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**Title:** Discovering Buddhism Online : A Translocative Analysis of Tibetan Buddhist Forum Discussions

**Year:** 2018

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Sharapan, M. (2018). Discovering Buddhism Online : A Translocative Analysis of Tibetan Buddhist Forum Discussions. Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, 13, 79-98. <https://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/article/view/23845/17587>

## Discovering Buddhism Online

### A Translocative Analysis of Tibetan Buddhist Forum Discussions

Maria Sharapan

#### Abstract

The study investigates how tenets, meanings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism are re-contextualized by non-Tibetan students of online courses offered by a major Tibetan Buddhist organization. The research adopts transcultural and translocal perspectives and aims to enrich the understanding of how Tibetan Buddhism is establishing itself globally through online facilities. A 'translocative' analysis, suggested by Tweed (2011) for the study of Buddhism, is employed as the main lens for analysing the online program's closed forum discussions. The data analysis reveals general trends in the development of Tibetan Buddhism as a transnational religion, and invites an extension of Tweed's (2011) model.

#### Keywords

religion online; Buddhism in the West; Tibetan Buddhism; Buddhist postmodernism

#### 1 Twenty-first century Shangri-la

The focus of this study is the process of negotiation and adoption of Tibetan Buddhism<sup>1</sup> in the twenty-first century, reflected in forum discussions of an online program offered by one of the largest global Tibetan Buddhist organizations. Over the next sections I will give a brief overview of the global spread of Tibetan Buddhism, the emergence of the religion in online space and some theoretical viewpoints shaping the focus of the study. Tweed's translocative analysis (2011) is presented in connection with these viewpoints and employed to approach the empirical data, which are discussed according to its points. The forum discussions support and illustrate Tweed's (2011) five-point lens and evoke an additional point to his analysis: *the flow of creed*.

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1 Here Tibetan Buddhism refers to what is also called North Buddhism or Vajrayana, and comprises the forms of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition spread to Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, areas of Russia, Nepal, and India

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The major encounter between the West<sup>2</sup> and Buddhism as a religion to adopt happened in the late nineteenth century. Facing the challenges of colonialism, missionary pressure and rationalism, as well as driven by internal societal forces, some prominent Asian modernists of the time initiated a reformation of Buddhism. On the other side, many Western intellectuals, losing interest in Christianity and driven by the ideals of European Enlightenment, projected their ideas of a better spirituality onto the co-created Buddhist modernism (McMahan 2008). In this process, ritual and recitation began to be surpassed by meditation and teaching the *dhamma* to lay people, and the doctrine was reconsidered as compliant with the contemporary scientific thought. The new Buddhism negotiated by East and West was a compromise between spirituality and rationality, entrenched in Western modernist thought, spiced by romanticism, and guided by the contemporary socio-political trends (Cox 2013; McMahan 2008). However, this New Buddhism was a remote picture of the Buddha Dharma<sup>3</sup> practiced in secluded and medieval Tibet at that time.

Unlike Theravada Buddhism and Zen, Tibetan Buddhism had not been modified to suit Western sensibilities and, as McMahan (2008) puts it, was simply “thrust into abrupt confrontation with modernity.” (p. 247) It was far from secular, rich in ritual and esoteric elements, such as deities and mantras, and intensely pre-modern. Regardless of its idiosyncrasies, Tibetan Buddhism found its devoted and ardent propagators among Western intellectuals, who have largely contributed to the media portrayal of Tibetan Buddhism through mass culture, film, popular literature and celebrity endorsement. Since the 1950s, when the first seeds of Tibetan Buddhism were planted in the US and Europe, all schools (*Gelug*, *Kargyu*, *Sakya*, *Nyingma*, and *Bön*) have attracted loyal followers among non-Tibetans. Nowadays Tibetan Buddhist groups operate even in the smallest Western countries, and geographical boundaries have become merely conventional for established Buddhist organizations, largely due to online facilities.

Although only a small fraction of internet users are Buddhists, there are, perhaps, as many representations of Buddhism online as there are means of technologically mediated communication. The internet recreates and modifies the habitual ways we understand religion, accommodating educational, ritualistic, and community-forming aspects of religious practice, and possibly hides potential pitfalls, such as turning followers away from real-time religious groups (Campbell 2004). Following Helland’s (2004) differentiation between *religion online* and *online religion*, and his anticipation of closer merger of the two (Helland 2005), the content of this study mostly represents religion online. Although the forum discussions do offer space for interactive participation, the forum is closely connected to the courses, offered by the established organization.

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2 Here “West” includes traditionally non-Buddhist industrialized countries of Europe, North America, and Australia

3 Here *dharma* (Sanskrit), or *dhamma* (Pali), refers specifically to the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni, forming Buddhism as a religion. However, the term is also used with respect to other Indian spiritual traditions, referring to some cosmic order of phenomena.

