The Struggle for “Trueness” of Buddhism: 

Internet as a Space of Dialogues and Conflicts in Buddhist Communities of Russia

The dissertation is devoted to the analysis of a wide range of phenomena related to Russian Buddhism and the Internet. Religion in the Internet becomes a popular direction of the humanities researches, however, the case studies of Christianity and Islam strongly prevail over Buddhist ones, not to mention the exploration of the Buddhism of Russia. At the same time, Buddhism in Russia is very diverse and unique from the point of view of Buddhist institutions, as well as the identity of Russian Buddhists. Nevertheless, the Buddhist communities of Russia remain understudied today, especially their activities in the Internet. That is why from the very beginning my research was performed in explorative manner and focused on two major research questions: (1) who are the Buddhist users of the Russian Internet? and (2) how do they use initially neutral Internet technologies and why?

Methodology

Even though the study of Internet resources is first of all associated with big data analysis, I focused on qualitative methods in my research and attempted to adapt anthropological methods for studying of the Buddhist communities in the Internet. In such a way, I perceive the Buddhist Internet resources as fields where the main actors are official Buddhist organizations, as well as ordinary Buddhist users. The study of Buddhist organizations’ activities in the Internet is based on the content analysis of Russian-speaking Buddhist webpages, as well as interviews with their editors. Such approach helped me to trace the reasons for using or ignoring the Internet by the Buddhist organizations. It turned out that in many aspects the use of the Internet depends on religious features of Buddhist schools and traditions, that is why part of the research is devoted to the analysis of Buddhist doctrines and their influence on the involvement of Buddhist organizations in the Internet activities.

The study of Buddhist Internet users beyond the Buddhist organizations is based on the materials collected during the fieldwork in the social network Vkontakte. I intentionally
approached Buddhist Internet resources not as a database, but as a field and for 4 years observed the activities within the Buddhist communities of Vkontakte, including its largest group Buddhism with more than 40 000 followers. Being Buddhist myself, my awareness in some aspects of Buddhism helped me to actively participate in the discussions with other users. Observation, discussions as well as interviews with most active members helped me to fix a lot of phenomena, which I united in several cases that most vividly show the laymen activities in the Internet. The majority of cases are based on the relationship between different types of Buddhists in Russia and can be characterized as “dialogues and conflicts of the Buddhist communities of Russia”.

The content of chapters

The dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapters I and II make up a significant part of the dissertation and focus on the first research question “who are the Buddhist users of the Russian Internet?” Chapter III is intermediary and focuses on the description of Internet technologies and principles of their work. Chapters IV and V are practical and are devoted to the second research question “how do they use initially neutral Internet technologies and why?”

Chapter I presents a general classification of Buddhism and its branches. Such overview of basic characteristics and differences of Buddhist schools and traditions offline is justified by its further reference in the description of the current state of Buddhism in Russia, as well as the analysis of the activities of Buddhist communities in the Internet. In this chapter, I demonstrate that various schools of Buddhism have significant doctrinal differences. In such a way, the main branches, such as Mahayana and Theravada, may rather look like different religions. Further on, I define the peculiarities of three Buddhist traditions, such as Tibetan, Chinese, and Southern Buddhism. As we know, Tibetan Buddhism places great emphasis on the methods of Vajrayana, and contains many esoteric elements called Tantra, such as secret practices, texts, sacral connection with the teacher and deities, search for reincarnates, initiation rites and so on. Chinese Buddhism today is mainly represented by such schools as Zen and Amidaism, which prioritize living practice over study of texts. Southern Buddhism is characterized by absence of deities and bodhisattvas. It does not focus on esoteric practices, instead, it relies on the texts of Pali Canon, thus, trying to reproduce the early Buddhism. The first chapter makes it clear that people who identify themselves as Buddhists may have completely different views on the fundamental questions: “who is Buddha?”, “where does the path of Buddhist
practice lead to?” In other words, we cannot talk about centralized Buddhism or a common Buddhist identity, but should always keep in mind the diversity of Buddhist schools.

