

# Tibetan Buddhism in cyberspace: new information and communication technologies in the Dzogchen International Community

## El budismo tibetano en el ciberespacio: nuevas tecnologías de la información y la comunicación en la Comunidad Dzogchen Internacional

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### ABSTRACT

The article explores the impact that new communication and information technologies have had on the recreation of Buddhism in the West. Taking as a case study the Dzogchen International Community, a group of Tibetan established with presence in Argentina since more than three decades. The paper aims to understand the role played by the use of the internet in the construction of the ritual, community, corporal, and political dimensions of the institution. In this way, the text focuses on analyzing the way in which cyberspace fosters the construction of a transnational religious community in which ritual practices mediated by virtual interfaces connect with the daily routines of its members. In addition, it explores the incidence that the virtual experience of religion has in the sphere of identity and corporality as well as in the sphere of power relations. The methodological approach on which the research is based included the ethnographic fieldwork and the investigation of the multiple digital media that the Dzogchen International Community uses, in order to enable the analysis of the interrelation between the online world and the offline field.

#### Keywords

Buddhism; internet;  
ritual; community;  
globalization

### RESUMEN

*El artículo explora el impacto que las nuevas tecnologías de la información y la comunicación han tenido en la recreación del budismo en Occidente. Se toma como caso de estudio la Comunidad Dzogchen Internacional, un grupo de raigambre tibetana con presencia en Argentina desde hace más de tres décadas. El escrito apunta a comprender el rol que juega el empleo de internet en la construcción de la dimensión ritual, comunitaria, corporal y política de la mencionada institución. De esta forma, el trabajo se centra en analizar la forma en que el ciberespacio propicia la construcción de una comunidad religiosa de carácter transnacional en la cual las prácticas rituales mediadas por interfaces virtuales se acoplan a las rutinas cotidianas de sus miembros. Además, explora la incidencia que tiene la experiencia virtual de la religión, tanto en el ámbito de la identidad y la corporalidad como en la esfera de las relaciones de poder. El análisis metodológico en el cual se basa la investigación incluyó el trabajo de campo etnográfico y la indagación de los múltiples medios digitales que emplea la Comunidad Dzogchen Internacional, a fin de posibilitar el análisis de la interrelación entre el mundo online y el campo offline.*

#### Palabras clave

Budismo; internet;  
ritual; comunidad;  
globalización

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## Introduction

Although the new technologies of information and communication are recent, not having more than three decades of existence, their impact on the economy, education, politics and interpersonal relationships is one of the most important phenomena of our era. It is currently possible to buy or sell any type of object, pay services, consult personal finances, pursue a postgraduate degree, socialize or debate political ideas by means of cyberspace. According to the 2004 report of the Internet Observatory in Argentina, approximately two million households had connection to the Internet in this country, figure that had increased tenfold by 2016. Currently, more than 80% of the forty million inhabitants have access to cyberspace, which is part of the daily routine of the Argentines since 85% of the users connect themselves every day. Moreover, the use of the Internet is not only daily but also intense; the population spends an average of four hours connected to the global network through mobile phones and twice the time through personal computers or tablets.<sup>1</sup>

In this general context of the social dynamic mutation brought about by the development of the new digital technologies, religion is one of the areas of life that has been affected to such an extent that we are barely starting to comprehend. Cyberspace makes it possible to circumvent temporal, spatial and cultural boundaries by conferring great accessibility and immediacy to the most diversified religious practices and representations; hence, the Internet contributes to a large extent to the visibility of minority heterodoxies. Now, through interfaces such as personal computers, tablets or mobile phones, it is possible to read religious texts that were previously not accessible, see and listen to spiritual leaders all over the world and participate in transnational spiritual communities.

Therefore, the path to access an institution of this type is shorter; entering a few words in a search engine such as Google suffices to encounter multiple options. Hence, spiritual seekers may easily explore religious alternatives by using digital networks. By using the new means of communication, individuals can find new religious experiences not only “in stone churches, in flesh and blood priests and in tangible rituals, but also in the existing religiosity available in the bits and pixels of the Internet” (Sbardelotto, 2014).

