

”BECAUSE MODERN PEOPLE BELIEVE IN NEW  
SKYDADDY”  
SHIFTING BUDDHIST IDENTITIES AND AUTHORITIES ON  
REDDIT

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ABSTRACT

Online religion may challenge traditional forms of practice, ideas, values, hierarchies, and authorities. This article explores some of the complex ways in which Buddhism is practiced as a lived religion on the internet. It looks at three case studies from the subreddit /r/Buddhism on Reddit.com and uses these examples as springboards for a broader discussion of Buddhist identity, authority, and authenticity in the twenty-first century. The article also discusses recent relevant scholarship and suggests that Reddit is a valuable yet understudied source of insight into the lives of ordinary religious practitioners in the twenty-first century. The article in particular highlights how Reddit can be a source of insight into “the broad variety of articulations of religious identities, such as the stories of women, gay people and other groups whose voices have been marginalized in religious communities throughout history” (Lövheim 2012: 163).

KEYWORDS

Digital Buddhism - identity - authority - authenticity - digital religion -  
Buddhism in the West - Reddit

INTRODUCTION

The digital world is an engine of religious change, as people from different backgrounds and contexts come together to create “new, dynamic opportunities for self-expression of belief and religious lifestyle practice” (Campbell 2011: 71). In particular, online religious expressions often challenge notions of traditional hierarchies and authority, exhibit

a heightened sense of individualism, and are marked by a ‘pick-and-mix’ approach in order to present “a self from the plurality of religious symbols circulated online” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 59). Similarly, expressions of digital religion often challenge traditional notions of what is ‘authentically’ religious. This article looks at Buddhism and Buddhist discourse online, with Reddit as its focus. It aims to discuss topics related to Buddhist modernism—or what possibly more properly could be called Buddhist post-modernism—and questions concerning Buddhist identity, authenticity, and authority. The article will first build a framework to work from with a basis in recent scholarship on the topic, which will make it easier to understand the discussion later, before moving on to Reddit as a case study and discussing the findings. What kinds of Buddhism(s) do we see reflected on the site? Is the Buddhism we see mostly secular but spiritual, as we might expect from Buddhist modernism, or is it in fact entirely religious? The examples that will be examined highlight some of the ways in which Buddhism is used by people to navigate their lives, helping them make sense of their surrounding environments, while playing an essential role in their identity formation. In the context of Reddit, this entails a huge variety of individual approaches and understandings of Buddhism that in turn highlight ways in which religion in general plays a pivotal role for sense-making and identity formation for people today.

A key aim of the article is to highlight the complex ways in which Buddhism is enacted and changed online and in the digital world. Far from being an anachronism, Buddhism is a living, fluid religion with a vibrant online presence, and we can learn much from studying these religious expressions online, in addition to textual analyses of older texts and materials. The modernization of Buddhism is a “complicated process of hybridization” that results in “a proliferation of Buddhisms adapted to contemporary global contexts” (Harding et al. 2020: 7). The internet is just such a contemporary global context, and it is well worth studying it in order to understand religious change. As has been pointed out, using the Internet for religious activity could become the dominant form religious experience in the future (Gandhi 2019: 2). Examining digital religion is therefore an essential part of understanding religion in the twenty-first century.

## METHODS, SOURCES, AND ETHICS

This article is based on a case study of Reddit posts about three homemade Buddhist altars. The subreddit in question, /r/Buddhism, is very active, with plenty of posts every day, and as of the time of writing (April 2023) a total of 661,739 users are members of the community.<sup>1</sup> A number of elements on the site itself are worth examining—for

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1. /r/Buddhism means it is a subreddit dedicated to Buddhism. /r/chess is a subreddit dedicated to chess; /r/tennis would lead to a subreddit dedicated to tennis, and so forth. There are in fact a great many (if not a bewildering amount of) subreddits, including ones dedicated to specific branches of Buddhism:

instance, an FAQ section with several interesting links, as well as a set of guidelines for posting. One of these rules is that “posts with New Kadampa Tradition-supporting content will be removed.” This is highly interesting in itself, but the article will not be going into any detail regarding these cursory matters and will for the most part forego discussing them. The focus is rather on the content actually posted and discussed by the users taking part in the subreddit.

I began the process of data selection by looking at posts about altars, typically home-made altars, before looking more closely at the specific users posting about these altars in order to find out what kinds of discourses are popular and possible on the site. The selection was originally much larger, and the three case studies focused on here were originally chosen on the basis that they contained pictures of altars that the users had shared on the site. The fact that they turned out to be remarkable examples of minority representation was a happy accident, but I suspect it is not entirely accidental. The extent to which the examples in the article are representative of a wider trend requires further study, but the examples and a more in-depth look at the site do suggest that they are a part of a broader trend of individualized forms of identity formation online, where people utilize a pick-and-mix approach to religion to find what they are searching for—be it meaning, spiritual fulfillment, community, or what have you. I have also limited the corpus by looking only at posts made between 2022—2023, with most of them effectively from November 2022 to early December 2022, though a few are recent (that is, up to April 2023).

Reddit is popular overwhelmingly in the United States and more generally in the Western world, with the United States making up almost 50 % of the traffic on the site. It is also skewed towards men, with about 70 % of users being male. It is, however, the nineteenth most popular website on the internet, which indicates that it is popular elsewhere as well. The trends and data one finds on Reddit may have relevance and influence beyond the website as such. The “online and offline worlds are simultaneously connected” and the “debates and processes that take place on the internet ... highlight the ways in which modern Buddhism” is “multiple and complex” (Gandhi 2019: 13, 19). It seems reasonable to assume that the influences go both ways, even if the brunt of the weight, at least in terms of numbers, is felt in the West when studying digital aspects of religion.