Chapter II, “Buddhism in Russia: historical development and Buddhist identity” provides an overview of more than four centuries of Buddhism in Russia, during which it experienced the dawn of pre-revolutionary period, decay during the Soviet regime, and revival in the post-Soviet times. The chapter is presented in a historical perspective. I aim to show the diversity of Buddhism in Russia today, its decentralized character, which is determined by various waves of Buddhism expansion. Indeed, modern Buddhism in Russia exists in the form of various global and local discourses that have an impact on Russian Buddhists, regardless of ethnic or territorial belonging. I distinguish three major discourses of Russian Buddhism: traditional Buddhism, Buddhist modernism, and new religious movements. Traditional Buddhism was shaping in Russian regions of ethnic Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva for several centuries, and established Buddhist environment in which laypeople predominantly comprehended Buddhism through traditions, rituals, and numerous sacral objects, as well as by honoring lamas and receiving practical advice from them. More profound practices in this model are the prerogative of the clergy. The Buddhist modernism in many aspects arose from Russian Buddhology and was finally formed during expansion of various global Buddhist communities to the West, including Russia. These communities emphasize the adaptation of Buddhist theory and monastic practices for laymen. In such a way, this model focuses on Buddhist theory and practice of meditation, and implies distribution of specialized literature and tours of Buddhist teachers with lectures throughout the world. The new religious movements can be seen as the result of strong interest of the West in Eastern religions, which led to a certain, often orientalized, syncretism of various religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, etc. These movements establish subcultures whose members consider themselves as Buddhists. I argue that Buddhists, regardless of their ethnic or territorial belonging, may come into contact with different Buddhist discourses, thus forming identity in various combinations. That is why, answering the first question I conclude that the Buddhist users of the Russian Internet belong to heterogeneous Buddhist communities, often unrelated to each other. But what is more, due to the fact that any user who identifies himself as a Buddhist can have completely different ideas about Buddhist doctrine and the forms in which it should be
practiced, it is necessary to examine each case and representative in the Internet contextually.

Chapter III, “The Internet: a qualitatively new space for Buddhism in Russia”, is intermediary and aims to describe the Internet space by focusing on the Internet participants and their abilities. I follow the popular division into Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, which demonstrates the development of Internet user abilities from consuming to creating and spreading of the information. Web 1.0 was an era of websites, the creation of which was accompanied by difficulties, required financial costs and professional knowledge in the field of information technology. Such features limited the number of participants-creators of Internet resources, while the majority of users were mostly observers and had scarce tools for self-expression. Such conditions gave rise to the problem of anonymity. What is more, taking into consideration the fact that the Internet space is inherently deterritorialized, and it does not matter for the user where the information is physically located, the name of a website (domain) receives crucial importance as it can influence the popularity of the created resource. Thus, Web 1.0 is an era of websites created primarily by professionals or organizations, where users mostly remained faceless observers.

The era of Web 2.0 arose with such services as facebook, wikipedia, youtube and many others. These services allowed ordinary users without any special skills to create their own content on the resources. The Web 2.0 has greatly expanded the number of participants in the creation and dissemination of information, practically replacing the outdated websites. The most popular type of platforms – social networks – led to de-anonymization of users and brought a lot of new phenomena based on interaction of users. In the conditions of Web 2.0, the Internet landscape is formed on the basis of user and information flows, where resources with the largest number of followers occupy the center and have greater influence. After describing the peculiarities of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, I observe the dynamics of Internet development in Russia in general, as well as Buddhist web resources in particular. Basing on the logic of the development of Internet technologies and Buddhist Internet resources, I conclude that it is necessary to study separately the activities of official Buddhist organizations (“the Internet in Buddhism”) and numerous independent Buddhists (“Buddhism in the Internet”).

In Chapter IV, “The Internet in Buddhism: global network in the life of official Buddhist communities of Russia”, I analyze the activities of Buddhist organizations in the Internet.
For many Buddhist organizations the Internet has become a new tool for attracting followers. A certain expansion led to an attempt to occupy the most popular domain names in order to gain more popularity. The content analysis of the websites shows that these Buddhist communities actively position themselves as the most advantageous ones for Buddhist path. Buddhist organizations belonging to global Buddhist communities can be called the pioneers of Internet space exploration. Global Buddhist communities often have Internet experience gained in other countries, which allows them to apply their experience to the Russian Internet.

