

Conference Paper

Religious and Ritual Space in New Media World: A Study of “Internet Zazenkai” in Japan

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Abstract

Zazenkai, also known as Zen meditation or Zen Mindfulness, is held in Japan for the general public, usually with time, place and procedures set by a Buddhist Zen Temple. With the emergence of the Internet and new media, several Zen Temples have started to hold Zazenkai by utilizing these media technologies including online live streaming. This new type of Zazenkai is known as Internet Zazenkai. Compared with traditional Zazenkai that are held at a certain time and place, the application of new media enables Internet Zazenkai to go beyond the spatial and temporal limits of nature, where Zen practitioners in different global locations participate together using webcam. Individuals spatially separated from each other could share the same time and space of Zazenkai on the Internet. While the new media technologies open up new opportunities for Zazenkai, they also invite examinations into religious meanings of time and space for Zen practitioners. This paper is based on the study and examination of Internet Zazenkai regularly held by Treeleaf Zendo, a Soto Zen temple in Tsukuba. Its homepage Treeleaf.org is a virtual space where live streaming of Zazenkai is provided, its recorded videos are kept, web podcast of lectures and talks are heard, and so on. By analyzing the techno-ritual phenomenon, this paper attempts to analyze the role of Zen masters and participants in the process of Internet Zazenkai and to examine the differences and similarities between traditional Zazenkai and Internet Zazenkai. This paper will shed new light on the influence of new media upon religious and ritual space in modern society.

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1. Introduction

Information Technology changes the way people communicate, and further shapes a new form of culture and community in modern society, where religion is influenced to a great extent. Published works on religious doctrine are for sale on the Internet, explanations of religious doctrines are uploaded to the Internet for its adoptions' study and discussion, and there also emerged religious practices conducted through the Internet media. Scholars have noted that people started to use the Internet to practice

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their religion as early as the mid-1980s (Ciolek 2004). In the 1990s, Buddhists began to experiment with bringing traditional religious practices such as the “dharma combat” online, and the Dalai Lama’s monastery in New York even performed a ritual to sanctify cyberspace for such practices (Zaleski 1997).

Concepts such as “cyber-religion”, “religion online”, and “digital religion” are quoted in studies on changes of religion caused by media technologies (Campbell 2012). When we analyze the relationship between media and religion, we must distinguish the religion founded before the use of media such as the computer from the newly-formed religion founded after the media revolution began. Helland (2000) has introduced two definitions to explain this, “religion online” and “online religion”. Based on the differences indicated by Helland, the relationship between new media and religion can be generally classified into two aspects. On one hand, new media has catalyzed a new category of religion to take shape, and has provided a unique landscape (namely, online religion) for this process. On the other hand, the new media has provided a new environment for traditional religion and reshaped it into religion online. These concepts show us the possibility that traditional religious practices and community could be transported or replicated online (Howard 2010). Using the word “digital religion”, Stewart Hoover further studied the relationship between digital technology and religion. Hoover suggests that religious practices and communities are not simply transported to, or replicated in the Internet space, but are reshaped into a kind of new religious experience. This paper focuses on “religion online” put forward by Helland, and follows Hoover’s works to study the transformation of religion by new media.

Zen Buddhism is undoubtedly a school of traditional religion with its certain form and its own religious organization, community, doctrine and practice. Brought to Japan from China in the 13th Century, Zen Buddhism has now developed into 3 main schools, namely Rinzai, Soto, and Obaku, amongst which Soto was introduced to Japan by Dogen in 1226. Dogen believed that the Buddhist doctrine he propagated was the genuine one and refused to call himself a “sect”. After his death, his fourth-generation disciples Keizan and Gazan began calling themselves the Soto School. The School nowadays upholds Dogen’s religious doctrine as “Shikantaza”, which can be translated to “nothing by precisely sitting”. Based on this doctrine, Zen temples of the Soto School frequently hold Zazenkai (a.k.a. Zen sitting) for the general public to experience this religious practice (despite the fact that this activity is not referred as a religious practice by Zen monks). Before the revolution of new media, the Soto School had already perfected the methods and channels of the religion’s existence and dissemination, although, it is affected by many religious factors including opinions of different schools and individual

monks, and by many non-religious factors such as social institutions, cultural system, etc. Moreover, for the general public to participate in religious activities like Zazenkai, factors including the individual participant's schedule and distance to site must also be considered. These factors, in different environment and against different background, exert more or less influences to different extents. With the arrival of the Internet and new media, several Zen temples have begun to hold Zazenkai through these new media technologies, including online live streaming. This new type of Zazenkai is called Internet Zazenkai. The emergence of Internet Zazenkai has influenced the mode and propagation of the Soto School's religious practice in a number of ways.