Veidlinger (2015) suggested a possible link between becoming Buddhist, internet usage, and the Buddhist philosophical tenets, such as no-self. His analysis revealed that the number of ascribed Buddhists on MySpace was twice as large as that in Pew Survey 2007, whereas for other religions the ratio was proportionate (Veidlinger 2015). He also found out that Buddhism was likely to be listed as an interest in the profiles of individuals, who did *not* claim to be Buddhist, whereas, for example, an avowed Catholic was not necessarily interested in Christianity, according to their profile. Whether his suggestion was true or not, it makes sense to assume that the internet plays a serious role in forming and maintaining a Buddhist identity and worldview. This study looks at how Tibetan Buddhist identity and worldview are adopted in the process of online interactive education, as reflected in forum discussions. The theoretical frameworks for this analysis are discussed below.

## 2 Across cultures and localities

The growing influence of online communication has been among the key factors, employed for the theorization of culture and cultural identities as flexible instead of fixed. However, the online does not exist in separation from the modern offline world, which is characterized by global cultural *flows*. Appadurai (1996) presented these flows in five intertwined dimensions: *ethno-*, *media-*, *techno-*, *finance-*, and *ideo-scapes*. As a general perspective for studying culture in the world of *flows*, Welsch (1999) introduced the concept of *transculturality*, criticizing the essentialist envisioning of cultures “in the form of islands and spheres” (Welsch 1999, p. 197) for its inaccuracy and creating a fruitful ground for conflict. He claimed that the concepts of *interculturality* or *multiculturalism* are not devoid of the same flaws, because they are based on the same “island premise.” (p. 196) By contrast, *transculturality* is grounded in the reality of cultures in the modern world, marked by cultural exchange, freedoms and flows. Despite being critical of globalization as a form of cultural merging, Welsch embraced globalizing tendencies together with particularism in the picture of “entanglement, intermixing and commonness.” (p. 205) Bergmann (2004) argued in favour of transculturality as a more accurate lens for modern scholars in religion, than the prevalent essentialist perspective.

When it comes to media phenomena, Hepp (2009) introduced an extended conceptual network for transcultural or translocal approach, which he sees as focusing on connectivity rather than locality. According to his paradigm, the context for this study is a deterritorialized religious cultural thickening, with its specific cultural patterns and power relations. He approaches an example of such in his case study of a Catholic media event (Hepp & Krönert 2009), which revealed a striking plurality of individualized variations of belief and value systems, gathered under

the same umbrella, embracing multiple nations and societies. Hepp & Krönert (2009) also highlighted the role of socio-political institutions in forming the basis for a transcultural mindset, resonating with another study of a forum on Middle East issues (Schachtner 2015). Despite transculturality becoming especially prominent in virtual space (Wilhelm 2008), Schachtner's analysis showed that virtual environment *per se* was a weak factor in creating conditions for a transcultural mindset, giving more emphasis to socio-political factors and institutions.

Viewed this way, culture, religion and identity are constantly evolving, shaped by various factors and *flows* that affect them. They are reflected in and enhanced by technologically-mediated communication, but rooted in real world processes and institutions. These theoretical viewpoints support and echo with the *translocative* analysis in studying contemporary Buddhism, suggested by Tweed (2011). As Tweed (2011, p. 20) critically points out:

Most prevailing interpretive models, which are borrowed from scholars not trained in religious studies, remain indifferent or hostile to religious practice, as with many poststructuralist and postcolonial frameworks, or specialists draw on models from religious studies that commit the interpreter to a static and bounded notion of culture that offers little aid to those who want to study the dynamics of religious practice in the era of global flows.

The approach that Tweed (2011) suggests instead is linked to his research in religious studies, as well as three basic principles of Buddhist philosophy: suffering (*duḥkha*), no-self (*anātman*), and impermanence (*anitya*). The Sanskrit word *duḥkha* refers to *dissatisfaction* or *anxiety*, and the very idea of religion is to “confront suffering.” (Tweed 2011, p. 21) The idea of *no-self* implies “there is no substantial and enduring stuff”, (p. 23) including ourselves, which we tend to perceive as solid and permanent. This concept challenges the idea that things, including religions, have *essence*. This resonates with Bergmann (2004) suggesting: “The postulate that tradition has one single essence is a social construction.” (p. 145) This “state of flux” (Tweed 2011, p. 23) is also reliant on the third principle, *impermanence* (*anitya*), which suggests that every phenomenon we observe is in constant state of change and decay, obvious or subtle.

Based on these premises, he proposed five axioms, which resonate with the previously mentioned frameworks. They represent five points to consider and be mindful of when studying contemporary Buddhism, reflected in the following gists<sup>4</sup>: 1. Migration, settlement and traces. “Follow the flows of people, artefacts, institutions and practices.” (p. 25) 2. Those present and absent. “Who is there? Who is not there? ... Who haunts the landscape?” (p. 25) 3. All religion's components (“stories, moral codes, artefacts, architecture, and rituals”) and objects of senses (“sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing”) (p. 25) 4. Expanding temporal and geographical

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4 The further sections presenting the results follow Tweed's original names for the axioms instead

boundaries. The scope of our analysis can “sometimes be larger and sometimes smaller than the nation-state.” (p. 25; Hepp 2009) 5. Role of “legal codes and institutional structures” (p. 25) in the flows of religion and practice.

