Indra’s Net is a metaphor for the reflective cosmological view that permeates the Hindu-Brahmanical world, symbolizing the universe as a web of transient connections and interdependencies. This conception was eventually absorbed into the early Mahayana philosophy. Essentially this book discusses the nature of online Buddhism and its evolution in terms of the transmission of meanings and practices through various communication networks over time. In the present time, the author tells us, the “Buddha’s concern with propagating his (doctrinal) message lives on in the wired world” (p. 4).

The book then discusses issues pertinent and apropos to the late modern world as practicing Buddhists (in diverse Buddhist cultural systems) confront a new lived space. In this changing milieu, cyber-Buddhism (with various Buddhist internet sites) has emerged since the 1990s as a response to the needs of an increasingly mobile and fragmented transnational (mostly urban) new social order. Arising from the experiences with modernity are new spatial possibilities engendered in large part by these hypertechologies, especially the internet; digitalization potentially and markedly transforms religious space. The book is a contribution to the realization of the transformative possibilities embedded in a postmodern digital religion following the trajectories of the ancient communicative systems. It extends these early philosophical traditions into a new world of communication via electronic space.

In general, it must be stated that the book is not new in its thematic coverage of cyber-Buddhism and the new (virtual) religious technologies of communication. The book though is intriguing in its use of identifying historical links to a new digital future. It is nevertheless rather fragmented in its argumentation and weakly supported by somewhat scattered use of theory. It nevertheless succeeds at another level as thought provoking, if somewhat speculative. Unfortunately, the work either is oblivious to or consciously omits other related thematic sources. As an example, one wonders why the author overlooked my earlier work on cyber-Buddhism.[1] This includes a not dissimilar consideration in regard to the way new electronic space/communications (in a postmodern urban milieu) has influenced the religious landscape and in the way we now perceive normative articulations of religious practice. Neither does the author make reference to my 2008 Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand (especially chapter 4), as it looks at a new (virtual) religiosity (especially chapters 5 and 6) regarding digital Buddhism, the changing nature of religiosity (how
devotees interpret meaning and practice in their religion), and the increased reliance on an electronic (communicative) space through the use of the internet.

Perhaps not surprisingly (as Daniel Veidlinger has worked with Gregory Grieve), Grieve’s work is well cited, though not his new work, *Cyber Zen: Imagining Authentic Buddhist Identity, Community and Practices in the Virtual World* (2016). But in discussing virtual (social) space and the implications for digital religion, the author should have referred to the pioneering work on virtuality (and the new possibilities of net life) in the 1990s by sociologists and cultural theorists, such as Rob Shields’s edited collection *Cultures of the Internet, Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*; the collection by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, especially chapters by Mark Poster and Kevin Robins; and work by Mark Nunes (his article “Jean Baudrillard in Cyberspace” and his new book, *Cyberspaces of Everyday Life*).[2] Indeed, we are at a time of importance in technological history, which arguably may be compared to the watershed emergence of an urban-centered merchant culture in tribal societies at the time of the Buddha (discussed in chapter 3 of Veidlinger’s book). It may be appropriate then to consider a new Jaspersian Axial Age where personalized transcendence and experience through the medium of new optical technologies replaces traditional embodied religious communities with online (web) communities. The discussion in chapter 2 on the Axial Age, given that the book is “suggestive,” could have taken this imagining a lot further than (an interesting) historical narrative (p. 229).

Veidlinger’s argument also needs to be framed in relation to textual Buddhism (orthopraxy and orthodoxy), as virtual/cyber communication challenges how we think, feel, and act on being religious. There is a broader ethnographic context missing in the book that needs to consider changes occurring in everyday practices (symbolism, meaning, and rituals). The net in fact produces multiple orderings of time and space that transcend online/offline boundaries (see the work of Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* [2000]). It is not enough to say that this communicative environment has the ability to shape ideas and the nature of the “self” (in a Buddhist sense) without considering how this is articulated on the ground and evidenced in social practice (p. 226). In a postmodern argument we can say that the Buddha, metaphorically speaking, is in the arcades and the shopping malls (“dreamscapes”), and in cyberspace as well as traditional centers of religious learning, village temples, frontier forest hermitages, etc. The author states (using a comparison to biological evolution) how the environment is a determinative process that we see occurring in the technological world as well; and of course there is ample evidence that technology has an effect on the way we perceive the world (that is, how we understand conventional reality). What should be taken into account here is the notion that Buddhism (as with other world religions) and religious change more generally could be seen as biosocial adaptations to changing environments (see Stephen Sanderson’s *Religious Evolution and the Axial Age: From Shamans to Priests to Prophets* [2018], though published too late for consideration by the author under review).