Another reason why Buddhist organizations start to use the Internet technologies is the territorial dispersion of their followers. In such a way, Internet helps them to contact their gurus who do not have the opportunity to travel to their city or country frequently. In other words, such meetings in the Internet simulate the real contact with the teachers for joint Buddhist practice. However, the use of remote methods of Buddhist practice is not encouraged in some traditions of Buddhism: the characteristics of Mahayana mainly complicate the use of the Internet. Tibetan Buddhism has many elements of esoterics, where the basic practice is tantra, which requires bans on publication of practices or any related materials. However, the leaders of Tibetan Buddhism do not have a clear position concerning the remote Buddhist practices in the Internet; some of them continue to perform such practices in the Internet. Zen school of Chinese Buddhism has such characteristics as the truth “outside the scriptures” where the main emphasis is on the direct contact with the master. Such features also complicate the use of the Internet by Zen communities. As a result, Zen webpages insist on the need for live contact, rather than broadcasting the teachings. As for the Southern Buddhism, it puts the Pali canon texts as the highest value, that is why Theravada communities actively function in the Internet. As for the local Buddhist organizations of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva, they have a lot of followers in close proximity, and do not experience strong need of using the Internet space. The official communities of Buryatia and Kalmykia have their own websites, however, they mostly serve as bulletin boards for the people. Tuva’s Buddhism is not presented in the Internet at all for today. Thus, the analysis of Buddhist organizations online showed great contradictions with the situation offline: communities mainly involved in the discourse of Buddhist modernism constitute the center of the Internet landscape, while local Buddhist organizations are rejected to the periphery. In such Buddhist landscape online an ordinary user while searching for religion in the
Internet will more likely encounter global Buddhist communities, rather than traditional Buddhist organizations.

In Chapter V, “Buddhism in the Internet: dialogues and conflicts of Buddhist communities of Russia”, I present the results of long-term immersion into the Buddhist communities in the social network Vkontakte, where the majority of Buddhist Internet activities take place. Interestingly, the neutral communities that do not belong to any Buddhist organization are the most popular. The density and intensity of the information and users’ flows in the Buddhism community of Vkontakte justified its choice as the major field for analysis. In course of research, I was able to fix a lot of phenomena, which I divided into four subsections, each of which was designed to describe a specific area of interrelations. The first subsection “Buddhist ideas vs New Age” shows the emergence of conflict interactions due to the different views on Buddhist ideas, when the content based on the New Age ideas and hardly connected to Buddhism leads to the struggle for “trueness”. In course of time there appears an “expert” community, which starts to filter the content and “clean” the image of Buddhism in the Internet. Such filtering is usually supported by public solidarity to acts of criticism, which acquire the effect of social pressure. Further on, this criticizing model of behavior predetermined the struggle for trueness already within the stable community of Buddhists, and specifically between representatives of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. In course of time it led to split of one of the largest Buddhist resources in Vkontakte, thus showing that coexistence of Buddhist communities with different ideas is difficult to achieve. In the next subsection, “Internet Buddhism vs. Traditional Buddhism”, I present case studies of traditional Buddhists. It should be noted that the number of Western Buddhists in social networks greatly exceeds the number of Buddhists from Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva. Basing on Internet communication with several traditional Buddhists involved into the struggle for trueness, I conclude that the Internet formulates for them an ideal image of Buddhism based on texts. Traditional Buddhists involved into Internet activities experience the shift in their religiosity, as well as acquire critical position towards their Buddhist environment offline. Internet provides new authorities to traditional Buddhists and can even lead to change in Buddhist school.

The case studies of conflicts are followed by the cases of online cooperation in the form of electronic petitions, where I introduce the attempts of different Buddhist communities to unite against the emerging problems of the Buddhist world.
Interestingly, the official Buddhist organizations do not participate in these actions; the initiators are Internet users who, by uniting others, claim the status of new authorities of Buddhism in Russia. However, the analysis again shows the complex relationship between the Buddhist communities of Russia, where it is not enough to be just a Buddhist in order to receive support from others: it is necessary that the idea of protest corresponded the ideas of others about Buddhism. Therefore, such actions in some cases can unite, and in other cases – alienate Buddhists from each other.

The cases considered in this dissertation show that the overwhelming majority of phenomena occurring in the Internet emerge due to the diversity of Buddhism in Russia, as well as absence of dominant Buddhist organization. Without any common meeting place offline, the Buddhists received it in the Internet. Thus, many questions that remained untouched due to the territorial obstacles opened up in a new common space. The study of the development of Buddhism in the Russian-speaking Internet is of further academic interest, taking into consideration the fact that everyday Internet use throughout the world will continue to grow, and in these conditions the influence of Buddhist Internet communities on Russia’s religious space will also continue to grow and strengthen.