Generally, the five axioms contribute to a fuller understanding of modern-day Buddhism in its complexity, embracing all seeming contradictions, all observable actors and entities involved and left aside, the historical and migrational vicissitudes, and current manifestations. This approach includes the understanding of changeability, plurality, institutional factors and global cultural flows. However, as I was analysing the forum discussions, I could not but pay attention to one prominent factor of participants’ discovering Buddhism. It was about how the students negotiate Buddhist beliefs, values, and conceptual network against (and alongside) their own worldview. With these premises in mind, the further sections of the study aim to answer the following research question: RQ1. *How is Tibetan Buddhism negotiated, re-contextualized and adopted among non-Tibetans, as reflected in the online forum discussions?*

### 3 Approaching the data

The organization chosen for the present study, the *Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition* (FPMT), was created in 1970s by Lama Yeshe (deceased) and his disciple Lama Zopa Rinpoche. As of September 2017, the network includes 161 centres and projects in 38 countries, and contributes to “preserving and spreading Mahayana Buddhism worldwide.” (FPMT Mission statement<sup>5</sup>) Belonging to the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism<sup>6</sup>, the organization declares fulfilling the Dalai Lama's wishes to be “the highest priority.” (Lama Zopa Rinpoche, quoted in Vast Vision<sup>7</sup>) The organization offers a range of onsite and online educational courses, from beginner level to advanced. An academic inquiry into a student forum of a mainstream organization like FPMT can give a solid understanding of contemporary global Tibetan Buddhism.

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5 <http://fpmt.org/fpmt/fpmt-mission-statement/>

6 The term Mahayana does not refer to Tibetan Buddhism alone. It also includes East Asian forms of Buddhism, originating in the Sanskrit tradition, such as Zen / Chan and Pure Land Buddhism. It is these branches of Buddhism, which are often referred to as ‘Mahayana’ in research, while Tibetan Buddhism is named ‘Vajrayana’ within this distinction.

7 <http://fpmt.org/fpmt/vast-vision/>

### 3.1 Ethics

The latest Ethical Guidelines from Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR 2012) offer detailed questions for a researcher to consider, above all concerning intrusion and identifiability. Richards (2015) emphasizes the importance of acceptance to any environment, online or offline. Access to the discussion boards was negotiated with the administration of the Online Learning Center, which was informed about the research objectives and practicalities. The staff were cooperative and helpful, but also mindful to protect the safe environment for open discussion. Almost all participants use either their real names or Tibetan 'dharma names', often accompanied by their real picture. All the names used in Results are coded names, which render participant's gender and origins. Although the forum is protected from unregistered public use, registered users can identify their comments. I contacted the participants I quoted to make sure they consented to me using their words for the study. In cases when I did not receive an answer, I used a paraphrased quotation, rendering it to be unidentifiable by the forum search engine.

### 3.2 Approach

Social constructionism was the paradigm framing the analysis, focusing on collectively created and transmitted meaning (Patton 2015). Grieve (2015) draws a clear parallel between social construction and ethnography on one side and Buddhist concept of two truths, absolute and conventional, on the other. While absolute truth refers to the nature of reality, beyond conceptual description, the mundane reality is interpreted as conventional truth, and is embedded in how it has been and is being constructed by participants (Grieve 2015). From this perspective, the closed forum represents a type of a co-constructed reality, shared by individuals, maintaining their own respective paradigms. Tweed (2011) connected his seeing phenomena as constructions in-flux not only to (Buddhist) philosophy, but also to ethics, suggesting his analysis as a more moral alternative to paradigms “that privilege stasis, homogeneity, and purity.” (Tweed 2011, p. 27)

For a more accurate understanding of culture, Hepp (2009) suggested analysing patterns of a) thinking, b) discourse, and c) practices, as its interconnected representations. Following this approach, I analysed not only what the participants wrote, but also how their thinking manifested through it, and what practices or lifestyle they reported to follow.

### 3.3 Analysis

This data-driven study employs thematic analysis with analytical coding (Richards, 2015) to identify central themes. Silverman (2015) sees certain benefits in using naturally occurring data in

contrast to research-provoked data, for obtaining novel insights, less induced by the researcher's previous assumptions. In the wake of internet research on Buddhism, Hayes (1999, p. 176) described the benefits of naturally occurring data found in email discussions, chats and forums. He noted that: “Electronic media provide a way of addressing issues and seeking the opinion of other people without actually having to meet those other people. [...] Few other media offer such combination of intimacy, immediacy and anonymity.” Unlike a number of studies approaching Buddhist forums (eg. Sul & Bailey, 2013; Busch, 2010), this one is looking at a closed forum, facilitating discussion between registered students and mentors of FPMT online programs. The mentors, or 'Elders', are six Westerners, who have accomplished FPMT programs and often function as instructors on FPMT modules. The forum has been available since 2009 and lists about 1000 discussion threads, consisting of 0-20 answers. I went through the conversations, arranging the name of the post, its content, relevant quotes, and emerging themes into a table with over 200 pages. Then the themes were classified into broader categories and the data were interpreted according to the theoretical points discussed above.

