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Tweeting the Dalai Lama, Are Cell Phones Becoming the New Vajras?

Ron Green [presented at the American Academy of Religion conference, Nov. 1, 2010]

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1. Introduction

On February 22, 2010 the 14th Dalai Lama joined the online microblogging site Twitter. Twitter is an internet based community, ranked the world’s third most used online social network by Compete.com. Members post messages called “tweets” that are displayed on to their profile pages and delivered to their subscribers, known as followers. The Dalai Lama reportedly joined Twitter after meeting the site’s founder, Evan Williams, although Mr. Williams posted on his own Twitter page that the Dalai Lama had laughed when he suggested the idea to him.¹ However, the account may have been set up one week before Williams met him and five hours after the seemingly dismissive tweet the @DalaiLama account was listed as confirmed authentic and began publishing messages.² Within a week, the Dalai Lama had over 100,000 Twitter followers.

So what if the Dalai Lama joins Twitter? Because the Dalai Lama is secular and spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism and people, and because he is perceived as the manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, his association with Twitter raises a number of questions concerning Buddhist soteriology. That is, through what means are people saved from suffering. Other learned Tibetan monks have recently adopted and adapted new technologies, apparently to disseminate the messages of the Buddha to a modern audience. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche has written and directed two dramatic feature films. His movie, *The Cup*, shows how monks’ obsession with satellite broadcasts of World Cup soccer lead to discovering ancient Buddhist teachings, both for the monks and the viewing audience. Since film in this case is the medium for visualization, it functions in a similar way to a tradition Buddhist mandala. Use of computers and cell phones in the process of awakening also raises questions about whether these devices can be considered ritual instruments, like the vajra, a handheld ritual instrument traditionally used in esoteric Buddhism of Tibet and elsewhere as a symbol of cutting through illusion. Can computers be considered a material cause for awakening, perhaps a cause that begins the process? Can there be a material cause for awakening?

¹ Even Williams, @ev, tweeted, “Met the Dalai Lama today in LA. Pitched him on using Twitter. He laughed.” 2:15 AM Feb 22nd (2010).

² http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/dalai_lama_joins_twitter_-_this_time_its_verified.php

2. History of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on Twitter

As of Monday October 18, 2010, eight months after it was opened, the Twitter account “@DalaiLama” had 925,364 followers, 36,763 lists following it and 0 lists it followed. It had made 322 Tweets. This is 29,385 more followers than it had one week earlier. Currently, the following is increasing by about this number each week.

There is also a twitter @hisholiness that provides Dalai Lama quotes. The biography on that page says, “daily Dalai Lama quotes. PLEASE NOTE, THIS IS NOT THE DALAI LAMA HIMSELF (see @dalailama instead).” It has 93,379 followers

The biography for @dalailama reads, “Welcome to the official twitter page of the Office of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.” According to the website dalailama.com, “The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (OHHDL), known in Tibetan as Kuger Yigtsang, is the personal office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It provides secretarial assistance to His Holiness and broadly speaking, is responsible for all matters related to His Holiness and acts on his behalf.”³ This implies that the tweets may be the words of the Dalai Lama but are being posted by his office acting on his behalf.

In February 2009, one year before His Holiness the Dalai Lama joined, Twitter closed a fake Dalai Lama page called @OHHDL. According to readwriteweb.com, “The company has been contacted by the real Dalai Lama’s office and the account has been closed. Twitter says that they are working to get the real deal set up with an account - there’s certainly demonstrated interest. At more than 16,000 followers in one weekend, the fake Dalai Lama was one of the fastest growing accounts that Twitter has ever seen.”⁴ Internet sources also say the fake Dalai Lama site is part of what spurred the creation of verified Twitter accounts.⁵

Other popular fake accounts of media personalities have continued to operate by opening regular internet sites spoofing Twitter accounts. A fake Twitter account for Steve Jobs, co-founder and chief executive officer of Apple Inc., after being booted from Twitter went on to enjoy popularity as a separate internet site, which incidentally depicts Mr. Jobs in drawing sitting in a lotus posture. It remains to be seen if parody Dalai Lama on Twitter sites will manifest. Others terminated by the organization include phony accounts for comedian Stephen Colbert and Bill Gates. Currently @God on twitter has nearly 58,000 followers.

