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THE CYBERSANGHA

Patch Kroll

“The Cybersangha” discusses how Tibetan Buddhism, a religion that has traditionally been heavily reliant on the proximity of practitioners, has changed as a result of the internet and the growing oppression of their people. Once heavily opposed to the internet, in the 1990’s a group of practitioners blessed the internet as a sacred space for practice, which has had great effects on the practice of the religion. In some diasporas, internet practice has reunited them with their faith, while in more developed parts of the world internet practice has caused a generation of “Nightstand Buddhists,” or people who practice some aspects of the religion and taint its teachings. This paper examines many sides to the argument of using the internet in the practice of faith.

It is often seen as a fact of life that over time change occurs, and with that change comes both excitement and reservation. One of the big changes of our time was the advent of the internet, where possibilities arose for game-changing international communication, allowing people worldwide to have a voice and have access to the voices of others. As the internet became a larger part of our world, Buddhists worldwide began using the various tools of the internet as tools for practice through forums, games, social media, and the like. Of all of the facets of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism is perhaps the most closely aligned with early adoption of the internet for Buddhist practice, but many practitioners continue to feel reservations with its use. The major argument against using the internet during practice is that it may allow for diluted traditions and practices to come front and center, and create a false religion that hinders people from finding the truth. This paper is an exploration of the rising involvement of the internet in Buddhism, and what comes as a result of the emerging "Cybersangha."

I. SHAPING TIBET

There are many events throughout history that have caused change upon Tibetan Buddhism, making it what it is today. Of all of these events, three have seemed to stand out as key to the development of contemporary Tibetan practice. The first is the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet, the second is the decision to focus on ridding impurities to achieve Buddhahood, and the third is the anti-secularizing of Tibetan Buddhism, promoting a strong master/student relationship.

To start at the beginning, Buddhism came to Tibet during the rule of King Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century, who inherited a unified country that practiced a religion involving sacrifice, court magicians, and elaborate rituals. At the insistence of two of his wives, to whom Gampo was married for political reasons, he changed the religion of Tibet to Buddhism and put special emphasis on Tantra, a set of rituals that "gives one the esoteric material needed to weave a spiritually visualized realm of Buddha and bodhisattva," promoting the "[removal] of ignorance and defilements in order to realize [the] innate, ultimate reality and attain Buddhahood."¹ The transition to Tantric practice was chosen because it would be easy for the people of

Tibet to transition from their past, ritual-based religion. While Buddhism spread to other places, none would inherit a particularly complete repertoire of Tantric practice like Tibet.²

The second major shaping of Tibetan Buddhism came in the turn of the eighth century, when a council decided that Tibetan Buddhism should focus on achieving Buddhahood through the gradual removal of moral evil, rather than the practicing of meditation for a sudden awakening.³ This instituted the key idea that Buddhism was a means

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of actively removing bad and passively attaining good, and provided a semi-synthesis of Chinese and Indian Buddhism practices.⁴ In addition, this provided a base understanding that people are already enlightened but do not realize how to access it, and it was through constant practice that people would be awakened to the truth of our existence. While Buddhism would leave Tibet for a time when King Langdarma pushed the religion underground, the key idea remained.⁵

The third major shaping came in the mid-eleventh century when the great Indian scholar Atisa came to Tibet, bringing with him a "mature synthesis of Indian Buddhism," as well as an emphasis on the "ideal relationship between master and disciple as the most important means for the proper transmission of the Dharma." This idea that only a master could translate the Dharma correctly, or that secularized Buddhism was a subordinate or near-impossible way of attaining enlightenment, would become a key concept in Tibetan Buddhism.⁶

While there were many more steps that shaped how Tibetan Buddhism is practiced today, these events provide insight into key arguments both for and against the use of the internet during practice.

II. JOURNEY TO THE INTERNET

One could argue that contemporary Tibetan Buddhists were drawn to the internet because of events where the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and pseudo-governmental leader of Tibet, fled to India during the Revolt of Tibet in 1959, when Tibetans tried to regain their independence from China. The oppression of Tibet by the Chinese is a modern day phenomenon, dating from 1950, and has caused many Tibetans to set up diaspora in neighboring countries and worldwide. This posed a major problem for Buddhists to participate in the non-secularized, master-driven religion that they had practiced for so many centuries, and many decades later, the internet would arise as a possible solution to their problems.

