

Constructing a Buddhist-Inspired Framework for Examining
Tulkus' use of Cyberspace

By

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Abstract

This thesis is both, an examination of *tulkus'* use of cyberspace (with a particular focus on social media); and a methodological experiment.

In this thesis I construct a framework for examining *tulkus'* use of social media platforms, such as: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. However rather than using “alien” ideas to construct the framework (such as, the ideas of Virtual Reality, and telepresence), I draw on concepts and doctrines found within the Buddhist tradition.

The four ideas I draw on are: *nirmāṇakāya*; the *yamakaprātihārya*; ideas surrounding presence and absence in the Buddhist tradition; and visualization meditation. The four ideas are then applied to case studies in order to demonstrate how these ideas could potentially offer a way to view *tulkus'* use of cyberspace from a “Buddhist” perspective.

One of the aims of this framework is to investigate the potential (from a Buddhist perspective) for cyberspace to be sacralised by the presence of a being such as a *tulku*, and consider how religious functions and activities seem to be carried out “in” cyberspace.

This framework is also a methodological experiment. Rather than using an “off the shelf” theory I plan to construct my methodology using ideas from within the Buddhist tradition. As far as I’m aware, the method of considering material from within the tradition being studied is relatively rare. I hope that this project will demonstrate the general potential for such an approach being used more widely in academia.

NB: When I submitted this thesis for examination, I was informed that I should have obscured the names of the Facebook users in the screenshots included in this work. I have done my best to rectify this problem, by obscuring all the names of the followers of the *tulkus* studied, and removed any reference to them by name in the body of the thesis.

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Introduction:

With the advent of social media, how and who we communicate with has changed dramatically. With tools such as Facebook and Twitter, we are now able to communicate and interact with people from all around the globe, whom we may not have necessarily met in “real” life. This ability to reach millions of people who were previously inaccessible has not been lost on politicians, religious leaders, and celebrities. Many now use social media to connect with worldwide audiences for a number of reasons. In the case of religious leaders, many seem to be using social media as a way to propagate the teachings of their faith, and to connect with people who are unable to connect with them in person.

Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis I have both used the papal Twitter account, @Pontifex, which has over 3 million followers.¹ The current leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II, also has an official Twitter account, @PopeTawadros, and has close to 100,000 followers.² Not only are leaders of the Christian faiths using social media; leaders from other religious traditions are also using these tools. *Tulkus (sprul sku)*, who often act as religious leaders within Tibetan Buddhism, have started using social media for a number of purposes.

Within Tibetan Buddhism, a tradition developed in which certain people were identified as the reincarnations of deceased Buddhist masters (often at a very early age).³ Traditionally *tulkus* undergo extensive religious instruction from a young age, and they often take on leadership roles within the tradition once they reach their majority.

Tulkus have started to use different forms of social media such as Facebook and Twitter as an alternative way to carry out their various religious functions. Many are using social media as a way to offer teachings on different aspects of Buddhism to those who follow them. It is not uncommon to see certain *tulkus* post a small teaching as a Facebook post or as a tweet. Some *tulkus* are using sites such as YouTube to make more substantial teachings available online. Followers respond to these teachings by leaving comments, often about how helpful the teaching was and how they plan to incorporate it into their daily practise.

¹ Pope Francis' Twitter page, accessed December 16, 2013, <https://twitter.com/Pontifex>.

² Pope Tawadros' Twitter page, accessed December 16, 2013, <https://twitter.com/PopeTawadros>.

³ I will expand on “what” a *tulku* is in a later section.

Followers of *tulkus* seem to be using the cyber- profiles of *tulkus* as an alternative for “real” *tulkus*. They use the profiles to receive teachings, and to experience or “be in” the *tulkus’* presence. These cyber-profiles seem to be operating as the *tulkus’* functional equivalents and are potentially making *tulkus’* presence available via cyberspace.

In this thesis, I plan to construct a framework that draws on ideas from within the Buddhist tradition to examine selected *tulkus’* cyber-profiles. The aim of this framework is to investigate the potential (from a Buddhist perspective) for cyberspace to be sacralised by the presence of a being such as a *tulku*, and consider how religious functions and activities seem to be carried out “in” cyberspace. The framework will incorporate ideas from within the Buddhist tradition. However, before I discuss the specific ideas I will be using in the framework, I will explain why I have chosen this approach.

A lot of ideas have been formulated and suggested as ways to think and talk about presence and virtuality. Two key ideas are Virtual Reality, and “telepresence.”⁴ While these ideas could offer a helpful way of examining the use of cyberspace by *tulkus*, they will not be included in my framework. This is because rather than using “etic” ideas from outside the *tulkus’* tradition, I plan to use “emic” ideas from within their own tradition. Tibetan Buddhism has a rich source of ideas that could be extremely helpful in thinking about the phenomenon of *tulkus* using cyberspace. Drawing on these ideas will allow for the possibility of talking about these questions using language familiar to the tradition.

I intend this study partly as an experiment in a certain kind of method. Rather than using an “off the shelf” theory I plan to construct my methodology using ideas from within the Buddhist tradition. As far as I’m aware, the method of considering material from within the tradition being studied is relatively rare. I hope that this project will demonstrate the general potential for such an approach being used more widely in academia.

⁴ According to Steur, Virtual Reality (VR) “is typically defined in terms of a collection of technological hardware.” He suggests an expanded definition in which the concept of “presence” is key. He defines presence as “the experience of one’s physical environment: it refers not to one’s surroundings as they exist in the physical world, but to the perception of those surroundings as mediated by both automatic and controlled mental processes”. When this process is mediated by a communication medium (such as a computer) Steur refers to it as “telepresence”. He concludes by defining VR as follows: “A Virtual Reality is defined as a real or simulated environment in which a perceiver experiences telepresence” Jonathan Steur, “Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence,” *Journal of Communication* 42 (1992): 73-93.

The proposed framework will be constructed from an “emic” perspective, even though I am outside the tradition (I am not a Tibetan Buddhist). I could be accused of telling Tibetan Buddhists what they should believe and how they should understand the phenomenon of *tulkus*’ use of cyberspace. However, this is not my intention; I simply feel that it would be wrong to ignore the multitude of ideas available in the tradition that could help us think about these questions in favour of “alien” ideas. Therefore, this framework is an exercise in thinking about how *tulkus*’ use of cyberspace *might* be understood using ideas from the Buddhist tradition.

To construct my framework, I will draw on four ideas found within the Buddhist tradition. Each component of the framework will have a chapter dedicated to it. In each chapter I will give a working definition of the idea being dealt with. I will then suggest how the idea could help us understand *tulkus*’ use of cyberspace from a Buddhist perspective. To support my suggestions, I will conduct case studies of three different *tulku*, including examples from the case studies that are relevant to the ideas being discussed. I will also examine the limitations of applying these ideas to *tulkus*’ use of cyberspace.

The four ideas that will make up my framework, and thus, the topics of my four main chapters are: *nirmāṇakāya*; the *yamakaprātihārya*; presence and absence in the Buddhist tradition; and visualization meditation. However, before I begin discussing these ideas I will give a brief explanation about “what” a *tulku* is and the origins of the *tulku* system. I will also introduce the three *tulkus* who will be used as case studies: Kalu Rinpoche; Tsem Tulku Rinpoche; and Traleg Rinpoche.

Case Studies

The Second Kalu Rinpoche

The current incarnation of Kalu Rinpoche was born in 1990 in Darjeeling. He was recognized as the reincarnation of the previous Kalu Rinpoche by Tai Situpa Rinpoche.

In recent years, Kalu Rinpoche has become very active on Facebook. His Facebook page is so popular that he has “maxed out” the number of friends he can have on one of his

Facebook pages, which has led him to create a second page (they both have the same posts/updates). He also has a personal website, paldenshangpa.net. He posts status updates daily and has a large number of followers. There is a lot of discussion of his “presence” on Facebook/in cyberspace amongst his followers. He also frequently posts small status updates giving advice to his followers, who respond by leaving comments.

Tsem Tulku Rinpoche

Tsem Tulku Rinpoche was born in 1965 in Taiwan to a Mongolian mother and a Tibetan father. He grew up with a foster family, first in Taiwan, and then in the United States. According to the biography on his website, monks came and recognised him as a reincarnated lama. They requested to take the child to the monastery for his spiritual education, but his mother did not allow them to take him away. She said that if he was really a high lama, he would eventually find his own way to the monastery. Eventually Tsem Tulku Rinpoche travelled to Gaden monastery in India and was ordained as a monk. After his ordination he was recognized by Kensur Jampa Yeshe Rinpoche as the reincarnation of Gaden Shartse’s 72nd abbot, Gedun Nyedrak. In 2004 he established a Dharma centre, “Kechara House,” in Malaysia.

Tsem Tulku Rinpoche has an extensive online network, consisting of social media profiles, websites, and videos uploaded to his YouTube channel. The “centre” of his cyber network is his website, specifically the personal blog he maintains. Tsem Rinpoche’s main purpose for using social media appears to be that of teaching.

Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche

Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche IX was the founder of the E-Vam Buddhist institute in Melbourne. The institute was established in 1982, and “offers courses, retreats and conferences on various aspects of the Buddhist tradition from the perspectives of the main denominations available in the world today”.

He had a Facebook page, which he and a team of administrators maintained. He would often personally post status updates and videos about what he had been doing and his upcoming teachings. On 25 July 2012, it was announced via his Facebook page that he had passed away.

After his death, many of his followers have used his Facebook page as a place to express their grief over his passing. Many leave comments saying how much they miss him and make requests for him to return soon.

“What” is a Tulku?

The term *“tulku”* (*sprul sku*) is used in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to describe someone who has been formally recognised (usually at a very young age) as the reincarnation of a deceased Buddhist master. The *tulku* institution has its origins with the Gyalwa Karmapas. After the death of the first Karmapa (Dusum Khyenpa) in 1193 CE, a young boy was born (Karma Pakshi). When he began to speak, he claimed to be the first Karmapa’s reincarnation. Eventually he was confirmed as such, becoming the second Karmapa, and arguably the first *tulku*.⁵

The driving concept behind the *tulku* institution is the *bodhisattva* ideal. In Mahāyāna Buddhism a *bodhisattva* is a person who postpones enlightenment and chooses to take rebirth out of compassion for all sentient beings. They do this in the hope that they can lead all sentient beings out of Samasara, the cycle of death and rebirth. Since the majority of *tulkus* are believed to be *bodhisattvas*, it is believed that unlike ordinary beings, they can choose where and when they are reborn.

What is particularly interesting is that the Tibetan traditions “chose the term for a body of a Buddha to name this notion of incarnation”.⁶ *Tulku* is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term *nirmāṇakāya*. *Nirmāṇakāya* describes a particular “type” of Buddha body: an

⁵ Tulku Thondup, *Incarnation: The History and Mysticism of the Tulku Tradition of Tibet* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2011) 5-7.

⁶ Donald Lopez, *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise guide to its History and Teachings* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 62.

“emanation” body. This emanation body is one of three bodies attributed to Buddhas within the *trikāya* theory.

It is to the idea of *nirmāṇakāya* we now move our focus. It is the first of the components which will make up my proposed framework, and will be the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter One: *Nirmāṇakāya*

The concept of *nirmāṇakāya* will be central to my framework, because the concepts of illusion and unreality are at its heart. In this chapter, I plan to discuss *nirmāṇakāya* in the context of the *trikāya* theory, followed by an examination of the etymology of the term *nirmāṇa*. Once a sufficient explanation of *nirmāṇakāya* has been provided, I will apply the concept to the three *tulkus*' (mentioned above) cyber-profiles to demonstrate how the concept could help us understand *tulkus*' use of cyberspace. I will then consider the limitations of such an application.

To have an adequate understanding of *nirmāṇakāya*, it must be understood in the context of the *trikāya* theory (the three Buddha bodies), of which *nirmāṇakāya* belongs to. The *trikāya* theory emerged out of the Yogācāra/Vijñānavāda school, and consists of the *dharmakāya*/*svābhāvikakāya* (essence body); the *sambhogakāya* (enjoyment body); and the *nirmāṇakāya* (transformation body).⁷ Each body could be understood as having a certain "function".

To put it in very simplistic terms, the *dharmakāya*/*svābhāvikakāya* could be understood as the "ultimate" body of the Buddha. According to Nagao, the *svābhāvikakāya* (which he claims is equivalent to the *dharmakāya*) is called such because it is "the Buddha's real essence".⁸ Nagao writes that "*Svabhāva* (own being) is used here to mean the Buddha's enlightenment... It exists all over the world with the *dharma-dhātu* as its own being; it is an immovable wisdom, an eternal body of the Enlightened One".⁹ It is often described as the foundation from which the two other bodies emerge.¹⁰

The *sambhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya* are changeable, impermanent, and dependent on the *svābhāvikakāya*.¹¹ The *sambhogakāya* is the body in which a Buddha enjoys the rewards and powers he has attained through his practise.¹² The Buddha can also use this body for the enjoyment of others, specifically enjoyment of the *dharma*, often referred to as the

⁷ Gadjin Nagao, "On the Theory of Buddha Body," *Eastern Buddhist* 6, no. 1 (1973): 30-32.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

“*dharma*-delight”.¹³ It is with this body that the Buddha gives sermons to assemblies of bodhisattvas in Pure Lands.¹⁴ The common consensus is that the *sambhogakāya* cannot be “seen” or perceived by ordinary unenlightened beings, who instead must rely on the *nirmāṇakāya*.

The *nirmāṇakāya* is commonly translated as the “transformation body”. Nagao offers an explanation for this translation: “The reason of its being called a transformation body is that the *dharma-dhātu*, limiting itself, has transformed itself to appear in the form of a physical human body.”¹⁵ The *nirmāṇakāya* is primarily a teaching body which the disciples of the Buddha can come “face to face with to hear the teachings”.¹⁶ It was this body that “achieved enlightenment and taught the dharma to the world. That is, the Buddha that we know is a magical display.”¹⁷

Etymology of Nirmāṇa

Nirmāṇakāya has a complex etymology. It has a number of translations into English, some of these include “The body of manifestation”; “a body of artifice, or more literally a body of measurement”;¹⁸ “the body of magical illusion/creation”;¹⁹ and, as mentioned above, “the body of transformation”.²⁰

Malcom Eckel discusses the definition of *nirmāṇa* as “manifestation”, saying that “manifestation suggests a ‘someone’ who is manifested through a ‘something’”. In fact the meaning of the Sanskrit term *nirmāṇa* comes closer to ‘an act of magic’, and it leaves open the question of the reality not only of the action itself but of the actor who performs the action.”²¹ Therefore, the *nirmāṇakāyas* of Buddhas and advanced *bodhisattvas*, which often give the illusion of being “ordinary” human bodies, are actually a clever “magic trick”. Eckel

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Donald Lopez, *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise Guide to its History and Teachings* 62.

¹⁸ Ananda Coomaraswamy, “Nirmanakaya,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1938): 81.

¹⁹ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 232.

²⁰ Gadgin Nagao, “On the Theory of Buddha Body,” 32.

²¹ Macolm Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher’s Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 84.

states that “A Buddha’s manifestation (*nirmāṇa*) is the equivalent etymologically and ontologically, of a person who is ‘magically created’ (*nirmita*).”²²

Nirmāṇakāyas of Buddhas do not have to be in human form, or even animate. According to Lopez, “the Buddha was not restricted in his emanations to the resplendent form so familiar to us from Buddhist iconography. He could appear as inanimate objects such as an inspiring sentence or word, a cooling breeze, or a bridge across an impassable river.”²³

The Etymology of Nirmāṇa in Lamotte’s translation of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra

Nirmāṇa, its variants, and related terms are discussed in detail throughout various passages in Lamotte’s translation. In what follows I will highlight some of these instances – especially when the term is discussed in relation to bodies and embodiment.

In a footnote to a section about the special qualities of a Buddha’s body, Lamotte explains that:

The terrestrial and human existence of Śākyamuni, although real, is not only miraculous but also, in a certain sense, artificial: the Buddha conforms to the world (*lokānuvartana*); he takes on worldly dharmas which in reality are foreign to him. There are several varieties of Lokottaravādas: sometimes the Bodhisattva Śākyamuni is a fictitious body (*nirmāṇakāya*), a phantom (Docetism), sometimes it is a body of birth which, at the time of enlightenment, is paired with a glorious body, a body of *dharmadhātu*.²⁴

The key points I want to emphasise in the above quote are that the Buddha’s body is a magical artificial creation; it is not a “normal” human body, and the Buddha manifests this artificial body in order to appear as though he is conforming to the “norm”. The reason the Buddhas feel this conformation is necessary is because, “If they appear to think, speak, act, suffer like us, it is out of pure compassion, in order to conform externally to our weakness

²² Ibid., 85.

²³ Donald Lopez, *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise guide to its History and Teachings*, 62.

²⁴ Étienne Lamotte, *The Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom of Nāgārjuna* (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra), *Composed by the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna and Translated by the Tripiṭakadharmacārya Kumārajīva of the Land of Koutcha under the Later Ts’in*. Translated by Gelongma Karma Migme Chodron, 2001. Privately circulated pdf. English translation of Lamotte, Étienne, trans. *La Traité de la grande vertu de sagesse* (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra). 5 vols. Louvain: Institut orientaliste de Louvain, 1966-1980, 40, fn. 70.

(*lokānuvartana*); they themselves are above all of that and remain strangers to it.”²⁵ Out of compassion Buddhas project *nirmāṇakāyas* that “look like us” so that we may hear and see the Dharma in a form we can comprehend.

Later, the text describes “fourteen minds of metamorphosis” that accomplish “eight kinds of *nirmāṇa*”.²⁶ These eight *nirmāṇa* are:

(1) reducing to the size of an atom (*paramāṇu*), (2) enlarging to the point of filling up space (*ākāśa*), (3) becoming as light as the feather of a crane (*sārasaloman*), (4) exercising sovereignty (*vaśitvakaraṇa*) by growing bigger, shrinking, lengthening, narrowing, etc., (5) possessing the Indrabala, the power that surpasses that of humans, (6) being far distant and coming close, (7) making the earth shake (*kampana*), (8) obtaining whatever one desires: being single and becoming many (*eko bhūtvā bahudhā bhavati*), being many and becoming single (*bahudhā bhūtvā eko bhavati*), passing through stone walls (*tiraḥ kuḍyaṃ gacchati*), walking on water (*udake gacchati*), walking in space (*ākāśe kramati*), touching the sun and the moon with one's hand (*sūryacandramasau pāṇinā āmārṣṭi*), transforming the four great elements, i.e., changing earth (*pṛthivī*) into water (*ap-*) and water into earth, fire (*tejas*) into wind and wind (*vāyu*) into fire, stone (*śaila*) into gold and gold (*suvarṇa*) into stone.²⁷

Two of these eight are of particular interest when thinking about the manifestation of *nirmāṇakāyas* in cyberspace.