During the past five years, I have studied Zazenkai held in Zen temples and have concluded that Zazenkai's religious space can be regarded as a unique Ritual space for people who don't believe in Soto. In research surrounding new media and religion, many scholars advocate that the "Internet serves as a sacred space for religious rituals". In the case of Internet Zazenkai's, I shall discuss the influences and changes led by new media to the multi-factors of religious space, further examining the effect of the Internet space to the ritual space of Zen sitting, and finally, I will evaluate whether this conclusion applies to Zen practice through this new media.

2. Methodology

This study uses Internet Zazenkai on Treeleaf.org as its example.

First, the arrangement of Internet Zazenkai, including its frequency, number of participants, and time was obtained by visiting the records of the website. Then, the author personally participated in the Internet Zazenkai held by Treeleaf Zendo, a Soto Zen temple in Tsukuba on September 22th 2018 for observational purpose. Further data was acquired from the videos available on the website, the time, participants, and the procedure of Internet Zazenkai were recorded. Finally, the features and religious significance were analyzed based on the author's previous research and study on Zazenkai in a Zen temple.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The description of Internet Zazenkai

3.1.1. Platform of Internet Zazenkai - Homepage of Treeleaf Zen Temple

Firstly, I will introduce the content combinations of Treeleaf.org as the platform of Internet Zazenkai. On its homepage there is a greeting video from Jundo, the chief priest of Treeleaf Zen Temple to those participating in Internet Zazenkai. Next to the video are links to four different entries, namely “知”“脈”“会”“話” (Dwg.1).



Dwg 1: Homepage of Treeleaf.org

In entry “知”, one can find the webpage introduction in a video to newcomers, the schedule for every day’s Internet Zazenkai, and the hosts’ Zazenkai calendar (refer to Table 1). Participants can log into the website and add which Zazenkai they are interested in and available for to their own website calendar. A notification will be sent to participants before the commencement of the added Internet Zazenkai. After clicking on the link of the calendar, one will enter into an online webcast webpage similar to an online chatroom webpage. In another entry, one can find the download links of documents regarding how to participate in Internet Zazenkai, including teaching new users how to prepare their environment, what to do with legs, hands and body,

what to do with the mind, how to end the sitting, and how to do the “Kinhin” which means “Walking Zen”. Attached at the end of the document is an English version of Fukanzazengi (The Standard for Sitting-Zen Recommended for Everyone) by Dogen.

TABLE 1: Internet Zazen Calendar.

MONDAY SITTINGS

Unsuji	N. American Eastern	Pacific	London	Paris	Japan
Kyonin (Zazen)	6:10am-7am (50min) One-way only	3:10am-4am (50min) One-way only	11:10am-12pm (50min) One-way only	12:10am-1pm (50min) One-way only	7:10pm-8pm (50min) One-way only
Shingen (Zazen)	10:00pm-10:30pm (30min)	7:00pm-7:30pm (30min)	3:00am-3:30am (30min)	4:00am-4:30am (30min)	11:00am-11:30am (30min)
General Member	N. American Eastern	Pacific	London	Paris	Japan
Washin (Zazen)	12am-12:30am	9pm-9:30pm	5am-5:30am	6am-6:30am	1pm-1:30pm
Khalil Bodhi (Zazen)	4:30am-5:00am	7:30am-8:00am	9:30am-10:00am	10:30am-11:00am	5:30am-6:00am
Daizan (Zazen)	7am-7:30am (30min)	4am-4:30am (30min)	12pm-12:30pm (30min)	1pm-1:30pm (30min)	8pm-8:30pm (30min)

In entry “脈”, there is an introduction about the Treeleaf Zen temple, its root temple, the Teacher Jundo Cohen and the lineage about Soto School. In entry “会” are community forums to discuss Zen Practice and Buddhism, where participants can post content of their own and join group discussions. Entry “话” is about knowledge of Buddhism and lecture notes on Buddhist doctrine, uploaded by Jundo, the chief priest of Treeleaf, and many other Zen monks.

