kingdom in 1993, after the schism between the Sōka Gakkai and the clergy of the Japanese Nichiren Shōshū. Finally, the Triratna Buddhist Community was known as Friends of the Western Buddhist Order until 2010. Unlike the

37 Bluck, British Buddhism, p. 49.
38 Bluck, British Buddhism, p. 65.
39 Bluck, British Buddhism, p. 89.
other traditions just mentioned, it did not stem from a single Buddhist school of Asian origin, but merged different Buddhist practices and teachings. It was founded in 1967 by the British monk Sangharakshita (Dennis Lingwood, 1925–2018), who had contact with a series of lamas and teachers belonging to diverse Buddhist traditions.40

The Italian Theravāda interviewees are lay practitioners related in varying degrees to a Thai tradition of the forest monastery, the Santacittarama. Founded in 1990, it draws inspiration from the teachings of Ajahn Chah (1918–1992) and was the first Theravāda monastery established in Italy.41 Sōtō Zen interviewees tend to follow an individual and autonomous path, while considering the Italian monk Fausto Taiten Guareschi (b. 1949) a point of reference. In 1984 he built the first Sōtō Zen monastery in Italy, the Italian Zen Institute Sōtō Shōbōzan Fudenji [Istituto Italiano Zen Sōtō Shōbōzan Fudenji]. Finally, the Italian Buddhist Institute Sōka Gakkai is the Italian branch of the aforementioned international organisation.42

4 Theoretical Framework: Connecting Individualisation, Subjectivisation and Bricolage

In interviewing participants, themes of religious individualisation and bricolage often emerged. Thus, in order to enrich a purely thematic analysis, I decided to apply a specific theoretical framework to shed new light on the

40 Bluck, British Buddhism, pp. 152–153. If we look at the United Kingdom, in 2001 there were about 144,000 Buddhists in England and Wales (Census 2001, cited in Bluck, British Buddhism, p. 15), whereas, according to the 2011 census, the number had risen to around 248,000. With regard to the number of Buddhists in the United Kingdom and Italy, it is worthwhile to recall the difficulties of making a reliable estimate. For instance, in the British census religious affiliation is self-defined, but we know that some practitioners would not define themselves as Buddhists, despite practising related meditation techniques. In addition, from an academic viewpoint there is no complete consensus on the answer to the question “How can we define a Buddhist?” In this respect, it is helpful to refer to Tweed, Who Is a Buddhist?, pp. 17–33 and Office for National Statistics, Religion in England and Wales 2011. Moreover, in 2016 the immigrant population in England and Wales included around 188,000 Buddhists (cf. Apostolova/Hawkins, Migrant Population of the UK).

41 Introvigne/Zoccatelli, Il buddhismo Theravada.

42 Cf. Introvigne/Zoccatelli, Le scuole Zen. With regard to Italy, the number of Buddhists in the country increased from 74,000 in 2001 to 140,000 in 2013 to some 333,000 in 2021 (Molle, L’Oriente italiano, pp. 75–78; Introvigne/Zoccatelli, Le religioni in Italia), this most recent figure made up of around 215,000 Italians and about 118,000 Asians.
empirical data. Therefore, in this section I will briefly outline individualisation theories and connect them to the concept of bricolage.

First of all, I am aware that individualisation processes were already in progress when the main academic contributions on this topic were written and well before many of the interviewees encountered Buddhism. However, it is not possible here to trace the historical trajectory of those processes in Europe, or in the United Kingdom and Italy in particular. Thus, I will limit myself to a few remarks in order to provide essential historical context. Focusing on religion in the United Kingdom in the decades immediately following World War II, Woodhead suggests that it was mostly shaped by the state, whereas since the 1970s its relationship with the market has become more and more relevant. Despite these important changes, religion is not an entirely private matter. Far from being unconnected, it remained profoundly intertwined with the social, political and economic fabric. In this context, Woodhead recalls that religiosity and secularisation coexist and challenges the idea that they are two opposite and irreconcilable entities. Moreover, each version of secularisation might differ on the basis of the religious background from which it stems. The same may be true for individualisation processes in countries with different backgrounds, such as England and Italy. With regard to Italy, in 2001 Enzo Pace mentions a “soft secularisation” and explains that the secularisation of customs and lifestyles “did not reduce the space occupied by religion”, since “it marked the start of a process of individualisation of belief [...] emphasising the defence of [the] individual and his/her prerogative.”

It is also relevant to quote what Heelas and Woodhead write about the historical aspect of what they call “subjectivization”: “we are not for one minute suggesting that subjective-life was absent in times past, nor that life-as has disappeared today.” However, they also say “the subjective turn has become the defining cultural development of modern western culture.” While observing the decline of life-as religion and growth of subjective-life spirituality, they also clearly state that “rather than viewing decline and growth as mutually exclusive [...] the West is currently experiencing both [...] secularization (with regard to life-as forms of religion) and sacralization (with regard to subjective-life forms of spirituality).” Therefore, they suggest “coexistence”

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43 Woodhead, Religion and Change in Modern Britain, p. 1.
44 Woodhead, Religion and Change in Modern Britain, p. 2.
45 Woodhead, Religion and Change in Modern Britain, p. 3.
46 Woodhead, Religion and Change in Modern Britain, p. 4.
47 Pace, Religious and Moral Pluralism in Italy, p. 8.
49 Heelas/Woodhead, The Spiritual Revolution, p. 5.
between secularisation and sacralisation, propose a “subjectivization thesis”\textsuperscript{50} and clarify that “the great historical bond between western cultures and a Christianity whose characteristic mode is to make appeal to transcendent authority is rapidly dissolving.” In place of this, they observe “the growth of a less regulated situation in which the sacred is experienced in intimate relationship with subjective-lives.”\textsuperscript{51}

4.1 Individualisation and Subjectivisation at a Glance

Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), Ulrich Beck (1944–2015) and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (b. 1946) show in their studies that contemporary processes of individualisation are able to “undermine and dissolve old constraints that bound people to certain lifestyles and to open up many areas of life to personal choice.”\textsuperscript{52} Bauman explains that individualisation “consists in transforming human ‘identity’ from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’”, and he describes the world he observes as “an infinite collection of possibilities.”\textsuperscript{53} This impressive multitude of choices produces exciting benefits as well as frightening drawbacks, which together characterise a new existential condition.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim state that “opportunities, dangers, biographical uncertainties that were earlier predefined within the family association, the village community, or by recourse to the rules of social estates or classes, must now be perceived, interpreted, decided, and processed by individuals themselves.”\textsuperscript{54} They echo Bauman’s discourse by employing the phrase \textit{homo optionis} to describe the human being in the present era as unceasingly engaged in choosing.\textsuperscript{55}

Véronique Altglas defines individualisation as “a sociological concept used to describe such emancipation of social actors from institutions’ power and traditional bonds in contemporary Euro-American societies.” Moreover, since institutional religions “have lost their regulatory functions in contemporary societies, [...] individuals seem to have ceased to conform to many social bonds, obligations, and norms.” Thus, religion is increasingly the “object of free voluntary individual choice” and “individual-centered.”\textsuperscript{56} Although she recognises that “this understanding of individualization has become paradigmatic within the sociology of religion”, Altglas rightly recalls that “individuals do not

\textsuperscript{50} Heelas/Woodhead, \textit{The Spiritual Revolution}, pp. 9–10.

