

Article

Engaged Buddhism in Italy: Space, Practice, and Social Transformation

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of engaged spiritualities within contemporary Buddhist communities in Italy. By employing an ethnographic approach, the research examines how physical space fosters spiritual experiences, facilitates social interactions, and serves as a site for personal and collective transformation. The study integrates insights from religious studies, anthropology, and neuroscience to analyse the cognitive and emotional effects of meditation while also engaging with Foucault's theories on power and space to understand Buddhist centres as structured environments that shape individual and collective subjectivities. The research highlights how engaged Buddhism in Italy adapts traditional practices to contemporary challenges, particularly in response to mental health concerns among university students. Through participant observation and interviews conducted during mindfulness and contemplative education programmes, the study demonstrates how meditation contributes to psychological well-being, emotional regulation, and social connection. This analysis aligns with theoretical discussions on the conceptualisation of spirituality in modern societies, illustrating how engaged spiritualities manifest in secular and pluralistic contexts. The findings suggest that Buddhist spaces in Italy function not only as sites of religious practice but also as transformative environments where power relations are renegotiated, identity is reconstructed, and alternative ways of living emerge. The study further explores how scientific advancements in neuroscience inform spiritual practices, shedding light on the reciprocal relationship between spiritual yearning and scientific inquiry. Finally, the research contributes to the debate on the future of engaged spiritualities in the face of global crises. It argues that while Buddhist communities in Italy preserve traditional wisdom, they also actively shape new forms of spiritual engagement that respond to contemporary social, political, and environmental challenges. This work situates engaged Buddhism as a key player in fostering alternative models of coexistence, well-being, and ethical responsibility in the modern world.



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1. Introduction

This research seeks to offer a contribution to the understanding of the intersections between spirituality, culture, and science. The integration of a multidisciplinary approach with the valorisation of ethnography as a research method opens new avenues for field investigations, which are essential to advancing our understanding of the neurobiological mechanisms underlying the effects of meditation. The link between lived space, interpersonal dynamics, and the relationship between neuroscience and religion provides a fascinating and multidimensional field of inquiry. Although these elements may appear

distinct, they intersect and interact in meaningful ways, shaping human experience and our understanding of spirituality¹. They can therefore be studied in an integrated manner to analyse how inhabited space, and interpersonal dynamics influence religious and spiritual experiences, and how these, in turn, affect the brain and behaviour. For instance, ethnographic research can reveal how practitioners interact with their environment during ceremonies and how such interactions influence their perceptions and well-being. Neuroscientific analysis can then provide quantitative data on how these experiences alter brain activity and emotional processing. This research not only enriches our understanding of spirituality and community but may also contribute to the development of practices and interventions aimed at improving people's psychological and social well-being, in a world where mental health is increasingly at the centre of attention. A concrete synergy emerges when each method informs the other: ethnography can guide the design of neuroscientific studies by highlighting the social and spatial dynamics of practice, while neurobiological data can deepen our understanding of the physiological and cognitive effects of these culturally situated practices. For example, observing group mindfulness sessions in a sacred space may reveal patterns of social regulation and communal engagement, which can then be examined neurobiologically to assess corresponding changes in connectivity between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex.

During my stay in several Italian Buddhist monasteries, I chose as a case study the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute of Pomaia², in Tuscany, where I conducted fieldwork³ aimed to understanding the social dynamics and the use of sacred space within this important centre of Tibetan Buddhism in Italy. This research seeks to explore the intersections between spirituality, culture, and science by adopting a multidisciplinary approach and employing ethnography as its primary method. My goal was to analyse how physical space influences daily religious practices and community life.

Religious experience cannot be reduced to a single dimension: it is the result of a synergy between internal cognitive processes and interactions with sacred space. This research aims to analyse places, rituals, and cultural meanings as an integral part of how the brain processes and experiences the sacred, making religious experience a phenomenon in which physical space, mind, and body intertwine. Buddhism is often defined as a philosophy of life whose principles and rules allow one to achieve a state of inner peace and harmony with the external world. Here lies the relationship between culture and spirituality. This religion is based on the principle that life is full of suffering, but that it is possible to alleviate it by detaching from material goods and desire. I believe, however, that in order to deeply understand the changing nature of Buddhist religious practices in interaction with the complexity of the contemporary world, it is also important to know the contribution that other disciplines, such as neuroscience, anthropology, and the geography of religions, have made in studying the specificities of Buddhist communities in the countries where Buddhism first arose and then spread. In this way, it will be possible to obtain a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of change and conservation, of similarities and divergences in practice, glimpsing what could be the future paths of Buddhism on a global scale.

From approximately the mid-1950s until the 1990s, studies on Buddhism were dominated, and continue to be dominated, by a historical, philosophical, and philological approach, although ethnographic research has been conducted since the 1960s. Religious systems produce knowledge and can thus be identified as epistemic systems: human and cultural constructions that seek to create a framework through which to interpret the world and act on society. In this sense, religions cannot be studied from only a single perspective (Batchelor 2017).

The study is also situated within debates on engaged spirituality and the anthropology of Buddhism, drawing on literature that explores how Buddhist traditions are reinterpreted, institutionalised, and embodied in Western contexts. It also engages with Foucault's theories on power, space, and subjectivity (Foucault 1975), adopting his lens to interpret Buddhist centres as structured environments where disciplinary practices, spatial arrangements, and regimes of conduct participate in shaping individual and collective subjectivities. Furthermore, the research dialogues with contemporary analyses of spirituality in modern societies (Giordan and Woodhead 2015), particularly regarding the emergence of secular, individualised, and therapeutic forms of spiritual engagement. In this way, it clarifies the specific contribution of the present study: showing how engaged Buddhism⁴ in Italy simultaneously preserves traditional ritual forms and innovates in response to social, psychological, and educational challenges, especially those affecting younger generations. This framework resonates strongly with the environment of the ILTK, where practitioners are encouraged not only to cultivate personal transformation but also to contribute meaningfully to society. In the Italian context, this socially engaged dimension becomes especially evident through initiatives promoted by the ILTK in collaboration with the Mind Science Academy, which aims to integrate contemplative practices into education and student mental health. Exploring how these initiatives embody the principles outlined by Fuller (2022) offered valuable insight into the ways Engaged Buddhism is being interpreted and applied within Italy.

