Spiritualizing the Internet: Exploring Modern Buddhism and the Online Buddhist World

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Abstract

Through the discussion of digital religion, modern Buddhism, and two different online platforms, this article argues that religious activities or debates on the Internet mirror those in the real or the offline world. This paper focuses on two different aspects of the online Buddhist reality: virtual worlds which may be experienced through avatars, and a web forum that claims to be universally Buddhist. By taking Second Life and the E-Sangha forum as examples, this paper argues that in addition to exhibiting features of modern Buddhism, online religious performative acts also raise important questions about Buddhist identity, authority, and authenticity.

Keywords: Second Life, E-Sangha, virtual worlds, forums, Internet, modern Buddhism

Introduction

In her book, *Give me that Online Religion,* Brenda E. Brasher stated that "using a computer for online religious activity . . . could become the dominant form of religion and religious experience in the next century."[1] This seems like a plausible statement, since various religious traditions were visible online through different users and platforms. For instance, sites like "Virtual Jerusalem" allowed users to partake in pilgrimage activities like placing prayers via webcam and e-mail services.[2] However, Heidi Campbell suggests that "the features of religion online closely mirror changes within the practice of religion in contemporary society."[3] The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the online Buddhist world also exhibits some important features of what defines "modern Buddhism," as termed by Donald S. Lopez.[4] Additionally, Campbell highlights the importance of "identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality," which are important aspects of online religion.[5] Many of these features are also related to modernist Buddhist movements. The reconstruction or reclamation of Buddhist identity and space is an integral part of modern Buddhism, and the use of online avatars or virtual bodies, as well as online profiles, enable users to reclaim or reconstruct their identities on the Internet; consequently, shifts in authority and claims to authenticity become important topics of discussion.

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[1] Brenda E Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2001), 19.

[2] Heidi A Campbell, "Introduction: The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion, " in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds,* ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 6.

[3] "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80.1 (2012): 65.

[4] Donald S Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), 161.

[5] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," 65.

As Gregory Price Grieve argues, "digital religion" is unique and can be marked by three important characteristics. First, it is experienced through a particular form of digital or new media, which may include things like digital audio or video, computer or video games, websites, e-mail, and even social media sites.[6] Secondly, Grieve argues that digital religion is tied to a particular "technological ideology of new media," which is seen as revolutionary and "tied to the triumph of human creativity and freedom over dogma and blind tradition."[7] Finally, Grieve argues that the online religious practices are often "workarounds" which help people cope with "the conditions of living in a world full of ambiguity and change, representing a 'liquid modern life.'"[8] He suggests that when practitioners meditate through online virtual worlds, there may be a chance that there are not enough traditional opportunities or locations to meditate in the offline world. Thus, it cannot be inferred that online religious activities are simply traditional religious practices transferred online, or that it replaces or transforms the religious traditions in a drastic way. However, studying online religious activities may help us understand how the online religious communities are affected by the daily debates and changes that are occurring in the offline or the "real" world.

It may seem a little odd that Buddhists have also migrated to the Internet for either a sense of community or for personal practices, such as meditation or performing religious rituals. There seems to be a widespread view of Buddhism as critical of consumerism[9] and capitalism (which may be tied to the use of technology). One may assume that forms

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[6] Gregory Price Grieve, "Religion," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds,* ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 108.

[7] Grieve, "Religion," 109.

[8] Grieve, "Religion," 109..