To conclude, this website includes mainly three aspects of content: Internet Zazenkai, the participants’ understandings of Zen knowledge, and doctrines of Buddhism. Users include non-religious participants of Zazenkai from the general public and Zen monks from some religious organization (including the Soto School and other Schools such as Rinza School).

3.1.2. Schedule Recording of Internet Zazenkai held on Treeleaf.org

Internet Zazenkai is frequently held on Treeleaf.org. Based on the author’s statistics using records from the webpage, Zazenkai was held 132 times in July, 116 times in August, 83 times in September and 91 times in October (Table 2), with an average of 3-4 streams per day. This frequency is impossible for Zazenkai held in a temple. For convenience, I have reorganized the Zazenkai Schedule for the first week in October, based on which, one can find that Internet Zazenkai on Treeleaf.org is hosted by a specific invited Zen monk for each period of each day except for Weekly Zazenkai on every Saturday or the Monthly Zazenkai.

TABLE 2: Time and host for Internet Zazenkai.

Mon.(10/01)		Tue.(10/02)		Wed.(10/03)		Tur.(10/04)		Fri.(10/05)		Sun.(10/07)	
4:00	Tonglen Practice Circle (Shugen)			8:00	Jakudo	8:00	Hobbie				
						9:00	Shujin				
		11:00	Shingen	11:00	Shingen	11:00	Shingen	11:00	Shingen		
12:00	Washin	13:00	Washin	13:00	Washin	13:00	Washin	13:00	Washin	12:00	Myogan
19:10	Kyonin	19:10	Kyonin	19:10	Kyonin	19:10	Kyonin	19:10	Kyonin		
										22:00	Sunday Zazenkai (Shugen)

I have left out Saturday Zazenkai on Table 2, due to the fact that there is a Monthly Zazenkai hosted by Jundo on the first Saturday of every month and a Weekly Zazenkai by Jundo on the second, third and fourth Saturday of every month. Except for the Monthly Zazenkai, Zazenkai held from Sunday to Friday lasts for 90 minutes. The first 15 minutes is a ceremony with the host chanting Heart Sutra followed by a Dedication. Next are two Zen sittings, each lasting for 45 minutes and between which is a Kinhin (Walking Zen). The last 5 minutes are vows with a chanting verse for atonement. The four-hour Monthly Zazenkai, however, repeats the Zazen and Kinhin, and after two repetitions begins Buddhism doctrine lectures.

3.1.3. Description of Internet Zazenkai on 22th September

Before examining the nature of Internet Zazenkai, I shall first elaborate the process of the Weekly Zazenkai on 22th September as an example. This Zazenkai took place between 10:00 am to 11:30 am in Japan Time.

Before the Zazenkai, the website had published its schedule in local times for Japan, New York, Los Angeles, London and Paris. The time period of each Zazenkai procedure and the necessary chant books were also uploaded. The live webcast page could be loaded 15 minutes before the Zazenkai. The streaming screen was limited to 10 individuals with cameras, but all participants could see Jundo in the Zen sitting Room.

The Zazenkai started at 10:00 am. In the meditation room was Jundo with 3 other people (one male and two females) in the Zendo (Zen sitting Room). There were 5 participants online (three males and two females, three of which were Zen monks, with the remaining two ordinary people, exclusive of the author). The chief priest first entered the Zendo and burned incense before Monju Bodhisattva’s statue niche, and then after

bowing with folded hands to the niche, walked towards the webcam, introduced the 3 accompanying people in Zendo, and chitchatted with online participants, just like common online chatting (Dwg.2). Then the chief priest stood up and bowed with folded hands four times towards the Buddha's niche. Participants waited with folded hands in this process.