According to Fuller (2022), Engaged Buddhism rests on the idea that inner transformation and social transformation are inseparable, since one cannot authentically cultivate compassion or wisdom without also confronting the structural and collective causes of suffering. He shows that this form of Buddhism expresses itself in a wide range of activities, including peace advocacy, social justice initiatives, environmental protection, educational programmes, and community-based projects. Rather than representing a break with tradition, Engaged Buddhism is presented by Fuller as a reinterpretation of essential Buddhist teachings, such as interdependence, non-violence, and compassion, in response to the ethical and social challenges of contemporary globalised societies.

During my research at the Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa, I was able to observe concrete expressions of this dynamic. The ILTK's emphasis on ethical awareness, community service, and collaborative projects reflects precisely the forms of socially engaged practice described by Fuller. Moreover, initiatives developed in partnership with the Mind Science Academy, particularly those aimed at integrating contemplative methods into educational settings and supporting students' mental health, offer a clear example of how Engaged Buddhism is being adapted within the Italian context. This process resonates with discussions on how Engaged Buddhism evolves as it encounters new cultural and institutional landscapes (Gregory and Sabra 2008). At ILTK, this evolution becomes evident in the Institute's effort to connect traditional Tibetan Buddhist teachings with contemporary discourses on mental health, scientific research, and educational innovation. Rather than merely adapting Buddhism to Western expectations, these initiatives reveal an ongoing negotiation of what forms of ethical and social engagement are meaningful within a secular European environment. In this sense, ILTK's programmes demonstrate how meditation, compassion training, and communal responsibility can be reinterpreted as practical instruments for addressing concrete social concerns, ranging from student anxiety and emotional regulation to the promotion of prosocial behaviour in educational contexts. Such developments underscore how Buddhist ethical frameworks are being rearticulated in ways that respond to contemporary societal challenges while maintaining continuity with the Institute's doctrinal foundations. From my fieldwork analysis, I interpreted these developments as emerging not only from theoretical discussions or external analytical frameworks but also

from the practical discourse of the practitioners within the Institute. This perspective is my own reflection, derived from observing how ILTK members negotiate, adapt, and enact Buddhist principles in response to world challenges.

I observed and participated in the activities of the centre, including meditation sessions, teachings, and rituals, with particular attention to the interpersonal dynamics between residents and visitors. I studied how individuals interact with sacred space and how this space is perceived as both distinct from the ordinary and open to transcendence. The research method I adopted was primarily ethnographic, based on participant observation. I immersed myself in the daily life of the Institute, positioning myself as an active observer during meditation sessions as well as morning and evening rituals. In particular, I examined how the Institute's spaces, both indoor and outdoor, are used to facilitate experiences of sacredness and transcendence. This process required my constant and attentive presence for a twelve-day period, during which I did not limit myself to conducting formal interviews, but also recorded and noted details of participants' interactions, their relationship with the environment, and the social dynamics that emerged during their stay. I also sought to understand the reasons that lead many individuals to approach Tibetan Buddhism and the social and personal implications of this process. Ethnography as a method proved particularly useful in this research, as it allowed me to observe the adaptation of an Asian religious practice within a Western context.

During my stay at the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute, one of the aspects that struck me most was the use of space and the way in which the physical structure of the centre reflects the fundamental principles of Tibetan Buddhist practice. Nestled in nature, the Institute emerges as an oasis of tranquillity, a space removed from the rhythms of ordinary life, where visitors and residents can immerse themselves in an environment that fosters meditation and the study of the Dharma. Its geographical location plays a crucial role: situated among the Tuscan hills, this physical isolation fosters an atmosphere of contemplation and detachment from the distractions of everyday life. My research focused on analysing how practitioners use this space, with particular attention to the arrangement of meditation halls, gardens, and common areas. I observed that spaces dedicated to spiritual activities are arranged to evoke sacredness and order, drawing on architectural and symbolic elements of the Tibetan tradition. The meditation halls, for example, are characterised by the presence of statues and *thangka* (sacred paintings)⁵, which serve not only as objects of veneration but also as tools for meditative concentration. The arrangement of sacred objects and the observance of specific rituals within these spaces are essential for creating an environment in which practitioners feel connected to a transcendent dimension. The interaction between physical space and ritual practice led me to reflect on how the conception of sacredness is experienced in everyday life. Meditation sessions and rituals, held regularly, are moments of collective sharing but also deeply personal experiences, in which each participant seems to withdraw into an inner world while remaining immersed in a communal context (Moiraghi 2024). This balance between individuality and community, between private and public dimensions, is one of the most sociologically significant aspects of life at the Institute.

In addition to the use of indoor spaces, the Institute's outdoor areas also play an important role. Gardens, green areas, and pathways surrounding the centre are used not only for meditative walking but also as places of reflection and contemplation⁶. I observed that many practitioners spend time outdoors, in silence and in contact with nature, considering it an extension of sacred space. This relationship with the natural environment is consistent with Buddhist philosophy, which encourages a sense of interconnection with all living beings and with the universe as a whole. Although the sacred implies a transcendent dimension, it always manifests itself through the concrete dimension of the physical world. In other words, sacred space is not an abstract entity: it must be located in a material,

tangible context that gives it meaning and makes it accessible to practitioners. Sacred space expresses itself through the physical world. Religious buildings, temples, monasteries, altars, and ritual objects are concrete manifestations of a space that is perceived as sacred. These material elements become the vehicles through which the sacred becomes present and tangible. Physical space can be structured to reflect or represent the sacred. Religious architecture, for example, is not only functional but also symbolic: the arrangement of spaces, the orientation of buildings, the use of light, and decorative elements can create a connection with the divine. Thus, physical space becomes sacred through the meaning attributed to it. The perception of the sacred is subjective and varies according to the beliefs and experiences of practitioners. A physical space that might otherwise appear ordinary or commonplace can become sacred for those who inhabit it or use it for religious purposes beyond its ordinary function.