Virtual worlds are not new or limited to the digital environment, since they have been present for millennia in the sphere of religion, literature and art. While we all share the experience of being immersed in an alternative, immaterial reality, the virtual world made possible through the digital technology offers some features that differentiate it from the virtual world created by mythical narratives or the reading a novel or the contemplation of a movie. The main characteristic of the virtual world is the possibility to establish a relation of interactivity (*cf.* Grieve, 2010; Bitarello, 2008).

On this particular issue, Helland (2005) makes a distinction between the websites where one can act freely and with a high level of interactivity (*online religion*) and the rest – the majority – of the sites that only provide religious information but do not offer any interaction (*religion online*). In the first case, people live their religion in and through the Internet; there is no divide between their life *offline* and their experiences *online* since their religious practices and worldviews permeate both environments. As the foregoing author points out, the dichotomy between *online religion* and *religion online* expresses the extremes of a phenomenon that, in practice, is always situated somewhere in between, since there are many institutional websites that are now offering space for interactivity.<sup>2</sup>

Anyhow, new communication technologies have been incorporated to a greater or lesser extent to almost all religious expressions worldwide. As Campbell (2005) points out, the differential appropriation of digital technologies varies according to the attitude religious institutions have toward cyberspace which can vary from an enthusiastic embrace to a conservative rectitude.

Nevertheless, the most frequent posture is to be found somewhere in the middle of these extremes, seeking to stimulate some forms of use and discourage others. It is therefore pertinent to explore the way individuals as well as organizations conceive and use the *online* space to represent the sacred and to practice religion.

This process implies providing the Internet with a narrative that contextualizes its purpose and explains the way in which it can serve its users, i.e., bring into play discursive strategies of apologetic nature that provide a framework in which to conceive the Internet technology.

The main topics addressed in the theoretical, methodological studies and case studies on the relation between the Internet and religion can be grouped into four main axes: community, identity, ritual and authority.

Regarding the first topic, different studies have explored the way in which digital technologies make it possible to imagine transnational communities (Anderson, 1983) based on religious affinities. This type of community is historically unique since it does not only represent new possibilities (e.g., the creation of collective identities that transcend territory and national barriers), but it also underlines new problems such as the difficulty to generate a sense of belonging when members of a given group are dispersed all over the world. In turn, many transnational religious traditions require the presence and constant guidance of an authorized instructor; hence the need to inquire how new digital means may help addressing this limitation (Campbell and Connelly, 2012).

The second topic focuses on the identity, experience and corporality, in a context where interpersonal relationships and the process of production of subjectivities is affected by phenomena such as hyper-connectivity, tele-presence and body virtualization. Citro and Puglisi (2015, pp. 12-13) argue that the Internet has become one more horizon in the world of everyday life which ontological structure can be coined “to be-on-the-net”.<sup>3</sup>

Along these lines, digital technologies offer new opportunities to construct religious identities, especially for those people that do not have many options in their local *offline* context (Campbell and Connelly, 2012).

The third topic shows a growing tendency to shifting religious practices to cyberspace in such a way that rituals are no longer anchored to traditional contexts; i.e., in other words, there is currently a dislocation of temples traditional space and the creation of new cult environments in decentralized virtual settings, together with the elimination of time barriers given the immediacy of the *online* communication (Casey, 2006; Kruger, 2005; Radde-Antweiler, 2006 and 2008; Sbardelotto, 2014).

Regarding the fourth topic which is related to authority, several authors have highlighted that cyberspace as a new environment provides different possibilities of bond with the sacred. These possibilities are rooted in the fact that digital networks frequently allow circumventing the mediation of temples, leaders and norms in the believer’s relation with numinous powers.

Conversely, this leads to questioning the roles of traditional authorities and democratization of the structures of religious powers (Brustolin, 2016; Sbardelotto, 2014). At the same time, we witness the emergence of new forms of authorities rooted in the virtual environment such as *webmasters*, administrators or moderators (Yonnetti, 2017; Campbell, 2005). In turn, the impact of the digital revolution raises questions such as whether religious competence becomes democratized when learned on the Internet, freeing itself from *offline* constraints or, it continues being permeated by power relations based for example on class, gender or age (Kruger, 2005).