It is simply incorrect at one level to say that village or rural Buddhism in Theravada countries had little connection to the outside world until more recent innovations in telecommunications and to imply in general that the “rural environment” encumbers social relations with the world outside (p. 221). Theravadin villages in Southeast Asia have of course long been influenced by external agents and have undergone internal transformations through their mobile interactions with the outside world (Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burmese, Sinhalese, etc.), as Stanley Tambiah had earlier noted in his “caravans of history” in his book *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (1970),
cited by Veidlinger. But if we compare changes to urban political and ritual centers then we can make this distinction. Indeed, communicative networks (especially early modern systems, railways, printing, etc. brought about through influences of colonialism since the late nineteenth century) may have been limiting cultural change, but these did not create impermeable communities. This is why anthropologists (since Thomas Kirsch in 1977) have explained endogenous Buddhism/s as syncretic, consisting of interactive religious strands. [3] Perceiving Buddhism as ossified or impervious neglects the transformations as well as the transmissions by nomadic/missionary monks through various “way stations” (for example, Sinhalese Buddhism and Mon in Burma) and in the manner of regional dispersed segmented pupilages—a picture that is part of the mobile preteritic vitality of Theravada Buddhism. Here I can only speak of the “southern school” of Buddhism. However, what has occurred in late modern times is the speed of these interactions and social and cultural changes and in religiosity brought about by new electronic or virtual communications as articulated by such thinkers as Paul Virilio and more recently Thomas Sutherland in relation to spatial ecologies, speed-space, or time-space compression.[4] Indeed, though not considered in the book, this would be useful in a discussion of late modern hyper-communications to underpin the author’s argument. But to be fair, the author never claims to take a late or postmodern position in his analysis except in a fleeting reference to the present “postmodern era” and a mention of Jean-François Lyotard in relation to advances in communication and information technologies (pp. 146-47, 195).

Ancient capitalism is discussed in the book (chapters 1 and 4, mentioning early trade routes, religious crossovers, the fifth century BC, and the rise of an Indic entrepreneur urban-dwelling class) but not taken further in the discussion of late modern capitalism and implications for new communications theory. It may have been useful to consider how this is articulated within a Marxist logic (as in David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* [1989]). Veidlinger notes that as people become ever more digitally connected across the world (especially through the use of new fiber optics) “delivering messages at light speed” that “we can expect a radical shift in perspective amongst those who have access to this network” (p. 31). Speed (as mentioned above) is connected to time, the latter something the late modern cyber-Buddhist devotee has less and less of. Although not pursued, this argument to online access implies local/global inequalities in an information and communications network dominated by the reach and influence of global capital that privileges some classes (and nations) but not others and even allows authoritarian leaders to control information and pursue propaganda and misinformation. However, as in Thailand and other heavily regulated countries, people now have access to various alternative counter-statist electronic social media and are able to get around single gateways as in the use of a live OS that can be installed onto a USB drive to mask the host system information from both the ISPs and the websites. (These are systems that one can plug into any computer and boot as if it is an alternative operating system without damaging or changing the machine. It is alleged that none of the activity will be logged on the machine because it will bypass everything, except of course for RAM.) Cyberspace is potentially also then a (third) space of resistance. At the same time, relevant to this discussion, digital space also opens up the possibilities for the emergence of varieties of new Buddhism/s that may contest normative (place-based) religion.

The Buddhist notion of “selflessness” (chapter 6) is not just that there is no organic or psychological (ultimate) “self” (Atta) as Veidlinger notes but also that we should not become fixated on this notion of self/identity, which leads to the substantiated delusion of ownership or self-importance (pp. 180-81). There is a “one who knows” (citta) and a recognition of the truths of the human condition. Insight practice is to understand the changeability and ultimate emptiness of the *khandhas*, the five
elements that constitute the totality of an individual’s mental and physical existence. This all raises the question of how computer-mediated communication can enable the practitioner to become a “stream enterer” (Sotāpanna) and achieve the ultimate fruition and results of normative Buddhist practice.