In 1996, having seen the power of the internet and wanting to use it to help reunite separated Tibetans, the monks of the Namgyal Monastery made the decision to “bless the network and sanctify the newly created ‘cyberspace’” using a combination of Tantric rituals and a personal computer.⁷ The monks saw the blessing resulting in the creation of a new “space” in which Tibetans worldwide could “meet” to practice Buddhism, and saw it as an extension of Tibet that could re-create what was lost to Tibet decades earlier.

III. VIRTUAL TIBET

As the internet continued to develop through the late 1990s, more and more websites emerged promoting and supporting the Tibetan situation, one of the main sites being Tibet.net. Tibet.net was created by Thubten Samphel at the turn of the millennium, and in its first week got over ten thousand unique visitors and spawned a massive community dubbed “Virtual Tibet” by Samphel.⁸ The goal of Virtual Tibet was straightforward: to demote Chinese propaganda surrounding Tibet and the Dalai Lama, promote uncensored, truthful information to the citizens of China; and most importantly act as a network for communication between Tibet and the various Tibetan diasporas. By 2004, Samphel describes the Virtual Tibet community as “embracing the internet [for practice]

just as they did Buddhism more than 1,300 years ago,” and “because of their power to transmit information instantaneously, [computers] are profoundly changing the world of the Tibetan diaspora and beyond.” Samphel goes on to say: “exiles have created a virtual Tibet that is almost unassailable, free, reveling in its freedom, and growing.”⁹

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Much like how the Namgyal monks saw the internet as an extension of their space to practice, Tibet and Virtual Tibet are not seen as separate entities, but extensions in a phenomenon described as “co-location.” Co-location was first presented as a concept by Dan Pinchbeck and Brett Stevens in 2006, and was later developed by Connie Hill-Smith when she examined Buddhists practicing Tantra online as well as in person.¹⁰ From her research, she found that the online communities surrounding Tantric practice are equally as powerful to people as they are to those who meet in real life to practice, even to the extent of e-pilgrimages having the same spiritual effect as going to see a holy object in real life.¹¹ Because these teachings can be conducted by the high Lamas via teleconference or other means, the fundamental Tibetan Buddhist principle that a master must instruct a student can still be achieved. A prime example of this is the Dalai Lama holding web seminars and making announcements over the Virtual Tibet network. The Dalai Lama is an active and strong supporter of using the internet as a tool for spreading the Dharma, and has said about the people who participate in Virtual Tibet that “the fruits of [their] good work will be far reaching and long lasting.”¹²

One of the more recent ways of connecting with masters is over “Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games” (MMORPGs), a great example being *Second Life*. In her essay “Our Virtual Materials,” Jessica Falcone, a gamer and scholar of Buddhism, describes her experience practicing Buddhism over the video game. Falcone describes her avatar meeting other avatars around a virtual Buddha statue in the *Second Life* virtual world. They are joined by a Buddhist teacher who guides the players through mantras and meditation, which they practice in their respective locations.¹³ This type of practice causes Falcone to reflect on the use of holy objects in Tibetan Buddhism. After an interview with a Tibetan Buddhist Lama, Kirti Rinpoche, he learns that all holy objects are seen as virtual representations. Rinpoche describes this in a contemporary way by likening it to using a personal computer. “[When using a computer, information] has to be shown on the screen, but the information is already there. But even as [a statue of the Buddha] is being built the Buddha is there... the blessing of the statue is like information appearing on the screen.”¹⁴ In other words, it seems that masters are taught to look at all physical objects as virtual, or at all virtual objects as physical.

A common theme in all discussion of virtual Buddhist practice is that a binary perception of internet-life and real-life is an illusion, much like our unenlightened and enlightened selves being unique is an illusion. The difference seems only to be in how the information is accessed, and therefore proper translation or proper access via a virtual instructor or community is seen as equivalent, and becomes near-superior when these practices can be accessed by more internationally. Contemporary virtual practice might not only be acceptable, but also may be key to the development of the Dharma and the Sangha.

IV. COUNTERARGUMENT (NIGHTSTAND BUDDHISTS)

The argument of the power of the internet is virtually unopposed, however the major arguments against using it for Buddhist practice revolve around two key ideas: it empowers people to feel like they have ownership of the information accessed, and therefore can alter it how

they choose, and that it empowers people who may not have been properly trained to spread a potentially diluted Dharma on a massive scale.