There was also a fake Twitter account for philosopher Jürgen Habermas, @JHabermas. This is interesting in analyzing the Dalai Lama on Twitter in part because Habermas’ work is considered foundational for public sphere theories.⁶ Accordingly, public spheres emerged in the late 1800s as places that challenged the political hegemony of monarchs. The creation of these separate domains was accompanied by growing rates of literacy, accessibility to literature, and a new kind of critical journalism. Habermas joining Twitter might imply his support of the site and the

³ <http://www.dalailama.com/office>

⁴ http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/his_holiness_the_14th_dalai_la.php

⁵ <http://mashable.com/2010/02/22/dalai-lama-twitter/>

⁶ Habermas, Jürgen, Thomas Burger, translator. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989.

internet in general as a potentially revolutionary public sphere challenging bourgeois ideology. Might the same be said in Buddhist terms of the real participation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama? We are currently experiencing a new set of social changes corresponding to information and technology potentially opening new avenues for negotiating social meanings. In this case it could be seen along with film as a fresh realm through which ideas about what constitutes Buddhism emerge. If so, the mediums of computers and cell phones indeed replace or supplement tradition instruments such as prayer wheels and vajras.

A week after the account began posting, the *Chicago Tribune* observed the Dalai Lama and Conan O'Brien joined Twitter the same week.⁷ Now, @DalaiLama has 937,049 followers while @ConanOBrien has 1,749,937, 812,888 more. Conan has the 19th most followed Twitter account. The Dalai Lama is number 293. Numbers 1, 2 and 3 are Lady Gaga, Britney Spears and Ashton Kutcher, each with around 6 million followers.⁸ This information might help us understand what Twitter is emerging to be, who uses it and in what ways, and how this figures into the Dalai Lama's use of it.

In April 2010, at Chirp, the official Twitter developer conference, Twitter revealed for the first time some statistics on its site, users, and growth. At that time, they reported Twitter had nearly 106 million members, which compares to Facebook at 500 million. Of Twitter's active users, 37 percent use their phone to tweet.⁹ 97% of Twitter users have less than 100 followers. 40% of users follow at least 10 user accounts. Twitter limits the number of characters that can be used in a single tweet to 140. Users are sending 55 million tweets per day. Its search engine gets over 600 million queries per day.¹⁰

The first two weeks of @DalaiLama tweets, from February 21 to March 4, 2010, were all links to webcast links. The first seemingly personal message came on March 5th. It read, "Compassion should be unbiased and based on the recognition that others have the right to happiness, just like yourself." For the next week, until March 12, most tweets were still web links. Currently, out of 322 tweets, about 1/3 of them, 112, are web links. In the remaining 210 tweets, science is mentioned 5 times; religion 10; compassion 56; love 33; peace 28; meditation 0; merit and karma 0; nirvana 0; bodhisattva 0; Buddha 0; Buddhism 0, although Buddhism is the major topic of the linked webcasts.

All of the personal messages so far can be seen as advice about ethical conduct through compassion. Two reasons for this can be found in the messages: 1. to help others change the world to a more peaceful and happier place and 2. to help yourself become a more peaceful and happier person. Examples can be seen in the following.

Sept. 20, "If we change inside and disarm ourselves by dealing constructively with negative thoughts and emotions, we can literally change the world."

⁷ February 26, 2010.

⁸ <http://twitaholic.com/top300/followers/>

⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/14/twitter-user-statistics-r_n_537992.html

¹⁰ <http://www.viralblog.com/research/twitter-facts-figures/>

Oct 12, “Ultimately, the source of happiness and joyfulness is within ourselves.”

Oct 18th, “According to my own experience, the highest level of inner calm comes from the development of love and compassion.”

It is not explained if inner calm, happiness and joyfulness are related to becoming a Buddha or simply enjoying oneself.

3. Buddhist soteriology and ways of “making a connection” to the Buddha

Traditionally Buddhists have attempted to form a tie or make a connection (結緣, *J. kechien*) with the Buddha or a buddha as a part of attaining salvation from suffering. This salvation is viewed as potentially occurring soon, in a future life or after rebirth in the Pure Land. In Esoteric Buddhism there is typically a consecration ceremony for making a connection.¹¹ How this is done and what objects are used to make the connection to the Buddha is in part dependent on the beliefs associated with particular historical traditions of Buddhism. In broad terms attaining salvation has been seen by some scholars as occurring through one’s own efforts or by relying on the other power of a savior bodhisattva or Buddha.¹² In the former case, one way people in Japan and China have made a connection with the Buddha is by forming compassionate charitable organizations called *chishiki* (J.) or *zhishi* (C.), which translates the Sanskrit *mitra*, acting in friendship. This way of making a connection relies on the act of giving (*S. dana*), which is one of the six *paramitas* or perfections leading to *prajñā*, the insightful wisdom of the Buddha and bodhisattvas. This accords with the Dalai Lama’s messages on Twitter. Those hoping to make a connection through other power have done so by venerating relics of the Buddha or masters, by circumambulating stupas, through concentration on the beings represented in a mandala and by the use of ritual implements such as the vajra and prayer wheels. Though such categories as self power and other power are useful in understanding different approaches, they are far from absolute. Buddhist traditions typically mix elements of self-power and other-power. Making a connection through the internet and the Dalai Lama’s emphasis on compassion could be seen as both. His words can be motivating and awe inspiring, considered mundane and sacred simultaneously. This is necessarily so of a bodhisattva, the intermediary between ordinary life and awakening. In addition, the sacred object inside a stupa is often a written scripture. Inside the prayer wheel is a slip of paper with a written mantra. The mantra repeats with every spin as does the written verses on a prayer flag as it flaps in the wind. Perhaps in cyberspace electronic words pulsate endlessly.