Regarding this paper specific topic of study, there is a growing body of texts that revisits the problems referred to above and analyzes the relation between the new digital technologies and the globalized Buddhism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These research studies show that individuals as well as groups are currently in a process of negotiation between the *online* and *offline* worlds, creating ritual practices that reinforce the Buddhist identity and developing new forms of communities (*cf.* Campbell and Connelly, 2012; Carini and Gracia, 2016; Connelly, 2010; Grieve, 2010; MacWilliams, 2006; Radde-Antweiler, 2008; Soper, 2014; Tarocco, 2017; Yonnetti, 2017).

In order to contribute to this field of study, this paper explores the role new digital technologies play, more specifically the Internet, in adapting and recreating Buddhism

in the Western World, taking as specific case the International Dzogchen Community, a Tibetan-rooted Buddhist group present in Argentina for more than three decades. By taking into consideration the questions previously raised, this paper focuses on exploring the way in which the digital communicational environment influences the ritual, community and authority processes of the community abovementioned.

The queries articulated in this paper refer to questions on how virtual instances are transferred to cyberspace; how they interweave in the *offline* everyday life of the members of the group; to what extent do interactivity and accessibility can be found in using the Internet; how does this mediation reproduce or challenge the role of traditional authorities; in which way does it influence the processes of the production of collective identities.

In order to accomplish this task, we have used a methodological analysis that took into consideration not only the virtual world but also the ethnographic fieldwork so that we could explore the interrelation between cyberspace and the world of the *offline* life. More specifically, we carried out an ethnographic work in the Argentinean branch of the International Dzogchen Community. This work included frequent visits to the centers of this organization located in Buenos Aires, Cordoba and La Plata, where we conducted participatory observation, interviews and life stories. We also paid attention to and registered the uses this group makes of the means of communication at a local and global levels.

This paper is organized into three sections. The first presents the topic of study by means of a brief characterization of Tibetan Buddhism and a description of the main socio-cultural and historic features of the International Dzogchen Community. The second describes the uses this institution makes of the new digital technologies and cyberspace, Lastly, the third ponders on how this specific use of the Internet describes the digital mediation processes of rituals, power and community.

### **Tibetan Buddhism and the International Dzogchen Community**

Tibetan Buddhism, also known as Tantric Buddhism, *vajrayana* or Lamaism, is a Buddhist current which fundamental doctrine does not differ from the two other great aspects of this philosophy: the *mahayana* and the *Theravada* but incorporates a large number of spiritual techniques of initiatory nature transmitted from the master (lama) to a disciple. In *vajrayana*, the recitation of sacred sounds (mantras), the visualization of deities and the use of body gestures (mudras) are of special importance since they are part of the baggage of devices to access the sacred.

It is worth mentioning that, from a native perspective, tantric teachings are secret doctrines and practices transmitted directly from the Buddha to some specially gifted students. The *vajrayana* esoteric nature would be a reason for which its teachings do not

appear in the Pali Canon, the text corpus that compiles the words of Buddha (*cf.* Blondeau, 1990; Harvey, 1998; Smith, 1963; Tucci, 2012).

This Buddhist tradition remained isolated on the peaks of the Himalaya until recently, when, in 1950, the invasion of Tibet China propelled its dissemination beyond the territory in which it was confined for nearly a thousand years.

In fact, the formation of nuclei of Tibetan refugees that upheld their beliefs in the diaspora, the political activism of the lamas against the Chinese occupation and the early interest of many Westerners for their rituals and cosmology, have been key factors in popularizing Tibetan Buddhism in the Western World (Baumann, 2001 y 2002).

Another relevant factor of the development of this branch of Buddhism has been the receptive attitude toward the new means of communication. In this regard, several authors have highlighted the wide variety of channels used by Tibetan lamas to spread their message among which are conferences, books, magazines, websites and television (Baumann, 2001; Obadia, 2001).<sup>4</sup>

Regarding our specific case study, the International Dzogchen Community was founded by Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, one of the last masters born and raised completely in Tibet before the Chinese occupation. Moreover, he was the first to transmit the Dzogchen tradition in the Western World, a system of esoteric teachings of the *nyingma* school of the Tibetan Buddhism. Namkhai was born in 1938, in the small town of Guehug, in the Derge district, province of Kham, eastern Tibet.