[9] See "Smokey the Bear Sutra" by Gary Snyder. Also, see Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

of Buddhism that wholly embrace modern technology are most likely corrupt. One may even ask: "is this really Buddhism?" However, these matters are not so black and white. In fact, Daniel Veidlinger argues that more than any other religions, Buddhist philosophy has dealt with the question of reality extensively, "and as such is a potent source for thinking about the nature of virtual reality."[10] Veidlinger points out one of the most important concepts in Buddhism—the *anatman* or no-self doctrine, which rejects a focus on a fixed soul or self. He suggests that Buddhism allows for the various identities that are formed over the Internet (through virtual world realities or even social media sites) due to its emphasis on the impermanence of a "self."[11] Additionally, he suggests that due to its emphasis on "*upaya*, or skillful means," Buddhism allows for unorthodox practices.[12] He suggests that since digital religion is in constant flux, it is compatible with the Buddhist point of view.[13] Moreover, Veidlinger suggests that the Buddhist notion of *pratītyasamutpāda,* or dependent origination, corresponds well with the nature of the Internet itself. The Internet allows users to affect each other in some way, even if they may not be in close proximity.[14] Thus, the assertion that Buddhism and modernity are incompatible overlooks the fact that digital technology, modernity, and Buddhism itself, are always evolving.

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[10] Daniel Veidlinger, "Introduction," in *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, ed. Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3.

[11] Daniel Veidlinger, "The Madhyama is the Message: Internet Affordance of Anatman and Pratitya Samutpada," in *Buddhism, the Internet and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, ed. Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger (New York: Routledge, 2015), 120.

[12] Veidlinger, "Introduction," 3.

[13] Veidlinger, "Introduction," 3.

[14] Veidlinger, "The Madhyama is the Message," 118.

Modern Buddhism

Like many other religious forms and traditions, Buddhism has been compelled to responding to the principles of modernity. Buddhist modernism, according to David L. McMahan, "refers to the various forms of Buddhism that have been significantly shaped by an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity."[15] Among the many features that may define this term, McMahan suggests that this form of Buddhism is not bound by geography or location. Additionally, Lopez states that this particular sect of Buddhism is a transnational one "that transcends cultural and natural boundaries, creating . . . a cosmopolitan network of intellectuals, writing most often in English."[16] Among the various ways that "Modern Buddhism," has transcended local and national boundaries is through the use of the Internet as a platform for its activities. In addition to its emphasis on the compatibility of the scientific view and Buddhism, the use of technology has become a creative and interactive form of establishing a *sangha,* or community, universally.[17]

Two important cases will be considered throughout this paper: first is the virtual world of Second Life, founded in 2003, which is a 3-Dimensional, "Internet-based virtual world that allows users to create a virtual representation, or avatar, to social network with others and collaboratively create their own virtual spaces;"[18] and secondly, a Buddhist web

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[15]David L. McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," in *Buddhism in the Modern World*, ed. David L. McMahan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 160.

[16] Lopez, *Buddhist Bible*, xxxix.

[17] McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," 161-162.

[18] Yu Chih Huang et al., "Exploring the Implications of Virtual Reality Technology in Tourism Marketing: An Integrated Research Framework," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 18, no. 2 (2016): 116.

forum known as the E-Sangha, which was an online space where different members could discuss their beliefs or ideas with reference to Buddhism. Before delving into the virtual world of Second Life, or the E-Sangha, it is important to understand the context within which such a form of Buddhism emerged. Despite certain preconceived notions, Asian agency has also played an important role in global or modern Buddhism, and it is not merely a product of Western discourses of modernity.[19] As McMahan suggests, "the first moves in the 'modernization' of Buddhism were made . . . by Western Orientalist scholars in the nineteenth century."[20] Many of these western observers, including the Transcendentalists, touted Buddhism as a philosophical and ethical tradition that emphasized meditation as its central principle.[21] They felt that the "essentials of Buddhism" were to be found within its classical texts, and that Buddhism as it was practiced was "peripheral and corrupted."[22]

However, as mentioned earlier, this was not a straightforward process of oppression. Rather, McMahan argues that Asian reformers, such as Anagarika Dharmapala, were important figures in the reconstruction of Buddhism "along the lines of the more sympathetic Western Orientalist interpretation: as a rational, ethical philosophy in harmony with modern scientific knowledge."[23] Although it has been argued that both the East and West have influenced this new "sect" (to use Lopez's suggestion) of Buddhism, matters become more complicated when the use of technology is added into the mix. As these more "popular" representations of Buddhism are taken into consideration, Edward Said's work on orientalism inevitably becomes important. Although he was mostly concerned with the

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[19] McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," 160.