I am aware that studying a social site like Reddit, which is based on user-interaction and discussions among real people, involves some ethical dimensions that must be considered. I have therefore consulted a variety of guidelines to follow. In particular, I have looked at the ones offered by the *Association of Internet Researchers*. A site like Reddit is largely anonymous and username-based, and real-life identities are obscured unless

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*/r/theravada*, */r/Vajrayana*, and so on. This paper will deal with the biggest of them, */r/buddhism*. The full link would be [reddit.com/r/Buddhism](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism).

the person in question is a “verified user”—typically a celebrity or politician or something of that kind. Most of the data that I will use in what follows will be based on the content of the posts and the reactions and discourse of both; the users themselves will be as anonymous, just as they are on the site. Additionally, the *National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities* (NESH) mentions that there are a few exceptions to the rule that one must inform subjects that they are being studied. One such exception is if the research concerns “open areas.” I would argue that sites like Reddit are akin to these open areas, only in the online world. Since Reddit is a website open for all to access, the posts made there must be expected to receive attention. I will provide links to the posts being discussed in footnotes for ease of access. Though /r/Buddhism is an open subreddit, more intricate ethical questions would come up if it were in fact a closed subreddit where one would have to request permission to join. Though it is not entirely relevant here, it is nonetheless an interesting ethical question surrounding the study of digital religion in general.<sup>2</sup>

### BUDDHIST MODERNISM AND IDENTITIES

There has been a “strong current” from the 1800s to make Buddhism modern, to “make Buddhism into a world religion” (Harding et al. 2020: 1). This process is long, complicated, and still ongoing. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the Western world has imported Buddhism through colonialism and simply superimposed Western values onto an ancient, unchanging religious tradition—more or less providing an essentialist view of Buddhism even as it has existed and exists in Asia today (Harding et al. 2020: 5). This, of course, is not only an oversimplification but also an unhelpful way of looking at the topic, which additionally completely removes Asian agency (Harding et al. 2020: 5). As McMahan puts it, if we see the development of Buddhism since the 1800s purely through the lens of Western influence, it “occludes the agency of Asian Buddhists as co-creators of modernist versions of their traditions (2008: 21).” It is important to note that we are dealing with “broad tendencies that coexist in creative tension with traditional elements, with neither side winning out wholesale” (McMahan 2008: 59). Indeed, in some cases, Buddhists have adopted a kind of “strategic occidentalism” or a “reverse orientalism” in order to appeal to Western sensibilities (McMahan 2008: 96).

In a nutshell, the central characteristics of this type of globalized and modernized Buddhism are rationalism and individualism as well as the idea that Buddhism and Buddhist monastics should be more involved with society (Harding et al. 2020: 2). In particular, the scientific and rational framing of Buddhism is important: Buddhism is viewed as a “way of living”, that is in essence “scientific, universal, instrumental, and empir-

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2. Consider, for instance, private Discord communities, which are often connected to particular subreddits and communities.

ically based” (McMahan 2017: 118). In places like Burma, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, lay meditation, especially vipassana meditation, has become much more important and has taken on a much more significant role than it had in the past, largely developed and popularized by Burmese meditation teachers and by the Indian layman S. N. Goenka who taught vipassana meditation in Sri Lanka and Nepal (Berkwitz 2010: 203). In this tradition, it is now believed that even laypeople can reach nirvana with vipassana meditation (Berkwitz 2010: 204). This focus on the individual, where the authority in regard to what counts as legitimate religion and spiritual beliefs lies in the hands of the individuals themselves, is a recent and modern phenomenon, and it highlights one of the ways in which Buddhist modernism is not simply a Western phenomenon but involves significant changes also within Asia (McMahan 2008: 212). In a more traditional view of Buddhism, meanwhile, the teacher/pupil relationship is absolutely key (Gethin 1998: 37). As McMahan points out, Buddhist communities have become increasingly intertwined with secular institutions and cultural forces, which grants them greater legitimacy and prestige. Far from leading to the decline of Buddhism, modernization is instead an “engine of religious change” (2017: 125).

Buddhism is thus not just a lived religion., It is also a living one that adapts and changes in response to broader, often global, influences. Since Buddhism lacks a fundamental centralized form of authority, it can sometimes be difficult to get at what exactly the core of Buddhism is, and *who exactly* is a Buddhist (Darlington 2018: 77–78). In scholarship there has been a tendency to look at textual sources to construct Buddhism, creating normative versions heavily reliant on these sources (Gould and McKay 2020: 145–146). But as Gethin (1998: 35) points out, “Buddhism cannot be reduced to a collection of theoretical writings nor a philosophical system of thought.” This approach has therefore been criticized: “A bias towards texts as the shibboleth of religiosity has been critiqued by a focus within studies of ‘lived religion’” (Gould and McKay 2020: 146). Thus, the focus should be on Buddhism on the ground, so to speak, and in order to understand Buddhism today one must have, besides an engagement with canonical and textual sources, a genuine engagement “with Buddhism as it is lived in complex topographies of history, society, and international information flows in the new-media age” (Gould and McKay 2020: 143). This article aims to look at the new-media aspect in particular.

We should not go into an examination of Buddhism online with the idea that there exists a ‘pure’ or ‘untarnished’ Buddhism elsewhere that we can compare it with, either in a historical sense or in the present. Instead, it is important to recognize that it is not quite reasonable to expect Western forms of Buddhism to “adhere rigidly to their Asian predecessors,” especially since they *too* are “hybrids embracing numerous cultural adaptations” (McMahan 2008: 254). Part of what is interesting about studying Buddhism online is the proliferation of opinions and views, some of which lean towards what McMahan (2008: 246) describes as people “attempting to reappropriate tradition,

to cast off some of the staples of Buddhist modernism, and to reassert more conventional views of the Dharma.” At the risk of beating a dead horse, I still find it worthwhile to put a great deal of emphasis on this point: these processes are complex and variegated, and one must see Buddhism as both a living and lived religion. On top of that, what people *say* online can be understood as a form of religious *action*, in the sense that they are *doing things* with words: “When we issue a meaningful utterance, we may succeed at the same time in performing illocutionary acts as promising, warning, entreating, informing, and so on” (Skinner 2002: 98). Understood here, this means that what people say online is not just speech per se, but it is *actually doing religion* (or religioning) with words. As such, the internet could become not just an essential part of religious *experience*, but in fact an essential part of *religious doing* (i.e., the acting out of religious beliefs and thoughts) as well.