\textsuperscript{51} Heelas/Woodhead, \textit{The Spiritual Revolution}, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{52} Howard, \textit{Introducing Individualization}, p. 1.


\textsuperscript{54} Beck/Beck-Gernsheim, \textit{Individualization}, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{55} Beck/Beck-Gernsheim, \textit{Individualization}, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{56} Altglas, \textit{Individualism and Individualization}, p. 385.
elaborate their religious identity in a social vacuum. Personal experience may have become determinant in religious life, but it is anchored in social contexts; a nexus of social relations and interactions enables social actors to authenticate it." In addition, she explains that "social actors often envisage spirituality as a discipline of the self that requires the awareness and control of one’s emotions, behaviors, and thoughts. Ultimately, ‘working on oneself’ and developing one’s potential resonate with strong social imperatives that reflect contemporary political and economic structures." The author effectively illustrates the connection between individualisation and market economy:

flexible economies and the shrinking of the welfare state require that we become increasingly responsible for ourselves. Religion, even in its most individualistic forms, does not escape from this social context; this is shown by spirituality’s incentives to work on oneself and achieve self-realization, adopt appropriate practices, and constantly evaluate and control one’s emotions. In other words, rather than emancipation from the social, religious individualism contributes to new ways of regulating social actors, through individual responsibility and self-discipline.

It is also relevant to take into account here the “subjectivization thesis”. Heelas and Woodhead describe the subjective turn as “a turn away from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences.” They add that the shift is from “life-as (life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man etc.) to ‘subjective-life’ (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation).” They claim that “life-as forms of the sacred [...] emphasize a transcendent source of significance and authority to which individuals must conform at the expense of the cultivation of their unique subjective-lives.” These forms “are most likely to be in decline”, whereas “subjective-life forms of the sacred, which emphasize inner sources

57 Atlgla, Individualism and Individualization, p. 386.
58 Atlgla, Individualism and Individualization, p. 386.
59 Atlgla, Individualism and Individualization, pp. 386–387.
60 Heelas/Woodhead, The Spiritual Revolution, p. 2. It is important to underline that the authors focused on a vast array of spiritual phenomena: “multifarious forms of sacred activity which are often grouped together under collective terms like ‘body, mind and spirit’, ‘New Age’, ‘alternative’ or ‘holistic’ spirituality, and which include (spiritual) yoga, reiki, meditation, tai chi, aromatherapy, much paganism, rebirthing, reflexology, much wicca and many more” (p. 7). Differently, my research primarily concerns Buddhist practitioners.
61 Heelas/Woodhead, The Spiritual Revolution, p. 3.
of significance and authority and the cultivation or sacralization of unique subjective-lives, are most likely to be growing."62 Of particular relevance in this context is the following statement:

The subjectivities of each individual become a, if not the, unique source of significance, meaning and authority. [...] The goal is not to defer to higher authority, but to have the courage to become one’s own authority. Not to follow established paths, but to forge one’s own inner-directed, as subjective, life. Not to become what others want one to be, but to “become who I truly am”.63

Constantly drawing inspiration from his or her own subjectivity, the individual can thus shape his or her life fully and freely.

However, individualisation does not always entail egocentric individualism. At times, under specific conditions, it is possible to see a connection between “thinking of oneself and living for others”, which leads to an apparently oxymoronic concept that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim define as “co-operative or altruistic individualism”.64 In this regard, it is interesting to notice that, despite pointing out that “subjectivization should not be confused with individualization”, Heelas and Woodhead believe that the “subjective turn sees individuals emphasizing their personal experiences as their source of meaning, significance and authority.” They also recognise that “this need not imply that [individuals] will be atomistic, discrete or selfish. For […] above all else subjective-life spirituality is ‘holistic’, involving self-in-relation rather than a self-in-isolation.”65

4.2 A Bridge Towards Religious Bricolage

Bauman observes a tendency to treat one’s own body as one’s own “product” and “responsibility”. He also underlines the “instinct of workmanship”, according to which “the product of my work is as good as […] the skills, attention and care which I invest in its production.”66 It is therefore the responsibility of the individual to fabricate an ideal life: “people are now expected to take their lives into their own hands.”67 This tendency may be extended to the religious aspect and resonates with the experiences reported by several interviewees. In

65 Heelas/Woodhead, The Spiritual Revolution, p. 11.
this complex process of fabricating an individual religious identity, we keep on shopping, as Bauman explains: “we shop outside shops as much as inside; we shop in the street and at home, at work and at leisure, awake and in dreams. [...] The avid, never-ending search for new and improved examples and recipes for life is also a variety of shopping.” If “everyone tries to make his life a work of art,” each life becomes a product of do-it-yourself. Hence the origin of the “do-it-yourself biography”. This concept reveals its importance when we think about the modalities in which human beings – especially in the urban areas of western countries – tend to address their need for religiosity. Instead of relying on their religious background, they construct an almost tailor-made religiosity, based on interests, encounters, reading, experiences and travel.

In this regard, Pino Lucà Trombetta (b. 1949) identifies the connection between the contemporary modalities of consumption and the religious choices of individuals. He mentions the “free choices” of the “spiritual consumer” and states that “individualisation of beliefs” drives human beings to follow their “personal path” by acting as “spiritual researchers”. Furthermore, he conceptualises a continuum with two poles, two extreme modes of religious consumption. The first end corresponds to a completely à la carte mode, in which the bricoleur freely chooses what he needs at any given moment, whereas the second represents full adherence to a specific religious system.

Altglas points out that bricolage is “a French common word that has no direct translation in the English language. It designates activities of fabricating, repairing, and installing – something like ‘DIY’.” She also describes bricolage as follows:

playful and culturally skilled individuals choose, consume, and combine cultural and religious resources of all kinds in unique assortments, thereby elaborating personal identities and lifestyles according to their subjectivity. Unfortunately, these current understandings of bricolage take for granted an arbitrary and limitless availability of resources involved in cultural or religious combinations and overestimate its personal nature. [...]
[T]hey overlook the ways in which, in contemporary society, norms and power are expressed through culture.74

Here again the author highlights the impact of contemporary society’s “norms and power” in shaping the “personal nature” of bricolage.