The first is that of “Being far distant and coming close”. Many people that interact with *tulkus* in cyberspace are usually very distant (geographically) from the *tulku*’s “physical” manifestation. The cyber- manifestation of a *tulku* closes this distance, giving the person the perception that the *tulku* is “close” or “near.” The second *nirmāṇa* of interest is that of “Obtaining whatever one desires: being single and becoming many”. This reiterates the tradition’s understanding that an advanced being can manifest multiple *nirmāṇakāyas*. Through their “desire” to benefit as many sentient beings as possible, *tulkus* manifest in multiple “forms” within cyberspace.

Later in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, a sense of comparison between *nirmāṇa* and *dharmas* are drawn. These comparisons give a very helpful insight into how the text understood the “nature” of *nirmāṇas*. The first comparison of note is between the notion

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 311.

²⁷ Ibid.

that “beings rewarded in a lifetime in the form realm (*rūpadhātu*) can transform substances by the power of concentration”.²⁸

These imaginary creatures are not subject to birth (*jāti*), old age (*jarā*), sickness (*vyādhī*) and death (*maraṇa*); they experience neither unhappiness (*duḥkha*) nor happiness (*sukha*) and thus are different from humans. This is why they are empty and non-existent. In the same way, all dharmas are without arising (*utpāda*), duration (*sthiti*) and cessation (*bhaṅga*); this is why they are compared to *nirmāṇas*.²⁹

We can assume from this comparison that *nirmāṇakāyas* are not subject to the phenomena listed above. How then, do we explain *tulkus*? They are born, grow up, teach, grow old and die, and then they apparently come back and repeat the process. I discussed earlier that *nirmāṇa* can be understood as a magical creation/illusion. Therefore, while *tulkus* appear to be making all the right noises and doing all the right things, they are not really. Such activity is just a form of expedient means which makes them accessible to “everyday” people who are subject to these things.³⁰

However just because *nirmāṇakāyas* are not “real”, does not mean they cannot have “real” effects:

Although they are empty of reality, the *nirmāṇas* can cause beings to experience joy (*muditā*), hatred (*dveṣa*), sadness (*daurmanasya*), suffering (*duḥkha*) or confusion (*moha*). In the same way, although dharmas are empty and unreal, they can cause beings to experience joy (*muditā*), hatred (*dveṣa*), sadness (*daurmanasya*), fear (*bhaya*), etc. This is why they are compared to a *nirmāṇa*.³¹

But if things are non-existent, how can they be seen, heard, and experienced? It is to this question that the ten comparisons that are presented here reply: they are seen in the way that one sees a magical object, they are heard in the way that one hears an echo, they are experienced in the way that one experiences things in a dream, etc.³²

²⁸ Ibid., 312.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ In his article “Some Reflections on the Personality of the Buddha”, Paul Harrison discusses this issue. While the Buddha’s physical body appeared to do all the things a “normal” human body would do, it was actually all just a show. Harrison discusses the Buddha’s portrayal in the Lokanuvartana-sutra. He argues that the agenda of the text is to show “only Buddhas can really fathom Buddhas... They are completely uninvolved with the world, but they must appear in it somehow to express their compassion and must make themselves known.” Therefore they make a “show” of carrying out everyday activities, for example: “They [Buddhas] make a show of answering the calls of nature, but their bodies are as hard and incorruptible as vajra.” Paul Harrison, “Some Reflections on the Personality of the Buddha,” *Ōtani gakuhō* 74, no. 4 (1995): 1-29.

³¹ Lamotte, “The Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom,” 312.

³² Ibid., fn 580.

Even though the forms a *tulku* takes (be it human or otherwise) are ultimately illusions, they can still have tangible effects on the sentient beings they interact with. A sentient being can learn/experience the Dharma by interacting with a *tulku's* *nirmāṇakāya*, because they believe the *tulku* is real.

The Etymological Link between Nirmāṇa and Māyā

Building on this, we can gain a greater insight into the meaning of *nirmāṇa* by examining the link between *nirmāṇa* and skt. *māyā*. The Petrograd dictionary connects *māyā* (art, wisdom, extraordinary or supernatural power, illusion, unreality, deception, fraud, trick), with the root *mā* (to measure, mete out).³³ Michael Radich summarises Gonda's study of this link:

Māyā seems originally to have meant something closer to "a power of marvellous creative action" by dint of which the gods manifested themselves in various forms, animated the natural phenomena of the world, achieved feats of battle, etc. . . . *māyā* is spoken of as a generative power at the hub of a wheel in which creatures are the spokes, and compared to a lotus (*yatra devās ca manuṣyāś cārā nābhāv iva śrītāḥ | apām tvā puṣpaṃ prcchāmi | yatra tan māyayā hitam*; Gonda 158-159, Whitney 600). Gonda also notes that the word *māyā* is probably etymologically and conceptually connected to *nir/mā* (key to the terminology of Buddhist docetism in *nirmita*, *nairmāṇikakāya* etc.); Gonda 167-168, 174-177, 176-177; on */mā* as producing *through mental operations*, 170. Later in the tradition, Prakṛti, spouse of Viṣṇu, is identified with *māyā* or called Māyā in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.10; in the *Kūrma Purāṇa*, this same Māyā is said to "bring forth the entire world"; and the "rather recent" *Kṛṣṇa Upaniṣad* makes her Kṛṣṇa's mother, Devakī; Goudriaan 47. *Māyā* was also connected to (Vedic senses of) *prajñā*, as a kind of "active wisdom . . ." ³⁴

From these various definitions the link is clear. Both words imply concepts of illusion, magic and trickery.

The term *tulku* is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term *nirmāṇakāya*. The "people" identified as *tulku* appear to have physical bodies like yours and mine; however, if they really are *tulku*, we must assume their physical bodies are really just illusions, and we have been pulled in by a clever trick. Since it is these "illusory people" that I am observing, it makes sense that the concept of illusory bodies should be the "hub" of my framework.

³³ J. Gonda, *Four Studies in Language of the Veda* (The Hague: Mouton & Co. 1959), 119.

³⁴ Michael Radich, *The Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra and the Emergence of Tathāgatagarbha/Buddha nature Doctrine*, Hamburg Buddhist Studies (Hamburg: Hamburg University Zentrum für Buddhismuskunde, forthcoming), Chapter Four.

The Functions of Nirmāṇakāya

The primary function of a *nirmāṇakāya* is teaching through the use of *upāya* (expedient means). The common understanding is that Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* can manifest *nirmāṇakāyas* in whatever form is most helpful and accessible to the sentient beings they are teaching.

A good example of this is the “Avalokiteśvara” chapter in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The *bodhisattva* Akṣayamati asks the Buddha how Avalokiteśvara moves through the world; how he teaches the Dharma; and what his powers of skillful means are.³⁵ The Buddha responds with an extensive list describing the different forms Avalokiteśvara can manifest in:

The Buddha said to Bodhisattva Akṣayamati: “O son of a virtuous family! If there is any land where sentient beings are to be saved by the form of a buddha, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara teaches the Dharma by changing himself into the form of a buddha. To those who are to be saved by the form of a *pratyekabuddha*, he teaches the Dharma by changing himself into the form of a *pratyekabuddha*. To those who are to be saved by the form of a *śrāvaka*, he teaches the Dharma by changing himself into the form of a *śrāvaka*. To those who are to be saved by the form of Brahma, he teaches the Dharma by changing himself into the form of Brahma.”³⁶

Avalokiteśvara forms appear to be limitless. He can take on whatever form is most helpful to save a particular sentient being.

While this text is talking about Avalokiteśvara specifically, I think it could be safely assumed that other highly advanced *bodhisattvas* would command the same powers. (During their spiritual “evolution” all *bodhisattvas* must gain the same “super-knowledges” in order to achieve perfect Buddhahood.) Therefore, in theory, all highly advanced *bodhisattvas* should be able to manifest themselves in multiple forms in order to teach and save sentient beings.

Cyber-profiles as Nirmāṇakāyas of Tulkus

Now that I have provided a working definition of what a *nirmāṇakāya* is, and how it functions, it is now possible to begin thinking about how the concept of *nirmāṇakāya* could be applicable to *tulkus*’ use of cyberspace.

³⁵ Kumārajīva, *The Lotus Sūtra Translated from the Chinese of Kumārajīva* (Taisho, Volume 9, Number 262), trans. by Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007), 297.

³⁶ Ibid., 297-98.

I will suggest that the following aspects of *nirmāṇakāya* doctrine could be applied to the cyber profiles of *tulkus*:

- Like *nirmāṇakāya* cyber-profiles allow *tulkus* to have multiple manifestations in cyberspace.
- Cyber profiles are “unreal”; they are illusions. Even though they are not the “real” *tulku* that they represent, they are still identified with/as the *tulku*.
- Some of the cyber-profiles of the *tulkus* I am examining are used to dispense teachings, which is one of the major functions of the *nirmāṇakāya*.

However the following limitations of such an application will also be considered:

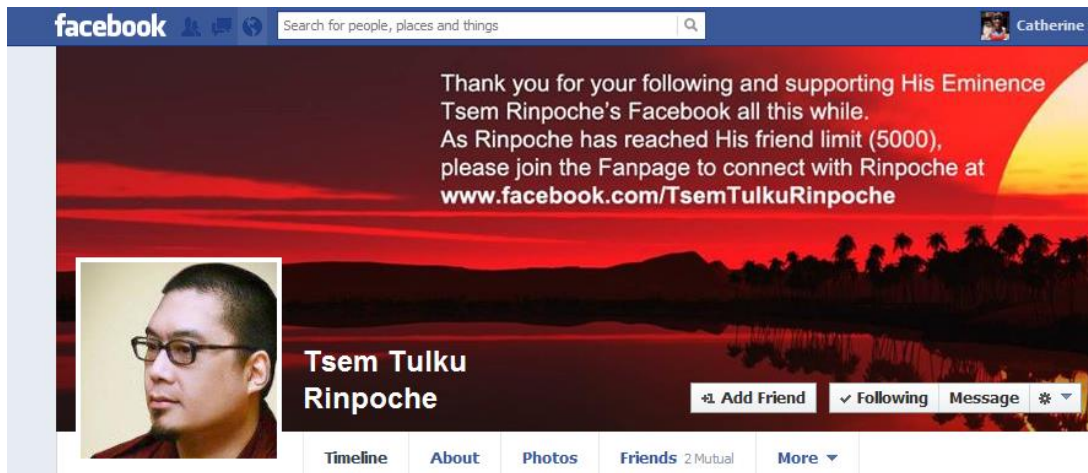
- Many followers of *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles do not consider them to be “equal” to the physical *tulku*. However according to my framework, both should be “equal” since they are both *nirmāṇakāya*.
- *Nirmāṇakāya* are bodies that are produced by the special powers of Buddhas and advanced *bodhisattvas*. The cyber-profiles of *tulkus* are not. They are produced in the same way any “normal” person would make a cyber-profile.
- While many cyber-profiles of *tulkus* do carry out teaching (which is a function of *nirmāṇakāya*), there is no indication that the people receiving the teachings believe this function in particular makes the *tulku* “present” in cyberspace.³⁷

Multiple Cyber-Profiles

Many *tulkus* have cyber-profiles on more than one site. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are the most common. Some *tulkus* have their own “individual” websites as well. Through these different profiles, *tulkus* are able to manifest multiple forms in cyberspace. While these forms appear different from one another, they often carry out similar (if not the same) functions.

Tsem Tulku Rinpoche has profiles on Facebook and Twitter.³⁸ On Facebook he has two profiles because his first has “maxed out” the number of friends he can have:

³⁷ I will discuss presence and absence in Chapter Three.



Tsem Tulku also has a YouTube channel, to which videos are uploaded of teachings he gives at Kechara house.³⁹ Tsem Tulku also has his own website which contains a personal blog that is updated by Tsem Tulku regularly.⁴⁰

Like Tsem Tulku, Kalu Rinpoche also has two Facebook pages, because his first has been “maxed out.”⁴¹ He also has a personal website: <http://www.paldenshangpa.net>. On this site, his teaching schedule for the upcoming months is made available. He also writes short blog posts about how he is feeling and his thoughts on different topics.

My final case study, Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche, has a Facebook page to which teachings, photos and videos of him are uploaded.⁴² Traleg Rinpoche also has a Twitter account.⁴³ The majority of “tweets” are quotes from teachings given by Traleg Rinpoche. For example:

³⁸ Tsem Tulku Rinpoche’s Facebook page, accessed January 1, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/#!/tsemtulku?fref=ts>.

Tsem Tulku Rinpoche’s Twitter page, accessed January 1, 2014, <https://twitter.com/tsemtulku>.

³⁹ Tsem Tulku Rinpoche’s YouTube channel, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.YouTube.com/channel/UCoTg0Wc5q3Gnz8ej3ETCdMQ>.

⁴⁰ Tsem Tulku Rinpoche’s website, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.tsemtulku.com>.

⁴¹ Kalu Rinpoche’s “first” Facebook page, accessed January 1, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/#!/kalu.skrilles?fref=ts>.

Kalu Rinpoche’s “second” Facebook page, accessed January 1, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/#!/mkpaldon.mkpaldon?fref=ts>.

⁴² Traleg Rinpoche’s Facebook page, accessed January 1, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/kalu.skrilles?ref=ts&fref=ts#!/TralegRinpoche?fref=ts>.

⁴³ Traleg Rinpoche’s Twitter account, accessed January 1, 2014, <https://twitter.com/TralegRinpoche>.



Traleg Rinpoche @TralegRinpoche

13 Nov

Many Buddhist believe thinking conceptually is a bad thing and concepts are seen as something bad- Traleg Rinpoche, Meaningful Life

Expand

← Reply ↻ Retweet ★ Favorite ... More

The examples above show that *tulkus* are utilising more than one form of social media to interact with their followers. Each type of social media allows them to manifest a different form in cyberspace. These different forms exist and function alongside each other, much in the same way the multiple *nirmāṇakāyas* of Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* manifest and function in alongside each other.⁴⁴ It is not problematic that these profiles are not “human” or “physical” manifestations, because *nirmāṇakāyas* can take on whatever form is most helpful/accessible to a particular group of sentient beings.

The Illusion of Cyber-Profiles

A concept central to the idea of *nirmāṇakāyas* is illusion. As was shown earlier in this chapter, the concept of *māyā* and *nirmāṇa* are intrinsically linked. *Nirmāṇakāyas* are “tricks” that make people believe them to be something they are not. The same can be said of the cyber-profiles of *tulkus*. They are not the person they are identified with. Yet often they are identified as the person they represent. The illusion is that the profile is in some way the person it represents.

On the website of Tsem Tulku Rinpoche, there are instances of people expressing their happiness at having met Tsem Rinpoche via his website:

Compassion and loving kindness to animals who have been abandoned...

I had the great honour to connect with H.E. Tsem Rinpoche yesterday via Twitter. I went to his [website](#) and read some contemplations, teachings and quotes, as well as his biography. I feel extremely blessed to have met with him online. Rinpoche's website is very beautiful: it conveys peace and gentleness from the moment it opens on the screen. I am grateful to have the opportunity to read the words of a great enlightened being who displays the purity of Bodhicitta.

⁴⁴ I will discuss cyber-profiles as multiple manifestations in more detail in Chapter Two.

The author of the above letter speaks as if they have met Tsem Rinpoche. This is arguably an illusion, because the website is not the “real” Tsem Rinpoche, the same could be said of Tsem Rinpoche’s physical form; it is not the “real” *tulku*, it is simply an illusion that “stands in” for the “real.”

Similar examples can be found on Kalu Rinpoche’s Facebook page. There are a number of instances in which people comment how happy they are to know him or to be with him:



In the above comment a Facebook user says that “we” (assume she is referring to herself and other Facebook users) “are all blessed for knowing you.” “You” here refers to Kalu Rinpoche, more specifically his Facebook profile. She is identifying the Facebook profile as Kalu Rinpoche.

Cyber-Profiles as a Teaching Tool

One of the primary functions of a *nirmāṇakāya* is to teach the Dharma to sentient beings in a form that they can relate to and access. Many of the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* I have observed are carrying out a similar function. Teachings on various Buddhist topics are being posted by *tulkus* on their profiles. Tsem Tulku Rinpoche’s primary use of his profiles is to dispense his teachings. All of his cyber-profiles offer Buddhist teachings in some form. Tsem Rinpoche’s blog is very much the centre of his cyber-network, as pointed out by one of his assistants in a YouTube comment:




Tsem Rinpoche blogs on a vast number of topics. He discusses everything from Buddhist doctrine to UFOs.⁴⁵ The blog has a large following. The site views counter has recorded over

⁴⁵ Tsem Rinpoche’s blog, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.tsemrinpoche.com>.


one million views.⁴⁶ The blog is divided into various sections such as: “Buddhas, Dharma, and Practise”; “Prayers and Sadhanas”; and “Facebook Questions”:⁴⁷


Prayers and Sadhanas



DUKKAR (SITATAPATRA)
Dec 11, 2013 | Views: 4,038


Dukkar or Sitatapatra is regarded as a female counterpart to Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

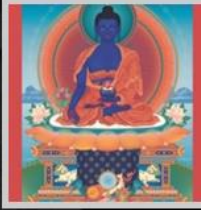
[Read more »](#)  30



Mandala Offering – A Powerful Method to Accumulate Merits
Dec 4, 2013 | Views: 3,092


In the Mahayana teachings, in order to take the ultimate essence of our precious human life, we should aspire to achieve full enlightenment so that we can lead all...

[Read more »](#)  11



Medicine Buddha Practice
Jun 2, 2013 | Views: 485

The Concise Essence Sutra Ritual of Bhagavan Medicine Buddha called The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel composed by Panchen Losang Chökyi Gyältsen translated by David Molk
*** Commentary by H.E. Tsem Tulku...

[Read more »](#)  4

While Tsem Tulku Rinpoche’s blog and website could be described as the “hub” of his online activities, he is also very active on other social media sites. He has his own YouTube channel, which as of November 26 2013 had 881 videos uploaded to it.⁴⁸ Many of these videos are recordings of teachings he has given at his centre, “Kechara house”, in Malaysia. From comments left on the talks, it seems that a lot of people from outside Malaysia watch these videos in order to receive Tsem Rinpoche’s teachings. Some examples of this follow:

⁴⁶ Tsem Rinpoche’s website, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.tsemtulku.com>.

⁴⁷ Tsem Rinpoche’s blog, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.tsemrinpoche.com>.

⁴⁸ Tsem Rinpoche’s YouTube Channel, accessed November 26, 2013, <http://www.YouTube.com/user/tsemtulku?feature=watch>.



2 years ago

Thank you for offering your teaching here so I, like so many others, without having met you in person can benefit from your wisdom and kindness exactly when we need that particular teaching.



