

Book Review

From Indra's Net to Internet: Communication, Technology, and the Evolution of Buddhist Ideas

By Daniel Veidlinger. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018, 273 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-7340-0 (hardcover), \$68.

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Daniel Veidlinger is professor of Buddhism at California State University, Chico. He is an established scholar who has published many articles and books, and has most recently co-edited, alongside Gregory Grieve, *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus* (2014), which examines a wide variety of topics concerning Buddhism on the internet. It is not surprising, then, that he has drawn from his extensive research and understanding of the history of Buddhism, orality, and digital humanities to write *From Indra's Net to Internet: Communication, Technology, and the Evolution of Buddhist Ideas*.

The book comprises eight chapters, an extensive reference list, and a detailed notes section. The primary aim of the book is to examine “what the evolution of religious ideas might look like when viewed from the perspective of communication” (220). Focusing on Buddhism, Veidlinger argues that Buddhist ideas are better suited for thriving on the internet than other religious ideas due to specific factors that he outlines throughout the book (110), such as the six elements of the Axial Age; the concept of self/not-self/identity; and the interplay between communication and the success of religion and religious ideas in society.

The first half of the book (chapters one to four) introduces media theory and a detailed examination of the historical developments and potential relationships between the growth in transport and travel, communication, and the development and spread of Buddhism during the axial age and the golden age (along the Silk Road).

In the early chapters, the author provides a phenomenal level of historical detail. In chapter two, Veidlinger discusses six axial age elements, namely, universal applicability, circle of compassion, belief in transcendental reality, personal experience, individualism, and the reconceptualization of ritual. He provides a comprehensive discussion of each of these elements in relation to several religions, including Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, but with the emphasis firmly focused on



Buddhism. He argues that, of all religions of the axial age, only Buddhism had all these elements and that they are “intimately connected to the communication environment at that time” (38). Veidlinger concludes this section by focusing on “convergent cultural evolution,” and explains that he is “not concerned with Buddhism per se (as a religion), rather with the constellation of ideas that are commonly held to characterize Buddhism” (69), which he revisits throughout the book.

Veidlinger’s detailed examination of the relationship between the expansion of trade, pilgrimage, communication, and the development of Buddhism provides an early glimpse of how he will present the connection between religion and media in later chapters. He argues that transportation is not necessarily needed for communication networks to develop and he acknowledges that the internet provides an example of how to “facilitate the delivery of information from one person to another” without the need for the humans to physically travel between locations, such as in the use of video-conferencing facilities (78). He then presents arguments from other scholars who conclude that trade, in and of itself, does not determine the successful spread of religion. Veidlinger contests this and argues that trade and travel, while not determining success, do facilitate communication, and thus they established and enabled the spread of Buddhism early on (109–110). He concludes that “Buddhism disappears from a region” where there are no mechanisms for communication (110). Veidlinger’s historical discourse presents a picture of how Buddhism and Buddhist ideas could manifest and potentially flourish on the internet, which is the focus of later chapters (134). For example, Veidlinger explains the concept of *ātman* (eternal soul/self as found in the Upanishads) and the Buddhist notion of *anātman* (not-self) and suggests that the identity of a person found online is not fixed, permanent, or a “true identity . . . and this accords well with the understanding of the human person that Buddhism has cultivated over the centuries” (137).

The second half of the book (chapters five to eight) moves the focus to new modes of communication, particularly the internet. In chapter five, subtitled “How the Internet Shapes the Reception of Buddhist Ideas,” Veidlinger shifts his focus to newer modes of communication. He relates these ideas to the framework of the six elements from the axial age, as discussed in chapter two. This chapter introduces the reader to media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan (135) and to features of Buddhism that are not part of the axial framework, such as a “lack of strict hierarchy,” and how such a combination of features “meshes well with the Internet ethos” (137). In particular, Veidlinger refers to McLuhan’s “Global Village paradigm” (135) and to Ervin Laszlo (an integral theorist), who argues that changes in attitudes have arisen due to a rise in communications, specifically including the internet. This chapter provides a rich exploration of the axial age framework in relation to the evolution of Buddhism and the parallels of Buddhist ideas in relation to the internet, as the internet encompasses “unity and interconnection” and Buddhism more so than other religions can successfully spread and engage people via the internet (164). He summarises this in the powerful statement that “the Internet is the Silk Road on steroids” (164).

The reader should be mindful of the context of Veidlinger’s discussion. Otherwise, statements such as “The Internet frees people from the shackles of race, gender, socioeconomic status. . .” (157) could be problematic. Indeed, the internet has not provided the utopian promise that some once dreamt of. While it certainly can provide a medium for communication—and thus potentially the

spread of Buddhism and global engagement with it—for those without internet or digital skills, the digital divide may in fact be a barrier to engaging with Buddhism. This is a factor worthy of further examination.