### SECULARISM AND BUDDHISM

One particularly salient aspect of Buddhism that is relevant for our purposes is the concept of secular Buddhism. Batchelor (2012: 87) provides three definitions for secularism: 1) perhaps the most common way today, where it has come to mean whatever “stands in contrast or opposition to whatever is called religious”; 2) from the etymological roots of the term, meaning “this age” or “the concerns we have about *this* world”; and 3) the traditional definition where it means the “transfer of authority over a certain area of life from the Church to the ‘temporal power’ of the State.” In his article, Batchelor sets out to show that Buddhism and “Dharma” fit all three and that in fact it is possible to get a “taste of nirvana” through modern-day conceptions of mindfulness and in a context that is entirely secular in all three senses of the term (Batchelor 2012: 88). He goes on to argue that it must be possible to practice Buddhism—or the Dharma—even without adhering to “the tenets of ancient Indian soteriology”, and he claims that the idea that one has to makes “little sense” (Batchelor 2012: 89). These arguments are similar to the ones mentioned by McMahan above.

Batchelor launches the idea of what he styles “Buddhism 2.0”, which must be “founded upon canonical source texts, be able to offer a coherent interpretation of key practices, doctrine and ethical precepts” while at the same time providing a coherent and cohesive “model of the dharma to serve as the basis for a flourishing human existence” (Batchelor 2012: 90). This is similar to the secular understanding of Buddhism that Higgins (2012) has sketched elsewhere, where he also points out that this view of Buddhism is largely a Western phenomenon (Higgins 2012: 110). In the secular Buddhism that Higgins and Batchelor promote, they essentially seek to renew “the Buddha’s tradition” by freeing the teachings of “later commentarial spin” and by “developing affinities between it and fertile social practices and intellectual developments in the host societies” (Higgins 2012: 111). In this sense, Buddhism 2.0 is entirely stripped of metaphysics and is primarily a pragmatic belief system where the only really important thing is adhering to

the practical ‘essentials’ of what the Buddha said (Batchelor 2012: 90, 102–104). In the end, Batchelor argues, the rise of secular Buddhism signals not the death of Buddhism, but instead is a “sign of the waning power of the orthodoxies that have held sway for the past two thousand or so years” (Batchelor 2012: 106).

Higgins is critical of some of the successes of Buddhism in the West, partly because it has become something of a brand. He writes that “the Buddhism brand” becomes “a fashion label” (Higgins 2012: 115), and he is especially critical of “New Age spiritualities and shallower psychotherapeutic currents” that he contends essentially “draw on vulgarized Buddhism” (Higgins 2012: 121). There is a fascinating juxtaposition here between Higgins’ opening up of Buddhism to function within secular contexts and his gatekeeping in terms of what ‘real’ Buddhism is and should be. In reality, however, many have used Buddhist ideas, for instance, to cope with the recent (and on-going) pandemic, and some mix freely between religious and New Age-traditions (e.g., Wicca and Buddhism) (Salguero 2022: 2). This is in line with predictions made by other scholars who have also found that identity creation online, including changes to the concept of ritual itself, has only become more important since the pandemic (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 67; see also Helland and Kienzl 2022: 49–50). We will indeed be seeing an example of the mixing of Wiccan elements and Buddhism in one of the Reddit posts. In addition, one might well argue here that the proliferation of religions in the West and their availability in a ‘marketplace’, where people freely choose some elements while discarding others, does not make the Western world more secular, but instead more imbued with religious polytrophy more characteristic of Eastern cultures (see Carrithers 2000: 834 for a definition of the neologism ‘polytrophy’).

It might be worthwhile to consider the representation of Buddhism in Western popular culture, as an understanding of this aspect of Buddhism can also enhance our understanding of Buddhism’s current, modern situation in the West and explain some of its allure. Is Higgins onto something when he refers to Buddhism as a brand? According to Jørn Borup, “Buddhism has been transformed from an intellectual capital and practice path for the elite to an easily approachable mindset for the masses in which consumerism, commodification and mediatization are part of the neo-liberal market where spirituality is for sale” (Borup 2016: 41). Borup even states that many who might be recognized as secular Buddhists in the sense of Batchelor and Higgins might not even call themselves Buddhists. Borup refers to the Buddhism emerging from this transformation as “feel-good Buddhism”—that is, a detraditionalized, secular and in many ways ‘selfishly’ motivated Buddhism, where ideas and practices (e.g., mindfulness) are selected, transformed and used instrumentally” (Borup 2016: 53). Borup is of course not alone in making this observation, though his critical remarks may come across as overly cynical. Nevertheless, this is an additional reason why the internet is such an important space to study, since it is “for many a religious marketplace, encouraging users to seek out preferred information or establish personalized practices” (Campbell 2011: 77), and the

digital world is a place that especially “might give more room for personal articulations of religion” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 65).

A recent study on the use of the Buddha in American advertisements also reached similar conclusions. Advertisers strategically adopt images of the Buddha, and this reshapes Americans’ perceptions of Buddhism (Bao and Willis 2022: 45). Elements of Buddhist philosophy and thought are simply left out if they are undesirable or “incompatible with the structurally rooted yearning for personal happiness, individuality, and consumption” that characterizes the United States (Bao and Willis 2022: 46). Bao and Willis identify these ideas in particular as being related to ideas of karma, rebirth, and life as suffering, since these are incompatible with prevailing American beliefs. Both Borup’s article and the study by Bao and Willis go a long way in showing how Buddhism interacts with the secular cultures of those places (Borup mainly looks at Denmark; Bao and Willis at the United States) and show precisely what McMahan (2017: 114) means when he writes that “secularity serves as a driver of change and reconfiguration of religious belief, practice and interpretation”—and this is the case regardless of whether or not we are entirely comfortable with accepting that, or even if one can pose some uncomfortable ethical questions regarding appropriation and respect. It is simply hard to avoid that the Buddha and Buddhism in general are still exoticized and for many this makes it ‘cool’ and alluring. Thus, within these localized and identifiable Western cultures one sees Buddhism permeating society and culture in specific ways. But how does this function online in the non-localized spheres of the internet?