6 years ago

Tulku Rinpoche, thank you for all your teachings and open for us on Youtube! We are in good Kalpa, because we can have great teaching from you which everybody understand well.



Deceiving Our Guru

Tsem Rinpoche · 881 videos

1,559



5 months ago

Very precious teaching, thank you so much. I did so much wrong out of ignorance, now I try to purify and change attitude. This teaching is so great.

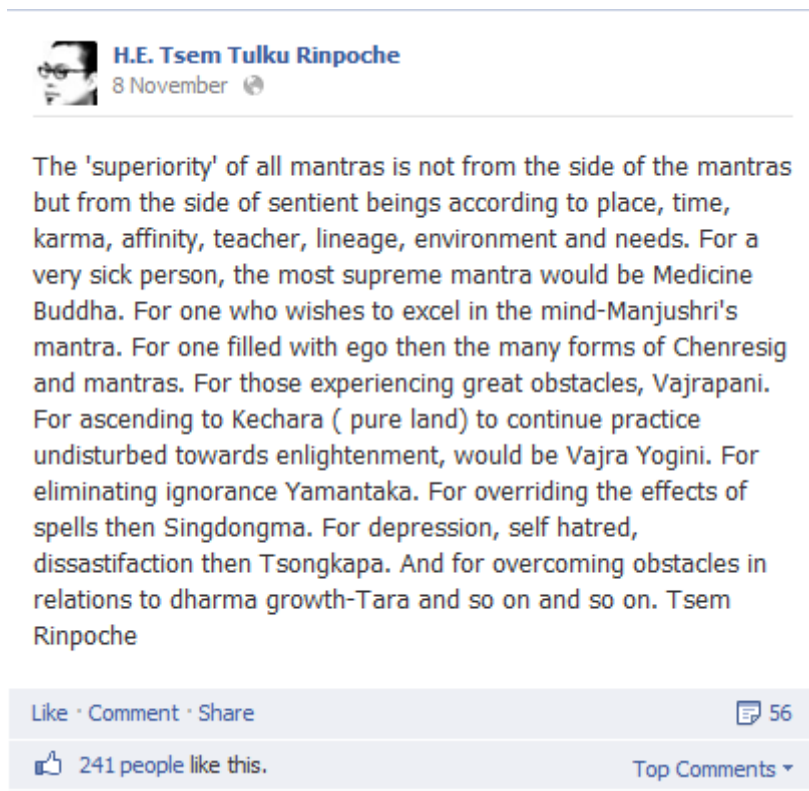


10 months ago in reply to

He uses skillful means to communicate his message. I've listened to dozens of his dharma talks, and they are always precious learning experiences.

Like his blog, Tsem Rinpoche's YouTube channel seems to primarily teach. From the comments above, it is apparent that a lot of people use these videos to inform their daily religious practise. Many commenters describe the teachings contained within the videos as "precious". The choice of word indicates that for many, these uploads are more than just simple videos. It is possible to read the word "precious" as an indication that because of what the videos contain, they have an element of sacredness for those viewing them.

Along with his blog, website and YouTube channel, Tsem Rinpoche also has profiles on Facebook and Twitter. On his Facebook profile, Tsem Rinpoche posts links to his most current blog posts, updates on the forest retreat he is building, photos of his travels, and small "snippet" teachings.⁴⁹ It seems that Tsem Rinpoche intends for his Facebook page and Twitter account to act as supplements to his YouTube channel and blog:




This is an example of one of Tsem Rinpoche's "teaching snippets", in which he talks about the use of different mantra. "Teaching snippets" seem to be the main thing posted on Tsem Rinpoche's Twitter page.

⁴⁹ Tsem Tulku Rinpoche's Facebook Page, accessed November 27, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/TsemTulkuRinpoche>.




As can be seen above, these tweets are small quotes. The hashtags used after the quotes should be noted. If they are read by themselves some of the tweets such as “consistency arises from taking responsibility” do not sound uniquely “Buddhist”, In fact they sound quite generic. However they are presented as “Buddhist” via the application of “Buddhist hashtags”, the first and last tweets in the above screenshots have the hashtag #dharma, which essentially labels them as a Buddhist teaching.


Kalu Rinpoche and Traleg Rinpoche’s cyber-profiles do not offer such extensive teachings as Tsem Rinpoche’s. However, they do still offer teachings to those that follow the profiles. Kalu Rinpoche often posts status updates in which he offers spiritual/life advice to his followers:



Kalu Rinpoche
 Yesterday via Mobile

Dear friends
 As I arrived in France and gave teaching last two weekends and I always tell people precisely that patience is the key in our life because like when you try to understand the meaning patience of spiritual practice.. you need patience without patience Nothing can be improved and to find the strong patience you need to find your wisdom the ordinary one and not miracle one and without pride
 Lots love and care from your kalu rinpoche

Like · Comment · Share
 53

 856 people like this.

 View previous comments 2 of 62


 You bless us with your posts. Thank you Rinpoche.
 3 hours ago · Like


Kalu Rinpoche
 8 October

Dear friends
 Never believe in bad karma
 Believe in good karma so
 You can move forward in life
 Never stop to change and improve to the best to help yourself and others with love and wisdom
 Lots of love to all of you
 From your kalu rinpoche

Show comments


 Rimpoché you are so kind precious teacher you always put hope and light in our hearts Thank u very much with best wishes of love and fun for you also
 8 October at 13:06 via mobile · Like ·  3


 thank you for your guidance _/_
 8 October at 13:32 · Like


 thank you so much Rimpochae for your valuable quotes i will try to put it into practice la
 10 October at 04:35 · Like

From the above post, we can see followers of Kalu Rinpoche use his posts as sources of teaching and guidance.

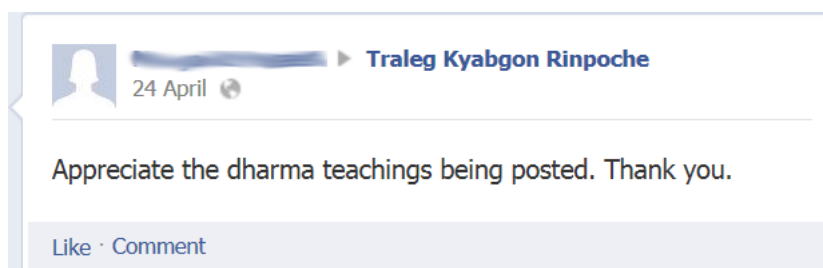
Similar examples can also be found on Traleg Rinpoche's Facebook and Twitter pages. One example is a video of a talk given by Traleg Rinpoche on relating to the Guru after his *parinirvāṇa*:



The video was posted on August 3 2013, ten days after Traleg Rinpoche's first death anniversary. Those that posted it probably did so with this in mind, knowing that many of Traleg Rinpoche's students would want advice on this issue.

One follower left a comment saying, "very clear and straightforward teaching. Thanks so much." Another follower said, "Thank you so much for posting, to be listened to and remembered again and again."

Yet another follower left the following comment in response to the links being posted on Traleg Rinpoche's page:



It is apparent that teachings on Buddhist related topics are being offered via the profiles. While they are not as extensive as the teachings offered on Tsem Rinpoche's profiles, the profiles are still functioning as teaching tools.

Buddhas project *nirmāṇakāyas* in a form that is most helpful and accessible to the sentient beings they are teaching, and these forms do not have to be human (or even animate). Therefore it is not necessarily a problem for my thesis that *tulkus'* cyber-profiles are not animate in and of themselves. However, there are some limitations to the use of *nirmāṇakāya* as a lens for viewing *tulkus* use of social media and cyberspace. I will now discuss some of these limitations.

Limitations of the Application of Nirmāṇakāya to the Cyber-Profiles of Tulkus

Cyber-Profiles and “Physical” Tulkus Are Not Treated Equally

If we are operating on the assumption that in our hypothetical Buddhist based interpretation, both the cyber-profile of a *tulku* and the “physical” form of a *tulku* are *nirmāṇakāyas*, then it stands to reason that they should be treated equally. Both are equally unreal, and therefore one should not be treated as more “real” than the other. However we do not see both “manifestations” being regarded equally.

A good number of people leave comments on the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* thanking them for being on Facebook etc. but at the same time expressing their desire that they may one day have the chance to meet the *tulku* in “real” life.

A woman wrote an email thanking Tsem Rinpoche for his online teachings. In it she said “Please give a thousand thank yous to His Eminence. It makes me want to take a trip to Malaysia just to meet him.”⁵⁰

Another woman wrote to Tsem Rinpoche saying, “In this lifetime I might never meet you in person and so never be able to take refuge with you and go deeper in the practises but I am still working on using your teachings as the main guidance in my life.”⁵¹

From what both women have said in the above comments, it is clear that while Tsem Rinpoche’s online profiles are important tools for them, they regard the physical

⁵⁰ Tsem Rinpoche’s Website, accessed January 14, 2014, <http://www.tsemtulku.com/friends/featured-letters/camille-inspired.html>.

⁵¹ Tsem Rinpoche’s website, accessed January 14, 2014, <http://www.tsemtulku.com/friends/featured-letters/responding-to-a-beautiful-mind.html>.

manifestation of Tsem Rinpoche as superior to his cyber-manifestations. Examples of this thinking are also seen on the profiles of Kalu Rinpoche and Traleg Rinpoche.

In the case of Kalu Rinpoche, people often make requests for him to come to their area of the world and give teachings. Often, these requests are made below posts Kalu Rinpoche has made about where he is currently giving teachings.

For example:


**Kalu Rinpoche**
23 December 2013 via Mobile

Hii dear friends
Everything with Teaching in south of france and Spain went very well thank you soo much for everyone for your hard work volunteer and love and care to me everything went very well with your wishes and 2 days free and going back to centre in bourgogne for more teaching. ... as always I will remember all of you thank you soo much lots of love from your kalu rinpoche

 Rinpoche La, please come to Shangpa Center in Poland ! 😊
23 December 2013 at 16:24 via mobile · Like · 1

 I hope you never forget to visit us when you are in France . So great to see you in Nice , just like if you were at our home... Very closely, so wonderful !
24 December 2013 at 00:43 via mobile · Like

 Dear Kalu: Please do not forget that there is many people waiting for you and for your teachings in Argentina. Respectfully, thank you so much.
24 December 2013 at 01:53 · Like

**Kalu Rinpoche**
13 September 2013

My dear friends,
in our daily lives, there are so many things we place importance but sometimes the belief we place in our importance gives us suffering and for that we dont reject the suffering but we should overcome our suffering to get peace in our mind. So the next question is How should we overcome our suffering? We do have instant thoughts and images flashing in our mind every millisecond, dont reject your thoughts and dont follow them. Let them be and it will dissolve by itself but never lose the clarity in your mind. In order to do this practise, we need a 5 minute of full focused in practise in a day in the beginning. The time and appreciation towards the practise will increase naturally. This is from my experience however practising with your mind will not give you 0 percent of problem but it will help in minimising our suffering. If theres a mistake I truly apologise, with lots of love and care, from your kalu rinpoche



From the above comments on Kalu Rinpoche's Facebook page, it is apparent that while they appreciate the fact that they can interact with Kalu Rinpoche online, they would prefer to see him "in person". In the comment directly above, the commenter thanks Kalu Rinpoche for his post, then immediately follows with a request for him to come to her Dharma centre to give teachings.

On Traleg Rinpoche's cyber-profiles, we see repeated requests for Traleg Rinpoche to "come back". This is because Traleg Rinpoche passed away on 24 July 2012,⁵² and the posters hope that he will soon return in a new incarnation. After, his death Traleg Rinpoche's Facebook become a focal point for remembering his life and teachings. Many requests have been made for his swift rebirth:



⁵² Traleg Rinpoche's Facebook page, accessed January 14, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/#!/TralegRinpoche?fref=ts>.

As we see under the photo of Traleg Rinpoche's relics on his throne, a follower makes the request "Precious Rinpoche. Please come back." This is a common request made in comments on photos of Traleg Rinpoche.

The comment indicates that Traleg Rinpoche's Facebook page is not held to be an equal alternative manifestation to his physical form. This is a problem for my attempt to apply the concept of *nirmāṇakāya* to *tulkus* cyber-profiles. If we are thinking of cyber-profiles as such then in theory they should be held in equal regard to a *tulku* physical form which is also a *nirmāṇakāya*. However this is clearly not the case, for many *tulkus'* followers, the *tulkus'* physical form takes precedence above all other manifestations.

It is likely that the followers of *tulkus* are not viewing *tulkus'* cyber-profiles from a completely Buddhist perspective. The majority of the followers probably think of a *tulku's* physical form is the "real" *tulku*. At the same time, they probably think of the *tulkus* cyber-profiles as "not real", but rather only representing the "real" physical *tulku*.

However, from the perspective of my framework a "Buddhological" explanation could account for this problem by suggesting that the followers assumptions of the reality of the *tulkus'* physical form simply means that the illusion of the *nirmāṇakāya* has worked. The followers have simply been pulled in by the trick. Since (from a Buddhist perspective) *tulkus'* followers are *prthagjana*, ordinary sentient beings in *samsāra*, and thus deluded by fundamental ignorance, their assumptions about the physical forms of *tulkus* being "real" is to be expected. They simply are not aware of the ultimate realities involved in the doctrine of Buddha-bodies, it is quite possible they're not even aware of the *tulkus'* status as a type of Buddha-body. Therefore they are not talking about the physical forms of *tulkus* in the "right way" because they simply have little, or no concept of the ultimate realities at stake.⁵³

Cyber-Profiles Are Not Produced by Special Powers

Nirmāṇakāya are produced by the special powers of Buddhas and advanced *bodhisattvas*. They are unique to these beings, and cannot be produced by ordinary means. This is not the

⁵³ I am aware that I am included within the *prthagjana* class of beings. I am not suggesting that unlike *tulkus'* followers, my view is the same as the view from enlightenment. However, I think in principle (from the perspective of the framework) it is possible to hypothesise about how the view from enlightenment could contrast with the view of those beings still trapped in *samsāra*.

case with cyber-profiles of *tulkus*. They are not produced through special powers; they are created using a computer that can access the internet. Not only are the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* not produced using special powers, they are produced in the exact same way an ordinary person would create a cyber-profile. Cyber-profiles are not manifestations unique to advanced beings, but can be easily produced by ordinary beings.

Like *tulkus*, ordinary people that are interacting with them online also have cyber-profiles. There is nothing different or “special” about the way *tulkus* create their cyber-profiles, that sets them apart from the cyber-profiles of ordinary people.

Cyber-Profiles and “Teaching”

As I discussed earlier, one of the primary functions of the *nirmāṇakāya* is to teach sentient beings. From the examination of my case studies, it is apparent that *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles are being used as teaching tools, and therefore could be seen as functioning in a similar way to *nirmāṇakāya*. However there are some problems with this assumption.

Just because something transmits Buddhist teachings does not mean it is a *nirmāṇakāya*. Buddhist texts also carry out the function of transmitting teachings, yet they are not considered *nirmāṇakāya*. Teaching is one function of the *nirmāṇakāya*, but it is not what makes a *nirmāṇakāya*. The *nirmāṇakāya* is a type of Buddha-body, which means a Buddha is embodied (or in the case of *nirmāṇakāya*, perceived to be embodied) in that form.

Presence plays an important role in the concept of embodiment. Michael Radich offers the following explanation for the relationship between embodiment and presence: “There must be ‘something’, or more accurately ‘someone’, *embodied in* that body”.⁵⁴ This definition of embodiment could be problematic in the case of Buddhism because of the tradition’s denial of the “self.” Even though this potentially leaves us stuck in a “doctrinal quagmire, it seems clear that some notion of an embodied ‘someone, or something’ must be implicit even in Buddhist notions of body and embodiment”.⁵⁵ Therefore, “A ‘body’ is a visible or otherwise tangible form in which some sentient being is actually or potentially

⁵⁴ Michael David Radich, “The Somatics of Liberation: Ideas About Embodiment in Buddhism from its Origins to the Fifth Century C.E.” (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2007), 50, ProQuest (3285579).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

present to sentient beings within the tangible world”.⁵⁶ For something to be a “body” a being has to be “embodied” in it, and “present” to other sentient beings.

An argument could be made that the teachings on *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles do not necessarily make them “present”, and that there is no difference in reading a *tulku*’s teachings on their cyber-profile, to reading teachings in a book. However, there are a number of differences between written texts and cyber-profiles that could allow for the argument that cyber-profiles mediate presence in a way texts cannot.

On Facebook, a person normally only reads what someone writes if they are “friends” with them. This creates (the perception of) a different kind of relationship to that between authors and readers of books. Facebook, and other social media websites typically contain photos and videos to a degree that is rare (or impossible in the case of videos) for books. This could have various ramifications for the “reading” experience. Unlike a book, a cyber-profile changes over time, this gives the perception that the “reader” is interacting with the “author” in the lived time of the “author.” With a book it matters little if the author is living or dead, and books are almost always static in form. Finally on social media sites such as Facebook, “readers” have the ability to give a personal response to what the “author” has written, and there is potential for the “author” to see the “reader’s” response and discuss it with the reader. Many, if not all of these considerations could potentially change the dynamic of “authorial” presence online. These differing dynamics could potentially create a greater “sense” of the “authors” presence for the “reader.”

I will also suggest in Chapter Three, that some followers believe that the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* are able to convey the *tulkus*’ presence in some way. While the teachings by themselves may not convey presence, it is possible that combined with the other components that make up a *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles they can contribute to the mediation of presence.

Concluding Remarks

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Therefore *nirmāṇakāya* is a helpful concept for applying to, and understanding *tulkus*' use of cyberspace in a number of ways. Illusion and "magical tricks" are key ideas surrounding *nirmāṇakāya*. Like *nirmāṇakāya* the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* are illusions. They "trick" people into identifying them as the *tulku*, when they are not. The concept of *nirmāṇakāya* can be used as a conceptual tool for thinking about the multiple "manifestations" of *tulkus* in cyberspace. It is possible for advanced beings to manifest multiple *nirmāṇakāya* at the same time. Like cyber-profiles these *nirmāṇakāya* act as the "manifesters'" functional equivalent. One of the primary functions of *nirmāṇakāya* is to transmit the *Dharma* through teaching sentient beings. We saw examples of *tulkus* giving teachings (or at least making them available) via their cyber-profiles.