Through my own exploration of mindfulness, I examined how participants are conditioned to regulate their emotional and physical states in response to social and institutional contexts. Meditation can function as a bridge for creating learning communities, helping individuals manage psychological challenges collectively. In a sacred space, mindfulness may operate not only as a subtle form of self-discipline but also as a gateway to a transcendence dimension. In the Buddhist sense, this refers to experiences that go beyond self-regulation or personal well-being, moments in which practitioners perceive a sense of interconnectedness, a continuity with others and with the sacred environment, or an awareness of reality beyond the individual self. Rituals, symbols, and shared practices support this process, creating conditions for both spiritual insight and stronger communal bonds.

In contrast, meditation in secular or non-ritualised settings emphasises individual autonomy. Without the symbolic and communal scaffolding of a sacred environment, the practice may remain more instrumental, serving primarily as a tool for self-regulation rather than fostering profound social or spiritual engagement. Group meditation introduces implicit social monitoring: the awareness of others practicing alongside oneself encourages internal discipline and alignment with collective norms. This dynamic is less present in solitary practice, where participants rely more heavily on self-directed regulation.

By combining ethnographic observation with insights into neurobiological and cognitive effects, my study highlights how context, community, and embodied practice jointly shape the outcomes of mindfulness. This approach demonstrates the interpretive and analytic benefits of integrating qualitative and quantitative perspectives, offering a richer understanding of the psychological, social, and neural dimensions of contemplative practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

Within the broader discourse on the role of religion and neuroscience, it is necessary to broaden the reflection by including a crucial anthropological dimension: the role of space in human life, as explored by the anthropologist Francesco Remotti⁷. This theme is deeply intertwined with religious and cultural dynamics, since space is not merely a physical context but rather a cultural construct that shapes daily practices, collective identities, and social relations. Remotti emphasises how the relationship between body and space is essential to understanding the human experience, suggesting that places are not neutral environments but carriers of symbolic meanings and cultural values (Remotti 1993). This reflection is directly linked to religious practices and sacred contexts⁸, which represent fundamental examples of how space is used to structure religious experience. Places of worship, such as monasteries, temples, or churches, are not only physical spaces but symbolic territories⁹ that shape the perception of the sacred, the relationships among the faithful, and the dynamics of power.

According to Erving Goffman, places of worship can be seen as stages on which the faithful enact social and ritual roles in accordance with shared rules (Goffman 2010). Worshippers regulate their behaviour based on contextual expectations, performing rituals that reflect social organisation and the internal power relations of the religious community. Within these contexts, the faithful take on ritualised roles that mirror the hierarchical structure of the community. Goffman employs the concept of the “stage”¹⁰ to explain how individuals use space to control the impressions they convey to others. Physical space becomes part of social performance, divided into the “frontstage” (where public behaviour is displayed) and the “backstage” (Goffman 2010), where individuals relax and prepare their performance. Thus, space is not neutral: it organises behaviour and influences dynamics of power and communication. Priests, monks, and spiritual leaders hold central positions of authority, while the faithful take on roles characterised by reverence and devotion. Rituals and religious practices such as prayer or meditation are carried out according to predetermined codes, which indicate how to behave and interact with the sacred space and with other participants. This reinforces the perception of the sacred as something organised and collectively shared. Power dynamics are also highly significant: for instance, in a church, the altar represents the centre of spiritual power, and only certain figures may access it. Interactions between believers and religious leaders thus follow established rules that often reinforce hierarchy and respect for authority. The interaction between individuals, symbols, and physical space produces a collectively experienced sacred reality that significantly shapes both the religious and social identities of practitioners.

Parallel to the neuroscientific discourse that seeks to understand how the human mind processes religious concepts, Remotti’s anthropological reflection on space expands our comprehension by showing how human beings use space to express their religious beliefs, construct collective identities, and establish cultural boundaries¹¹. Rituals, often linked to specific sacred spaces, reinforce social cohesion and contribute to the formation of community. Remotti also addresses the notions of otherness and territoriality, concepts that are fundamental not only in anthropology but also in the study of religion. Sacred spaces are frequently employed to mark boundaries between the sacred and the profane, between what belongs to the religious community and what remains outside it. This spatial division reflects and reinforces power dynamics, determining who has the right to access certain places and who is excluded, thereby contributing to the construction of collective identity and otherness.

For Émile Durkheim, it is the community itself that defines what is sacred and what is profane (Durkheim [1912] 1963). Sacred spaces, therefore, do not merely serve to distinguish between the sacred and the profane but are essential for the construction and maintenance of identity and social cohesion. Through the sacred/profane distinction and sacred spaces, societies establish who belongs to the community and who remains outside, thereby preserving order and stability. Remotti’s anthropological perspective on mobility and dwelling also helps us to better understand how migration and territorial change influence religious practices and perceptions of sacred space. Communities in movement bring with them their cultural and religious heritage, adapting or transforming new spaces to reflect their spiritual identity. Religion is not solely the product of internal cognitive processes, as suggested by neuroscience, but rather the outcome of a dynamic interaction between body, mind, and space. Sacred places, with their cultural and symbolic meanings, play a crucial role in shaping religious practices, collective identities, and social relations. In the attempt to better understand religious experience, the intersection between neuroscience, anthropology, and psychology proves particularly fruitful.