Traditionally the median of paper and ink has been extremely important to both lay and monastic Buddhists. A copy of the *Diamond Sūtra* found at Dunhuang at the beginning of the 20th century

¹¹ It is also mentioned in Zhiyi’s *Mohe zhiguan* (摩訶止觀, *Stopping and Seeing*) T 1911.46.80a16.

¹² These categories were suggested by the 14th century Japanese Buddhist historian Gyōnen (1240-1321).

is said to be “the earliest complete survival of a dated printed book.”¹³ The colophon at the end reads: “Reverently made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents on the 15th of the 4th moon of the 9th year of Xiantong [11 May 868].” As with the internet, Buddhist made early use of the new medium. A major practice in East Asian Buddhism continues to be hand copying and distributing sūtras for the health and merit of friends and family members. Both the act of copying and that of distribution is seen as efficacious. For centuries this was done under imperial patronage by hundreds of people at a time for the physical health of a royal family member, to stop a drought or to insure the prosperity of the state. Distributing printed versions of scriptures is still considered a way to build merit. With recent and ongoing digitization of the 88 volumes of the Chinese Buddhist canon there may be karmic potential in sending virtual copies to millions of people through e-mail spam. Perhaps a link to the canon would suffice.

In contrast, many traditions place importance on holding a text and looking at the written words while chanting them. Physical scriptures including the *Prajna Paramita Sūtra* have been considered sacred objects and sometimes further represented in paintings as supra-mundane anthropomorphic beings. In medieval Japan to transfer merit and spiritual power in order to aid a sick person, a sheet of paper was made from letters that person had written and a scripture copied on it. The personally used paper was said to carry the soul of the person.¹⁴ Compared to paper texts, in some ways the internet may appear to depersonalize the medium, which in the above cases can be seen as more important than the message or at least inseparable from it. It is hard to imagine treating a sick person’s iPod as carrying his or her soul or an object worthy of veneration. It might however be considered the tool for connecting to the evanescent cyber-realm where spiritually charged things neither abide nor do not abide in a way we typically think of as physical. Also, a recent *Wall Street Journal* article suggests, “...an MP3 player is a thing that plays MP3s, but an iPod has always been a thing that provides an identity. Perhaps this is what the “i” has really stood for all along. Since the object has an aura, our listening with it feels more real and more authentic as well.”¹⁵

4. Conclusion – is new media changing Buddhism?

In light of these developments, we might pose the following questions and attempt possible answers.

1. Does it affect the messages of Buddhism to receive them in 140 characters?

¹³ In the words of the British Library, <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/diamondsutra.html>

¹⁴ This information is found in a paper on medieval Japanese literature and religion by Shinobu Apple, delivered at the Conference on South Asia, Madison, Wisconsin, October 15, 2010.

¹⁵ Wittkower, D. E. “Apple Announcement: Why iPods Are Devouring Your Life” in *The Wall Street Journal*, September 1, 2010. <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/09/01/apple-announcement-why-ipods-are-swallowing-your-life/>

2. Does it affect the messages of Buddhism to receive them between those from Ashton Kutcher and Justin Bieber on a lighted screen of intentionally disposable materials?
3. Why does His Holiness the Dalai Lama or the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama seem to prefer Twitter to Facebook?
4. Is tweeting Buddhism an oxymoron?