## 4 Discovering Buddhism with FPMT

### 4.1 The general overview of the forum

The modern allowances of storage and exchange of information create a truly unprecedented opportunity to study the *dharma*. A twenty-first century Buddhist is offered numerous benefits. S/he receives the teaching from any master recorded, dead or alive, Asian or Western, streamed or saved; downloads it, uploads it, shares it with others, bookmarks it, synchronizes it on all devices; at will s/he surrounds her-/himself with the *dharma* through laptops, smartphones, Youtube, Kindle, Dropbox, Netflix, Facebook. Users of the FPMT forum liberally rely on modern tools to learn about traditional Tibetan Buddhism. For many students, the online format is the only possibility to access structured information on Buddhist theory and practice, due to remoteness, disability or social anxiety. Throughout the pages of discussion, students express gratitude to the online learning modules and the forum for availability, convenience and structure: “I'm grateful to FPMT people that's [sic] giving me and others this opportunity to receive these precious teachings online, I wouldn't have it otherwise,” says J. Pablo. However, a clear note of dissonance is many people's desire to join a physical community and find a flesh-and-blood teacher:



“I attend classes regularly, study commentary and listen to books on CD constantly, attempt to meditate every day, created an altar, and try very hard to put what I learn into practice. That's all great but what I really really want is a teacher; an actual person to talk to about all of these questions I have,”

says Teresa Lawrence, who was an active forum user in 2010.

The forums function greatly as a supporting platform for clarifying the modules, readings, answering pressing questions, in a very human, very personal way. The study modules seem well adjusted to a habitual Western format: separate programs for beginners, for those interested to discover more, for advanced students and for those dedicated to practice. A pseudo-academic format helps to outline the study, and re-establish the traditional educational approach in the global world of standard education systems. Lectures, readings, assessment, exams, peer support, student feedback, tutoring, linear but flexible learning structure satisfy the needs of a modern learner. Quoting the impression of Amanda Cornely: “I'd studied in the past, but it was rather hit or miss. I'd even studied the Lamrim [*see below*] a bit, but I missed a lot not having a clear course of study. Now I'm filling in a lot of the blanks.” A system like this has a stereotypically Western downside of pushing for achievement, stress and inadequacy, which is balanced on the forum by peer support, cooperation, and Lama Yeshe's motto, reiterated time and time again: “Slowly, slowly.”

The idea of a steady path of graded stages is reflected in the name of the major text studied by Gelugpas, the Lamrim Chenmo, or *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, composed by Je Tsonkapa, a Tibetan sage of 14th-15th centuries, who founded the school. It is also reflected in the way the *dharma* has been taught by the gelugpas in medieval Tibet and nowadays: stressing the basics, sequence of learning and consistency of practice. This approach has an advantage for a novice Buddhist learner: one is expected to understand more as they proceed: “It's a bit like a jigsaw puzzle. At first it seems like this jumble of ideas, but the more pieces you become familiar with, the more the other pieces start to fall into place,” says an Elder.

Following a graded approach is not the only link to the origins. In general, the idea of authenticity, authority, and lineage is explicitly or implicitly evident throughout the discussions. Interestingly, students do not confront their tradition with other schools of Tibetan Buddhism, branches of Buddhism, or other religions. They sound respectful and liberally draw on what they find insightful in them, recommending books by prominent non-Gelug teachers, quoting Zen masters, and referring to Jesus: “If you study the teachings of Jesus and look at them as metaphor and not to be taken literally, then what you will find is many similarities between Christianity and Buddhism,” says Amanda Cornely.

The only group which is regarded with criticism is the New Kadampa Tradition<sup>8</sup>, another large Gelug organization, popular among non-heritage Buddhists. Mostly the criticism is voiced carefully, avoiding harsh judgements, and is connected with the group's relations with the Dalai Lama. Jamie Pane, who started in 2010, advises: "I am not blindly following the Dalai Lama, but if the lama advises against the practices of the organization than [*sic*] extreme caution must be used." Then he adds: "triple murder... not my kind of dharma," referring to a notorious case of Ven. Lobsang Gyatso and two of his disciples reportedly killed in Dharamsala in 1997 by Dorje Shugden propitiators, connected with the NKT (Bultrini 2013). Some respondents admit the accessibility of the NKT centres and large differences across them in their accentuating the sectarian Dorje Shugden practice (Kay 1997). Alan Travis, a beginning Buddhist, recalls his experience: "I've been very fortunate to have access to teachings and a very kind sangha for the past year. I think perhaps down at the grassroots level people are not nearly as fanatical as the publicity makes it appear."