5  Research Methods

This research is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with thirty English and Italian lay practitioners. I came into contact with possible interviewees randomly by attending public activities at the relevant Buddhist centres or venues. Often, but not always, those most ready to participate were very active or responsible members of the centre or group. I recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. The aim of the research was neither to interview a significant sample nor to cover an entire city, region or Buddhist tradition. A qualitative survey was preferable, in order to achieve a greater depth of analysis, as well as to allow new findings to emerge.

The interviewees were connected with different degrees of involvement to diverse Buddhist schools and traditions: Samatha Trust (2), Jamyang Buddhist Centre (4), Serene Reflection Meditation (3), British Sōka Gakkai (4), Triratna Buddhist Community (2), Theravāda (4), Sōtō Zen (2) and Italian Sōka Gakkai (9). The English interviews were carried out in Leeds and Manchester, between 11 March and 15 June 2018. Three respondents from the Sōka Gakkai, unable to meet face-to-face, provided their answers in written form. The Italian interviews were conducted in Livorno, Narni (Province of Terni), Pisa and Pontedera (Province of Pisa) between 4 July and 22 August 2018. The participants were of various ages, with different social backgrounds and levels of expertise in Buddhist practice: the youngest interviewee was a 21-year-old student and the oldest a 76-year-old retired professor.

6  Analysis of Empirical Findings

Amongst the multiple issues discussed during the interviews, I selected five themes on the basis of the heuristic potential stemming from their relevance in the light of the chosen theoretical framework. The analysis of these themes

74  Altglas, Syncretism, p. 826.
enables us to highlight the peculiarities of the processes of religious individuation, subjectivisation and bricolage in the examined context: 1. Religious background, 2. Ways of coming into contact with Buddhism, 3. Its appealing elements, 4. Involvement in other Buddhist groups, 5. Perceived changes in social life and role of social engagement.

6.1 Modalities of Perceiving One’s Own Religious Background

It is possible to identify five groups corresponding to different religious backgrounds, as well as various degrees of conflict towards one’s own background, which can be perceived as neutral, indifferent or negative. The first figure represents the number of respondents included in the group, whilst the numbers and letters in brackets indicate specifically the interviewee’s number, his or her Buddhist school or tradition of reference and country:

- Negative Catholic 10 (1 st-en, 6 jc-en, 15 sg-en, 16 sg-it, 17 sg-it, 18 th-it, 20 th-it, 21 th-it, 24 sg-it, 28 sg-it).
- Neutral or indifferent Catholic 6 (19 th-it, 22 sg-it, 23 sz-it, 25 sg-it, 27 sz-it, 30 sg-it).
- Non-Christian 3 (9 tbc-en, 26 sg-it, 29 sg-it).
- Negative Protestant 1 (7 srm-en).

First of all, it is important to underscore that in the list of interview questions there was a specific query about the interviewee’s religious background – both family and individual. Thus, each respondent was able to provide detailed information about this issue and their relationship to this background. Amongst the interviewees with a Catholic background, a certain degree of tension with their family religion is common, although with varying nuances. This is not found to the same extent among interviewees with an Anglican background. It is not possible to generalise here, and it would be helpful to explore this issue with further empirical research. The first group is particularly interesting. Mary – a 50-year-old woman who has been practising in the Samatha Trust for several decades – explained that her family was Catholic. She recalled “a certain disillusionment with Catholicism”, due in part to the fact that during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) the Church had taken decisions that she...
considered “not modern enough”. Also Elizabeth – a 50-year-old Sōka Gakkai member – stated that she “didn't trust the Church as an institution”, whilst Sofia – a 57-year-old Sōka Gakkai member – considered negatively a series of restrictions, dogmas and ways of imposing the faith. Giulia – a 38-year-old woman who has been practising in the Italian Sōka Gakkai since 2010 – described her parents as “formally Catholic”. Growing up “in a small town”, she was confirmed, “but reluctantly”. Lorenzo – a 53-year-old Theravāda practitioner – was born into a Catholic family, with parents who regularly went to church. Despite still considering the Gospel an excellent message, he has lost the will “to select that part that is to be saved compared to the rest that is substantially frustrating.” Finally, Alice – a 66-year-old Sōka Gakkai member with a Catholic background – reported a telling anecdote regarding the moment when, after practising Buddhism for five months, she felt the desire to attend mass again:

As I entered the church, I saw many people wearing furs. I've a fur too; there's nothing wrong with that, but the image was of many people wearing fur and chatting with each other or with the neighbour in the pew while the priest was talking. Here was this image of total distraction, disinterest: you go to mass because you have to go, almost as if it were [...] a social event. This feeling made me go out and say: “If I'd stayed at home and chanted daimoku for an hour, I would be much better off.”

If one’s own religious background can no longer be taken for granted, the individual may decide whether to accept or reject it and may also select the most satisfying, true or useful parts of it. In some cases – as in Lorenzo’s – religious
background is partially rejected, and through a personal bricolage process new practices are employed to fulfil spiritual exigencies. For instance, Lorenzo stated he also tried to chant *daimoku*, even though he felt more comfortable with silent meditation. In this regard, it is possible to observe the existence of two forms of religious *bricolage*, which can be *synchronic* or *diachronic*. In the first case the individual selects elements from different religious traditions and employs them all at the same time. In the second the *bricolage* spans the whole of an individual's lifetime, with different phases characterised by the presence of diverse religious traditions and practices.83

6.2 First Encounters

Interviewees came into contact with Buddhism in different ways. It is possible to identify six groups, listed in order from the most to the least common:

- Personal contact, usually a friend or a relative, combined with an individual problem or with personal suffering 11 (8 sg-en, 12 sg-en, 14 sg-en, 15 sg-en, 16 sg-it, 17 sg-it, 24 sg-it, 25 sg-it, 26 sg-it, 28 sg-it, 29 sg-it).
- Predominantly intellectual and academic interest 9 (1 st-en, 2 st-en, 4 jc-en, 5 sm-en, 7 sm-en, 13 sm-en, 19 th-it, 20 th-it, 30 sg-it).
- Meditation 3 (9 tbc-en, 10 tbc-en, 21 th-it).
- Martial arts 2 (11 jc-en, 23 sz-it).
- Public events related to Buddhism 2 (18 th-it, 22 sg-it).
- Atypical 3 (3 jc-en, 6 jc-en, 27 sz-it).

It is interesting to see that the eleven practitioners in the first group are all Sōka Gakkai members, four from England and seven from Italy. This movement spreads above all person-to-person, based on family and friendship relationships. Often practitioners are introduced to Buddhism in moments of personal crisis. Wilson and Dobbelaere underline the relevance of “one-to-one relationships and personal introductions”. Bluck also mentions this aspect.