In 1950, while Namkhai was traveling in India, he attempted to return to his native country without success since Tibet was now under Chinese occupation and the borders were blocked. Although he was only 22 years old, he was already recognized as an authority in all aspects of the Tibetan culture and was offered work in several Western universities. At the invitation of the renowned anthropologist and orientalist Giuseppe Tucci to work in Rome at the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East, he immigrated to this country in 1960, where he worked as a Tibetan language, literature and culture professor until his retirement in 1992.

In the mid-1970s, Namkhai began spreading ideas and practices of the Tibetan Buddhism to a small group of Italian students. The 80s were years of rapid dissemination of his teaching throughout the world. In 1981, he founded Merigar, the first residential center of the International Dzogchen Community in the Italian city of Arcidosso. During the following years, other centers sprung into existence in more than 40 countries of Europe, America, Australia and Asia.

In 1983, Namkhai organized the first Tibetan medicine convention in Venice, and in 1988, he founded the Asia non-governmental organization (NGO) (Association for

International Solidarity in Asia), to promote education and health throughout Tibet. In 1989, he founded the Shang Shung Foundation (FSS) to preserve Tibet's cultural traditions. This foundation was launched by the renowned Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama.

Hence, the disseminating work of Namkhai was structured triadically: the International Dzogchen Community, the Asia NGO and the Shang Shung Foundation. Even though these three institutions represent the same community of Dzogchen practitioners, each of them has a differential purpose.

While the Dzogchen Community unites the Western members committed to the Dzogchen practices and cosmovision, the Asia NGO channels the material resources that flow from the West to the East in order to benefit the precarious life conditions of the Tibetans; the Shang Shung Foundation is the visible face of the community to the outside world and shows a secularized version of the Dzogchen that emphasizes the value of the Tibetan culture.

The International Dzogchen Community has had a steady growth since its inception in the 1970s and it currently has ten thousand committed followers approximately worldwide together with numerous supporters that participate to a greater or lesser extent in the activities.

In parallel, Namkhai has become one most well-known faces of the Tibetan Buddhism in the Western World. His main activity focuses on conducting "retreats", events that can last several days to one month in which he provides daily teachings and shares his everyday life with his disciples throughout the world in the centers (*gars*) established by the International Dzogchen Community.<sup>5</sup>

There are two *gars* in Europe (Italy and Rumania), two in North-America (in the United States and Mexico), two in South America (in Venezuela and Argentina), one in Australia, another in Russia and a last one called "*global gar*" in Tenerife, Spain. Furthermore, the *gars* not only offer retreats but also other types of events such as meditation, *yantra yoga* or *vajra dance* taught by authorized members.<sup>6</sup>

As we have mentioned earlier in this paper, one of the key factors that has promoted the existence of Buddhism in the Western World, and which, in turn, has contributed to recreating it in this part of the globe, has been the use of the new means of communication and information, more specifically, the Internet. Therefore, next, we will explore the uses of cyberspace in the International Dzogchen Community.

## Uses of Cyberspace in the International Dzogchen Community

Currently, there is a multiplicity of digital channels through which information and communication on the Dzogchen Community circulates. E-mail, Whatsapp, Facebook, Youtube, Webcast and a set of institutional websites are being used. Local daily activities are coordinated through e-mails and Whatsapp, which maintain a fluid exchange of information among the disciples that meet one-on-one on a regular basis; hence, having a limited accessibility, a high level of interactivity and a daily use.

On the contrary, institutional websites reach every center of the International Dzogchen Community and are opened to the public in general, even though there is little interactivity. Every *gar* or regional center has its own website, so that cyberspace reproduces *offline* territorial cleavages. Nevertheless, there is a series of sites of global reach which are that of the Shang Shung Foundation, the Asia NGO, and *The Mirror* newspaper, a site that offers a webcast system to broadcast the community events live; there is another site called “*Practicing Together*” which coordinates global practices to all the members simultaneously. Each one of these virtual spaces have different uses and purposes; we will refer to some of them in the following paragraphs.