However, there were limits to the application. In principle if cyber-profiles are being understood to be functioning as *nirmāṇakāya* then they should be held to be "equal" to all other *nirmāṇakāyas*. As we saw this was not always the case with *tulkus*' cyber-profiles. Often followers of *tulkus* showed a preference for a *tulku*'s physical *nirmāṇakāya* over his cyber-profiles.⁵⁷ There was also the problem of *tulkus* not producing their cyber-profiles through special powers – the profiles were produced in the same way as any ordinary being would create one. Finally there was the issue of teaching. Just because something conveys Buddhist teachings does not mean it is a *nirmāṇakāya*. However, this "problem" could be far less of one if the being giving the teachings is also considered "present" via the same medium.⁵⁸

The ability to manifest multiple *nirmāṇakāya* is an ability attributed to many advanced beings in Buddhist thought. The Buddha displayed his ability to do this when he performed the *yamakapratihārya* (the miracle of twins/doubles). This miracle will be the second component of my framework, and the subject of the next chapter.

⁵⁷ However, this problem could be potentially dealt with due to followers' status as *prthagjana* (see page 27).

⁵⁸ The idea of presence will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Two: The *Yamakaprātihārya* “The Miracle of Twins”

The *yamakaprātihārya* was a miracle performed by the Buddha in which he created multiple copies of himself. These copies “filled-in” for him when he was absent, acting as his “living extensions.”

In this chapter I will briefly outline a version of the myth that describes the miracle. I will then give some examples from various parts of the Buddhist tradition(s) in which copies were created of the Buddha and treated as his living extensions. After these examples have been given I will suggest how the *yamakaprātihārya* and the ideas of living extensions could be a helpful conceptual tool for examining *tulkus*’ use of cyberspace.

The Miracle in the Dhammapada Commentary

The *yamakaprātihārya* was performed by the Buddha at Śrāvastī. It is considered one of the ten indispensable acts, and one of the thirty obligatory deeds that a Buddha must perform in his final life time.⁵⁹ The Buddha performed the miracle in response to challenges made by rival heretic teachers, and is actually a *series* of miracles.

To begin, the Buddha creates a jeweled walkway in the air and stands on it.⁶⁰ He then performs the “miracle of double appearances”. Flames emerge from the Buddha’s upper body while simultaneously water emerges from his lower body. He then “switches” so water comes from his upper body and fire comes from the lower part.⁶¹

Then flames and water simultaneously emerge from the front and back of his body, from his right and left eyes, from his right and left ears, from his right and left nostrils, shoulders, hands, sides, feet, etc.⁶²

The flames and water end up illuminating the whole universe; while this is happening the Buddha preaches the Dharma to the gathered audience.⁶³

The story then arrives at the part where the Buddha creates a “double” of himself. The Buddha realizes that he is the best person to ask questions about the Dharma as well as

⁵⁹ John S. Strong, *The Buddha: A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 107.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

answer them, so he creates a double of himself. This double then asks questions which he answers, sits while he walks and vice versa.⁶⁴

In some versions of the story there is a part in which the Buddha creates multiple copies of himself:

Sitting on a lotus throne brought to him by two *naga* kings, the Buddha creates above of, in front of, and behind him, other lotus thrones on which sit replicas of the Buddha. In this way he multiplies his own body and does not stop until he has filled the whole sky with Buddhas, up to the heavens. Some are seated, some are standing, some are walking, some lying down, and they exhort the crowd with these words: Start now! Leave home! Apply yourself to the Buddha's teaching!⁶⁵

After these miracles the Buddha ascends to Tuṣita Heaven. There he teaches his mother (who has been reborn there). He once again produces a double of himself which takes over teaching for him when he wants to rest and eat.⁶⁶

According to Faxian (as conveyed by Strong), while the Buddha was in Tuṣita Heaven, King Prasenajit became impatient and commissioned the first Buddha image to substitute for the Buddha in his absence. Once finished, the image was placed on the Buddha's empty throne. When the Buddha returned, the image stood up and greeted him. The Buddha proceeded to thank the image for taking his place while he was away, explaining that its services would be needed again when he went into *parinirvāṇa*.⁶⁷

Strong notes that Faxian's tale "is significant, for it illustrates the homology between a properly fashioned statue and a magically projected image, both of which can act as substitutes for the Buddha in his absence."⁶⁸

Multiple Buddhas and "Doubles" in Other Texts and Myths

While the miracle of Śrāvastī is the most famous example of the Buddha creating multiple copies of himself, it is certainly not the only instance. This Buddhological ability crops up in multiple Buddhist traditions. One in particular, the Burmese Mahāmuni image's "origin story", bears some striking similarities with Faxian's tale of the first Buddha image.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Apparently, the image was created during the Buddha's last lifetime, and was consecrated or "enlivened" by the Buddha himself.⁶⁹ The Buddha did this to create a "living twin" who in the Buddha's absence would advise the king and preach to the community.⁷⁰ After the Mahāmuni image was created, it was placed on a jewelled throne. When the Buddha approached the image it stood and addressed him as "older brother".⁷¹ The Buddha responded:

Younger brother, do not stand up. I shall enter *nirvāṇa* in my eightieth year; but you, endowed with the supernatural power of a Buddha, shall exist for 5000 years, which I have prescribed to be the limit of my religion; you shall be the means of working out the salvation of men and nats.⁷²

In one of my former existences I was King on the island of Cheduba. I broke the thigh bone of the gardener and sliced off a piece of flesh from the back of a young prince; you (addressing the image) are my representative on earth and you shall suffer the results (*kammavipāka*) of these two deeds.⁷³

According to myth, the image (named Candasara by the Buddha) used to speak, preach the Dharma, and counsel the king, "but fell silent with the progressive decline of the Buddhist dispensation and the defilement of the world".⁷⁴ Many Burmese people also believe that the damage and decay that the image has been subjected to over the years fulfils the Buddha's prophecy that image would suffer the retribution for the Buddha's former immoral actions.⁷⁵

From the description above, it is apparent that the myth of the Mahāmuni image draws on, and was heavily influenced by the "miracle of twins". Juliane Schober points this out, saying that "The Twin Miracle in the *Dhammapada Commentary* is a textual model for the creation and popular veneration of "living doubles" which clearly inspired local proliferations of mythic traditions like that of the Mahāmuni image."⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Juliane Schober, "In the Presence of the Buddha: Ritual Veneration of the Burmese Mahamuni Image," in *Sacred Biography in the Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. by Juliane Schober (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002), 260.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 268.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 269.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Schober outlines the similarities found in both myths. Both emphasize the creation of magical doubles that help the Buddha in teaching the Dharma. “In both narratives, the Buddha interacts and converses with his twin on religious topics. Both the Twin Double and the Mahāmuni Candāsara act in the Buddha’s absence as his legitimate living extensions in the propagation of the Dharma.”⁷⁷

Twins and Doubles in the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra

There are a number of instances in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* where the Buddha’s power to create magical emanations is discussed (as we saw in my earlier section on *nirmāṇa*). However, there is another story which I have not yet discussed and it is worth mentioning.

In a section titled “Miracle of the Multiplication of Fictive Buddhas”, Ananda worries that the Buddha will not have enough time to fulfil all his Buddha activity because he was born in a “bad age,” (*kalpakaṣāya*), and thus has a shorter life span than Buddhas born in good ages. The Buddha, becoming aware of Ananda’s concern, “entered into the concentration of the rising sun (*sūryadayasamādhi*) and created innumerable Buddhas, as many as the rays (*raśmi*) of the sun spreading in the ten directions, by emanation (*nirmāṇa*) from his body. Each of these fictive Buddhas (*nirmitabuddha*) was in the universes and each one there fulfilled his Buddha activity: some preached the Dharma, others manifested the superknowledges (*abhijñā*), others were in *samādhi*, others took their meals: in these many ways, they did the work of the Buddha and saved beings”.⁷⁸ Upon seeing the miracle Ananda realises “Supposing that the Buddha lived only a single day, even the plants (*ṭṛṇakāṣṭha*) of the great earth would all be saved”.⁷⁹

The *yamaka* myth in the *Dhammaapada* commentary; the origin myth of the Mahāmuni image; and “the miracle of the multiplication of fictive Buddhas” are just a few examples of myths from multiple Buddhist traditions that focus on the ability of Buddhas to create multiple copies of themselves. These copies are understood to be just as legitimate as the

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Lamotte, “The Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom, 1941.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

“original”, and can act on the Buddha’s behalf when he is absent. Like the Mahāmuni myth; I think that my framework could use the *yamakaprātihārya* as a model to examine *tulkus*’ use of cyberspace. Within cyberspace, *tulkus* project multiple copies of themselves (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) that are treated as “legitimate living extensions” of the *tulku* by those approaching them in cyberspace.

The Doubles of Buddhas vs The Doubles of Bodhisattvas

Strong observed that, “The Discourse on the Miracle” specifies that this is a power unique to Buddhas. When *arhats* create replicas of themselves the replicas cannot act independently. When the *arhat* speaks, the replica speaks (and says the same thing).⁸⁰

The ability to create “independent” doubles is a power unique to Buddhas. *Arhats* (and presumably *bodhisattvas*), can only create doubles that act in unison with them. The majority of *tulkus* are considered to be *bodhisattvas* not Buddhas (the Panchen Lama being a notable exception).

Therefore, from the perspective of my framework, it is not problematic that *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles do not act independently of the *tulkus*’ other forms. Since the majority of *tulkus* are considered to be *bodhisattvas*, not Buddhas, then their multiple manifestations should not be able to act independently of each other.

Living Extensions and Substitutes

In the *yamakaprātihārya* myth, the Buddha has two main reasons for creating “doubles”: propagating the Dharma, and acting as his “living extensions.” Before he ascends to Tuṣita Heaven, he creates a double to help him expound the Dharma to his audience in the most effective way possible. Then he creates a double in Tuṣita to substitute for him when he wants to rest or collect alms. When he descends back to earth, he “enlivens” the statue that is acting as his substitute on the throne, thanking it for taking his place and telling the image that its services will be needed again when he (the Buddha) enters *parinirvāṇa*. By saying

⁸⁰ Ibid.

these things, the Buddha gives legitimacy to the image to act as an extension of himself in the same way a magically-created double would.

Many traditions have used the “model” of *yamakaprātihārya* to legitimise their own local images. This is apparent in the Mahāmuni origin story, which appears to have drawn directly from the story of the “substitute statue” at Śrāvastī. Since the people of Burma can no longer access Buddha Śākyamuni in his physical human body, they must access his living extension in the form of the Mahāmuni statue.

As we will see in the following case studies, this is what seems to be happening when people “access” *tulkus* online. The people interacting with *tulkus* in their multiple cyber-forms do not have access to *the* “real” *tulku* (whatever they may consider that to be). The cyber-profiles are acting in the “real” *tulkus*’ absence, just as the magically-created doubles acted in the Buddha’s absence in the *yamakaprātihārya* myth, and the Mahāmuni acts in the Buddha’s absence in the Burmese context. They are extensions of the being, making the *tulku*/Buddha appear to be in many places simultaneously, while at the same time pointing to the “real” *tulku*/Buddha’s absence.

The Yamakaprātihārya and Cyber-Profiles

A lot of what I said in the section on *nirmāṇakāya* and cyber-profiles could be repeated here. The main distinction is that the miracle was centred on the Buddha producing multiple *nirmāṇakāya* at once. Therefore, my inclusion of the *yamakaprātihārya* as part of my framework was intended as an aid for thinking about what the manifestation of multiple *nirmāṇakāya* by one being might look like in practice.

There are two main points I want to make about why applying the *yamakaprātihārya* to *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles is conceptually helpful:

- The *yamakaprātihārya* is a helpful tool for examining the relationship between “different” *nirmāṇakāyas* – in the case of *tulkus* and cyberspace, the relationship between the *tulkus*’ “physical” *nirmāṇakāyas* and their “cyber” *nirmāṇakāyas*.

- I want to examine how the concept of “living extensions” could be helpful for understanding the role of *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles.

The Source of the “Physical” and “Cyber” Nirmāṇakāyas of a Tulku

In the *yamakaprātihārya* myth, the Buddha creates a double of himself (in some versions he also makes multiple copies of himself that end up filling the entire cosmos). These copies look exactly the same as the Buddha’s physical body, which is actually a *nirmāṇakāya*. While all the copies are *nirmāṇakāyas*, the “starting” *nirmāṇakāya* appears to be the source from which the others are produced. This can be seen in the language used to talk about the “other” *nirmāṇakāyas*. They are referred to as “replicas” and “doubles”, which give the impression they are somehow secondary to the “original” *nirmāṇakāya*. However this is not the case; the “original” *nirmāṇakāya* is as much of an illusion as the others; it is not the source of the others, and they are all equally unreal. However there seems to be the illusion that the Buddha’s physical form is the source of these “copies” and that the “copies” are secondary stand-ins for the Buddha’s “real” physical body.

The “relationship” between the Buddha’s “original” *nirmāṇakāya* and its subsequent copies could be applied to *tulkus* in the cyber-context. I discussed above the issue of the “physical” *tulku* being viewed as superior to his cyber-profiles, much like the Buddha is viewed as superior to the doubles and copies produced in the *yamakaprātihārya* myth, the physical *tulku* appears to be the “source” from which the cyber-profiles are produced and controlled.

However, if cyber-profiles are being thought of as *nirmāṇakāya*, then in theory they should be treated as an alternate and parallel manifestation produced from the same source as the *tulku*’s physical *nirmāṇakāya*. The *tulku*’s physical *nirmāṇakāya* gives the illusion that it is the source of the “other” *nirmāṇakāyas*, when it is actually the “real” *tulku* that is the source of all these manifestation including the physical.⁸¹

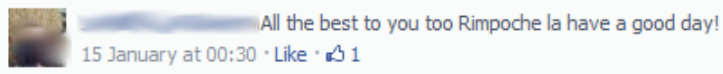
⁸¹ Refer to pages 16-17 and 24-27 for my discussion of illusion, cyber-profiles, and the unreality of *tulkus*’ physical manifestations.

Cyber-Profiles as “living extensions”

The *yamakaprātihārya* myth provided a model for the creation and legitimization of “living extensions” in the Buddhist tradition(s). The concept has been applied to different images around the world, and can be applied to the cyber-profiles of *tulkus*, because like certain images, cyber-profiles act in the “real” *tulku*’ absence.

Within cyberspace, many *tulkus* have a number of different “copies” in the form of social media accounts, blogs, and websites. A lot of the time, these profiles are linked directly to each other (Tsem Tulku Rinpoche’s Facebook and Twitter accounts are linked so that they are updated at the same time). Followers interacting with *tulkus* in their multiple cyber-forms do not have access to the “real” *tulku* (whatever they may consider that to be).

There are a number of examples of followers treating cyber-profiles as extensions of, or substitutes for the *tulku*. Many people use the comments function of Facebook to “speak” directly to *tulkus*:



Comment on Kalu Rinpoche's Facebook



Comment on Traleg Rinpoche's Facebook

Also many followers of the *tulkus* in my case study leave comments on the *tulkus* profiles that indicate they believe the cyber-profile is capable of mediating the *tulku*’s presence to some degree.⁸² The following example is from Kalu Rinpoche’s Facebook page:

⁸² This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.



In the above picture, a follower comments, “What a beautiful emanation this is.” Such a statement might indicate that the follower believes the image is somehow an emanation of Kalu Rinpoche, which is made accessible via his Facebook profile.

The cyber-profiles are acting in the “real” *tulkus*’ absence, just as the magically created doubles acted in the Buddha’s absence in the *yamakaprātihārya* myth, and the Mahāmuni acts in the Buddha’s absence in the Burmese context. They are extensions of the being, making the *tulku*/Buddha appear to be in many places simultaneously, while at the same time pointing to the “real” *tulku*/Buddha’s absence, therefore functioning in a very similar way to a *nirmāṇakāya*.

Limitations of the Application

The limitations I discussed in my chapter on *nirmāṇakāya* also apply to the *yamakaprātihārya*, because the miracle is an example of how multiple manifestations of *nirmāṇakāya* could work in practice. I will not repeat what I wrote previously but operate on the assumption that the reader is aware that the limitations discussed in the previous chapter also apply here. However, there are a couple of limitations specific to the *yamakaprātihārya* that I wish to acknowledge and discuss.

I gave some examples in which the *yamakaprātihārya* was used as a model (by certain traditions) to give legitimacy to their own substitutes or “living-extensions” of the Buddha. The Mahāmuni image (and the Jowo Rinpoche which will be discussed in Chapter Three), are two such examples. The origin stories of both images have strong parallels with the

yamaka myth and it is clear the myth was heavily influential on the stories that developed around the images, and links to the myth were purposefully made.

This is not the case with the cyber-profiles of *tulkus*. It is highly unlikely that followers of the profiles or *tulkus* themselves think of the profiles in terms of the *yamka* myth. I have seen no examples of *tulkus* making any explicit link to the myth in an attempt to legitimate their profiles as their “living extensions.” Therefore, my application of the *yamaka* myth to *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles, differs from the Mahāmuni and Jowo Rinpoche because unlike these statues, *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles have not been purposefully linked to the *yamaka* myth by those using them.

This is not surprising considering that the *yamakaprātihārya* myth describes a set of miracles performed by the Buddha. The Mahāmuni image, and the Jowo Rinpoche are images of the Buddha, therefore it stands to reason that the traditions associated with the images would draw on a myth in which a living extension of the Buddha was created.

In the case of *tulkus*, a link is not as clear cut. The myth demonstrates it is possible for an advanced being to create multiple copies of themselves, which then can act as their living extensions. However, it is also a narrative about a specific person, the Buddha. Therefore it is unlikely that *tulkus* would draw on the myth to legitimise their own living extensions because the myth deals specifically with living extensions of the Buddha.

While there are limitations to the application of the *yamakaprātihārya* to *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles, it can still function as a helpful component of the framework. If the *yamakaprātihārya* is “stripped” of the narrative specific to the Buddha, we are potentially left with a model that allows us to examine the relationships between multiple manifestations of the same being. The *yamakaprātihārya* provides us with a model indigenous to the Buddhist tradition, which, stripped of the narrative specificity that restricts it to the Buddha himself, shows us one way that Buddhists themselves might make sense of phenomena like the online presence of *tulkus*.

Concluding Remarks

Therefore, the *yamakaprātihārya* myth is a useful model for thinking about the relationship between *tulkus'* physical manifestations, and their cyber-profiles. In the *yamakaprātihārya* myth, the Buddha created copies of himself to act as his living extensions. This myth was drawn on by multiple Buddhist traditions to give legitimacy to their own local images to act as living extensions of the Buddha.