Thomas Tweed is one Buddhist scholar who worries about the dilution of true Buddhism by people who only somewhat understand the practices, who he dubs “Nightstand Buddhists” in his Essay called “Who is a Buddhist?” The term Nightstand Buddhist refers to a person who goes out, buys a book about Buddhism, reads it before bed, and practices it the next day, calling himself a Buddhist. Tweed argues that while the intention is right, this erodes the message over time, especially if a Nightstand Buddhist gets others involved with his incorrect practices. It leads to what Tweed calls “Buddhist sympathizers,” or people who pick and choose certain aspects of the Dharma to follow, but choose to not follow others. Tweed believes this weakens a person’s ability to properly attain truth, and therefore does not fulfil the ultimate goal when practicing Buddhism.¹⁵

A good example of this are books written by Buddhist sympathizers explaining the practice of certain Tantric rituals, which are fundamentally secret to the point that they are not written down and are only learned by experienced monks. Tantric rituals are believed to have been passed down from the Buddha himself, and when performed correctly Tantra is able to speed up one’s enlightenment like a plane can speed up travel compared to a car, but attempting to learn Tantra without a true master is believed to be like flying in a plane where the pilot’s only experience is reading a manual on how to fly. There is a great dissonance between the idea of writing a book on Tantra and truly knowing Tantra and what’s more is monks believe that Tantric rituals performed wrongly can be devastating and cause insanity.¹⁶ If this is true then Nightstand Buddhists and Buddhist sympathizers may accidentally cause harm upon themselves and others by attempting to falsely learn Tantra, and internet practice may empower the ignorant to do so.

Whether one believes in the power of Tantra or not, the dilution of a religion because of inexperienced or not totally committed practitioners is a concern to true practitioners, especially when people actively attempt to change it and then preach the old way being outdated.

An example of this is Buddhist Geeks, a website and online group that has emerged as a prominent location for discussions of North American Buddhism practice.

Buddhist Geeks began as a podcast by Vincent Horn and Ryan Oelke in 2006 as a way for them to “combine their geeky skills together with their passion for Buddhist practice”, and has amassed a large following since its creation with a recorded 100,000 downloads of podcasts

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per month in 2010.¹⁷ The major critique of Buddhist Geeks is that Horn describes its offerings as “Do It Yourself” (DIY) Buddhism, promoting their followers to choose the pieces of the religion that work for them and disregard the parts that do not. Rohan Guntillake, a Buddhist geek and another controversial Buddhist-technologist for his invention of the Buddhify mobile application describes the community as a “hacker of the Dharma,” a phrase that raises a large red flag in many minds.¹⁸ It comes as no surprise that the people who seek to keep their Buddhism as authentic as possible worry about the influence of DIY Buddhism and Buddhist Geeks. David Chapman, author of several Buddhist books and active blogger is critical of how Buddhist Geeks alters the lessons of Buddhism to focus on happiness rather than knowledge.¹⁹ Chapman feels that what forms from DIY Buddhism is “consensus Buddhism,” which he says “promotes a therapeutic ethos,” while something nice, is not a traditional Buddhist goal. He explains that “the main problem with consensus Buddhism is that it has eradicated

fundamental differences between traditional forms of Buddhism, and has actively marginalized alternative forms of modern Buddhism.”²⁰ Chapman believes that Buddhist Geeks not only changes how Buddhism is practiced, but also changes the core essence altogether. Horn, who believes that a “democratized Buddhism” will ultimately lead to enlightenment and human mental-evolution, disagrees that Buddhist Geeks is causing harm, and is instead providing access to the Dharma in a way that makes it attractive to ordinary people in a way they can incorporate into their daily lives.²¹ In Horn’s mind, Buddhist Geeks’ method of delivery and traditional practice are two paths to a common goal, much like Mahayana and Theravada forms of Buddhism. The question of whether Buddhist Geeks’ hacking of the Dharma is positive or negative has yet to be determined from a factual standpoint, but the strong opposition by many Buddhists emphasizes that online practice can do just as much harm as it can help.

V. REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

In a monastic or traditional Buddhist community there is consistent and constant exposure to proper practice, which is guided by masterful elders. When using the internet, one may access some of the same information without a guide, and may only be exposed to certain aspects. While this may feel personally beneficial, ultimately traditional Buddhists believe that it causes the practitioner to learn a fractured, marginalized form of their religion. Nonetheless, the internet is also being used as a very effective means of practicing, and has reunited estranged exiles with old traditions such as being guided by a master, albeit over the computer. Perhaps then the argument is not whether to use the internet for practice or not, but to discern how to properly use the internet. All things considered, the internet is a new phenomenon that as a race we are only beginning to understand, but as it becomes more incorporated into our daily lives, it will become inherent that Tibetan and other forms of Buddhism figure out how to use the power of mass communication to both preserve traditional methods of practice and communities, and to shape the next generation of Buddhists in contemporary ways.