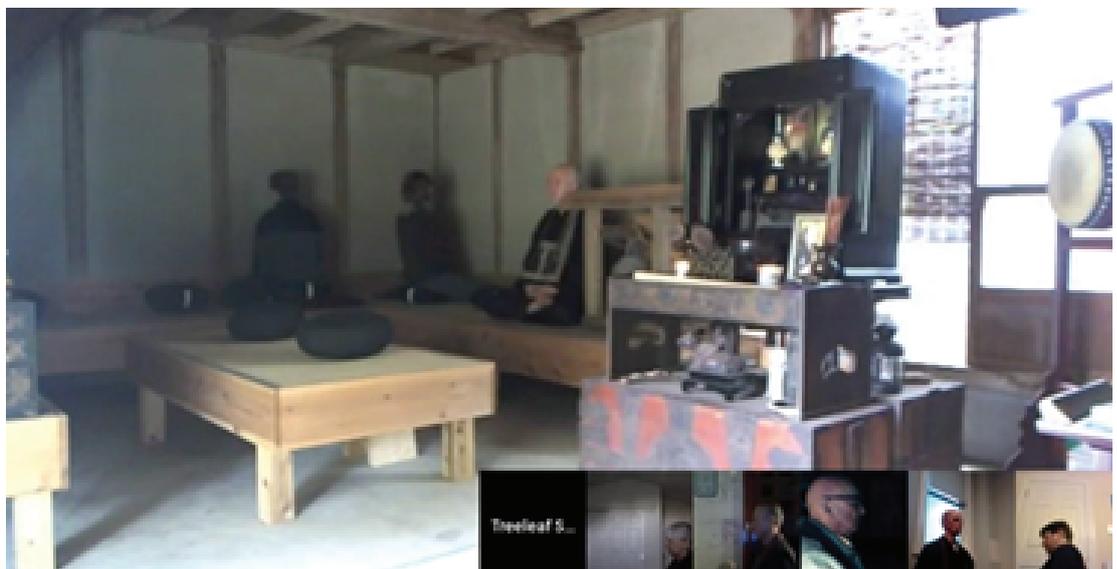
Dwg 2: Opening talk in the Internet Zazenka.

After a series of rapid ringing of bells, the chief priest and all participants altogether bowed with folded hands four times. Then after three slow ringing of bells, the chief priest started to chant the English version of Heart Sutra with the sound of the temple block (Dwg.3). Each chapter ended with a ringing of bells. At the closure of the Chant was another series of rapid ringing of bells and all the participants bowed.



Dwg 3: Chant in Internet Zazenkaï.

At 10:15 am, after the chief priest gave the instruction of Zazen, he turned off the light in his room, walked to the frontage of his Zafu (round cushion used for Zen sitting) to prepare for Zen sitting. Other meditators in Zendo walked to the frontage of their straw-mat floor in a clockwise manner, gave a Rinimonjin salute (to bow with folded hands to their left and right neighbors), took seat on their Zafu, adjust their sitting manners and breath, and start Zen sitting. Online participants of Zazenkaï then sat on their own Zafu towards their own chosen directions in their own chosen positions to start Zen sitting (Dwg.4).



Dwg 4: Zen Sitting in Internet Zazenkaï.

After 30 minutes, the chief priest rang the bell. All the Meditators bowed with folded hands and stood up to start Kinhin (Walking Zen, Dwg.5). Participants in Zendo followed the chief priest to walk clockwise and online participants also left their seat to walk with no appearances in the webcam.



Dwg 5: Kinhin in Internet Zazenkai.

After about 5 minutes, the chief priest rang the bell to give the instruction of Zazen and all participants went back to their Zafu to start their next 30-minute round of Zen sitting.

At around 11:20, the chief priest rang the bell again and all participants stood up. Those in Zendo walked slowly to the niche of Monju Bodhisattva to bow with folded hands while online participants returned to the webcam to do the same. After 3 rings of the bells, the chief priest started to chant the Four Vows, with a ringing of bells at the end of each chapter, and two slow ringing of bells at the close, accompanied by all participants' bowing with folded hands. The chief priest walked up to the Monju Bodhisattva's niche and extinguished the incense which brought closure to the Zazenkai. Meditators bowed to each other with folded hands and casually returned to the webcam and said goodbye. The Internet Zazenkai ended at this point. A rough procedure can be concluded as follows:

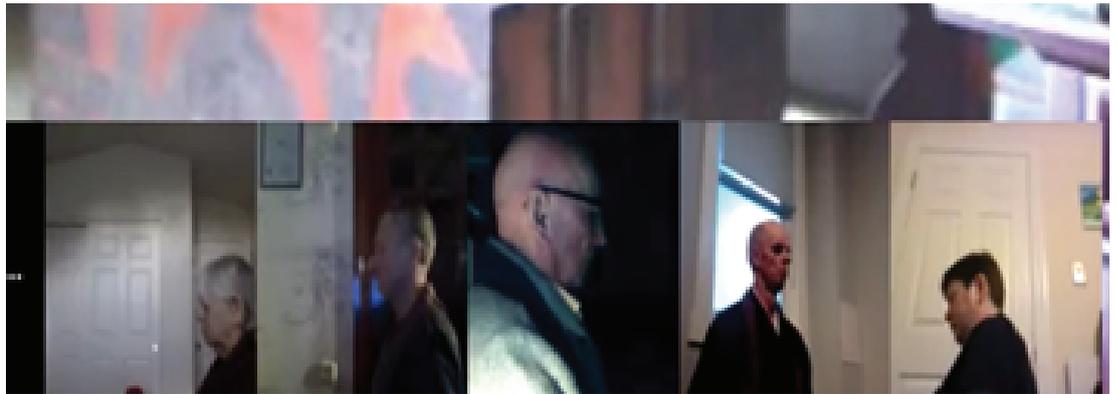
Ceremony and Dedication(15min)→Zazen(30min)→Kinhin(5min)→
Zazen(30min)→Kinhin(5min)→Verse of Atonement and Four Vows(5min)

