

## THE GLOBAL SPACE OF DIALOGUE AND CONFLICT: THE CASE OF RUSSIAN BUDDHISTS

Nowadays Buddhism is considered as a global religion in academic circles. Oyuna Dorzhigushaeva argues that Buddhism has acquired main features of a globalized religion, such as “formal religiousness, synthesis of different religions, distribution of informal religious movements, commercialization of religious activity, ‘network’ religion, i.e. a mobile network of autonomous communities operating out of national and confessional borders, loss of binding to a concrete territory and ethnic identity, typical for traditional religions” (Dorzhigushaeva, 2012, 153). In other words, such processes as migration and expansion have influenced the globalization of Buddhism; a lot of Buddhist communities start to exist and function in a deterritorialized condition.

Internet as yet another factor of globalization starts to exert influence on Buddhism too. Various communities based on local forms of Buddhism in different parts of Russia hardly ever meet with each other in the real life, as there is no common space for such a meeting. In this context, the Internet becomes a space for communication between Buddhists belonging to different movements. What is more, the Internet gives the opportunity to discuss topics that can hardly ever be raised in the real life.

In this article, I would like to analyze Internet communication of Russian Buddhists in the social network “vkontakte” and reveal new features of Buddhism that appeared in the Internet. I argue that the passage from the local level to the global one inevitably leads to a clash between various Buddhist identities, in consequence of which there appear problems and issues of identity rarely noticed or examined before.

In order to identify the types of Buddhists that can meet in the virtual space, I start with the context of historical development of Buddhism in Russia and the classification of diverse Russian Buddhist groups. To define the peculiarities of the Internet communication in comparison to the real one, I include some information about Internet services development. Finally, I consider the examples of meetings between different Buddhist groups in the social networks.

The Buddhism has been existing on the territory of Russia for more than 400 years. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Russian Empire, extending its borders to the East, had integrated such

people as Kalmyks, Buryats and Tuvinians<sup>1</sup> who professed Tibetan Buddhism of Gelug school which came to them from Mongolia (Semotyuk, 2005, 229). From the middle of the 17th to the end of the 19th century, Tibetan Buddhism was strengthening on those territories. In 1741, the empress Elizabeth issued a decree according to which Buddhism was officially recognized as one of the religions of the Russian Empire. Active construction of monasteries (datsans), teaching and publishing began (Zhukovskaya, 2013, 61).

From the middle of the 19th century, Buddhism received interest of the western part of Russia; the academic buddhology started to develop (Torchinov, 2000, 208). The end of the 19th — the beginning of the 20th century was the period of blossoming for Buddhism. It entered almost all spheres of public life in traditional Buddhist regions of Russia. The reformatory movements, aimed to improve the quality of Buddhism, began to be active (Abaeva, 1992, 197).

With the arrival of the Soviet power, Buddhist culture suffered destruction. Mass repressions, such as shooting of Buddhist monks and activists, and destruction of temples started from the end of 1920s and lasted till 1980s (Zhukovskaya, 2013, 62).

From the middle of 1960s, with easing of the Soviet policy towards religion, the first steps towards the revival of the Tibetan Buddhism in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tyva had been taken (Montlevich, 1991, 33). After the fall of the Soviet Union, Buddhism started to spread in the non-Buddhist regions of Russia in form of communities and Dharma-centers. If previously only the Tibetan Buddhism of Gelug school existed in Russia, the opening of borders promoted the appearance on the Russian territory of all other schools of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as other traditions, such as Chinese and Southern Buddhism. These Buddhist communities that had been new on the Russian territory settled down mostly in the central cities. Thus, nowadays practically all traditions and schools of Buddhism are represented in Russia (Poresh, 2002, 496).