A significant contribution in this field is offered by the physician Franco Fabbro. Providing an integrative perspective, Fabbro focuses on how brain structures and cognitive

processes shape the perception of the sacred and the spiritual experience. He explores how religious experiences, often perceived as transcendent, are in fact deeply connected to specific areas of the brain, including the temporal and prefrontal lobes, that become activated during contemplative practices such as meditation or prayer (Fabbro 2019)¹². In this context, Fabbro's vision resonates with Remotti's reflections on cultural space, highlighting how religious experience is influenced both by cognitive structures and by the interaction between body and space. The act of praying or meditating within a sacred place activates neural circuits associated with attention and emotional regulation¹³; yet such experiences cannot be fully understood without considering the importance of the physical and cultural context in which they occur. In other words, sacred spaces, with their symbols and rituals, act as catalysts of an experience that is simultaneously neuropsychological and cultural. Fabbro stresses that although religious experiences are mediated by the brain, they cannot be reduced to mere neurobiological processes. He speaks of a "virtuous circle" between mind, body, and environment¹⁴, in which the physical-cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing spiritual experience (Fabbro 2019). This resonates with Remotti's assertion that space is not simply a passive container but an active construct that shapes identities and social relations. Places of worship, therefore, not only physically represent the sacred but also profoundly influence the way the brain interprets and lives the sacred.

Neuroscience and neuropsychology, as highlighted by Fabbro, allow us to see how states of ecstasy, transcendence, and mystical union are correlated with specific brain activations, such as those involving the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. However, this neuropsychological perspective needs to be integrated with an anthropological and cultural analysis that considers the role of places and rituals in eliciting these states. Remotti encourages us to reflect on the fact that the physical space in which these states occur, whether a church, temple, or monastery, is an integral part of the experience itself, as it is imbued with symbols that reinforce its spiritual significance.

The interdisciplinary approach combining neuropsychology and anthropology thus offers a more comprehensive understanding of religious experience. While Fabbro helps explore the cerebral mechanisms underlying the experience of the divine, Remotti prompts reflection on how physical spaces and cultural contexts shape these mechanisms, creating a complex network of interactions between mind, body, and space. From this perspective, religion appears as a complex phenomenon that unfolds through the dynamic interplay between brain structures, cultural practices, and symbolic places, in a continuous cycle of meanings and perceptions.

3. Methodology and Data

The methodological approach adopted in this study draws on an embodied and immersive conception of ethnography, combining participant observation with impregnation, a mode of inquiry in which the researcher temporarily suspends the analytical filter of academic distance in order to inhabit the lived experience of a community. This theoretical orientation, resonant with Geertz's notion of *being there* (Geertz 1988), conceives the researcher's body as the primary instrument of knowledge: by participating in meditation sessions, communal activities, and daily routines, rather than merely observing them, the ethnographer acquires access to the experiential, affective, and spatial dimensions of religious life that would otherwise remain imperceptible. Such embodiment is essential for understanding how sacred space operates as a site of personal transformation, shaping not only ritual practice but also forms of subjectivity, modes of sociality, and emotional alignment.

The central question guiding this analysis concerns how meditative practices shape, regulate, and transform subjectivity within specific social and spatial environments. Addressing this question requires moving beyond an understanding of meditation as a purely individual cognitive exercise: it must instead be examined as a phenomenon situated at the intersection of biological processes, spiritual traditions, spatial configurations, and socio-political forces. This multidimensional perspective can be broadly framed under the *Engaged Spiritualities*, a term that captures the entanglement of contemplative practice with collective life, institutional settings, and broader regimes of meaning and power. For this reason, this study integrates insights from neuroscience, Buddhist philosophy, ritual and spatial theory, and Foucauldian approaches to discipline and subjectivation. Neuroscientific research provides crucial evidence regarding how contemplative practices modulate attention, emotional regulation, and physiological stress responses, an issue of pressing relevance in contemporary university contexts, where rates of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among students have risen sharply. In parallel, Buddhist traditions contribute a long-standing and sophisticated account of the mind as a dynamic, conditioned, and continuously transforming process (Payne and Rambelli 2022). This view not only resonates with neuroscientific models of neuroplasticity, but also introduces ethical, relational, and existential dimensions that are largely absent from strictly biomedical interpretations of mental health.

The fieldwork, enriched by semi-structured interviews and conversations with long-term residents, students, teachers, and both Buddhist and non-Buddhist practitioners, reflects a theoretical commitment to integrating qualitative immersion with elements of quantitative inquiry when appropriate. My involvement at the Mind Science Academy Summer School further expanded the theoretical horizon of the research, enabling me to observe how contemplative practices and neuroscientific perspectives intersect within an educational framework designed to address the rising mental health challenges among university students. The renewed social bonds observed among participants, fostered by the serene and contemplative environment of the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute, reveal how sacred spaces function as relational and affective infrastructures that counteract isolation and psychological distress, resonating with neuroscientific literature on meditation's effects on emotional regulation and neuroplasticity.

This theoretical lens highlights the Institute as a transformative environment where spatiality, embodied practice, and communal interaction converge, and where the dialogue between Asian contemplative traditions and Western scientific inquiry becomes a living laboratory. Drawing on works such as Fabbro's studies on the neuropsychology of religious experience, the research positions itself within a theoretical field that situates meditation at the intersection of spirituality, cognition, neuroscience, and cultural adaptation, thus reaffirming the value of ethnographic presence as a way of "touching with one's own hands" what is otherwise conveyed only through texts and academic discourse (Fabbro 2010).

Fieldnotes, informal conversations, and in-depth observation provide the empirical foundation for analysing how individuals interact with sacred space, how they navigate the boundary between the ordinary and the transcendent, and how communal practices foster emotional regulation, social cohesion, and shared experiences of sacredness. Supplementary interviews conducted during mindfulness and contemplative education programmes, especially those involving university students, further illuminate how meditation practices are perceived as tools for psychological well-being, stress reduction, and identity negotiation. These ethnographic findings support and nuance neuroscientific research on the cognitive and emotional effects of meditation, offering a social and spatial context often missing from laboratory studies.