The Shang Shung Foundation aims at reaching potential Dzogchen students that might be interested in the philosophical, linguistic, historical or artistic aspects of the region of the Himalaya even though they are not specifically looking into the alternatives Tibetan Buddhism offers. As referred to in the foregoing paragraph, the FSS is represented as an institution with non-profit, non-political or non-religious affiliation, which object is to preserve, disseminate and promote the recognition of the past and present Tibetan culture as a unique and universal treasure that can improve the lives and welfare of people and societies on a global scale.

For the preservation and dissemination information, the FSS focuses on the translation of ancient manuscripts, language teaching, book publicity, traditional medicine, calligraphy, *thankas* painting, modern dances and music, yoga and other activities that make known different aspects of the Tibetan cultural heritage. The FSS website covers much of this work that involves the work sustained by a team of publishers concerned about “offering an attractive content” in five languages. Furthermore, it has an audio, video, photographic and written file documenting more than 40 years of the life of the Dzogchen community.

This file was digitalized in 2002 in 100 terabytes that contain more than 40 000 image and 18 000 video and audio folders. In 2014, the FSS developed a digital file platform to preserve all that information. Currently, its members are standardizing uniform criteria to classify into catalogues the material of all the branches of the community throughout the world.



Moreover, the FSS's immediate objective is to develop an open code "under the collaboration and generosity principle" so that any programmer interested may help the Foundation in its projects. To further this mission, in August 2017, the FSS held its first Merigar Hackathon under the name of "Programmers for Tibetan Culture" to which programmers and experts in interface designs interested in the Foundation's proposal participated online or in person. Free lunch and accommodation were provided. Through this hackathon, the Foundation sought to develop software for videoconferences, tools to develop online studies of the Tibetan language and medicine, mobile applications for magazines, fund raising systems and, also thematic games for smartphones.

One of the first results of these efforts to incorporate and develop digital technology mediated by the Internet took place in 2005 when the International Dzogchen began broadcasting via webcast most of the retreats and other events Namkhai carried out during the year in different countries of the world so, since then, every one of his disciples can follow his teachings in real time.

Besides the online broadcasting of audios and videos, the webcast system includes a simultaneous translation service in several languages, among which Italian, Russian, Spanish, Japanese, German, Czech, Polish, French, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Chinese. Some of the events are open access while others are reserved to "registered users".

There are more than nine thousand registered users in the webcast system and there is an announcement on the website that provides the service when a new record of simultaneous live connections is achieved during an event. These users, besides having access to all the broadcasts, also have the possibility to "replay", i.e., observe the recordings of past events.

The requirement to register as user and have access to the entire webcast of the community is to be an "active member". To do so, one must pay an annual fee which is considered an offering to the master in gratitude for his teaching and a way of showing one's commitment, a way of fostering the life of the community and making possible the continuity of the teachings and the recruiting of new followers. In turn, in order to become an "active member", and by extension, have the possibility to register as a user of the webcast system, it is necessary to have participated in the "transmission" ceremony which is an initiation rite during which the master "transmits" to the aspiring member a "vision of the Buddha nature", a state of illumination or spiritual grace:

The Dzogchen teachings are linked to a transmission that lives within the Master and which is fundamentally important to the development of the disciples' knowledge and realization. This transmission is obtained through a direct introduction which is the opportunity for the disciple to unify with the state of the Master which is the primary illimited state of all the sentient beings.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the teacher, through granting the disciple with a type of numinous experience, reveals the bounty of Buddhist salvation (also called “state of presence or “*rigpa*” at the beginning of the disciple’s spiritual path, experience that he/she must cultivate and reinforce through years of practice. As of that moment, the disciple is considered “*vajra* brother”, i.e., someone who is now united to the rest of the community through sacred bonds and becomes members of the spiritual lineage to which the master belongs.

The transmission does not only generate a permanent spiritual bond with the Master but also with the rest of his disciples, building a symbolic frontier that defines the other external one while constituting a “we”. The requirement to participate to the *online* and *offline* life of the community is to have received the transmission given the esoteric nature of the Dzogchen teachings.