As we can see historically, there are traditional Buddhist and non-Buddhist regions. Buddhism also exists in its various movements. To be more clear about their differences, I would like to consider a classification of Buddhism in Russia. I propose three criteria: firstly, movements and schools of Buddhism; secondly, the mode of existence of Buddhist schools; thirdly, the types of religious practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Kalmyks are Oyrats of Dzungarian ethnic group, the majority of which live in the autonomous Republic of Kalmykia on the western shore of the Caspian Sea in Russia. Buryats are the largest indigenous group in Siberia, mainly concentrated in the Republic of Buryatia. They are the major northern subgroup of the Mongols. Tuvinians are a Turkic ethnic group living in southern Siberia. Tuvans' recent ethnic history is rooted in Mongol, Turkic, and Samoyedic groups of peoples. They live in the republic of Tyva.

## 1. MAHAYANA AND VAJRAYANA VS THERAVADA

There exist two main versions of Buddhism: Mahayana that includes Vajrayana, and Theravada (Hinayana).

Mahayana (the “Great vehicle”) is the path of the Bodhisattva seeking complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, also called “Bodhisattvayana”, or the “Bodhisattva Vehicle” (Keown, 2003, 38).

Vajrayana is an extension of the Mahayana Buddhism that differs in the adoption of additional techniques (upaya<sup>2</sup>) rather than in philosophy. Some of these upaya are esoteric practices in which the adept must be initiated; they are thus transmitted only through a skilled spiritual teacher (Reginald, 2001, 1). In some classifications of Buddhism, Vajrayana is considered as a separate branch.

Philosophical features of Mahayana permit to integrate local cultures into the Buddhist doctrine. Spreading in Asian countries, the original religion suffered further divisions into two synthetic forms, such as Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism has four main schools: Gelug, Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya. Chinese Buddhism has two main schools: Chan (Zen) and Pure Land Buddhism.

On the other hand, Theravada is the oldest school of Buddhism. It is highly conservative, even archaic, and closer to the early Buddhism than any other Buddhist tradition (Gethin, 1998, 1). In Theravada, the adepts keep to the way of Arahant, i.e. they try to achieve enlightenment from themselves and do not care about the enlightenment of the others. According to Theravada, only a monk who practices Buddhism can achieve enlightenment. This is why, due to its philosophy, Theravada almost did not intermingle with local cultures. As it spread in the southern countries of Asia, it is also called Southern Buddhism.

The distinction between Mahayana and Theravada is accepted worldwide. Further classifications reflect the development and division of the Buddhism in Russia.

## 2. TRADITIONAL VS NEOPHYTE BUDDHISM

Russian buddhologist Sergiei Nesterkin outlines three forms of Buddhist inscription in Russia: 1) the monasticism; 2) so-called “Dharma centers”; 3) small, informal groups of disciples united around one teacher. While the first form usually takes place in the traditional regions of Buddhist presence, the two latter ones are widespread in traditionally non-Buddhist regions (Nes-

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<sup>2</sup> From sanskrit — expedient means

tyorkin, 2008, 46). Thus, it is possible to say that there are traditional monastic and neophyte forms of Buddhism.

The traditional Buddhism implies a long-term monastic education of adepts under the supervision of teachers, with strict hierarchy and discipline that subdues the disciples in relation to the teachers. Buddhist rituals, astrological information, medical and psychological assistance usually occupy an important place in social life of traditional Buddhist regions. In other words, besides education, monasteries carry out a set of public spiritual functions.

The neophyte forms developed thanks to the processes of the globalization of Buddhism. They are not connected with monkhood, have no strict requirements, such as a long-term meditative practice. Rare arrivals and visits of teachers can not assure the strict obedience of students. These communities perform only a minimum of public functions and serve mostly the neophytes themselves, for the purpose of their education in Buddhist knowledge and methods of Buddhist practice.

### 3. PHILOSOPHICAL VS POPULAR BUDDHISM

Besides the above mentioned classifications, Otton Rosenberg, a well-known buddhologist, outlines a “philosophical” and a “popular” Buddhism. According to him, the popular Buddhism is “a religious Buddhist vision spread out of monastic community among laymen who confess Buddhism. Besides traditional canonical views, popular Buddhism includes pre-Buddhist local beliefs, and also simplified presentation of Buddhist principles adapted to the level of knowledge of the believers who are not sophisticated in difficult philosophical concepts” (Rozenberg, 1991, 203).