The students' allegiance to FPMT is revealed through frequent references to Gelug texts and teachers, FPMT instructors and materials. Although references to the sutras are not uncommon, it is recognized that making sense of the 84,000 articles of teachings that the Buddha left, is hard without relying on a tradition of masters, who dedicated their lives to making them available to future generations: "It is helpful to remember that buddhism [*sic*] has been tested, verified and developed for over 2600 years. A huge amount of intellectual effort and experience has been put into these teachings," notes Geert Anstoot, active forum user since 2015. Own ponderings and assumptions are usually shared humbly: "I haven't been studying very long and I don't have any profound insights but I will offer my thoughts in the hopes that we all benefit," says Gabriela Santoz.

## 4.2 Axiom 1: Following the flows

The first lamas who fled Tibet faced a world hardly possible to describe with their language, carrying a contemplative tradition hard to conceptualize in English. Half a century later, the same tradition became globally accessible, with Tibetan Buddhist centres opening all over the world and the Dalai Lama becoming a popular token of global peace, love and understanding. The students share stories of personal problems and even tragedies, illness, depression, MBSR<sup>9</sup> and Vipassana courses, or just heavy spiritual queries, not satisfied by Christian or secular answers, which made them set their eyes on Buddhism. Gabriela Santoz, a Buddhist since 2009, confesses:

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<sup>8</sup> The NKT originated as an offshoot of FPMT after a schism between Lama Yeshe and the NKT leader, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, in 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Mindfulness-based stress reduction, introduced by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1970s

I must confide that taking refuge was a homecoming of sorts and I felt at that time that I had walked back into the arms of something that felt so warm and familiar to me that there was no question I was where I belonged. The feeling remains that way today but it has some basis to it now.

Many forum users see their encounter with Buddhism as life changing, and are able to bring surprisingly much of what they discover into their world outlook and lifestyle. Many posts are about adhering to Buddhist ethics, while resolving everyday issues, such as tackling a difficult person, helping a dying relative or pet, overcoming addictions, or getting rid of insects, to quote Frederic Levy, an active user since 2011:

I had sand fleas in my apartment and I would keep getting bites. While trying to keep an altruistic intention in mind I told them they could stay and I would not harm them if they would stop biting me. I stopped getting bites and some time later they moved out!

The forum discussions illustrate vividly the dynamics of “itinerancy and homemaking” (Tweed 2011, p. 25), revealing how individuals around the world encounter deterritorialized Tibetan Buddhism, as they experience some level of *duhkha*, suffering, and how Buddhism becomes part of their daily existence.

#### 4.3 Axiom 2: Notice all the figures crossing

The second point of Tweed's (2011) translocative analysis concerned noticing those present and absent. The most prominent presence is that of FPMT's head teachers, female and male instructors and established Western icons of Tibetan Buddhism (mostly Gelugpa). One important face is missing from the landscape almost entirely: a Spanish young man Osel Hita. Osel was recognized as the reincarnation of Lama Yeshe, and spent years of his childhood in Tibetan monasteries in India. He was a gifted and unusual boy, who seemed to display the same qualities as Lama Yeshe (Mackenzie 1996). However, as he grew up he showed resentment towards the title, foisted onto him, eventually disrobing, refusing to become a teacher, and starting secular education to become a film director. However, Osel maintains friendship with FPMT, appears at important events, and gives occasional talks. The rare references to his personality reveal that students and Elders are understanding of his choice, and hoping to see Lama Yeshe's wisdom in the coming fruit of Osel's cinematic vocation: “I wonder what kind of films Osel will make?” an Elder wonders.

Another interesting point of absence are Tibetans themselves. The forum unites people of various nationalities, cultural backgrounds and creeds. A Russian living in Germany, a German living in Sri Lanka, an Indian former Catholic and an American former atheist can all find common

premises in FPMT forums. Still, I have noticed none of the estimated 130,000 exiled Tibetans, let alone of over 6 million Tibetans in Tibet<sup>10</sup> among forum users. Tibet and Tibetans are discussed on the forum in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, lamas, doctors, language, history and the Tibetan cause. Some users adopt Tibetan names and robes. Tibetan culture can hardly be separated from the Buddhism taught by FPMT. Transcending ethnic and historical boundaries, 'Tibetanness' becomes a 'cultural thickening' (Hepp 2009), shaped by people, for whom Tibetan cultural elements are *acquired* ones. Interestingly, forum users seem to accept their religion of choice in Tibetan cultural wrappings with harmony, while attempts to unyoke culture and religion cause friction.