Namkhai, at the beginning of his disseminating activity, granted the transmission in person which largely limited the membership volume. However, from 2005, the individuals interested in his teaching can also receive the “transmission *online*” through webcast. The procedure involves an older member that has access to the event who officiates as an intermediate that explains to the person interested the way to carry out the initiation ceremony and its meaning.

Another example that illustrates the uses of the webcast system is the *ganapuja*, a ceremony of commensality where the disciples gather to consume food and beverage on special days following the lunar calendar. The rite includes long mantra recitations, gesture practices or *mudras* and complex visualizations. Its purpose is to establish and strengthen bonds between the classes of being, integrating different ontological regimes.<sup>8</sup>

*Ganapujas* are convened through a text message or e-mail sent to the members of the local communities, i.e., those that belong to the same city. Their frequency depends on the availability of a space to carry out the ritual since these gatherings are being carried out at the members’ private homes. In La Plata and Buenos Aires, there are approximately 20 Dzogchen disciples in each one of these cities; the gatherings are held mostly every fortnight with an attendance of four to seven disciples. There are small ways of making present the absence of the master. One of these ways consists in serving a plate of food and a beverage “for the master” which is deposited on the altar under his photograph.

The *ganapuja* can also be held *online* through the webcast system that takes place on special occasions such as in February 2017 when celebrating Namkhai’s forty years missionary work. On that occasion, the Tibetan leader was in the Tenerife center while

his disciples worldwide were watching him live on the screen of the computer while, at the same time, carrying out the ritual.

Lastly, the other case that illustrates how the International Dzogchen Community uses of the Internet is the [www.practicingtogether.org](http://www.practicingtogether.org) website. This site coordinates the “world chains”, collective practices of tantric rituals that include visualizations and mantra recitation, e.g., the practice centered on the Green Tara, the female Buddhist goddess.

The world chains are considered a “collective project” that seeks to unite the full “strength and capacity” of the Dzogchen students so that, at a predetermined schedule, there is a large number of disciples reciting a Tara or any other similar ceremony. This practice is done to “gather merits” to reach an explicit goal such as improving Namkhai’s health, complete the construction of the Tenerife global *gar* or contribute to the world’s welfare.

The idea is that, through the collaboration of all the disciples in the world, an interrupted chain of individuals chant the Tara for 24 hours. This mechanism implies filling out an online form with the name and country of origin of the group or individual engaged in carrying out the ritual for one hour, trying to fill the schedule to be “covered or reinforced” according to the information appearing on the webpage specifically designed to such purpose. However, in order “not to cut the chain”, it is suggested to start a few minutes before and end a few minutes after the chanting of the mantras.

### **The Community Digital Mediation: The Ritual and the Power**

The reference made in the foregoing section is a clear example of what Campbell (2005) calls “*spiritualizing the internet*”, phenomenon by which it is conceived as an appropriate technology to live the religious dimension, encouraging the members of a group to include daily online activities in their spiritual life.

From the native discourse, the Internet has an “external dimension” which is a “tool that allows us to reach people throughout the world, preserving and disseminating the Tibetan culture in many new attractive forms, and an “internal dimension” “that serves as an organizational tool to improve the management, the communications, to align the programmatic activities between the branches and provide mechanisms to ensure the general coherence, the efficiency and the quality of the projects being undertaken”.

Here, we can identify a narrative about the Internet that considers it both a missionary tool to disseminate the teaching as well as a social technology that allows connecting the scattered members of the community and facilitate the circulation of knowledge and practices and underpin a specific religious *ethos* (cf. Campbell, 2005).

In the case of the Shang Shung Foundation, digital technology is not only appropriated, but it is also actively produced to serve the institution's purposes such as raise funds, teach the Tibetan language and carry out *online* rituals. In turn, digital technologies make it possible to articulate a political project of reinventing a tradition that offers multiple facets according to different purposes.

As for the FSS, we can see how it uses the Internet to shape an identity that is conceived appropriate to a larger public, and which is presented under a modality that focuses more on culture than religion. The audiovisual register and the intense edition activity of the written material operates as one of the devices that allows broadcasting Namkhai's teaching in different countries and, creating conditions so the transnational and globalizing communities, built on religious affinities, be a possible utopia in this day and age.