[20] McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," 161.

[21] McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," 161.

[22] McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," 161.

[23] McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," 162.

effects of European colonialism on Islam, his argument that "the colonizer . . . [created] an image or idea of the 'Orient'" to better control and maintain it, may be applied to Buddhism as well.[24] Questions regarding who gets to represent Buddhism, and whether such representations may be considered authentic are "linked to the history of Western colonialism *vis-á-vis* [*sic*] Buddhism and its native Asian locales."[25] While exploring the role that the Internet plays in the expression and practice of Buddhism, questions regarding identity, authenticity, and authority are critical. Despite Lopez's observation that one of the features of Modern Buddhism is that it "often exalts the individual above the community,"[26] it will become clear that this emphasis on the individual, which is a product of modernity, will still be placed within the larger context of collective discourse.

Avatars and the Virtual World of Second Life

One of the ways in which the Internet has played an important role in establishing individual identity, as well as a sense of community, is through the use of avatars in virtual worlds such as Second Life. Avatars, as described by Pullen, are "virtual bodies" which may "as a catalyst for the reformation of a decolonized identity that is not laden with the histories of oppression and colonization."[27] As suggested by Edward Said (1978), new media technologies can be significant in the process of constructing

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[24] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 123, quoted in Scott A. Mitchell, "Buddhism, Media, and Pop Culture," in *Buddhism in the Modern World,* ed. David L. McMahan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 313.

[25] Mitchell, "Buddhism, Media, and Pop Culture," 312.

[26] Lopez, *Buddhist Bible*, ix.

[27] Treva Michelle Pullen, "Skawennati's Timetraveller: Deconstructing the Colonial Matrix in Virtual Reality," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 12.3 (2016): 248.

identities of colonized peoples as they are able to learn more about them-
selves through such new forms of knowledge.[28] The ability to create an
avatar, thus one's identity, allows the individual to remove herself from
dominant narratives, and the emphasis is placed on the individual voices
and "decolonizing" narratives which allow for a more "fluid and evocative
presentation of [the] self."[29] Insofar as cyberspace provides users with an
open and free space, and the opportunity to engage with Buddhists and
non-Buddhists, the avatar does not necessarily annihilate the Buddhist
identity. Throughout his ethnographic work, Grieve mentioned that vir-
tual robes may be used as attire, which would help the Resident become
visibly Buddhist.[30] Since users of Second Life are allowed to chat, socialize,
and even buy or sell items, the appearances of the avatars can help Bud-
dhist groups identify and connect with each other.[31] The robes, for some,
"marked authentic Buddhist practice, and were a strategy by which they
differentiated themselves from the other Residents."[32] It should be noted
that the reconstruction or reclamation of Buddhist identity and space is
an integral part of modern Buddhism.

As argued by Lopez, "modern Buddhism does not see itself as the
culmination of a long process of evolution, but rather as a return to the
origin, to the Buddhism of the Buddha himself."[33] As such, the ability of

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[28] Pullen, "Skawennati's Timetraveller," 239.

[29] Pullen, "Skawennati's Timetraveller," 239-40.

[30] Gregory Price Grieve, "The Middle Way Method: A Buddhist Informed Ethnography of
the Virtual World of Second Life," in *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in
the Lotus*, ed. Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger (New York: Routledge, 2015),
35.

[31] Grieve, "The Middle Way Method," 32.

[32] Grieve found that the Agnostic Buddhist Group did not feel the need to wear robes, as
it did not meet their views on Buddhist practice. Grieve, "The Middle Way Method," 35.