The Monastery is visible and easily accessible, reachable both by car and public transport. Currently, the Institute is led by two Masters: Geshe Tenphel and Geshe Jampa Gelek. The Institute offers guest accommodations within the central building, in double or triple rooms, or in the dormitory (separated by gender). Additionally, there are comfortable wooden cabins located in the forest, on terraces of the olive grove, or adjacent to the experimental herb garden, all offering views of the forest and the sea. All rooms feature wooden walls, flooring, and ceilings, as well as bright windows. The Institute tends to fill up quickly on weekends, when courses are held, or during festivals such as the Tibet Festival, celebrated in September. In addition to the accommodations, extra courses related to individual and collective well-being, as well as conferences, retreats, workshops, and study seminars, are organised in the halls and gardens surrounding the Institute. On average, more than fifty people reside at the Institute on a stable basis, including monks, laypeople, volunteers, and staff. There are eight nuns and three monks living permanently, with a total capacity of approximately one hundred people. During my visit to the Institute, approximately fifty people were present on weekdays, including staff, monks, and volunteers. On weekends, the number of people could rise to around seventy to eighty, reflecting the higher attendance during courses and retreats. This fluctuation in population provided a dynamic environment for observation, allowing for the study of interactions between permanent residents, temporary participants, and visitors, as well as the functioning of communal spaces, meditation halls, and gardens under varying levels of occupancy.

In addition to guest residences, the Institute hosts two monastic accommodations: the Takden Shedrup Targye Ling Monastery for men and the Shenphen Samten Ling Monastery for women. The Institute also includes an administrative office, a large dining hall with panoramic windows overlooking the valley where three daily vegetarian buffet meals are served, fostering communal interaction, and several meditation halls, including the Gompa Hall, the Mandala Hall, and the Censerig Gompa, formerly a chapel, restored and located in the wooded area behind the main building. The Institute houses a library containing approximately 4000 valuable Dharma texts, including foreign-language editions. The library is always accessible as a place of study and reflection, while consultation and borrowing require coordination with the appointed staff during designated hours. Traditional Tibetan canonical texts are kept in the main meditation hall, while a large paper archive of treatises, commentaries, and practice texts is stored in the offices of the Residential Studies Coordinator. The Tsa Tsa House is located near the western entrance of the Institute, at the end of the main avenue. This small building, topped with a beautiful statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, was constructed by Cesare di Giovanni and contains one hundred thousand bas-reliefs created by him during a retreat. A cafeteria and a shop provide a more worldly and Western-oriented aspect, alongside a Japanese-style tea garden with ground seating among the trees, open from May to September between 5:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.

The proximity of meditation halls, study spaces, gardens, and communal areas facilitated participant observation, allowing for continuous engagement with monks, nuns, lay practitioners, and visitors. The integration of local residents and the broader Pomaia community provided a socio-cultural context to study the interactions between religious institutions and their surrounding environment. Archival research within the library, as well as observation of rituals and courses, offered additional layers of understanding regarding the transmission of Buddhist knowledge, meditation practices, and the material culture of Tibetan Buddhism in a contemporary Italian setting.

4. ILTK, Spirituality in Modern Societies

The Lama Tzong Khapa Institute has played a central role in the establishment and dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism in Italy. Its history is closely linked to the encounter between the West and Tibetan Buddhism in the 1970s. In the 1960s, interest in Eastern spirituality began to grow in Europe, with figures such as Lama Anagarika Govinda introducing Tibetan Buddhist teachings to the continent. Tibetan Buddhism in Italy has since gained significant presence, becoming one of the most widely practiced forms of Buddhism in the country, largely due to the influence of Tibetan masters and the increasing Western interest in meditation and Eastern spirituality. The Italian Buddhist Union (UBI) also contributed significantly to this process. In the early 1980s, it became necessary to foster communication between the various Buddhist groups and to create a single interlocutor for relations with the Italian State. Today the UBI comprises 70 centres, including the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute. Tibetan Buddhism was introduced to Italy mainly during the 1960s and 1970s, following the arrival of Tibetan masters in Europe after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. The growing popularity of the Dalai Lama and his message of peace further helped spread this tradition, alongside the rise of Western interest in meditative practices such as mindfulness and meditation. The Lama Tzong Khapa Institute stands as a key centre where Tibetan Buddhist teachings have taken root in Italy, combining the transmission of authentic monastic practices with their adaptation to a Western cultural context.

The Mind Science Academy (MSA) is a project launched in 2023 by the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute (ILTK) in collaboration with the University of Pisa (First-Level University Master's Programme in "Neuroscience, Mindfulness, and Contemplative Practices"), the FPMT (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition), and the Italian Buddhist Union. The project is the result of a long journey that began during the Dalai Lama's visit to Pomaia in 2014, where the spiritual leader emphasised the need for dialogue between Western science and Asian spirituality to address the complexity of the human mind. The Dalai Lama, a longstanding advocate for the dialogue between science and religion, has encouraged initiatives such as MSA, which aim to bridge the gap between spiritual and scientific approaches in the study of consciousness. His vision is one of integration between the discoveries of neuroscience and the millennia-old practices of Buddhism, with the conviction that both can provide valuable tools for understanding the mind and emotions. For this year's edition, titled *Consciousness and Cognition*, I participated as a tutor in the Summer School at the Institute.

MSA seeks to promote a multidisciplinary approach to the study of mental and emotional processes, drawing on both the methods, tools, and knowledge of Western sciences (biophysics, neuroscience, psychology, psychophysiology, philosophy of mind, etc.) and the rich insights of the Buddhist tradition in analysing mental processes, introspection, concentration, meditation, and mindfulness. Each year, together with professors from the Mind & Life Institute and with the support of the Italian Buddhist Union, a Summer School is organised at the Pomaia Institute for students from the University of Pisa and around the world. Through a multidisciplinary approach that engages neuroscience, biology, artificial intelligence, and physics with the epistemological questions addressed in phenomenology, Asian philosophies, and contemplative practices, the project aims to offer alternative perspectives in neuroscience, providing students with tools to formulate new questions and generate innovative ideas on a subject that remains fundamentally open.

The relationship between neuroscience and contemplative practices, such as those found in Buddhism, has gained increasing attention in recent years. On one hand, neuroscience explores brain function and the regulation of emotions through scientific and experimental methods; on the other, Buddhism offers an ancient tradition of practices, such as meditation, aimed at cultivating awareness and introspection (Miller and Thoresen 2003).