All this textual documentation is a collective project that helps imagining a practicing community linked more to an aspiration than a memory, created "*ex profeso* to produce anticipated memories for intentional communities" (Appadurai, 2005, p. 127).

As for the transmission through webcast, this innovation through which a secret passage rite, in-presence and limited to a reduced number of individuals, is transformed in an open and massive act and which does not require the physical presence of the master and the disciple, acquires all its logic if we take into consideration the way to overcome important obstacles when making possible the growth of the Dzogchen community; the mentioned need to "get the transmission" in order to participate in most of the activities and become a member.

Up to a certain point in the path of the Dzogchen community, the expansion of the membership required the physical presence of the master and the disciple; however, after the implementation of the *online* transmission, the possibility of its growth, transnationalization and globalization opened up, retaining the master as the traditional centralization of the authority.

Here, we can see how distance communication technologies make it possible for the communities scattered nationally and transnationally can grow without any material limitations imposed by the territorial dispersion and, at the same time, not losing their sense of collective identity; hence, the new communication means are used for traditional purposes since they make it possible to maintain the structures of power and the ancestral rites of passage permeating space and time barriers.

Likewise, through the *online ganapuja*, it is possible to fully appreciate the way in which the Internet makes it possible to imagine a community based on a collective ritual articulated around a charismatic leader, providing a clear example of the mediation of the authority through the new digital technologies.

As in in-presence retreats, where everyone carries out the practice contemplating the master sitting on a central platform in a large hall, in the *online ganapuja*, everyone is facing the computer screen looking at Namkhai through the webcast system. The difference here is of dual modality (partly *online*, partly *offline*) in which the fundamental components of the ceremony are formed: on the one hand, the master, and on the other, the disciples.

The website [www.practicingtogether.org](http://www.practicingtogether.org) also offers a testimony of the mediating power of the virtual when building a sense of community that transcends geographic boundaries. Even if everyone is home alone or gathered in small groups, cyberspace enables the construction of an imagined transnational community that provides a sense of collective identity based on the idea of belonging to a “*vajra* family” consisting of “*vajra* brothers and sisters” who find themselves practicing together, united as parts of a whole”. So, when the in-person fellowship and contact between the master and its disciples are impossible, the face-to-face relations are not the only ones to sustain the collective identity. The new information technologies contribute in creating and maintaining a sense of belonging.

However, we must not lose sight that *online* religion is not a substitute for *offline* religious communities (Campbell, 2005). Even if the use of innovative technological means is important to maintain the coherence and to overcome difficulties when incorporating new members, it also presents some problems.

According to Hubert Dreyfus’ approach (2001), tele-presence affects interpersonal relationships and generates a lesser sense of reality, since it depends on the embodied presence. The cost of virtual relationships is the loss of contextual information given in communication and the sensitivity to “mood atmosphere” (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 55), and the lack of the inherent risk sensation to body participation in the physical world. These factors grant us the sensation of our power as well as our vulnerability in social life and allows us to learn to interact with people and things.

Therefore, the virtual mediation of ritual practices and distance communication go hand in hand with ritual practices and face-to-face intersubjective encounters, in a codependence relationship in such a way that it is impossible to understand one without the other. Participation in community-life instances during “retreats” is fundamental to build the group identity, the recognition of the “*vajra* brothers” as such, for themselves as well as for others.

Moreover, the members of the community consider hearing the words from the master himself at the same moment they are uttered in a ritual context set in a sacred time and space, as something extremely valuable. One of the questions frequently asked to all of those who are taking their first steps in the world of the Dzogchen is “if they have already

met the master”, and we often heard stories about the impact on the subjectivity the encounter with the sacred leader generates.

An example of the numinous power granted to the master’s word is the *lung* rite (original sound) in which Namkhai rapidly recites the texts of the different practices in presence of the neophyte. This “transmission of the original sound” is necessary so the initiations and invocations to the Tantric Buddhist deities acquire their full efficacy. It is necessary to attend a retreat with Namkhai to receive the *lung*. Moreover, there is a ritual competence that is transmitted by Namkhai himself or one of the authorized instructors or older students exclusively face-to-face in the intimacy of an in-person retreat. This consists of specific knowledge on how to carry out certain practices; the place where the visualization of a certain deity is situated in space, the size the disciple imagines it, the way to perform the ritual gestures (*mudras*), the way to chant the mantras, etc.