[33] Lopez, *Buddhist Bible*, ix.

the avatar to reconstruct itself and its identity also encourages the process of modern Buddhism itself. For example, during his ethnographic work exploring the Shangrila region of Second Life, Grieve describes "standing in front of a wooden building, through a glass door of which [he] could see a long wooden altar with incense, candles, flowers, and a large statue of Shakyamuni Buddha."[34] This description of his *surroundings* points to the emphasis on the traditional figure of the Buddha, as well as other 'traditional' markers of Buddhism. Furthermore, the practices that Grieve analyzed highlight the ways in which people "imagined, enacted, embodied, and realized" these Buddhist practices on their own terms.[35] During his ethnographic research, Grieve and his team explored various Buddhist temples, witnessed discussions about Buddhism, and attended Dharma talks. He noticed that these social worlds dictated "the same ethical guidelines as . . . those of face-to-face" interactions.[36] Grieve insists that instead of thinking of the two worlds as completely distinct from each other, virtual worlds may be thought of as a "conventional social space, because they offer new social fields with differing social positions, lifestyles, values, and dispositions."[37] Understood in this way the virtual and the actual world exist in relation to each other, further emphasizing its compatibility with the doctrine of Buddhism.[38]

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[34] Grieve, "The Middle Way Method," 24.

[35] Grieve, "The Middle Way Method," 25.

[36] Grieve, "The Middle Way Method," 25.

[37] Grieve, "The Middle Way Method," 27.

[38] Grieve, "The Middle Way Method," 27.

The E-Sangha Forum

In addition to the Buddhist virtual reality offered by the Second Life plat-
form, Buddhist forums have also been influential in the process of modern
Buddhism. One such forum is the E-Sangha, which was a "large, transna-
tional, Buddhist Web Forum."[39] This web forum illustrates another im-
portant feature of modern Buddhism, as described by Lopez, which is a
shift away from the traditional leadership of the monastic community or
the clergy to the laypersons.[40] According to Lopez, modern Buddhism:

> blurred the boundary between the monk and the layperson, with
> laypeople taking on the vocations of the traditionally elite monks:
> the study and interpretation of scriptures . . . shifting emphasis
> away from the corporate community (especially the community of
> monks) to the individual, who was able to define for him- or herself
> a new identity that had not existed before[41]

Although this aspect of modern Buddhism aligns well with the avatars
created in virtual worlds like Second Life, the issues regarding authority
and identity are more pronounced when exploring the E-Sangha forum.
The forum created a dialogue among Buddhists online and offline due to
its part in the attempted establishment of Buddhist authenticity and au-
thority.

Through the maintenance and control of the content and Web at-
mosphere of the forum, the moderators and the founder of the E-Sangha

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[39] Laura Busch, "To Come to a Correct Understanding of Buddhism: A Case Study on
Spiritualizing Technology, Religious Authority, and the Boundaries of Orthodoxy and
Identity in a Buddhist Web Forum," *New Media & Society* 13.1 (2011): 59.

[40] Lopez, *Buddhist Bible,* xxxvii.

[41] Lopez, *Buddhist Bible,* xxxvii.

asserted their ideological and technological authority over the users of the forum.[42] Accordingly, they set the boundaries for the community, and as such, they broke away from "traditional forms of Buddhist institutional authority," by placing the majority of the control in the hands of the laypeople.[43] However, this does not indicate that the E-Sangha forum was free of hierarchical, authoritative figures.

In addition to shifting the authoritative roles from the monastic community to the laity, the E-Sangha aspired to fulfill another aspect of modern Buddhism, namely the emphasis on the "universal over the local."[44] Accordingly, the E-Sangha website supposedly "did not align itself with a particular ethnicity or sect; rather, it aimed to provide an online space where users could simply talk about Buddhism.[45] In the case of the E-Sangha forum, both aspects of modern Buddhism—authoritative role of the laypeople and the emphasis on the universal—led to issues regarding identity and authenticity. Although the E-Sangha website touted itself as "an inclusive, nonsectarian discussion forum," the website was anything but impartial.[46] This is apparent through its utilization of yet another feature of modern Buddhism: going back to the Buddhism of the Buddha, to the origins. This includes "the study and interpretation of scriptures," as stated earlier.[47] In its attempts at establishing authority, the E-Sangha's guidelines or rules were "placed within the spiritual framework of the

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[42] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 59.