The dialogue between these two domains allows for a more comprehensive approach to understanding mental and emotional processes, providing tools to address challenges such as stress and anxiety.

In Buddhism, meditation is a central practice aimed at cultivating awareness and concentration. It is regarded not only as a tool for achieving inner peace but also as a method for exploring the nature of the mind. Among the most studied forms of meditation are mindfulness meditation, or *vipassanā*, which teaches the observation of thoughts and emotions without judgement, and concentration meditation, or *samatha*, which trains attention to focus on a single object or the breath. Research conducted on practitioners has shown that meditation can promote brain plasticity; that is, the brain's ability to reorganise itself in response to new experiences. Moreover, meditation has been associated with reduced levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, and with increased activation of the prefrontal cortex, the brain region involved in emotion regulation and planning. From a Buddhist perspective, body, mind, and emotions are inextricably interconnected. Negative emotions such as anger and anxiety are seen as the result of an untrained mind and can be transformed through meditative practices that cultivate awareness and compassion.

During the theoretical sessions in Pomaia, experts in neuroscience and artificial intelligence discussed the latest scientific findings on consciousness and cognition, while the religious component of the programme delved into the Buddhist view of the mind and emotions. The meditation sessions offered participants the opportunity to directly experience the benefits of contemplative practice. For instance, participants explored the parallels between probabilistic models in quantum physics and the indeterminacy of the mind observed in meditation.

In quantum physics, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle states that one cannot simultaneously measure with precision both the position and the velocity of a subatomic particle. This means that the state of a particle can only be described probabilistically. The behaviour of matter at the quantum level does not follow classical deterministic laws but is governed by wave functions that describe a range of possible outcomes, in which probability plays a central role. In the practice of meditation, particularly in Buddhist traditions, the mind is observed as a continuous flow of thoughts, emotions, and sensations. This flow is often chaotic and indeterminate, lacking fixed structure or stable reference points. Through meditation, one may come to realise that the mind, like quantum particles, is not a fixed entity but manifests through a multiplicity of potential states, each conditioned by contingent and impermanent factors. In both quantum physics and meditation, uncertainty is not perceived as a limitation but as a fundamental aspect of reality. In physics, such uncertainty arises from the laws that govern particles at the microscopic level; in meditation, the indeterminacy of the mind reflects the mutable and conditioned nature of human consciousness. In both cases, the act of observation or control inevitably leads to the recognition of unpredictability¹⁵.

Another significant parallel is the role of the observer: in quantum physics, the act of observing a system influences its behaviour, a phenomenon known as the "collapse of the wave function". In meditation, the internal observer (the meditator) becomes aware of mental processes, and this very observation transforms the relationship to one's thoughts and emotions. In both contexts, observation is not neutral but alters what is being observed.

The space in which meditation takes place also plays a crucial role in shaping the mental experience. Physical space, like the state of mind or matter, is a dynamic element that both influences and is influenced by observation and meditative practice. Meditation does not occur in a neutral void but is deeply conditioned by the surrounding environment, which may either support or hinder openness of mind and the capacity to embrace uncertainty. In many Buddhist and spiritual contexts, sacred space is intentionally designed to

foster a sense of stillness, openness, and transcendence. The physical organisation of the space, the arrangement of ritual objects, and even the light and sounds that permeate it all contribute to creating a field that sustains meditative practice.

Pascal Boyer, in his book *Religion Explained* (Boyer 2001), suggests that religious concepts are by-products of the functioning of the human mind, which evolved to solve problems related to survival and social interaction. These cognitive mechanisms include the tendency to perceive agency or intentionality even in natural or inanimate events, such as the movement of the wind or the sudden appearance of a sound. This mental schema would have been advantageous for survival, since interpreting a movement as intentional could prevent danger. Likewise, the tendency to perceive intentionality in natural events facilitated the development of religious beliefs. The adaptive function of religion would therefore be to promote social cohesion, fostering prosocial behaviours such as altruism and reciprocity, which are crucial for the survival of groups. Boyer's account suggests that religion, while often perceived as a cultural phenomenon, has its roots in universal cognitive mechanisms. The interaction between neuroscience and religion, explored through the lens of neurotheology, thus provides a new interpretative framework in which sacred space, mind, and brain mutually influence one another, fostering experiences of transcendence and personal well-being.

Uncertainty is an intrinsic condition of human life, the idea that the individual is solely responsible for his or her own success or failure, thereby encouraging people to internalise the burden of economic and social precariousness. Within this system, uncertainty is not addressed through structural change but is instead managed at the individual level. Individuals are encouraged to adopt a proactive approach, developing skills to cope with unpredictability. This process leads to increasing self-surveillance and constant self-improvement, attributing the responsibility for personal difficulties to individual shortcomings rather than systemic factors. Practices such as mindfulness and yoga, while potentially beneficial, are often commercialised within this framework. Presented as tools for managing uncertainty, they teach individuals to remain "flexible" and "calm" in the face of chaos. However, their integration into the existing system raises critical questions. While on the one hand these practices provide relief and individual support, on the other they risk becoming functional to the maintenance of the status quo, diverting attention from the structural causes of suffering and normalising precarious conditions. As Fisher (2009) observes, such tools risk becoming mechanisms of adaptation rather than vehicles of social transformation.

Rather than implying a direct causal relationship between contemplative practices, neuroscientific data, and the principles of quantum physics, my analysis draws on these fields to illuminate conceptual analogies that clarify different ways of understanding mind, observation, and reality. In this sense, the parallels I discuss are not intended as empirical explanations for meditative states but as analytical tools that help frame how diverse disciplines, from Buddhist epistemology to contemporary physics, grapple with the limits of observation and the relational nature of phenomena. For instance, the discussion of non-separability in quantum physics, particularly as articulated by d'Espagnat's "veiled realism" (D'Espagnat 2013), is mobilised to show how certain scientific models challenge the notion of self-existent, isolated entities. This does not suggest that quantum mechanics validates Buddhist metaphysics; rather, it highlights how contemporary physics, like Buddhist thought, questions naïve realism and recognises that what appears as a discrete object or mental state is often the product of relational processes. In keeping with d'Espagnat's open realism, the section emphasises that quantum theory does not describe "reality-in-itself" but the empirical manifestations accessible to observation, an idea that resonates methodologically with contemplative traditions that distinguish between direct experience

and the conceptual constructions built upon it (Duquette 2011). By situating the analogy at this epistemological level, the discussion avoids metaphorical overextension and remains anchored in the scientific debates surrounding the idea of non-separability, and the limits of representational knowledge. Similarly, the neuroscientific material presented during the Summer School, relating to emotional regulation, neuroplasticity, and the effects of meditation on stress circuits, is used to contextualise how empirical research approaches the mind, not to imply that neuroscience and quantum physics operate on the same explanatory plane.