### DIGITAL BUDDHISM

The practice of Buddhism online includes wholly new terms such as “E-Sangha” and “cybersangha” as well as new ways of looking at how religion is *done*. Some scholars have already noted “an affirmation and embrace of technology” among Buddhists that “signifies a discernable shift and in the dialogue between Buddhism and technology” (Gleig 2014: 19). The term itself—digital religion, or digital Buddhism—is also more complicated than just Buddhism on the internet, as on Reddit or Twitter. Digital religion can be consumed through unique forms such as video games, websites, e-mail, instant messaging services like Discord, and much else as well. I would argue here that the religious expressions we see on these platforms—and the ways in which they are conveyed, which can include seemingly ‘silly’ things like memes—do not necessarily have less ‘value’ than what we can observe in the ‘real’ world; indeed, for many it is possible that the internet becomes the only viable and real option for *genuine* religious expression, especially for people who are breaking with traditional norms in their societies (something other scholars also have noted, see Campbell 2011: 72; Campbell and Sheldon 2022: 77).

Gleig argues that online Buddhists represent a new generation of Buddhists that are “comfortable and fluent in both Buddhist and technological worlds (2014: 21).” This



development will only accelerate as more and more people around the world get regular and stable access to the internet and contribute to it. This should not come as a surprise: Buddhism has crossed geographical boundaries and has moved through cultural epochs throughout its history. That it should survive, change, and adapt to changes in our own time is hardly a shock, even if the ways in which it changes might be surprising.

Gleig's own study—the first of two to be focused on here—is on an online Buddhist media company called Buddhist Geeks, which records a weekly podcast, publishes a digital magazine component, and organizes annual conferences. In her article, Gleig stresses that the community lacks traditional hierarchical structures, so that it is not uncommon for teacher and students to mix freely with “no formal markers of authority such as special seating for teachers” (Gleig 2014: 19). The community emphasizes a “pragmatic and utilitarian approach to Buddhism” that they themselves refer to as “DIY Buddhism” (Gleig 2014: 19). The participants of the community draw liberally from different forms of Buddhism and there is no privileging of one single Buddhist tradition (Gleig 2014: 20). This new form of Buddhism has been fashioned by modernizing Buddhists in Asia and the West who are engaged in creating their own responses to the dominant problems and questions of Modernity (Gleig 2014: 25).

But while Gleig finds that the community continues many of the characteristics associated with modernism, especially in its scientific interpretation of Buddhism and the emphasis on meditative experience, she also finds a number of signs pointing to characteristics that are more associated with the postmodern than the modern. She argues here that there is a plurality of competing frameworks of meaning that indicates a postmodern sensibility in Buddhism as metanarrative or absolute system (Gleig 2014: 25–26). Postmodern religion is characterized by a refusal of rationalistic criteria as the exclusive standard of knowledge, a willingness to combine different frameworks of meaning, a consumer approach, and a relativistic attitude towards truth (Heelas 2008: 4–5). Those who participate in this Buddhist postmodernism are “responding to and reacting against already Westernized and modernized forms of Buddhism rather than classical forms of Asian Buddhism” (Gleig 2014: 29). It is important to keep Gleig's article in mind once the article proceeds to the case study of Reddit, as this understanding of postmodern Buddhism is highly relevant.

Like Gleig, Gandhi recognizes that Buddhism is always in flux and evolving, meaning that even central Buddhist ideas like dependent origination get reinterpreted and understood differently in different contexts (Gandhi 2019: 4; see also Batchelor 2012: 95 for a similar point). Gandhi examines first the virtual world of Second Life, which is a “3-Dimensional Internet-based virtual world that allows users to create a virtual representation, or avatar, to social network with others and collaboratively create their own virtual spaces” (Gandhi 2019: 5), and a Buddhist web-forum named the “E-Sangha”. Throughout her article, Gandhi shows how, even though the communities in question

exalt the individual over the community, this emphasis is still “placed within the larger context of collective discourse” (Gandhi 2019: 7).

Thus, for many users of Second Life, putting the robe of a monk on their avatar is not only an affirmation of their identity, but also makes it easier for Buddhist groups to “identify and connect with each other” (Gandhi 2019: 8). For many, this is a way to reconnect with the origins of Buddhism; far from perceiving it to be an evolutionary culmination of Buddhism, it is rather a return to its roots. Gandhi claims that Second Life provides a platform for the congregation of an online sangha. Thus, although the users create an avatar of themselves, placing themselves outside of the social context that may define them in the offline or actual world, avatars are constructed in a Buddhist framework that subjects them to new Buddhist identities (Gandhi 2019: 20).

Gandhi’s study of the E-Sangha forum is perhaps the most relevant one for this article, as an online forum is quite similar to Reddit. Gandhi notes that issues regarding authority and identity were more pronounced on the E-Sangha forum than in the Second Life virtual world. The E-Sangha forum was run by moderators who asserted ideological and technological authority over the users of the forum. These moderators set the tone and boundaries for the discussions. Interestingly, though the site claimed to be “an inclusive, nonsectarian discussion forum”, the website was anything but” (Gandhi 2019: 11). The goal of the forum was to go “back to the Buddhism of the Buddha”, which includes such rules as not being allowed to “disagree with doctrines considered Buddhist orthodoxy, which includes karma, post-mortem rebirth and no-self” (Gandhi 2019: 12). Gandhi even recounts the case of a Soto Zen monk who stated that the concept of rebirth should not be taken literally, which resulted in a swift ban from the forums. Recall that discussions of the New Kadampa school are not allowed on the /r/buddhism subreddit. This was also so for the E-Sangha forum; discussions of New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) and all other proponents of Dolgyal/Shugden, Dark Zen, True Buddha School, and Aro Ter/Flaming Jewel Sangha were all prohibited and resulted in bans (Gandhi 2019: 14). A similar kind of discord exists here as we saw it in Higgins earlier.