[43] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 59.

[44] Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible,* ix.

[45] Jeannine Chandler, "Invoking the Dharma Protector: Western Involvement in the Dorje Shugden Controversy," in *Buddhism Beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States,* ed. Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie E.F. Quli (New York: SUNY, 2015), 86.

[46] Chandler, "Invoking the Dharma Protector," 86.

[47] Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible,* xxxvii.

Eightfold Path towards Buddhahood (a textual means of sanctifying the regulations to enact social control)."[48]

The implementation of the site's rules or guidelines in conjunction with the Eightfold Path was not a mere aesthetic move; rather, these different guidelines were interpreted and given descriptions by the website's creator and moderators.[49] This application of Buddhist guidelines "suggests that the rules themselves are fundamental to Buddhist practice."[50] Although certain rules simply connect Buddhist beliefs to guidelines for behaviour, others were implemented by the creator and the moderators in ways which defined their "ideological views regarding Buddhist beliefs and identity."[51]

Consider the following description under "Right View:"

> Members must not publicly disagree with doctrines considered Buddhist orthodoxy, which include karma, post-mortem rebirth and no-self.[52]

This indicates that the belief in karma, rebirth, and the *anātman* (or no-self) doctrine are central to Buddhism. While many schools of thought and sects within the Buddhist tradition would agree with these, Buddhism is not a homogenous tradition. Consequently, there may be individuals who do not completely agree with the guidelines of E-Sangha. For example, a Soto Zen monk expressed his belief that the concept of rebirth should not be taken literally. Unfortunately, as a result of his views (which did not align with those established by the E-Sangha website), he was banned

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[48] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 66.

[49] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 66.

[50] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 67.

[51] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 67.

[52] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 67.

from the forums.[53] What this illustrates, according to Laura Busch, is that "E-sangha's moderators and founder, through creating rules couched in Buddhist terminology, sanctify their right to suspend any member from the site who publicly discusses disbelief or difficulty with believing in E-sangha's orthodoxy," which even includes members from the monastic community.[54] In this manner, these authoritative figures maintain their ideological authority through technological control. This also legitimizes their views on what constitutes correct teachings, thus validating their roles as reliable or trustworthy sources of Buddhist knowledge.[55]

Issues Regarding Authenticity and Authority

The dynamics of Buddhist practice and the performative acts of power are present through both the forums and the virtual world of Second Life. Interestingly, just as the moderators and the founder of E-Sangha employed the Eightfold Path as the framework for their behavioural guidelines, so the avatars of the virtual world invoke their authenticity and authority through the "wearing of robes."[56]

Consequently, it may be inferred that although modern Buddhism places more emphasis on the individual and the layperson, there is still a need to trace back to the original or traditional markers of authority and authenticity, namely those representative of the monastics. Furthermore, as Grieve states, the online and offline worlds are simultaneously connected. This is best exemplified through the another rule under the guide-

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[53] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 67.
[54] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 67.
[55] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 68.
[56] Grieve, "The Middle Way Method," 35.

line concerning "Right View," indicating that members would not be al-
lowed to post any links to websites or books related to four particular
sects.[57] These included: "New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) and all other pro-
ponents of Dolgyal/ Shugden, Dark Zen, True Buddha School, [and] Aro
Ter/Flaming Jewel Sangha."[58] The aforementioned list of Buddhist schools
were not accepted by the E-Sangha.[59]

