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Buddhism, the Internet and Digital Media. The Pixel and the Lotus

Routledge: New York/London, 2015.

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The present volume, which also inaugurates a new series at Routledge on “Studies in Religion and Digital Culture,” contains the proceedings of the symposium “Buddhism and Digital Media” held at California State University, Chico, in November 2011. Besides a substantial introduction by Veidlinger, it consists of eleven papers which are grouped under four headings: Methodological Consideration (3 papers), Historical Approaches (2 papers), Buddhism, Media and Society (2 papers), and Case Studies (4 papers). The participants were all asked to answer the same question: “What is digital Buddhism?” If anything becomes clear after reading their answers, it is the fact that the topic has become so vast that no single volume could do it justice. Although the editors tried their best to bring the papers, which are consistently called “chapters,” together and formulate some common concerns, no cohesiveness could be achieved here, neither in terms of a central thesis, nor in the joint treatment of a common and well-defined set of questions, nor in the achievement of a resulting systematic survey. Nevertheless, the individual disparate papers are all clearly written and informative, and anyone who is not already specialized in the subject will learn a great deal from them. I for one was not aware of the Blogisattva Awards (unfortunately discontinued) given to the best Buddhist blog internationally, a competition that attracted more than three hundred participants. I also have to admit that I did not know anything about Second Life, a website that includes several virtual Buddhist ‘worlds,’

where your 3D 'avatar' can sit for meditation, join a virtual sangha, listen to various Buddhist teachings, go to a retreat, and so on.

One of the problems apparent in most, if not all papers concerns the scope of the enquiry: What should count as Buddhism? And who, or which group of internet users, is to be considered Buddhist in the virtual world? There is no easy answer to these questions and some of the *ad hoc* solutions proposed in the volume seem doubtful or problematic. Thus, Daniel Veidlinger (pp. 120 ff., also introduction, pp. 10-11) takes the core of Buddhist religion to be the doctrines of anatman and pratitya samutpada (sic, no diacritics are used in this volume), and claims that these ideas are exclusive to Buddhism and distinguish it from other religions. This may be so, but the rather simplistic way in which he interprets these ideas ("there is no soul", "pratitya samutpada holds that things ... arise due to other causes and conditions") renders the core of Buddhism indistinguishable from current materialist and physicalist theories. It is not surprising, therefore, that he finds strong similarities and affinities between these Buddhist notions and the notion that a permanent self is illusory which may become (or indeed already is) prevalent among internet users. One wonders whether at least the belief in karma and rebirth should not have been added to the core Buddhist ideas. In its absence, the conclusion (p. 129) that "the Internet may stimulate a rapid growth of Buddhism in the coming years" seems premature.

Another, somewhat un-Buddhistic answer to the question what should count as Buddhism and who is a Buddhist is offered by Jessica Falcone (p. 187): "Buddhist objects make Buddhist space and they make Buddhists, in virtual and actual environments." The most nuanced and reasonable approach is offered by Foulks McGuire with regard to Buddhist blogs (pp. 205-206).

“The tendency to assume that a ‘Buddhist blog’ is a blog written by a Buddhist is problematic, for several reasons. First, while one might easily identify Buddhist monks or nuns as ‘Buddhist,’ such characterizations become more difficult when applied to Buddhist lay people ... Second, some bloggers, taking full advantage of the anonymity provided by blogs, do not explicitly identify themselves as Buddhists ... A final, subtle issue with this approach is that, by focusing on the identity of the blogger it overlooks the possibilities afforded by the blog as a medium ...” (*ibid.*)

After further discussion she concludes (p. 209) that Buddhist blogs are “online journals updated frequently by a single author that reflect an interest in—or identification with—Buddhist tradition, people, concepts, or practices in their content and/or form.” (*ibid.*)

Being a relatively recent phenomenon, the practice of Buddhist religion on the internet raises some difficult questions. What is the ontological and religious status of virtual objects? Are they real? Or half real? Are they efficient and powerful? May one be in danger of developing attachment to unreal things?

Most of the writers in this volume take the standpoint that the distinction between real and virtual objects is not decisive from a Buddhist point of view. Indeed, Madhyamaka would consider both categories to be empty and unreal, and according to Yogācāra they would be “unreal conceptual constructions” (*abhūtasparikalpa*). Things may seem more problematic when considered from a realist point of view, such as in the Theravāda tradition, but even there what counts is not the physical action itself, but the intention behind it (karma is *cetanā*). Yet, a major difference between the classical Buddhist traditions and Buddhism as it is presented in this book lies in the essentially negative attitude of the former towards

everyday reality. The basic Buddhist approach would presumably have been that virtual objects are as worthless and pernicious as those of everyday reality, not as valuable as they are.

Finally, the question arises whether Buddhism ‘works’ in a virtual environment. When you let your avatar rest on a virtual cushion for silent online meditation (which the practitioners call *zazen*, see p. 95) and remain inactive in front of the computer screen, does this have the same value or efficacy as *zazen* meditation in a Buddhist monastery? Do the “sacred places” recreated on the internet have a sacred nature? And are the virtual pilgrimages to these places meritorious (pp. 167-168)? Are the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas present in their virtual statues after the latter have been consecrated, or even beforehand (see p. 176)?

Further, how spiritually and soteriologically useful are the Buddhist Apps? For instance, *iSatori* is an App that offers images of flowers and invites one to gaze at them without judgment (p. 144). Will this help you reach enlightenment, as the vendors claim? Can meditation be accomplished “while one is concurrently driven to amass points and solve puzzles” (p. 149)? “Rub the Buddha’s belly and get lucky!” suggests another App, and of course the rubbing need not be done on a real statue, let alone a real Buddha, but is done on your iPhone’s screen. Another App, “Wheel of Death,” invites you to meditate on difference means of dying which will help you to “embrace mortality” (p. 150). That one actually sounds reasonable.

The problem in answering all the above questions is, of course, that there is no one to decide authoritatively. Buddhism is a decentralized religion and does not have a pope as final arbitrator in doctrinal and other matters. It is for this reason that in the final analysis Buddhism is what a sufficient number of people who call themselves Buddhists say it is. And when enough such people would consider the sitting of avatars on virtual green cushions to be a genuine Buddhist practice, who are we to deny it?

This brief review cannot do justice to all the issues raised in the book. Whatever its shortcomings in detail might be, its great merit lies in helping us understand how Buddhism is growing and changing in relation to the internet on both an individual and an organizational level. Especially when one is studying or working on contemporary Buddhism, not to engage with online Buddhism is no longer an option, as the reviewed volume amply demonstrates.

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