We also need to keep in mind that there is not just one Buddhism but many Buddhisms, as the author includes in the book on his discussion on various vinayas, national Buddhism/s, and practices. Trevor Ling first referred to “Buddhisms,” in *Buddhist Trends in Southeast Asia* (1993), as a means to express the plurality and diversity of (Buddhist) religio-cultural forms within national contexts. Indeed, the emergence of cyber-Buddhism in the twenty-first century is one such reflection of a felt need in the late modern world, where devotees normally spend most of their time online. Tom Boellstorff’s book, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (2015) (especially pertinent is his chapter 5 on “self” and “personhood”), is a brilliant ethnographic analysis that would have nicely complemented the brief reference made to this virtual world in regard to Buddhist impermanence and to Buddhists engaged in it. Boellstorff notes the dilemma among some of his informants as they come to terms with their virtual and actual selfhoods.

As contemporary societies become more interconnected and intensified through globalization, Veidlinger claims, people become more aware of their own impermanence (annica), a condition “instantiated strongly on the Internet” (p. 180). Then, later, he notes that “we can see that the dynamic space opened up by computer-mediated communication is fostering an environment in which unprecedented opportunities emerge for the realization of core Buddhist concepts such as anitya (annica) and anatman (anatta)” (p. 197). Interesting as it may be to conjecture given the changing social space, as Buddhists is it feasible to envisage insight (or even Enlightenment) gained directly online by the “denizens of cyberspace” analogous to actual normative experiences gained from grounded Buddhist practice given that the core of Buddhism is located in realizing the truth of “suffering” or “unsatisfactoriness” (dukkha) (p. 164)? There is thus something utopic (or eutopic) about how this book portrays computer-mediated communication. Undergirding it is a belief that the internet may lead one to (a comfortable) transcendence and where (as I have earlier noted, and equally speculative) the new prophets of this new (postmodern) electronic religion are the Buddhist “webmasters,” now the religious specialists or “virtuosi” for giving definitions, even taking the place of place-based monks as disseminators of religious (insight) knowledge.[5]

Chapter 7 is a study of internet use and provides some interesting national data and related discussion, but again I have some discomfort in the conclusion to this chapter that the survey user-data about religious beliefs and online behavior implies that the more time spent on the internet, the “more likely one is to have an affinity for Buddhism,” and that this allows or affords its users to unwind the sense of attachment to individuality/self, or with the connection of online practice with the complexity of the Buddha’s teachings on Dependent Origination. I agree that there are arguments that this is of course “likely to play an important role in the attractiveness of Buddhism to the wired segments of society” (p. 219). In fact, online Buddhism is more likely to facilitate (virtual) connectivity and to lead to a new sense of religiosity, even to what we may refer to as postmodern Buddhism located in these virtual technologies for the communication of simulated religious ideas and practices. Being “online” is a medium of reproducing actual discourses that are generated within real-life (embodied) communities—at least for those who are able to have access to the internet. There are numerous examples of Buddhist teachers (mostly in the West) who now actively teach online (and posted as YouTube videos), who could have been used as ethnographic case studies. Face-
to-face interactions may now rarely take place, except through the virtual online (especially in the Covid-19 pandemic) using various cloud platforms.

It is the nature of the imagination that is key to understanding the new communicative technologies, a virtual potential new (third) space and one that potentially may generate not just cultural change but societal change as a whole. It is the totality of this axiological “radical interconnection” that is missing in the book (p. 220). Instead we are offered fragments of thought throughout the eight chapters. Nowhere do I get the sense that these new communications technologies can capture a sense of an exciting new (hyper-real) religiosity, or even religious environment reflecting the sociality in late modernity or postmodernity. However, we can envisage a Buddhism as some kind of “fractal dreaming” (Robins’s term) and in so doing using new electronic vectors posit a challenge to normative or orthodox Buddhism. Adam Possamai influenced by Baudrillard’s thinking termed “hyper-real religions” to those religions “created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers at a metaphorical level.”[6] These are cases where religions and popular culture are so intermingled that it becomes hard to find a sense of the actuality or “real” of religions and religiosity behind them. Possamai in fact identified the internet as a key factor in the transformation and growth of these hyper-religions. In other words (if I may be permitted to finish with Baudrillard), in this creation of a new heterotopic space of simulated digital religion, is this so extended from its original source of (communicated) meaning that we end in a more-real-than-real (hyper-real) simulacrum of Buddhism?

Notes