Applying the *yamakaprātihārya* myth to *tulkus'* cyber-profiles could help us think about the relationship between a *tulku's* physical form and his cyber-profiles. The Buddha's "original" *nirmāṇakāya* appears to be the source of his multiple copies, much like a *tulku's* physical manifestation appears to be the source of his cyber-profiles. However, from the framework's perspective, the Buddha's "original" *nirmāṇakāya*; its copies; the physical *tulkus*; and their cyber-profiles are all *nirmāṇakāya*. Since they are all illusions, none can be the source of the others, yet ordinary sentient beings are under the illusion that (in the case of *tulkus*) the physical *tulku* is the "real" *tulku* and the source of his unreal cyber-profiles, much in the same way the audience in the *yamaka* myth viewed the Buddha's multiple manifestations as "copies" of his "original" form. By thinking about the relationship between *tulkus* and their cyber-profiles in this way, the framework can account for the "problem" of *tulkus'* followers giving primacy to a *tulkus'* physical form over their cyber-forms.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to the application. Many of the limitations discussed in the chapter on *nirmāṇakāya* also apply to the application of the *yamakaprātihārya* to *tulkus'* cyber-profiles.⁸³ There are also some limitations specific to the *yamakaprātihārya*. The *yamaka* myth was used as a model by some Buddhist traditions to give legitimacy to their local images. Myths about the origins of images (such as the Mahāmuni statue) have strong parallels with elements of the *yamakaprātihārya* myth. This is not the case with *tulkus'* cyber-profiles, there are no examples (that I have seen) in which *tulkus* purposefully draw on the *yamaka* myth in order to legitimise their cyber-profiles as their living extensions.

Even though the application does encounter limitations, the idea of the *yamakaprātihārya* is still a helpful component of the framework. If it is "stripped" to its "bare-bones", it provides a model that allows for the examination of the relationship between multiple manifestations of the same being, and therefore can be used to examine the relationship between a *tulku's* physical and cyber-forms.

⁸³ See Chapter One, pages 24-27.

Through the application of both *nirmāṇakāya* and the *yamakaprātihārya* to *tulkus'* cyber-profiles it is possible to view the cyber-profiles as manifestations of *tulkus*. Whether there is potential for these manifestations to mediate the *tulkus'* presence will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Presence and Absence

Presence is a complex issue in the Buddhist tradition. The historical Buddha appeared to be “present” in a human body to that lived and died. However, according to a broad Mahāyāna consensus, this was an illusion, his human body was actually a *nirmāṇakāya*. The Buddha appeared to be present when he was in fact absent. The “problem of absence” has been responded to and dealt with in a number of ways by the Buddhist tradition(s). These responses seem to be attempts to mediate the Buddha’s presence in some way, even if the presence achieved is imperfect and incomplete.

In this section, I plan to survey some of the ways the Buddhist tradition(s) responded to the problem of absence. In doing so I hope to demonstrate the great variety in the tradition(s)’ response to the problem of absence. I will then discuss the application of the ideas surrounding presence and absence in examining the use of cyberspace by *tulkus*.

The “Problem” of Absence in the Buddhist Tradition

One of the major questions the Buddhist tradition has struggled with is: “How does the Buddha continue to influence the life of the Buddhist community after his career has come to an end?”⁸⁴ For some, the problem of absence relates to the Buddha’s final *parinirvāṇa*, while for others (such as Nagajuna) , it relates to the Buddha’s enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree.⁸⁵ At the time of his *parinirvāṇa*, the Buddha’s *nirmāṇakāya* appeared to die, resulting in the Buddha’s complete absence from the world, making him inaccessible to ordinary sentient beings. This meant that the tradition “had to find devices to maintain a sense of direction in his absence”.⁸⁶ For Bhāvaviveka the problem of absence arose before the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa*, Bhāvaviveka draws on the image of the silent Buddha in the *Tathāgataguhyā-Sūtra*, which explains that the Buddha withdrew from active teaching not at the end of his life, but at the moment of his enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree.⁸⁷ Bhāvaviveka had to explain how after this withdrawal, the Buddha continued to influence his disciples (and apparently teach them) for another 45 years. In this fashion, regardless of “when” certain parts of the tradition claim the Buddha became absent, it is clear that all

⁸⁴ Malcolm Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher’s Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness*, 73.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

strands were faced with the problem that at some point the Buddha became absent from the world and was no longer accessible. Different Buddhist traditions responded to this problem in a number of ways.

Responses to the Buddha's Absence

The Buddhist tradition responded in a variety of ways to the problem of the Buddha's absence. While many of these responses appear to be very different from one another they all have the same (or at least a very similar) function. They all offer a way for practitioners to access some aspect of the absent Buddha. In the following paragraphs I will give a brief overview of some of the most notable responses.

Statues/images:

As we saw in my discussion of the Mahāmuni image, statues depicting the Buddha can be “living extensions” and act in the Buddha's absence. Through narrative and ritual consecration, these images become both identical to and extensions of the “flesh and blood” body of the Buddha. “These Bodies [statues] possess all of the qualities of the living, animated Buddha: the ability to speak, cry, walk, confer blessings, convert non-Buddhists, etc. However, these Bodies simultaneously represent that Body, in the sense of being a mimetic extraction, while also fully embodying that actual Body”.⁸⁸

Within the Tibetan tradition specifically, statues/images of Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* are actually referred to as *sku rten* (body supports). Body supports can be divided into two sub-categories: *bris* (painted or drawn images), and *bur* (sculpted three-dimensional images).⁸⁹ *Sku rten* is one of three supports that represent the enlightened body, speech, and mind of the Buddha. The other two supports are *thugs rten* (mental supports), and *gsung rten* (verbal supports).⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Janet Gyatso, “Image as Presence: The Place of Art in Tibetan Religious Thinking,” in *The Newark Museum Tibetan Collection: III/Sculpture and Painting*, ed. Valrae Reynolds, Amy Heller, and Janet Gyatso (Newark: The Newark Museum, 1986), 30.

⁸⁹ Cameron Warner, “The Precious Lord: The History and Practise of the Cult of the jo bo Sakyamuni in Lhasa Tibet,” PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2008, 28, Proquest (3334849).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

When Cameron Warner asked Tibetan lamas in exile about *sku rten* many made “disparaging comments regarding the worship of body supports”.⁹¹ Body supports seem to be considered “primarily to facilitate the faith and apotropaic goals of uneducated Buddhists”.⁹² While this may be an opinion among some within the tradition, this does not take away from the fact that Buddha images such as the Jowo Rinpoche are immensely popular as objects of devotion.

The tradition’s use of the word *sku* (honorific for body) to describe statues and other types of images of Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* is quite telling. It seems that the images are not understood to be static representation of a Buddha or *bodhisattva*: rather, they are understood to be a body of a Buddha/*bodhisattva*. Cameron Warner comprised a list of twenty-six terms for what would be called a “statue” in English.

Some examples are:

- *sku tshab* (honorific for an ambassador , representative, envoy, proxy, substitute).⁹³
- *ngo ma’i tshab* (the actual, real, true, genuine, original, authentic or in person).⁹⁴
- *bzo sprul sku* (manufactured manifestation).⁹⁵

The common factor with all these definitions is the emphasis on the images being bodies. These “statues” are not mere representations, they are manifestations. This idea could be very helpful for thinking about *tulkus’* cyber-profiles. Many online followers of *tulkus* seem to regard *tulkus’* cyber-profiles as more than mere representations of the *tulku*, for the followers the cyber-profiles allow the *tulku* to be “present.”

Jowo Rinpoche: *sku tshab* of the Buddha Śākyamuni in Tibet

The Jowo Śākyamuni (referred to affectionately as “Jowo Rinpoche” by many Tibetans) is arguably one of the most famous “living images” in Tibetan Buddhism. He is a depiction of the Buddha Śākyamuni around the age of twelve, and resides in the Jokhang temple in

⁹¹ Ibid., 29.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid. The word “*tulku*” (*sprul sku*) is used in this term.

Lhasa.⁹⁶ He “embodies the living presence of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni in Tibet”.⁹⁷ According to the Tibetan tradition, the Buddha commissioned the image so that it could act as his *sku tshab* (proxy) “in order to alleviate the suffering of Tibetans through illuminating the soteriological path and apotropaically protecting Tibet”.⁹⁸

Since the Jowo Rinpoche is considered to be a living manifestation of the Buddha, many Tibetans visit the Jokhang in order to have an audience (*mjal*) with him.⁹⁹ According to *Vase Shaped Pillar Testament – A*, the Jowo was made during the Buddha’s lifetime, sculpted from a “life portrait” of the Buddha with the destiny of being his proxy “in both appearance and responsibilities, in Tibet”.¹⁰⁰ According to the Tibetan tradition, he was the first Buddha image ever created.¹⁰¹

From what we have seen of the Jowo Rinpoche so far, it is apparent there are strong parallels between both his functions and origin story, and that of the Mahāmuni image in Burma. No doubt a large part of the reason for this is that both traditions seem to have drawn on the story of the creation of the first Buddha image in the *yamaka* myth. Like the Mahāmuni image, the traditions surrounding the Jowo seem to have used the *yamaka* myth as a textual model to give legitimacy to their own image.¹⁰²

The Jowo Rinpoche is not the only “living image” in the Tibetan tradition; “Tibetans visit temples to have audiences with many statues.”¹⁰³ He is but one example of how images have been used as a “solution” to the problem of the Buddha’s absence.

In his dissertation, Cameron Warner observed that with the advent of the 20th century and photographic technology, the Tibetan tradition’s history of worshipping representative substitutes expanded to the worship of photographs [of high lamas], “which were valued for

⁹⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁷ Cameron Warner, “Recrowning the Jowo Sakyamuni: Texts, Photographs, and Memories,” *History of Religions*, 51 no. 1 (2011): 1.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰² The Mahamuni and Jowo images are not the only images to be regarded as the first Buddha image. The Seiryōji icon in Japan is also worshipped as “the first Buddha image.” See Cameron Warner “Recrowning the Jowo Sakyamuni,” 6.

¹⁰³ Cameron Warner, “Recrowning the Jowo Sakyamuni,” 3.

their simultaneous indexical and iconic qualities”.¹⁰⁴ It is now common to see photos of high lamas on shrines in people’s homes and temples. Images of the Dalai Lama are frequently placed on thrones in monasteries etc., and are venerated in the same way as the “flesh and blood” Dalai Lama.

Since photos of high lamas have come to be used and venerated in the same way as more traditional Buddha images are in the Tibetan tradition, these photos could be considered “modern” *sku rten*. Like photos, the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* seem to be venerated by many people in the same way (many contain photos). Many *sku rten* are believed to be able to talk and interact with devotees, so the fact that *tulkus* talk and interact with people via cyberspace is not problematic for my interpretation; *sku rten* can be interactive. Thus, the concepts of *sku rten* and *sku tshab* could be very helpful in trying to understand and think about what is happening in cyberspace with *tulkus*.

While statues and images are one of the major ways the tradition has dealt with the Buddha’s absence, it is not the only way. Another response was the identification/veneration of relics.

Relics

Relics are another important way in which the Buddhist tradition has responded to the problem of the Buddha’s absence. Gregory Schopen has written prolifically on this topic, and I will draw on his work to explain how relics “deal” with the problem of absence.

To begin, a clear understanding of the term “relic” is required. The English word “relic” comes from the Latin *relinquere*, “to leave behind”.¹⁰⁵ However the two Sanskrit terms which are often translated as “relic” in English can have quite different definitions.

¹⁰⁴ Cameron Warner, “The Precious Lord,” 36. Warner draws on the theory of “signs” of Charles Sanders Pierce. Pierce proposed a triadic division of “sign”, “object”, and “interpretant”. Three examples could be an iconic sign, an indexical sign, and a symbol.” M. Gail Hamner, *American Pragmatism: A Religious Genealogy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

“An icon is a sign that refers to its object on account of its similarity to it.” A photo could be one example of an icon so defined. “An index is a sign that indicates an existing individual object.” “A symbol is a sign that represents its object by virtue of some conventional, habitual or law-like relation” M. Hulswit, *From Cause to Causation: A Peircean Perspective*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002).

¹⁰⁵ Gregory Schopen, “Relic,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 256.

Śārira (the more common of the two terms), is defined by Schopen as “the body, bodily frames”.¹⁰⁶

The second Sanskrit word often translated as “relic” is *dhātu*. Some of its meanings are “constituent part”; “ingredient”; element”; “primitive matter”; and “constituent element, or essential ingredient”.¹⁰⁷ As we can see there are some rather large etymological differences between the Sanskrit terms *śārira* and *dhātu*, and the English term relic, yet frequently the Sanskrit terms are rendered as relic in English.

Śārira gives the sense that the “relic” is “alive”. It is a body of the Buddha, which can continue the activities of the historical Śākyamuni. It is another example of a living extension.

Dhātu could be interpreted as referring to something primordial. It is not merely a static “leftover”, as the term “relic” insinuates.

Now we have a better understanding of the terms we are dealing with, we can turn to *how* relics/*śārira*/*dhātu* deal with the issue of absence. This is a rather difficult topic, as the tradition has frequently remained silent on the subject. However because I am only briefly surveying the issue I will draw on the theories of Gregory Schopen.

According to Schopen all Buddhist Indian sources are nearly unanimous in agreeing that relics of the Buddha are animate.¹⁰⁸ Schopen gives the Bajuar Inscription of Menandros as an example. It refers to what we would call a “relic” as: “the body of the blessed One Śākyamuni which is endowed with life [literally, breath]”.¹⁰⁹ “Relics” are considered to be living bodies of the Buddha. Other sources talk about *śāriras* or *dhātus* being, “infused with morality, infused with concentration, infused with wisdom”.¹¹⁰ They are infused with the three things that define a living Buddha or saint.¹¹¹

According to Schopen this belief that relics are living bodies of the Buddha led to an interesting practise throughout the Buddhist world. Where relics of the Buddha were enshrined in *stūpas*, people’s remains were buried nearby. Schopen described these

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 259.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Gregory Schopen, “Relic,” 261.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

practises as a type of “Buddhist” burial *ad sanctos*.¹¹² Schopen has theorised that the practise probably emerged out of instructions given by the Buddha in the Sanskrit version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. The Buddha describes the benefits of going on pilgrimage to the sites of his birth, enlightenment, first teaching, and death, saying “They will speak thus: ‘Here the Blessed One was born’; Here was the Blessed One fully and completely awakened to the most excellent, correct, and complete awakening,’ etc., ... Which of them on that occasion will with devout minds die in my presence (*mamāntike kālam kariṣyanti*) they – those with karma yet to be worked out (*ye kecit sopadhiṣeṣaḥ*) – will all go to heaven (*te sarve svargopaga*)”.¹¹³

The text seems to be saying that the Buddha is “actually present” at the four sacred sites.¹¹⁴ Any activity, be it pilgrimage or death, is understood to be taking place in the presence of the Buddha. This presence has the power to positively affect the future rebirths of those that die there.

Of special interest to my project is the fact that this is yet another example of a word for “body” (*śārira*) appearing in a response of the tradition to the Buddha’s absence. Within the tradition, “bodies” and presence seem to be tied up together. Often, there seems to be a need for some type of body in order for the presence of the Buddha to be facilitated.

“The Empty Throne”: Early Buddhist “Aniconic” Art

It would be possible to conclude that the presence/absence paradox is expressed most strikingly in early Buddhist “aniconic” art. However in recent years there has been a lot of debate within the field of Buddhist Studies as to whether early Buddhist art was actually aniconic.

For the majority of the 20th century, the prevailing view in Buddhist Studies was that early Buddhist art was aniconic.¹¹⁵ At places like Sanci, there were many images that appeared to depict scenes from the Buddha’s life, yet the figure of the Buddha was often missing. In his

¹¹² Ibid., 266.

¹¹³ Gregory Schopen, “*Stūpa and Tīrtha*, Tibetan Mortuary Practices and an Unrecognized Form of Burial *Ad Sanctos* at Buddhist Sites in India.” In *The Buddhist Forum Volume III 1991-1993: Papers in Honour and Appreciation of Professor David Seyfort Ruegg’s Contribution to Indological, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies*, ed. Tadeusz Skorupski and Ulrich Pagel (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1995), 290-291.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Susan L. Huntington, “Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism,” *Art Journal* 49, no. 4 (1990): 401.

place, “symbols” would be used instead. For example, scenes believed to be depicting the Buddha’s enlightenment show a *bodhi* tree with an empty throne beneath it, and scenes believed to be of the Buddha’s first sermon show the *dharmacakra* in place of the Buddha.¹¹⁶

When scholars such as Foucher saw these images they concluded that they were aniconic. Foucher based his conclusion on the belief that the earliest images of the Buddha were produced in Gandhāra around the beginning of the Common Era, and that these images were produced after Indian artists came into contact with the sculptural style of the Greeks and classical world.¹¹⁷ This introduction to the Greek style was believed to be the trigger that caused the first anthropomorphic images of the Buddha to be made.¹¹⁸

However, Susan Huntington has called into question the validity of these assumptions. She has suggested that the majority of the images interpreted as aniconic representations of the major events in the Buddha’s life are not that at all. According to Huntington, they are actually depictions of laypeople carrying out worship at the major sites associated with the Buddha’s life, after the Buddha’s death.¹¹⁹

One of the major points of evidence Huntington draws on to support her argument is the inscriptions that accompany the images. This is because (according to Huntington) the inscriptions indicate a place, not an event in the Buddha’s life.¹²⁰

Not all scholars, however, are convinced by Huntington’s argument. In her article “Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems”, Vidya Dehejia appears to respond somewhat critically to Huntington’s argument. She postulates that the images at early Buddhist sites such as Sanci, the emblems of the *bodhi* tree, the *dharmacakra*, and the *stūpa* have “multiple meanings”.¹²¹ According to Dehejia, there are three ways in which these emblems can be read: first, they can be read as “aniconic presentations of the Buddha”, second, they can be read as “representing sacred spots”, and third, they can be read as “attributes of the

¹¹⁶ Y. Krishan, *The Buddha Image: Its Origin and Development* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996), 1.

¹¹⁷ Susan L. Huntington, “Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism,” 401.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 403.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 403.

¹²¹ Vidya Dehejia, “Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems,” *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991): 45.

faith; thus the tree is intended to recall the divine wisdom of the Buddha, while the pillar represents his sacred doctrine".¹²²

Dehejia acknowledges that while Huntington was right to argue that many of the images found at early Buddhist sites depict images of people worshipping at the sites associated with the Buddha's life after his death, denying that they are aniconic is to "deny the validity of this concern of the ancient artists, devotees, monks, and nuns is to misread the overall message of the monuments."¹²³

This is because Dehejia believes that the way a particular image should be interpreted depends on the context. In one panel, a *bodhi* tree with a seat beneath it may be intended as aniconic representation of the Buddha's presence, while in another, a similar image may be intended to represent a pilgrimage site.¹²⁴ She concludes that while Foucher "misstated the nature and extent of aniconism he was certainly accurate in perceiving its existence".¹²⁵ She then says (in apparent reference to Huntington's argument), "However denying the existence of aniconism is equally invalid."¹²⁶

Huntington wrote a direct response to Dehejia's article which was rather scathing of Dehejia's argument, and her alleged failure to adequately acknowledge the ideas of Huntington's that she drew on. She also claimed that Dehejia misrepresented her (Huntington's) claims, saying, "I have never claimed nor intended to claim that there are no aniconic works of art."¹²⁷ Her claim, rather, was that the majority of early Buddhist images believed to be aniconic depictions of events in the Buddha's life are not that at all, and that the argument of aniconism has been "vastly overstated and that the theory has been indiscriminately applied".¹²⁸

Thus, Huntington and Dehejia's "exchange" shows that the extent and nature of aniconism in early Buddhist art is highly contested. Regardless of what stance one might have on whether early Buddhist art went through a period of aniconism, I think the following can be

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Susan Huntington, "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems: Another Look," *Ars Orientalis* 22 (1992):

111.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

said: Aniconic or not, early Buddhist art confronts the “problem” of the Buddha’s absence. It is possible to view the arguments about whether early Buddhist art is aniconic as arguments about how the broader problem of the Buddha’s absence was dealt with in such early art.