Chapter six examines several key Buddhist concepts and how they can be positioned in relation to discussions of identity, notions of the self, and ephemerality on the internet. Drawing on the work of Sherry Turkle which focused on gaming and the creation and management of ephemeral and fluid multiple selves and online identities (183), Veidlinger considers impermanence, the concepts of embodiment and the creation of virtual selves (such as avatars in virtual worlds), and the use of “selfies.” Veidlinger argues “that the idea that oneself is coterminous with one’s body is thrown into doubt each time one logs into cyberspace and leaves traces of oneself deeply embedded in the pixels” (197) and therefore the virtual self draws parallels with the notion of Buddhist *anātman*. This thought-provoking chapter introduces the reader to the intersection between Buddhist philosophical ideas and internet culture, which Veidlinger expands on and elucidates further, in later chapters.

In chapters seven and eight, Veidlinger presents survey data gathered in 2009 from participants in the virtual world, including MySpace, Second Life, and Facebook. Veidlinger uses this data to assert his claim that “there is a statistically significant correlation between Internet usage and religious ideas that are associated most strongly with Buddhism” (31). These findings provide interesting reading and are underpinned by comparative data on religion and internet usage from the Pew Research Center. The concluding question of chapter seven leaves the reader with food for thought: “Does this mean that the Internet causes people to become Buddhist? That depends on how one conceives the notion of causality,” but it “does suggest that the Internet is a key factor” (219).

Such conclusions may be challenging, but these findings provide a stepping stone toward further examination of Veidlinger’s dataset, which is based on an American cohort and primarily relates to the social media site, MySpace. Popularity of platforms can change quickly and, since 2009, platforms such as MySpace have been largely replaced by mobile phone apps or more visual spaces, such as TikTok and Instagram. Understanding this ever-changing cultural and technical context is critical if we are to continue Veidlinger’s approach to examine different platforms and cohorts in digital spaces.

Veidlinger concludes chapter eight with the assertion that the lens of communication has provided an opportunity to examine the “evolution of religious ideas” (220), in this case how Buddhism’s ideas have manifested in the online environment of the internet. He references the anthropologist Jack Goody’s idea that evolution can be determined by levels of literacy (222). For Veidlinger, this theory, while useful, will not always be conclusive. For example, in early India we find great advancements in philosophical critical thinking while literacy was higher elsewhere. Nonetheless, Veidlinger argues that there is a connection between the flow of information and routes or communication technologies in determining “the success of Buddhist ideas in [a] society” (223), and that powerful connection between them “is likely to benefit Buddhism” (224).

Readers may be left wondering how to define the form of Buddhism found on the internet and if this differs from forms of Buddhism found offline. Veidlinger does acknowledge this potential issue

and states that he is not examining what “authentic” Buddhism is or should be (223). In fact, this is a topic that others have explored in depth in relation to digital religion (Lövheim and Campbell 2017) and new religious movements (Baffelli 2016), as digital Buddhism can challenge traditional notions of authenticity and authority, and perhaps even challenge notions of hierarchy (which Veidlinger discusses in chapter five).

The audience for this book is wide-reaching and would be most suited to those seeking a comparative understanding of communication and religion in, for example, media studies or religious studies courses. It would also be beneficial in Buddhism courses where students are introduced to a discourse on the intersection of Buddhism and media. Those already familiar with the field of media, religion, and culture may have expected to see more in-depth discussion and reference to associated theories and themes such as authenticity, authority (Baffelli 2016), identity, community (Lövheim and Campbell 2017), or how Buddhism and Buddhist concepts are being redefined or reimagined on the internet partly due to the technological affordances of platforms (Connelly, forthcoming). The reader, therefore, should be mindful that this is an alternative examination and is positioned within a specific context, rather than a discussion of the intersection between Buddhism and the internet (which is commonly organized around one or more of the themes mentioned above). Nor is it a development of theories for studying religion, media, and culture, such as those posited by Campbell (2010), or, more recently, by Peterson (2020), who provides insight into how people are using technology for meaning-making; how individuals and institutions are using technology to reimagine and redefine religious authority, identity, community and ritual; and how they negotiate and blur online and offline space and religion.

The processes of how cultural spaces, including the internet, make meaning and how they mediate religion are large and complex topics. In order for us to better understand these constantly evolving processes, we need to continually revisit and re-define our methods of examining them. Scholarship often challenges established ideas and boundaries, and elements of this book do exactly that. For example, in chapter one, Veidlinger makes his position clear in relation to an argument put forward by Heidi Campbell, a leading media, religion, and culture researcher. He considers one of Campbell's earlier arguments (2010) on the topic of technological determinism, and disputes the claim that “technology [does not] determine(s) behaviour” (6). Veidlinger instead argues that “media affects the development of religious ideas in society” (7). Notably, he does recognise the limitations of this stance, but believes this approach will be fruitful for the examination of “different features of religions and . . . how and why some might succeed better than others in certain technological and communication environments” (15). It is thus important for readers to consider their own position in relation to media theories and religious concepts, and also to how Veidlinger is positioning his argument in relation to those theories and concepts. In doing so, we may challenge our own preconceived or normative understandings of the topics being discussed and consider exploring new and emerging research, such as on the influence of algorithms on religious experience or on social and political influence on communication and religion. This book provides a valuable contribution to this ever-growing research area.

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