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83 The concept of “diachronic bricolage” might appear similar to that of “seekership” (Campbell, *The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization*; Sutcliffe, *Seekership Revisited*). However, there are two main reasons why “diachronic bricolage” is more suitable for the present research. First of all, this concept allows us to differentiate between the synchronic and diachronic dimensions, as well as to underscore this differentiation. Moreover, the term “bricolage” suggests the craftsmanship of building one’s own religious dimension that is closely connected to Bauman’s conceptualisation (see supra section 4.2). Thus, using the term “seekership” would be more generic and less suited to the chosen theoretical framework.


Molle states that the affiliation with the Sōka Gakkai “appears [...] as the result of an encounter with one of its members.” In this regard, Barone and Molle write:

The methods of recruiting new members are based, almost exclusively, on the network of interpersonal relations of their adherents [...]. It is not surprising that in Italy informal contacts work far more effectively than street preaching and, in general, public recruitment methods: the succession of ritual interactions over time generates social bonds of trust and shared symbolic universes that function as a privileged vehicle for spreading [...]. If the proposal to try to attend a meeting of an unknown Japanese religious group came from a stranger we met on the street, it would be much less credible than one coming from a family member or friend we have known for some time, whom we trust and with whom we share, at least in part, ideas and value orientations.

Empirical data show that the same is valid for English Sōka Gakkai practitioners. In the second group, characterised by an intellectual and academic interest, most people are related to Theravāda, Sōtō Zen and Tibetan practices. With regard to the first group, Giulia had some contact with Buddhism through friends, but she decided to practise in a period described as “super-stagnant” and marked by “great suffering.”

Looking more closely at the second group, Mary discovered Buddhism as she was studying comparative religions at university, whilst Alessandro – a 29-year-old Theravāda practitioner – acquired his initial interest in Buddhist philosophy by reading books. In a context of widespread individualisation and bricolage processes, meetings with people, books, events and places play an important role in defining the tortuous path of the spiritual wanderer.

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87 Molle, L’Oriente italiano, pp. 82–83.
88 Barone/Molle, Così vicini, così lontani, p. 192. It. vers.: “le modalità di reclutamento dei nuovi membri si basano, quasi esclusivamente, sulla rete di relazioni interpersonali dei propri aderenti [...]. Non stupisce che in Italia i contatti informali funzionino in modo ben più efficace della predicazione in strada e, in generale, delle modalità pubbliche di reclutamento: il susseguirsi nel tempo di interazioni rituali genera legami sociali fiduciari ed universi simbolici condivisi che funzionano da veicolo privilegiato della diffusione [...]. Se la proposta di provare a partecipare ad una riunione di uno sconosciuto gruppo religioso giapponese provenisse da uno sconosciuto incontrato per strada, sarebbe molto meno credibile di quella proveniente da un familiare o da un amico che conosciamo da tempo, di cui ci fidiamo e con cui condividiamo, almeno in parte, idee ed orientamenti di valore.”
89 Int. 17, sg-it, 09.07.2018. It. vers.: “super-stagnante e di grande sofferenza.”
specific *trouvaille* might represent an existential milestone, a turning point in the research journey of the *bricoleur*.

### 6.3 Selecting Appealing Elements for One’s Own Bricolage Work

Although there are several motivating factors to take into account, some of them take on a particular relevance in the interviewees’ storytelling. Some respondents provide more than one element. However, it is possible to identify groups of similar answers and put them in order from the most to the least frequent:

- Silent meditation 12 (1 st-en, 2 st-en, 5 srm-en, 7 srm-en, 9 tbc-en, 10 tbc-en, 11 jc-en, 18 th-it, 21 th-it, 23 sz-it, 27 sz-it, 30 sg-it).
- Philosophical aspects 9 (1 st-en, 4 jc-en, 6 jc-en, 8 sg-en, 13 srm-en, 14 sg-en, 20 th-it, 22 sg-it, 30 sg-it).
- Daimoku and gongyō 8 (8 sg-en, 12 sg-en, 15 sg-en, 16 sg-it, 17 sg-it, 24 sg-it, 28 sg-it, 29 sg-it).
- Outer empowerment 2 (4 jc-en, 14 sg-en).
- Positive changes in close friends or family members 2 (26 sg-it, 28 sg-it).
- Presence of masters 1 (4 jc-en).
- Pragmatism 1 (25 sg-it).
- Finding books / having dreams with lamas 1 (3 jc-en).

Silent meditation is an important element in almost all the Buddhist traditions taken into account. The only exception is Sōka Gakkai members in the *daimoku* and *gongyō* group. More specifically, the interest in silent meditation stems from the need for something helpful to calm the mind, as George, Jennifer and Leonardo mentioned, or for “feeling the connection with something bigger”, as Mary put it.

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90 *Daimoku* is the invocation of *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*, which expresses devotion to the Lotus Sūtra as the most prominent Buddhist teaching. (*Myōhō-renge-kyō* is the Japanese reading of the Chinese title of the Lotus Sūtra.) Nichiren regarded it as the essence of the Sūtra. *Nam* (a phonetic change of *namu*) indicates devotion to the title and essence of the Lotus Sūtra. *Gongyō* literally means to “exert [oneself in] practice”. In Nichiren’s teaching, it means to chant the *daimoku* of *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* and morning and evening to recite portions of the Expedient Means and the Life Span of the Thus Come One (second and sixteenth chapter, respectively) of the Lotus Sūtra. See the respective entries in *The Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism*.

91 Int. 2, st-en, 11.03.2018.
92 Int. 10, tbc-en, 18.04.2018.
93 Int. 18, th-it, 12.07.2018.
94 Int. 1, st-en, 11.03.2018.
Also the philosophical aspects raised interest amongst interviewees. Mary mentioned the Four Noble Truths,\textsuperscript{95} appreciated the fact that the principles of Buddhism emerged from a “human experience” and perceived a clear contrast between philosophical principles deriving from a purely human inner quest and dogmas of divine origin.\textsuperscript{96} Similarly, Patricia – a 36-year-old Jamyang Centre practitioner – pointed out the experiential character of Buddhism by saying that “there is no dogma to believe in; you can question what you read and experience it in your life.”\textsuperscript{97} What appears is therefore a path of individualised religious quest where the practitioner experiments, questions and chooses. An informed reader will notice that statements by Mary and Patricia might recall elements of a modernist interpretation of Buddhism. In this regard, participants in the present research were connected to both traditionalist and modernist Buddhist schools and traditions. It is possible that a relationship exists between these schools’ traditionalist or modernist characters and specific features of individualisation and bricolage processes in practitioners’ experiences. First of all, it is interesting to notice that discourses about dogmas and rational examination of religious principles and experiences come from practitioners mainly linked to the Samatha Trust (Mary) and the Jamyang centre (Patricia). It would be problematic, however, to clearly define these organisations and centres as purely traditionalist or modernist. For example, the Samatha Trust might be considered a modernist organisation because it is completely secular, yet some of its rituals – for instance, chanting in the Pāli language – are strongly connected to traditional forms of Buddhism.