Discussion 1. Time and Space of Internet Zazenkai

My previous study has considered Zazen as a ritual in the perspective of contemporary people. The meditators are first separated from their daily life, then to experience nondaily subjects in Zazen, and eventually come back to their daily life. And they experience a process where, firstly, they are separated from the community of contemporary society, and then, formed into a new meditating *communitas*, and finally return to the community of contemporary society. (the word *communitas* is Latin language which used by Victor Turner (1969), it is different from community). Thus, the meditators have experienced the ritual process from an ordinary state to an extraordinary state and finally back to an ordinary state, and the process of separation, transition, incorporation in a special space-time in the temple. While in Internet Zazenkai, “separation”, “transition” and “incorporation” of ritual have changed tremendously.

In a Zazenkai in Zen temples, the “separation” process of the ritual consists of the following procedures. First, the meditator is to be separated from the common time and space of the contemporary society, and then enter the time - space arranged by the temple for Zazenkai. Moreover, the meditator is to be separated from symbols of modern society. Before meditation begins, the meditator should put on special clothes and take off their watches and cell phones, thus representing the detachment from their modern social status, and creating in shape a common ground and equal relationship between different meditators, namely, *communitas* of Zazen. Last but not least, after being separated from their social properties, like their nationality, race, gender or physical ability, meditators are no longer bearing the relationship as set in a structured contemporary society, but a common and equal relation subject to the Buddhist’s authority in the ritual.

Separation from time and space in contemporary society is due to the fact that traditional Zazenkai in Zen temples are held at a certain time and place set by a Buddhist Zen temple. In Internet Zazenkai, the time of Zen sitting is up to meditator’s own arrangement. This means the selection of time to participate in an online live streamed Zen sitting continues to be limited to the host’s schedule, but to participate in Zen sitting by following the recorded videos taken from the live-stream, Internet Zazenkai also enables the Meditators to select any time freely. The other factor, space, of Zazenkai shall not be limited to a Zendo in a Zen temple, and more participants choose to conduct Zen sitting in a quiet and undisturbed place at home. We can also see from the webcams of the participants that some people sit in front of their book shelf, some with a window at their back, and some with a door at their back (Dwg.6).



Dwg 6: The environment arranged by meditators.

Therefore, space and time of Internet Zazenkai must be examined separately in terms of those following a live-streamed event and those following a recorded video. In a live-streamed Zen sitting's instance, the Zendo space where Monju Bodhisattva's niche and the authority representative (the monk as the guiding monk for Zen sitting) is located, is coexisting and happening at the same time together with the Zazen space arranged for Zen Practice by an online meditator. The Internet only serves as a bridge to transmit the space of Zendo but not the space of Zen Ritual with certain functions. For a Zen sitting following the video recording, however, the space of Zendo is in the storage of cyberspace, and the Internet Space here serves as the object of folded-hand bows and as the authority of the ritual. Since the Zendo space on the Internet transcends the limit of time, it becomes an indispensable part to construct Ritual Space of Zen sitting together with online participants' own space for Zen sitting.

Another unordinary perspective is that all Meditators participating in the live-streamed online Internet Zazenkai, including the Meditators in Zendo with monks and the online participants, can see themselves in the webcam images. I noticed that somebody from an Internet Zazenkai discussion group on Treeleaf.org published a comment that he "cares about the existence of the webcam and it distracts himself in the Zen Meditation". I have also found that some meditators would unconsciously pay attention to the webcam during the Zen Sitting process. Based on this phenomenon, the Internet in live-streamed Zazenkai also serves to duplicate and present the Zendo space and meditator's space, and this function does not influence the process of ritual, but affects the quality of Zen sitting of the meditators.