In the real life, all the divisions of Buddhism mentioned above overlap one another. As I have written, Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tyva have been Buddhist regions for a long time. These regions are usually associated with traditional Buddhism in Russia, as its monastic form was established there.

While expanding into these regions, Buddhism had entered into cooperation with local shamanic tradition of Tengrism<sup>3</sup>. It interacted with former beliefs and adopted the majority of their public functions, producing rituals and ceremonies. Tatyana Bernyukevich notes that the adoption of Buddhism by Buryats, Kalmyks, Tuvinians and their ancestors can be explained by typological similarity between their shamanic beliefs and the Tibetan shamanism, Bon. Tibetan sha-

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<sup>3</sup> Tengrism is a Central Asian religion characterized by the features of shamanism, animism, totemism, both polytheism and monotheism, and ancestor worship. Tengriist believers view their existence as sustained by the eternal blue Sky, Tengri.

manism was successfully synthesized with Buddhism in its Tibetan variant; this is why the synthesis of Tibetan Buddhism with Tengrism in traditional Buddhist regions of Russia was quite natural (Bernyukevich, 2010, 26). Such an assimilation in the traditional Buddhist regions considerably increased the number of laymen Buddhists who, unlike monks, mostly practice the popular Buddhism as it was pointed by Rosenberg. For the laymen, who represent the majority of Buddhists, faith and the usage of rituals is a sufficient basis for the self-identification as a Buddhist. What is more, as Darima Amogolonova writes in her survey, many of the traditional Buddhists of Buryatia don't even know the basic formulations, such as the "Four Noble Truths" and "The Noble Eightfold Path" (Amogolonova, 2008, 42). Traditional Buddhists can not explain theoretically the necessity of certain actions, but have an inner conviction of the correctness of their attitude. The traditional Buddhist model of behavior is absorbed and transmitted in families.

In contrast to the traditional Buddhists, the neophytes apparently feel no need for rituals and ceremonies. It is usually a conscious intention and interest that lead people from non-Buddhist regions to adopt Buddhism. As Buddhism is for them something new, immersion in the Buddhist doctrines is more intensive and conscious. At the same time, the awareness of the Buddhist knowledge is the basis for the self-identification as a Buddhist. What is more, it should be noted that in Russia all other than Tibetan schools of Buddhism are developed in neophyte form.

As a result, we can see the following oppositions:

- 1) Traditional Buddhist / Neophyte.
- 2) Mahayana Buddhist / Theravada Buddhist.

These types of identities co-exist rather harmoniously in their environment out of the Internet as they do not meet with each other very often. However, the Internet, with its distinctive features, became a space for meeting of these types of Russian Buddhists.

In recent years, the Internet significantly expanded its audience of users in Russia, due to the fast development of technologies and networks, both stationary and mobile ones. According to GfK (Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung, Society for Consumer Research), which is one of the largest market research organizations in the world, by the end of 2014, 67,5% of the Russian population, i.e. about 80 million people, were Internet users above 16 years of age. 60 million of them used the Internet every day (GfK, 2015).

The virtual space consists mainly of Internet services, which had been actively developed especially in the last 10 years. Each step of development enriched the Internet with new features and opportunities. In 2005, Tim O'Reilly divided web services into Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). The distinction between these eras lies in modes of production and distribution of information, and consequently in modes of its perception.

In times of Web 1.0, the creation of web pages was carried out by their owners only. Ordinary users had no opportunity to change the content of web pages, while e-mail and guestbook were the only ways to present feedback, providing quite poor opportunities for the communication between the founders of the web pages and their users. There were no developed chats; ICQ and more often the e-mail were the main tools used for the communication in the Internet. All these facts mean that the Internet users could only consume information prepared for them by either the owners, or the editors of web pages. The user was a faceless observer, and all the Internet was predominantly a space of anonymous meetings.

The main difference between the first web and the second one consisted in the opportunities offered for the self-expression of the users. As a rule, users could talk on forums, chats and other public places, but only a few of them could create their own web pages to express themselves fully. The creation of a “homepage” was a rather difficult job. People had to study HTML codes and buy the services of hosting providers, while the prices were targeted rather at the companies wishing to open a web page than at the private users. Therefore, the era of the web 1.0 was the time of the web pages, not of individual people: the web pages were the center of the Internet.

