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Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus

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A Review of *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*

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Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus. Edited by Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger. New York: Routledge, 2015, viii + 232 pages, ISBN 978-0-415-72166-0 (hardback), US$145.00.

Since technology began to penetrate various spheres of our lives, researchers have pondered the role of digital media in communication and practice of religion. However, due to the frequently-mentioned bias in favor of the more habitual Judeo-Christian understanding of religion prevailing in research, works on Buddhism in digital contexts have so far been at most episodic. The recent book *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media,* edited by Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger, is an important step toward bridging this gap.

The book was inspired by a conference on Buddhism and digital media organized at California State University in 2011, and consists of contemplations on method and social impact, historical accounts, and case studies. The chapters of the book provide insights into the emerging

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field, suggesting bold perspectives and posing new questions. This review will touch upon each chapter in the order they are presented, giving attention to the book's entangled structure.

Daniel Veidlinger's introduction presents the main concepts and questions of the book. The first chapter, by Gregory Grieve, is based on a virtual ethnography, opening up with a pithy example of his attending a Zen retreat in Second Life[2] with his avatar. Being the only clerically attired participant among sixteen others with fancy dress, Grieve admits feeling "out of place" (25). He looks into the reality of the *conventional* from two seemingly unrelated perspectives: Buddhist Madhyamaka (Middle Way) philosophy and ethnography. By bringing the Buddhist idea of the two truths, *absolute* and *conventional*, to the field of virtual ethnography, Grieve accentuates the compelling importance of context and tacit knowledge, at the same time demonstrating their cloud-built nature. Grieve's insights could be enlightening for anybody engaged in a quest of virtual ethnography.

The next chapter inquires into how Tibet becomes recreated in digital media. Laura Osburn's contribution on hyperlinks and narratives on websites about Tibet stands apart from the general scope of the book, as Tibet is seen primarily in terms of political and social justice, and not that much in terms of Buddhism. However, her detailed and thorough methodological accounts can serve as a good platform to a researcher interested in narrative analysis of websites and social networks. She describes the opportunities and challenges of a mixed-method approach on the example of her study, which can prove to be a useful basis for a similar research in the broader field of digital culture.

The next contribution, based on an ambitious study by Louise Connelly, strives to draw a map of a vibrant, inconsistent, and ever-changing phenomena of Buddhist cyberspace. Connelly acknowledges the acute need of religious studies "to explore how individuals and or-

[2] Online virtual world.

ganizations are using online space to represent the sacred and practice religion" (61). She critically discusses the existing paradigms of religious cyberspace in terms of applicability to contemporary online Buddhism. Bringing up examples of elements of the Buddhist cyberspace, such as blogs, journals, virtual worlds, and Facebook profiles, she presents a complicated scheme "visually depicted as a cluster diagram rather than a hierarchical model" (71). The conclusion to Connelly's analysis, unlike the previous two chapters, is more like an interrogation than a statement. Given the complexity and the versatile nature of the Buddhist cyberspace, she poses questions of authenticity, relations between traditional and online religion, the impact of technology, and the use of the Internet space.

The first chapter on historical approaches is dedicated to the emergence of online peer-reviewed journals by the pioneer of the field, Charles S. Prebish. The chapter narrates engaging biographies of two online journals (*Journal of Buddhist Ethics* and *Journal of Global Buddhism*), starting from their conception. The contribution from Professor Emeritus at Pennsylvania State University and Utah State University, as well as the founding editor of both journals, ponders the past, present and the future of open-access scholarly journals in general, and the significance of Buddhist ones to Buddhist scholars and practitioners. Prebish refers to a "staggering" amount of newsletters, popular journals, and blogs on Buddhism (89), suggesting peer-review and established standards to be a way to preserve quality alongside quantity. The open-access policy, liberal format, and acute scope make these scholarly journals accessible, but at the same time authoritative sources of information on modern Buddhist issues.

The second chapter on historical approaches is yet another contribution by editor Gregory Grieve. While in the first chapter Grieve refers to his virtual ethnography from a methodological perspective, in chapter six he describes how the modern American understanding of Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism in digital realms, has been shaped

by the representations in fiction literature and philosophy. This perspective might not be novel, but it is certainly bold due to the kind of examples Grieve proposes. He opens his chapter with Slavoj Žižek's criticisms of digital Buddhism and virtual reality as a postmodern tool for "retaining mental sanity" in perpetuating capitalism (93). Grieve refutes such criticisms by putting them against a real observation of the phenomenon and its historical development. Drawing on the Buddhist or near-Buddhist mass culture works and presentations, Grieve accounts for how Zen entered the sphere of America's virtual landscape. His analysis may be useful not only as a proof of the point he makes when refuting Žižek's criticism, but also as a demonstration of how mass culture (re-)shapes the ancient practices in the modern world.