Both Virtual World and the E-Sangha forum share many of the characteristics of Buddhist modernism. There is “an emphasis on laypeople over the monastic community, universality over the particular geographical locations” and a focus on “the original Buddhism of Sakyamuni Buddha” (Gandhi 2019: 20). However, while Gandhi does not write about this in her article, there are also signs of postmodernism as defined above in the E-Sangha forum as well. They created rules and moderated their forum on the basis of a *rejection* of Buddhist modernism—regardless of whether or not their understanding of traditional forms of Buddhism was ‘correct’ or not. That is to say, by rejecting the Buddhist modernity, they existed more in conversation with *it* rather than traditional Buddhism, and in one fell swoop rejected essentially everything except for what they saw as the essential teachings of the Buddha. There is a kind of essentialism in all of this, which may very well be reminiscent of the secular Buddhism of Higgins and

Batchelor. These examples highlight the multiple and complex ways in which forms of Buddhism are in conversation with one another and react to one another, both in the on-line and offline worlds. And as Gandhi (2019: 21) writes, “Online religion is an integral part of modern Buddhist movements, and exemplifies the ongoing discourse regarding Buddhist identity, authority, and authenticity.”

### BUDDHISM ON REDDIT

The posts on /r/Buddhism provide users with an enormous wealth of information in the sidebars of the page, and for users that are logged in and part of the community, there is a part where they select a ‘flair’. This flair will indicate next to their username, whenever they post something in the subreddit, which branch of Buddhism they identify with or belong to. The list of flairs is long and also quite revealing and includes options like ‘pragmatic dharma’, ‘academic’, and even ‘Christian Buddhist’. There are guidelines for posting, where the most interesting rule has already been mentioned.<sup>3</sup> It is also possible to filter the content on the page from the sidebar, so that you only see posts from a specific topic.<sup>4</sup> A little further down one can find links to other Buddhist-related subreddits, many dedicated to the specific Buddhist branches from the flair-options mentioned above. As far as I have been able to determine, /r/Buddhism is the largest by quite some margin. As mentioned earlier, the analysis will begin by looking at a collection of posts including pictures of altars, as they are quite revealing in their contents and details, especially when examining the users more closely.

The first post to be examined is titled ‘An improvised altar [work in progress],<sup>5</sup> by a user with the name ‘devadatta3’. It includes a small statue of a seated Buddha, sitting on top of a few small, thin books. The topmost is an Italian translation of the *The Liturgy of Nichiren Shu*, indicating that the person is familiar with and probably drawn to or is a follower of the form of Buddhism associated with the Japanese prophet Nichiren (1222-82) (Gethin 1998: 265). However, the user’s flair is the Mahayana flair, and the user is also active in another, more specific Buddhist subreddit, namely /r/pureland, which is dedicated to Pure Land Buddhism. In this post, the person has placed a glass of water and an apple in front of the Buddha, presumably as an offering, along with what appears to be incense lying next to it. One can also see some electronic device to the left, though

3. The semantics of the rule about New Kadampa Tradition is fascinating: “Posts with New Kadampa Tradition-supporting content will be removed.” The implication seems to be that they are allowed to talk about and discuss it, but only in a hostile way.

4. There are 25 such filters, and again it can be useful to list all of them: news; sutta/sutra; academic; dharma talk; question; request; politics; meta; Theravada; Mahayana; Vajrayana; early Buddhism; fluff; opinion; video; article; interview; anecdote; announcement; audio; iconography; misc.; practice; book; life advice.

5. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/zbc3z0/an\\_improvised\\_altar\\_work\\_in\\_progress/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/zbc3z0/an_improvised_altar_work_in_progress/)

it is hard to make out exactly what it is. There are not many comments on this post besides one user saying “Love it :)”, and it received some 50 upvotes as of the time of writing.<sup>6</sup>

A closer look at the user’s profile reveals that, besides taking part in active discussions about various Buddhist topics in both /r/Buddhism and /r/pureland, the user has posted quite a few other altar pictures. In one of them, the user has posted a new, updated altar based on feedback received from other users in other altar posts they have made.<sup>7</sup> This altar is much more ‘minimalistic’, only containing what looks like a *thangka* (a sacred picture, commonly used for meditation) of (a) Buddha with a water bowl in front of it. The books, apple, incense and electronic device from the first picture have all been removed. What is particularly fascinating here is the *active* identity formation—recall that the user themselves calls this a “work in progress”—with changes being made on the basis of feedback from the community, a community that consists of people representing a huge variety of different conceptions of Buddhism. This is a perfect example of how identity creation has become an active phenomenon on the web, where places like Reddit allow for “new spaces of expressing identity outside the control of parents and teachers” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 61). At the same time, it highlights how identity formation is a deeply “social process, deeply anchored in the individual’s need to stay connected, to find meaning, and to act in everyday life” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 67). This point becomes even more pronounced when looking at the user’s post history and finding that they are gay. In one comment in a thread made by a user called ‘Tendai-Student’, which is interesting in itself to explore as the thread is a long refutation of “misconceptions about Buddhism”, ‘devadatta3’ writes that “I’m a gay person, and virtually there in NO traditional religion that accepts me and loves me as I am. There’s always been a little or big BUT somewhere for us. So I get the point of your view about the issue, I really do.”<sup>8</sup>

This quote is only part of a larger discussion that the user had with another user in the thread. We should take note of these interactions. As Campbell has noted, the internet may create new opportunities for self-expression of belief and religious lifestyle practice that do not exist in traditional religious contexts. This can be particularly the case for people who belong to minority groups. The internet can offer new modes of

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6. All users can either upvote or downvote posts or comments. Upvoted threads and comments mean many people have essentially given a thumbs up to the thread or comment, and they receive increased visibility as a result. It is possible to sort comments in threads (and threads themselves) based on both most upvoted as well as controversial (i.e., the comment has received many upvotes as well as downvotes, indicating disagreements), new posts, and old posts, among others, these being the most relevant.

7. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/116vdd2/updated\\_altar\\_thanks\\_for\\_all\\_of\\_your\\_advice/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/116vdd2/updated_altar_thanks_for_all_of_your_advice/)

8. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12fhza2/misconceptions\\_about\\_buddhism\\_online\\_and\\_on/jfkgng2/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12fhza2/misconceptions_about_buddhism_online_and_on/jfkgng2/)

interaction and possibilities for constructing religious identities, particularly for “people who lack such opportunities in the local or offline context” (Campbell 2011: 72). The example of ‘devadatta3’ is quite illustrative of the possibilities of religious expression and religion online in general. There is a pick-and-mix approach to religion, where the user can select “elements for presenting a self from the plurality of religious symbols circulated online” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 45), while being a part of a “loosely bound dynamic network” (Campbell and Sheldon 2022: 74) where the users engage with the internet as a “‘meaning resource’ used by spiritual seekers in contemporary society in religious orientation and formation practices” (Campbell 2011: 82). For this user, Reddit and /r/Buddhism (along with various other Buddhism-related subreddits) clearly play an essential role for the person’s navigating of identity and religious belief, sharing their religiosity with others in a dynamic context with no clear religious authority.

The second post to be examined underscores these points further.<sup>9</sup> Here, we see again a seated Buddha statue—a typical motif in general for pictures of altars shared on the site—placed on a small, elevated platform with a turtle to its right (perhaps a reference to the Lotus Sutta) and what seems to be a laughing Buddha to its left. There is a teapot and a glass on the table, as well as a plate with a string of mala beads on it. Underneath the platform are some rocks (possibly crystals) and a lamp. At the left-most edge of the altar itself, right-most for the viewer, is a stack of three books. The top-most book is one by Thich Nhat Hanh, an Italian translation of *The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion*. The original poster reveals in the comments that the two others are the Lotus Sutra and Thich Nhat Hanh’s commentary on the Amithaba Sutra. The poster has also hung up a rainbow flag behind the altar, and a commenter in the thread writes that this is “pretty awesome because its always been a Buddhist symbol anyways.” The original poster replies that they did not know this and that the flag “is there cause of a coincidence.”

Examining the user’s post history more closely reveals that, in addition to their active participation in other subreddits such as /r/meditation, he is also gay—or at least not straight. In fact, the user posted a thread asking the community, “Buddhist friends, what’s your opinion on LGBT community?”<sup>10</sup> It received a great deal of comments and discussion, where the most upvoted comment (448 upvotes at the time of writing) is emblematic for the majority of posts, sharing its sentiment: “They are no different to anyone else, we are all in the same cycle of dukkha and should not treat anyone differently.” In another thread in which another user asks the subreddit community “Can gay people become buddhist/ what does buddishm think of gay ppl?”, he commented: “I’m not straight and I’m Buddhist. Buddhism doesn’t focus on this, sexuality doesn’t matter.

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9. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/z1ud67/my\\_simple\\_altar/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/z1ud67/my_simple_altar/)

10. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/yu22yt/buddhist\\_friends\\_whats\\_your\\_opinion\\_on\\_lgbt/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/yu22yt/buddhist_friends_whats_your_opinion_on_lgbt/)

Rather, hate is forbidden in Buddhism and love for all beings is recommended.”<sup>11</sup> What makes this a particularly interesting example is that the user is only 15 years old. This is revealed in another thread he created, asking the community, “Can I attain Enlightenment if I’m not a monk?”<sup>12</sup> In a comment in his own thread, he writes that “I hope I achieve enough discipline in my life. I’m 15 years old though and I’m passing a tough period I hope I get well soon so I can have a better practice.”<sup>13</sup> Several others in the community chime in and relate their own experiences, with one user, now 25, writing that “I first started my practice at 12, and have passed through many tough periods. I had a lot to explore, and naughty things to get into before I could set them aside and devote myself to practice.”

In the altar picture that we began this example with, one user writes that “part of the Buddhist path is acknowledging ourselves where we are—if part of that is our queerness then we can celebrate that as authentically ourselves. The Buddha would never want us to be anything we aren’t, and taught the path to actualizing who we really are.” This openness about LGBTQ matters engaging with Buddhist thought is quite remarkable, and it gives fascinating insight into how people understand and engage with Buddhism today. The emphasis here is also on finding what is “authentically ourselves” and “actualizing who we really are.” This again emphasizes the aforementioned point that Lövheim and Lundmark (2022: 61) have made about the internet being particularly effective places for young people to not only express but also figure out their own identities. Lövheim (2012: 152) has also stressed that young people are not simply “passive recipients of religious socialization in formal as well as informal settings” but are rather “active participants who exercise a high degree of ‘critical autonomy’ in decisions about religious beliefs and actions.” It could be argued here that Reddit provides an extraordinary platform for just this, and it is useful to reflect over the uniqueness of this in the context of history: a 15 year old gay, Italian Buddhist engaging with and discussing Buddhist doctrine and practice with other self-identified Buddhists (at least mostly) that could technically be from anywhere in the world, of any age, of any gender, and any background. If we consider the fact that Reddit is only one example of this, and that the internet is *full* of such cases, it stands to reason that the affect it is having on Buddhism and the development of Buddhism must be enormous—even if complicated and unpredictable.