Individual people and the possibilities of their self-expression became the center of the second web generation. Web 2.0 is neither a new standard nor a new format in the evolution of the Internet. It is not possible to say that the second web replaced the outdated web pages. On the contrary, it became their logical improvement. The Web 2.0 is an era when people, their knowledge and their interaction became the basis of the Internet.

The best example of the web 2.0 are social networks. A social network is a platform allowing to create one’s own network image; it also provides possibility of interaction with the Internet images of other people. This interaction is executed through the joint production, consumption and distribution of information by the participants of a social network.

The main function of a social network is the communication with real people. Anonymity didn’t allow to create such a network of communications; that is why the process of network deanonymization started at that moment. This phenomenon becomes very important for the analysis of the Internet communication, because now we can refer the user, with a higher probability, to a certain group, for example gender or nationality.

Self-representation plays an important role in social networks. Firstly, all the information created in a social net is created with the aim of its presentation to other users, leading to subsequent assessment in the form of “likes” or comments. This can induce the users to provide contents that should mostly be either pleasant or surprising, or exert some influence on other users. Secondly, the virtual reality creates a set of opportunities for simulation. Online image can consi-

derably differ or even fully mismatch the original. Such issues had been analyzed by Jean Baudrillard in his theory of simulacra. According to him, a simulacrum is an image without the substance or the qualities of the original (Baudrillard, 1994). But it is important to note that not everything in the virtual reality can be simulated. For example, we can simulate a high degree of compassion or kindness, but we can't simulate high awareness in a certain field of knowledge.

Being easily mastered and simple to use, the social networks significantly expanded the age and the professional competences of the audience of the Internet. It can be said that the Internet became one of the signs of socialization today.

Buddhism didn't stay away and also started to develop in this new sphere of communication. In the modern society, it has become easier to find a Buddhist community that meets one's personal interests in social nets, rather than to go to a temple, or look for a community able to satisfy one's religious interests in the off-line reality.

Now let us proceed to the analysis of the content. As I have defined it earlier, I would like to analyze first the relation between the neophyte and the traditional Buddhists in the Internet, and then to examine the clashes of Mahayana vs Theravada Buddhists.

It is important to notice that almost all large groups in the Russian social network "vkontakte" are created by neophytes. I argue that it is the result of more conscious interest of neophytes in the Buddhist doctrines. Greater awareness and better knowledge of the Buddhist literature makes the neophytes more capable to create Buddhist contents and, therefore, Buddhist communities in the Internet.

The most active communication is maintained inside the group "Buddhism" with 33.5 thousand users. This community does not belong to any specific Buddhist movement; thus, it acts as a meeting place for the representatives of all traditions and schools. This fact suggests already the distinctive opportunities of the Internet. In the real life, Buddhist temples and communities always belong to a certain school. What is more, it is hardly possible that such a number of representatives of various schools from various places of Russia could meet in one place.

Close communication with neophyte participants of this group revealed that almost none of them visited the regions of traditional Buddhism. Their ideas about the Buddhism, the Buddhist regions of Russia and the adepts of Buddhism are based on literature, movies, communication in the Internet and Buddhist lessons held by visiting Buddhist teachers.

The majority of books created by Buddhist teachers and leaders are dedicated to the explanation of philosophy and practice of Buddhism in its exemplary form. Most of the movies about Buddhism also show the exemplary level of the Buddhist world. Acquaintance with Buddhism based on such exemplary images presented in literature, movies and lectures, without visiting the

traditional Buddhist regions, results in an imaginative, often idealized view that the neophytes have of the Buddhist world. Such state of affairs meets the view of Arjun Appadurai, who considers “the work of imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” (Appadurai, 1996, 3).