Clarifying these distinctions helps to articulate the interdisciplinary contribution of this work, contemplative practice is examined not through speculative correlations but as a site where different knowledge systems, neuroscience, quantum physics, and Buddhist philosophy, offer complementary insights into how observers engage with phenomena, construct meaning, and navigate uncertainty. The aim is therefore not to conflate scientific models with spiritual ones, but to show how each field interrogates the relations between perception, embodiment, and what may lie beyond the reach of conceptualisation.

Thanks to my experience at the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute in Pomaia, I was able to engage, albeit at a basic level and for only twelve days, with MBSR practices within a Buddhist temple. My objective was to study, with the guidance of the professors of the Summer School, not only the neurobiological and psychological changes associated with the practice, but also the social dynamics that developed in a sacred environment. I concluded that practitioners, upon entering the sacred space, internalise norms and regulations, conforming to expected behaviours without explicit surveillance, something I first observed in myself. These spaces disciplined my body, regulating my mind according to a specific spiritual order. Meditation practiced in a secular context, as occurs in the experiments of American scholars or in the personal experience of Mp4s, removes part of that disciplinary network present in a sacred place: religious symbols and the implicit hierarchies of a sacred space are absent. Here, disciplinary power is weaker or decentralised; meditating in a secular context does not necessarily require conformity to the ritualised practices of the sacred space, which can give the individual a greater sense of autonomy but, at the same time, may reduce the effect of internalising the norms and practices imposed by a sacred environment. Meditation thus risks losing its capacity to create a radical break with daily life, becoming more akin to a technique of self-management, devoid of the symbolic and ritual meaning conferred by sacred space.

When mindfulness is practiced in a group, participants are subject to reciprocal surveillance, even if implicit. The awareness that others are practicing alongside me creates a form of social control that reinforces my internal discipline. This can lead to a normalisation of behaviour, where the presence of others fosters conformity to the required practices. Such a phenomenon is less evident in solitary mindfulness practice, where social control is weaker, and the individual is freer to self-discipline according to personal rules. This brings us back to the importance of collectivity and the permanence of meditative practices within a society: these are not isolated cases, but rather meditation as a form of self-regulation has historically been an accepted and absorbed *forma mentis* by the population.

In a modern context, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programmes, we observe a secularised version of this process. Meditation is used to reduce stress, anxiety, and anger, thereby improving individual well-being and fostering more harmonious social relations. Within institutions, such as universities, but also in prisons, meditation is promoted as a way of creating more collaborative and less conflictual environments. Thus, meditation, although seemingly a purely personal practice, also becomes a tool for maintaining social peace and order. Through the dialogue between neuroscience and Buddhism, it becomes possible to develop a more comprehensive approach to academic

well-being, one that considers not only students' intellectual needs but also their emotional and psychological health (Miller and Thoresen 2003). Data collected during the experience at Pomaia, supported by the lectures I attended, indicate that students who meditate regularly show greater concentration and a reduction in symptoms related to stress and anxiety, conditions that can undermine both academic performance and overall well-being.

However, these conclusions cannot be exhaustive. Although meditation clearly offers benefits for mental well-being, it is essential to acknowledge that it does not constitute a universal solution. Not all students derive equal benefits from meditative practices, and the effectiveness of these approaches can vary depending on cultural, social, and individual contexts. Moreover, integrating meditation into higher education requires careful consideration of institutional structures and the necessary support for effectively implementing such practices.

5. Conclusions

The experience of the Summer School revealed the growing importance of the dialogue between neuroscience, contemplative practices, and religion. Such events contribute to the creation of a social network of practitioners and scholars who acknowledge the value of an integrated approach to body and mind. A central aspect that emerged from my research is the significance of community and human relationships in the creation and maintenance of a religious space. At the Institute in Pomaia as well, the physical environment plays a crucial role in supporting the spiritual development of practitioners: the spaces of the Institute provide an environment specifically designed to facilitate the path toward awareness and inner transformation.

My own immersion in daily life at ILTK further highlighted how participants themselves interpret and enact forms of socially engaged spirituality. During my stay, we devoted several hours each day to meditation, engaging in practices designed to cultivate awareness and explore our inner landscape. The communal life we shared enriched this experience, allowing us to interact, work together, and confront issues of personal and relational growth. Community work, whether helping with everyday tasks or participating in group workshops, placed emphasis on care, responsibility, and mutual support, values that practitioners often framed as integral components of their Buddhist commitment. During group sessions, I observed how individual suffering emerged openly and without pretence. This phenomenon created an important space for exploring vulnerability and human connection. Sharing such experiences generated an atmosphere of mutual support that allowed suffering to be collectively acknowledged and processed. It therefore seemed important to highlight how collective suffering, once recognised and channelled through practices such as mindfulness, becomes normalised and rendered acceptable, potentially shifting attention away from the structural origins of distress (whether social, economic, or political) toward a more individualised and internalised mode of management.

The space itself transforms according to the needs of the community. Moreover, the emphasis on community demonstrates how spirituality is mediated through intersubjective relations. The creation of a religious environment is sustained not only by physical infrastructures but also by the bonds of trust, cooperation, and shared intentionality among its members. Thus, the Institute functions simultaneously as a spiritual laboratory, a site of personal transformation, and a social arena in which identities are negotiated and collective meanings are produced.