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11. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/11u2l0v/can\\_gay\\_people\\_become\\_buddhist\\_what\\_does\\_buddishm/jco7g1o/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/11u2l0v/can_gay_people_become_buddhist_what_does_buddishm/jco7g1o/)

12. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12ebuq8/can\\_i\\_attain\\_enlightenment\\_if\\_im\\_not\\_a\\_monk/jfb2no1/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12ebuq8/can_i_attain_enlightenment_if_im_not_a_monk/jfb2no1/)

13. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12ebuq8/can\\_i\\_attain\\_enlightenment\\_if\\_im\\_not\\_a\\_monk/jfb2no1/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12ebuq8/can_i_attain_enlightenment_if_im_not_a_monk/jfb2no1/)

One final example sheds further light upon the complex processes of religious bricolage and identity formation on the internet.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to make out all the details on the picture, as it is quite pixelated and of lower quality than the others. What is particularly interesting here is that the top-most statue is of Ganesh—a Hindu deity not typically associated with Buddhism. The Buddha is placed below Ganesh, with beads around him, with another set of beads lying next to it. There is also a pestle and mortar on the table, with what appears to be a crystal lying in front of the Buddha statue. Of the posts examined in this article, this one is the one that most clearly exemplifies the mixing of religious ideas: Ganesh, typically associated with Hinduism; the Buddha with beads; and a crystal, more associated with New Age. The top comment on the thread is also, of course, “can I has samadhi?”—a reference to the title of the post, “My tuxedo kitty gaining some merit while my wife and I meditate”, and the infamous ‘can I has’ cat meme that was so popular on the internet in the mid to late first decade of the 2000s.

But looking into the user’s post history further, a whole host of interesting things beyond the religious mixing appear. It becomes clear that the person is from the United States, and that neither is this user straight, but in fact is a “late blooming lesbian”.<sup>15</sup> She also actively takes part in other subreddits where she makes it clear that she is also autistic, posting in subreddits like /r/autisticwithADHD and /r/autisminwomen. She also actively takes part in other religious subreddits, such as /r/religion. In one such post, she writes that she is an atheist in a reply to the thread “Why are some religions called ‘religions’ and others religions practiced in the ancient times are now called mythologies?” Her reply: “Because modern people believe in New Skydaddy, and all the other Old Skydaddies in the past were Wrong, and thus myths. But not the one now. That one is real. 😊”<sup>16</sup>

She is a particularly active poster on /r/Buddhism/ and she mentions in one post that she has been a practicing Buddhist for 15 years.<sup>17</sup> In addition, in a thread made by a different user on /r/Buddhism, asking if “Tattoo of Dharma Wheel offensive?”, she reveals that “I have a dhamma wheel tattooed on my forearm! And part of the metta sutta above it, and the words metta/pañña on my wrists, and a lotus on my chest!”<sup>18</sup> This is, again, quite a remarkable example of a person engaging with Buddhism online and

14. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/yo5wrf/my\\_tuxedo\\_kitty\\_gaining\\_some\\_merit\\_while\\_my\\_wife](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/yo5wrf/my_tuxedo_kitty_gaining_some_merit_while_my_wife)

15. [https://www.reddit.com/r/AutismInWomen/comments/119m7wd/my\\_autistic\\_husband\\_leans\\_on\\_me\\_for\\_everything/j9n4ocs/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AutismInWomen/comments/119m7wd/my_autistic_husband_leans_on_me_for_everything/j9n4ocs/)

16. [https://www.reddit.com/r/religion/comments/12gxzh8/why\\_are\\_some\\_religions\\_called\\_religions\\_and/jfmp826/?context=3](https://www.reddit.com/r/religion/comments/12gxzh8/why_are_some_religions_called_religions_and/jfmp826/?context=3)

17. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12fh9yf/working\\_on\\_lifelong\\_maladaptive\\_reaction/jfgobtg/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12fh9yf/working_on_lifelong_maladaptive_reaction/jfgobtg/)

18. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12go5g8/tattoo\\_of\\_dharma\\_wheel\\_offensive/jf1834o/?context=3](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12go5g8/tattoo_of_dharma_wheel_offensive/jf1834o/?context=3)

forming their identity with the help of digital tools. Reddit thus allows for the participation of a neurodivergent (autistic), lesbian woman, adding to the discourse on the site, and highlights the plethora of different and variegated individuals who are contributing to shaping and forming modern-day Buddhism. The juxtaposition of religious imagery, infused with pop-culture meme references, with no gatekeepers around to make it less visible or hide it entirely, is an extraordinary example of “lived religion” where “many religious symbols and narratives become freed from their traditional structures and dogmas and so become tools for reconstructing spiritual meaning in daily life” (Campbell 2011: 66–67). In this sense, and this user is a good example of this, Reddit—and the internet itself—become, in many ways, just another tool in the toolbox “people take on board in the ongoing process of negotiating the tension between the individual and the group, the expectations of the tradition, and benefits associated with personal preferences and freedoms” (Campbell 2011: 84).

### BUDDHIST IDENTITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND AUTHORITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

We can now return to the questions posed in the beginning of the article: What kinds of Buddhism do we see reflected on Reddit? What kinds of discourses exist, and what ideas and concerns are prominently debated and discussed? Does the type of Buddhism(s) we see indicate modernist or postmodernist sensibilities? And finally, what can we gauge from Reddit about Buddhist identity, authenticity, and authority in the twenty-first century?

The Buddhism we see on Reddit—at least on /r/Buddhism—is diverse, complicated, and complex, and oftentimes downright confusing. There is such a proliferation of opinions, views, and other expressions of belief(s) and faith that it is simply impossible to pigeon-hole and categorize it all accurately and precisely. In many ways, it is to a large extent a confusing jumble where it is hard to make out exactly what the essence of things is. There are differing degrees of certainty of doctrinal points and degrees of belief; discussions, debates, and disagreements appear welcome. Some are clearly more in the camp of individualism, secularity, and reason, leaning towards ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ Buddhism. Others emphasize the communal aspect. The sharing of pictures of private altars in their homes indicates a need for community, while their other posts are often more individualistic, where the users are trying to figure out aspects of their own identity. The Buddhism that we see on /r/Buddhism is, then, a *mélange* of all kinds of opinions and thoughts and ideas—from deeply traditionalist to those that simply pick out what they like about Buddhism and use it to cope with the human predicament. In that sense, the Buddhism we see on Reddit carries with it the hallmarks of what Gleig calls postmodern, but that does not mean that there are no opposing voices visible on the site.