Apart from Appadurai, Jean Baudrillard also refers to the imagination as he introduces the term “simulacrum”. However, if we speak about the imagined, exemplary Buddhist world based only on theoretical literature, it can not be considered as a simulacrum of the real Buddhism, because this literature is not supposed to describe the existing reality or to be its copy; quite the other way around, it is rather the reality that tries to imitate the Buddhist theory. But if one describes the real-life Buddhist world by means of imagined, exemplified one, such an act can already turn an image into a simulacrum. Anyway, this discordance leads to a conflict between the objective reality and its virtual image. Moreover, Baudrillard notes that the relation between the virtual images and the surrounding reality may change as they start influencing it.

The distribution of the Buddhist content in the Internet can involve more people, including the traditional Buddhists, in the imagined worlds of the neophytes. In other words, people from traditional Buddhist regions can enter the neophyte Buddhist community and experience a change in their Buddhist identity. Such influence on some users from Buryatia and Kalmykia was actually observed in the analyzed group “Buddhism”.

A closer look at an example can help to understand this complex interaction. In the analyzed service, there has been posted a press article on how Buddhist monks in Buryatia blessed a meat factory and its products (Link 1<sup>4</sup>, 2015). The text states that on the occasion of “Sagaalgan”, the new year in the lunar calendar, the lama Bair Ayusheev has made rituals of blessing the products and the building of a meat factory in order to ensure its future wealth and blossom. This article prompted a sharp criticism from both traditional and non-traditional Buddhists. A Buryat, 26 years old, writes: “This act disagrees with the Buddhist philosophy. Blessing of animal murdering in consumer scales somehow doesn’t meet the Buddhist principles. I consider that such marketing acts need to be stopped immediately, because they distort very much the Buddhist philosophy. Of course, I understand the importance of the Buddhist secular activity for my people and the Buddhists of Russia, but not to such an extent. Regress is obvious, it is necessary to change something...”.

A Tuvinian woman, 40 years old, asks a question: “It is said to be bad to criticize monks, but I can not understand why we have all the monks so corpulent? Maybe they eat too much meat? If they stick to the rule of having a meal once a day, they might be not so fat?” It is necessary to

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<sup>4</sup> The web address corresponding to Link 1 is indicated in the bibliography.

comment that the sangha (the Buddhist community) has a very high authority in the Tibetan Buddhism. It is very wrong to criticize actions of lamas, because first of all it brings negative karma, and secondly, it is considered that laymen can not see the true intentions of a lama and even if these actions look very strange for a Buddhist, it is more likely that a lama acts in such a way for a good result (Lama Sopa, 2007). In traditional regions, it is the sangha who usually says how Buddhism should look like. However, the example quoted above shows that the laymen from traditional regions find new bases for the understanding of religion, start to criticize the sangha and express their opinion on how it should be organized.

Another example of the criticism among the traditional Buddhists can be seen in the discussion around a question asked by a Kalmyk man, 28 years old: “Recently there are a lot of talks about the revival of the Buddhist traditions in Kalmykia. But do modern Kalmyks need Buddhism? If yes, what form should it have? Do people need the Buddhism’s philosophy or just some rituals are enough?” (Link 2, 2015). A Russian woman, 31 years old, who is one of the moderators of this group, gives a detailed answer. The question concerning the choice of Buddhism’s form seems not important to her; instead, she starts to debate the reasons of lack of interest towards the Buddhist philosophy as one of the “problems” of Kalmyk Buddhists: “this Buddhist history it as old as time:) The person who needs Buddhism will look for it whatever and wherever it is. It is possible to live near lamas and never ask — and what do they do in the datsans there... Kalmyks, it seems to me, have the same problems”. Then she gives her recommendation: “People need an EXAMPLE [highlighted by the author] that the Doctrine exists in its purity and there is someone BESIDE who is a REAL holder of the Doctrine ... If you and the other guys from Kalmykia go and train good in India, and over time you become well-informed teachers, it will help to expand Sangha and new people will join it at their own wish. When young people decide to choose this difficult way — it is a good example too. People need Dharma very much, but, unfortunately, many of them are far from understanding it”. It is easy to notice her attitude toward the traditional Buddhism in Russia. It is expressed by the presupposition of “non purity” of its doctrine, the opposition between “true / not true holders of knowledge” and apparently by the lack of the “true” ones. Kalmyks are advised to go to train in India, even though there are Buddhist universities in Buryatia. What is more, monastic, not layman way is recommended, even though neophytes themselves very rarely choose it. Besides, it was noticed that this message received “likes” from several Kalmyks, other Kalmyks thanked her for the answer.