This particular guideline or rule, especially the exclusion of the New Ka-
dampa Tradition from the accepted community of the E-Sangha website,
is indicative of the ways in which the actual world affects the virtual
world, and creates a space for further discussion. The controversy sur-
rounding Dorje Shugden, considered to be "the 'Powerful Thunderbolt'
[or] a wrathful deity," has been an important topic for the Tibetan refugee
community for more than twenty years.[60] Yet, the Western world did not
know much about it until the summer of 1996, when followers of the New
Kadampa Sect publicly accused the Dalai Lama of "restricting their reli-
gious freedom."[61] The main issue was that the Dalai Lama had asked his
followers to abandon the worship of this particular deity, and his inten-
tions became much clearer after his exile to India.[62] Contrary to the views
of many other Gelug monks, the Dalai Lama did not see Shugden as a Bud-
dha; rather, he saw Shugden as "a worldly god, even an evil spirit, whose
worship promoted sectarianism in the refugee community and thus was

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[57] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 68.

[58] Dorje Shedrub (Founding Member / Contributor), "Announcement: ALL MEMBERS
READ – New Rules Effective 02-02-09," E-Sangha homepage, http://www.li-
oncity.net/buddhism/index (retrieved by Chandler, February 20, 2009), quoted in
Chandler, "Invoking the Dharma Protector," 90, n.25.

[59] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 68.

[60] Donald S. Lopez, "Two Sides of the Same God," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 7.3 (1998):
2.

[61] Lopez, "Two Sides of the Same God," 2.

[62] Lopez, "Two Sides of the Same God," 2.

inimical to the greater cause of Tibetan independence."[63] This created dissonance within the sect, but the Dalai Lama's position was given precedence when the "Tibetan government-in-exile" issued the following statement:

> "The government departments and their subsidiaries, as well as monastic institutions functioning under the administrative control of the Central Tibetan Administration, should be strictly forbidden from propitiating this spirit." Individual Tibetans, it said, must be informed of the demerits of propitiating this spirit, but be given freedom to "decide as they like." [*sic*][64]

As a result, one of the monks threatened the Dalai Lama's regulation and founded the New Kadampa Tradition in England. Accordingly, he centralized the worship of Dorje Shugden as the most important aspect of this new tradition.[65] These events raise questions related to identity, authenticity, and authority. Dorje Shugden belongs to the class of deities known as "'protectors of the religious law' or 'Dharma Protectors.'"[66] Yet, there is a doctrinal dispute concerning whether Shugden is a Buddha or a worldly deity,[67] as announced by the 14th Dalai Lama. There is also a political dimension to this controversy that stems from the historical emphasis of the Gelug sect's exclusivist orientation, which the Dalai Lama has rejected. Furthermore, this issue sheds light on the opposition against the Dalai Lama's "modern, ecumenical and democratic political vision."[68]

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[63] Lopez, "Two Sides of the Same God," 3.

[64] *World Tibet News*, September 21, 1996, quoted in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 192.

[65] Lopez, "Two Sides of the Same God," 3.

[66] David Kay, "The New Kadampa Tradition and the Continuity of Tibetan Buddhism in Transition," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12, no. 3 (1997): 280.

[67] Kay, "The New Kadampa Tradition," 283.

[68] Kay, "The New Kadampa Tradition," 283.

Despite its claim to be a nonsectarian and universal forum for Buddhists, by forbidding any links to the websites, books, or even the New Kadampa Tradtion's followers' websites, the E-Sangha forum "chose sides in the Shugden dispute."[69] In addition to illustrating how the offline world affects the online world, this particular example also shows how the two worlds may mirror one another. The increase in Western involvement since the public conflict in 1996 inadvertently fueled "sectarianism among conservative Tibetan Buddhists."[70] Jeannine Chandler argues that the "American cultural context has intensified the traditional sectarianism and factionalism of Tibetan Buddhism, as American converts 'choose sides' in disputes about which they know little."[71] Furthermore, she states that globalization via the Internet, as well as modern technology have allowed for this dispute to continue and intensify years after its major events took place.[72] Consequently, the debate has been taken up by "anonymous and inflammatory chat rooms of cyberspace."[73]

Consider the following excerpt from the archive of the E-Sangha forum, which highlights the concerns that the members of the E-Sangha had regarding the rules imposed by the creator and the moderators:

> Drama, drama, drama . . . Yes, I have read the rules of this forum, but maybe we should add the following Ten Commandments as an addendum:
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> 1. I am Buddha and I am a jealous god, and thou shalt have no other god before me.
> 2. Thou shalt not criticize the Dalai Lama.
> 3. Thou shalt not discuss Dzogchen.