If we take Huntington’s view that the majority of “aniconic” depictions of the Buddha’s life are actually depictions of laypeople worshipping at locations associated with the Buddha’s life (after his death), we are then confronted with images of people trying to deal with the Buddha’s absence by finding alternative ways to experience his presence, such as travelling to locations he was believed to have “been” at during certain points in his life.

On the other hand, if we are sympathetic to the aniconic interpretation of early Buddhist art, then the way the Buddha’s absence is “dealt” with could be interpreted quite differently. “Emblems” such as the *bodhi* tree and the *dharmacakra* become symbolic representations of the Buddha in scenes that are depicting events from his life. A number of reasons have been given as to why artists might have chosen to represent the Buddha in aniconic form. Huntington quotes a suggestion by Gombrich as one example; he suggests that these images depict the Buddha as “absent” from the scenes of his own life because “he was *nibutta* (extinguished)”.¹²⁹

Both these interpretations read early Buddhist art quite differently. However, they both suggest that early Buddhist art was an attempt to “confront” the problem of the Buddha’s absence. How this problem was confronted, and the nature of the Buddha’s absence, differ between the two theories; but there is little doubt that “early Buddhist [aniconic] art” is one of the earliest examples of the tradition’s attempts to deal with (or at least articulate) the problem of the Buddha’s absence.¹³⁰

Tulkus, Cyber-profiles, and Presence/Absence

In this section I will suggest that cyber-profiles function in a similar way to many of the tradition’s responses to the “problem of absence.” Like statues/images; relics; and early

¹²⁹ Susan Huntington, “Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism,” 401.

¹³⁰ Huntington pointed out an interesting example of an image found at Amaravati. It depicts “neither a non-figurative subject nor a Buddha”. Rather, it depicts a Buddha *image* placed on a throne (see Huntington, “Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism,” 402-403).

Buddhist art (which all deal with the problem of the Buddha's absence); cyber-*tulkus* act in the "real" *tulkus'* absence. They allow users of cyberspace access to the *tulku* in some form. This access provides an element of presence, or at least perceived presence. However the presence that is mediated is imperfect and incomplete.

The following limitations might restrict the application of these ideas to the cyber context:

- It is likely that both *tulkus* and their followers do not "view" or "interpret" their cyber-profiles from a purely Buddhist perspective; they are also applying other ideas and models.
- Some *tulkus'* profiles focus on teaching rather than "presence" (especially that of Tsem Tulku Rinpoche).

In previous sections, I have suggested that these cyber-profiles of *tulkus* could be viewed as *nirmāṇakāyas*. These cyber-manifestations appear to be present in cyberspace, but they are actually illusions. We encounter a paradox; the cyber-*tulku* represents the absent "real" *tulku*. However this representation is an illusion, it appears to be present, but ultimately it is just as absent as the "real" *tulku* it represents. How then can we understand this paradox? I will borrow a phrase coined by Malcolm Eckel in an attempt to offer a feasible explanation. Cyber-*tulkus* could be described as "the presence of absence".¹³¹ They point to the absent "real" *tulku* and represent him, but at the same time, the cyber-*tulku* is absent, even though he appears (through illusion/skilful means) to be present. Absence represents absence, resulting in the illusion that absence is actually present.

The Perception of Tulkus' Presence in Cyber-Space

The followers of *tulkus'* cyber-profiles have a number of different views on the "presence" of *tulkus* in cyber-space. Some seem to view the profiles as vital for mediating the *tulkus'* presence, without which access to the *tulku* would be "lost". Others do not seem to view the profiles as mediators of presence; rather, they seem to view the profiles as tools from which they can receive teachings. These differing views are often held by followers belonging different "communities". For example, Kalu Rinpoche's followers seem to be

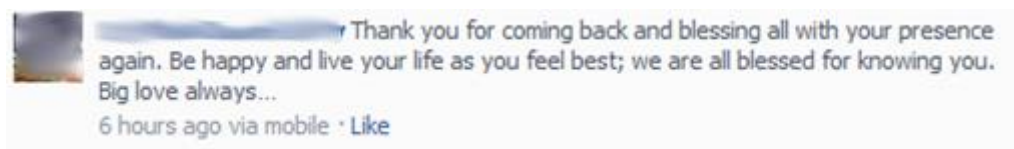
¹³¹ Malcolm Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness*, 73.

much more concerned with his presence/absence, while Tsem Rinpoche's followers seem to be more focused on accessing his cyber-profiles to receive teachings.

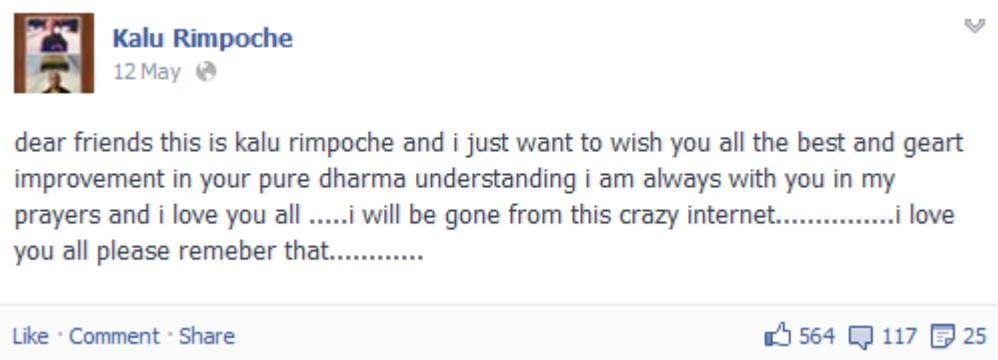
Kalu Rinpoche's Presence and Absence from Facebook

In the case of Kalu Rinpoche many of his followers explicitly discuss his presence in cyberspace/on Facebook.

The comment (below) is interesting for two reasons. The first reason (and probably the more obvious) is the follower thanking Kalu Rinpoche for his presence, and the blessings that come from it. She is responding to a post in which Kalu Rinpoche expresses his happiness at being the second Kalu Rinpoche, and says that he loves all his followers. The post allowed her access to Kalu Rinpoche's presence:



On the 12th of May Kalu Rinpoche posted a status in which he announced he was “leaving the crazy internet”:¹³²



Upon Kalu Rinpoche announcing that he was leaving the internet, there were swift and varied responses from his followers. Some were supportive, empathizing with Kalu Rinpoche's need to take a break from Facebook, and stating that they had experienced similar feelings. Others expressed sadness, confusion, and worry when faced with the

¹³² Kalu Rinpoche's Facebook page, accessed May 12, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/#!/kalu.skrilles?fref=ts>.

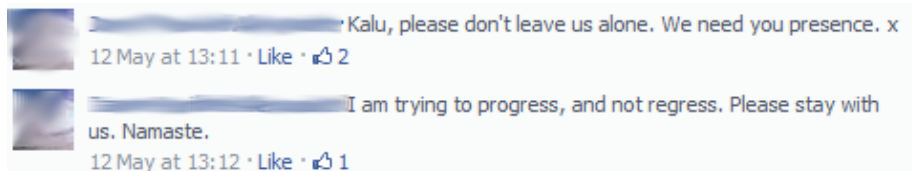
announcement. Some people seemed unfazed by Kalu Rinpoche's announcement, reasoning he would be "with" them regardless of whether or not he was on Facebook.

For example, one follower left the comment below:

A screenshot of a Facebook comment. On the left is a small profile picture of a person with blue hair. To the right of the picture is the text: "I'm with you with or without internet. E Ma Ho...". Below this text, it says "12 May at 12:57 · Like".

I'm with you with or without internet. E Ma Ho...
12 May at 12:57 · Like

However other respondents were very concerned by the announcement:

Two screenshots of Facebook comments. The top comment has a profile picture of a person with blue hair and text: "Kalu, please don't leave us alone. We need you presence. x". Below it says "12 May at 13:11 · Like · 2". The bottom comment has a profile picture of a person with blue hair and text: "I am trying to progress, and not regress. Please stay with us. Namaste.". Below it says "12 May at 13:12 · Like · 1".

Kalu, please don't leave us alone. We need you presence. x
12 May at 13:11 · Like · 2

I am trying to progress, and not regress. Please stay with us. Namaste.
12 May at 13:12 · Like · 1

The two comments, directly above, indicate two things:

- The commenter experiences Kalu Rinpoche's presence via his Facebook page.
- For Kalu Rinpoche to adequately mediate his presence to her via his Facebook, he needs to update his profile regularly, his Facebook profile "on its own" is not enough. This is an example of the previously mentioned "problem" of followers favoring a *tulku's* physical *nirmāṇakāya* over a cyber *nirmāṇakāya*.

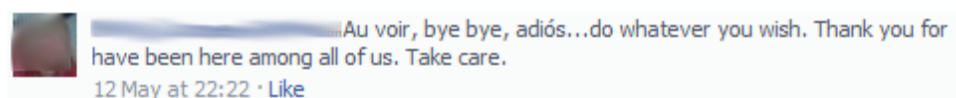
Many others had similar responses:

The commenter below also refers to Kalu Rinpoche's "presence". Her language indicates that Facebook (or perhaps more broadly cyberspace) is a "place" or "location" in which Kalu Rinpoche can be present and choose to vacate if he wishes:

A screenshot of a Facebook comment. On the left is a small profile picture of a person with dark hair. To the right of the picture is the text: "sorry to see you go from FB. you are a very sweet and loving presence. thank you for the time you have been here! I wish you well.". Below this text, it says "12 May at 10:22 · Like · 1".

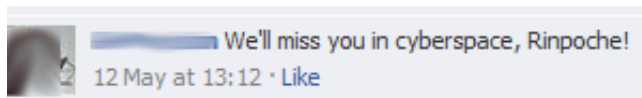
sorry to see you go from FB. you are a very sweet and loving presence. thank you for the time you have been here! I wish you well.
12 May at 10:22 · Like · 1

We see a similar sentiment expressed by another follower. Kalu Rinpoche's Facebook profile allowed him to be "among" her and the others that followed him:

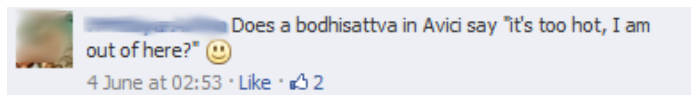
A screenshot of a Facebook comment. On the left is a small profile picture of a person with dark hair. To the right of the picture is the text: "Au voir, bye bye, adiós...do whatever you wish. Thank you for have been here among all of us. Take care.". Below this text, it says "12 May at 22:22 · Like".

Au voir, bye bye, adiós...do whatever you wish. Thank you for have been here among all of us. Take care.
12 May at 22:22 · Like

One commenter makes direct reference to Kalu Rinpoche not being "in" cyberspace:

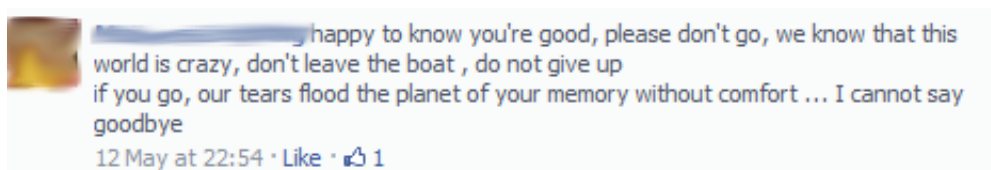


The following comment was particularly interesting, because it is one of the few comments I have come across that applies Buddhist ideas to a tulku's use of cyberspace. The commenter compares Kalu Rinpoche "leaving" Facebook to a bodhisattva abandoning their vow to save all sentient beings:

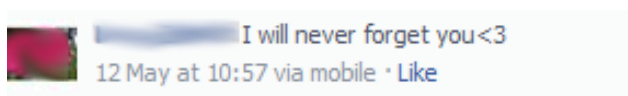


Other users had rather intense reactions to the news. Some people talked about Kalu Rinpoche leaving Facebook in a way that was reminiscent of talk about someone who has just died.

The statement below has an air of finality and despair to it that one would usually only expect with something like death. Clearly being able to interact with Kalu Rinpoche via Facebook was very important to this commenter:



A large number of these reactions share the belief that they had (or were going to) lose something. Some people referred directly to Kalu Rinpoche's presence as the thing that would be "lost". Others expressed this loss as Kalu Rinpoche leaving or being "gone":



Many of the followers of Kalu Rinpoche's Facebook page seem to have shared a similar experience. I think that shared experience could be best described as a loss of access to Kalu Rinpoche. However, on the 6th of September 2013 Kalu Rinpoche announced his "return" to Facebook:



Kalu Rinpoche

6 September

hi dear friends

i am back on my Facebook public page. Last few months I took a break from Facebook but connection with my students is more important than my own personal break.

lots of love and care from your kalu rinpoche 😊

Like · Comment · Share

709 78 15

This was met with happiness and rejoicing from his many Facebook followers. Many expressed how much they had missed him:



I missed you welcome back Kalu la love & blessings Prakash

6 September at 09:54 · Like



I miss you soooooo much! Thank you back

6 September at 19:13 via mobile · Like



Tashedhelk Rinpoche, Thank you for coming back for us.

6 September at 22:25 · Like



I hope you are doing well. No we can all practice together again.

6 September at 09:36 · Like



Welcome back to the FB realm.

6 September at 08:18 via mobile · Like

It seems that for many of these people following Kalu Rinpoche, Facebook is a “place” which can be vacated, returned to, and shared. It is through this “place” they are able to access Kalu Rinpoche and “meet” with him.

The Absence of Traleg Rinpoche

As I noted in my introduction to my case studies, Traleg Rinpoche passed away in July 2012. It has now been over a year since his death. Admins of the E-Vam Institute update Traleg Rinpoche’s page on a fairly regular basis.¹³³ Many of his followers still leave

¹³³ Very recently a Twitter account has also been set up in Traleg Rinpoche’s name. So far it is operating on a very small scale. Traleg Rinpoche has twenty-six “followers”, is “following” eight people, and has “tweeted” fourteen “tweets.” Traleg Rinpoche’s Twitter account, accessed November 30 2013, <https://twitter.com/TralegRinpoche>.

comments on his page, saying how much they miss him. With Traleg Rinpoche between incarnations, his cyber-profile is one of the only ways people can still access or interact with Traleg Rinpoche. A number of the comments left on his page are simply about how much the poster misses him.¹³⁴

In the comments on the image of Traleg Rinpoche below, we see posters expressing their grief at Traleg Rinpoche's passing. Some people even address him directly; "It is wonderful to see you Rinpoche," "I miss you Rinpoche," and "thank you Rinpoche." Knowing that the physical manifestation of Traleg Rinpoche is no longer accessible or "present", his followers are turning to his cyber-profile as an alternate form in which he can be accessed.



His followers are using his profile to access him: however, his cyber-form is not entirely satisfactory to them. There are requests on his page for him to "come back":



¹³⁴ This is not unique to Traleg Rinpoche, it seems to have become a social media "norm" to leave messages on the page of a deceased person. The following article by Stephanie Buck discusses the phenomenon: <http://mashable.com/2013/02/13/facebook-after-death>. Buck observes that: "The deceased's online identity not only continues in the virtual space; it can also evolve and adapt as others continue to interact with the dead person's profile."

These requests are indicative of the “problem” I discussed earlier. Traleg Rinpoche’s cyber-manifestation is held to be “inferior” to his physical manifestation by his followers. Traleg Rinpoche’s Facebook profile allows a degree of access and “presence”, however, his followers want a physical manifestation available. This indicates that they feel Traleg Rinpoche is more accessible and more “present” through his physical manifestation. The cyber-manifestation is a substitute for, not an equal alternative to, his physical form. As far as his followers are concerned, Traleg Rinpoche is less present in his cyber-form than in physical-form.¹³⁵

Tsem Tulku Rinpoche

In my first chapter, I noted that Tsem Tulku Rinpoche’s main focus on his various cyber-profiles was the transmission of his teachings. Many of his followers rely on the teachings he provides for their spiritual practice, but in comparison to my other case studies, there is little discussion about Tsem Tulku’s online presence amongst his followers.

However, on his various cyber-profiles, there are a number of instances in which Tsem Rinpoche posts pictures and photos of high lamas and statues, encouraging people to download them so they can receive their blessings.

There is a section on his website in which images of statues and high lamas (including himself) are made available for download. The following explanation is given as to why the images are available:

We realise that it can sometimes be difficult to find good quality, iconographically correct images of the various Buddhas and bodhisattvas, especially in places where Dharma is not strong, or in remote areas. Therefore we are very happy to be able to make this selection of images available to everyone to download at absolutely no charge. The images are high resolution and of sufficient quality to be printed clearly on an A4 or A3 sheet of paper and framed for your altar or shrine.¹³⁶

A number of images of Tsem Tulku are available for download, including the images below:

¹³⁵ Again, this “problem” could be attributed to the followers’ status as *prthagjana* (see page 27).

¹³⁶ Tsem Rinpoche’s website, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://resources.tsemtulku.com/free-downloads/attained-masters.html>.



Another of the images available for download is a picture of the Jowo Rinpoche:



Another picture of a “statue” available for download is of a Tara from a temple in New Jersey:

The Tara that Speaks
Oct 19, 2010 | Views: 2,165

This is a sacred Tara statue in Howell, New Jersey. It is said She has spoken to people a few times in the past. She is very holy. Just to gaze at this Tara is a blessing.

Tsem Rinpoche

right-click on this picture below and click “Save Picture As...” to download this holy picture into your computer



People are advised to “download this holy picture into your computer”. Blog viewers responded to the image/instructions as follows:

on Oct 19, 2010 at 1:04 pm
Thank you for the posting. Real Bliss. Have saved Her Holy Image onto my computer, will transfer to my phone too.

on Oct 19, 2010 at 2:08 pm

Wow – the speaking Tara! As all Tara statues are already superbly blessed, imagine one that can speak!