This brings us to the issue of traditionalist and modernist categories. We should problematise these by considering that they are “weberian idealtypes[	extsuperscript{s}].”\textsuperscript{98} In reality, Buddhist organisations and practitioners often represent a spectrum ranging between the two extreme ideal types, with multiple nuances in the middle. In fact, David L. McMahan mentions a “spectrum of tradition and modernism” and states that “the line demarcating a modernist from a traditionalist is often blurry and uneven.”\textsuperscript{99} When looking closely at organisational and individual practices, we observe that traditionalist and modernist elements often coexist or intermingle, making a clear-cut
definition difficult. In addition to the fact that organisations are multivalent, the micro-level of analysis remains to be considered, since individual practitioners may also be more or less traditionalist or modernist and not always in line with the organisation or centre to which they are mainly connected. Moreover, links between some participants and the relevant Buddhist school or tradition are at times strong, at times weak. Therefore, also at stake is the issue of the different modalities and degrees of practitioners’ affiliation.

With regard to the complex – and at times inextricable – intermingling of traditionalist and modernist elements in the same Buddhist organisation, another relevant example comes from the Sōka Gakkai. If Barone and Molle underscore its modernist elements, it is also true that traditionalist aspects persist both in Italy and in England. In comparing the Italian Sōka Gakkai with the Japanese organisation Sūkyō Mahikari, they point out that:

the conceptual and ritual apparatus of the SG [Sōka Gakkai] is decidedly more bare, simplified and ultimately more rationalised. […] [A] history of the micro-transformations undertaken by the Japanese leadership in the regulation of ritual practices in Italy would reveal the remarkable capacity of adaptation of this movement to our cultural and linguistic context.¹⁰⁰

In fact, adaptations and modernisations are visible in the Sōka Gakkai. However, comparing it with Sūkyo Mahikari might make these same adaptations stand out more. Indeed, there remain elements of traditionalist appeal in the Sōka Gakkai that cannot be overlooked.¹⁰¹ The interviewees include those with a high degree of individualisation who are linked to traditionalist centres or even monasteries, such as the already mentioned Santacittarama. Thus, on the basis of the present group of participants, it is not possible to state a clear relationship between the degree of traditionalism/modernism of an organisation/practitioner and its/her/his degree of individualisation. Nevertheless, the potential existence of this kind of relationship represents a fascinating subject for further research.


¹⁰¹ Not to mention the internal debate within the organisation between traditionalists and modernists, which cannot be delved into here.
Different aspects of *daimoku* and *gongyō* are included in the third group. Some interviewees, such as Michael,\(^\text{102}\) Sofia\(^\text{103}\) and Alice,\(^\text{104}\) appreciated positive life experiences they consider to be effects of chanting *daimoku*. Certain respondents, like Linda,\(^\text{105}\) were attracted by the sound of *daimoku*, while others, such as Riccardo,\(^\text{106}\) by that of *gongyō*. More specifically, Giulia described the first effects she experienced with this practice by mentioning a sort of “landslide” or “inner earthquake”\(^\text{107}\).

With regard to the inner empowerment group, Michael, a 76-year-old Sōka Gakkai practitioner, particularly liked “the fact of taking responsibility for one’s own life”.\(^\text{108}\) Joseph, a 49-year-old Sōka Gakkai practitioner, added “the possibility of changing one’s own life condition”.\(^\text{109}\) Moreover, Elizabeth, a 50-year-old practitioner of the same organisation, appreciated the opportunity to develop “infinite courage, compassion and wisdom in one’s own life”, thanks to Buddhist practice, as well as to understand that “every difficult situation has the function of helping us to grow and develop our lives.”\(^\text{110}\) Their words echo what Bauman wrote about the fabrication of an ideal body and life.\(^\text{111}\) It might be that the vocabulary of market economy – evident in the use of terms such as *growth* and *development* – is to some extent colonising religious practices. In this regard, Altglas reminds us:

sociologists of religion seem to forget that for Beck […], such reflexive constructions of personal biographies are relatively standardized, because individuals become more dependent on the dictates of various institutions and experts (including religious movements) to lead them on an increasingly important quest for self-fulfillment.\(^\text{112}\)

\(^\text{102}\) Int. 8, sg-en, 17.04.2018.
\(^\text{103}\) Int. 16, sg-it, 04.07.2018.
\(^\text{104}\) Int. 24, sg-it, 20.07.2018.
\(^\text{105}\) Int. 12, sg-en, 25.04.2018.
\(^\text{106}\) Int. 28, sg-it, 26.07.2018.
\(^\text{107}\) Int. 17, sg-it, 09.07.2018. It. vers.: “valanga”, “terremoto interiore”.
\(^\text{108}\) Int. 8, sg-en, 17.04.2018.
\(^\text{109}\) Int. 14, sg-en, 06.06.2018.
\(^\text{110}\) Int. 15, sg-en, 15.06.2018.
\(^\text{111}\) See supra pp. 11–12, section 4.2.
\(^\text{112}\) Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah*, p. 1–4. It is worth remembering that in her monograph the author does not only focus on Buddhist groups, but also examines the experiences of numerous individuals “who explore, successively or simultaneously, a vast array of religious teachings and alternative therapies originating from different cultural backgrounds”, such as yoga, Sufism, meditation or Kabbalah.
Therefore, we have new forms of personal biography standardisations, as well as new forms of personal dependencies with regard to making choices. We should not underestimate the power of the dictate of the “various institutions” mentioned in the passage. The fact that individuals seem less affected by institutions, such as established churches or families, in their religious choices does not mean that they are not being influenced at all. On closer inspection, the individual continues to be conditioned by institutions, only these are not the same ones that previously shaped individual choices about religion. The market economy can be counted among the new influencing elements having a strong impact on religious choices. These new institutions might be far more powerful and pervasive than their predecessors. This possibility allows us to relativise and problematise the individualisation paradigm. Religious choices are produced through a complex interplay between individual and social resources and constraints.

In this regard, it is relevant to take into account what François Gauthier notices in examining “marketization”. This concept entails two sets of processes: “consumerization” – that is, the “shaping into consumerism-friendly or consumerism-contesting forms” – and “neoliberalization” – that is, “an effect of the implementation of free-market policies”. The main effects of these two processes, respectively, reconfigure “religion into lifestyles and thereby cater to the need for identity construction, belonging and life ethics” and expand the “reach of the market to formerly protected areas of social life”.113 Importantly, Gauthier states:

Lifestyling reshapes religion to serve the reform of personal life, whether it is on the born-again or the quest and self-realization model. [...] The belief in progress on a collective or universal scale has been replaced by the belief in the possibility (and imperative) of individual progress. In this respect, consumerization aligns with neoliberal values such as adaptability, personal responsibility, seeing obstacles as opportunities to better oneself, self-reliance, mobility and so on.114

The author also makes clear that an anthropological and sociological approach to marketization is conducive to the opening of new pathways to evaluate “how religion too is being reshaped and formatted in the wake of the rise to dominance of market economics over social life across the world”, as well as

113 Gauthier, Religion Through the Lens of ‘Marketization’, pp. 495–496.
114 Gauthier, Religion Through the Lens of ‘Marketization’, p. 496.
“how these processes are enculturated, resisted, modified and reconducted in a variety of patterns across the globe.”