A number of articles and books recently report medical findings that internet and cell phone use rewires the brain causing attention deficit problems.¹⁶ *New York Times* bestselling author Nicholas Carr worries about the affect of Twitter alerts blinking on screen, competing with other running programs and incoming messages for a piece of our mind. He quotes science fiction writer Cory Doctorow saying we are plugged into an “ecosystem of interruption technologies.”¹⁷ Dr. Elias Aboujaoude, director of the Impulse Control Disorders Clinic at Stanford University stated, “If our attention span constricts to the point where we can only take information in 140-character sentences, then that doesn’t bode too well for our future.”¹⁸

If the Dalai Lama has gone online in order to bring a message to more people, Facebook might seem a better blogging site than Twitter in that it has a much larger membership and no word limit. Generally, Facebook can be seen as more inviting of interactions whereas Twitter is a space conducive of corporate and self promotion. While the previous studies imply microblogging is more harmful, the 140-character limit makes for better aphorisms, which may be the point. In contrast, Facebook can be seen as being more gaudy and spectacle-like.

The charge that new media is making us attention deficit and causing the mind to jump from link to link corresponds to the Buddha’s general critique of the mind’s activity as stated in the *Dhammapada* and elsewhere, it “jumps from here to there like a monkey searching for fruit in the forest.”¹⁹ Accordingly the remedy remains Buddhist practices such as *vipassana*, mindfulness meditation sustained on a single activity such as breathing, the opposite of multitasking. But how can people be convinced this will ultimately make them happier when technology is immediately seductive while *vipassana* is not? More so than Twitter, Facebook’s nature is to encourage people to expand upon entries. Twitter is more focused. Expansion is related to the mind’s tendency to conceptually elaborate, called *pranacha* in Sanskrit. Cyclically this encourages desire and is encouraged by desire. Likewise, if an iPod is a means of forming and perpetuating an egocentric self identity, would a Buddhist not discourage its use? One way of looking at the Dalai Lama’s tweets is that they are aimed at those likely most prone to these problems, Twitter users as opposed to Buddhists in a monastery where the message remains much different. In Buddhism generally, extreme self-absorption is ignorance resulting in attachments, repulsions and suffering. The antidote to this is to realize our dependence on and coexistence with all beings, actualized through compassion.

How are the messages of Buddhism being changed by and for new media? Recently an increasing number of books and articles have appeared about the relationship of Buddhism and

¹⁶ “Attention loss feared as high-tech rewires brain” November 15, 2009, by Benny Evangelista, SF Chronicle Staff Writer.

¹⁷ Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows, What the internet is doing to our brains*. W. W. Norton & Company, June 2010, 91.

¹⁸ http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-11-15/business/17179391_1_texting-tweets-attention

¹⁹ *Dhammapada*, verse 334.

science, partly because the Dalai Lama is funding new research in this area. In these there can be found portrayals of the Dalai Lama as having been long interested in science and technology along with Gendun Chopel (1903-51) and other modern Tibetan Buddhists. The Dalai Lama has spoken of his predecessor, the 13th Dalai Lama as also having been keenly interested in science and technology. According to Donald Lopez Jr., in these new writings about Buddhism and science, meditation is denigrated to a practice simply for relaxation and removing stress. The Buddha is said to have been empirically oriented. Missing from these writings are references to traditional Buddhist deities, nirvana, becoming a Buddha, merit and karma.²⁰ Such a change in emphasis seems to be confirmed by many of the Dalai Lama's posts that not only fail to mention these traditional elements but devalue religion. He tweets:

July 22nd, "I sometimes say that religion is something we can perhaps do without. What we cannot do without are the basic spiritual qualities."

August 25th, "There must be a way of promoting human values without involving religion, based on common sense, experience and recent scientific findings."

The focus by @DalaiLama should come as no surprise in light of the traditional view that he is the manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Scriptures including the *Lotus Sūtra* explain such beings manifest solely for the purpose of bringing the Dharma to sentient beings. They do this through Skillful Means, which is to say by tailoring their message according to each individual's capacity and tastes that develop in specific social contexts. In this way, the bodhisattva lures people towards awakening while they remain quite unaware of it. If this is now occurring through Twitter it brings us back to the issue of the mode and means of Buddhist soteriology in the current age. As with the films of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Twitter may be a new way of discovering ancient Buddhist teachings. Accordingly, we might answer the question asked in the *Chicago Tribune* about his Twitter account, "If you follow the Dalai Lama, does that make you a Buddhist?"²¹ Maybe it does, even if you don't know it.

²⁰ Donald Lopez Jr., *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, University Of Chicago Press, 2008.

²¹ "Conan, Ozzie and the Dalai Lama: Together on Twitter" by Rob Manker, *Chicago Tribune* said February 26, 2010, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-02-26/news/ct-talk-celebrities-on-twitter-0226-20100225_1_dalai-lama-buddhist-leader-conan-o-brien, accessed Oct. 22, 2010.