The opening contribution of the book's third section (case studies) is by editor Daniel Veidlinger. Veidlinger asks on the basis of his data "whether it is possible that there is something about being connected to others online that may lead people to display an affinity for Buddhism" (117). The outcome of his quantitative research, which prompts him to ask this question, is a correlation between displaying interest in Buddhism and online presence. His analysis of a popular social network (MySpace) reveals that not only does the network list a double share of Buddhists compared to a Pew survey of 2007, but also that many of those who do not describe themselves as Buddhist often state Buddhism or related topics as an interest, while in the case of other religions there is a reverse trend. Being careful about mistaking a correlation for cause-effect relations and the role of demographic factors in the outcome, he suggests the explanation should be found in the basic Buddhist doctrines of no-self and dependent-origination, which somehow enhance one's virtual presence. This daring proposition would pose interesting questions in the study of Buddhism, virtual culture, and Buddhist virtual culture.

The next study is a careful analysis of mobile applications use for one's religious practice. The authors, Rachel Wagner and Christopher

Accardo, map out the variety and nature of Buddhist apps available at the time of the study, claiming their usage to be an inevitable outcome of the religion being adopted in an individualist tech-savvy society. Warning about the challenges, such as distraction, withdrawal from community and reality, and the lack of authenticity, the authors nevertheless admit that "if the aspects of those apps that cohere well with the Dharma are highlighted, then they may prove to be a welcome and useful addition to the treasury of tools for the practice of Buddhism" (151).

The first case study approaches the issue of mediazation of Tibet, mentioned in the first part of the book. Written by a different author, Christopher Helland, this contribution makes a stronger attempt at linking the topic of Tibet to that of Buddhism in digital media. The introduction mentions Tibetan monks from Namgyal Monastery performing a Kalachakra ritual in order to sanctify a web platform. The author also makes a slight inquiry into the perceived authenticity of online space as a vehicle for religious rituals. However, most of the study describes construction and negotiation of exiled Tibetan identity in virtual space, which will certainly attract attention of researchers specializing in this field.

Another study based on a virtual ethnography in Second Life is the chapter by Jessica Falcone. This contribution explores the issue of re-establishing originally physical Buddhist practice, such as pilgrimage and prostrations, in virtual reality. According to her informants, real-life objects are often perceived as more significant and primary than their virtual copies, but their significance itself is seen in terms of "the ideas that we imbue them with" (183). In her concluding paragraph, titled "All of our materials are virtual" (186), she outlines her ideas about the co-created meanings cast upon both material and virtual objects, which make them "real" in the anthropological sense.

In the next chapter Allison Ostrowski describes her analysis of the formation of an American Cybersangha. She uses a mixed methods approach to answer two key questions: *who* uses Buddhist online re-

sources, and *why*. She starts her chapter with a general introduction into the formation of American Buddhism, and brings up answers relevant not only in terms of online Buddhism or digital religion, but greatly in terms of understanding Buddhism both in America and the West generally. Her study treats the Internet particularly as a *context* for understanding a phenomenon, rather than a phenomenon in itself.

The closing chapter of the book, titled "The Way of the Blogisattva," analyzes the nature and the role of Buddhist blogs. The author, Beverley Foulks McGuire, demonstrates the huge variety of those available online, exploring the phenomenon from the religious, social, and technological perspectives. Questions of authenticity, the relation between so-called *two Buddhisms (*heritage and convert), and the dusk of blogging in the face of social media popularity, are posed in this study. Additionally to the acuteness of the results, this contribution will certainly be a remarkable piece of reading for anybody interested in Buddhism and/or digital culture, which will arouse curiosity, smiles, and frowns.

In general, the book presents a number of interesting conclusions, and demonstrates how many questions can be asked in the fields of religion and digital culture. Although an academic inquiry into Buddhism may not be novel, it is the introduction of a Buddhist perspective to academic inquiry that makes this book particularly interesting. Another remarkable point about the compilation is that it does not mention many acute issues in online Buddhism. For instance, considering the vital role of consistent education and mentoring in Buddhism, more questions can be asked about the affordance of technology in the sphere of online learning. Other gaps, such as online transmissions and community building, together with the questions posed by the contributors, can and ought to be filled by future researchers. Altogether, the book approaches a wide array of issues, including modern Buddhist community, offline and online; virtual space, instrumental and sacred; and human behavior, simultaneously in its most ancient (religion) and most novel

(Internet) manifestations. It will certainly be of great insight to those interested in these topics.