#### 4.4 Axiom 3: All religion's components

With his third point, Tweed (2011) emphasized paying attention to all possible outer manifestations of a religion. The dharma manifests in a certain time and space; it is transmitted through myths and tales of the past, discoveries of the present, personal life stories, insights and miracles. Buddhism is not just a token one ascribes to themselves, it *materially* alters a person's lifestyle and surroundings. While opulent dharma centres, temples and monasteries are built in Europe and America, followers devote time off of their busy schedules and allocate a part of their home as a little Shangri-la, decorated with pictures and artefacts, scented with Tibetan incense, and filled with sounds of mantras. All physical components of the religion seem to find a cosy place in Western homes. An American with a Tibetan name shares: "I have created a shrine room that is very inspirational and facilitates some wonderful times of meditation."

Not only do many people appreciate the outer cultural manifestations accompanying Buddhism, but some can even be attracted by them. For example, Linsay Roderick, recalled her experience of living in Asia: "I was drawn to the Buddhist temples and pagodas. I was always emotionally moved by chanting, especially." Some share pictures of sites they have made a life-changing pilgrimage to, as well as tips on how to create an altar, obtain ritual objects, or behave at Buddhist events. An example of this is how participants discuss and engage in the prostration practice. Traditionally, a serious student is expected to start their path with preliminary practices, including 100,000 full-body prostrations, accompanied by visualizations and addressing 35 Buddhas, which require a commitment to about a half-an-hour daily practice over about three years. Although it may not sound like something a modern Westerner might eagerly undertake the students' reactions to it display far more interest than resistance. Trust towards the teachers and the modules plays a big role, as well as personal and peers' experience of the practice. Many mention doing them, and speak of the benefits:

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10 Numbers retrieved from <http://tibetdata.org/projects/population/index.html> as of September 2017 and approximated

“Prostrations make me feel more respectful, calm and focused. They mark off the start of a period of time that is different. They remind me to tame my body, speech, and mind. They are also great for cracking the nut of self-cherishing. What it's not about is submission or worship,”

explains Chandler Nash, on the forum since 2010.

Mundane meanings are added to make the practice more tempting to oneself and peers: “Just started doing prostrations and have found the benefits go beyond the mind. Even my level of physical fitness has benefitted”, says an Australian woman with a Tibetan name. Occasional voices of scepticism towards some ritual practices are met with convincing explanations of *why* things are done in such a fashion and *what for*, including arguments referring to the tradition:

“There is a line in Pabongka Rinpoche's "Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand" where he says something like, "They say you will make no progress if you only do the things that make sense to you."<sup>11</sup> Ironically, this makes sense. We're learning something new and, by most accounts, counter-intuitive. There is bound to be some grinding of gears. You need faith to persevere,”

says an Elder.

And more modern ones, as Chandler further explains: “The rituals are also full of meaning: in the same way that memory specialists invent stories so that they can place facts they want to remember into a framework, so the ritual serves as a physical, visual, and auditory mnemonic.”

Somewhat counter-intuitively, most FPMT forum users seem to appreciate and adopt the external, ritual side of Tibetan Buddhism.

#### 4.5 Point 4: Consider varying scales

The participants seem to surpass cultural and language boundaries through their common interest – Buddhism, and common language – English. Cultural, ethnic and language backgrounds are not neglected, but do not seem to have much effect on the discussion. Instead, there is emphasis on individuals with their multiple backgrounds, traits and messages. Tweed (2011) invites to:

reframe the study of Buddhism and not only think about Buddhism in North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Australia, or ‘the West.’ New angles of vision might open up if we situate what we study, the Buddhist flows we are following, in the Atlantic World, the Indo-Pacific World, the Western Hemisphere, or the Global South (p. 25).

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11 The actual quote in translation runs: “They say you will get nothing out of the path if you only practice the portions that seem plausible to you” (Pabongka 1997, p. 203)

However, the forum clearly indicates that any fixed geographical frames are in fact vain. Although there is bound to be difference in Buddhist practice in a democratic country, and for instance, Middle East, this can hardly suggest drawing symbolic lines on the map. FPMT centres are sprinkled all over the world, and the website connects every continent. Some users, for example, Amanda Cornely, celebrate this connection: “Through the online learning centre, the FPMT website, and the Lama Yeshe Wisdom archive online, Rinpoche and everyone who has helped with these projects have made the Buddha's teachings available to almost everyone on the planet.” And yet, considering the importance of socio-political institutions and systems, it has to be kept in mind that “almost everyone on the planet” does not include billions of people, who have limited access to websites, scarce leisure and income, restrained freedoms and insufficient command of English. This way, drawing boundaries in the modern world relies not as much on geography, as on societal, political, educational and economic factors. Therefore, instead of studying the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in a region of the world, e.g. East Asia, it would make more sense first to consider ideological and economic pressures within the region. Needless to say, there are drastic differences between Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan and Mainland China, or South and North Korea in terms social and political factors.