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[69] Chandler, "Invoking the Dharma Protector," 86.

[70] Chandler, "Invoking the Dharma Protector," 80.

[71] Chandler, "Invoking the Dharma Protector," 80-81.

[72] Chandler, "Invoking the Dharma Protector," 84.

[73] Chandler, "Invoking the Dharma Protector," 85.

4. Thou shalt put down other people's whole lineages.

5. Thou shalt think that your teaching is the only way.

6. Thou shalt brag about how many empowerments and transmissions thou hast received.

7. Thou shalt make sarcastic remarks and devalue other people's spiritual realization.

8. Thou shalt turn Dharma into an egocentric spiritual trip.

9. Thou shalt close all the interesting threads.

10. Thou shalt turn a good topic into a battleground of personal attacks, instead of healthy view-sharing.

Maybe, I should start reading the Torah. The Ten Commandments in the Torah are WAY [*sic*] better.

P.S. Or maybe I should just go to sleep and wake up to see this thread closed just like all the other ones I wanted to read.[74]

As predicted by the individual who re-posted this thread, the moderators removed this comment within half an hour of its posting on the website.[75] What this particular thread indicates is that the E-Sangha moderators, in addition to their descriptions of "Right View," which prevents any association with the New Kadampa Tradition, denies the members' rights to any debate or dialogue regarding the Shugden dispute. In light of these arguments, it becomes evident that the E-Sangha forum's founder and moderators were participating in this discussion, while "adding fuel to the fire," as would be suggested by scholars like Chandler and Busch.

Additionally, this description, as part of the Eightfold Path framework, excludes and disparages the identity of the followers of the New Kadampa Tradition, while validating the proponents of the Dalai Lama.

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[74] James, 2009, https://esanghalert.wordpress.com/#comment-79.

[75] James, 2009, https://esanghalert.wordpress.com/#comment-79.

As a result, this new authoritative system is reminiscent of the traditional hierarchical structure of the monastic community. Furthermore, certain voices that wish to express a different form of Buddhism, not identified by E-Sangha moderators or its creator as authentic Buddhism, are silenced. For instance, any moderator with the authority to delete messages or threads, suspend an account, or block a user's IP address may do so if the rules of the forum are violated. Additionally, the "E-sangha's rules also state that the moderators have the right to take the above actions 'for any other reason with or without notice.'"[76] According to Al Billings' several articles on the E-Sangha debates in his blog, Pursuit of Mysteries, many statements from the ex-members of the forum demonstrate how "the moderators have complete technological and ideological power to determine the boundaries of Buddhist identity and appropriate Buddhist dialogue (which inevitably includes discussions on orthodoxy) and can exercise this control without insight from, or entering into dialogue with, their own online members." [77]

Therefore, the voices of those with a variety of opinions different from those of the moderators become marginalized, as they get eliminated from the dominant narratives present in the cyberspace of the E-Sangha. Consequently, the idea that the avatar delinks the individual from colonial modernity may hold some truth, but in the context of globalized and modern Buddhism, it becomes unclear who is speaking for whom. The debates and processes that take place on the Internet, in the forms of virtual worlds or online *sangha* forums like the E-Sangha, highlight the ways in which modern Buddhism or "modern Buddhisms,"

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[76] "Announcement: All members read – new rules effective 7-28-2008," E-Sangha, http://www.lioncity.net/buddhism/index.php?act=announce&f=22&id=43, quoted in Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 68.