This experience transformed my understanding of mindfulness. Rather than viewing it solely as an individual method of stress regulation, I began to see it as a tool for social bonding and community formation. At the same time, I questioned whether, through mindfulness, students were being subtly conditioned to regulate their physical and emotional

states in ways that align with institutional expectations. This led me to explore more deeply how meditation might function as a bridge for creating learning communities capable of addressing the psychological challenges faced by many students, drawing on the relevant literature on critical mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy.

The forms of practice, discourse, and community engagement I observed strongly resonate with the principles articulated in the broader literature on Social Engaged Buddhism. The concept thus operates at both levels: emic, insofar as ILTK practitioners articulate ethical conduct, service, and mutual care as central to their Buddhist commitments; and analytic, as I use the term to situate these practices within recognised scholarly frameworks. This dual perspective helps position the ILTK case study more precisely within discussions of Engaged Buddhism in Western contexts, highlighting how contemplative practice, community life, and psychosocial support are interwoven in ways that bridge personal transformation with forms of social engagement, though sometimes in ways that remain implicitly shaped by institutional and cultural constraints.

The case of Pomaia demonstrates how religious and contemplative spaces in contemporary Europe can no longer be understood solely in terms of doctrinal transmission or ritual performance. Rather, they must be analysed as complex ecosystems in which physical environments, interpersonal relations, and intellectual exchanges mutually reinforce one another. The Institute embodies a form of *relational space*, one that acquires meaning only through the practices, discourses, and needs of its community.

This dynamic understanding of religious space invites us to reconceptualise how traditions adapt, how communities evolve, and how sacredness is continually reconstituted in contemporary contexts. These findings open several pathways for future interdisciplinary research. First, further ethnographic and phenomenological studies could examine how participants interpret the implicit norms present in sacred environments and how these norms influence their engagement with mindfulness. Second, collaborations between neuroscientists and scholars of religion could explore how ritual symbols, sacred architecture, and collective practice modulate the neurocognitive effects of meditation in ways distinct from secular settings. Third, research in education and sociology could investigate the institutional implications of integrating mindfulness into universities, assessing not only its therapeutic potential but also its role in shaping student subjectivities and expectations of self-management. Finally, comparative studies across different religious and secular contexts could translate how meditation circulates globally as both a wellness practice and a subtle form of social organisation.

At the same time, the analysis invites caution. Meditation cannot be assumed to provide uniform benefits across all individuals and contexts, nor can it be understood as a neutral technique. Its effects are conditioned by spatial settings, institutional structures, and cultural expectations, all of which determine how practices are internalised and reproduced.

Overall, this work suggests that meditation is never merely a private technique of introspection. Rather, it is a practice embedded in social, spatial, and historical frameworks that shape its meanings, effects, and political implications. Understanding these dynamics requires sustained interdisciplinary dialogue, and this study offers a preliminary foundation for such future investigations.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical approval was not required for this research, as the study was limited to the historical and religious dimensions of the institute, with particular attention to its tangible and intangible heritage, and did not involve human participants. The interviews carried out were restricted to discussions on the history and heritage of the institute, and informed consent was duly obtained beforehand. No sensitive, personal, or health-related data were collected at any

stage. Moreover, the research did not include any clinical, pharmacological, or medical procedures, and therefore did not fall under the conditions necessitating approval by territorial or national ethics committees. Based on these considerations, and in line with Italian regulations concerning historical research, review by an ethics committee was not required.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- 1 The interaction between culture, spirituality, and science highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in the study of religion.
- 2 The Lama Tzong Khapa Institute (Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa) was founded in 1977 and is today one of the most important centres of Tibetan Buddhism in Europe, affiliated with the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT).
- 3 I conducted this research as a university researcher, approaching the field as a non-Buddhist, yet deeply engaged with the tradition, particularly its meditative practices. While I do not identify as a practitioner in the religious sense, my experience with meditation and my participation in related practices informed my observations and reflections throughout the study.
- 4 Engaged Buddhism, also known as socially engaged Buddhism, refers to a Buddhist social movement that emerged in Asia in the 20th century, composed of Buddhists who seek to apply Buddhist ethics, insights gained from meditation practice, and the teachings of Buddhist dharma to contemporary situations of suffering and social, political, environmental, and economic injustice. Finding its roots in Vietnam through the Buddhist teacher Thiền Thích Nhất Hạnh, engaged Buddhism was popularised by the Indian jurist, politician, and social reformer B. R. Ambedkar, who inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement in the 1950s, and has since grown and spread throughout the Indian subcontinent and the West.
- 5 Thangka paintings often depict Buddhas, bodhisattvas, or mandalas, and are traditionally used as supports for meditation and ritual visualisation.
- 6 The integration of natural surroundings into Buddhist practice is consistent with the notion of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), a key concept in Buddhist philosophy emphasising the interconnectedness of all phenomena.
- 7 Remotti's work emphasises the cultural construction of space as a key dimension in anthropological inquiry. See (Remotti 1993).
- 8 On the interrelation of sacred space, ritual, and symbolic order, see (Eliade 1959).
- 9 The sociological dimension of religious space has also been explored by Pierre Bourdieu, particularly in his notion of social space and symbolic power. See (Bourdieu 1990).
- 10 See (Goffman [1959] 2010), where the dramaturgical model is introduced as a framework for understanding social interactions.
- 11 The spatial arrangement of sacred sites, for example, influences how practitioners relate not only to the divine but also to one another.
- 12 Research in the field of neurotheology and contemplative neuroscience confirms the involvement of the temporal and prefrontal cortices in religious and meditative states.
- 13 Studies using fMRI and EEG have demonstrated changes in activity within the anterior cingulate cortex and insula during meditation, suggesting a link between spiritual practice, attention, and emotional awareness.
- 14 The idea of a feedback loop between individual cognition and cultural context parallels Gregory Bateson's notion of the "ecology of mind," where mind and environment are seen as inseparable systems.
- 15 Impermanence (*anicca*) and conditionality are core aspects of Buddhist phenomenology of the mind.

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