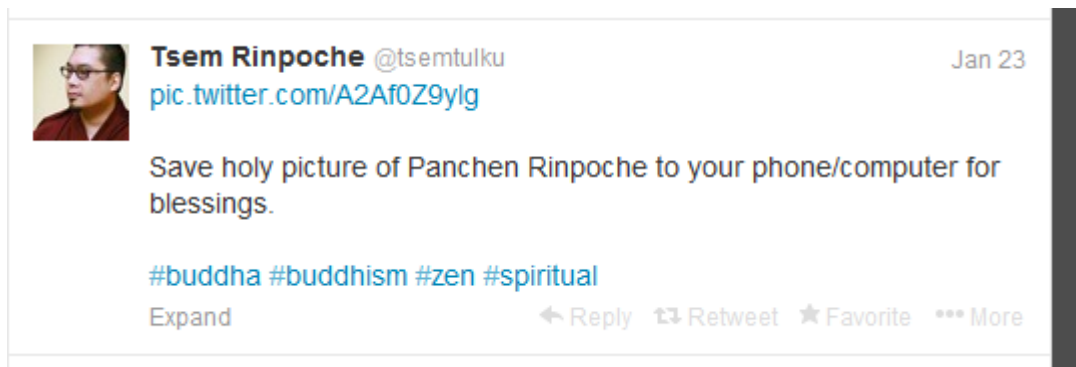
We often wonder about miracles and how there is an intense lack of it now. Perhaps it is not that there are lack of miracles, but we lack the merits to actually view it, experience it or even hear it.

How kind of Rinpoche to share this immensely scared Tara picture with us all. May we all truly make that connection with its blessed qualities and be inspired to practice Dharma even more. May we create the causes for us to view and experience miracles in our lifetime.

REPLY

The posters refer to the image as being “immensely sacred” and “holy”, and one poster says they had saved the image to both their computer and phone.

Tsem Rinpoche also uses his Twitter page to make images of high lamas available, encouraging people to download them to their computer and phone:



He offers the following explanation for doing so:



Again we see references to “holy pictures”, and Tsem Rinpoche talking about the pictures’ ability to bless those that download them.

It seems Tsem Rinpoche intends for these images to act as *sku rten*. In the absence of the “real” being, the photos act in their place. They are held to be sacred, and have the ability to bless those that view them. Tsem Rinpoche’s encouragement to download the photos to a computer or phone indicates that the photos virtual presence on/in the devices, allows the images’ blessings to be mediated via cyberspace and electronic devices.

The example of Tsem Rinpoche differs from my previous case studies, because by providing sacred images of various holy beings/people, Tsem Rinpoche is using his cyber-profiles to mediate the presence of others rather than himself. I have not seen examples of this in the cases of Kalu Rinpoche and Traleg Rinpoche. In these cases, the images being made available were of the *tulku* associated with the cyber-profile. While the above examples help demonstrate my larger claims about the potential for cyberspace to be sacralised, it also raises some limitations in applying “Buddhist” ideas about presence and absence to the cyber-profiles of *tulkus*, as I will now discuss.

Limitations to the Application

While there are some clear examples of the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* being used as a solution to the problem of absence, there are also some limitations to viewing cyber-profiles as “the same” as the other responses to absence that I discussed previously. These limitations include:

- The degree of “success” *tulkus* have had in “presencing” themselves in cyber-form (from the perspective of their followers).
- Tsem Tulku Rinpoche’s focus on teaching.

Tulkus’ Imperfect Presence

According to a widespread Mahāyāna understanding, it is impossible for a *tulku’s* “real” form to be accessible to ordinary beings. Therefore, he must produce a *nirmāṇakāya(s)*. Since *nirmāṇakāyas* are illusions, any presence of the *tulku* experienced by ordinary beings is imperfect because what appears to be present is actually absent. There are some problems in applying these ideas to the case of *tulkus’* cyber-profiles.

Followers interacting with these profiles believe the physical *tulku* to be the “real” *tulku*. They are not viewing a *tulku’s* physical body as an illusion or unreal. Therefore the *nirmāṇakāya* has been successful, the *tulku’s* followers have been pulled in by the “trick” and they are none the wiser. The same cannot be said of a *tulku’s* cyber-profiles. While followers seem to be happy to use the profiles as a substitute or stand-in for the “physical” *tulku*, they do not consider the two to be equal. This can be attributed to the failure of the cyber-profiles to convince followers that through these cyber-profiles the “real” *tulku* is fully and completely present.¹³⁷

Once again we encounter the “problem” that comes with trying to apply the idea of *nirmāṇakāya* to cyber-profiles. All *nirmāṇakāya* should be functionally equivalent to each other. One of these functions is to appear to be something they are not. If the people being “tricked” can see through the ploy then the “trick” has failed. The success of a *nirmāṇakāya* relies on ordinary beings believing the illusion. Cyber-profiles of *tulkus* have not been able

¹³⁷ However, the same “Buddhological” explanation that was used in Chapter One (see page 27) also applies here as a reason for why *tulkus’* followers are under the impression that the “physical” *tulku* is the “real” *tulku*.

to create or maintain this illusion as convincingly; their followers do not believe the *tulkus* are as fully present in their cyber forms as they are in their physical forms.

The Challenge of Tsem Tulku Rinpoche

Previously I noted that the main focus of Tsem Tulku Rinpoche's cyber-profiles was the transmission of teachings. Tsem Rinpoche's followers' primary reason for accessing his cyber-profiles is to receive his teachings. The majority of their discussions are about his teachings, and there is very little to indicate that they are experiencing his presence through his teachings.

In my chapter on *nirmāṇakāya* I noted that just because something transmits teachings, that does not mean it is a *nirmāṇakāya*. Presence (or the illusion of presence) of the being producing the *nirmāṇakāya* should also be accessible as well. On Tsem Rinpoche's cyber-profiles, there is very little to indicate that his followers are experiencing his presence via his cyber-profile. There were some examples; in the Chapter One, we saw a follower express their happiness at having "met" Tsem Rinpoche via cyberspace, and in Chapter Four we will see some examples of followers who made offerings to Tsem Rinpoche in cyberspace. However, overall his cyber-profiles are being used first and foremost as teaching tools.

Unlike Kalu Rinpoche and Traleg Rinpoche, the primary function of Tsem Rinpoche's cyber-profiles is not to make the absent *tulku* present. It is to transmit his teachings. The most notable example of something that could be viewed as the mediation of presence was Tsem Tulku making images of high lamas and holy statues available for his followers to view and download so they can receive blessings from them. His cyber-profiles are mediating the presence of other beings.

Thus, the case of Tsem Rinpoche is challenging to my framework, because many of his followers are treating his cyber-profiles as a tool from which they can receive his teachings. The medium happens to be cyberspace. Unlike my other two case studies, there is very little to indicate that his followers were viewing his cyber-profiles as able to mediate his presence.

When presence was mediated via his cyber-profiles it was the presence of others rather than himself.¹³⁸

Concluding Remarks

Therefore ideas about presence and absence in the Buddhist tradition are helpful for examining *tulkus'* use of cyberspace. The problem of the Buddha's absence is an issue that the tradition developed a number of responses to. Some of these responses were: statues/images, relics, and early Buddhist Art.

Many followers of *tulkus'* understand *tulkus'* cyber-profiles as capable of mediating the *tulkus'* presence. In the case of Kalu Rinpoche, we saw many of his followers talk about his presence online. When Kalu Rinpoche "left" the internet many of his followers asked him not to leave, and to "stay" with them. Traleg Rinpoche's followers use his Facebook profile to experience his presence in the absence of his physical form, due to his death. Tsem Rinpoche often makes images of high lamas and other advanced beings available on his cyber-profiles. He encouraged people to view them and download them in order to receive blessings from them. However, the perceived presence of *tulkus'* in cyber-space is imperfect, and could be best described as the presence of absence.

There were some limitations to the application. Once again, the problem of followers giving primacy to *tulkus'* physical forms over their cyber-forms was encountered. However the same "Buddhological" explanation offered in Chapter One is also applicable here. Tsem Rinpoche's cyber-profiles were also challenging to my framework. The profiles' main focus was the transmission of teaching. When there were instances of presence being mediated, it was often the presence of other beings, rather than the presence of Tsem Rinpoche himself. However, as I noted in Chapter One, there are a number of ways in which cyber-

¹³⁸ However, because his teachings are being made available via social media, it is possible to argue that Tsem Rinpoche's presence is being mediated to his readers in a way not possible for books. (See page 29).

profiles and texts differ, this could potentially allow cyber-profiles that contain teachings to mediate the presence of an author in a way a text cannot.¹³⁹

The cyber-profiles of *tulkus*' could be understood as a response to the problem of *tulkus*' absence, much in the same way the tradition developed responses to the Buddha's absence. The final component of my framework could also be understood as a response to the problem of absence: visualization meditation. This will be the focus of my final chapter.

¹³⁹ See page 29.

Chapter Four: Visualization Meditation and Cyberspace

In this chapter, I will discuss how visualization meditation could be a helpful component of my framework. Different forms of visualization meditation have been developed and practised in multiple Buddhist traditions. Within some of these forms, one of the aims of the visualization is to construct an alternate reality/world which is inhabited by multiple Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*. The deity is thus understood to be accessible to the practitioner in some way. Often, aids, such as images and textual descriptions of the world, are used as tools to help the practitioner visualize the subject with clarity and detail. Visualization meditation could also be viewed as another “response” to the Buddha’s absence.

One of the main reasons I decided to include visualization meditation as a component of my framework is because there have already been explicit links made between cyberspace and certain visualization meditation practices by practitioners within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss some of the different forms of visualization meditation that have developed in various Buddhist traditions. I will then discuss how some Tibetan Buddhists have applied certain visualization meditations to their use and understanding of cyberspace. This will be followed by an attempt to apply certain ideas found in visualization meditations to the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* and to cyberspace more generally. I will consider how the application of such ideas could be helpful for understanding what is going on from a Buddhist perspective, and then I will consider the limitations that become apparent from attempting such an application.

Visualization Meditations Within Different Buddhist Traditions

A number of visualization techniques were developed within the Buddhist tradition which allowed practitioners to construct alternate worlds through meditation.

In the Pure Land tradition, alternate worlds were visualized (such as Amitabha's Pure Land) in order for practitioners to have direct access to Amitabha Buddha and receive teachings from him.¹⁴⁰

Tantric Buddhism also developed visualization meditations, known as *sādhana*. Like Pure Land visualizations, *sādhana* allowed practitioners to construct alternative worlds in their mind, giving them direct access to certain deities. However, Tantric *sādhana* went further, the aim was not simply to visualise the deity and its world, rather, the aim was to become the deity.¹⁴¹

The worlds that are visualised in *sādhana* are extremely complex; therefore, often a visual aid was used to help with the visualization. The images used are *maṇḍala*, circular two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional worlds.¹⁴² "*Maṇḍalas* are images, often quite complex, representing the buddha-fields in which a given Buddha resides."¹⁴³ They often depict palaces, which have a central Buddha and they are also inhabited by a number of *bodhisattvas*.¹⁴⁴ While *maṇḍala* can be physical visual aids, they are also "consciously and meticulously created images developed and sustained in the imagination of the meditator."¹⁴⁵ *Maṇḍala* become "a 'place' in which the ideal teaching situation presented in a sūtra is recreated – a place where the Buddha is present to be seen and heard teaching the Dharma."¹⁴⁶

Once the *maṇḍala* and its inhabitants have been visualized, the meditator can engage in worship of; receive teachings from; and in the tantric case, merge with the deity residing in that Buddha-field. Such meditations allow the practitioner a type of access to a deity that would otherwise be impossible. *Sādhana*s are "an arena for the playing out of tensions between presence and absence".¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ David L. McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 149-150.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 164.

¹⁴² R. Kohn, "The Ritual Preparation of a Tibetan Sand Mandala," in *Mandala and Landscape*, ed. A. W. McDonald (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1997), 365-366.

¹⁴³ McMahan, *Empty Vision*, 164.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 165.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 170.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 161.

A particular type of *sādhana* is guru yoga. The *Kālacakra Tantra* contains a six session guru yoga practice. The following description is based on a teaching given by Jhado Rinpoche on the six session practice:

During the practice the meditator visualizes Kālacakra “in his simple form with one face and two arms”.¹⁴⁸ Jhado Rinpoche emphasizes the importance of visualizing Kālacakra “in the nature of your teacher”, because it is your teacher that “brings the Buddha close to you...so in your visualization the deity has the aspect of Kālacakra but is in the nature of your teacher”.¹⁴⁹ Guru yoga is a form of visualization meditation in which the visualized deity takes on the appearance of the meditator’s teacher.

Digital Maṇḍala

In recent years, practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism have experimented with computers and cyberspace, combining these technologies with certain elements of visualization meditation. One of the most notable (and earliest) examples of such a combination was Pema Losang Chogyen’s “digital *maṇḍala*”.

The practices of visualization meditation and *maṇḍala* construction have made their way into the realm of computers and cyberspace. There are cases in which *maṇḍala* have been digitally constructed in both their two-dimensional and three-dimensional form. There was even an event in which cyberspace was the object of a visualization meditation.

Between 1989 and 1990, Pema Losang Chogyen worked with staff and students at Cornell University’s Programme of Computer Graphics to create a 3-D digital model of the Vajrabhairava Maṇḍala.¹⁵⁰ The model contains tens of thousands of objects, and upon the visit of the 14th Dalai Lama to the university, a copy of the *maṇḍala* (recorded on a videotape) was offered to him.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Jhado Rinpoche, “Essence of the Kālacakra Tantra Six-Session Guru Yoga Practise,” in *As Long as Space Endures: Essays on the Kālacakra Tantra*, ed. Edward A. Arnold (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2009), 459.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Exploring the Mandala, accessed November 16, 2013, <http://www.graphics.cornell.edu/online/mandala/>

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Chogyen's *maṇḍala* is now available on YouTube.¹⁵² Comments left indicate that people are using it as a visualization aid. For example: "Very helpful for practice and visualization of the mandala in most Highest Yoga Tantra deity practices", "I am so delighted as it is so precise in the smallest details, which is difficult to find in a single commentary - one has to study more and specific, especially the roof is so helpful".¹⁵³

The Blessing of Cyberspace

This is not the only instance in which "digital" *maṇḍalas* have been used as a visualization support. In 1996, the monks of Namgyal monastery used a digital image of a Kālacakra Maṇḍala they had previously constructed using sand to aid them in their blessing of cyberspace.

On the 8th of February 1996, the monks of Namgyal monastery carried out a blessing of cyberspace.¹⁵⁴ According to the monastery's website, cyberspace is:

A dimension of space sustained by networked computers designed to extend the power of the mind. Remarkably, the Internet often appears almost mystically to have a life of its own that is more than the sum of its parts. Mental projections can of course yield both positive and negative uses and results.¹⁵⁵

The monastery's website goes on to explain that while using the internet they noticed that it produced both negative and positive behaviours in people, as it reflected human nature. Therefore, they decided that carrying out a tantric blessing of cyberspace would be appropriate "to help purify how it is used, and the results or effects it yields".¹⁵⁶

It was decided that the blessing should be carried out using the *Kālacakra Tantra* as "it especially emphasizes space itself (along with consciousness) as one of the six constituent

¹⁵² Mandala, accessed November 16, 2013, <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=mFn8xrcHxvA>.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Namgyal monastery's website, accessed November 16, 2013, <http://www.namgyal.org/blessings/cyberspace.cfm>.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

elements of the universe, in addition to the more familiar elements of earth, air, fire and water.”¹⁵⁷

The blessing took about half an hour and “consisted of the monks chanting blessing prayers from the *Kālacakra Tantra* while envisioning space as cyberspace, the networked realm of computers, in their imagination. An image of the Kālachakra Maṇḍala, actually a scanned photo of a sand painting made earlier by the monks, was present on a computer as a visual aid, but was not considered essential to the power of the blessing”.¹⁵⁸

The monks used visualization meditation to transform ordinary space into cyberspace. For the monks, cyberspace is an alternative space to “ordinary” space, which can be constructed both in the mind, and via networked computers.

The blessing of cyberspace by the monks of Namgyal monastery, and Pema Losang Chogyen’s digital *maṇḍala* are important for the present analysis for two reasons. They show us that members of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition have used virtuality and cyberspace in combination with visualization meditation as both a tool to aid religious practice, and as an alternate “space” in which religious practice can take place.

Cyberspace, Constructed Realities and Tulkus

Visualization meditation could be an extremely helpful tool for thinking about cyberspace more broadly as the “realm” in which *tulkus* and internet users are interacting and carrying out religious practise in their cyber-manifestations. Like the worlds created when carrying out a visualization meditation, cyberspace is an alternate space (or is at least it is perceived to be) in which religious activities such as worship of deities or advanced beings is made possible. Both provide access to beings that under “ordinary” circumstances would be inaccessible. Both allow practitioners to receive teachings and blessings from the object of their devotion. Problems such as time and space would usually inhibit the possibility of practitioners receiving these teachings, do not apply to these constructed realms.

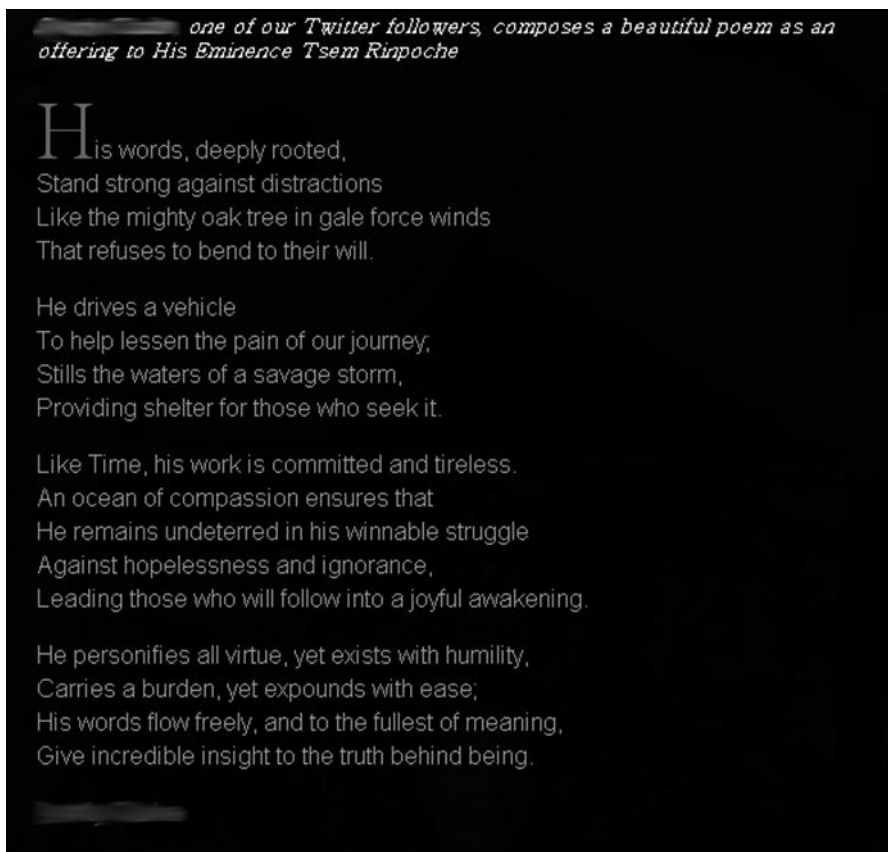
¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Cyberspace as an Alternative to “Ordinary” Space

Like the realms constructed during various visualization meditations, cyberspace is an alternate space or reality to “ordinary” space. Within these alternate spaces, activities and functions not possible in ordinary space can be carried out. There are a number of examples of cyberspace allowing *tulkus* and followers to engage in activities with each other that would be impossible in “ordinary” space.