[77] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 68. Al Billings' articles are still availale in his new blog: https://openbuddha.com/

as indicated by McMahan, are "multiple and complex."[78] Although Lopez indicates certain features of modern Buddhism,[79] there are still various interpretations and views in the Buddhist world that do not represent a complete consensus among all its members.

As illustrated by the Buddhist virtual world in Second Life, the robes indicated that practitioners viewed these markers of authenticity and authority with reverence. In contrast, the E-Sangha moderators required no monastic credentials to establish their authority over the members of the forum. Additionally, the E-Sangha forum had "a strict code regarding the use of monastic images for a member's avatar."[80] If a monk or nun wanted to present themselves via such images, they had to provide the administrators with a documented proof of their ordination.[81] By eliminating any content that disagreed with the views of the administrators of the E-Sangha Web forum and by restricting the presence of monastic figures, the moderators hoped to maintain their own technical and ideological control over this cyberspace. However, "discrepancies between a community narrative and its online organizational structure can create disdain among members and may lead to the failure of an online community."[82] Consequently, the E-Sangha forum ceased to exist in 2009.[83]

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[78] McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," 173.

[79] Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, xxxix.

[80] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 72.

[81] Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 72.

[82] In her article, Busch refers to Bennett's and Toft's (2008) research on social and political narratives and online communities. For more information, see: W. Lance Bennett and Amoshaun Toft, "Identity, Technology and Narratives: Transnational Activism and Social Networks," in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics,* ed. Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard, (London: Routledge, 2008), 246-260. Busch, "Correct Understanding of Buddhism," 68.

[83] Chandler, "Invoking the Dharma Protector," 86.

Conclusion

The online or virtual worlds are interconnected with the offline or actual worlds. They exhibit many of the features of modern Buddhism, such as an emphasis on laypeople over the monastic community, universality over particular geographical locations, and the original Buddhism of Sakyamuni Buddha. However, the suggestion by Lopez that Modern Buddhism "often exalts the individual above the community,"[84] is only true insofar as the monastic institution is considered. The Buddhist virtual worlds within Second Life, as well as the E-Sangha forum provide platforms for the congregation of an online *sangha.* Furthermore, the different performative acts (in the virtual worlds) and the guidelines (for E-Sangha members) highlight the complexities that have arisen since the origination of not just modern Buddhism, but Buddhism itself, as there are many different "Buddhisms."[85] Although the creation of the avatar allows its users to place themselves outside of the historical and sociopolitical processes that may define them in the offline or actual world, the Buddhist framework within which these avatars are constructed subject them to the new Buddhist identities that these users must take on.

Thus Grieve's and Campbell's assertion, that the two worlds mirror one another, is crucial in understanding the ways in which Buddhists interact in a globalized world. Although they are situated in an online community, the moderators of the E-Sangha illustrate how ideological and technical control can shape the boundaries of a Buddhist community and

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[84] Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, ix.

[85] Victor Sōgen Hori, "How Do We Study Buddhism in Canada?," in *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*, ed. John S Harding, Victor Sōgen Hori, and Alexander Soucy (Montréal: McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2010), 30.

identity, while also establishing their own authority (not based on monastic credentials). Furthermore, the E-Sangha's guidelines in conjunction with the Eightfold Path, point to the fundamental feature of modern Buddhism as seeking authenticity in the "original" Buddhism of the Buddha, and suggest the various ways different figures have attempted to establish their form of Buddhism as the "authentic" one. Moreover, the various discussions involving the members of the E-Sangha, as well as their role in the Shugden dispute, indicate that the process of modern Buddhism is neither homogenous nor passive. Modern Buddhism (whether it is practiced online or offline) is ever-changing, and the debates that various Buddhists engage in globally are perceptibly intensified and made available through the use of virtual space. Online religion is an integral part of modern Buddhist movements, and exemplifies the ongoing discourse regarding Buddhist identity, authority, and authenticity.

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