One of numerous causes of the Sōka Gakkai movement’s expansion may lie in its elements of self-empowerment, which resemble the features of the do-it-yourself biography. I might hypothesise that the dissemination modes of the Sōka Gakkai movement seize the opportunity offered by individualisation, subjectivisation and marketisation processes that are taking place in western societies. At the same time, it manages to shape these same processes in an altruistic sense through the connection between individual human revolution – an inner spiritual transformation – and kōsen-rufu – a concept entailing a widespread diffusion of Buddhist principles in society that culminates in global peace.

6.4 Looking Around for More Appealing Elements
As regards the experimentation with practices related to other Buddhist schools or traditions, it is possible to identify two groups of interviewees who:
– never experimented with other Buddhist practices, even though they read books, searched for information or tried other Eastern practices 20 (2 st-en, 3 jc-en, 4 jc-en, 5 srm-en, 6 jc-en, 7 srm-en, 10 tbc-en, 12 sg-en, 14 sg-en, 15 sg-en, 16 sg-it, 17 sg-it, 20 th-it, 22 sg-it, 23 sz-it, 24 sg-it, 25 sg-it, 26 sg-it, 28 sg-it, 29 sg-it);
– experienced other Buddhist practices, with different degrees of insight 10 (1 st-en, 8 sg-en, 9 tbc-en, 11 jc-en, 13 srm-en, 18 th-it, 19 th-it, 21 th-it, 27 sz-it, 30 sg-it).
Notably, twenty out of thirty respondents have not experimented with other specific Buddhist practices. It is also true, however, that they have sought information or experienced other types of Eastern practices and have, therefore, searched for other elements to enrich, so to speak, their do-it-yourself religiosity. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that eleven out of thirteen Sōka Gakkai members – both English and Italian – are in the first group. This school shows

116 Human revolution is “an individual inner reformation” with the ultimate goal of obtaining “a peaceful world and the happiness of humanity”. Kōsen-rufu (literally “to declare and spread widely”) is a term from the Lotus Sūtra which can be translated as “wide proclamation and propagation”, in reference to the wide dissemination of the message contained in the Lotus Sūtra, which Nichiren considered the fundamental Buddhist teaching. See the respective entries in the *Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism*. 

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a tendency to be very focused on their specific practice, with a lesser degree of “shopping around”.117

In the first group, George stated that he had not assiduously experimented with other Buddhist practices and believes that the Samatha Trust is the best from his point of view.118 Alexander, a member of the Jamyang Centre, had some minimal contact still within the Tibetan tradition.119 In the second group, Mary attended Tibetan Buddhism classes; however, she did not find clear instructions on meditation, and she felt uncomfortable with some specific teachings. For this reason, she started meditating in the Samatha Trust.120 Leonardo began with Tibetan Buddhism; however, he did not appreciate the adherence to belief systems and rituals, being primarily interested in meditative practice. Then he experienced Zen and Theravāda.121

The individualisation and subjectivisation processes tend to have an impact on the choices within the Buddhist landscape. The interviewees in the second group in particular adopt a sort of “cherry-picking approach” in order to choose the best practices and principles on the basis of their individual expectations and preferences. Bricoleur’s exigencies tend to change over time; consequently, the choices made will also have to be renegotiated. Thus, we can apply to Buddhist practitioners Lucà Trombetta’s spectrum of religious bricolage with two polarities. One pole represents the minimum degree of bricolage, the other the maximum degree. It is also relevant to consider the existence of an interdenominational bricolage amongst Buddhist practitioners. Furthermore, a practitioner might merge practices from different Buddhist traditions synchronically (at a specific moment) or diachronically (at different times).

6.5 Breaking the Shell of the Individual?
The emphasis on a non-dual vision is meaningful; this concept is a guiding thread running throughout the answers of many respondents who mention, more or less directly, the non-duality between the inner life of the individual and the surrounding environment, as well as the non-separation between Buddhist practice and daily life.122 These concepts seem to challenge the

117 This might depend on Nichiren’s teachings, as well as on the modalities and reasons that motivate members to practise. Space constraints prevent me from delving into this aspect here.
118 Int. 2, st-en, 11.03.2018.
119 Int. 3, jc-en, 13.03.2018.
120 Int. 1, st-en, 11.03.2018.
121 Int. 18, th-it, 12.07.2018.
122 With regard to the role played by non-duality concepts and sangha, additional empirical data might illustrate relevant differences between Theravāda and Mahāyāna practitioners.
atomisation envisaged by individualisation theories; however, on closer inspection, they may be compatible with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s idea of a “co-operative or altruistic individualism”. Heelas and Woodhead also recall that subjectivisation processes do not necessarily “imply that [individuals] will be atomistic, discrete or selfish” since “subjective-life spirituality is ‘holistic’, involving self-in-relation rather than a self-in-isolation.” In addition, many respondents consider the sangha – the community of practitioners – as a rich and beneficial source of guidance and high-quality social life. For instance, Alexander stated that he has expanded his network of friendships through Buddhist activities, and Jennifer reported that, while previously she had few friends, now she has many “spiritual friends” in the sangha. Thus, to some extent respondents employ Buddhist practices to challenge or shape individualisation and subjectivisation processes by promoting a specific form of community-building and employing non-duality concepts and the sangha as antidotes to the potentially hyper-individualistic outcomes of those processes. In view of Heelas’ statement that “New Age spiritualities of life [...] contribute to ‘the resistance’”, we might say that there are relevant examples of “Buddhist resistance”.

“Tangible benefits” is another meaningful topic. In this regard, Barone and Molle explain that the Sōka Gakkai tends to emphasise the importance of material benefits to its members in the job sphere, friendship, family environment and romantic relationships:

The goal of every Buddhist must be to fulfil oneself hic et nunc: emotional rewards, as well as financial ones, are the most convincing proof that “Buddhism works”. Perhaps the element that exerts the greatest fascination on neophytes is precisely this sort of sacralisation of earthly rewards or, if you prefer, the breaking down of any barriers and contrasts between the sacred and the profane. [...] [T]his type of message ensures a perfect complementarity between the religious and economic spheres, between adherence to this reformulation of Buddhist teachings and full inclusion in a prosperous consumer society [...]. This observation is certainly well-founded and such complementarity undoubtedly constitutes one of the keys to SG’s success.