Some of Tsem Tulku’s followers have made offerings to him “in” cyberspace. The first offering was made to him on Twitter. The offering was a poem written for and dedicated to him by one of his followers. The poem is reproduced in full below:



It is highly likely that the only way the author can access and interact with Tsem Tulku is through cyberspace. This would mean there would be no way for her to directly offer her poem to Tsem Tulku in “ordinary space”, but the alternate realm of cyberspace made it possible for her to offer the poem directly to him using their respective Twitter “manifestations.”

Another follower made an offering of a religious text to Tsem Tulku via email. This follower wrote the following:

I have yet to directly make any offerings to you even though you never need it. I do understand why we offer gifts to Rinpoche, but to start it off I have attached the translation of the Heart Sutra in this email for you so that you may one day teach this amazing text to me and many many more tantras and sutras to all of us.

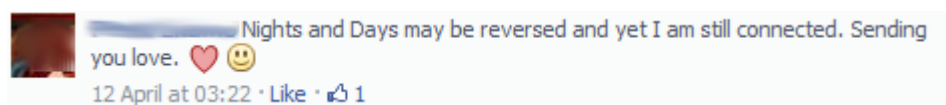
May Rinpoche be BLESSED always by the NOBLE TRIPLE GEMS and THREE JEWELS.

May I for the first time address You as my Root Guru. I hope you will accept me. :)

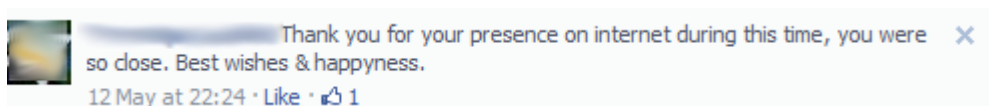
Yours sincerely,

The follower offered the Heart Sutra in the form of an email attachment. From the wording of the email it seems he hopes the offering is the beginning of a student/teacher relationship between himself and Tsem Tulku. One of the most important relationships in Tibetan Buddhism, the relationship between lama and student, has been embarked upon purely in the cyber “realm”.

Cyberspace also removes the obstacles of time and space, which can be problematic in the “ordinary” world. Issues like geographic distance and different time zones, which would make interaction between *tulkus* and their followers around the world impossible, are not applicable in cyberspace.



Comment on Kalu Rinpoche's Facebook Page



Comment on Kalu Rinpoche's Facebook Page

The above comments demonstrate that the ordinary rules of time and space do not apply in cyberspace, allowing followers to interact with *tulkus*.

Tulkus' Cyber-Profiles as Aids for Visualization Meditation

Pema Losang Chogyen's digital *maṇḍala* has already shown us that virtual tools can and have been used as aids for carrying out visualization meditations. When carrying out a visualization meditation, it is not uncommon for a meditator (especially someone who is less advanced) to use an image to aid them in their visualization. Depending on what is being visualized, different aids are used. *Maṇḍala* are used to aid the visualization of entire Buddha-fields, while images of deities are used to help a meditator visualize a deity in a particular form.

There are some examples of people using images of *tulkus* (on their cyber-profiles) as aids for carrying out *guru yoga*. On one of Kalu Rinpoche's Facebook profiles, two of his followers left comments on a photo of him indicating they planned to use the image when they next did *guru yoga*:



Both followers say they use the image when they engage in *guru yoga*. They accessed the image through Kalu Rinpoche's Facebook profile. Like the digital *maṇḍala*, this virtual image "in" cyberspace is being used as a tool by two practitioners (most likely more) to aid them in carrying out their religious practise. This is the only example I have encountered of

followers talking about using an image from a *tulku*'s cyber-profile in such a way. While the example in no way "proves" that this is something that is happening frequently, it does show that cyber-profiles of *tulkus* are being utilised by some as an aid for a specific religious practise.

Limitations of Applying Visualization Meditation to Tulkus' use of Cyberspace

While there are many aspects of visualization meditation that can help us think about cyberspace using Buddhist concepts, there are limitations to such an application.

There are a number of ways which the application of visualization meditation to the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* could be problematic. I will discuss two limiting factors: The differing ways cyberspace and visualized realms are constructed; and what activities can and cannot be done within each "space."

Differences between the Construction of Cyberspace and the Construction of Buddha-Fields

Both cyberspace and Buddha-fields are constructed realities that can act as alternate spaces to "ordinary" space. However, these alternate spaces are constructed in rather different ways. Cyberspace is constructed by networked computers. Without a network of connected computers, cyberspace would "dissolve", or at the very least be inaccessible. Buddha-fields constructed through visualization meditations are constructed mentally in the mind of the meditator. While a tool (such as a *maṇḍala*) can be used to aid in the field's construction, it is not essential. This is not the case with cyberspace, because a computer is an essential tool for constructing and accessing cyberspace.

If meditators are significantly advanced, they can construct an entire Buddha-field on their own. In the case of cyberspace, "the network" is responsible for its construction. It is the multiple websites and interactions between various people that constructs, develops and evolves cyberspace. Cyberspace is a collective construction.

When a Buddha-field is constructed, the "builder" is in a meditative state. This meditative state is the only action the "builder" can engage in while constructing a Buddha-field. The

construction of cyberspace has no such limitations. While engaging in the construction of cyberspace a person might be engaging in a number of other activities in “ordinary” space, such as eating, having a conversation, or going for a walk, as long as they have a device through which they can access cyberspace.

Activities in Cyberspace and Buddha-Fields

Cyberspace is not a realm in which only religious activity takes place. Religious activity is just one of many activities that are carried out in cyberspace, whereas it seems that realms constructed in visualization meditation are realms exclusively for religious activity.

The cyber-profiles of *tulkus* are examples of this. Religious activities are carried out in cyberspace by both *tulkus* and their followers, using their cyber-forms. However, both the “place” of cyberspace and the cyber-forms of *tulkus* and followers are not exclusively for religious activities. Many *tulkus* use their cyber-forms for other non-religious activities. Tsem Rinpoche uses his cyber-profiles to blog about many “Buddhist” or “religious” subjects and give teachings, but at the same time he uses his cyber-forms (mostly his blog) to discuss and investigate the possibility of alien life forms from other planets and UFOs. Buddha-fields, on the other hand, are spaces in which the activities are exclusively religious. They are “ideal” locations for the transmission of and receiving of Dharma.

However, these differences do not necessarily mean that visualization meditation as a tool for thinking about *tulkus’* use of cyberspace is redundant to use. Such an application allows us to see key differences as well and consider ways in which the tradition could respond to these differences.

Cyberspace is constructed through networked computers. However, it seems that the monks at Namgyal monastery believed that ordinary space could be transformed into cyberspace through visualization meditation. For them, cyberspace can be constructed via other means than networked computers. Cyberspace (constructed by networked computers) could be seen as the aid/support upon which the monks of Namgyal monastery based their “mental” construction of cyberspace. In this sense, “networked” cyberspace could be seen as having a similar function to that of a “physical” *maṇḍala* both are a visual representation of an alternate reality which aids a meditator in constructing that realm mentally. Also,

networked cyberspace could be argued to have its origins as a mentally constructed realm. It can be assumed that at some point a group of people came up with the concept of and “imagined” the realm of cyberspace. Computers were then used to create a network that constructed and maintained cyberspace, so in a sense cyberspace was initially constructed in the mind/imagination and then “outsourced” to computers.

Concluding Remarks

Thus, there are a number of ways in which visualization meditation could help us think about *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles, and their use of cyberspace. There have already been instances in which practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism have used visualization meditation in combination with cyberspace and computer technologies. In the early nineties Pema Losang Chogyen (with staff and students at Cornell University’s Programme of Computer Graphics) created a digital *maṇḍala*. Recently the digital *maṇḍala* has been uploaded to YouTube. A number of people have left comments on the video indicating they use it as a visualization aid.

In 1996 the monks of Namgyal monastery carried out a blessing of cyberspace. The *Kālacakra Tantra* was used to conduct the blessing, and the monks visualised “ordinary” space as cyberspace, “the realm of networked computers”.

Cyberspace, like the realms constructed in visualization meditation, is a constructed alternate space to ordinary space. Both allow people to engage in religious activities that would be difficult, if not impossible in the ordinary world. We saw examples of *tulkus*’ followers engaging in activities with *tulkus* in cyberspace that would have been impossible for them to do in “ordinary” space. Followers of Tsem Tulku Rinpoche made offerings to him in cyberspace, and followers of Kalu Rinpoche using images of him they accessed in cyberspace as visualization aids for performing *guru yoga*.

However, there are some limitations in applying aspects of visualization meditation to *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles, and cyberspace more generally. Cyberspace is constructed in a very different way to a visualised Buddha-field, and cyberspace is not a realm exclusively for religious activity. These differences demonstrate the limits of a project like this one,

however, at the same time they can provide us with some interesting possibilities as to how a religious tradition could respond to such differences.

Conclusion

This project was an attempt to examine the way *tulkus* and their followers use cyberspace. Particular focus was given to the way *tulkus* and their followers use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Rather than applying alien ideas to explain what was happening, I chose to use ideas from within the *tulkus'* own tradition. I wanted to investigate the possibility of cyberspace being sacralised by the *tulkus'* cyber-profiles and the extent to which they could be understood to be present in cyberspace.

To help think about these questions I drew on ideas within the Buddhist tradition that could be applicable to the cyber context. They were: *nirmāṇakāya*; the *yamakaprātihārya*; ideas surrounding presence and absence; and visualization meditation. The application of these ideas to my cases studies was conceptually helpful in a number of ways.

Successes of the Application of the Framework

The concept of *nirmāṇakāya* provided a conceptual tool for examining the multiple cyber-profiles deployed by *tulkus* in my case studies. The application of the concept of *nirmāṇakāya* to the cyber-profiles provided an excellent way of dealing with the “unreality” of the profiles, as well as the numerous profiles associated with one *tulku*. Many of the functions of the profiles were similar to those of *nirmāṇakāyas*. They allowed the *tulku* to appear to be in multiple places at once, and they acted as the “real” *tulkus'* functional equivalents.

The concept of *yamakaprātihārya* provided a way of dealing with the problematic relationship between a *tulku's* physical *nirmāṇakāyas* and cyber-*nirmāṇakāyas*. In the *yamakaprātihārya* myth, the Buddha's physical body appears to be the source of other “copies” of himself. However, while this appears to be the case, it is actually an illusion, because the same could be said of a *tulku's* physical body: while it appears to be “behind” the cyber-manifestations, it too is a *nirmāṇakāya*. It merely appears to be the source, so that people mistake it for the “real” *tulku*.

Ideas about presence and absence in the Buddhist tradition provided a way to understand why people were interacting with the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* in the manner they were. Followers were interacting with the cyber-profiles because the “real” *tulku* was absent, and the profiles were the only “aspect” of the *tulku* available. However, the followers were aware of this absence and of the limited “presence” the profiles provided, which meant many were not fully satisfied with the “presence” mediated by the profile. Therefore, while *tulkus*’ presence was being mediated to their followers via their cyber-profiles, it was not a full or complete presence.

The idea of visualization meditation helped give the framework a broader scope. Rather than just dealing with the cyber-profiles of *tulkus*, it allowed for the consideration of cyberspace more generally. Cyberspace, like the Buddha-fields created in visualization meditation, is a constructed space that can function as an alternate space to “ordinary” space. In the “alternate” space of cyberspace, it was possible for followers and *tulkus* to interact with each other without being subject to the obstacles of “ordinary” space, such as: different geographic locations, and different time zones.

Limitations of the Application of the Framework

However, there were limits to the application of the above ideas to *tulkus*’ use of cyberspace. As is the case with almost any theoretical framework my framework did not explain, or fit all details of the empirical material. Often, these limitations were due to the fact that both the *tulkus* and their followers were not solely applying Buddhist assumptions to their approach and use of cyberspace. One possible example of this problem was the assumption that the physical *tulku* was “real.”

Another limitation was that some aspects of *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles (and how they were being used) caused tension with, or sometimes were in direct contradiction with, parts of the ideas/doctrines being applied to them. One example of such a limitation was the problem of the cyber-profiles of *tulkus*’ not being produced by special powers, which is how Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* produce their *nirmāṇakāyas*.

However while the proposed framework did encounter a number of limitations, this does not necessarily render it unhelpful. This is because there were also a number of ways in which the applied framework offered an interesting and unique way of thinking about *tulkus'* use of cyberspace. For every limitation each idea encountered, there was also a way in which it helped give a way of explaining what was happening. All theoretical frameworks eventually break down, but as long as those applying a theory are aware of its imperfect nature, then the parts of a theory that are applicable can be used to gain a new or fresh perspective on the phenomena that it is being applied to. Furthermore, the limitations encountered during the application of a theory can be helpful because they may end up providing unexpected insights, which were never considered when the theory was initially constructed.

The Implications of the Framework

The construction and application of my framework has demonstrated some interesting and perhaps unexpected things. I set out to show that *tulkus* were making their presence available to their followers via their cyber-profiles, and that “presence” could sacralise cyberspace. The reality turned out to be less black and white.

The framework has demonstrated that the cyber-profiles of *tulkus* do mediate their presence to their followers. However, the presence being mediated is not a “full” or “complete” presence. There are a number of mitigating factors explaining why this is the case.

The first factor is the followers themselves. They are the ones who experience or perceive the presence. As we saw from the case studies, the experiences of the followers and their reasons for accessing *tulkus'* cyber-profiles were greatly varied. Some spoke directly about how they experienced the *tulku's* presence when they interacted with the *tulkus* cyber-profiles, but others made comments about how they hoped they could one day meet the *tulku* in “real” life. Therefore, it seems some followers experienced a *tulku's* online presence much more intensely than others. This makes it difficult to generalise about the extent of presence being mediated in online fora, because many followers were having vastly

different experiences due to the different assumptions with which they approached the cyber-profiles.

The second factor is the *tulkus* themselves. From the case studies, it became clear that the three *tulkus* had different reasons for using social media, and had different focuses. Kalu Rinpoche's profiles were dominated by professions of love for his followers. There seemed to be a focus on togetherness and mutual affection, which made his presence or absence a central concern of his Facebook followers. Tsem Tulku Rinpoche's main focus was using his cyber-profiles to transmit his teachings, and this left very little room for anything else. During his lifetime, Traleg Rinpoche could be viewed as falling somewhere in the middle. He would post teachings and extracts from books he had written, and often he would post short videos about what had been doing in the weeks following his last videos. However, after his death the focus of the profile turned towards remembrance and grief.

While each case study had examples in which presence was being mediated, the extent or fullness of the presence experienced often varied greatly between case studies and individual followers.

As I have said, the proposed framework was not without flaws. However, I have also demonstrated that incorporating ideas from within the tradition being studied can offer a legitimate and useful methodological framework for academic studies. The ideas incorporated from the Buddhist tradition into this particular project offered a unique perspective on the phenomena being studied which more "traditional" methodologies would have not been able to give.

If Steur's theory of telepresence and Virtual Reality (VR) had been used as the basis for this methodology, I suspect the theory would have led to conclusions that fundamentally contradicted some core assumptions of the Buddhist tradition. This would have been ironic due to the focus of this study being on Buddhist practitioners and their use of cyberspace for "Buddhist" activities. Steur's theory operates by differentiating between Virtual Reality and the "real" world. VR is a simulation of the "real" world, and is therefore an "unreal" illusion of the "real" world. This would have led to the assumption that the "real" world was superior to "unreal" cyberspace. By contrast we know that Mahayānā Buddhism usually operates on the assumption that everything, even what we perceive as "real" is ultimately

an illusion and “unreal.” My framework, thus takes the illusion and unreality of ordinary things as some of its central assumptions. This allows for the “real” world and cyberspace to be considered equally; they are both equally unreal, and therefore neither is superior to the other. Without the inclusion of Buddhist ideas in this framework, it is unlikely that such a conclusion could have been drawn.

There are various ways this project could be developed further in future work. One possibility would be to take it further by interviewing *tulkus* and their followers about their understanding of what they are doing in cyberspace in the context of their faith. As it stands, this project has had to speculate on what assumptions followers were bringing to their interactions with *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles. Interviewing followers and confirming what their assumptions actually were could help clarify the limitations of the proposed framework.

Another possibility could be undertaking a similar project with another religious tradition. This would allow for a comparative element, and insight into whether other religious traditions were encountering similar issues surrounding the sacralisation of cyberspace and the ways the tradition was utilising the medium.

Therefore, from the perspective of both the framework, and from what we have seen of the followers of *tulkus*’ cyber-profiles, while *tulkus* have succeeded in “presencing” themselves to a certain extent in cyberspace, they have not done so as fully or completely as was initially anticipated. This raises the general issue of the sacralisation of cyberspace. From what we have seen, I think the following can be said: cyberspace is very “young,” social media sites are even “younger”. What we are witnessing with *tulkus* and their followers is possibly the beginning of the sacralisation of cyberspace (or at least parts of it). People are just starting to experiment with and work out how their religious beliefs and practises can be incorporated into or adapted to this newly available space.

It is likely that the manner in which cyberspace can be sacralised, and the extent to which this is possible, will always be contested within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (as well as other religious traditions). Many religious traditions have internal conflict about the extent to which locations in the “ordinary” physical world can be/are sacralised, and it is likely cyberspace faces the same fate. We already saw examples of such “divisions” within my case studies. Often there was a general consensus amongst the followers of a particular

tulku about how cyberspace could or should be used for religious practise, and how “present” the *tulku* was in cyberspace. However, there was quite different and varied understandings about cyberspace between the different groups of followers associated with the three *tulkus* that were studied. Therefore, while particular groups of people within a tradition can develop “norms” about how cyberspace can be used for religious practice, and its potential for sacralisation, it is likely that the only broad consensus we could possibly see from the Buddhist tradition as a whole would be that cyberspace can potentially be sacralised. However, the nature and extent of that potential sacralisation will always be contested.

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