Discussion 2. Transformation of the Zen monk's role during the "transition" process

In Zazen in Zen temples, during the "transition" process, meditators complete transforming their ego awareness by imitating the lifestyle in the temple (like the way Zen Buddhists dine, bathe and sleep) and imitating Zen practices (like Zen Sitting). Zen monks play a very important role in this "transition". First, before the Zazen, Zen monks explain to the meditators how to adjust their sitting posture and breath, and how to do the ritual of Zazen. Despite the fact the Soto School has a doctrine on Zen sitting, the details of Zazen differ due to different understanding of the doctrine by Zen monks. Meditators should follow the Zen monks' explanation to conduct the Zen Practice. From this perspective, Zen monks serve as an instructor for Zen sitting. Second, in Zazen, participants usually imitate Zen monks when they don't know how to do the ritual, due to the complexity of Zen sitting rituals and almost no verbal communication in Zazen, despite of the earlier explanation from the monks. Therefore, Zen monks become the participants' imitation object. Third, Zen sitting usually takes place for around 40 minutes, which is the time period to burn out a piece of incense. However, meditators cannot see the clock, or the progress of the burning incense, because they have to keep their eyes half closed, their body still, and their face towards the wall. Moreover, they are required to be non-thinking, inclusive of the time. Consequently, the concept of time for meditators is not that as shown by a clock, but through an undefined interval based on the monk's instructions or ringing of bells. Zen monks serve a role in the allocation of time (despite that the method of time allocation is required by religious doctrines). Fourth, during Zen Sitting in a Zen temple, the monk usually holds a Kyosaku (A wooden stick), to alert the meditators by striking them when they feel sleepy or when they are in an improper posture. The art to strike with the Kyosaku has the meaning of "encouragement by Monju Bodhisattva" so that Zen Practice will proceed smoothly. Hence in Zazen in a Zen temple, Zen monks also serve as a supervisor for Zen sitting activity on behalf of the Sacred.

In Internet Zazen, Zen monks still perform a role in allocation of time and being the imitated object, but seldom or barely elaborate the method of Zen sitting, due to the fact that Meditators usually study relevant knowledge in advance by themselves. This makes Internet Zazen different from that which occurs in a temple. In the September 22th Internet Zazen's instance, some participants sat facing towards a wall (Soto School's style), while some sat with a wall or a window at their back (Rinzai School's style). Meditators do not confine themselves to the regulations of a certain school, but conduct

Zen Sitting based on their own knowledge and understanding. As another issue, Internet Zazenkai does not require the webcam to be placed in a certain way, and therefore the online participants' bodies cannot be fully shown in the screen due to their limited space. During Kinhin in the Internet Zazenkai on 22th September, when everybody stood up, these online participants would barely appear in the screen. The chief priest is not able to remind them even if someone is sleepy, since verbal communication is not allowed during the process. A Kyosaku can be used by the monk during Zazenkai in a temple, but this turns out to be useless in Internet Zazenkai. It is also possible that the screen is not big enough and is placed a distance away from the monk, hence he cannot see clearly the state of the meditators based on the image transmitted through the Internet.

Based on the above, the function of Zen monks in the Zen Ritual of Internet Zazenkai is tremendously limited. And their weakened functions to give instructions for Zen sitting on behalf of their school, and to alert participants by striking with the Kyosaku on behalf of Monju Bodhisattva, also implies that the Zen monks' symbolic function as an absolute authority in Internet Zazenkai Ritual is weakened.

4. Conclusion

This paper, based on a case study of the phenomenon of Internet Zazenkai on Tree-leaf.org, has recorded the circumstances and procedures of Internet Zazenkai in modern society, revolutionized by new media, and further analyzed the feature of Internet Zazenkai from perspectives of time, space and instructor by comparing it with traditional Zazenkai. The following conclusion is reached: first, the arrange of time and space in Internet Zazenkai is more of a result of a meditator's personal will, and the expression of religious practice is more often based on a meditator's personal understanding of religion, but not on the doctrine of a religious school or of a host with religious belief. Second, Internet space presents or reproduces a ritual space which originally arises at Zendo, and during Internet Zazenkai, Internet space not only simply presents the Sacred Space, but also weaken the function of the Sacred (Monju Bodhisattva) and authority representative (Zen monks) through the Internet's transmission, recording, and reproduction.

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