What is important to emphasize here is that this is all a two-way-street: these elements all reflect the real world while simultaneously being reflected *in* the real world—these are *real* people doing *real* religion. As Campbell (2011: 82) puts it, “Offline meta-narratives and goals inform what they see as the purpose of the internet or how they justify their engagement with it.” In the case of the examples presented in this article, these goals can be many and particularly related to identity and navigating the world as part of a minority or marginalized group. Media play important roles in forming understandings of social reality, and people engaged with these media representations are not all passive consumers of media, but are also engaged and critical citizens (Lövheim 2012: 158–161). The internet—and in this case Reddit—appears as what Campbell calls a new tool in the toolbox “of new possibilities for religious expression and connectedness that enhance individuals’ religious lifestyles and allow for the creation of new forms of hybridized religion” (Campbell 2011: 79–80). One must reckon with technologies being used in different social and cultural contexts and in the everyday lives of users, which “requires considerations of aspects such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and even geopolitics.” (Campbell and Sheldon 2022: 80). This openness about LGBT matters, and sites like Reddit providing a space for these minority groups to discuss and find information, is likely not a trend that is going to disappear as more and more people have the freedom to explore sites like Reddit. It should be kept in mind here that there might be many people who browse the site in similar predicaments as the examples taken up this article, but who do *not* post their questions or even have a user profile on the site. Thus, there is also an unseen influence in these examples that is impossible to measure or know about. In the examples discussed above, we see precisely how the internet—or this new tool—allows for “broader articulations of religious identities, such as the stories of women, gay people and other groups whose voices have been marginalized in religious communities throughout history” (Lövheim 2012: 163).

This is in large part allowed on Reddit since it seems the moderators of the subreddit allow most kinds of discussions and topics and have lenient rules. The ‘gatekeepers’ of any kind of ‘authentic Buddhism’ as such are therefore missing, which allows for remarkable variation in what is posted and debated. “Authority and expertise,” writes Lövheim (2012: 160), “is distributed among many rather than attached to a certain position or institution”, and the debates and discourses online are quality-controlled “through constant, interactive peer-review rather than controlled through certain institutions or fixed, formal procedures and regulations.” This, of course, is highly characteristic of what Gleig has referred to as postmodern. As Helland and Kienzl (Helland and Kienzl 2022: 45) put it, “in contemporary Western society, there is a great deal of individual religiosity or ‘patchwork’ religion, and although the ‘official’ position may be that online rituals are not authentic, community members may choose to disagree.” Helland and Kienzl are talking about rituals in particular here, but that goes for any kind of religious expression online. Since rituals are “woven into the cultural meaning-making system”, usually with

“engagement within a particular environment” (Helland and Kienzl 2022: 50), there may be room to view the sharing of pictures of altars on Reddit as a fundamental part of the ritual aspect of altars; this is especially the case for the first example examined, where the poster continually posts updated altar pictures as a ‘work in progress.’ What is especially tantalizing here is that the ritual aspects are being changed in real time without any real religious authority figures involved—or, if they are, their voices are only part of the tapestry—and the arena of religious expressions has in large part become “democratized” (Cheong 2022: 91).

With this democratization of authority, the scope of what counts as ‘authentic Buddhism’ is also much broader. Instead, /r/Buddhism gives us a glimpse of the lived religion online, where people can select, assemble, and present an identity, and in many cases this is done with the help of the community on the site. Thus, the Buddhism that many people encounter in their lives, for instance through the focus on mindfulness and what some have called ‘feel-good-Buddhism’, or through the ‘brandification’ of Buddhism via popular culture, can satisfy their curiosity by finding sites like Reddit and seeing these types of discussions. And for many, far from dismissing what they see, they might instead do the exact opposite: embrace what they find as yet another tool for spiritual improvement, personal growth, or simply for the sake of belonging and community. From the examples provided in this article, it is clear that /r/Buddhism has the potential to be a significant resource that can be used in religious orientation and identity formation. The users actively engage in discussions, debates, and the sharing of altars and opinions, actively participating in meaning-making and identity creation.

It is unlikely that things will get any *less* digital with time. Advancements in artificial intelligence, robotics and gaming change the ways we connect and relate to others in the digital age (Campbell and Sheldon 2022: 83). How this will impact the online/digital landscape is an exciting question. It is interesting to imagine the responses AI might give to equivalent questions that many of the users in the examples in this article posed on Reddit. In any case, “the modernization of Buddhism is not a process of homogenization, but it is a complicated process of hybridization, involving multiple flows, and discourses that is resulting in a proliferation of Buddhisms adapted to contemporary global contexts” (Harding et al. 2020: 7). /r/Buddhism is a perfect example of this—non-homogenized, hybrids galore, multiple and complicated flows and directions, and tremendous complexity in terms of discourse, in a completely new and unique global context. On top of that, Reddit offers remarkable potential in terms of insight into the lived religions of marginalized groups and minorities.

This article has had, however, a relatively narrow and limited focus, with only a few example posts from /r/Buddhism forming the corpus for a brief case study. In the world of Buddhism on Reddit, this is not even getting one’s ankles wet. Besides studying the other explicitly Buddhist subreddits that have been mentioned elsewhere in the article, beyond the biggest in /r/Buddhism, it could also be possible to look at /r/meditation,

which has a remarkable 1, 492,230 members at the time of writing, or /r/mindfulness, with 1,172,382 members. Studying these online and digital spaces of religion is worthwhile and important, as it gives serious insight into how people understand their own beliefs, transform religious ideas and concepts, and how people generate and create their religious identities. What we find is the extremely complex ways in which Buddhism exists online and in the digital world, and to restate the introduction, we find a fluid, living religion in flux with a vibrant online presence.

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