Another Kalmyk man, 27 years old, in a personal correspondence told me the following about his attitude towards the neophytes: “Russian Buddhists know much more than ours, all the basic knowledge of Buddhism I’ve received is from the Russians. Maybe I didn’t meet such Kal-

myks, but those whom I met know almost nothing and still call themselves Buddhists”. The examples show that Kalmyk’s identification as traditional Buddhists suffers revision due to the influence of the neophytes in the Internet. They criticize the sangha and even find new authorities in Buddhism. The involvement of the traditional Buddhists in the imagined, idealized world of the social network groups changes their view on functions and images of the traditional Buddhism.

As for Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists, their philosophical views become a matter of dispute. Due to the conservatism and archaism of the Theravada Buddhism, its representatives reject all types of synthesized Buddhism of Mahayana. Rare meetings between the members of these communities in the real life didn’t gain special attention. On the other hand, the meetings in the neutral Buddhist Internet groups provoked sharp disputes. Russian representatives of Theravada entered into an information struggle, as Mahayana does not correspond to their ideas on Buddhism. This struggle is carried out by the distribution of articles and Internet memes, and the creation of forums for disputes in neutral groups. For example, an image (Link 3, 2015) was found on which on the right side there are Shaolin monks, Tibetan monks and the Dalai Lama, and on the left side there is Buddha who cries and shields his eyes with his hand at the sight of them. Another meme (Link 4, 2015) cites Uspensky’s poem “Memory” in which one and the same phrase is repeated, and every time the meaning becomes more and more messed. The title of this meme is: “Eduard Uspensky unwittingly described precisely the process of Mahayana emergence”. Further there are four stages of Mahayana development: ”1) Nagarjuna “received” a sutra of Prajnaparamita from nagas; 2) Padmasambhava mixed a Hindu tantra and local Bon Shamanism with Buddha’s teaching. This ugly child was named Vajrayana; 3) a Japanese monk Nichiren created a school of worship of a white lotus; 4) a Chinese monk Shandao created a school Pure Land of Buddha Amitabha”. In other words, the creators of this meme want to show that just as in the Uspensky’s poem, the development of Mahayana went far from the original. There is a number of similar memes that criticize all tendencies and schools of Buddhism other than Theravada.

A considerable number of articles (Link 4, 2015) criticize Mahayana phenomenon of “bodhisattva”. Bodhisattva is an enlightened being who refused to enter the nirvana and takes various forms in order to save all living beings. The main criticism is directed against the refusal of entering the nirvana, because from the point of view of Theravada it is a false belief that only strengthens the Sansara. Mahayana phenomenon of “upaya” is also criticized. Upaya is a concept emphasizing that practitioners may use their own specific methods or techniques that fit the situation in order to gain enlightenment and save of all living beings. One of the articles (Link 6,

2015) says that “skillful methods” are only an excuse for non-moral and non-Buddhist acts which distort the original Buddhism.

Such information struggle gained the attention of a Thai teacher Ajahn Chatree, an official representative of the Thai Theravada sangha in Russia. He declared that the Thai sangha does not take the responsibility for the actions of the Russian Theravada followers who use social networks and mass media for the promotion of their own extremist, Buddhist ideology (Link 7). This fact indicates one more time the difference between the traditional offline and the neophyte online Buddhism.

The analysis of the online communication in the Buddhist groups of “vkontakte” shows the new features of Buddhism. Social networks become a meeting place for Buddhists belonging to various movements and schools. The dialog between the neophytes and the traditional Buddhists leads to a revision of their view on functions and images of the traditional Buddhism, which further leads to the revision of the bases for religious identity. Laymen Buddhists get more involved in Buddhism’s philosophy. The meeting between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists became real in neutral Buddhist groups and resulted in an information struggle led by the Russian followers of Theravada.

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