To summarize, we can say that there is a complementarity relation between the *online* and *offline* worlds in the daily practice of the Dzogchen students. An event such as the transmission via webcast provides accessibility to the *offline* activities while the in-presence rituals such as the *lung* are required even for *online* practices.

## Conclusion

Print capitalism unleashed a new power in the world: the ability to read and write and the simultaneous mass production of projects of ethnic affinity that were free from the need of a face-to-face communication. Therefore, the reading of the same texts created the possibility to imagine a community (Anderson, 1983). Currently, information and communication technologies punctuate a new stage in this process since they make it possible to share interactively not only texts but also images and sounds.

Cyberspace has created spatial dislocations between material and virtual neighborhoods, since massification, a consequence of mediatization, leads necessarily to bring distanced individuals and lives together in a space. Then a fragmentation and dispersion of religious communities that transcend national boundaries is being observed.

Along these lines, the new technologies contribute to the formation of transnational communities since, when social face-to-face interactions are not possible, they are substituted by interactions at distance, whether textual or audiovisual; thus activating new forms of imagining communities based on religious affinities, producing collective identities that transcend territory and national boundaries.

Therefore, we can assert that the formation of Buddhist centers such as the International Dzogchen Community poses as possibility conditions, the transformations of the means of communication of the last decades and the development of cyberspace. These technologies foster two key dimensions: the community and the authority.

While ritual practices such as *online ganapuja* offer a clear example of this double function, the global chains (used to coordinate the joint efforts of a large and dispersed pool of individuals) are linked mainly to the symbolic construction of the community and the transmission via webcast with the maintenance of the structure of the authority. In this last case, the dissolution of the space and time limits allows the sacred presence of the master to be virtually anywhere, transforming the domestic environment into a space of worship.

The foregoing shows the transformation of Buddhism given its shift to the Internet setting, forming space of practices distant from the traditional ones. Hence, the sacred is known by constantly experiencing and re-developing it through flows of communication that circulate throughout digital networks.

Likewise, we noticed that the production process of subjectivities is being affected by phenomena such as hyper-connectivity, tele-presence and body virtualization. In fact, the religious individual is currently being constructed through the mediation of digital networks, in such a way that we can say that the practice of religion in a digital environment involves a transformation of the experience of the sacred “given through new temporalities, new spatialities, new materialities, new discursivities and new ritualities” (Sbardelotto, 2014, p. 12).

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<sup>1</sup> According to the data of the above-mentioned agency, cyberspace is used mainly for communication (through e-mail applications, Whatsapp, Messenger, etc.) entertainment (including activities such as listening to music, watching video on YouTube or reading current news), acquisition of goods or socialization). In fact, Argentines spend an average of three hours and a half on social networks such as Facebook, which has 31 million users in the country.

<sup>2</sup> According to Helland (2005), there is a change between the mere reception of information and the opportunity of more complex operations, even if they are limited to actions such as requesting a prayer for someone or subscribing to a newsletter.

<sup>3</sup> This structure questions traditional conceptions of the subject as a territorialized, individual and stable entity embodied in a present body. Hence, these authors invite us to think about subjectivity as a result of multiple intersubjective and dynamic networks, embodied in present or virtual bodies. It is therefore relevant to explore the way in which the religious subject mediated by digital networks is constructed, and what type of subjectivity and corporality is being constituted by and through the virtual experience of religion (Citro and Puglisi, 2015, pp. 12-13).

<sup>4</sup> For a historic and sociocultural outlook of Tibetan Buddhists in Argentina *cfr.* Carini, 2014a and 2018.

<sup>5</sup> To this date, Namkhai has conducted more than 600 teaching retreats worldwide.

<sup>6</sup> For a study of body, experiential and cosmovisual aspects of these practices, *cfr.* Carini, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Text taken on the Internet “World Transmission of the Guruyoga with Chögyal Namkhai Norbu”. Source: [www.tashigarsur.org](http://www.tashigarsur.org). Date of consultation: July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of this ceremony and its symbolism, *cfr.* Carini, 2014b.