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123 Beck/Beck-Gernsheim, Individualization, p. 28.
124 Heelas/Woodhead, The Spiritual Revolution, p. 11. In this respect, see supra p. 11.
125 Int. 3, jc-en, 13.03.2018.
127 Heelas, Spiritualities of Life, p. 231. In this regard, see supra p. 2.
128 Barone/Molle, Così vicini, così lontani, p. 198. It. vers.: “L’obiettivo di ogni buddhista deve essere quello di realizzarsi hic et nunc: le gratificazioni affettive, così come quelle
Interestingly, the authors highlight the “complementarity between the religious and economic spheres” and mention a “full inclusion in a prosperous consumer society”. This attention to tangible benefits and individual self-realisation represents an important element if we look at how market economy influences religious movements. Barone and Molle also underscore the importance of “individual fulfilment” and “sacralisation of the self” and conclude by stating: “the affinity between SG Buddhism and contemporary society lies on the value level of the centrality awarded to individual achievement.” Empirical data from interviews make our knowledge of this issue more sophisticated. In fact, the focus on individual desires and achievements can only be adequately framed and contextualised by taking into account the concepts of upāya (Skt. “skilful means”) and bonnō-soku-bodai (Jpn. “earthly desires are enlightenment”). On the basis of these two principles, the apparent consistency with market economy tenets could be interpreted as an expedient for intercepting the exigencies of potential practitioners. By deepening their understanding, they will gradually realise the meaning of this expedient. Herein lies the shift from an exclusive interest in one’s own earthly desires to a more profound conception of human revolution, which ought to be an instrument for opening one’s own selfishly individual perspective to others and the world at large, in order to strive for kōsen rufu. In this regard, a diachronic qualitative investigation would be appropriate to capture changes in individual practitioners’ priorities and economiche, rappresentano la prova più convincente che ’il buddhismo funziona’. L’elemento che esercita forse il maggiore fascino sui neofiti è proprio questa sorta di sacralizzazione delle ricompense terrene o, se si preferisce, la rottura di qualunque barriera e contrapposizione tra il sacro e il profano. Da più parti si è constatato come questo tipo di messaggio assicuri una perfetta complementarietà tra la sfera religiosa e quella economica, tra l’adesione a questa riformulazione degli insegnamenti buddhisti ed il pieno inserimento in una società benestante dei consumi [...]. Questa osservazione è sicuramente fondata e tale complementarietà costituisce indubbiamente una delle chiavi del successo di sg."

129 Barone/Molle, Così vicini, così lontani, p. 199. It. vers.: “realizzazione individuale”, “sacralizzazione del self”, “l'affinità tra il buddhismo della SG e la società contemporanea si colloca sul piano valoriale della centralità riconosciuta all'achievement individuale.”

130 The term upāya, a relevant concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism and in the Lotus Sūtra, indicates “the methods adopted to instruct people and lead them to enlightenment.” These methods are “skillfully devised and employed by Buddhas and bodhisattvas to lead people to salvation.” Also, bonnō-soku-bodai refers to a prominent Mahāyāna principle, according to which “earthly desires cannot exist independently on their own; therefore one can attain enlightenment without eliminating earthly desires.” Thus, “extinguishing earthly desires” would not be “a prerequisite for enlightenment”. See the respective entries in the Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism.
goals over the years. Such a survey might reveal an evolution from the goals of a beginner to those of a long-term practitioner. Aurora – a 56-year-old Italian Sōka Gakkai member who has been practising since 2002 – clarifies this point:

This is a Buddhism that assigns a lot of importance, especially at the beginning – but just as an expedient – to the achievement of personal goals. [...] In the widespread perception this element seems very materialistic and also very selfish. In fact, this is a really reductive interpretation of this Buddhism because we know that it has much more ambitious goals: the fulfilment of values of respect for human dignity, inviolability of the person, dignity of life. This is the great engine for a social commitment that should characterise every Buddhist. Unfortunately, this is not very frequent [...] for most practitioners, at least in Italy; there is a tendency to remain stuck in the accomplishment of personal goals [...]. We often forget that being a Buddhist is a way of being in the world that must be consistently applied in all areas.131

Interestingly, Aurora perceived a selfish tendency in some members and clearly explained the meaning of “skilful means”. It is evident that in the same organisation there are different sensitivities and levels of awareness. Qualitative analysis of empirical evidence provides relevant insights about these aspects. The processes of individualisation, subjectivisation, bricolage and marketisation are shaped and to some extent challenged by the active resistance of practitioners who are not passive recipients of these processes’ influences.

Aurora’s words bring us to the subject of social engagement. Although all interviewees tend to consider personal commitment in society as important and praiseworthy, there are two different approaches to this kind of commitment:

131 Int. 22, sg- it, 12.07.2018. It. vers.: “Questo è un buddismo che assegna molta importanza, soprattutto all’inizio della pratica, ma proprio come expediente, alla realizzazione degli obiettivi personali; [...] nella percezione diffusa questa cosa sembra molto materialista e anche molto egoista; in realtà questa è veramente un’interpretazione molto riduttiva di questo buddismo perché sappiamo che ha degli obiettivi molto più ambiziosi. La realizzazione di valori di rispetto della dignità umana, dell’inviolabilità della persona, dignità della vita, questo è il grande motore per un impegno sociale che dovrebbe caratterizzare ciascun buddista. Purtroppo questo non è molto frequente [...] per la maggior parte dei praticanti, almeno in Italia, c’è una tendenza a rimanere incastrati nella realizzazione degli obiettivi personali. [...] Spesso ci si dimentica che essere buddisti è un modo di stare al mondo che deve essere coerentemente declinato in tutti gli ambiti.”
The respondents in the active group are almost all related to the Sōka Gakkai and the Jamyang Centre, whilst those of the contemplative group are mainly related to the Theravāda, Sōtō Zen and Triratna traditions. The first group is more focused on the outward dimension of engagement, whereas the second tends to concentrate on the inward aspect of it.

In the first group, Alexander – a Jamyang Centre member – engaged personally because his “understanding of the world is changed thanks to Buddhist practice.”

Linda – a British Sōka Gakkai member – explained that she strives to behave as “a compassionate bodhisattva”.

Aurora – an Italian Sōka Gakkai member – underlined the role played in Italy by the Senzatomba campaign, which for years has worked towards the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Interestingly, Giulia considered this campaign as a “direct application of [Buddhist] fundamental principles.”

With regard to the second group, Jennifer – a Triratna practitioner – provided an insightful explanation: “the Buddhist message is that if we can change ourselves and help other people to change themselves, then the world will change.” In the first group, this need for a profound inner change is also clear, but the approach is different. In Jennifer’s explanation, there are two distinct moments: *then* and *will* are the key terms. In the first group, the process of inner transformation does not precede social commitment, but is simultaneous and parallel to it. In order to clarify her viewpoint, Jennifer added: “doing social work is very good but it is like a sticking plaster. We need to change the consciousness of the world. We can change our own consciousness and by doing that we affect the world around us enormously.”