#### 4.6 Point 5: Notice how flows start, stop and shift

The role of socio-political institutions is crucial to the flow of values and ideas. The main institution, the pillar of authority for the forum visitors, proves to be the Dalai Lama XIV. Devoting most of his time to addressing people around the world, giving advice on spiritual practice, the Tibet cause, secular ethics and dialogue with science, the Tibetan monk has become a real icon of Tibetan Buddhism for the modern world. The popularity of the Tibetan leader can be illustrated by his being listed among 100 most influential people by *TIME* magazine three times, heading the list of Leaders and Revolutionaries in 2008, followed by Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama<sup>12</sup>. The forum participants mention him with impressive frequency and stable admiration: “I am relatively new to the Dharma but I have a massive respect and love for HH [*His Holiness, in reference to the Dalai Lama*]. He does actually feel kind of like a father in a funny way,” says Pete from Australia. He creates trust between East and West, bridges the edges and soothes contradictions. Similarly to the Pope being delineated by Hepp & Krönert (2009, p. 280) as a sort of a “brand symbol” of a deterritorial religion, the Dalai Lama acts as such for most Buddhism sympathizers.

Another institution, important for the students is, unsurprisingly, FPMT itself. The organization seems to have it all: a good record, founders from Tibet and Nepal, a head office in

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12 <http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,1733748,00.html>

Oregon, the Dalai Lama's endorsement, an impeccable structure, worldwide community, temples and monasteries, an online store, a publishing agency, a magazine, charity and mission projects. Consequently, students develop gratitude and loyalty. Another Australian woman with a Tibetan name assures: "I am sure if you trust FPMT to guide you and listen to the advice that is given you cannot 'fail' as such." Although learning and practicing outside FPMT is common and in some cases even encouraged, many students seem to be willing to invest their money, time and effort in the organization whenever possible. "I support them [Wisdom Publications] as much as I can, as it's part of FPMT, and I like to keep the money 'in-house'," claims an American monk with a Tibetan name.

Yet, socio-political institutions underlying a transcultural worldview are not only organizations and formal titles. Buddhism spreads in socio-political environments that create the necessary freedoms and affordances for religions to migrate across localities. The Australian woman and the American monk, introducing themselves with their Tibetan names on the forum, can easily access both FPMT and the Dalai Lama. However, socio-political institutions elsewhere may decidedly not allow for this, and Tibet, the cultural and geographical homeland to both, is one example.

#### 4.7 Adding one more axiom: Trace the flow of ideas

An additional point I felt compelled to add to Tweed's (2011) outline was on the *flow of creed*. The forum messages draw a portrait of a modern learner of Buddhism as a discursive person, who likes to think, philosophize, discuss, and enrich their worldview. S/he is haunted by questions of meaning, workings of the mind, being at ease with others, and is not satisfied with the answers given by other religions or modern society. Teresa Lawrence from the US confesses:

"I am sure that my lifetime of Christian upbringing has left me cold - with more questions than answers and a nagging sense of uneasiness about religion and the conventional concept of God. I am sure that for the first time in my life, I feel comfortable in my own skin."

Buddhism is introduced as one distinct paradigm among others: "I find that Buddhist texts are quite good at explaining the Buddhist point of view, so no great need to interpret Buddhist doctrine through the (possibly distorting) lens of another tradition." (Elder) FPMT teaching strategy is leading a student gradually into the Buddhist conceptual network, combining theory with practice, and allowing to discard what is not relevant at the moment, explaining it in detail and guaranteeing it will become clear later on (Sharapan 2017):



”Some of these vexing questions and doubts will probably be answered. I still have some hanging around from many years ago. But, mostly, as I try to continue to listen, reflect and meditate, they seem to resolve without much effort.” (Elder)

Observing the forum I could notice this gradual change happening, for example, as Geert Anstoot noted after studying the modules: “Now, my former view on reality, which was completely nihilistic, seems so improbable and lacking several explanations, while the ideas of no-self, and an ongoing but ever changing consciousness grow more and more real in my mind.” However, some questions are only answered upon achieving enlightenment, which is 'not instant soup!': “The detailed working of karma are classified as 'extremely hidden' phenomena, so subtle and complex that only a Buddha is able to perceive them,” says an Elder. Compelled by free circulation of ideas, Buddhism is collated with Christian thought, science, and popular spiritual trends. Buddhist ideas overlap and compete with other views, offering logical explanations, flexibility, a well-tested tradition, and relevance. Some people, like Ron Moore, end up changing their previous belief: “I just started learning about Buddhism a while ago, I listened to some teachings a few years ago, and I definitely don't believe in God and creation anymore.” For others Buddhist ideas do not supplant, but rather form a harmony with their former world outlook, be it a Christian one, New Age or atheist,. For example, an experienced practitioner Thomas Fox says: “I am often struck with the similarities of the two religions and firmly believe Buddhism has made me a better Christian (if that makes any sense).”

