From Indra's Net to Internet: Communication, Technology, and the Evolution of Buddhist Ideas, by Daniel Veidlinger. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 273pp. Hb \$68. ISBN-13: 9780824873400.

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Within this work Daniel Veidlinger explores a topic that is becoming ever more significant in the study of religion today: what is the relationship between the use of the internet and the rise in interest in particular religions, in this instance Buddhism? Veidlinger's conclusion is that Buddhism is suited to online environments as it has always thrived in conditions where communication is most open between people of differing beliefs and experiences. In order to lead us to this conclusion, he presents a broad intellectual history beginning with 'Axial Age religions', utilizing Karl Jaspers' understanding. Veidlinger then explores the religious landscape of ancient India more generally, before examining Buddhism's transmission along the Silk Roads, the trade routes that at their height ran from Japan through to southern Europe. Finally, he navigates the reader to the modern period, specifically the rise of the internet. He suggests that ideas such as impermanence (*anitya*) and not-self (*anātman*) allow Buddhism to grow in an era in which the speed of communication and urbanisation is increasing rapidly, as these concepts are easily adapted outside of their original context.

In support of his argument, Veidlinger draws upon many different sources ranging from early Buddhist texts from the Pāli *Sutta-piṭaka* (p. 111), historical accounts of the spread of Buddhism across Asia, as well as survey data of his own concerning the rise in numbers of online Buddhist community members in comparison to those of other religions since 2010. (Chapter Seven: 'Thus I have clicked'). It is also worth commenting that while Indra's Net features within the title of this book, the imagery only appear twice throughout the work and is not a significant part of Veidlinger's argument.

Veidlinger begins his exploration by defining six key features of Axial Age religions that Buddhism satisfies 'in at least some of its various incarnations' (p.39). These are universal applicability, expansion of compassion beyond that which might be shown to kin, viewing a transcendental reality through mystical experience, a privileging of personal experience over blind faith, a focus on individual agency, and a reconceptualization of ritual that emphasizes ethical rather than somatic components of it. These six key features become the framework by which Veidlinger explores ideas that are associated with Buddhism in three main contexts within the book.

Firstly, Veidlinger examines the social, political, technological and economic environment of India during the period in which Buddhism emerged (Chapter 3).

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In doing this, he ties together innovations of early Buddhism with the 'robust communication regime that was radically more integrated and extensive than what had come before in the region' (p. 71). Veidlinger ties his work to that of Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbett (*The Sociology of Early Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, 2003) and explores the key role that merchants had in the spread of Buddhism, as well as the significance of urban populations in the reception of Buddhist ideas, concluding that 'expanded consciousness of humanity's place in the world fostered by increasing communication amongst different peoples was also an important contributor to the development and acceptance of certain ideas that are most certainly articulated in Buddhism' (p. 100). Veidlinger uses an account of the Silk Roads to support this argument. He suggests that there is a distinct relationship between areas in which there is increased communication between other cultures and the popularity of Buddhism. In particular, he identifies Buddhism's applicability in a variety of social contexts and its promotion of compassion beyond one's kin as key factors in its growth. He also spends some time exploring why these factors aided the spread of Islam later on in the Silk Road's history (pp. 102–134).

After providing a fairly thorough historical account of Buddhism's transmission across Asia, Veidlinger then shifts his attention to recent history for the remainder of the book. In Chapter Five he explores how, much like in the case of the Silk Road, the internet today serves as a tool of mass communication and has shaped the reception of Buddhist ideas. He draws upon the six key features of the Axial Age identified earlier in order to argue his point. For instance, he states that 'the internet is a great equalizer' (p. 144) and provides a medium which lends weight to claims of universal applicability as it carries the ethos that 'everyone should have the right to access and partake in everything' (p. 144). Veidlinger compares the universal message of Buddhism to the universal applicability of the internet, concluding that 'Buddhism has rarely been the exclusive religious identity for anyone and therefore it feels very comfortable in the universalist but nonexclusive environment of the Internet' (p. 147).

Working through each of six key features he identifies, Veidlinger systematically demonstrates how, due to the invention and use of the internet, it is not surprising that ideas that are closely associated with Buddhism are on the rise. In particular, in Chapter Six, he explores the notions of impermanence (*anitya*) and not-self (*anātman*) and how they become increasingly significant today within our vastly interconnected world. He justifies this by suggesting that the dynamic spaced opened up by computer-mediated communication reminds us 'again and again of the ever-present shadow of change and mutable nature of self' (p. 197). Finally, Veidlinger provides quantitative data to support his theory of the relationship between the success of Buddhist ideas and communication provided by the internet in the twenty-first century. For instance, using the virtual world of *Second Life* (an online simulation website where people can meet, own property, socialize and go about day to day activities) to conduct his research, Veidlinger has found that the number of people engaged in Buddhist group membership changed from 2,140 in 2010, to 5,618 in 2016. It is worth noting here that to be a Buddhist group

member does not require any knowledge of Buddhism, in the same way that people may join a group or like a page on other social media platforms. Nevertheless, Veidlinger highlights an increase of participation in these groups of 162.5% in just six years (p. 207). In comparison, the same statistics for Christian groups on the platform show a decline of 14.6%. These findings seem to support his hypothesis: that in a situation in which communication is faster and more easily accessible, Buddhism not only grows when some other religions are in decline, but does so at the largest and fastest rate compared to other traditions.

From Indra's Net to Internet is a provoking read for those interested in how 'high' levels of communication provide a solid foundation upon which Buddhism can prosper, whether that be in ancient India, or in the present day after the emergence and expansion of the internet. Veidlinger's argument that increased communication leads to profound developments in religious ideas (p. 35) is a compelling one, particularly with the evidence he provides for the three main contexts within his work. However, there is one aspect of the book that I feel the author could have developed further. Veidlinger's overview of Buddhist intellectual history makes for an enjoyable read, but there could have been several more chapters that fill in the history he provides between the Silk Road (Chapter Four) and the founding of the internet (Chapter Five). Filling in this almost thousand-year gap with more examples of times when Buddhism flourished in areas of 'high speed' communication would only serve to reinforce the author's argument. For instance, he could have provided an account of how Western publishers from the mid-nineteenth century impacted on the spread of Buddhism over a hundred years before the development of the internet. Overall, *From Indra's Net to Internet* is an interesting attempt to explore Buddhism today through the lens of media theory, particularly informed by the work of Marshall McLuhan (p. 12). Veidlinger's argument is clearly defined as he explains how communication leads to an acceptance of other's ideas in his comparison between different pre-modern and internet-age modes of transmission.