It is also interesting to notice that Sofia – another Italian Sōka Gakkai member – underlined that social commitment does not have to be compulsory because it should emerge spontaneously and according to the inner evolution of the practitioner.

Comparing her cautious statement with the straightforward viewpoint of

132 Int. 3, jc-en, 13.03.2018.
133 Int. 12, sg-en, 25.04.2018.
134 Int. 22, sg-it, 12.07.2018.
135 Int. 17, sg-it, 09.07.2018. It. vers.: “una diretta applicazione dei principi fondamentali [del buddhismo].”
137 Int. 10, tbc-en, 18.04.2018.
138 Int. 16, sg-it, 04.07.2018.
Giulia (in the first group), it becomes clear that religious organisations are not monoliths. Furthermore, according to Leonardo, such a commitment ought not to be institutionalised, but instead “should derive spontaneously and naturally from one’s own personal practice.”\textsuperscript{139} Finally, Mattia exemplified the viewpoint of a Sōtō Zen practitioner with these words: “Buddhism is an a-historical religion, that is, outside history. When we sit [meditate] we do not think about external conditions. We sit during Fascism as we sit during the Republic.”\textsuperscript{140}

7 Discussion of Limitations and Fruitful New Insights

This comparative cross-national, multi-thematic research has qualitatively explored possible differences and affinities between lay practitioners diversely connected to a range of Buddhist traditions from countries with different socio-religious backgrounds. As such, it intends to contribute to the discussion concerning the existence of multiple Western Buddhisms.\textsuperscript{141} Another purpose is to evaluate how participants shape and challenge current trends of individualisation, subjectivisation and bricolage processes by practising Buddhism. A limitation lies in the extent of the fieldwork, as with additional time and funds it would have been possible to conduct more interviews with other Buddhist groups, to involve other European countries and to examine more aspects of the respondents’ practices and experiences. The application of the theoretical framework at a later stage than the data collection gave the opportunity to look at the empirical materials with new eyes. The enquiry provided a more nuanced image of Buddhism in Europe and strove to problematise and deconstruct the concept of Western Buddhism, which should not be considered as a monolith.

On the basis of this comparison of English and Italian practitioners, I argue that in this specific case it is the Buddhist school or tradition and not the nationality that is decisive. Practitioners associated with diverse Buddhist groups showed considerable differences – even though they shared the same nationality. Similarly, respondents mainly connected to the same Buddhist

\textsuperscript{139} Int. 18, th-it, 12.07.2018. This is not the place for an in-depth examination of this aspect. However, the institutionalisation processes of Buddhist organisations in the United Kingdom and Italy, as well as the positive or negative perception of these processes by practitioners and ordinary citizens, would deserve a comparative study based on empirical data.

\textsuperscript{140} Int. 23, sz-it, 16.07.2018. It. vers.: “Il buddhismo è una religione a-storica, cioè fuori dalla storia. Quando sediamo [meditiamo] non pensiamo alle condizioni esterne. Si siede durante il Fascismo come si siede durante la Repubblica.”

\textsuperscript{141} Prebish/Baumann, Westward Dharma, p. 5.
group but of different nationalities had common traits. There are, however, some exceptions, for example concerning religious background. It is not possible to generalise; however, amongst Italian interviewees there was a certain degree of tension with a background that they described as Catholic, while English participants did not express much hostility towards their Protestant background. This is interesting in view of what Mellor (1991) writes about the role played by “Christian discourses and forms of life” in shaping Buddhism in England.\(^1\)\(^4\) Nieri (2006–2007) has already explored the relationships of her Buddhist respondents with their Catholic background, and in some of her interviews a certain degree of hostility towards Catholicism emerges. However, she had only taken into account the members of a Tibetan Gelugpa monastery, the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute.\(^1\)\(^6\) On the basis of the new findings presented here, it is now possible to state that this tension does not only concern Italian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, but also those of other traditions examined, such as Theravāda, Sōtō Zen and Sōka Gakkai. Further research of a larger group of respondents would provide a more complete picture.

The collected data also show how English and Italian Sōka Gakkai members’ first contact with Buddhism – unlike other traditions – is almost always through one or more acquaintances, friends or family members. Wilson and Dobbelare (1994), Barone and Molle (2006), Bluck (2006) and Molle (2013) mention this specific feature;\(^1\)\(^4\)\(^4\) however, it is now possible to add further details concerning the differences between Sōka Gakkai and other Buddhist schools, as well as similarities between English and Italian Sōka Gakkai members. When it comes to the elements of appeal, the analysis suggests that one of the possible causes of the development of Sōka Gakkai is the adoption of a self-empowerment vocabulary that echoes the description of do-it-yourself biography provided by individualisation theorists, as well as reflecting the main features of subjectivisation and marketisation processes. This might represent a persuasive explanation of the noticeable spread of this movement in some western countries. However, data also show that the issue of “tangible benefits” is more complex and nuanced than it initially appeared.\(^1\)\(^5\) It would be worth expanding the respondents group to further explore this hypothesis. In addition, building on Lucà Trombetta’s research,\(^1\)\(^6\) it is possible to consider cases of “diachronic” and “interdenominational” bricolage amongst Buddhist practitioners.\(^1\)\(^7\) This increases the complexity of our current view of English

\(^1\)\(^4\) See supra p. 4.
\(^1\)\(^6\) See supra p. 5.
\(^1\)\(^4\)\(^4\) See supra pp. 4–5 and 15–16.
\(^1\)\(^5\) See supra pp. 23–24.
\(^1\)\(^6\) See supra pp. 12 and 22.
\(^1\)\(^4\)\(^7\) See supra pp. 15 and 22.
and Italian Buddhists’ practices and experiences. Furthermore, in describing the effects of Buddhist practice, the guiding thread of the non-duality between the inner aspect and the social environment is meaningful, as is the non-separation of practice and life. These principles seem to question – or at least to provide a new orientation towards and meaning for – individualisation, subjectivisation, bricolage and marketisation processes.¹⁴⁸

On the one hand, encountering Buddhism is often the outcome of these processes. At the same time, however, Buddhist practice itself enables practitioners to creatively appropriate the same processes and then shape or challenge them by leading the individual back to a social dimension perceived as more authentic, where the inner transformation is not merely an individual matter but can reverberate more or less directly into the community in which one lives. This brings us to the pivotal issue of the social role of Buddhism in European societies. The analysis shows that two different approaches to social engagement emerge – active/outward and contemplative/inward – even within the same organisation. This not only provides us with a deeper understanding of how Buddhist practitioners conceive of their individual and organisational social commitment, but also suggests novel potential research paths in the field of the relationships between individuals and society in Western Buddhism, as well as in the area of engaged Buddhism studies.

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¹⁴⁸ See supra pp. 2–3 and 22–23.
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