Students also demonstrate relative ease accepting transphenomenal concepts (e.g., karma, rebirth, enlightenment). Some students claim to have had a firm belief in such concepts before becoming a Buddhist, based on personal experience, like in the case of Caroline Butler, a Buddhist since 2009: “I am totally convinced in rebirth. I have sufficient proof in my personal experience and no more questions about it”. Others find support for them in other philosophic or religious sources, or even science: “Some exhaustive research has been done by Dr. Ian Stevensen (very mainstream, not a quack) in which he collected about 20 cases of purported rebirth that had excellent evidence and were not explicable on any other grounds,” argues Pete.

This flexibility is assisted by a tendency to *instrumentalize* a belief, see a pragmatic purpose in a certain idea, message or physical practice: “I think these concepts are 'skilful means'. They are leading us in the direction/path we should take,” says a beginning Buddhist Donald Barley. In less frequent cases, a participant may confess having problems accepting a concept, idea, or a way of presentation. The doubt is met with explanation and a sort of a compromise is achieved: the essential concepts can be 'put on a higher shelf' until they become clear, and unessential ones, such as existence of hungry ghosts, can be respectfully discarded without challenging the core of the Buddhist view.



Interestingly, a reverse cultural impact is also observed on the forum: Tibetan Buddhism becomes enriched with the contemporary trends. First, the value of scientific discovery is engaged to verify meditation and to expand our understanding of reality. Second, inclusivity and resistance to discrimination seem to seem well incorporated into Buddhism. It is reflected in the re-envisioned role of women, quoting Anna Briggs:

What concerns a female rebirth, I must say I'm really grateful and happy being born as a woman, and it can't be changed. However, I'm also deeply conscious of the fact that in earlier times, and nowadays in many cultures, it has been a huge hindrance to learning and practicing. Just because of the culture;

clarifying the status of disability for a Buddhist practice, as Amanda Cornely mentions: “This teaching is 2500 years old. The technology to overcome the obstacles to studying and practicing the dharma has only become widely available in the past ten to thirty years”; and redefining traditional frames of sexual ethics to embrace LGBT rights under the principle of 'do not harm', as Silvia Hamshire put it: “Fortunately, I don't believe homosexuality is considered sexual misconduct any more than heterosexual sex presuming no one is inflicting any harm.”

## 5 Conclusions

This study has put to test Tweed's (2011) five axioms in the context of the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the twenty-first century. Analysed through this lens, the FPMT forum discussions reflect migration of religious artefacts, codes and practices to ease suffering and quench spiritual thirst of people of various non-Tibetan backgrounds. The forum establishes pervasive presence of important teachers, and reveals absence of Tibetans themselves. It reflects Tibetan Buddhism as *physically* penetrating individual lifestyles on all levels, beyond geographical boundaries. Yet, it tacitly reveals the importance of institutional structures and legal codes, drawing attention to social, ideological and economic boundaries instead of geographical ones.

In the final chapter of his book, McMahan (2008, p. 246) mentioned *retraditionalization* as a characteristic of Buddhist postmodernism, evident mostly in Tibetan Buddhism. The forum clearly supports this point by reflecting the students' respect of and emphasis on elements associated with the *tradition*. On a broader level, Gleig (2014) confirms this in her analysis of the tech-savvy Buddhist Geeks formation, claiming that Buddhist postmodernism “identifies participants as responding to and reacting against already Westernized and modernized forms of Buddhism rather than classical form of Asian Buddhism.” (p. 29) Exposure to modern media not only facilitates

transmission of original Tibetan Buddhist concepts and practices, but also potentially increases tolerance to their “foreignness.” (Moberg & Grandholm, 2014, p. 107) Tibetan monastic robes may not be so shocking after the American president annually meets the Dalai Lama; Buddhist philosophy may not seem so alien, when Alicia Keys sings about Karma on MTV; and mantra recitation may not be so off-putting, when Hollywood stars wear prayer beads on their wrists.

Finally, the case of FPMT forum discussions invites one more axiom to Tweed’s (2011) analysis: *trace the flow of ideas*. Tweed’s theory was partially inspired by his study of exiled Cuban Catholics, and his deliberate “de-emphasis of the creedal” (Tweed 2011, p. 22) may be connected with tacit influences of Christian thinking. The analysis of the forum discussions clearly demonstrates that the creedal is too prominent to be de-emphasised. Ideas, beliefs and worldviews infuse societies of both past and present, and therefore inevitably affect religions, which spread within them. I would argue that tracking down their origination, collision, collation, and dilution is among key factors to understanding religions in general. This process becomes even more robust in the modern globalized world. Appadurai (1996) mentioned *ideoscapes* (facilitated by techno- and mediascapes) as the fifth dimension of global flows, and indeed, it is hard to imagine the process of becoming a twenty-first century (Tibetan) Buddhist without re-constructing the respective worldview at least to some extent. For a keen contemporary spiritual seeker creed seems to be a distinct project in the making, and Tibetan Buddhism has preserved well-honed tools for shaping it.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the FPMT teachers, instructors, staff and forum users for their trust, cooperation, encouragement and inspiration. I am especially grateful to the respondents, who gave their kind permissions to cite their messages, and to the forum admin, who made it technically possible.

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